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Sympathizing With Antiheroes: A Study of Narrative Transportation and Moral Disengagement in Adolescents

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate whether the extent to which adolescents feel lost in a fictional story (i.e. narrative transportation) affects the extent to which they justify or forgive the protagonist's immoral actions (i.e. moral disengagement). Ninety-two Dutch secondary school students (37 males) between 12 and 16 years of age participated and were randomly assigned to an instructed fiction or uninstructed fiction condition. While participants in both conditions read the same story, only those in the former condition were instructed to immerse themselves in the narrative. Participants then completed the Narrative Transportation Scale and a moral disengagement questionnaire. Contrary to expectations, this study did not find a significant link between transportation and moral disengagement. Moreover, the transportation-enhancing instructions appeared to be ineffective. Although the results indicate transportation does not affect moral disengagement in adolescents, several limitations of the study suggest that further research is warranted.

Keywords: [fiction, moral disengagement, narrative transportation, adolescence]

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Recent media studies suggest there is a growing popularity in books, movies, TV series, and video games that center on morally ambiguous protagonists, commonly known as antiheroes (Eden et al., 2017; Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010; Kleemans et al., 2016). This trend has led to an increased interest in understanding how audiences come to enjoy and root for characters whose actions or intentions they would find morally inexcusable in real life (Janicke & Raney, 2015; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Shafer & Raney, 2012). Media scholars contend that one of the main pathways to enjoyment of antiheroes and the stories in which they reside is through moral disengagement (MD)—a cognitive process in which people re-frame a character's immoral actions or intentions in a manner that justifies or excuses them, thereby preventing feelings of guilt from arising (Janicke & Raney, 2015; Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Raney & Janicke, 2013). Abundant research has highlighted the importance of MD on audiences' reception of morally ambiguous protagonists and their narratives (Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Shafer & Raney, 2012). But does the *way* that audiences engage with a story affect the extent to which they morally disengage from the protagonist's wrongful behavior?

Narrative transportation is a common way of engaging with a narrative that involves feeling completely lost or absorbed in the story (Green & Brock, 2000; Green & Dill, 2012). It has repeatedly been shown to have persuasive effects on audiences' attitudes and beliefs about the real world (Green & Brock, 2000; Green & Dill, 2012; Gretter et al., 2017). For instance, viewers petrified by the popular 1975 shark-attack thriller, *Jaws*, may continue to falsely believe that sharks are bloodthirsty man-eaters (Carpenter & Green, 2012; Harrison & Cantor, 1999). However, the relation between

narrative transportation and MD remains unclear. This study attempts to further current understanding of MD by examining whether the degree to which readers feel transported in a printed fictional narrative is related to the extent to which they justify or excuse the protagonist's immoral actions. Moreover, this study will investigate the proposed relationship between narrative transportation and MD in a sample of early adolescents—a population of readers who are still in the midst of developing their critical thinking and moral reasoning abilities and who have received relatively limited attention in prior print-based MD research (Gretter et al., 2017; Nippold et al., 2020).

Moral Disengagement

Extant research has supported the idea that, generally speaking, audiences develop a positive disposition towards a heroic and righteous protagonist, and a negative disposition towards a morally corrupt antagonist (Raney, 2004; Raney & Janicke, 2013). However, unlike the archetypal heroes and villains in many ancient myths and modern day superhero stories, antiheroes are neither consistently virtuous nor consistently immoral—they lie somewhere in between (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2016). Some antiheroes act righteously but do so for selfish or dishonest reasons (e.g., Frank Underwood, an ambitious US congressman who strives for the presidency, from the series *House of Cards*). Others have noble intentions but pursue them in morally corrupt ways (e.g., Dr. Gregory House, an egotistical and insolent medical doctor from the series *House*). Still others act prosocially and with good intentions in one scene, then are deliberately antisocial in the next (e.g., Tony Soprano, a New Jersey mafia boss who struggles with taking care of his business, family, and mental health, from the series *The*

Sopranos). By cognitively re-construing the sins of these morally ambiguous protagonists in a way that makes them seem justified or forgivable (i.e. MD), audiences can simultaneously avoid outrage and continue liking them without remorse, thereby maximizing their chance of enjoying the story (Janicke & Raney, 2015, 2018; Raney & Janicke, 2013).

