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The model of intuitive morality and exemplars is an organizational framework that was created to incorporate theories of basic human motivations with both micro- and macrolevel media research. Thus far, literature has integrated a framework of basic moral intuitions (here labeled altruistic motivations) with the model but has yet to integrate a framework of basic egoistic motivations. The current study integrates frameworks for both altruistic and egoistic motivations with the model in order to examine depictions of motivational incongruities (e.g., moral dilemmas) in television content for young audiences. Findings suggest that the frequency of depicted motivational incongruities increases as audience target-age increases. In addition, findings show that most motivational incongruities involve both egoistic motives versus altruistic ones, rather than just egoistic or altruistic motives alone. Discussion centers on implications for research on media and morality as well as entertainment theory.

INTRODUCTION

Explaining the links between media and morality has been a central focus for communication scholars. For example, content analyses have focused on a
variety of morally charged issues such as sex (Smith, 1976), violence (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002; National Television Violence Study, 1996), and stereotypes (Tamborini, Mastro, Chory-Assad, & He Huang, 2000), and researchers have noted their potentially “antisocial” effects on children and society. Along this vein, recent studies have applied newer understandings in moral psychology to inform content analytic research (Bowman & Lewis, 2012; Tamborini, Enriquez, Lewis, Grizzard, & Mastro, 2011), providing a theoretically grounded basis from which scholars can detect and decipher morally relevant content. These studies have successfully captured depictions that activate basic human motivations related to moral judgment (here labeled altruistic motivations) but are limited because they do not capture depictions that activate egoistic motivations, which may be indirectly related to morality and equally prevalent in media content. Moreover, these studies have not examined content that activates incongruent motivations, such as depictions of moral dilemmas or other mental conflicts (here labeled motivational incongruities), which are particularly important to literature on media and moral development (Krcmar & Cooke, 2001). By incorporating a framework of egoistic motivations, the current study is able to identify and classify the types of motives involved in these incongruities. The study addresses these issues by examining depictions of motivational incongruities for young audiences of different age groups.

The article begins by introducing the model of intuitive morality and exemplars (MIME; Tamborini, 2011, 2012) and its implications for understanding motivational incongruity in media content. Using a recent reformulation of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010), an attempt is also made at incorporating a framework of egoistic motivations with the MIME to aid in classifying depictions of incongruity in narrative content. The article then presents a study examining how these depictions vary across popular television content targeted at distinct audience age groups. In addition, the study examines which types of motivations (i.e., egoistic and altruistic) are involved in these depictions.

MODEL OF INTUITIVE MORALITY AND EXEMPLARS

The MIME is a broad, micro–macro model of media influence that represents the relationships between an audience’s moral sensitivities, the psychological processes behind their media choice and appraisal, and the content consumed by aggregate audience groups (Tamborini, 2011, 2012). The model is intended to organize research on media and morality so that separate studies on effects, choice, appraisal, or content may inform one another.
Important to the current study is the latter part of the model, which describes how shared patterns of exemplar and motivational salience (among an aggregate audience) is related to media content. The model represents a link suggesting audience morality and content should accord with each other (Tamborini, 2012). Content-analytic techniques have been used to test the model’s assumption that content adheres to the moral values of its principal audience subgroup (cf. Bowman & Lewis, 2012; Tamborini, Enriquez, Lewis, Grizzard, & Mastro, 2011). To understand and classify these moral domains, the MIME adopts a framework of basic motivations known as moral foundations theory (Haidt & Joseph, 2007).

**Incorporation of Basic Motivations**

The motivational subdomains of moral foundations theory are composed of five distinct moral intuitions (Haidt & Joseph, 2007). These intuitions are used collectively to represent the overarching domain of altruism in the current study. According to the framework, each moral intuition is a preconscious, mental adaptation for a distinct type of social situation. Each yields a judgment of approval or disapproval without consciously weighing evidence or inferring guilt. The intuitions are labeled care (concerned with feeling and disliking the pain of others), fairness (related to motivations for justice, reciprocity, and punishing cheaters), ingroup loyalty (dealing with group identity and punitiveness toward outsiders), authority (respecting dominance hierarchies), and purity (dealing with the psychology of disgust and unquestioned sacred values). Recent research has shown the predictive value of these intuitive motivations in determining the appeal of narrative-based entertainment (Tamborini et al., 2013) as well as the appeal of news stories (Lewis et al., 2011). In addition, content analyses have used the framework to identify and categorize depictions that might trigger, satisfy, or violate these moral intuitions (Tamborini et al., 2011).

