MAKING A GOOD (BAD) IMPRESSION:
AN EXAMINATION OF DISPOSITION THEORY’S
AND THE CONTINUUM MODEL’S TENETS
OF IMPRESSION FORMATION

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ABSTRACT

Individuals are constantly faced with the need to form impressions of others they encounter. For decades social psychologists and media researchers have examined not only the end result of impression formation but also the cognitive process itself. However, very little media research has examined the cognitive process that takes place when viewers are forming impressions of fictional media characters. There is reason to believe that viewers rely on information and form impressions of media characters in much the same way they do interpersonally. Viewers may use an approach in which categorical labels are the driving force and individual characteristics or attributes receive second billing, or they may be prompted to use a more systematic approach in which impressions are formed based on evaluation of individual attributes, especially when provided or exposed to information that is inconsistent with their preconceived notions of the target person/character. The present study will attempt to build a base for establishing a stronger link between social psychological theories of impression formation and fictional media characters, applying Fiske and Neuberg’s Continuum Model of Impression Formation (1987), inconsistency resolution (see Macrae et al., 1999), and disposition theory (see Raney, 2003) as theoretical frameworks.
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Chapter 1

Individuals are frequently faced with the opportunity to use available information to form impressions of different individuals they encounter (Neuberg & Fiske, 1987). These impressions can help shape attitudes about others, and affect feelings and behaviors towards them (Hinds, 1999; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). Whether the impressions formed are correct or not, people are adept when it comes to using the cognitive processes available to them to make evaluations about others and about situations. In media viewing experiences, individuals also encounter persons about whom they form opinions. Experiences within the fictional realm are arguably not different from the “real world” in that media exposure also includes a fair amount of information usually concerning the characters being depicted and the situations in which they find themselves.

Media characters are considered by many people to be the substance of our media content. Even in reality-based programming such as the news and reality television shows that depict actual people and their life encounters, audiences are only provided with a small snippet of who these people really are—they become like characters. Regardless of if these individuals are real or fictional, characters are the driving force of our stories and are such an integral part of overall appeal that they are often mentioned as the reason for which a particular media experience is enjoyed (Cohen, 1999; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Tal-Or & Papirman, 2005; Vorderer & Knobloch, 2002). For example, ABC’s highly rated Grey’s Anatomy has been heralded by both critics and viewers because of its characters. The characters not only serve as “people” to identify with but also as the draw that motivates and keeps viewers coming back week after week (Keveney, 2005).
Without characters, story plots would make little sense, and viewers would be left with little to identify and interact with (Livingstone, 1992). Characters, being a part of the content, serve to connect the viewer with the show or the film. This connection is thought to be so strong that some researchers argue that in actuality, a connected audience is more important to the success of a film or television show than is a large audience (Russell, Norman, & Heckler, 2004).

Consistent with this argument, in the summer of 2005 USA Network began a new marketing campaign titled, “Characters Welcome.” Many of the marketing pieces in this campaign focus on the characters from the network’s most popular programs including “Monk,” “WWE Raw,” and “Law and Order: Special Victims Unit.” Bonnie Hammer, President of USA Network and the Sci Fi Channel stated that people watch a show because it is well-done, having good characters. She argued that programs work the best when “the people at home can relate to what’s on the air…And there’s some connective tissue between those faces that are on the air. ..It’s really about the chemistry of the characters on the screen and how you relate to that chemistry as a viewer. Is it relatable? Do you believe them? Do you like them? Do you hate them? Do you cry with them? Do you laugh at them? It’s all about that connective tissue” (Block, 2005, p. 18).

Arguably, viewer-character relationships are important to media involvement. In fictional programs, only with involvement do viewers come to care about stories that may otherwise be irrelevant to them. The more significant the character, the more memorable the characters, and the more emotion he/she will elicit from viewers. Yet these relationships are also important to how we learn about others, fulfill personal needs, and have new experiences (Cole & Leets, 1999; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Pfau & Mullen,
By developing and maintaining these relationships, viewers can vicariously participate in an unlimited array of experiences and come to understand others’ roles in society (Pfau & Mullen, 1995).

Whereas there is ample evidence of various viewer-character relationships, there seems to be one aspect of the connection that has not been empirically examined in as much detail. How do viewers form impressions of characters? How is the character assessed as “someone” we like or dislike, as possessing various qualities?

Previous research has identified character-related factors, character qualities which viewers can react to such as physical appearance and behavior, as strongly influential in viewers’ favoritism towards a character (Cohen, 1999). Therefore, it is important to understand how information about characters is perceived, interpreted, and integrated into a final impression that leads to the viewer-character connections frequently reported by media researchers.

Many aspects of a media presentation may affect viewers’ impressions including characters’ motivations (Potter & Ware, 1989) and intentions (Vorderer & Knobloch, 2002; Zillmann, 2002; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977), consequences of their behavior (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991), as well as shooting and production aspects which may emphasize certain behaviors and characteristics. Viewers have also been found to assess how similar the characters are to themselves (Zillmann, Johnson & Harahan, 1973), the characters’ morality (Livingstone, 1992) and in some instances, what is known about the actor portraying a character (Tal-Or & Papirman, 2005). Despite providing insight on what elements may influence viewer responses, media research has not explicitly examined the cognitive process of impression formation per se.
Viewers’ relationships with characters in some instances closely resemble interpersonal relationships. That being the case, it may also be possible that the cognitive processing used to evaluate characters may be similar to processing used in face-to-face interpersonal interactions. Babrow, O’Keefe, Swanson, Meyers, and Murphy (1988) specifically studied a comparison of real-peer versus fictional-peer impressions. These researchers found support for the idea that evaluation of characters and evaluation of individuals in face-to-face interactions share a common cognitive process, even though there were differences in the information used for evaluation of each kind of target.

Media scholars argue that mediated relationships are built on the same foundations and processes as interpersonal relationships, regardless of the fact that viewers are seeing the lives of fictional characters (Babrow et al., 1988; Cohen & Perse, 2003; Cole & Leets, 1999; Konijn & Hoorn, 2005; Raney, 2004). The present study will attempt to build a base for establishing a link between psychological theories of impression formation and fictional media characters and the cognitive process viewers use when a character does not meet initial expectations. While it is not expected to change the propositions of current theorizing concerning viewer-character relationships, the study may shed light on how character information and qualities are assessed by the audiences during a viewing experience.
Viewer-Character Relationships

Media effects theories suggest viewer-character relationships mediate certain effects because characters serve as the vehicles for influencing audiences’ behaviors and meeting personal needs (see Cohen, 1999; Cohen, 2001; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). For example, social learning and imitation theories argue that viewers imitate or model behaviors of favorite characters, whether these behaviors are positive or negative (Bandura, 2002a; Cohen, 1999; Cohen & Perse, 2003). According to Cohen and Perse (2003), viewer-character relationships are also important because the interaction between the parties could fulfill interpersonal needs, in addition to directing audiences to watch the media programs/films in which the favored characters appear. Viewers can relate to media characters in a wide variety of ways, and are able to distinguish the connections from one another (Cohen & Perse, 2003). Among the most often researched and theorized viewer-character relationships are identification, parasocial interaction, liking and/or affinity, and dispositional affiliations or alignments.

Identification refers to a sense of similarity with another person or media character, whether that similarity is due to physical or personality characteristics (Cohen, 1999; 2001; 2003). For example, viewers tend to identify more closely with same-sex characters, and they are able to identify whether the character’s behavior is positive or negative (Cohen, 1999; Hoffner, 1996). Perceived similarity serves as a motivator for liking fictional characters and is central to engagement. Identification can moderate feelings of sympathy towards a character (see Konijn & Hoorn, 2005).
Identification, however, is more than just a feeling of similarity with another individual or character. It also involves sharing the experiences and perspectives of that individual – placing oneself in their shoes (Cohen, 1999; Hoffner, 1996). The vicarious experiencing of another’s feelings temporarily replaces the viewers’ feelings. This relationship requires absorption of the viewer into the narrative, signaling that viewers are involved with the content (Cohen & Perse, 2003). Identification can also come in the form of wishful identification -- the desire to imitate or be like another individual (Cohen, 1999; Cohen & Perse, 2003). This form of identification is very common and has been argued to be the theoretical foundation of many media effects. For example, many theories (e.g. social learning, affective disposition, etc.) are based on the assumption and expectation that viewers will form this kind of attachment with media personalities (Cohen & Perse, 2003). The likelihood of it occurring is bolstered by how realistic the characters and the situations are (Cohen, 2006; Cohen & Perse, 2003). In identifying with characters, viewers may also bring together perceptions of themselves and information about the character to form an impression of and a relationship with that character.

Parasocial interaction is another viewer-character relationship examined in entertainment research. Initially, parasocial interaction was defined as a seeming face-to-face relationship that occurs between a viewer and a mediated person, whether fictional or nonfiction, in which viewers interact with characters as if they were real individuals who can respond directly to the viewers (Cohen, 1999; 2001; 2003; Cole & Leets, 1999; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Klimmt, Hartmann & Schramm, 2006). For example, a viewer screaming at a heroine not to go into a room in which a maniacal killer is hiding can be argued to be parasocially interacting with the heroine. However, parasocial relationships
are probably best described as quasi-friendships with a sense of intimacy in that viewers feel as though they know media personalities just as they do real people (Cohen & Perse, 2003; Cole & Leets, 1999). Such relationships are most likely to occur when the viewer has much to gain (e.g. fulfilling social and companionship needs), but at minimal cost. Parasocial relationships can also occur as a function of an individual’s attachment style or need to find security in others (Cole & Leets, 1999). Viewers must possess a desire to maintain and strengthen these mediated relationships (Cohen, 1999; Hoffner, 1996). Being that parasocial relationships are very similar to friendships, it may also be feasible that processing of information about both real and mediated people may also be similar. That is, the cognitive process used to evaluate characters, in some instances, may closely resemble the ones used interpersonally.

Another viewer-character relationship is often referred to by both scholars and viewers as simply “liking.” Liking is closely connected to identification and parasocial interactions, many times leading to the relationships previously discussed. Liking a character means empathizing with the character; identification can also sometimes lead to liking (Cohen, 1999; Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). The viewer places him/herself into the emotional shoes of the character, feeling the same emotions as him/her (see Bryant & Miron, 2002). Previous research has found liking to be more strongly related to the strength of a parasocial relationship than to identification (Cohen & Perse, 2003). But before a character can be liked or disliked, their characteristics, traits, and other information about them must be assessed in some way.

Viewer-character relationships seemingly play an important role in connecting the audience members to one another and immersing viewers in the viewing experience.
While such connections can occur in various ways, the foundation for them seems to rest on the overall impression the viewer holds of the character(s) involved. In discussing the various viewer-character relationships one implication arises—before any relationship is formed, an impression is formed first (Klimmt et al., 2006). The following sections examine the cognitive processes involved in impression formation—what occurs cognitively when individuals encounter a person. Being that media characters, just like real human beings, can be complex entities in terms of their personalities, it will be proposed that similar mechanisms apply within a mediated context. Yet the distinction between the two entities (i.e. real targets and mediated targets) must be acknowledged. Being that previous research has only briefly examined the similarities and differences within a very specific context (see Babrow et al., 1988), two opposing theoretical frameworks will also be discussed. Each one relies on different cognitive mechanisms in dealing with the complexities of character attributes.

What is Impression Formation?

Scholars argue that forming an impression is the first thing individuals do when reacting to another individual (Asch, 1946; Hamilton & Zanna, 1974). Mainly a concept examined from a cognitive perspective, impression formation generally concerns mental processes that have the potential to produce some form of response that consists of the general opinion of another individual. This opinion is infused with a perceiver’s interpretations of the available information. However these interactions and responses are not solely limited to the domain of interpersonal social interactions and the realm of social psychology. As the aforementioned viewer-character relational theories illustrate, media researchers have acknowledged the importance of media characters and the
impressions viewers hold of them as being a driving force in the overall evaluation of a viewing experience (Block, 2005; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Keveney, 2005). And since impressions have been found to have a range of effects including feeling that a person deserves a certain outcome (Lupfer & Gingrich, 1999) and feeling that a person is a good role model (Reeves & Lometti, 1979), it is important to define more than just the concept of impression, but also define and study the process that leads to the evaluation (Reeves & Lometti, 1979).

Before moving to an in-depth examination of impression formation, it is important to clarify the distinction between person perception and impression formation. Media researchers seem to have a tendency to use perception and impression synonymously. Although the two concepts are very similar, they are not the same. Impression formation is considered to be the first step in person perception, but not the only step (Brewer, 1988; Newman, 2001).

Perception concerns not just what individuals do with information about others (impression formation), but also what happens when individuals are exposed to seemingly typical behaviors (social categorization), how individuals figure out what a person did (social inference) and why they did it (attribution), and what kind of people they are (social construct accessibility; Newman, 2001). Perception is much broader and includes impressions formed, expectations, and predispositions moreso than the actual characteristics a person possesses (Forgas & Bower, 2001). Impressions are evaluations of a person based on perceptions of various trait aggregations, they are usually tied to a hedonic valence (e.g. positive, negative; Newman, 2001), and they can incorporate an
interpretation of inferred or observed actor characteristics (Babrow et. al, 1988) that serve as a means of differentiating people (Reeves & Lometti, 1979).

Forming an impression involves many concepts including the person, an interaction, behaviors, physical appearance, and traits. The person can exist within two capacities in impression formation: as either the one forming the impression (the perceiver) or as the person about whom the impression is being formed (the target). In order for impression formation to occur, these two types of individuals must interact. An interaction is any event, social or nonsocial, formal or informal, between one or more perceivers or targets. Interactions can be short (e.g. minutes) or more long-term (e.g. hours, recurring; McDonald & Chakroff, 2005; Reeves & Lometti, 1979).

