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# Moral clarity decreases as viewer age increases: a content analysis of the moral values and reinforcement cues depicted in popular U.S. children's television

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## ABSTRACT

Evidence suggests that exposure to narrative media content emphasizing the importance of moral intuitions can increase the extent to which children value those intuitions. This is especially the case when intuition exemplars are accompanied by clear social desirability cues (i.e., moral acts are rewarded/performed by heroes or immoral acts are punished/performed by villains). Less is known about the effects of exposure to ambiguous social desirability cues (i.e., moral acts are punished/performed by villains or immoral acts are rewarded/performed by heroes). In order to investigate the extent to which popular media content may serve as an effective moral educator for young viewers, this paper describes a content analysis designed to examine the frequency and clarity of moral intuition exemplars in popular children's television shows (N = 30). Results demonstrated that moral clarity in content decreased as viewer age increased. That is, content popular among older children (ages 6–17) featured more ambiguous social desirability cues compared to content popular among younger children (ages 2–5). Content across age groups also featured a preponderance of care and fairness intuition exemplars. Findings are interpreted in line with extant research on moral complexity and narrative entertainment. Practical implications are considered.

## IMPACT SUMMARY

**Prior State of Knowledge:** Recent work has demonstrated that narrative media's emphasis on moral intuitions can increase the importance audiences place on those intuitions. This work largely focuses on understanding the effects of moral exemplars that are clearly reinforced in narratives.

**Novel Contributions:** Using content analysis, the present study demonstrated that the clarity of narrative reinforcement cues decreases as the age group in which the content is popular increases. Specifically, moral exemplars in television shows popular among teens featured the most ambiguous reinforcement cues.

**Practical Implications:** For caregivers hoping to use media as a tool for inculcating certain moral values in children, these results suggest the importance of considering not only which moral values are exemplified in content, but also how clearly those values are reinforced.

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Much effort has been devoted to understanding what children get from consuming popular entertainment media, and whether the messages they absorb can impact their social behavior (e.g., Johnson, 2005). Although the bulk of research on this topic focuses on understanding outcome behaviors deemed socially detrimental (e.g., aggression; Anderson et al., 2003), a growing body of research has examined media content's ability to communicate the importance of moral values to child audiences (e.g., Hogan & Strasburger, 2008; Mares & Woodard, 2005). Research in this area largely suggests that children can and do learn moral values from exposure to popular media content, and that what they learn is dependent upon the content to which they are exposed, their ability to comprehend it (Fisch, 2005; Mares & Acosta, 2008), and the extent to which content depicts moral values as socially desirable (Bandura, 2001; Kohlberg, 1971).

In order to examine the mechanisms underlying media's ability to socialize moral values in children, recent work has attempted to synthesize knowledge on children's learning from media with advancements in moral psychology (Hahn et al., *in press*; also see Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008). Guided by the model of intuitive morality and exemplars (MIME; Tamborini, 2013), this work has suggested that media content's ability to teach the importance of moral values to child audiences is rooted in content's capacity to increase the importance viewers place on a comprehensive scheme of moral intuitions; or evolutionary developed sensitivities toward right/wrong in the domains of care, fairness, in group loyalty, respect for authority, and purity/sanctity (Hahn et al., *in press*; also see Haidt & Joseph, 2007; Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008; Tamborini, 2013; Tamborini et al., 2016; Tamborini, Prabhu, Lewis, Grizzard, & Eden, 2018). More specifically, the observation of an exemplar (i.e., example) of one of these moral domains in media content is thought to activate gut-level responses and increase the importance audiences place on that moral domain in real life – at least temporarily. The mere presence of a moral or immoral exemplar in media content is thought to indicate to audiences that behaviors within that social domain are socially desirable or undesirable, respectively (Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008; Zillmann, 2000).