Thus far, MIME-based literature has not incorporated a theoretical framework for identifying or categorizing egoistic motivations, despite acknowledgment that such a step is necessary (Tamborini, 2012). As the model does not currently incorporate egoistic drives, it lacks utility for understanding their role in the reciprocal influence between audiences and media content. For example, content frequently depicts motivational incongruities that pit these altruistic motivations against egoistic ones. Consider a story in which the main character is torn between abandoning friends to seek fame and fortune alone (presumably choosing egoistic motives over altruistic ones) and remaining loyal and caring to the group while sacrificing fame and fortune (presumably choosing altruistic motives over egoistic ones). Incongruity may also occur between two altruistic motives (e.g.,
a ground soldier ordered by a commanding officer to violate international law) or two egoistic motives (e.g., a character having difficulty choosing what to wear). Without a framework for deciphering which motives are egoistic versus altruistic, we cannot accurately describe their role in such depicted incongruities. A recent reformulation of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (cf. Kenrick et al., 2010) may be able to address this theoretical gap. The hierarchy proposes a set of distinct motivations underlying basic drives such as homeostatic regulation (concerned with nutrition and physiological imbalances), safety (concerned with familiar surroundings, sensitivity to threats), affiliation (concerned with gaining resources to enhance alliances and social regard, feelings of competence, and autonomy), and mating (concerned with sexual opportunity as well as long-term alliances). Similar to moral foundations theory, Kenrick et al.’s (2010) framework proposes that each of these motivations is designed for specific environmental circumstances and that each can be triggered, violated, or satisfied without conscious appraisal of the environment. The current study focuses on the manner in which such egoistic concerns may be depicted simultaneously with the altruistic concerns of moral foundations theory, as their simultaneous activation may yield mental conflict and qualitatively different audience responses.

Incorporation of Dual-Process Logic

Beyond its ability to incorporate different frameworks of human motivation, another feature of the MIME that is important for the current study is its incorporation of dual-process logic for understanding audience response. The model suggests that two distinct, psychological systems drive media selection and appeal, the intuitive system (composed of the separate motivational subdomains previously listed) and the deliberative system (used to detect and resolve incongruity between simultaneously activated motivations; cf. Kahneman, 2003; Lieberman, 2007; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Sloman, 1996). Mentally mature audiences may detect and deliberate on incongruity when depictions evoke competing subdomains (i.e., those subdomains of MFT or Kenrick et al.’s framework). For example, incongruity occurs when characters are faced with difficult decisions such as saving some people’s lives at the expense of others (care vs. care), or whether to betray one’s friends to gain fame and fortune (ingroup loyalty vs. status). Such depictions may cause audiences to deliberate on the relative importance of the different subdomains involved in the depiction.

Recent research in entertainment theory has shown that children of different age groups utilize intuitive and deliberative systems differently in their media appraisals and character judgments (AUTHOR), and that use
of these systems is associated with different responses to narrative entertainment (i.e., enjoyment conceptualized as an intuitive, pleasurable response vs. appreciation as a deliberative, mixed response; Lewis, Tamborini, & Weber, 2011). As discussed next, younger audiences do not have the ability to detect and deliberate on incongruent subdomains so incongruity is not weighed in their appraisals. Consistent with the bulk of research in entertainment theory (e.g., mood management theory; Knobloch, 2006; and excitation-transfer theory; Zillmann, 1983) as well as both of the motivational frameworks used here, the MIME suggests that most responses do not require deliberation. Slower, deliberative media appraisals occur less frequently, when content activates incongruent motivations such as in the examples above. Thus, understanding the prevalence of incongruity in media content as well as the motivational domains involved in incongruity are important goals for research. Although content analytic research has examined the frequency with which the individual moral subdomains are depicted in content (Bowman & Lewis, 2012; Tamborini et al., 2011), research has yet to examine the frequency with which they are simultaneously active and incongruent with one another or with egoistic subdomains. Such a step is important for the advancement of MIME-based literature, as it has implications for understanding differences in media content for distinct audience subgroups the MIME describes.