Bandura et al., (1996) identified eight commonly used mechanisms of MD, which have since been studied in relation to a number of both real and fictional moral conflicts. One may re-construe a character's immoral actions as necessary to fulfill some greater social or moral purpose (*moral justification*); they may blame immoral conduct on external circumstances (*attribution of blame*); they may re-construe a character's wrongful actions as necessary to prevent a worse alternative (*advantageous comparison*); they may portray the victim as somehow less-than-human and therefore, deserving of harm (*dehumanization*); they may minimize the character's responsibility by diffusing the blame amongst a group of other characters (*diffusion of responsibility*) or by blaming the character's immoral choices on the dictates of authorities (*displacement of responsibility*); they may downplay the harm of the character's actions by rephrasing it with an innocuous term or expression (*euphemistic labeling*); or, finally, they may simply disregard or misrepresent the harmful consequences of the character's actions (*distortion of consequences*; Bandura, et al., 1996). Stories themselves typically contain cues embedded within the plot (e.g., in the form of dialogue or backstory) that can help trigger these eight mechanisms of MD (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010; Raney & Janicke, 2013; Shafer & Raney, 2012).

In addition to narrative cues, media scholars have identified several other factors that appear to impact the likelihood or extent to which we disengage ourselves from the immoral actions of antiheroes (Janicke & Raney, 2018; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Shafer & Raney, 2012). One such factor—which is closely related to narrative transportation—is the extent to which we identify with the character (i.e., character identification) (Janicke & Raney, 2015; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Instead of feeling absorbed in a story as a whole, identification involves feeling completely absorbed in one of the characters of a story (Sestir & Green, 2010). Given the experiential similarities between identifying with a character and feeling transported in a story, the following section will outline past research that attests to character identification's impact on MD.

Character Identification

Character identification is a common way of engaging with a narrative that is often described as "putting yourself in the character's shoes" (Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). It is an imaginative state during which one feels fully absorbed in a story, loses one's self-awareness, and abandons one's observer-identity while cognitively and affectively adopting the character's goals and point of view (Cohen, 2001; Green & Dill, 2012).

As mentioned earlier, extant research has supported the notion that it is easier for audiences to accept or justify the immoral behaviors of characters if they identify with them (Janicke & Raney, 2018; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Researchers Tsay and Krakowiak first demonstrated this relationship between character identification and MD in 2011. In their seminal study, participants read a short fictional

story about a morally ambiguous protagonist who set out to summit Mount Everest with two companions and commits several moral transgressions along the way. The participants responded to a series of questionnaires that measured, among other things, the degree to which they identified with the protagonist and the extent to which they agreed with a list of statements that conveyed justification for his immoral actions (e.g., "It was all right for the main character to not share his food with his friend because he knew he would need all the energy he could get to make it up the mountain"). Tsay and Krakowiak (2011) found that the more the participants identified with the morally ambiguous protagonist, the less they faulted him for his transgressions. But does the extent to which readers feel absorbed in a story *as a whole* have this same effect? The following section will shed light on narrative transportation's impressive ability to hold sway over people's convictions and will examine previous research on how it might affect their responses to morally ambiguous characters.

Narrative Transportation

As with character identification, narrative transportation is a way of both cognitively and affectively engaging with a narrative that requires people to tune out their real-world surroundings and devote their full attention to the story in front of them (Green & Dill, 2012; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). However, unlike character identification, narrative transportation is all encompassing; it involves feeling lost or immersed in a story as a whole rather than in the identity of a specific character (Sestir & Green, 2010; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). Although the two constructs often work in tandem, Sestir and Green (2010) point out, "Theoretically, transportation can occur without identification,

and identification can occur in the absence of transportation, although the latter is less likely." (p. 276).

Narrative transportation is most frequently measured using Green and Brock's (2000) Narrative Transportation Scale (NTS) to assess its different aspects, including mental imagery, loss of awareness of surroundings, and cognitive and affective focus on the story. Using the NTS, media scholars have demonstrated that narrative transportation may enhance audiences' moral responses to fictional characters—it can increase their empathy for the heroes of a story and intensify their aversion for its villains (Green et al., 2004).

Perhaps the bulk of narrative transportation research has concerned its power to unconsciously sway people's attitudes and beliefs about the real world (Green & Dill, 2012; Gretter et al., 2017; Nabi & Moyer-Gusé, 2012; van Laer et al., 2014). This is exemplified in the work undertaken by Green and Brock in 2000. In a series of studies, participants read a short story about a young girl who was brutally murdered by a psychiatric patient at a shopping mall. Across all three studies, the highly transported participants agreed to significantly more beliefs consistent with the story's conclusions (e.g. that psychiatric patients should have their freedoms restricted) and evaluated the morally ambiguous protagonist more positively than their less-transported peers (Green & Brock, 2000). But how exactly does being transported in a story make audiences more vulnerable to persuasion? And more importantly, do narrative transportation's persuasive effects extend to adolescents' beliefs about the acceptability of a character's immoral actions (i.e. MD)?