However, narrative reinforcement, or the association of an exemplar with reward/punishment or a heroic/villainous character, can alter viewers' interpretations of a moral or immoral exemplar's social desirability (Bandura, 2001; Kohlberg, 1971; Tamborini, 2013; Tamborini, Hahn, Prabhu, Klebig, & Grall, 2017). Narratives that associate a moral exemplar (e.g., sharing) with positive reinforcement cues (e.g., reward), or an immoral exemplar (e.g., stealing) with negative reinforcement cues (e.g., punishment) feature *clear reinforcement*. In cases of clear reinforcement, the social desirability indicated by the reinforcement cues bolsters the already salient intuitive response to right/wrong that audiences would have experienced when they observed the im/moral exemplar by itself. Some research suggests that clear reinforcement is necessary in order for popular media content to serve as an effective educator of social values (e.g., see Bandura, 2001; also see Kohlberg, 1971).

Conversely, narratives that associate a *moral* exemplar (e.g., helping) with negative reinforcement cues (e.g., punishment), or an *immoral* exemplar (e.g., harming) with positive reinforcement cues (e.g., reward) feature *ambiguous reinforcement*. In cases of ambiguous reinforcement, the social desirability indicated by the reinforcement cues contradicts the already salient intuitive response to right/wrong that audiences would have experienced when they observed the im/moral exemplar alone. Logic from research

on children's learning suggests that ambiguous reinforcement should attenuate audiences' learning of moral values from narratives, ultimately decreasing the social benefits that child audiences might be expected to acquire from consuming content meant to be morally educational (Bandura, 2001; Kohlberg, 1971; also see Lewis, Grizzard, Mangus, Rashidian, & Weber, 2017; Tamborini et al., 2017). In order to understand the extent to which popular media may serve as an effective source of moral education for child audiences, it is necessary to understand not only what moral values are emphasized in content frequently consumed by developing and uncritical audiences, but also the extent to which content clearly reinforces the social desirability of these values.

With the expectation that narratives depicting moral values alongside clear social desirability cues would have the greatest educational value for child audiences (Bandura, 2001; Kohlberg, 1971), the present study investigates the extent to which moral exemplars in popular children's television programming are depicted with clear or ambiguous narrative reinforcement. This manuscript begins by reviewing research on children's ability to learn moral values from media content. It goes on to describe the model of intuitive morality and exemplars (MIME) as a guiding theoretical framework that is useful for contextualizing research in this area (Tamborini, 2013), and considers the role of narrative reinforcement cues as an important factor governing children's ability to learn social values from media content. Finally, it describes a content analysis designed to assess the (a) frequency of moral exemplars in popular children's television programming, (b) the extent to which these exemplars are clearly reinforced through surrounding narrative cues, and (c) whether this clarity differs according to the age group in which the content is popular.

### Children's learning from media

In the past, scholars examining media's ability to teach social values to child audiences have taken an approach rooted in understandings of prosocial and antisocial content and effects of observing that content (e.g., Coyne et al., 2018). Researchers typically define prosocial content in terms of storylines that promote social benefit such as helping or sharing, and antisocial content in terms of storylines that may promote social detriment such as aggression or prejudice (e.g., Anderson et al., 2003; Coyne et al., 2018). The bulk of research in this area has focused on the extent to which exposure to antisocial content can lead to similar antisocial behaviors in audiences (Hogan & Strasburger, 2008). However, as Mares and Woodard (2005) point out, media depicting prosocial behaviors may be even more likely to influence viewers' behaviors given that prosocial behavioral outcomes adhere to societal norms and more direct sources of moral education from parents and teachers (also see Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Rushton, 1979). That is, prosocial outcomes are socially-sanctioned by children's media and non-media environments.