Motivational Incongruity in Content for Younger versus Older Audiences

Literature on cognitive development suggests that younger children have diminished executive functions, which may be important for resolving incongruity between the altruistic and egoistic motives previously described. For example, younger children are less able to hold multiple response options in working memory (Davidson, Amso, Anderson, & Diamond, 2006), inhibit salient responses (Jonkman, 2006), and perform the mental calculus necessary for cost–benefit analyses (Mead, Alquist, & Baumeister, 2010). Recent research has shown that media appraisals of younger children (<7 years of age) tend to be dominated by a single salient motivation, and do not reliably take into account incongruity between multiple active motivations (AUTHOR). The same research demonstrated that older children more reliably weigh incongruity in their appraisals. This age-based difference in media appraisals should be related to the content produced for them, as suggested by the MIME.

H1: As audience target age (i.e., cognitive maturity) increases, the frequency of motivational incongruity in content will increase.
Altruism versus Egoism in Content for Young Audiences

Also interesting to literature on media and morality are the motivations involved in depictions of incongruity. To what degree are the overarching domains of egoism versus altruism involved in depictions of incongruity? Incorporating Kenrick et al.’s (2010) framework of egoistic drives should help to answer this question.

Both Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1984) discussed the tendency for egoistic and altruistic concerns to conflict in everyday life, suggesting that such conflict evokes “mental disequilibrium”—which they propose as a mechanism for moral growth. However, neither of these two scholars had a theoretical scheme for understanding the basic human motivations driving this conflict. Kenrick et al.’s (2010) framework and moral foundations theory are the most well developed theories of egoistic and altruistic motivations, respectively, and will thus be used here for this purpose. If Piaget and Kohlberg are correct that mental conflict leads to moral growth, then the motivations involved in incongruities depicted in popular media content are an important descriptive concern. Answering this question will give entertainment scholars a clearer, ecological picture of the basic motivations salient in media content for young audiences. Beyond addressing this descriptive concern, answering this question will also lend credence to Kenrick et al.’s theoretical framework for understanding egoistic drives important for morally relevant media content.

RQ: What is the relative frequency of the three types of motivational incongruity (i.e., [a] egoistic vs. egoistic, [b] altruistic vs. altruistic, and [3] altruistic vs. egoistic) in content for young audiences?

METHOD

Sample

To identify programming relevant to young audiences of different age groups, data were purchased from the Nielsen Company. Nielsen’s demographic system separates age categories into three groups of young audiences (aged 2–5 years, 6–11 years, and 12–17 years; here labeled younger, middle, and older, respectively). A list of the 40 most popular televised programs for each of these three age categories for the calendar year 2011 was used to select the sample. The popularity data were based on Nielsen’s Live +7 data stream for U.S. audiences.¹

¹The Live +7 data-stream metric includes the number that watched a program during live broadcast as well as the number that watched it via digital video recording within 7 days after live broadcast, excluding specials and sporting events.
Ten programs were randomly sampled from each top-40 list, for a total of 30 programs. Two sampling criteria were considered. The first was to ensure the sample reflected ecologically popular material so that findings could generalize primarily to that universe of content. The second was to ensure sufficient power to observe the age-dependent differences, which were expected to be easily detectable. All programs were recorded within the same 2-week period. Each program’s time slot was randomly chosen using software for a computer-based tuner device. After these programs were recorded, they were segmented into separate scenes for more organized coding and lower level analysis. Originally, episode-level coding was planned in addition to the scene-level analyses presented here, yet reliability could not be achieved during planning phases because coders would not agree on the most salient incongruities for entire programs. The current study is thus restricted to scenes as the unit of analysis. Scenes were defined as any continuous depictions of related action between characters or personae. Segmenting yielded a total of 556 scenes ($n_{young} = 125$, $n_{middle} = 137$, $n_{older} = 294$). Commercials and opening credits were not included in the analysis. The number of scenes for the eldest age category was overrepresented due to the presence of longer, 1-hour programs popular among this age group. The younger category included programs such as *Curious George* and *Go, Diego, Go!* The middle age category included programs such as *iCarly* and *Phineas and Ferb*. Finally, programs from the older age category included shows such as *Jersey Shore*, *Teen Wolf*, and *Terra Nova*. Although a very small number of programs (e.g., *American Idol*) appeared on lists for both the 6- to 11-year-olds as well as the 12- to 17-year-olds, no such overlap affected the final sample.