It has been suggested that narrative transportation facilitates belief change partly because audiences' intense concentration on the plot and eagerness to be entertained by the story minimizes their desire and ability to counter argue or resist any subtle messages they encounter (Green & Dill, 2012; Nabi & Moyer-Gusé, 2012). Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to narrative transportation's persuasive effects, seeing as their critical thinking skills are still developing (Nippold et al., 2020). Stories that portray violence or aggression as justified are ubiquitous within the realms of both young adult fiction and the new media (Coyne et al., 2011; Gretter, et al., 2017). What's more, narrative transportation can obfuscate adolescents' ability to distinguish between the facts and fiction they read on social networks, blogs, and other online spaces, which can lead to serious real-life consequences (e.g., the "Slender Man Stabbing" case, see Gretter et al., 2017). Despite these concerns, adolescents have been largely neglected from past research on engagement with morally ambiguous narratives. Thus, it is important to investigate the possible influence narrative transportation may have on the MD of adolescents.

Considering narrative transportation's similarity to character identification as a form of narrative engagement, and in light of the abundant evidence of its persuasive effects on audiences' attitudes and beliefs, it seems reasonable to expect that narrative transportation may also hold sway over adolescents' acceptance or justification of the wrongful actions of morally ambiguous characters. This study seeks to clarify the relationship between MD and narrative transportation by examining whether the extent to which adolescents grant a protagonist moral leniency is related to how transported they feel while reading a story.

In order to investigate this question, all participants were asked to read a short story that features a morally ambiguous protagonist. However, in an attempt to ensure differences in participants' transportation levels, only half of the participants received a set of instructions immediately prior to reading the narrative designed to encourage them to vividly imagine the characters and events of the story as they read it. These transportation-enhancing instructions were decided on in view of extant research that suggests that pre-reading instructions may be used to manipulate readers' narrative transportation (Green, 2004). It is hypothesized that the participants who are more transported would report greater MD for the protagonist (as measured by a self-report questionnaire) than their less-transported peers.

Method

Participants

A total of 199 Dutch-speaking secondary school pupils (100 males) between 12 and 16 years of age (*M* = 13.87; *SD* = 0.97) participated in the study. Participants were recruited from two Dutch secondary schools in Noord-Holland and Zeeland that were selected based upon existing contacts with the researchers. The sample involved participants from the havo (higher general continued education) and vwo (university preparatory education) streams of Dutch secondary education. Signed consent forms were obtained from both students and parents prior to data collection and the Leiden University Psychology Research Ethics Committee approved this study.

This research was part of a larger project that investigated narrative fiction exposure in relation to various aspects of cognition; thus, a large number of the participants were excluded from analysis because they were assigned to a condition not

relevant to the current investigation. Specifically, 48 of the 199 participants were excluded because they were assigned to a condition that was impertinent to the present study. The scores of 22 participants who reported having already read the story before the day of the study were excluded because their familiarity with the narrative could impact their transportation into the story as well as the extent to which they morally disengage (Raney & Janicke, 2013; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016). 14 participants were excluded from analysis because they failed to pass the reading comprehension test, which suggests they did not fully read or understand the story. 11 participants were tested but their results were later excluded from analysis because their consent forms were incomplete. Four participants were excluded from analysis because they did not fully complete the NTS. The scores of three students who have dyslexia and two students who have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) were also discarded from the data set prior to analysis because these disorders could interfere with their ability to fully comprehend and feel transported into the story (Horowitz-Kraus et al., 2016; Mason et al., 2008). The scores of two participants who were seen discussing answers with one another were also excluded from analysis in order to preserve the integrity of the results. Finally, one participant was excluded due to incomplete data. Consequently, the sample that was ultimately considered for analysis comprised a total of 92 participants. See Table 1 for more information on the number, average age, and gender of the participants in the two study conditions that were considered in the analysis.

Table 1. Participant information

Condition	Instructed Fiction	Uninstructed Fiction	All participants combined
Number	50 (54.3%)	42 (45.7%)	92 (100%)
Age	13.88 (SD = 1.1)	14.14 (SD = 0.75)	14.02 (SD = .99)
Gender Male	18 (19.6%)	19 (20.6%)	37 (40.22%)
Gender Female	32 (34.8%)	23 (25%)	55 (59.78%)

Materials

Transportation-Enhancing Instructions. Participants in both conditions were first presented with a set of opening instructions about how to complete the study (see Appendix A). However, only participants assigned to the instructed fiction condition received an additional set of instructions immediately prior to reading the short story that encouraged them to completely absorb themselves in the narrative (see Appendix B).