As predicted, exposure to prosocial content has been found to reliably and meaningfully influence outcomes in children such as social inclusion and helping behaviors (e.g., de Leeuw & van der Laan, 2018; Mares & Braun, 2013). Acknowledging the socially beneficial effects that exposure to prosocial content can have on developing audiences, content analytic work in this area has noted an abundance of prosocial exemplars (Zillmann, 1999) throughout popular children's media (e.g., Smith et al., 2006). Yet without a comprehensive theory describing prosocial media, its subsequent effects, and the

boundary conditions of these effects, predicting exactly when, why, and which of viewers' specific behaviors may be influenced by exposure to moral exemplars is difficult. Recent work has attempted to overcome these difficulties by adopting a comprehensive scheme for considering media's influence on children's social behaviors (Aley et al., 2021; Hahn et al., 2019; Tamborini, 2011, 2013). Synthesizing existing understandings of media influence with knowledge from moral psychology, the model of intuitive morality and exemplars (MIME) offers a framework for identifying and categorizing media content and the effects of exposure to that content (Hahn et al., [in press](#); Tamborini, 2011, 2013; also see Cingel & Krcmar, 2020).

## The MIME

The MIME (Tamborini, 2013) outlines a reciprocal relationship between media and audiences. Adopting logic from the social intuitionist perspective (Haidt, 2001), moral foundations theory (MFT; Haidt & Joseph, 2007), and exemplification theory (Zillmann, 2002), the MIME describes a process through which exposure to moral exemplars in media can increase the salience of moral instincts (i.e., intuitions) in audiences. As moral intuitions become more valued by viewers, media producers then seek to create content that aligns with viewers' values, thereby producing content that highlights the moral intuitions viewers find important.

## Intuitions

Drawing on MFT, the MIME adopts five intuitions which serve as part of the central mechanism governing media's influence (Haidt & Joseph, 2007). MFT proposed that all moral judgments are the result of five moral intuitions, or instinctual sensitivities toward certain classes of behavior (also see Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008). The five intuitions include: *care*, pertaining to notions of compassion and empathy; *fairness*, associated with justice, honesty, and equitable distribution of resources; *in group loyalty*, concerning favoritism for the in group and against the outgroup; respect for *authority*, dealing with deference toward legitimate hierarchies and tradition; and *purity*, concerned with contamination avoidance and the desire to live a noble life. Each intuition is thought to exist in humans universally and innately, regardless of cultural upbringing or age (Miller, 2008). Evidence for each has been demonstrated in very young children, as Hamlin notes that even infants' moral sensitivities "are sophisticated, flexible, and surprisingly consistent with adults' moral inclinations, incorporating aspects of moral goodness, evaluation, and retaliation" (2013, p. 191). Notably for the present study, the five intuitions serve as a useful categorical scheme for identifying the presence of moral values in media content.

Each intuition is conceptualized as a drive to provide benefit to others at a cost to the self in different social domains (Haidt & Joseph, 2007; Tamborini, 2013). When observing an intuition upheld (a *moral* exemplar; e.g., witnessing Batman save a child from a burning building), positive affect is produced in observers. When observing an intuition violated (an *immoral* exemplar; e.g., witnessing the Joker harm innocent tourists), negative affect is produced in observers. For example, the care intuition is associated with compassion and empathy. It produces positive affect in response to

helping others in need and negative affect in response to cruelty or indifference to others' needs. As such, a television show that portrays Clifford the Big Red Dog helping another dog should elicit positive affect in viewers, and a show portraying Captain Hook be cruel to his first-mate, Smee, should elicit negative affect. Logic from the MIME suggests that even the simple portrayal of a moral exemplar, regardless of narrative context, should (1) invoke positive affect in viewers, (2) indicate to audiences that behaviors driven by that moral intuition are socially desirable, and (3) increase the importance that audiences place on that moral domain in real life (Haidt, 2001; Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008; Tamborini, 2013).

### *Intuition salience*

Although each of these intuitions is said to be universally present in the minds of all humans, some may be given greater weight than others in determining moral judgment and behavior. The MIME refers to this weight as *salience*. Intuition salience can be temporary (elicited as a momentary response to recently observing specific intuitions in media content) or chronic (elicited as a more enduring response to one's cultural membership or in response to frequently observing specific intuitions in media content; Eden et al., 2014; Tamborini, 2011, 2013; Tamborini et al., 2016, 2018). Thus, the MIME defines the process of learning moral values in terms of shifting the salience of moral intuitions in individuals' minds. Although many agents can contribute to the salience of moral intuitions, exposure to moral exemplars in media content has been specifically noted for its potential to influence the salience of humans' intuitions (e.g., Hahn et al., *in press*; Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008; Tamborini, 2011, 2013; also see Bandura, 2001; Zillmann, 2002).