**Coding Procedure and Categories**

Two undergraduate research assistants (one European-American male and one Chinese female) who were naive to the study’s purpose served as content coders. Under supervision of the author, coders viewed each scene and then paused to independently record the number of motivational incongruities present in the scene. If any incongruities were present, coders recorded which specific subdomains were in conflict. The manifest indicator of motivational incongruity was defined as whether a character (or a unified group of characters) displayed verbal or nonverbal signs of difficulty or distress in choosing between two or more options. These incongruities marked points in the storyline where an entity could choose between multiple alternative preferences that were made salient in the narrative. Only overt reactions to the dilemma were recorded. Verbal signs of difficulty or distress in choosing an option included characters’ comments indicating (a) explicit awareness of
dilemma (e.g., saying “on the one hand . . . on the other,” or comments indicating the character is “torn” between two choices), (b) lack of knowledge on how to proceed with dilemma (e.g., saying “I don’t know what to do”), (c) fear of possible outcomes (e.g., saying “but what if…”). Nonverbal signs of difficulty or distress in choosing between options were also considered. These included character behaviors showing overt signs of avoidance when considering a needed (but unwanted) option (e.g., showing fear of a necessary dentist visit) or the inverse of this, which included overt behavioral signs of preference for one option when another was unwanted but necessary (e.g., showing signs of attraction to a forbidden romantic interest).

Two subdomains had to be recorded for each instance of incongruity, and any subdomain could be marked as incongruent with itself if deemed appropriate.2 Concepts related to each of these motivations were drawn from seminal works from the authors of their respective theoretical frameworks. Concepts were pulled from Haidt and Joseph’s (2007) article on moral foundations theory for altruistic motivations (care, fairness, ingroup loyalty, authority, and purity) and from Kenrick et al.’s (2010) article on the reformulation of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs for egoistic motivations (immediate physiological needs, safety, affiliation, status, and mating). When incongruities were coded for altruistic and egoistic considerations, each motive had separate operational definitions. Within altruism, care was assessed as a consideration of the suffering of others, including preventing injury to others, compassion, kindness, and sympathy; fairness was assessed as a consideration of equality, which included rights, discrimination, favoritism, proportionality, and social justice; ingroup loyalty was assessed as a consideration of membership in a broader group (e.g., family, nation, ethnicity, or other) in a decision, which included cohesion, teamwork, and preference for ingroup (vs. outgroup) members and excluded dyadic loyalty (such as loyalty between a married couple or friends); authority was assessed as a consideration of deference to respected individuals or social conventions, which included obedience, respect, tradition, duty, and submission; purity was assessed as a consideration of moral decency, which included chastity and other sex-related issues, and avoiding drug use, and excluded feelings of disgust that seemed unrelated to morality. Within egoism, immediate physiological needs were assessed as the most basic survival needs, which included breathing, eating, excreting, as well as mood and sleep; safety was assessed as protecting one’s self from bodily detriment, and included health considerations,

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2In addition, coders were tasked with recording which motivational subdomain was satisfied and which was violated as a result of the incongruity. Due to an inability to achieve reliability on this measure during design phases of the study, it was dropped.
self-defense, job security, and general injury avoidance; affiliation was assessed as the need for belonging and included considerations of being accepted by friends, spending time with friends, and getting along with friends; status was assessed broadly as the need for gaining feelings of recognition for one’s self and included considerations of gaining skill and competence, acquiring status-enhancing awards, products, or social connections, as well as the desire for money; mating was assessed as gaining and sustaining desirable sexual partners, which included childish, asexual dating motives and “crushes,” explicit sexual attraction, and maintenance of sexual relationships.