Reading stimuli. Participants in both conditions were given the Dutch translation of Roald Dahl's fictional short story, *Lamb to the Slaughter* (Dahl, 1953). The narrative was chosen according to several criteria. First, the story was chosen because it is under 4,000 words in length, which was important due to the participants' time constraints. Second, the story was chosen because it concerns at least two characters; this was a condition that was necessary for several analyses that are not pertinent to the current study. Lastly, in order to investigate the relationship between narrative transportation and MD, it was important that the short story center on a protagonist who commits some moral wrongdoing that could be considered justified or forgivable to some readers. *Lamb to the Slaughter* is a short story about a devoted and pregnant housewife named Mary who eagerly awaits her husband, Patrick, to return home from work. When Patrick—who

works as a senior policeman—finally arrives, he reluctantly gives Mary some shocking news. Although Patrick's troubling confession is never explicitly revealed, he directly assures Mary that he will give her money and make sure that she is looked after. Readers can infer from his promise and from Mary's subsequent reaction that Patrick confessed that he plans on leaving her. Upon hearing the news, Mary enters a blind rage and hits Patrick over the head with a frozen rack of lamb, which kills him instantly. The rest of the short story involves Mary's subsequent cover-up of her crime, including the closing scene in which she convinces the police officers (Patrick's colleagues) to eat the same rack of lamb that she had used to kill him.

Reading Comprehension Test. A short reading comprehension test was devised to ensure that participants in both conditions fully read and understood the short story (see Appendix C). The scores of any participants who incorrectly answered at least two of the five multiple-choice questions were discarded from the data set (see the results section below for details on the participants who were discarded from the data set on this basis).

Narrative Transportation Scale (NTS). Green and Brock's (2000) NTS was translated into Dutch and used as a self-report measure of participants' transportation into the short story (see Appendix D). The adapted NTS was also used to assess the effectiveness of the transportation-enhancing instructions. The original scale contains 12 items, each of which is measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*), with higher scores indicating greater transportation into the narrative. Example items include, "While I was reading the narrative, I could easily picture the events in it taking place" and, "The narrative affected me emotionally". However, item

10 ("The events in the narrative are relevant to my everyday life") and item 11 ("The events in the narrative have changed my life") were both removed from the questionnaire in response to recommendations from pilot test participants[1]. Thus, the adapted NTS contained a total of 10 items.

Moral Disengagement Questionnaire. Although various methods have been developed to measure audiences' MD in response to specific narratives, none of them have been adapted for widespread use (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013). Consequently, a seven-item questionnaire was created specifically for the current study in order to assess participants' MD from the short story (see Appendix E). The MD questionnaire that was created was based partly on a 9-item MD scale used by Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel (2013) and an 11-item MD scale developed by Krakowiak and Tsay (2011). In line with these two prior MD scales, the seven questionnaire items developed for the current study were specifically adapted to the short story (*Lamb to the Slaughter*) and were designed to represent seven of Bandura's (2002) eight mechanisms of MD. Specifically, the mechanism of moral justification was measured with the item, "I believe Mary had good reasons for her actions"; advantageous comparison was measured with the item, "I believe Mary had to lie to the police to protect her unborn child"; distortion of consequences was measured with the item, "I believe Patrick's death would <u>not</u> have affected many people", attribution of blame was measured with the item, "I believe Patrick is at least partially to blame for his death, since he provoked Mary to lose control"; diffusion of responsibility was measured with the item, "I believe the police are

[1] The pilot was individually administered to a sample of 5 Dutch adolescents who voluntarily completed the study in full and subsequently provided their feedback. The volunteers were selected based on existing contacts with the researchers.

at least partially to blame for Patrick's death, since it is their job to protect people from harm"; dehumanization was measured with the item, "I believe Patrick was a heartless and selfish husband"; and finally, displacement of responsibility was measured with the item, "I believe Mary should not be blamed entirely for Patrick's death because she was in shock". Bandura's (2002) final mechanism of MD, euphemistic labeling, was not assessed due to a lack of Dutch euphemisms that were suitable for this particular story. Each item was translated into Dutch and was measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating greater MD.

Design

This study is part of a larger study that utilized a between-subjects design. The purpose of this study is to assess if participants' level of transportation into a short story is significantly related to their level of MD from the morally ambiguous protagonist. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: (a) instructed fiction or (b) uninstructed fiction. The independent variable was the condition to which participants were assigned and the dependent variable was the participants' scores on the MD questionnaire. The control variable was their scores on the NTS. The transportation-enhancing instructions were given to participants in the instructed fiction condition in an attempt to experimentally increase their levels of narrative transportation. Since the instructions were not guaranteed to lead to a significant increase in their levels of narrative transportation, the NTS was also used as a manipulation check to assess the effectiveness of the transportation-enhancing instructions.