Impression formation, then, is a cognitive process in which physical and personality characteristics, behaviors, beliefs and personal values are analyzed and brought together in an effort to form an understanding of another individual, and better interpret and predict that individual’s future behavior (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Sundar, Kalyanaraman, Martin, & Wagner, 2000). The process can be either intentional or incidental (Carlston & Mae, 2003; Hinds, 1999) and can involve the use of organized sets of beliefs a perceiver has, information from direct observations, or information provided by others (Babrow et al., 1988).

Some conceptualizations of impression formation differ in terms of whose characteristics drive the cognitive process. Perceiver-centered definitions such as those posited by McDonald and Chakroff (2005) and Brewer (1988) argue that attributes of the perceiver and individual difference variables (e.g. need for cognition) are critical to the impression formation process. McDonald and Chakroff conceptualize impression
formation as a comparison process in which perceivers compare their attributes to those of the target, as well as take into account their personal needs and whether the target person can fill them. Brewer argues that relevancy to the perceiver is a determining factor in terms of how the process will occur. Delia and colleagues (1974) suggest that perceivers’ cognitive complexity determines how extensive and stable the resulting impressions will be. Likewise, Forgas and Bower (2001) argue that perceiver mood can also affect the impression formation process.

In contrast, target-centered definitions suggest that the characteristics of the target are critical to impression formation (Asch, 1946; Fiske, Neuberg, Beattie & Milberg, 1987; Fiske, Lin & Neuberg, 1999; Rosenberg, Nelson & Vivekanathan, 1968). In particular, these conceptualizations of impression formation argue that the presence and absence of characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs of the target, as well as their fit with perceiver expectations, determine the kind of cognitive process perceivers will use to form an impression. The present study works from this perspective, acknowledging that multiple cognitive mechanisms are available to perceivers for impression formation.

* Cognitive approaches to impression formation. Some people form impressions quickly whereas others are much slower to do so. Some require an extensive amount of information to draw conclusions whereas others only require a little information. It is also possible to be faced with different situations that require different information-processing solutions (Hinds, 1999; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). The literature concerning the use of person and social categories and individual attributes or characteristics in forming impressions differs in how, when, and if these kinds of information are used.
Historically, impression formation literature can be categorized into two main theoretical camps: those that rely solely on categories or schemas to form impressions, and those that rely solely on the use of attributes. Media research on viewers’ impressions of fictional characters appears consistent with both theoretical approaches. However, within the last few decades there has been a marriage of the two approaches in social psychology theorizing.

*Impression formation as category application.* The category-oriented approach argues that individuals form impressions of others according to salient social (e.g. ethnicity, gender, etc.) or person categories (e.g. good person, doctor, etc.). This approach rests on the idea of individuals as cognitive misers or “mental sluggards.” Individuals prefer to categorize targets because doing so requires little cognitive activity (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001; Yzerbert & Rogier, 2001). Perceivers use prior organized beliefs, both simple and complex, to come to an evaluative judgment about another (Applegate, 1982; Babrow et al., 1988; Delia et al., 1974). Lupfer and Gingrich (1999) used the label “character appraisal” to refer to perceivers’ use of schemas in assessment of how much a person shows traits and behaviors that the perceiver deems socially appropriate. This approach thus relies heavily on the propositions of schema theory, a theory that has also been used to explain how viewers understand the temporal and logical connections in television stories and social portrayals on television (Collins, 1981; Collins, 1983; Fitch, Huston, & Wright, 1993).

Schema theory is based on the assumption that individuals use the regularities of their experience to construct knowledge and expectations about people, places, objects, and events. A schema itself is a “cognitive structure that represents organized knowledge
about a given concept or type of stimulus” (Fiske & Taylor, 1984, p. 140). The schema includes concept attributes, emotional meanings that are associated with them, and constructs or information concerning the relationship between attributes (Fitch et al., 1993; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). The constructs themselves are organized into specific domains. The process of impression formation is the application of these constructs within the interpersonal domain (Babrow et al., 1988), with individuals applying different social schemas to a target in order to come to an evaluation of that person (Applegate, 1974; Delia et al., 1974; Babrow et al., 1988).

Social schemas are believed to consist of a category label at the top level and expected attributes or components of that label at the lower level. The category label can be any characteristic that is the most salient or cognitively accessible and that best organizes the other associated attributes (Fiske et al., 1987; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). These labels serve as substitutes for the lower-level information, in some instances making it unnecessary for the attributes to be considered. Weaker or less salient attributes such as personality traits can operate as category labels within different contexts (Crocker, Hannah, & Weber, 1983; Klein & Loftus, 1990; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001; Wyer, Bodenhausen, & Srull, 1984). For example, children have been found to be able to quickly distinguish between good and bad characters, using these characteristics as person categories to guide their interpretation of the story (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). But category labels are more likely to consist of social categories, and social categories are also more likely to cue traits rather than the other way around (Fiske et al., 1987; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990).
Affective information or emotions can also be incorporated into schemas. Affective information is treated and organized within schemas in a similar fashion as person attributes, incorporated into schemas by way of affective tags. Each individual attribute has an affective meaning. The emotion that is ultimately associated with a category label may be a result of combining or averaging the emotions associated with lower-level attributes or it may be the conditioning of affect to the category label. As with salient attributes, once the affective tags are established, the dominant affective tag can substitute for the attribute-level ones, becoming relatively independent of the attribute tags yet still serving as a proxy for them (Fiske et. al, 1987). Whether researchers’ primary concern is affect or cognitive assessment of personality, there seems to be some agreement that media lends itself to the use of schemas or cognitive shortcuts (Potter, Pashupati, Pekurny, Hoffman, & Davis, 2002). Reeves and Lometti (1979) suggest that media may actually give prominence to concrete cues such as physical appearance, and social categories such as gender and race, implying that impressions may be involuntarily based on categories rather than specific attributes. Repeated exposure to such cues may lead viewers to develop a tendency to base media impressions on these categories and their associated mental constructs (Potter et al., 2002). Researchers have argued that media, by sheer nature, induce the use of cognitive shortcuts.

In the context of media research, one of the most often referred to salient person categories is physical appearance. Physical appearance has a substantial influence, particularly in media viewing, because it is generally the first attribute that comes to viewers’ attention (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Consequently, it is possible to view appearance as a category label that guides impressions of targets. For example, research
on impressions of media characters has generally found that physical attractiveness is related to perceptions of more socially desirable personality traits (Smith, McIntosh & Bazzini, 1999). Similar relationships have also been found to exist with body type (see Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Overweight characters are seen as lazier, more talkative, and more warm-hearted, characters with athletic builds were perceived as stronger, more self-reliant, and more likely to be leaders, and characters with tall and thin body types are assumed to be more ambitious, suspicious of others, tense, nervous, and stubborn. Viewers have also been found to form impressions based on facial features, hair color, ethnic origin, vocal characteristics, and even characters’ mode of dress (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Neumann, Cassata, & Skill, 1983).

More specifically, technical aspects of media content may make reliance on categorical information more likely. The argument of technical influence on cognitive load rests on the idea that media-viewing situations, in and of themselves, limit the amount of attention a viewer can pay to the content. Researchers suggest that today’s video, because of additional information conveyed and problems with signal quality may reduce systematic processing, resulting in a heavier reliance on categorization and stereotyping (Hinds, 1999). Added elements such as ambient sound and background music may also increase the amount of information transmitted to the viewer, resulting in a heavier information load (Hinds, 1999; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). If the medium is audio only (e.g. radio, audiobooks) then the only social cues that can be conveyed are those that can be determined through auditory signals. Once the visual channel is added, visual cues such as eye gaze, facial expressions, race, and gender will be conveyed as well. Because a person cannot process everything they are exposed to in a media
experience, the only way to be involved with the media is to select what information to
attend to and process, and what information to ignore (Harris, 2004). The information
that is processed provides a foundation against which subsequent behavior is compared
(Klimmt et al., 2006).

Both media researchers and social psychologists acknowledge the existence of
impression formation as a top-down process that heavily involves the use of schemas.
From this viewpoint, perceivers use mental shortcuts and categorical information to
evaluate another person and come to some conclusion as to who that person is and how
they should feel about him or her.

Impression formation: The attribute-oriented approach. The attribute-oriented
approach to impression formation argues that perceivers form impressions by considering
each attribute individually or as isolated pieces of information in a piecemeal fashion.
This approach can be traced back to elemental views of the mind and Asch’s (1946)
alternative model of impression formation (see Fiske et al., 1987).

In one of the earliest studies of impression formation, Asch (1946) defined
impression formation as an organized process where characteristics are perceived in
relationship to one another. Other social psychologists have adopted a similar
perspective, agreeing that targets individually interpret highly developed and obvious
attributes, and then combine them along with their denotative and connotative meanings
to form an impression of a target (Hamilton & Zanna, 1974; Rosenberg et al., 1968). In
other words, impression formation is the adding of positive with negative traits, including
with them the valence and value of the traits. Central traits, such as “good” and “bad”
determine how peripheral traits such as “intelligent” and “slow” are ranked and
interpreted, yet the peripheral traits are still assessed apart from the central ones. The resulting impression refers more to the individual rather than to the social category to which the target belongs.

In a similar vein, implicit personality theories argue that impression formation involves placing similar traits together, based on a strong dimension such as likeability (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Rosenberg et al., 1968). Impression formation, from this viewpoint, involves assuming or inferring the possession of characteristics based on one strong trait. A person thought to have a certain trait will also be thought to possess other typically associated traits, even if they are not a part of the provided target description. For example, the appearance of a positive trait such as “good” will lead to the assumption that the target also possesses traits such as warm, kind, and helpful. All of the traits, whether explicitly conveyed or assumed, are interpreted individually and compose the overall impression.

Media research has also acknowledged the role of systematic processing of character attributes in forming impressions. Lachlan (2005), for example, found that viewers use justification for violent behavior as a guiding force in the interpretation of the behavior. Viewers assess character motivation, objectives and goals, and situational context in order to determine if the character is justified in using violence or if the person is violent by nature. McDonald and Chakroff (2005) have recently argued that in selecting a favorite character, viewers go through a comparison process where they compare the characters’ individual personality traits with their own individual traits.

In addition, characters’ emotions and nonverbal expressions are pieces of information sometimes emphasized by close-ups enhancing their saliency. This
information may help viewers to understand the motives, behaviors, and psychological states of fictional characters and hence affect impressions (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Regular viewers, as they increase their viewing and exposure, may actually form more detailed and complex impressions or impressions based on individual pieces of information rather than on categories. These results, among others, suggest that the attribute-oriented approach to impression formation has applicability in media situations.

A marriage of approaches: The continuum model. Despite the merits and evidence of the attribute approach, social psychologists in particular have argued that it is limited in scope, as is the categorical approach. That is, some scholars have noted that the attribute-oriented approach cannot fully account for cognitive load, and the categorical approach does not seem to account for inconsistencies with schemas. Another aspect of this criticism reflects individual differences in the way that impressions are formed. As previously stated, some people form impressions quickly, requiring little information to do so, while others are much slower and require a lot of information. Variations in situations may also contribute to the use of different impression-formation processes (Hinds, 1999; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). Perceivers can conceivably find themselves in situations where they are unable to use a systematic approach or alternatively, in a situation where careful scrutiny of a target is necessary to their own well-being. This argument is also applicable to media. Some media programs are designed to simplify character impressions by making a few aspects particularly salient. Other programs devote a lot of screen time to character development and include sequences that are designed to reveal personal information normally unavailable in an interpersonal context (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Rather than individuals forming their
impressions using the same process all the time, individuals may have more than one
process at their disposal.

With these arguments in mind, more recently social psychologists have taken the
merits of both theoretical traditions and combined them to formulate a definition that
views impression formation as a concept that involves multiple cognitive processes
(Brewer, 1988; Fiske et al., 1987). Multiple cognitive processes are particularly
important when one acknowledges that perceiving targets is not always a simple task.
During the course of an interaction targets perform many different behaviors and express
many different beliefs that may not always coincide nicely with one another. Perceivers
must be able to cope and deal with unexpected and seemingly inconsistent information
when it arises.

Brewer (1988) views impression formation as a process that includes data-driven,
integrated evaluations of a person and the use of social categories and schemas to come
to an overall evaluation of a target. She argues that the processes lie in a branch pattern in
which there is one limb that represents automatic processing and reliance on categories,
and another that represents more controlled processing that can eventually lead to
individuation. This model is driven by relevance to the perceiver and self-involvement. If
the target is relevant to the perceiver and the perceiver is very involved, then he/she will
assess more attribute-related information until the category label and attributes match (in
either a broad or more specific category label).

Fiske and colleagues agree, arguing that impression formation involves multiple
cognitive approaches. Their argument diverges from Brewer’s in that they conceptualize
impression formation as multiple cognitive approaches that lie on a continuum (Fiske et
The present study uses Fiske and Neuberg’s continuum model of impression formation as a theoretical framework (Fiske, 1988; Fiske et al., 1987; Fiske et al., 1999; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990).

Fiske and colleagues (1987) formally began their attempts to integrate the two main theoretical approaches of impression formation. In a move away from the idea of the cognitive miser, this model favors the idea of the fully engaged thinker with a number of cognitive strategies available for use based on goals, motives, and needs (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). The continuum model describes the range of ways in which perceivers form impressions of targets while acknowledging that perceivers share fundamental processes. These processes include top-down processing (category-based impressions) and bottom-up processing (attribute-based impressions). The continuum specifically incorporates categorization, category confirmation, recategorization, subcategorization, and individuation, with each process being increasingly more systematic than the one immediately preceding it.