Coder Training and Reliability

Preparations consisted of (a) a collective reading of the coding protocol, (b) leisurely co-watching television programs to identify when incongruity occurs using the protocol, (c) coding the content independently, (d) discussing reasons for disagreement during practice, (e) updating the protocol, and (f) iterating these steps until coders agreed on the presence of motivational incongruity and the types of motivations involved. Agreement on the individual motivational domains was relatively easy to achieve once coders agreed on the presence of incongruity. After high subjective agreement was achieved

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding category (presence or absence)</th>
<th>Krippendorff’s $\alpha$</th>
<th>% Agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivational incongruity</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>0.00$^a$</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroup loyalty</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purity</td>
<td>0.00$^a$</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruistic Summed</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate physiological needs</td>
<td>0.00$^a$</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>0.00$^a$</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status/Esteem</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mating</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egoistic summed</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 80$.

$^a$Denotes a category in which Coder 1 marked zero for all cases whereas Coder 2 detected the motivation in very few cases. In this situation, Krippendorff’s $\alpha$ is equal to zero despite high agreement on absence.
on each overall measure (i.e., incongruity, altruism, and egoism), a larger set of content, which included 80 scenes of material, was coded independently to compute a reliability score. This training material was not included in the final sample. High reliability (Krippendorff’s $\alpha > .80$) for all of the primary variables was achieved for this practice content. See Table 1 for these reliabilities. Notably, because a character’s decision to seek wealth or money did not fall neatly into any of these single categories (although it is clearly egoistic), it was categorized with status needs as per Kenrick et al.’s (2010) discussion of status’s relation to the accumulation of resources. After demonstrating reliable coding of the practice content, coders were assigned 15 randomly selected programs each to cover the entire sample of 30 programs.

RESULTS

Eight percent ($n = 46$) of the 556 total scenes contained motivational incongruity. Four of the scenes contained two instances of incongruity each, for a total of 50 incongruities in the entire sample. The hypothesis that the number of incongruities would vary across audience age group was first tested using a nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis analysis of variance. The overall analysis yielded significance, $\chi^2(2) = 7.42, p = .02$. Proportion of incongruities per scene were $M_{\text{young}} = .02$ ($SD = .15$), $M_{\text{middle}} = .10$ ($SD = .33$), and $M_{\text{older}} = .11$ ($SD = .35$). This pattern of proportions for the three age groups is consistent with the notion that incongruities are more common in content for more cognitively mature audiences. As age group was ordinal, a rank-order correlation was computed. This analysis yielded a small but significant positive Spearman’s $\rho$ coefficient ($r = .10, p = .02$) consistent with the study’s hypothesis.

With regard to the three types of incongruity mentioned in the research question, a chi-square test of proportions between the three types of incongruity yielded significance, $\chi^2(2) = 12.04, p < .001$. By far, most cases of incongruity (56%, $n = 28$) were between an altruistic versus an egoistic motivation. A standardized residual of ($SR = +2.77$) indicated that this type of incongruity was significantly overrepresented in the sample. Incongruities between two altruistic motivations (26%, $n = 13; SR = -0.90$) or two egoistic motivations (18%, $n = 9; SR = -1.88$) were far less common.

In terms of overall representations of egoism and altruism, no statistical difference was detected between the frequencies with which altruistic ($n = 54; 10\%$ of sample) versus egoistic ($n = 46; 8\%$ of sample) motivations were salient in the incongruities. However, altruistic motivations seemed to be more frequently depicted in incongruities for older audiences than for younger audiences, as evidenced by a small positive Spearman correlation.
between audience age and summed altruism for each scene ($r = .10, p = .02$). No relationship between audience age and summed egoism was observed ($r = .05, p = .21$). Of course, these relationships are not independent of the types of incongruity discussed above. See Figure 1 for frequencies of the three types of motivational incongruity crossed with age category.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1** Proportion of incongruity types (i.e., [a] altruistic vs. altruistic, [b] egoistic vs. egoistic, and [c] altruistic vs. egoistic) per scene by age group. (Color figure available online.)