Procedure

All participants were given both an information sheet and a consent form prior to the day of testing. Only the individuals who had provided both parental consent and gave their own consent were included in the data analysis. On the day of testing, participants were assigned to individual desks in their regular classrooms in an order that ensured that participants who were in the same study condition were not seated beside one another. Experimenters distributed three paper booklets to each participant, which were arranged in the following order:

1. A story booklet, which contained the study instructions, a brief demographic questionnaire, and the short story (*Lamb to the Slaughter*).
2. A mentalizing booklet, which contained two theory of mind (ToM) tasks (that are not pertinent to the current study).
3. A work booklet, which contained the reading comprehension test, the NTS, and the MD questionnaire. The work booklet also contained an Author Recognition Test, a reading habits questionnaire, and score sheets for the two ToM tasks; however, since these latter three materials are not relevant to the current study, they will be excluded from analysis.

Participants were encouraged to ask any questions they had prior to the start of the study and were instructed to raise their hand and wait quietly for a researcher to assist them if they had any questions during the study. First, participants read the opening study instructions and filled in several demographic questions on the cover of their story booklet. They then read the short story. Only participants in the instructed fiction condition read the additional transportation-enhancing instructions immediately prior to

reading the short story. On average, participants took approximately 20 minutes to read the short story. Once participants finished reading the story and completed the tasks in their mentalizing booklet, they were redirected to their work booklet, in which they completed the reading comprehension test, the NTS, and the moral disengagement questionnaire. The materials in participants' work booklet were randomized so as to avoid order effects. Participants took an average of approximately 45 minutes to complete the entire study but were entitled to a full hour to complete it, without any breaks; they were instructed to sit quietly at their desk until the full testing hour was complete if they finished early. After the hour ended, each participant was thanked and rewarded for their participation with a candy bar as they left the classroom.

Results

The aim of this study was to investigate whether the degree to which adolescents justify or forgive a fictional protagonist for their immoral actions (i.e. morally disengage) is related to how transported they felt while reading the story. In particular, is there a significant relationship between narrative transportation and MD in adolescents? It was hypothesized that the adolescents who felt highly transported while reading the story would also report greater levels of MD than their less transported peers. The independent variable was the study condition to which participants were randomly assigned—either the instructed fiction condition ($N = 50$) or the uninstructed fiction condition ($N = 42$). The dependent variable was the measure of MD and the NTS was the control variable.

Participants in both conditions were compared on the MD questionnaire. It was predicted that participants in the instructed fiction condition would report greater MD than those in the uninstructed fiction condition. On average, participants in the instructed

fiction condition did indeed report greater MD ($M = 25$, $SD = 4.83$) than those in the uninstructed fiction condition ($M = 24.73$, $SD = 5.68$). However, an independent samples *t*-test revealed that this modest difference (0.27) in MD scores between the two conditions was not significant $t(80.93) = -0.25$, $p = .81$. Thus, contrary to expectations, participants reported similar levels of MD, regardless of whether or not they received the transportation-enhancing instructions.

The lack of a significant difference in the MD scores of participants in the two conditions was an unexpected result that could perhaps be explained by the participants not actually differing in their levels of transportation. Although the transportation-enhancing instructions were intended to ensure a difference in transportation levels between the two conditions, it is possible that the instructions did not succeed in achieving this intended effect. Thus, in order to examine whether or not the transportation-enhancing instructions were actually effective, it was necessary to compare the participant's scores on the NTS.

An independent samples *t*-test was used to compare the NTS scores of participants in the instructed fiction ($N = 50$) and uninstructed fiction ($N = 42$) conditions. On average, participants in the instructed fiction condition did in fact score higher on the NTS ($M = 48.23$, $SD = 8.8$) than those in the uninstructed fiction condition ($M = 44.31$, $SD = 10.28$). According to the independent samples *t*-test, the difference in NTS scores (3.92) verged on but did not reach the accepted threshold of significance $t(81.25) = -1.94$, $p = .055$. The fact that participants in the two conditions had statistically similar mean scores on the NTS suggests that the transportation-enhancing instructions were not actually effective in experimentally increasing their levels of transportation; this may at

least partly explain the surprising lack of a significant difference between the two conditions when compared on the MD questionnaire.

Thus, in order to examine whether the participants who were highly transported in the story also reported higher levels of MD, it was necessary to divide participants in both conditions based on their scores on the NTS. A median split on the NTS was conducted in order to separate participants into either a high- or low-transportation group (*Mdn* = 47, *range* = 24-66). 4 participants who scored at the median were added to the high-transportation group. The two resulting groups were therefore those with low levels of transportation ($N = 43$, $M = 38.27$, $SD = 6.57$) and those with high levels of transportation ($N = 49$, $M = 53.6$, $SD = 5.17$).