Categorization still remains an integral part of the model (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). Perceivers simplify the task of understanding others by categorizing them as members of familiar groups because it generally uses too much mental effort to individuate them (Fiske et al, 1987; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001; Neuberg & Fiske, 1987). In the case of categorization, individuals’ responses are often based on the stereotypes, prejudices, and behavioral tendencies associated with the assigned categories. Such a processing strategy allows for the instilling of stimuli with meaning under difficult or cognitively taxing processing situations (Macrae & Bodenhausen,
The major difference between the older models that argued for one impression formation process and the continuum model is that the end result of the impression formed depends on the relative success or failure of initial categorization.

If successful categorization occurs, meaning that the individual attributes match with the category being used, the category label remains activated in memory and so does its stored affective tag. The attributes that supported the successful categorization need no longer be considered, and they and their affective tags are subsumed by the category label. Once this occurs, people are less likely to continue to reference the attribute information, and affective responses will come primarily from the affective tag for the category.

Category-based processing is predicted to occur under three conditions: 1) when there is only a category label available, 2) when perceivers receive a category label and additional information, and the two are consistent with one another, or 3) when a category label and additional information are received, but the additional information is not relevant to the label, making the category label the primary piece of meaningful information (Fiske et. al, 1987; Neuberg & Fiske, 1987). In the latter case, the attributes are uninformative or irrelevant with regard to the category, so perceivers no longer refer to them and consequently base affective responses mostly on the category (Fiske et. al, 1987; Neuberg & Fiske, 1987).

When the available relevant attributes do not fit the available category label or when unlabeled attributes do not cue any particular category in memory, individuals will first attempt to resolve inconsistencies with another available label. Perceivers will attempt to use a subcategory label to form their impression, and if this is not a successful
match, they attempt to recategorize the target person. Subcategorization and recategorization are intermediate processes that utilize attribute information more than do initial categorization because the new category is based on the attributes of the person being evaluated (Fiske, et al., 1987; Fiske et al., 1999; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Neuberg & Fiske, 1987). However, both still allow a category label to organize the attribute information, resulting in a similar use of schemas and the included affective tags.

If inconsistencies persist, even after subcategorization and recategorization are attempted, perceivers then rely more on attribute information. Impressions are thus based on the individual attributes rather than on the category label (Fiske et al., 1987; Fiske et al., 1999; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Attribute-based or individuating processing occurs when 1) people receive and interpret attributes that are inconsistent with or that dispute the category label, making the label no longer useful or 2) when people receive an informative label along with attributes or noncategorizable attributes that alone do not cue any particular category. In both cases these situations result in perceivers ultimately basing their affective responses and impressions on the attributes the target possesses, rather than the category-based affective tags (Fiske et. al, 1987; Neuberg & Fiske, 1987). This portion of the continuum is rare in its occurrence, however it does occur. Movement along the impression formation continuum is dependent on a number of factors, the most prominent of them being cognitive attention and motivation to form an accurate impression.

When perceivers are motivated to do so, they will spend more effort to understand inconsistent information and hence use more cognitively taxing strategies to do so (Rojahn & Pettigrew, 1992). For example, interpersonal competition has been found to
cause individuating processes rather than impressions based on categories, but when
competition involves groups or teams, impressions are formed based on the category or
group label (Ruscher & Fiske, 1990). Movement is also dependent on individual
differences such as need for cognition, attachment, and perceiver personality traits (Fiske
et al., 1999; Zhang & Hazan, 2002). In addition, there are individuals who have a
tendency to base their evaluations more on the category under some circumstances and
more on the attributes under others (Neuberg & Fiske, 1987).

In addition to the aforementioned moderators, the continuum model also includes
taxing two primary mediators that allow for the movement from a categorical to an
individuating process: attention and interpretation. While increased attention and
attentional resources do not guarantee accuracy, there are still motivators that may affect
whether information about a target is viewed as consistent or inconsistent with the initial
categorization (Fiske et al., 1999; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). Personal relevance is
also a determining factor of movement towards individuation. If the perceiver’s well-
being is related to the target, or if forming a certain kind of impression will result in some
form of benefit for the perceiver, the perceiver may be motivated to move beyond
categorization (Fiske et al., 1999; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001; Neuberg & Fiske,
1987). In essence, the continuum model views impression formation processes as
malleable to the perceivers, the context, and the situation.

Inconsistency resolution. Part of the flexibility of social perception is the
individual’s ability to deal with seemingly inconsistent or unexpected information
concerning another individual (Macrae, Bodenhausen, Schloerscheidt & Milne, 1999).
According to Festinger, inconsistency among cognitions can result in a negative affective
state that motivates individuals to seek out and use strategies that ease the aversive psychological and physiological feelings (Elliot & Devine, 1994; Shaffer & Hendrick, 1974). Inconsistency resolution is one such strategy used in cognitions concerning target others.

Conceptually, inconsistency resolution is the process where individuals compare incoming information stored temporarily in memory to information that is stored in permanent memory (Macrae et al., 1999). More simply, it involves the comparison of unexpected incoming information to previously stored information that comprises schemas. When perceivers encounter seemingly schema-discrepant information, and evaluate the information as being subjectively different, they attempt to reconcile this information with prior held beliefs (Macrae et al., 1999; Rojahn & Pettigrew, 1992; Wyer et al., 1984). This process can lead to either a greater reliance on the schematic information and discounting of the discrepant information, the inconsistent information may be assimilated into the schema, or the discrepant information is used as the basis for the impression (Rojahn & Pettigrew, 1992; Rosenbach, Crockett, & Wapner, 1973).

Forming impressions may thus become like a problem-solving task which requires some cognitive effort and processing (Shaffer & Hendrick, 1974). Inconsistency resolution is likely to occur when perceivers are motivated in forming their impressions (Rojahn & Pettigrew, 1992). However, perceivers must possess the cognitive ability to engage in such a process; perceivers cannot be cognitively overloaded (Macrae, Hewstone & Griffiths, 1993).

Individuals may use a variety of tasks to come to unified, coherent evaluations (Rosenbach et al., 1973; Shaffer & Hendrick, 1974). This reconciliation is commonly
assessed experimentally through the ability of a person to recall the incongruent information (Hastie & Kumar, 1979; Macrae et al., 1999). According to inconsistency resolution, when both congruent and incongruent information are presented along with a category label, viewers will better recall the incongruent information about the target, assuming that there is cognitive space to engage in the process (Rohajn & Pettigrew, 1992; Macrae et al., 1993; Macrae et al., 1999; Skowronski, Carlston, & Isham, 1993). Higher recall of inconsistent information may be a direct result of attempts to reconcile incongruent information with prior expectations (Macrae et al., 1993).

One reason for the greater recall of inconsistencies may be due to how informative incongruent information is perceived to be. Information that disconfirms the initial information may be more informative than information that is consistent (Hastie & Kumar, 1979). However, this higher recollection of inconsistent information does not necessarily translate into a strong influence on the impression. Perceivers seem to prefer to attribute inconsistencies to situational influences rather than view them as a part of the target’s personality (Crocker et al., 1983). In other words, by blaming the situation and not the person for the discrepant or unexpected behavior, the perceiver may discredit the information. This is not so say that inconsistent information has no effect on impressions -- perceivers will concede dispositional attributions to a degree. However, to what degree is something not yet explored by researchers.

Inconsistency resolution shares a commonality with individuation in that both are connected to executive functions or higher order cognitive operations (Macrae et al., 1999). Executive functions are involved in planning, executing, and regulating behavior, and they also coordinate memory activities. Both inconsistency resolution and
individuation seem to play a role in integrating information from various sources, and they are both strategic operations. However their functioning can be impaired when a qualitatively similar task is being performed simultaneously (e.g. random digit generation; Macrae et al., 1999).

However, inconsistency resolution is a different cognitive process from individuation. Individuation more strongly pertains to the organization of person information in terms of the individual person rather than the use of characteristics associated with a particular group the person may belong to (Macrae et al., 1999). Individuation requires that the perceiver attends to specific attributes of the target rather than generalizations (Fiske, 1988; Fiske et al., 1987; Fiske et al., 1999; Fiske, & Neuberg, 1990). The person is better remembered than the group to which they belong. In contrast, inconsistency resolution still incorporates the use of schemas or categories. Rather than ignoring or not using schema-related information, inconsistency resolution uses the schematic information as a basis for comparison. The individual attributes are thus compared to the characteristics a person of a particular group is supposed to possess, with either the inconsistent information being discarded or assimilated as a part of the schema (Rojahn & Pettigrew, 1992).

In summary, research on multiple cognitive approaches suggest that perceivers will sometimes rely on schemas and category labels to form their impressions, and other times on specific individual target attributes and behaviors. Which process is used depends on a number of perceiver and target characteristics and situational contexts. The extent to which media researchers have revised or attempted to incorporate into their arguments the theoretical proposition of multiple cognitive approaches in character
impression formation is small in comparison to theoretical strides in social psychology. Although there are a number of media theories and approaches that address cognitive processing, disposition theory appears to be the one that is most closely related to the concepts of interest to the present study.

*Disposition-Based Theories*

Affective disposition theory, a prominent theory of media entertainment and enjoyment research, examines the relationship between viewers and media personalities, and how these relationships relate to enjoyment of a media experience (Bryant & Miron, 2004; Vorderer, 2001; cf. Raney, 2003; 2004). Disposition approaches focus on the dispositional consequences of moral assessments that affect enjoyment. These arguments are similar to character appraisal (see Lupfer & Gingrich, 1999), in that mediated others are assessed based on how moral and immoral viewers perceive them to be. These others can include fictional and nonfiction characters, athletes, and entire sports teams, among the arguably endless array of character types featured in media content. The viewer serves as a moral monitor, condemning or applauding a party’s intentions and actions. For characters empathized with and liked, viewers hope for success and good fortune, enjoying these outcomes when they occur. Viewers fear failure and bad outcomes for their media “friends” and are annoyed when these outcomes occur. On the other hand, for condemned or disliked parties, viewers fear good fortune and are annoyed when these characters/parties succeed. However viewers experience enjoyment when these parties receive their just desserts. As negative dispositions increase so does enjoyment of bad outcomes. On the other hand, as positive dispositions increase, viewers become more
annoyed when their allies experience bad outcomes, but enjoy the experience more when these allies come out on top (see Figure 1).

Disposition theory’s propositions have been examined within the contexts of dramas such as violent films (Zillmann, 1996), comedy, and sports (Zillmann, Taylor & Lewis, 1998), operating much the same within each of these contexts (see Raney, 2003; 2006). Affiliations may lead to increased suspense (Bryant & Raney, 2002; Harris, 2004; Vorderer & Knobloch, 2002), affect evaluation of resolution of conflict between fictional characters (Raney & Bryant, 2002; Sparks & Sparks, 2002), and lead to enjoyment of punishment or teasing, as long as it is not too severe or overly hostile (Lachlan, 2005; Zillmann, 2000; Zillmann & Bryant, 1975; Zillmann, Bryant & Cantor, 1974; Zillmann & Cantor, 1996). Enjoyment thus hinges on either success of the character or appreciation of the disparagement. Either way, the foundation for the enjoyment of the experience hinges on the relationship between the viewer and those being depicted. Whether the targets are human characters or some other force (e.g. natural disasters, animated objects, etc.), forming these affiliations requires evaluation of the target.

Disposition theory alludes to the idea that viewers exert some cognitive effort to form their alignments through systematically evaluating the properties, characteristics,
Figure 1. Enjoyment as function of dispositional alignments
and moral behavior of the target. That is, this theory’s original conceptualizations of viewers’ perceptions of media characters were akin to attribute-oriented approaches to impression formation. Viewers were thought to observe characters’ actions and behaviors, and on the basis of these observations, construct a general impression of the character that reflected evaluations of the characters’ morality or immorality.

However, viewers do not go into every viewing situation with a blank slate. Schemas may make it easier to interpret characters’ behaviors, and may allow for assessments of characters in the absence of observing individual attributes (Raney, 2004). Namely, Raney (2004) recently argued that stereotypes and archetypes may aide viewers in forming dispositions. From continuous or long-term media use, viewers may learn story schemas that define many of the typical situations on television and film (Potter et al., 2002; Raney, 2006; Schank & Abelson, 1995). These scripts are composed of contextual information (e.g. story plot, characters, production characteristics and styles) that can be cued when any of these elements appear. Scripts also set up viewer expectations and serve as guides through narrative and action, influencing viewer interpretation (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Potter et al., 2002; Raney, 2004).

Based on this reasoning, Raney (2004) recently proposed two amendments to the tenets of disposition theory. First, the initial formation of an affective disposition toward a character may at times actually precede specific observation of the character’s individual attributes. In other words, impressions are formed relatively quickly, so quickly that viewers may rely on character-schemas to form their impressions and moral evaluations. Second, viewers expect that liked characters will do good things and disliked characters will do bad things. These expectations lead viewers to interpret character
actions and motivations in line with those expectations—expectations that exist in part because of character schemas. He argues that affective dispositions stem from established schemas but also through forming moral judgments and justification of character behaviors. Viewers may use their expectations to interpret and/or re-interpret actions, paying closer attention to type-consistent behaviors. In this regard, unacceptable behaviors may be permitted, accepted, and defended.

For example, a hero is widely considered to be a character whose behavior revolves around the benefit of others, often to his or her own detriment (Potter & Ware, 1989). But a hero, in working to save and help others, often commits wrong or extremely violent acts, especially in the case of action adventure programming and films (Lachlan, 2005). These violent actions are arguably more frequent and harsher than the actions committed by the antagonist of the story. However, the viewers, rather than ceasing their affiliation with a hero, may re-interpret the negative actions as serving a moral purpose, and the actions are therefore seen as excusable if not “appropriate.” As a result, the hero remains the hero.