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivational subdomain</th>
<th>Raw count</th>
<th>Standardized residuals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroup</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-2.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruistic total</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate physiological needs</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mating</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egoistic total</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Standardized residuals greater in magnitude than 1.96 significantly deviate from expected frequency.
In terms of individual motivational subdomains of egoism and altruism, there were differences in the frequency with which the 10 separate motivations were present, $\chi^2(9) = 43.20, p < .01$. Standardized residuals indicate that care and status motivations exceeded expected frequencies, whereas purity and affiliation motivations fell below expected frequencies in the sample of incongruities. See Table 2 for raw counts and standardized residuals for each of the ten motivational subdomains.

**DISCUSSION**

The results corroborate the hypothesis that motivational incongruity is depicted more commonly in content for older, more cognitively mature (vs. younger, less cognitively mature) audiences. In addition, large differences observed in the sample show that the most frequent type of incongruity in content for young audiences depicts egoistic motivations competing with altruistic motivations. Egoism and altruism are far more frequently incongruent with one another than with themselves in content watched by younger audiences.

These results have several implications for the literature on media and morality. First, they further develop the link between content and audiences that is represented in the MIME. Second, the data show the importance of examining egoistic motivations in addition to the altruistic motivations outlined by moral foundations theory, as both play a role in popular media content for young audiences. At least within the context of depicted motivational incongruity, no difference in the frequency of egoistic versus altruistic motivations was detected. Kenrick et al.’s (2010) framework was useful not only for identifying and categorizing depictions of egoistic concerns but also for providing a grounded psychological logic for understanding individual motivational subdomains of egoism.

These implications are particularly important for literature in entertainment theory. Early entertainment literature (cf. Zillmann & Bryant, 1975) focused on the importance of cognitive development for moral judgment and responses to narratives. The current study shows how content may adhere to such developmental constraints. Other recent studies have demonstrated that responses to narratives largely depend on abilities to weigh incongruity in media appraisals. For example, recent research on enjoyment versus appreciation has discussed the role of incongruity in shaping audience response to narratives (Lewis et al., 2011). Specifically, for cognitively mature audiences, enjoyment is higher and evaluations are faster when incongruity is not present at the end of a story. By contrast, appreciation is higher and evaluations are slower when incongruity is present at the end.
of a story. It has been proposed that the same (intuitive vs. deliberative) mental processes characterize evaluations of “pure heroes” versus “anti-heroes” in narrative entertainment (Lewis, Tamborini, Grizzard, Weber, & Prabhu, 2012), as antiheroes may satisfy some morals (or egoistic motivations) at the expense of others. Other research has shown that older children can reliably weigh the congruity of primes present early in a narrative with the way in which a storyline resolves itself, whereas younger children do not reliably weigh congruity in their appraisals (AUTHOR). The data here suggest that depictions evoking complex cognitive and emotional responses such as these will be found less frequently in content for younger audiences. Moreover, the results underscore the large role that egoistic motivations likely play in these responses.

In addition to the implications previously discussed, some secondary findings are important to interpret here. First, with regard to age-based differences in the most salient motivational domains, data suggest that altruism is more frequently depicted in content for older audiences than younger audiences. Foundational developmental literature suggests that older children have greater moral salience (Bandura, 1991; Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1965). This is also in line with MIME-based logic that content will accord with audience preferences. Second, although not presented in the results section, holistic viewing of the coded instances of incongruity also seems to reveal that specific subdomains are salient in content for audiences at different life stages. For example, content for younger children contained dilemmas about sharing toys versus keeping them for oneself. By contrast, content for older children had different salient subdomains. For example, an episode of iCarly, a show popular among the middle age group examined here, depicted a dilemma between fairness (hiring a person due to their qualifications vs. attractiveness) and mating (wanting to date the potential employee). Unfortunately, the small number \( n = 50 \) of incongruities in the sample limited the study’s ability to draw conclusions about age-based differences between which motivational subdomains are most salient in content for different age groups. Future studies should use larger samples to address this question.