### *Intuition portrayals in media content*

The MIME considers media's influence on the salience of intuitions in audiences to be reciprocal, such that content will influence audiences' intuition salience, and audiences' intuition salience will then drive production patterns of future content (Tamborini, 2013). As such, an understanding of the moral intuition exemplars depicted most frequently in media content popular within a particular group (e.g., children of different ages) can provide insight into the moral intuition salience hierarchy among audiences of that content (see Eden & Tamborini, 2017).

The present study focuses on examining television content, as television remains the most popular medium among child audiences – especially those who are very young (Common Sense Media, 2017; The Nielsen Company, 2020). Previous research has found that children's television content, books, and songs tend to emphasize egoistic, or self-serving, concerns most often (Aley et al., 2021; Hahn et al., 2019), although this focus diminishes slightly for content popular among very young audiences (Tamborini et al., 2020, 2017). In terms of moral, other-serving concerns, Western media systems would be expected to emphasize exemplars of the care and fairness intuitions most often, as these intuitions tend to be relatively more salient across Western audiences (Graham et al., 2011). Although it is reasonable to expect patterns of intuition exemplar portrayals across children's television content broadly, we might also expect differential patterns of intuition salience in television content popular among different child age groups (i.e.,

content's age of popularity). Specifically, it could be the case that child audiences (and those selecting content for them) might value (or wish to inculcate the importance of) different moral domains depending on the viewer's age:

RQ1: Which intuition exemplars are (a) frequently shown in popular children's television content, and (b) does this differ by age of popularity?

### **Narrative reinforcement**

Yet despite research demonstrating media's ability to transmit the importance of cultural values to child audiences by mere exposure (Hahn et al., *in press*; Tamborini, 2011, 2013; Tamborini et al., 2017; Zillmann, 2000), several important factors have been identified as critical determinants of audiences' ability to learn from narratives (see Bandura, 2001; Kohlberg, 1971). In terms of narrative characteristics, one of the most critical factors governing children's learning of social values is the extent to which moral values are depicted as socially desirable. In particular, character behaviors that are rewarded or performed by a heroic character are more likely to be imitated by audiences (Bandura, 2001; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963; Hogan & Strasburger, 2008), with early conceptions of morality even suggesting this type of reinforcement is necessary for very young children to be able to tell right from wrong (Kohlberg, 1971). Although the MIME would suggest the mere presence of a moral exemplar should activate intuitive positive affect and indicate the moral domain's social desirability alone, the model acknowledges that positive narrative reinforcement can strengthen this effect (Tamborini, 2013; Tamborini et al., 2017; also see Zillmann, 2000). Thus, there is utility in understanding which moral intuition exemplars in popular media are depicted as socially desirable through reward and character-type, as logic from the MIME and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) would contend that these moral domains would be most likely to be subsequently valued, or even imitated, by uncritical, child audiences. This logic leads to our second research question:

RQ2: What intuitions are frequently reinforced in popular children's television content through (a) consequences, (b) character type, and (c) does this differ by age of popularity?

Importantly, not all indications of social desirability are equal, and certain patterns of narrative reinforcement can alter viewers' interpretations of which moral domains are socially desirable. Indeed, differential patterns of narrative reinforcement could feasibly impact which moral values audiences are likely to subsequently act upon (Bandura, 2001; Bandura et al., 1963; Hahn et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2017; Tamborini et al., 2017; Zillmann, 2000).