An independent samples *t*-test was then performed to compare the mean MD scores of participants in the low- ($N = 43$) and high-transportation ($N = 49$) groups. Interestingly, participants in the low-transportation group scored on average higher on the MD questionnaire ($M = 25.48$, $SE = 0.85$) than those in the high-transportation group ($M = 24.34$, $SE = 0.7$). See table 4 for the mean MD scores and standard deviations of the participants in the two transportation groups. However, the difference (1.14) was small and not significant according to the *t*-test, $t(84.55) = 1.04$, $p = .30$. These results suggest that transportation into the narrative did not have a significant effect on MD in this sample of adolescents.

Post-Hoc Analysis

Taken together, the results of the a priori analyses do not support the hypothesis that greater transportation is related to higher MD. The finding that there is no relationship between transportation (as measured by comparing the groups that were

supposed to differ on transportation and when using the NTS as the grouping variable) and MD is unexpected. In order to determine what might explain this, it became necessary to investigate whether there might be issues with the seven items of the MD questionnaire. Accordingly, seven Pearson correlations were carried out and tested against a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of .007 (0.05/7). Results indicated that only item 1 (which assessed ‘moral justification’) and item 4 (which assessed ‘attribution of blame’) of the MD questionnaire were significantly correlated with one another, $r = .461$, $p < .001$, which suggests that both items measure the same underlying factor. The fact that five other items of the MD questionnaire are not correlated suggests that the scale as a whole is not an ideal measure of MD. A reliability analysis confirmed that MD questionnaire did not reach acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .518$, $M = 17.41$, $SD = 3.65$).

Given this information, it became necessary to disregard the scale as a whole and investigate whether there is a relationship between transportation and any of the seven individual components of the MD questionnaire. To that end, eight Pearson correlations were carried out and tested against a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of .006 (0.05/8). Results indicated that only item 5 of the MD questionnaire (which assessed ‘diffusion of responsibility’) was significantly correlated with the NTS; however, the correlation between item 5 and the NTS was weak and in the opposite direction that was predicted, $r = -.353$, $p < .001$. Apart from this single weak correlation, the results of these post-hoc analyses suggest there are not any relevant relations between the MD and transportation constructs. It can now be said with more certainty that, at least as far as this particular operationalization of the research question goes, there is no evidence for there being a relationship between MD and narrative transportation.

Discussion

This study set out to determine whether or not the extent to which adolescents feel transported in a fictional story is significantly related to their MD towards the story's morally ambiguous protagonist. It was hypothesized that adolescents who reported higher levels of narrative transportation would also report greater levels of MD compared to their less-transported peers.

Surprisingly, the analysis revealed no significant difference between the mean MD scores of participants in the instructed fiction and uninstructed fiction conditions. Participants' scores on the NTS were then examined in an attempt to account for this unexpected result. No significant difference between the mean NTS scores of participants in the instructed fiction and uninstructed fiction was found, which suggests that the transportation-enhancing instructions were not actually effective in raising the transportation levels of the participants in the instructed fiction condition. Consequently, in order to answer the question of whether or not there is a relationship between MD and narrative transportation in adolescents, the two original conditions were disregarded and all 92 participants were divided based on their level of transportation. A median split was conducted on the NTS variable, creating both a low- and a high-transportation group. Finally, a comparison between the low- and high-transportation groups on the MD questionnaire failed to find a statistically significant difference.

As part of a post-hoc exploratory analysis of the data, the seven items of the MD questionnaire were then examined. Results indicated that only item 1 ("I believe Mary had good reasons for her actions", a measure of moral justification) and item 4 ("I believe Patrick is at least partly to blame for his death, since he provoked Mary", a measure of

attribution of blame) were significantly correlated with one another. It is probable that these two items are correlated because they assess essentially the same underlying attitude toward Patrick's murder, and survey respondents tend not to contradict themselves on items that are in agreement with one another (Spector, 2013). Those who believe Mary had good reasons for killing Patrick are not likely to consider him a blameless victim.

Further analysis of the MD questionnaire confirmed that as a whole, it is a poor and unreliable measure of the MD concept. The seven individual items of the MD questionnaire were then examined against transportation, which revealed that only item 5 was significantly correlated with transportation; however, the observed correlation was weak and not in the expected direction. Item 5, which was designed to represent the MD mechanism diffusion of responsibility, stated, "I believe the police are also somewhat guilty of Patrick's death because it is their job to protect people". Considering the fact that the police were not present at the scene when Mary attacked Patrick, it is possible that item 5 was negatively correlated with transportation because the statement itself was a bit too implausible for participants to support.