Consequently, even in situations where the characters’ behaviors do not always fit the role, viewers will still rely on their schemas and character categories to come to an impression. In order to assimilate the inconsistent information, Raney (2004) argued a cognitive mechanism such as moral disengagement, may be used. This disengagement can occur through changing the perception of the conduct itself, the perception of the effects of conduct, or by holding a negative perception of those who are affected by the adverse behaviors.
Reformulating the perception of the negative behavior can occur in a number of ways. Moral justification is the cognitive reconstruction of the behavior itself (Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 2002b; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). The conduct is made both personally and socially acceptable by portraying it in such a way that it serves socially worthy or moral purposes. Individuals come to see the actions as good. By the sheer nature of being a good person, bad actions or use of extreme violence by heroes, for example, is justified because they are engaging in these acts to overcome a villain (see Lachlan, 2005; Raney, 2004).

Reformulating negative behavior can also occur through advantageous comparison, sometimes referred to as palliative comparisons. In this kind of comparison the bad behavior is compared to another, worse behavior committed by someone else; the more flagrant the comparison, the better (Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 2002b; Bandura et al., 1996). In making such a comparison, a person’s “bad” behavior pales in comparison to the more heinous actions, and can even at times seem benevolent. But in order for the original act of violence to seem more appropriate, nonviolent or more appropriate behaviors must be deemed as ineffective and therefore not a good option. The individual must also rationalize that the injurious action will actually prevent more suffering than it will cause, thus making what was once condemnable now a source of valuation (Bandura, 1999; 2002b). Continuing the previous example, a hero’s use of extreme violence is necessary in comparison to the villain’s violent acts, and the only available action committed for the benefit of others.

Finally, disengagement can occur through negatively perceiving the victims of the actions. By dehumanizing the “victims” -- taking away their “humanity” -- empathetic
activation, vicarious emotion, and feelings of similarity are hindered (Bandura et al., 1996). Taking away the human qualities makes the victims or injured parties seem more like beasts, increasing the likelihood that perceivers will concede to the idea that harshness may actually be deserved. For example, a hero’s violent behavior towards a bad guy responsible for the suffering of others may be considered acceptable if the villain is perceived as devoid of human qualities. It is okay for villains to be punished because their humanness is stripped away. However, if they perform some act of kindness or show some humanity, viewers may morally engage and thus have difficulty accepting the violence committed against them. Yet research has found that even in these instances, positive feelings towards such characters, such as warmth, is minimal (Sanders, 2005).

Whether the interceding mechanism is moral disengagement or another cognitive strategy, once formed, Raney’s (2004) suggested revisions to disposition theory imply the impression we hold is important to interpreting subsequent behaviors. Specifically, Raney’s argument suggests that schemas may guide and override any inconsistent information and unexpected, usually unacceptable behaviors. This reformulation of disposition theory implies that viewers, in forming their alliances with characters, rely on the use of person schemas, even in the face of inconsistent information. Viewers will attempt to reconcile the discrepancies between the initially accessed label and the characters’ behaviors. While it is acknowledged that in order for schemas to continue to be of use, a mediating cognitive process may be necessary, moral disengagement as a mediating mechanism may be limited. Moral disengagement nicely explains how schemas are continuously used for characters of good moral fiber, but the propositions are not applied as nicely when considering bad characters that may occasionally perform
seemingly benevolent acts—disengagement may no longer be applicable. A mediating cognitive mechanism should be applicable in multiple contexts and with multiple archetypical character roles. Inconsistency resolution may be a better mechanism because it seems to allow for and specifically applies to general inconsistencies between accessed schemas and behaviors and/or attributes.

Present Study and Rationale

The present study will attempt to shed light on how relationships and affiliations are formed by examining the various cognitive processes available for forming impressions. Over the course of several episodes or even in one single episode or film, it is likely that viewers engage in at least some form of impression formation. Individuals generally develop feelings of liking or disliking as a function of forming impressions. Just as in interpersonal interactions, when exposed to media characters, viewers will be interested in the characters’ goals in relationship to other characters, how vigilant these characters will be in pursuit of their goals, and how much intentionality is involved. Many additional aspects of a media presentation including motives and intentions of the character and the consequences of the behavior for the performer and the recipient, may affect viewers’ interpretations of behaviors. Yet, media, because of its many nuances and differences from interpersonal interaction, also may involve different kinds of information used to form impressions.

Scholars argue that there are three main differences between mediated impression formation and impression formation in an interpersonal context, namely differences in expectation, accessibility of feedback, and differences in design (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). First, the media-viewing context differs from the interpersonal one in that viewers
have no expectation of meeting the characters and actually interacting with them. However, this lowered expectation does not prohibit various forms of other interactions (e.g. identification, parasocial interaction, homophily, etc.; Cohen, 1999; 2003; Eyal & Rubin, 2003).

Secondly, in an interpersonal situation, interactions can provide feedback, such as a nodding of the head and various facial expressions, that shapes impressions of personality and behavioral tendencies. Media viewers do not receive such direct feedback. However, viewers are usually able to observe characters more closely and in more private situations, sometimes even witnessing the emergence of unflattering personal traits (see Cohen, 1981; Pfau & Mullen, 1995). Viewers are privy to characters’ thoughts and motivations and the psychological contexts, sometimes actually seeing visual enactments or hearing verbalizations (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Rather than providing feedback to perceivers through facial expressions and behaviors, characters’ goals and motivations provide viewers with information that aide them in interpreting and integrating information, thereby influencing what information is attended to (see Bryant & Miron, 2002; Lachlan, 2005).

The final distinction between interpersonal and media interactions is that character information is scripted and designed to produce a particular impression in a relatively efficient manner (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Potter et al., 2002). Camera angles, close-ups, and the way in which scenes are edited all aid in this scripting. In contrast to media portrayals, interpersonal settings are typically much less systematic and less planned. Even with scripting, however, viewers can exhibit a variety of responses. Scripting may encourage certain perceptions or reactions to characters, but characters do
not always serve the purpose for which they were created. Viewers may easily come to love a character that was created to be an antagonist, just as easily as they can love a “good guy” (see Sanders, 2004a; 2004b; 2005).

While differences between interpersonal impression formation and character impression formation seem to exist, media depictions seem to compensate for these differences. Yet very little research has been conducted specifically on impression formation of fictional media characters (Babrow et al., 1988; McDonald & Chakroff, 2005). Despite the lack of empirical evidence concerning mediated impression formation process(es), there are reasons to believe that there are similarities in how people form impressions of actual individuals and of media characters, with subtle differences (Ang, 1985; Babrow et al., 1988; Cohen, 2006; Cohen & Perse, 2003; Cole & Leets, 1999; Konijn & Hoorn, 2005; McDonald & Chakroff, 2005; Raney, 2004; 2006).

The literature suggests not only a fleeting similarity between interpersonal impression formation and character impression formation, but more specifically that there are multiple cognitive processes that viewers may have available to access when forming an impression of a media character. Regular viewers, as they increase their viewing and exposure, may actually form more detailed and complex impressions or impressions based on individual pieces of information. Some programs are designed to simplify character impressions by making a few aspects particularly salient, while others devote a lot of screen time to character development and include sequences that are designed to reveal personal information normally unavailable in an interpersonal context (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). But which kind of impression, and by extension which kind of impression formation strategy is used, may depend on a number of factors.
General evaluative dimensions, both salient (i.e. gender, ethnicity) and abstract (i.e. personality, social beliefs) have been found to account for the largest amount of variance in impressions of others (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Both media scholars and social psychologists seem to agree that individuals will rely on schemas when forming an initial impression. The continuum model argues this to be the case, especially when individual pieces of information seem to be supportive of the category. According to the propositions of the continuum model it is expected:

H1a: Participants who receive who receive completely consistent information will hold perceptions that are evaluatively more similar to the presented label than will those participants whose character label and behaviors are inconsistent with one another.

Fiske and Neuberg’s model argues that behaviors and perceived attributes that are inconsistent with the category label initially accessed will have greater influence on the impression that is formed than will the category label initially accessed. More specifically, perceivers will rely more heavily on the individual attributes and behaviors to form their impressions than they will the label. Hence:

H1b: Participants who receive inconsistent information concerning the target character will form impressions that are more in line with the hedonic valence of the character’s presented behavior than with the character label initially presented.
According to the continuum model, perceivers will also rely on individual behaviors and attributes if no appropriate category label is present. If this is so, then we predict:

**H1c:** Participant impressions will strongly reflect the presented character behavior. For participants who receive no character label a priori, the impressions will be more similar to the valence of the characters’ behavior than will the impressions of those who receive an a priori label.

The results of the current study will be considered consistent with the continuum model arguments if a significant behavior main effect and a significant label X behavior interaction effect emerge (see Figure 2a).

Recently reformulated disposition arguments suggest that perceivers will use categorical labels to form their impressions, regardless of the interpretation of the targets’ subsequent behaviors. Raney (2003; 2006) argues that the use of story schemas may allow for only abridged moral evaluation—that viewers interpret character behaviors in light of their label, forcing all behaviors, consistent and inconsistent, to fit with schematic expectations. This suggests that media research and social psychological theories diverge in terms of what they posit will occur in situations of inconsistency and in situations when no initial labeling is provided. If this is so, we predict that:

**H2:** If the category label and subsequent attributes and behaviors are inconsistent with one another, the resulting impressions will be more in line with the hedonic valence of the presented label than with it will the valence of the specific behavior of the character. The results will yield a significant label main effect (see Figure 2b).
Figure 2. Continuum model and reformulated disposition results
As previously mentioned, in order for schemas to continuously be used, a cognitive mechanism must be used to reconcile the discrepant information with the schema. Inconsistency resolution is the mechanism tested by the current study. This mechanism is of interest because it seems applicable to general cognitive inconsistencies, not solely to moral inconsistencies or considerations. Inconsistency resolution is not solely a reliance on and reinforcement of categorically inconsistent information. The discrepant information must be discrepant enough, but may only be inconsistent to a degree in order for the process to take place (Hastie & Kumar, 1974; Rojahn & Pettigrew, 1992). Inconsistency resolution may be one way in which schemas are maintained. As argued by Raney (2004), viewers may interpret or re-interpret actions to maintain schematic expectations. Yet what will result is greater cognitive attention to the inconsistent information in order to reconcile it with the accessed schema. If schemas are maintained and this process is mediated by inconsistency resolution, we predict:

H3a: There will be a significant Label X Behavior interaction effect on recall of character attributes and behaviors.

H3b: Recall will have a significant effect on impressions formed.

H3c: The results will show a significant recall covariate effect, accounting for the variance previously explained by the independent variable(s).

Research has shown that for both media characters and real people, individuals require more evidence to confirm positive than negative traits and less information to disconfirm positive than negative traits (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Zhang & Hazan, 2002). In other words, it takes more information to arrive at a positive evaluation and less information to overturn one. On the other hand, it takes less information to arrive at a
negative evaluation and more information to overturn one. For media this means that a character may perform one cruel act and be evaluated negatively regardless of how many good acts they perform later, or a character can be evaluated negatively after performing one bad act no matter how many good acts they performed prior to that bad act. This suggests that the applicability of the continuum model and Raney’s revised disposition argument may be a function of the hedonic valence of the category label. Based on this, the current study also asks:

RQ: Does the hedonic valence of the information presented (good vs. bad) play a role in the impression formation processes that viewers use?
Chapter 2

Method

Participants

A total of 151 participants from a large northeastern university participated in this study. Participants were recruited from a large-lecture introductory Communications course; participation was provided in exchange for moderate extra course credit. Participant age ranged from 18 to 31 with the average participant age being 20.19 (SD=1.54). The sample consisted of mainly female participants (79.3%). The majority of the participants were also White (82.1%), with the remainder reporting that they belonged to an ethnic minority group. Participants reported renting a movie 2.20 times a month (SD=2.68) and going to the movies an average of .95 times a month (SD=1.58). The sample also reported watching television for an average of 1.38 hours before 6 p.m. (SD=.68) and an average of 2.38 hours after 6 p.m. (SD=1.28).

Operationalization of Independent Variables

According to Fiske and Neuberg (1990), category labels are those features, whether observed (e.g. social group, a role, a job, etc.), communicated by a third party, or verbally provided, that serve as organizers to help in understanding the other features and characteristics a target possesses. Labels must be broad enough to serve as a starting point for impression formation. Being that targets may be categorized in multiple ways, the category label that perceivers tend to rely upon is the one that has either temporal primacy, a physical manifestation, is contextually novel, or chronically accessible in memory. The remaining features are organized based on the label being used; these features are attributes (e.g. personality traits). Labels thus have strong links to attributes.
and will link to many attributes, while attributes may connect with one another but not as strongly or as often.

The present study operationalized category label as one that is chronically accessible in the minds of the fictional media viewers or rather, labels that have been consistently triggered in prior media experiences, more specifically a hero label and a villain label. As previously stated, story schemas become associated with specific character roles. Arguably two of the most significant character roles are those of the protagonist and the antagonist. The behaviors or attributes associated with a hero include but are not limited to politeness and helpfulness, and actions that are brave, noble, and prosocial (see Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Potter & Ware, 1989). Conversely, villains’ behaviors are those actions and attributes that serve to cause conflict and inflict harm on others, selfishness, and indifference towards others’ welfare (Potter & Ware, 1989).