### **Clear reinforcement**

Clear reinforcement (or congruous reinforcement; i.e., narrative cues that associate a moral exemplar with positive reinforcement or an immoral exemplar with negative reinforcement) can strengthen children's ability to learn moral values from media content (Bandura, 2001; Tamborini, 2013; Tamborini et al., 2017; Zillmann, 2000). In MIME terms, this strengthened effect would occur because the social desirability indicated by the clear reinforcement cues bolsters the already salient intuitive response to right/wrong that



audiences experience when observing the im/moral exemplar by itself (also see Zillmann, 2000). That is, for moral exemplars that are positively reinforced (e.g., observing Dottie from *Doc McStuffins* praised for her compassionate acts), audiences learn that behaviors associated with the exemplified moral domain (compassion) are socially desirable and should be adopted. For immoral exemplars that are negatively reinforced (e.g., observing Captain Hook, the villain from *Jake and the Neverland Pirates*, steal treasure from an innocent boater), audiences learn that behaviors associated with the exemplified moral domain are socially undesirable and should be avoided. Given the educational value of clear reinforcement in narratives (Bandura, 2001; Kohlberg, 1971), the present study attempts to determine the extent to which moral intuition exemplars are clearly reinforced in popular children's media. However, narrative reinforcement is not always so straightforward.

### *Ambiguous reinforcement*

Ambiguous reinforcement (or incongruous reinforcement; i.e., narrative cues that associate a *moral* exemplar with negative reinforcement cues, or an *immoral* exemplar with positive reinforcement cues), is thought to attenuate audiences' learning of moral values from narratives, ultimately decreasing the social benefits that child audiences might be expected to acquire from observing moral exemplars in content (Bandura, 2001; Lewis et al., 2017; also see Zillmann, 2000; Zillmann & Bryant, 1975). In MIME terms, the social desirability indicated by the reinforcement cues contradicts the already salient intuitive response to right/wrong that audiences experience when they observe the im/moral exemplar by itself. Notably, the MIME considers both intuitive and rational responses to observing moral exemplars. Although a moral exemplar would be expected to intuitively invoke positive affect and determinations of social desirability in audiences, the presence of ambiguous reinforcement would be expected to invoke rational processing where audiences would need to employ deliberative reasoning to determine right from wrong. For example, observing Dottie from *Doc McStuffins* punished for helping a vulnerable stuffed pig (a care exemplar) would require children to weigh the social undesirability of the outcome (punishment) with their intuitive reaction that the exemplified care domain is socially desirable.

Although adults and older children may be able to deliberate the circumstances leading to this outcome, for instance, perhaps the punishment was simply a mistake that will be revealed as such later, especially young viewers may have difficulty understanding whether the moral exemplar (upholding care) was desirable at all, given that it was associated with negative reinforcement (a punishment). Indeed, a capacity for moral deliberation in this regard is not yet developed in very young children, making them more likely to uncritically receive messages without further evaluation. Yet we might expect older children to have less trouble deliberating on such content, given their greater ability for comprehending ambiguity (see Lewis, 2012; Wilson, Cantor, Gordon, & Zillmann, 1986; Piaget, 1948; Zillmann & Bryant, 1975). Notably, experimental work in this area has focused on understanding the effects of clear moral messages on audiences (e.g., de Leeuw & van der Laan, 2018; Hahn et al., *in press*). Less work has focused on the effects of equivocal moral messages that might feature ambiguous reinforcement (but see Lewis, 2012; Zillmann & Bryant, 1975).



Because moral exemplars that are ambiguously reinforced require deliberative processing not yet developed in very young children, and because those selecting content for these children would seemingly want to provide content emphasizing the most straightforward moral message possible, it is expected that ambiguous reinforcement would be relatively absent from media content popular among young viewers. In contrast, content that is popular among older children may feature moral exemplars accompanied by more instances of ambiguous reinforcement cues, as viewer comprehension would have a greater chance of surviving despite the presence of these cues. This logic leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: The lower the age group of popularity, the more narrative television content will feature clear reinforcement through (a) consequences and (b) character type.

## Method

### Sample

A random selection of children's television shows was drawn from The Nielsen Company's list of most popular broadcast, cable, and syndicated television programming from late 2013 and early 2014. These shows were reported by Nielsen to be the most watched in terms of live television and digital recording playback among three age groups: toddlers, tweens, and teens (ages 2–5, 6–11, and 12–17, respectively). Using a stratified sampling technique, 10 shows were selected for three of Nielsen's identified age categories. Then, one episode was randomly selected from each television show from an online streaming service to be coded for the study.