The major finding of this study—that transportation into a short story does not have a significant impact on the MD of adolescents—was contrary to expectations given the extensive evidence of transportation's powerful effects on audience's story-related beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000; Green & Dill, 2012). The non-significant result was also surprising given the research that suggests that character identification, which is cognitively and affectively similar to transportation, facilitates MD (Janicke & Raney, 2015; Sestir & Green, 2010; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011).

The secondary finding of this study—that the transportation-enhancing instructions did not significantly increase the transportation levels of the participants in the instructed fiction condition relative to those in the uninstructed fiction condition—was partly unexpected. Although some advertising studies suggest that pre-reading instructions could help encourage transportation, Green and Brock (2000) found that such external instructions had a negligible impact on participants' experienced transportation (Chang, 2012; Esacalas, 2004).

While it is possible that transportation into a printed narrative is not significantly linked to MD in adolescents, a more probable explanation is that a number of limitations of the study have influenced the results that were obtained.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The first limitation of the study that certainly had an impact on the results was the 7-item Likert scale that was developed and used to measure participants' MD in response to the short story, *Lamb to the Slaughter*. As previously mentioned, only the fifth item of the scale (which assessed diffusion of responsibility) was correlated with transportation. However, the observed correlation was both weak and not in the expected direction—possibly because the statement itself was too implausible. Moreover, the scale as a whole did not reach an acceptable level of reliability. It is important to consider that these limitations of the MD questionnaire may diminish the validity of the results that were obtained. In order to get a more comprehensive understanding of how transportation relates to MD, future researchers may find it useful to design a questionnaire that measures all eight mechanisms of MD, with multiple items per mechanism.

As previously stated, the manipulation check revealed that the transportation-enhancing instructions used in this study did not work particularly well in creating a high-transportation condition. One possible explanation for this outcome is that actual experienced transportation is impervious to external instructions. However, it is also possible that participants in this study simply skimmed over the transportation-enhancing instructions or disregarded them entirely. Given that the study did not incorporate checks on instruction understanding, it is not possible to determine whether participants fully understood and applied them. These checks could be incorporated in future studies to rule this possibility out. Notwithstanding this limitation, the near-significant result that was obtained when the transportation scores of participants in the two conditions were compared suggests further research should be done on the possible role that instructions may have on transportation.

Another limitation of the study involves the fictional narrative that was used. Roald Dahl's (1953) *Lamb to the Slaughter* was selected as the fictional text because it is relatively short in length and features a morally ambiguous protagonist. However, it may have been difficult for the participants to relate to the plot and/or protagonist of the short story. As previously detailed, the narrative centers on a pregnant housewife who murders her husband in a blind rage after he presumably confesses to wanting a divorce—these themes are most likely unfamiliar to most teens. Researchers have posited that while it is possible for individuals to become transported by a story without having prior familiarity with its subject content, they are generally more transported by stories that correspond with their prior knowledge (Green & Dill, 2012). The adolescent participants' lack of familiarity with the story's subject content could therefore be at least partly responsible

for their having reported only moderate levels of transportation. It is recommended that researchers in any future studies who wish to maximize transportation select a narrative that is more relatable to the participants in their sample.

The current study was also limited by the setting in which the data was collected. All participants were seated at individual desks in their regular classrooms and were given the same hour to independently complete the study. Although the participants remained relatively quiet throughout the hour, certain unavoidable noises occurred (e.g., students shifting in their chairs, sounds emanating from the hallway) that might have distracted the participants while they were reading the story. Research suggests that distracting stimuli that draw readers' attention back to reality makes transportation more difficult (Green et al., 2004). That being so, it is likely that the various noises that were heard in the classrooms during the study either interrupted or impeded the transportation of some of the participants, which may have contributed to the relatively low transportation levels that were reported. Ideally, each participant would have read the story by themselves in a quiet and private room in order to minimize distractions and encourage transportation. Unfortunately, the participants had to be tested together in their classrooms due to both time constraints and a lack of available private rooms.

Finally, although the size of the sample that was considered in the analyses was modest (N = 92), the sample consisted of a fairly specific group: Dutch-speaking secondary students between the ages of 12 and 16. Thus, the results of the present study may not generalize to other adolescent populations. Given the specificity of the sample, future researchers may wish to re-examine the relationship between narrative transportation and MD using a larger and more inclusive sample of adolescents.