Design

A 3 (Label Valence: Hero, Villain) X 2 (Behavior: Good, Bad) between-subjects post-test only experiment was conducted by manipulating the type of information available to viewers prior to “meeting” the target character as well as the character’s behavior in a subsequently viewed video clip. Participants were exposed to one of the following treatments: a condition in which the labeling of the character matched or was consistent with his behavior (consistent), a condition in which the labeling of the character did not match his behavior (inconsistent), or a condition in which the character was not labeled a priori (behavior-only). Being that there were two prototypical characters of interest to the current study, all levels were created for each character yielding six treatment conditions (two consistent, two inconsistent, and two behavior-
only conditions) with participants randomly assigned to one of the conditions (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Experimental Conditions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label Valence</th>
<th>Good Behavior/Attributes</th>
<th>Bad Behavior/Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hero Label</td>
<td>Consistent ($N = 22$)</td>
<td>Inconsistent ($N = 26$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villain Label</td>
<td>Inconsistent ($N = 23$)</td>
<td>Consistent ($N = 28$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Label</td>
<td>Behavior-only ($N = 30$)</td>
<td>Behavior-only ($N = 22$)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Stimulus Material*

This study examined specifically the two arguably most prototypical characters, the hero and the villain. Stimulus material therefore consisted of both a “good” and a “bad” character. Prior research has argued that simple exposure to a category label may not be enough to activate the label in the perceivers’ minds (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). In an effort to strengthen the saliency of the label, the stimulus material was created such that it was comprised of three components for the conditions that featured a label: a print advertisement, a 10-second audiovisual introduction, and a five-and-a-half minute video clip. The two conditions that did not feature a label did not have the print advertisement and the audiovisual introduction as a part of the stimulus.
The print advertisement was created to resemble newspaper and magazine advertisements typically used in marketing campaigns for television shows (see Figure 3). The image showed the target character prominently displayed. The text of the advertisement informed participants of the show’s name, air day, and home station, as well as critics’ perceptions of the show’s main character. These critic quotes served as a labeling mechanism for the target character. Hence there were two advertisements created, one for each character type.

The second portion of the stimulus was an audiovisual introduction. This 10-second introduction also served as a means of providing a character label. In conditions in which the character was labeled as a hero, he was introduced as “one of the most heroic characters on television.” This audio announcement was combined with on-screen text that described the main character as “A hero in the truest sense,” as deemed by a television critic. In conditions in which the character was labeled a villain, the text read “Puts the ‘V’ in villain,” as the announcer introduced him as “one of the most villainous characters on television.” Both the advertisement and the audiovisual introduction plus text were used as labeling mechanisms for a number of reasons. The primary reason is that simultaneous presentation of similar information using different modalities has been found to complement one another, leading to better retention of the information (Lim, Benbasat & Ward, 2000).

The third component of the stimulus, the five-and-a-half minute audiovisual clip, was composed of scenes from a 1996 FOX television show, Profit. The show’s premise revolved around the main character, Jim Profit, a businessman focused on upward mobility within a major international corporation. In the conditions in which his behavior
Text for Hero Label Conditions: “In a world of sharks and tigers, Jim Profit emerges as a true hero.”

Text for Villain Label Conditions: “If ever there was a villain to despise, Jim Profit is it.”

*Figure 3.* Print advertisement component of stimulus material.
was intended to be perceived as good, Jim came to the rescue of a drunk superior and his wife, made a speech about the importance of trust and integrity within the business world, and attempted to defend scrupulous actions that in the long-term benefited innocent babies. In conditions in which Jim’s behavior was intended to be perceived as bad/ villainous, the scenes focused on Jim using sensitive family information to coerce one of the company’s executive assistants into helping him destroy his boss’ career.

Pretest

A repeated measures within-subjects experiment was conducted to test the effectiveness of the stimulus manipulation. The stimulus pretesting procedure was designed to include two different characters (see Table 2). Pretest results determined the character used in the main study as the target character.

Four pretest conditions were created, each with two video clips featuring two distinct main characters portrayed by different actors. Each character was either labeled via a print advertisement and an audiovisual introduction as a hero or as a villain. In each set, the label was consistent for one character but inconsistent for the other. In essence, participants viewed one good character (either labeled as hero or villain) and one bad character (either labeled as hero or villain). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions; the characters’ presentation order was counterbalanced.

Fifty-two (52) participants were recruited to participate in the pretest of the stimulus material (Clip Set 1 \( N = 14 \); Clip Set 2 \( N = 13 \); Clip Set 3 \( N = 14 \); Clip Set 4 \( N = 11 \)). Pretest participants ranged in age from nineteen to twenty-three years old (\( M = 20.61, SD = 1.09 \)), and slightly more than half were female (59.6%). The majority
(78.8%) were White, with the remainder of participants reporting that they belonged to an ethnic minority group.

Table 2

**Pretest Experimental Design**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clip Set 1</th>
<th>Clip 1</th>
<th>Clip 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Label-Behavior Match</td>
<td>Label-Behavior Match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clip Set 1</td>
<td>Character 1</td>
<td>Hero label-Good behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clip Set 2</td>
<td>Character 1</td>
<td>Hero label-Bad behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clip Set 3</td>
<td>Character 2</td>
<td>Villain label-Good behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clip Set 4</td>
<td>Character 2</td>
<td>Villain label-Bad behavior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After viewing each clip, participants were asked to answer questions concerning the characters’ actions as well as how well the presented label applied to the character. The dependent variable of interest for the stimulus pretest was perceived consistency of the labeling mechanisms with the characters’ behaviors. Perceived consistency was assessed using three dimensions measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *Disagree* to 7 = *Very Much Agree*. Perceived Consistency of the Audiovisual Introduction with the character behavior was comprised of five items (e.g. “I think the introduction to the clip was a good match to the clip itself” “The voiceover before the clip gave me a good idea of who the main character was”; observed $\alpha = .85$). The second dimension, Ad Consistency, refers to how well participants thought the print advertisement described the characters’ behaviors (e.g. “The advertisement for the show
provided an accurate picture of the main character”; observed $\alpha = .81$). The final dimension assessed the Overall Perceived Consistency of both labeling mechanisms with the characters’ behaviors (e.g. “The critics’ perceptions of the character were accurate”; $r = .70, p < .001$; see Appendix A for complete pretest questionnaire).

No participants reported being previously exposed to any portion of the stimuli prior to the pretest, so none of the participants were excluded from the analysis. A picture of the main character was placed immediately above the questionnaire items that pertained to that character. The main characters’ names were also mentioned in the written and verbal instructions to the participants.

For each tested character, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with label—behavior match (i.e. whether the presented label evaluatively matched the presented behavior) entered as an independent variable, and the three perceived consistency dimensions entered into the model as dependent variables. For the first character, the results yielded a significant match main effect, Wilks’ $\lambda = .49, F(3, 48) = 16.45, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .51$. The univariate analysis showed the printed advertisement and the audiovisual introduction were perceived as significantly more consistent with the character’s behavior when this was the intended purpose: Perceived Consistency of Audiovisual Introduction $F(1, 50) = 18.15, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .27$; Perceived Ad Consistency $F(1, 50) = 33.72, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .40$ (see Table 3). The same was found the overall consistency of the labeling material, $F(1, 50) = 48.31, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .49$.

A follow-up MANOVA was conducted using label valence (e.g. good or bad) and behavior valence as separate independent variables and the three consistency dimensions entered into the model as dependent variables. Of particular interest to the test of the
manipulated stimulus was the interaction effect of the label valence and behavior valence. A significant multivariate interaction effect was obtained, Wilks’ \( \lambda = .44, F(3, 46) = 19.65, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .56 \). Tables 4, 5, and 6 show the means associated with this interaction. Again, label and behavior were considered significantly more consistent with one another in those conditions in which consistency was intended (i.e. label-behavior match) than when inconsistency was intended (i.e. label-behavior mismatch).

Table 3

*Perceived Consistency of Presented Labels with Character Behaviors for Pretest*

**Character 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>Univariate F-statistic</th>
<th>Partial ( \eta^2 )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Label-Behavior Match</td>
<td>Label-Behavior Mismatch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4.49 (.25)</td>
<td>3.02 (.24)</td>
<td>18.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisement</td>
<td>4.63 (.25)</td>
<td>2.57 (.24)</td>
<td>33.72*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Consistency</td>
<td>5.04 (.25)</td>
<td>2.65 (.24)</td>
<td>48.31*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

* \( p < .001 \)
Table 4

**Perceived Consistency of the Audiovisual Introduction with Character Behavior**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Behavior</th>
<th>Negative Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Label</td>
<td>4.06&lt;sub&gt;aA&lt;/sub&gt; (.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Label</td>
<td>2.80&lt;sub&gt;aB&lt;/sub&gt; (.32)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ F(1, 48) = 20.39, \ p < .001, \ \eta^2_p = .30 \]

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Within rows means with no lowercase subscript in common differ at \( p < .05 \) level; within columns means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at \( p < .05 \).

Table 5

**Perceived Consistency of the Advertisement with Character Behavior**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Behavior</th>
<th>Negative Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Label</td>
<td>4.10&lt;sub&gt;aA&lt;/sub&gt; (.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Label</td>
<td>2.50&lt;sub&gt;aB&lt;/sub&gt; (.33)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ F(1,48) = 38.64, \ p < .001, \ \eta^2_p = .45 \]

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Within rows means with no lowercase subscript in common differ at \( p < .05 \) level; within columns means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at \( p < .05 \).
Table 6

**Perceived Overall Consistency of Labeling Mechanisms with Character Behavior**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive Behavior</th>
<th>Negative Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Label</td>
<td>4.50\textsubscript{aA} (0.31)</td>
<td>2.39\textsubscript{bA} (0.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Label</td>
<td>2.89\textsubscript{aB} (0.31)</td>
<td>5.73\textsubscript{bB} (0.35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(F(1,48) = 57.48, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .55\)

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Within rows means with no lowercase subscript in common differ at \(p<.05\) level; within columns means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at \(p<.05\).

For Character 2, the results did not yield a significant match main effect, Wilks’ \(\lambda = .94, F(3, 48) = 1.03, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = .06\). The univariate analysis showed the printed ad and the audiovisual introduction were perceived as slightly more consistent with the character’s behavior when the labeling information was intended to be inconsistent with the character’s behaviors: Perceived Consistency of Audiovisual introduction \(F(1, 50) = .06, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = .00\); Perceived Ad Consistency \(F(1, 50) = .57, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = .01\) (see Table 7). The same was found for the overall consistency of the labeling material, \(F(1, 50) = 1.81, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = .04\).
Table 7

*Perceived Consistency of Presented Labels with Character Behaviors for Pretest*

**Character 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Label-Behavior Match</th>
<th>Label-Behavior Mismatch</th>
<th>F-Statistic</th>
<th>Partial $\eta^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction Consistency</td>
<td>3.17 (.23)</td>
<td>3.26 (.24)</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisement Consistency</td>
<td>2.95 (.25)</td>
<td>3.23 (.26)</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Consistency</td>
<td>3.02 (.28)</td>
<td>3.56 (.29)</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wilks’ $\lambda = .94$, $F(3, 48) = 1.03, p > .05$, $\eta^2_p = .06$

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Being that this effect was not a significant one and that the means were not in the expected or necessary direction, this stimulus manipulation was not used in the main study.

**Procedures**

Experimental sessions were conducted in a student computer technology classroom with twenty-seven (27) computer stations. Placed at each station were a participant informed consent form and a participant identification card/number.

Upon commencement of the experimental session, the researcher explained to participants that the purpose of the study was to measure their perceptions of media characters. This was done as to make the labeling mechanisms relevant to the participants’ current processing concerns (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). In those treatment conditions in which the character was labeled, participants were then given two
minutes to examine the print advertisement that described the main character and the television show in which the character appeared. Participants were then exposed to the 10-second audiovisual introduction and the video clip. Following the clip presentation, participants were asked to complete two web questionnaires pertaining to the main character and the overall viewing experience. The same procedure was enacted for those participants in the no-label treatment conditions, however, they were not given a print advertisement to view nor was there a 10-second audiovisual introduction.

Dependent Measures

In order to assess which impression formation process was used, two forms of perception measurements were used. Measurement items were selected based on prior person perception and impression formation research (Hoffner, 1996; Pfau & Mullen, 1995; Sanders, 2005). Items that were seemingly redundant or not applicable to the target character were not included in the final questionnaire. Participants were asked to rate on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = Not at All to 7 = Extremely) how well 24 adjectives described the main character. In addition, participants were asked on 7-point semantic differential scales how well 14 additional adjective-pairs (e.g. moral-immoral, weak-strong, bad-good, etc.) described the main character they had just seen. The instructions also made a particular point to specify that the ratings should be of the character and not of the actor portraying him. A factor analysis was conducted, with the results yielding one large Perception factor accounting for 54.16% of the variance. Thirty of the items were averaged to form the Perception scale (observed $\alpha = .97$) with higher scores meaning participants held a more positive impression of the target character. The remaining items were dropped due to poor inter-item reliability.
If the Continuum Model is supported, it was expected that participants would provide higher ratings if they viewed a character that was labeled and behaved as a hero, or if he was labeled a villain but behaved as a hero. In conditions in which he was labeled a villain and behaved as such or labeled a hero but behaved as a villain, participants were predicted to provide more negative ratings. If disposition arguments are supported, in conditions of heroic labeling, participants should provide higher ratings, regardless of how the character behaves. Conversely, in conditions of villainous labeling, participants should provide lower ratings regardless of how the character behaves. The “no label” participants’ ratings should coincide with the valence of the character’s behaviors.

An open-ended free recall measure was used to assess inconsistency resolution. Free recall was selected as the measurement of choice because it assesses the structure of information in memory, whereas recognition pertains moreso to memory accuracy (Rojahn & Pettigrew, 1992). Participants were asked to list or write as many of the main character’s behaviors and statements as they could remember. The listed items were coded as being either hedonically consistent or inconsistent with the label that was provided in the printed ad and the audiovisual introduction, as well as for hedonic valence.