The unit of observation for this content analysis was individual scenes within each episode. The actual sample size depended on how many identifiable scenes existed in each selected episode. Scenes were divided any time there was a change in setting, time, or major characters, and opening and closing credits were not included in the scene time count. This method of identifying scenes generated  $N = 553$  scenes ( $n_{\text{toddler}} = 167$ ,  $n_{\text{tween}} = 152$ ,  $n_{\text{teen}} = 234$ ; sampling error at the 95% level of confidence = 0.02). Scenes were identified within each television show according to their timestamps. The final sample of the toddler-aged group (ages 2–5) included shows such as *Bubble Guppies* and *Dora the Explorer*, the tween-aged group (ages 6–11) included shows such as *Shake it Up!* and *Spongebob Squarepants*, and the teen-aged group (ages 12–17) included shows such as *Glee* and *Pretty Little Liars*. Shows and episode titles coded in the final sample can be seen in Table 1.

### Coding procedure

Coders were instructed to code each scene for the presence of moral and immoral exemplars of each of the five intuitions identified by the MIME, whether the exemplar was rewarded or punished (consequences), and whether the character associated with the exemplar was portrayed as heroic or villainous (character type). More specifically, coders first identified whether an exemplar of one of the five moral intuitions was present, and if so, whether it was moral (i.e., a value related to one of the five intuitions was upheld) or immoral (i.e., a value related to one of the five intuitions was violated). If

**Table 1.** Sample of television shows and episodes content analyzed.

Age Group	Television Show	Episode
2–5	Yo Gabba Gabba!	Summer
	Special Agent Oso	Thunder Berries/Flowers are Forever
	Handy Manny	Francisco Comes to Town/Broken Drawbridge
	Bubble Guppies	Bubble Bite
	Jake & the Neverland Pirates	Happy Hook Day!/No Returns!
	Caillou	Toy Trouble
	Dora the Explorer	Dora's Rescue in Mermaid Kingdom
	Doc McStuffins	Knight Time
	My Little Pony	One Bad Apple
	Curious George	On Time/Bunny Hunt
6–11	Power Rangers: Samurai	The Blue and the Gold
	Phineas & Ferb	One Good Scare Ought to do It!
	The Suite Life of Zack & Cody	Cody Goes to Camp
	Spongebob Squarepants	A Day Without Tears/Summer Job
	Good Luck Charlie	Kwikki Chick
	Johnny Test	101 Johnnies/Johnny Zombie Tea Party
	Adventure Time	When Wedding Bells Thaw
	Shake it up!	Glitz it up!
	Regular Show	Grilled Cheese Deluxe
	Jessie	A Doll's Outhouse
12–17	Glee	The Purple Piano Project
	Walking Dead	Say the Word
	Family Guy	Yug Yimaf
	American Dad	A Pinata Named Desire
	The New Girl	Injured
	Modern Family	Fizbo
	Bob's Burgers	Art Crawl
	Teen Wolf	Code Breaker
	Pretty Little Liars	Know your Frenemies
	The Simpsons	Them, Robot

a moral/immoral exemplar was identified, coders indicated whether its portrayal was subsequently rewarded or punished. Rewards/punishments were identified when coders observed either (a) explicit verbal or physical praise/scolding, or (b) more subtle disapproval indicators such as a smile or scowl as a direct result of a moral exemplar. If no immediate reward/punishment was observed in the scene, coders were instructed to denote the scene and return to update it if a reward/punishment appeared in a later scene. Finally, to code character type, coders identified whether the character performing the moral exemplar was heroic or villainous. To determine this, coders were instructed to take into account the character's appearance, setting, music, and any other context clues that the narrative affords them in determining whether a character was heroic or villainous. When coders could not determine whether a character was heroic or villainous, they were instructed to code the character as neutral.