Limitations

Although they do not affect the conclusions previously mentioned, four limitations are worth mentioning here. First, “feed-through” reliability problems affected coding of the individual subdomains. As both coders had to agree first on the presence of incongruity in a scene before coding for the presence of individual subdomains, reliability of the subdomains was lower by design. Despite this, most of the domains received acceptable reliability, and agreement was very high for the overarching egoism and
altruism concepts. Second, and more important, the study initially aimed to code for which of the two conflicting subdomains was ultimately satisfied and which was violated or unsatisfied as a result of their incongruity. This finding would have been theoretically important as the MIME suggests that depictions of incongruity are particularly important in shaping the perceived importance of the motivational domains in audience members. Unfortunately, it was apparent early in study design phase that reliability on this measure would be impossible to achieve for at least two reasons: First, this measure added a second level of feed-through reliability problems. Not only did coders first need to agree on the presence of incongruity, but they also needed to agree on which two motivational subdomains were in conflict before deciding which was satisfied or unsatisfied. However, the primary reason for not achieving reliability on this measure was that incongruity was almost never resolved within the same scene in which it was made salient; and it was often left unresolved after an entire program (presumably left for subsequent episodes to resolve). Future research would need to examine entire narrative arcs within program seasons in order to successfully capture which conflicting motivations are ultimately satisfied or violated in such motivational dilemmas. Despite this limitation, the current study provides a foundation for such future research to understand and measure which motivations are depicted as “winning” the conflict.

The third limitation regards the course measure of audience age based on Nielsen’s three categories. These age-based groupings crossed over distinct developmental periods (e.g., children 12 years of age were in the same group as adolescents 17 years of age). Despite its coarseness, the measure allowed for the key observation that target age was related to depictions of motivational incongruity. Nevertheless, an analysis using reliable, more fine-grained age data would be insightful and a worthy endeavor for future research.

The fourth limitation regards partial support for the expectation that continuous differences would be observed in content for the three age groups. That is, a positive linear trend in the frequency of incongruities was expected for the youngest, middle, and older age groups. The frequency of motivational incongruities differed between the youngest and middle age groups, but no difference was detected between the middle and oldest age groups. The logic used to construct the linear-trend hypothesis focused on cognitive development generally rather than moral development specifically. Had moral-stage theories been applied, a different hypothesis may have been deduced. Specifically, it is interesting to note that cognitive-developmental stage theories of morality mark a major transition in children’s moral judgments at approximately 7 years of age (Eisenberg, 1986; Kohlberg, 1984; Krcmar & Cooke, 2001; Zillmann & Bryant, 1975). For example, Piaget’s (1932/1965) model notes that children older than 7 years have reached the
stage of “equitable retribution” and can better weigh moral concerns based on an inner sense of justice (as compared to children younger than 7 years, who rely on authority and punishment to judge right from wrong). Despite only partial support for the linear-trend hypothesis, it is interesting to note that the content-based difference detected in the current study corresponds to the developmental point noted by past scholars.

Conclusion

The study’s findings support the MIME’s suggestion that content is in line with its audience’s moral sensitivities. Specifically, the findings here show that content adheres to age-based differences in audience ability to weigh the relative importance of multiple incongruent motivations. In addition, the data show the primacy of dilemmas that pit egoistic motivations against altruistic motivations in content (vs. those between two egoistic motivations or between two altruistic motivations). This finding should point researchers to the potentially important role of egoistic drives in understanding audience response to narrative outcomes and character behavior. First, if egoistic drives are prevalent in content, measuring the importance audiences place on them may have predictive utility for media selection and appeal. Second, repeated exposure to depictions of egoism may lead to a modification (or maintenance) of the relative salience of motivational subdomains. Both of these propositions should be tested, as they are important for both the micro- and macrolevel processes described in the MIME. If research shows that media experiences can shape egoistic concerns, and egoistic concerns can determine selection and appeal, then scholars would have further insight into the reciprocal influence between audience groups and their media environments.

REFERENCES