Each statement and behavior presented during the clip presentation was coded by the researcher as being positive or negative. The valence of the coded items was based on the current operationalizations of hero and villain as well as the adjectives deemed by pretest as being indicative of a particular character role. Ten adjectives were deemed by pretest as being good descriptors of heroes ($M < 3.50$ on 7-point semantic differential scale ranging from 1 = Hero to 7 = Villain). Seven items were pretested and observed to
be good descriptors of villains \((M > 3.50\) on 7-point semantic differential scale ranging from 1 = Hero to 7 = Villain; see Table 8). Recalled behaviors and statements were coded as being consistent or inconsistent based on the hedonic valence of the label presented with the clip. All codings were made using the gist criterion (Hasti & Kumar, 1979; Wyer, Bodenhausen & Srull, 1984). If the participant recalled a behavior that actually occurred or paraphrased a statement the character made, the responses were coded. If a response included a behavior that did not occur or a statement the character did not make, the response was not coded.

Upon initial inspection, it was discovered that participants were not only recalling specific behaviors and statements, but were also possibly engaging in spontaneous trait inferencing (STI). Spontaneous trait inferencing involves attributional processing, or more specifically, attributing specific behaviors to person traits in a relatively automatic fashion (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994; 2005; Carlston, Skowronski & Sparks, 1995). The concept rests on the premise that perceiver rules and constructs allow for perceivers to connect specific behaviors to target attributes. When perceivers are asked to recall information about a target, they recall the traits rather than the specific behaviors. Trait implying behaviors and traits thus are spontaneously linked and sometimes indistinguishable from one another because STI may quite often occur unintentionally and outside of perceiver awareness during the impression formation process (D’Agostino & Beegle, 1996). Acknowledging this phenomenon, recall of trait descriptors were also coded for hedonic valence and consistency with the presented labels when appropriate.
Table 8

One-sample T-test for Valence Adjectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive Item or Adjective</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>T-statistic</th>
<th>DF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good-natured</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>-19.12***</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthy</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>-24.71***</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sincere</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>-16.56***</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warm</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>-23.91***</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>-20.25***</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>-13.86***</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerant</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>-14.09***</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>-6.46***</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>-5.80***</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foolish</td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>2.06*</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>3.67**</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obnoxious</td>
<td>5.57</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>6.21***</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangerous</td>
<td>6.04</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>9.82***</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>12.01***</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dishonest</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>14.61***</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wicked</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>15.17***</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evil</td>
<td>6.52</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>13.06***</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Lower means suggest the item to be more descriptive of a hero or good character.

* p < .05  **p < .01  ***p < .001 for two-tailed one-sample t-test
For each participant, the total number of positive behaviors, statements, and traits were tallied. A cumulative score of negative behaviors, statements, and traits was also computed. A proportion of positive behaviors/statements/traits to total items recalled, and negative items to total items recalled were then computed for each participant (Macrae et al., 1993; see Rojahn & Pettigrew, 1992).

In an effort to control for responses to the actor portraying the main character, three items were also included in the questionnaire that specifically assessed perceptions of the actor (observed $\alpha = .74$). Among these items were “The actor who played Jim typically plays controversial roles” and “It was difficult for me to see the actor play this character because he usually plays characters that are quite different from this one” (see Appendix B for complete questionnaire).
Chapter 3

Results

In accordance with the propositions of the continuum model, H1a predicted that those participants who were exposed to a label that was consistent with the subsequent character behavior would hold perceptions of that character that are evaluatively similar. Also based on this model, Hypothesis 1b predicted that when the presented label and subsequent behaviors were not hedonically similar, perceivers would form impressions that are more in line with the valence of the character’s behavior rather than the label presented. The model also proposes that when labels were not overtly presented, perceivers would base their perceptions on the individual target attributes and behaviors (H1c). In essence, a significant Label Valence X Behavior interaction effect and a significant Behavior main effect would provide support for the continuum model in its entirety. Conversely, media theory, more specifically current reformulations of disposition theory, would argue that in many instances regardless of consistency between labels and behaviors, perceptions would be based more so on the labels provided to and accessed by the perceiver (H2). A significant label main effect would suggest support for disposition arguments.¹

A 3 (Label: Hero, Villain, No Label) X 2 (Behavior: Good, Bad) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine label and behavior effects on perceptions of the target character. The Label Valence main effect was not significant, suggesting the results to be inconsistent with disposition arguments, \( F(2, 145) = .85 \ p > .05, \ \eta^2_p = .01. \)

¹ All analyses were conducted with perceptions of the actor entered into the models as a covariate (Raney, 2006; Tal-Or & Papirman, 2005). None of the analyses showed the variable to have a significant effect. Therefore only those analyses without the covariate variable are reported.
Perceptions of the target were moderately positive across label conditions (No label: $M = 4.00$, $SE = .12$; Hero Label: $M = 3.96$, $SE = .13$; Villain Label: $M = 3.79$, $SE = .10$).

The results yielded a significant behavior main effect, $F (1, 145) = 296.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .67$. The target character was perceived in a significantly more positive light when his behavior was good ($M = 5.14$, $SE = .10$) than when his behavior was bad/villainous ($M = 2.69$, $SE = .10$).

The results also showed a non-significant Label Valence X Behavior interaction effect, $F (2, 145) = 1.10$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2_p = .02$. When the target character exhibited good/heroic behaviors, he was perceived more positively, regardless of the valence of the labeling mechanisms that preceded exposure to the character’s behavior (see Table 9 for complete list of means). The interaction results also address the research question for the current study. The proposed question concerned whether or not impressions formed were a function of the combination of the label’s valence and the behavior’s valence. The non-significant Label X Behavior effect suggests that it does not.

Table 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Good Behavior</th>
<th>Bad Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hero Label</strong></td>
<td>5.06 (.19)</td>
<td>2.86 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Villain Label</strong></td>
<td>5.01 (.18)</td>
<td>2.56 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No Label</strong></td>
<td>5.36 (.16)</td>
<td>2.64 (.19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Higher means reflect a more positive impression.*
Overall the results seem to be partially consistent with the propositions of the continuum model, supporting the attribute-oriented approach. In situations of label-behavior hedonic inconsistencies, the target character’s behavior was a significant factor in the impression that was formed. In addition, the behavior also seemed to drive perceptions when the labeling mechanism matched in hedonic valence the target’s behavior.

The present study was also interested in the possible mediating effects of the process of inconsistency resolution on impression formation. Inconsistency resolution was assessed using a free recall measure. As previously stated above, ANOVA results yielded a significant main effect of behavior on perceptions; neither the Label Valence main effect nor the interaction of Label Valence and Behavior were significant. A 3 (Label) X 2 (Behavior) repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects on recall. Label and Behavior were entered into the model as between-subjects factors, while proportion of positive information recalled and negative information recalled were entered as two levels of a within-subjects factor, henceforth referred to as Recall. The Label main effect, the Behavior main effect, the Label X Recall, and the Label X Behavior X Recall three-way interaction effects were not statistically significant (see Table 10 for F-statistics; see Table 11 for complete list of means). Most important to the present study, the Label X Behavior interaction effect was not statistically significant, F (2, 135) = .83, p > .05, ηp² = .01. Participants did not seem to perceive inconsistencies between label and behavior, therefore it is difficult to say that inconsistency resolution

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2 Recall was computed into two different variables: 1) the proportion of positive behaviors recalled in relationship to the total number of behaviors recalled and 2) the proportion of negative behaviors recalled in relationship to the total number of behaviors recalled (Macrae et al., 1993). This resulted in two proportional scores for each participant.
Table 10

ANOVA Results for Effects of Label Valence and Behavior on Recall of Positive and Negative Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F-statistic</th>
<th>Partial $\eta^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Label Valence</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Label Valence X Behavior</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall</td>
<td>5.46*</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall X Label Valence</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall X Behavior</td>
<td>170.71**</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall X Label Valence X Behavior</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* $^* p < .05$, $^{**} p < .001$
Table 11

*Mean Proportion of Recall of Character Information by Label Valence and Behavior*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hero Behavior</th>
<th>Villain Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proportion of Positive Information Recalled</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hero Label</td>
<td>.46 (.05)</td>
<td>.06 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villain Label</td>
<td>.50 (.05)</td>
<td>.11 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Label</td>
<td>.48 (.04)</td>
<td>.04 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proportion of Negative Information Recalled</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hero Label</td>
<td>.21 (.05)</td>
<td>.55 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villain Label</td>
<td>.12 (.05)</td>
<td>.57 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Label</td>
<td>.09 (.04)</td>
<td>.55 (.05)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.
occurred. However, Recall did emerge as having a significant effect on impressions formed.

The results yielded a significant Recall main effect, Wilks’ $\lambda = .96$, $F(1, 135) = 5.46$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Overall, participants recalled a higher proportion of negative behaviors ($M = .35, SE = .02$) than they did positive behaviors ($M = .27, SE = .02$). There was also a significant Recall X Behavior interaction effect, Wilks’ $\lambda = .44$, $F(1, 135) = 170.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .56$. Participants recalled information that was more consistent with valence of the character’s behavior than they did information that was inconsistent with the behavior. When the character’s behavior was positive, participants recalled more positive information ($M = .48, SE = .03$) than they did negative information ($M = .14, SE = .03$). When the character’s behavior was negative, participants recalled more negative ($M = .56, SE = .03$) than positive information ($M = .07, SE = .03$) (see Figure 4).

In order to further examine the effects of Recall on impressions, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted looking at Recall as a predictor of impression. One multivariate and univariate outlier was excluded from the analysis. The regression model accounted for a significant amount of the variance, Adjusted $R^2 = .65$, $F(2, 138) = 129.11, p < .001$. It must be noted that multicollinearity is a problem in this analysis; recall of positive behaviors and recall of negative behaviors were significantly negatively correlated, $r = -.72, p < .001$. The multicollinearity between the two variables may be suppressing the beta coefficients calculated by the multiple linear regression, even though the variables are significant predictors in the model. Therefore the bivariate correlational relationships will be examined. The bivariate correlations show recall of positive behavior is positively correlated with perception ($r = .77, p < .001$) while recall of
Figure 4. Behavior X Recall interaction effect
negative behavior is negatively correlated with perception ($r = -.73, p < .001$). As the recall of positive information increased, the impression of the target was more positive; the opposite effect occurred for recall of negative information.

Finally, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to examine the effects of Label and Behavior on impression, controlling for the effects of Recall. Again, the Label main effect, and the Label X Behavior interaction effect were not statistically significant, Label Main Effect: $F (2, 133) = 1.21, p > .05, \eta^2_p = .02$; Label X Behavior Interaction: $F (2, 133) = .37, p > .05, \eta^2_p = .01$. The Behavior main effect, controlling for Recall of negative and positive behaviors, was statistically significant, $F (1, 133) = 58.48, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .31$. Regardless of the label valence, the target character was perceived significantly more positively when he exhibited good behavior ($M = 4.61, SE = .12$) than when he exhibited bad behavior ($M = 3.14, SE = .11$).

The results do not support the inconsistency resolution hypotheses. The Label X Behavior interaction effect on recall was not statistically significant, nor do the results suggest that participants perceived inconsistencies between the labeling mechanism and subsequent character behavior in such a way that it affected the impressions formed. However, Recall as a variable did play a significant role in impressions formed. When Recall was statistically controlled for, behavior still had a main effect on impression, suggesting behavior to be a salient and strong influence on impressions formed, and Recall to be a partial mediator. The non-significant label main effect on impressions and the significant behavior main effect suggest the label’s role in the impression formation process may have been so minimal that it could not create inconsistency in the minds of
the participants. Behavior, on the hand, may be very closely tied to recollection because behavior is extremely salient in audiovisual presentations.

Results Summary

The results were partially consistent with the continuum model in that a significant Behavior main effect showed impressions to be consistent with the valence of the behavior that the character exhibited. In addition, a series of analyses showed inconsistency resolution was not a mediating mechanism for impression formation, however; Recall was a partial mediator of character behaviors’ impact on impression in that it had a unique effect on the impression. When recall was statistically controlled for, the Behavior main effect remained, but the variance that it explained was less than when recall was not a covariate.
Discussion

The results from the present study suggest that when viewing media characters, viewers may engage in an impression formation process that is similar to the cognitive process they engage in when meeting individuals face-to-face. Specifically, Fisk and Neuberg’s Continuum Model of impression formation seems to be a better explanatory mechanism for the results rather than reformulations of disposition theory, at least partially.

The results did not yield a Label main effect, implying that the character label, or at least the labeling mechanisms used in the present study, may not be particularly influential in impression formation. Cognitive load may also explain the lack of a significant label main effect. Some scholars contend that under high cognitive load, perceivers will rely more heavily on heuristic processing and form impressions based on an initial prime or anchor (Hinds, 1999). If this were the case, the results would have shown a significant Label main effect. However others argue that under high cognitive load perceivers may be aware of a label but are too busy to activate the associated content, thus relying on the behavior to form the impression (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). Within the context of the present study, the label may not have been perceived to be as salient as the character’s behavior (Vorderer & Knobloch, 2002).

The results did yield a significant Behavior main effect implying that characters’ behaviors are a particularly salient and influential factor in impression formation. The influence occurs in instances when the labeling mechanism and subsequent behaviors are evaluatively similar, and when these two pieces of information evaluatively contradict
one another. In addition, this process occurs regardless of whether the initial label is hedonically positive or negative. These results are consistent with the propositions of the continuum model, more specifically the attribute-oriented approach.