For example, consider a scene depicting Captain Hook, a pirate outlaw, from *Jake and the Neverland Pirates* stealing treasure from an innocent boater. In a subsequent scene, Jake finds out what Captain Hook has done, tracks him down, scolds him for taking what is not his, and then returns the treasure to its rightful owner, who smiles and thanks Jake. In the first scene, Captain Hook's action would be coded as an immoral fairness exemplar (because it was an act of stealing), punished (because the act of stealing was scolded in a subsequent scene), and associated with a villainous character (due to Hook's scraggly, outlaw appearance). In the second scene, Jake's action would be coded as a moral fairness exemplar (because the act restored justice), rewarded (because restoring justice resulted

**Table 2.**Coder reliabilities for variables of interest in reliability test on N = 111 scenes (6 shows).

Variable	Cohen's Kappa
Care exemplars	0.85
Fairness exemplars	0.92
Loyalty exemplars	0.74
Authority exemplars	0.74
Purity exemplars	0.80
Consequences	0.82
Character types	0.84

in the treasure's owner smiling and thanking Jake), and associated with a heroic character (due to Jake's soft, friendly appearance).

### **Coder training and reliability**

Two independent coders were trained for one month on the coding procedure. Coder training consisted of reading the coding protocol aloud, coding examples together, discussing disagreements, and revising the protocol. After coders appeared to agree on all steps of the coding procedure, they each coded six shows (two were randomly selected from each age category;  $n = 111$  scenes; 20.07% of all scenes) so that intercoder reliability could be assessed. Intercoder reliability for each coding category exceeded the .70 threshold for Cohen's Kappa to indicate acceptable agreement (average Kappa = .82). Coder reliabilities for all variables of interest are presented in Table 2. After intercoder reliability was achieved, disagreements for scenes coded in the reliability test were resolved by having coders discuss differences until agreement was reached. Finally, and in line with procedures outlined by Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2013), each coder coded half of the remaining sample independently ( $n = 221$  scenes each).

### **Data preprocessing & analysis strategy**

After coding was complete, two variables were created: One to indicate each moral/immoral exemplar's consequence clarity and one to indicate each moral/immoral exemplar's character type clarity. The variable for consequence clarity was created by combining the code for each moral/immoral exemplar with the code for each exemplar's consequence (reward/punish). This new variable, consequence clarity, had three levels ranging from ambiguous to clear. Specifically, consequence ambiguity (coded as 0) was coded when a *moral* exemplar was *punished* or when an *immoral* exemplar was *rewarded* (e.g., a character is praised for stealing). Consequence clarity (coded as 2) was coded when a *moral* exemplar was *rewarded* or when an *immoral* exemplar was *punished* (e.g., a character is punished for stealing). The absence of consequences was considered characteristic of moderate clarity and was coded as a 1 when a moral or immoral exemplar was neither rewarded nor punished.

The variable for character type clarity was created by combining the code for each moral/immoral exemplar with the code for each exemplar's character type (heroic/

villainous). Like the consequence clarity variable, the new character type clarity variable had three levels ranging from ambiguous to clear. Specifically, character ambiguity (coded as 0) was coded when a *moral* exemplar was associated with a *villainous* character, or when an *immoral* exemplar was associated with *heroic* character (e.g., a villainous character saves a child's life). Character clarity (coded as 2) was coded when a *moral* exemplar was associated with a *heroic* character, or when an *immoral* exemplar was associated with a *villainous* character (e.g., a villainous character kills another person). Moral or immoral exemplars associated with characters deemed neutral (neither heroic nor villainous) were considered indicative of moderate clarity (coded as 1). Hence, both consequence and character type clarity were coded on an interval scale, with higher numbers indicating greater reinforcement clarity. To analyze our data, we implement chi-square tests to investigate RQ1 and RQ2, and a one-way ANOVA to investigate H1.