Conclusion

Overall, the present study failed to find support for the proposition that greater transportation into a short story is linked to greater MD in adolescents. In fact, the research suggests that transportation has no significant bearing on MD at all. However, given the extensive literature that would suggest otherwise, and bearing in mind the numerous limitations of the study that were highlighted above, further investigations are needed in order to explicate the possible relationship between narrative transportation and MD. As long as stories that feature violent or aggressive protagonists continue to thrive across different types of media, the investigation of the factors that play a role in how adolescents come to see those immoral actions as justified or forgivable will continue to be an important area of research.

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Appendix A

Opening Study Instructions Given to Participants in Both Conditions

Dear Participant,

First of all, we would like to thank you for participating in this survey. If you want to stop participating at any time, you can indicate this to the student who is conducting the study.

There are 3 booklets in front of you. The first booklet, which includes this sheet, is your story booklet, the second booklet is your mentalizing booklet, and the third booklet is your work booklet.

You will soon start reading a short story in the story booklet. After reading this text, put the story booklet away and begin the tasks in your mentalizing booklet. Once you have completed the tasks in the text booklet, you can proceed to filling in the questionnaires in your work booklet.

All questionnaires and tasks include instructions. Follow these instructions as closely as possible. Make sure you view all pages and answer all questions.

Before you begin, we would like you to enter a few details.

First name: ………
Last name: ………
Birth date: ………
Gender: Male / Female (please circle your answer)
Class: ………
Level: Havo/Vwo (please circle your answer)

Thanks again for taking part in this survey!

The investigation team

Appendix B

Transportation-Enhancing Instructions Given to Participants in the Instructed Fiction Condition

While reading the story, try to imagine the setting; picture what you are reading in your head. Imagine the house and the room that the characters are in. Also try to imagine what the characters look like.

Think about your feelings while reading the story. What is your first impression of the woman? How does she treat her husband? Is she a good wife? Do you like her? Does your opinion of her change during the story? Try to imagine how all the characters feel.

Try to also understand why the characters do what they do. Try to empathize with them. While reading the story, try to predict what will happen next and how the characters will react.

Try to compare the content of the story to your own experiences, for example, a situation where you heard bad news or got very angry with someone.

Take your time while reading the story, and read carefully.

Appendix C

Reading Comprehension Test

Multiple-choice questions about *Lamb to the Slaughter*
Fill in the bubble of the correct answer.

1. What was Patrick Maloney's job?
- o He was a teacher
- o He was a police detective
- o He was a shoe shiner
- o He was a florist

2. What did Mary Maloney use to hit her husband's head?
- o A baseball bat
- o An English key
- o A frozen leg of lamb
- o A knife

3. What did the detectives eat at the end of the story?
- o An ice cream
- o A leg of lamb
- o A chicken leg
- o A sandwich

4. Why did Mary Maloney go to the store?
- o She was hungry
- o She wanted the detectives to think she was somewhere else during the murder
- o She was still in shock
- o She had to buy milk

5. Why was Mary upset?
- o Because she no longer had any whiskey in the house
- o Because her husband told her something very upsetting
- o Because the supermarket was already closed
- o Because the dinner was burnt

Appendix D

The Narrative Transportation Scale (NTS)

Circle the number under each statement that best represents your opinion about the narrative you just read.

1. While I was reading the narrative, I could easily picture the events in it taking place.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all Very much

2. While I was reading the narrative, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all Very much

3. I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the narrative.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all Very much

4. I was mentally involved in the narrative while reading it.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all Very much

5. After the narrative ended, I found it easy to put it out of my mind.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all Very much

6. I wanted to learn how the narrative ended.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all Very much

7. The narrative affected me emotionally.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all Very much

8. I found myself thinking of ways the narrative could have turned out differently.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all Very much

9. I found my mind wandering while reading the narrative.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all						Very much

10. I had a vivid mental image of Mary Maloney.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all						Very much

Appendix E

Moral Disengagement Questionnaire

For each of the statements below, circle the response that best characterizes how you feel about the statement.

1. I believe Mary had good reasons for her actions.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Not Sure Agree Strongly Agree

2. I believe Mary had to lie to the police to protect her unborn baby.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Not Sure Agree Strongly Agree

3. I believe Patrick's death did not upset many people.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Not Sure Agree Strongly Agree

4. I believe Patrick is at least partly to blame for his death, since he provoked Mary.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Not Sure Agree Strongly Agree

5. I believe the police are at least partly to blame for Patrick's death, since it is their job to protect people from harm.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Not Sure Agree Strongly Agree

6. I believe Patrick was a heartless and selfish husband.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Not Sure Agree Strongly Agree

7. I believe Mary should not be blamed entirely for Patrick's death because she was in shock.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Not Sure Agree Strongly Agree