Research on recency effects and first impression bias may explain the current study’s results. First impression bias or primacy effect argues that the first piece(s) of information presented to a perceiver about a target will greatly influence the resulting impression, prompting perceivers to either re-interpret or ignore information that is inconsistent with the initial label. Such an argument is supportive of reformulated disposition arguments. Changing or overriding a first impression is rather difficult, however, possible when the subsequent information is especially vivid, as in multimedia presentations (Lim, et al., 2000). Vivid, rich information, even if inconsistent with the initial labeling mechanism, is too difficult to re-interpret or ignore. In addition, multimedia presentations which allow perceivers to see behaviors performed and are imbrued with more cues, have been found to have a stronger influence on impressions than text-based information (Lim et al., 2000). Therefore it is possible that impressions changed to reflect the target character’s behaviors.

These arguments suggest that behavior’s significant effect on impression formation is not entirely unexpected. Media presentations tend to rely rather heavily on characters’ behaviors and actions. Viewers see behaviors as being very important and they are an integral part of moral appraisal (Cantor, 1996; Cohen, 1999; Lachlan, 2005; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). Actions are observable and can allude to character motivations and intentions (Potter & Ware, 1988; Vorderer & Knobloch, 2002). Vivid
information, such as behavior, has been found to not only be more appealing but also more likely to be stored and recalled (Sundar et al., 2001).

An additional explanation is the effects of integrative and retrospective processing. Integrative processing is the online encoding and integration of information about a target. During this form of processing, inconsistent behaviors are attended to carefully and are explained away. Primacy is especially important in this process as it lays the foundation for the impression and guides how all subsequent behavior is interpreted. Retrospective processing does not involve all of the information presented but rather a subset of what was presented (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). This subset of information is usually the information that is most salient or accessible at the time the judgment is assessed. In this present case, the most salient information was the character’s behaviors. The seeming inconsistent information is strongly represented in memory, quickly accessible and thus receives more weight in the impression of the target. Retrospective processing is more likely to result in recency effects or the strong influence of the most recent information on the impression. Consistent with this argument, the results showed a strong correlation between recall and the impression as impressions formed via this process are based on the content of the memory (Hamilton et al., 1999; Macrae et al., 1993; Skowronski et al., 1993). Such processing has also been shown to result in a greater reliance on information that is inconsistent with the predominant theme or label. The current results seem to be consistent with retrospective processing, especially in light of the argument that this process typically occurs in response to specific target-centered questions.
The significant behavior effect also has implications for the fictional media’s role in the perpetuation of stereotypes. Stereotypes can be inhibited and hence cannot be used in subsequent judgments (Devine & Monteith, 1999). The findings suggest that if counterstereotypical behaviors are presented, the behaviors themselves may be enough to counteract initial inaccurate judgments. Viewers are capable of disregarding inapplicable information which may also reflect at least a moderate amount of cognitive engagement with the content and the characters.

The initial arguments for this study viewed inconsistency resolution as being a cognitive mechanism that aides in either reconciliation of consistent information or disregard of inconsistent information. As stated previously, this process was thought to be a mediating one, particularly used so that viewers are allowed to continue the use of labels regardless of behaviors being performed.

The results of the present study seem to suggest that within a media situation, viewers may disregard the label, and rely on the exhibited behavior. The reliance on behavior is represented by a greater recollection of those behaviors. More specifically, viewers engage in an individuating process in which they recall more of the behaviors, which were also the salient information in the present study (Crocker et al., 1983; Hamilton, 1998; Hamilton & Garcia-Marques, 2003; Hastie & Kumar, 1979; Macrae et al., 1993). It is difficult to say at this point, however, that inconsistency resolution as theoretically defined is a mediator because there was no significant Label X Behavior interaction effect. It must be noted that there are three possible outcomes to inconsistency resolution (Rosenbach et al., 1973). First, the perceiver could use both sets of information (e.g. label and inconsistent behavior) without attempting to reconcile or
integrate them. Second, the inconsistencies could be integrated into the schema and become a part of the unified impression. Lastly, the perceiver could opt to disregard either the schema-related information or the inconsistent behavioral information, forming his or her impression based on only one form of information. A disregard of the inconsistent behavioral information could represent a category-based or schema-based cognitive process as argued for by the categorization portion of the continuum model and reformulated disposition arguments, respectively. An impression that seems to have disregarded categorical information may suggest that the perceiver relied more heavily on the inconsistent behavioral information, thus representing an individuating process of impression formation.

It must be noted that the study’s design did not allow for the first outcome to be tested (integration/use of both sets of information), so we cannot conclude that inconsistencies are not explained or included in the final impression. Many viewers/participants also may not have perceived inconsistencies as they were not manifested in the measures utilized. Recall, as the mechanism was operationalized, had its own unique effect on impressions formed, contributing to the impression, and serving as a partial mediator. The recall effects suggest that the impressions formed were not only a function of the behaviors seen, but also what was remembered of those behaviors.

Perceivers seemed to be forming impressions on what they had seen, but also on behaviors and characteristics not necessarily seen but rather inferred. This suggests that there is still additional variance not accounted for by recall. The impressions were much broader than what was shown by the characters’ behaviors. This suggests that trait inference may also be an additional explanatory factor in impression formation.
Expectations, predispositions and implied personality are all contributing factors (Forgas & Bower, 2001). Behavior attributions have been argued to be a default foundations for impressions in which perceivers first categorize behaviors in terms of a personality trait then the target in terms of that trait (Yzerbyt & Rogier, 2001).

Behaviors make up schemas, but behaviors have to be illustrated before perceivers know which schema to access. In a media situation, while schemas may be utilized, it may be the behavior that is still the driving force. Additional behaviors and characteristics are inferred that are consistent with those that have already been exhibited and that fit with the accessed schema. Similar to implicit personality arguments, impression formation of fictional targets seem to be largely an attribute-driven one (Babrow et al., 1988; Forgas & Bower, 2001). Both exhibited and implied behaviors, as well as expectations, are contributing factors, but impressions may not be entirely driven by them. However, it still remains unclear what specifically happens in the perceivers’ minds when a vivid inconsistent behavior(s) are exhibited--it is only clear that adjustments are made (Lim et al., 2000; Yzerbyt & Rogier, 2001). Character behavior, recall of behavior, and perceiver-centered explanations like viewer expectancy, cognitive load, and perceiver mood may explain or account for the variance of impression left unexplained by the present study.

Limitations

The present study may be limited in its explanatory power due to limitations in the measurement and operationalization of key concepts, and study design.

The measurements used to assess impression formation all relied on recall and post-exposure impression assessment and reporting which lack a certain amount of face
validity. The impression formation process was not assessed as it occurred, but rather the measure relied on the perceivers’ recollection, and the actual cognitive process that was used was inferred. Such measures allow for limited examination of how perceivers may have attempted to attribute inconsistencies or unexpected behaviors and attributes to the target’s disposition or the situation in which he may have found himself (Crocker et al., 1983; Hamilton, 1998).

It may have been beneficial to assess impression formation using both close-ended measurements and open-ended ones and to do so during the character impression formation process as well as after. Fiske and colleagues (1987) have specifically used talk-aloud data to examine the impression formation process. Perceivers speak aloud their thought processes, what is going through their minds as they come to an impression of a target. Researchers have also used talk-aloud methods, sentence-completion and read aloud techniques to determine how much attention (in seconds) is paid to various attributes of a target, how much of the process is devoted to discussing various kinds of information (e.g. consistent information, inconsistent information, etc.), and the extent to which positive and negative information is taken into account during the process (Ruscher, Hammer & Hammer, 1996; Ruscher et al., 2000). Such methods have greater face validity in that researchers can actually “see” what is taking place in the thought process. Using such measures also allows for the examination of integrative processing or incidental impression formation which is more likely an occurrence during media viewing. As previously stated, this form of cognitive processing allows for the strengthening and continued reliance on a dominant theme or label throughout the impression formation process, an argument consistent with reformulated disposition
theory arguments. Using both measures, researchers may see more results indicative of multiple cognitive processes at work in character impression formation. In addition, the use of both types of measurements post-hoc may aide in establishing greater predictive validity for open-ended measures, using them to predict the impressions that are formed and assessed via close-ended measurements.

Using directions similar to that of the Crockett Role Category Questionnaire (see Babrow et al., 1988, Delia et al., 1974; Kenny, Press & Crockett, 1972), participants could be asked to describe the character as completely as possible including what they knew, felt, and thought about the character. This measure has not been used in the past to assess the continuum model’s tenets of impression formation but it has been shown to be a reliable and valid measure of impression formation (see O’Keefe & Sypher, 1981). More specifically the measure assesses the complexity of formed impressions, with use of more characteristics, more abstract personality traits, and more integration of available information representing a more complex impression. More complex impressions would suggest a more individuating processing strategy.

Using a more complex measurement system would also require the assistance of multiple coders rather than one coder as was used in this study. The use of only one coder in the current study is also a limitation in that it does not provide for the researcher to discuss or provide information concerning the reliability of the measure used. Multiple coders would increase the reliability and validity of the measures and by extension the

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3 The Crockett Role Category Questionnaire has traditionally used data from open-ended impression formation measures to assess the cognitive complexity of an individual person. However, Babrow and colleagues (1988) found evidence that suggests that a person may vary in his/her cognitive complexity as a function of the target being evaluated. The resulting impression may be complex for one target and simple for another.
examination of the recall effect on impressions within the context of media, as has been shown in social psychology.

A second limitation pertains to the stimulus material used in the current study. The results suggested that character behavior is a very salient piece of information for perceivers, and that labels are relatively irrelevant; however, as previously mentioned, labels and categories, including the ones tested here, have been previously found to have significant influences on impressions. This suggests the possibility that the label manipulation may not have been a very strong one. It was also unclear if the label provided is the one perceivers actually used as a point of comparison. When multiple categories are applicable to a target, the more salient category is traditionally what perceivers will rely on to guide their impression (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001; van Rijswijk & Ellemers, 2002). The main character was a businessman which could very well have been the categorical label or sub-category accessed. A stronger and clearer labeling mechanism may allow for examination of severely inconsistent information and a better examination of inconsistency resolution’s role in the impression formation process (Hastie & Kumar, 1979; Rojahn & Pettigrew, 1992). When the label is more salient or explicit and the subsequent stimuli more vague, a stronger reliance on the label and by extension, recollection of the behaviors associated with it may be the result (Skowronski et al., 1993). Overt and covert labeling result in different effects on impression processes. Overt labeling results more often in contrast effects while covert labeling results in assimilation.

In regards to study design, the continuum model was not tested in its entirety as there was no condition in which only a label was provided to participants. The existence
of such a condition within a media context may be questionable as media presentations tend to incorporate behaviors, however a study could and may need to be designed such that all steps of the continuum model are tested. In addition, it was difficult to parse apart the effect of the label from the effect of the character’s behaviors in conditions in which the two hedonically matched. The model argues that in situations of consistency, perceivers rely on the label rather than the attributes and behaviors. However, there was no mechanism incorporated into the study that allowed for such an effect to emerge. The existence of a label-only condition may assist in solving this problem. As a result, dispositional attributions may be more likely to emerge in the results.

Future Research and Conclusions

The results are seemingly consistent with the original arguments of disposition theory in that viewers used behaviors to form impressions in much the same way they are argued to use and moral assessments of those behaviors to form dispositional alignments. The findings also provide partial support for the continuum model. It must be noted that the current results, while not showing statistical support for the reformulated disposition propositions, should not be interpreted as irrefutable evidence that the latest propositions for the theory are incorrect. The non-significant label main effect in this study should not be interpreted as meaning that character labeling is never influential or not accessed cognitively to form an impression. Theories including those of identification, parasocial interaction and of stereotyping have shown media viewers to use categorical information and schemas but more so in regards to salient person characteristics such as race and gender (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Potter et al., 2002). However, the techniques used in the present study (i.e. print advertisement, audiovisual labeling in the form of a show
introduction), which are also typically used in industry, may not be the best operationalizations of category labels for media characters. In addition, inconsistency resolution may not be the mechanism that fully mediates or allows for viewers to continuously use schemas to form their impressions.

But the larger issue is that the findings leave a foundation upon which to argue that there may multiple cognitive processes at work in character impression formation. The present study represents the first efforts to explore multiple cognitive processes in forming impressions of media characters. This data supports one theoretical approach (attribute-oriented one), but the limitations of the present study coupled with previous findings/research make it feasible that the category-oriented approach is also applicable. The impressions formed, whether a result of integrative or retrospective processing, require perceivers to organize the presented target information into a coherent evaluation (Hamilton et al., 1999). Future research would be necessary to further examine the cognitive processes involved, and to do so in increasingly ecologically valid ways.

Previous research has found that viewers find fictional characters that have both good and bad characteristics to be the most fascinating because they increase suspense levels, can elicit mixed emotions and cause more inner conflict (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). In actuality, many fictional characters with which viewers have a strong connection possess both bad and good characteristics and exhibit both kinds of behaviors. But there is an inconsistency threshold, meaning that unexpected information may only be influential if it is not presented too often (Hastie & Kumar, 1979; Rojahn & Pettigrew, 1992). After a certain point, inconsistencies do require a lot more cognitive attention, which raises the question of whether or not the inconsistencies affect the enjoyment of
the viewing experience? Research has found that in situations where behavioral inconsistency occur, perceivers may still be able to form an impression about a target, but they are also less confident about the impression they formed (Hamilton et al., 1999; Lim et al., 2000). The decrease in certainty may adversely affect enjoyment of the viewing experience, or it could lead to feelings of suspense and thus increase enjoyment. The present study presented a character with a very lop-sided personality (i.e. completely good, completely bad).

Future would also do well to examine incidental impression formation. Even though characters are an integral part of the viewing experience, viewers do not go into the situation with forming an impression being the primary goal (see Carlston & Mae, 2003). Examining incidental impression formation would involve both changes in procedure and design. This would involve providing filler or distraction tasks and burying trait scales used as dependent measures among other irrelevant questionnaire items so as to divert perceiver attention away from the impression goal.

Changing the experimental session to one in which the study’s purpose is less evident may aide in discouraging the use of systematic processing. Experimental sessions may come with the preconception that in-depth processing of presented stimuli is necessary. Hence the impression formation process is intentional rather than incidental. Intentional impression formation may involve additional process such as correction and editing. It is influenced moreso by the target’s behavior and can result in more specific trait impressions. Incidental impression formation, on the other hand, may involve more simple associative processing, and may be more vulnerable to bias by simple heuristics. Many studies of impression formation examine the intentional form of processing. Being
that there may be different processes and outcomes as a function of intentionality and
incidence, the results yielded by intentional impression formation studies may be
misleading or inapplicable to incidental impression formation theorizing. Therefore the
present study could be improved and expounded upon by assessing correction, an
indication of a more systematic processing strategy, as well as the effects of more
peripheral cues and influences such as background music, show/film title, character
names, occupations, etc. (Carlston & Mae, 2003; Potter et al., 2002).

Potter and colleagues (2002) specifically attempted to parse apart the effects of
content from the effects of viewer schemas on subsequent judgments about stimulus
content. Their findings suggested that viewers strongly rely on schemas, moreso than
specific content, in evaluating their viewing experiences. In replicating their
methodology, a future study could incorporate measures that assess judgments about the
specific acts and behaviors performed by the character to determine how these judgments
affect perceptions. If schemas are the driving force, then such judgments should be
stronger predictor of impressions than would a manipulated content variable such as level
of consistency between a labeling mechanism and subsequently presented information
(i.e. low, moderate, highly consistent).

Once the mechanisms and model(s) have been identified, researchers would do
well to examine how relationships such as connectedness, identification, and parasocial
interaction fit into the the process (Raney, 2006). For example, according to Elliot and
Devine (1994), the degree of negative affect resulting from cognitive inconsistency
depends on how relevant to the self the information is. If the inconsistency is highly
relative to self-defining standards, the individual’s aversion will be specific and so will
the strategy used to reduce dissonance. If the information is less internalized or the connection is minimal, general negative affectivity will be felt, and an individual will be less discriminating in the strategy he or she will use to reduce dissonance. It may be that a perceiver will not systematically attempt to resolve character inconsistencies. Level of identification could also serve as a moderator in determining the strategy used to deal with inconsistent character information. Higher levels of identification, and by extension feelings of similarity, could result in a more specific strategy such as inconsistency resolution or individuation. However it may be that the lower the identification viewers, having not internalized the inconsistency, may rely on a less taxing strategy and use schemas to form their impressions in order to alleviate the dissonance.

Involvement may also play a role in the impression formation process and is arguably an integral part of the viewer-character connection. Involvement is the level of psychological investment in a character, the ability to approach him/her (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). The extent of label activation is moderated by level of involvement with the target (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). When involvement is low, perceivers rely on the broadest category representation rather than a more differentiated one like hero or villain, hence involvement may serve as a moderator for impression formation processing in media-viewing situations.

In future studies participants should also be exposed to fictional targets in varying increments (5 minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes, etc.) to determine if the process changes over time. This kind of design closely resembles what may occur in television serial viewing in which viewers are exposed to a character in small doses, whether they be 30-minutes or 60-minutes once a week. Over time, character impression formation strategies
may change as viewers become more familiar with a character and additional cues and information about the character are provided. Initial information, while important, may become less so as exposure increases. Character labels, or other peripheral cues such as character occupation, or show title, while powerful and influential are also susceptible to discounting, thus their effects may be short-term in nature (Petty, Priester & Brinol, 2002; Petty & Wegener, 1999).

There are undoubtedly media situations in which viewers will rely on their schemas, and continue to do so in the face of contradictory behavior. Stereotyping research suggests this to be the case. It would be wise, then to continue to explore other possible mechanisms through which this may occur, such as moral disengagement as proposed by Raney (2004) and the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) which argues that social cues may lead to individuation when they are present, while their absence leads to a reliance on relevant and salient social identities (Tannis & Postmes, 2003). Brewer’s (1988) dual-processing model may be another theoretical framework in which to proceed in the examination of character impression formation. This framework allows for multiple cognitive approaches, as does the continuum model, but the process and the ability to categorize or individuate is dependent on perceiver relevance and involvement with the target. Such an examination of this framework’s arguments could be examined by replicating the present study and varying levels of involvement. The Elaboration Likelihood model and HSM also both argue for dual-processing systems (see Petty & Wegener, 1999; Chen & Chaiken, 1999). In other words, there are other cognitive mechanisms, arguments, mediators, and possibly moderators,
that may still lead to the kind of processing strategies argued for by Raney’s (2004) reformulation of disposition theory.

In continuing this line of research, one must remember that disposition theory is not a theory whose primary focus is cognitive processing as theories of impression formation may be. However, this is what reformulations of the entertainment theory are attempting to incorporate. The present results suggest that viewers do not always use schemas or character categorizations. Behavior, ability to remember what happened, and possibly to a smaller degree, the initial labels are all influential in impression formation. While the results are partially consistent with the propositions of the continuum model, this model may not be the best explanatory mechanism for character impression formation. However, the results are still not convincing enough to disregard the propositions the reformulated disposition theory makes in regards to impression formation. Future studies would do well to determine in what instances schemas and behaviors are prevailing factors.

Keeping these results and ideas in mind, media producers during the creative process may do well to take into account how prior viewing experiences and story schemas and the roles characters play in them, may affect current perceptions. Marketers may need to be cognizant of how characters are presented in campaigns and advertisements, as misrepresenting these characters could be problematic. This study also suggests that critic reviews in advertisements and brief character introductions may not be particularly salient triggering mechanisms for viewers.

The present study provides a foundation upon which to suggest that interpersonal impression formation processes and mediated ones are similar, despite the dissimilarities
in context. Both situations may call for the use of schemas and categories in some situations, and behaviors in others as the driving mechanism. However, it seems that interpersonal models may not apply directly to character impression formation. Media viewers, in the viewing experience, may have other and/or additional cognitive mechanisms at their disposal and contextual factors that may influence character impressions.
References


In S. Chaiken & Y. Trope (Eds.), Dual process theories in social psychology (pp. 231-254). New York: Guilford.


Appendix A
Pretest Questionnaire

Please indicate how well each statement represents your thoughts on the video you just viewed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Very Much Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I think the introduction to the clip was a good match to the clip itself.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The voiceover before the clip gave me a good idea of who the main character was.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The information in the ad was consistent with the character’s behaviors.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The clip itself gave me the best sense of the main character’s personality.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The character’s actions weren’t consistent with what the introduction for the show suggested.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The introduction to the show did not accurately describe the main character.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The characters’ behaviors were consistent with the critics’ description.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The advertisement for the show provided an accurate picture of the main character.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. The introduction suggested that the character was something he was not.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I thought the clip was not long enough for me to get a sense of who the character was.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I thought the advertisement for the show did not describe the main character very well.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. The critics’ perceptions of the character were accurate.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Have you seen this show before?</td>
<td>□ Yes</td>
<td>□ No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Of the following, which piece of information do you feel was most salient during the presentation?</td>
<td>□ The advertisement</td>
<td>□ The 10-second introduction</td>
<td>□ The character’s behavior in the clip</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How well does each of the following adjectives describe the character, Jim Profit?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Does Not At All Describe</th>
<th>Somewhat Describes</th>
<th>Very Much Describes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
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<td>Intelligent</td>
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<td>Heroic</td>
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<td>Warm</td>
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<td>Good Natured</td>
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<td>Sincere</td>
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<td>Foolish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Villainous</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trustworthy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skillful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wicked</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dangerous</td>
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<td>Pleasant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evil</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

STOP!

Please wait for further instructions.
Please indicate how well each statement represents your thoughts on the video you just viewed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Very Much Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I think the introduction to the clip was a good match to the clip itself.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The voiceover before the clip gave me a good idea of who the main character was.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. The information in the ad was consistent with the character’s behaviors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. The clip itself gave me the best sense of the main character’s personality.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. The character’s actions weren’t consistent with what the introduction for the show suggested.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. The introduction to the show did not accurately describe the main character.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. The characters’ behaviors were consistent with the critics’ description.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. The advertisement for the show provided an accurate picture of the main character.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. The introduction suggested that the character was something he was not.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. I thought the clip was not long enough for me to get a sense of who the character was.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. I thought the advertisement for the show did not describe the main character very well.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. The critics’ perceptions of the character were accurate.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Have you seen this show before?</td>
<td>□ Yes</td>
<td>□ No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Of the following, which piece of information do you feel was most salient during the presentation?</td>
<td>□ The advertisement</td>
<td>□ The 10-second introduction</td>
<td>□ The character’s behavior in the clip</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continue to Next Page
How well does each of the following adjectives describe the character, Jimmy Berg?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Does Not At All Describe</th>
<th>Somewhat Describes</th>
<th>Very Much Describes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Competent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intelligent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tolerant</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heroic</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Warm</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Good Natured</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sincere</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
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<td>Foolish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Villainous</td>
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<td>Trustworthy</td>
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<td>Wicked</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dangerous</td>
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<td>Pleasant</td>
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<td>Evil</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Continue to Back Page
For each adjective below, with 1 being a better descriptor of a hero and 7 being a better descriptor of a villain, please use the check boxes to indicate which character type you believe the adjective best describes. For example, if you believe the adjective “imaginative” better describes a villain, then provide a rating that is closer to the right-hand side of the grid.

<table>
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<th>Competent</th>
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<td>Villain</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Media Use Habits
This section of the questionnaire pertains to additional various aspects of media use.

1. How many days of the week, if any, do you read a newspaper? _____Days a Week Read Newspaper

2. On a typical day, how many hours of TV do you watch between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.? _____Hours of TV During the Day From 6 a.m - 6 p.m.

3. On a typical night, how many hours of TV do you watch between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m.? _____Hours of TV at Night From 6 p.m. - 6 a.m.

4. On average, how many days during the week do you watch at least one news program on TV? _____Days a Week Watch Television News Program

Please indicate how much you like each of the following types of television programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Television Program</th>
<th>Dislike Very Much</th>
<th>Neither Like nor Dislike</th>
<th>Like Very Much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Situation Comedies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. News</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Fictional Police Dramas (e.g. Law &amp; Order, NYPD Blue, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Talk Shows (e.g. Oprah, Tyra Banks, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Reality-based Police Programs (e.g. Cops, America's Most Wanted, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Sporting Events</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Reality TV Shows (e.g. Survivor, The Amazing Race, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Fictional Dramas (e.g. Nip/Tuck, Lost, etc.)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demographic Information

What is your age? ______________________

What is your gender? Male Female

What is your academic standing? Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

What is your ethnicity (select all that apply): ___ African American ___ Caucasian ___ Latino ___ Asian/Asian American ___ Pacific Islander ___ Native American ___ Other

End of Questionnaire
Appendix B
Study Questionnaire

Perception Scales

Please provide your perceptions of the character below. Your ratings should be based on the character rather than on the actor who played the part.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at All</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Extremely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sincere</td>
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<td>Trustworthy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good Natured</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dishonest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Courageous</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noble</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Instructions

Please provide your perceptions of the character below. Your ratings should be based on the character rather than on the actor who played the part.
Please use the rating scales below to indicate which adjective you believe better describes this character.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uncaring-Caring</th>
<th>Unattractive-Attractive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selfish-Unselfish</td>
<td>Anxious-Calm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong-Right</td>
<td>Weak-Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improper-Proper</td>
<td>Unsexy-Sexy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nervous-Poised</td>
<td>Unqualified-Qualified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense-Relaxed</td>
<td>Bad-Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meek-Assertive</td>
<td>Immoral-Moral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recall Measure

In the box below, please list or write as many of the main character's behaviors as you can remember.

Response to Actor  1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree

I have seen the actor who played Jim quite frequently on other shows. The actor who played Jim typically plays controversial roles. It was difficult for me to see the actor play this character because he usually plays characters who are quite different from this one. When I think of the actor who played Jim, I usually think of a good guy.

Prior Exposure to Stimulus

I have seen this show or part of it.  1 = Yes  0 = No
Appendix C
Advertisements

“If ever there was a villain to despise, Jim Profit is it.”
Michael Warren
USA Today

Tuesdays this Fall
“In a world of sharks and tigers, Jim Profit emerges as a true hero.”
Michael Warren
USA Today

Tuesdays this Fall
VITA: MEGHAN S. SANDERS

EDUCATION
M.A. in Media Studies, The Pennsylvania State University, May 2003
Advisor: S. Shyam Sundar

B. A. in Mass Communications, Dillard University, May 2001

RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS

- Cognitive processing of and psychophysiological response to media information
- Responses to media characters
- Enjoyment of media genres
- Mass Communication Theory and Media Effects
- Communication Research Methods
- Media Representations of Women and Ethnic Minorities

Publications


Competitively Selected Conference Presentations


*Top Student Paper


COURSES TAUGHT
Mass Media and Society, COMM 100, The Pennsylvania State University (Spring, 2006; Summer 2006).
Research Methods in Communication (Quantitative Research Methods), COMM 404, The Pennsylvania State University (Fall, 2005).
Women, Minorities, and the Media, COMM 205/WMST 205, The Pennsylvania State University (Summer, 2004; Summer 2005).