## Results

Research question one asked (a) which intuition exemplars were most frequently portrayed by popular children's television content, and (b) whether this differed by age. Of the 553 scenes, 48.82% ( $N = 270$  scenes) contained at least one intuition exemplar. Examining RQ1a, one-sample chi-square analysis revealed a significant difference in the extent to which different exemplars were portrayed,  $\chi^2(4, n = 272) = 108.04, p < .01, \phi = .63$ . Specifically, care (standardized residual = 7.13;  $n = 107$  scenes; 19.31% of all scenes) and fairness (standardized residual = 2.39;  $n = 72$  scenes; 13% of all scenes) exemplars were significantly overrepresented in content.

To examine RQ1b, which asked if intuition exemplar portrayals differed by age, a 3 (age: toddler, tween, teen)  $\times$  5 (exemplar: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, purity) chi-square test was conducted. Results of this analysis revealed differences in exemplar portrayals according to age,  $\chi^2(8, N = 272) = 21.51, p < .01$ , Cramer's  $V = .20$ . Television shows popular among the youngest age group featured an overrepresentation of fairness exemplars (adjusted standardized residual = 2.1), the tween content featured an overrepresentation of authority exemplars (adjusted standardized residual = 2.2), and the teen-aged content featured an overrepresentation of both loyalty (adjusted standardized residual = 2.3) and purity (adjusted standardized residual = 2.4) exemplars.

Research question two asked which intuition exemplars were most often reinforced by popular children's television content through (a) consequences and (b) character type, and (c) whether this differed by age. To answer RQ2a and RQ2b, two analyses were conducted, one for reward/punishment and one for character type. First, a 2 (consequence: reward, punishment)  $\times$  5 (exemplar: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, purity) chi-square analysis was conducted using only scenes that featured an exemplar being rewarded or punished. The results of this analysis revealed that fairness exemplars were more likely to be punished than any other intuition (adjusted standardized residual = 2.8) and care exemplars were more likely to be rewarded than any other intuition (adjusted standardized residual = 3.1),  $\chi^2(4, N = 180) = 13.12, p = .01$ , Cramer's  $V = .27$ . That is, in terms of consequences, fairness was depicted as the most undesirable, whereas care was depicted as the most desirable. Second, a 2 (character type: heroic, villainous)  $\times$  5 (exemplar: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, purity) chi-square analysis was conducted using only scenes identified as featuring a heroic/villainous character along with an

exemplar. Results for this analysis overall did not reach statistical significance,  $\chi^2(4, N = 250) = 6.80, p = .15$ , Cramer's  $V = .17$ .

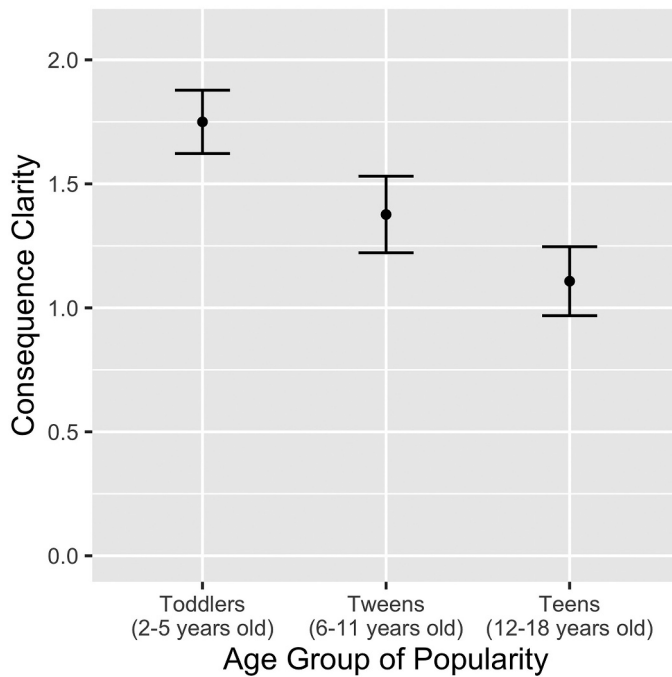
To examine whether reward/punishment consequences differed according to age and answer RQ2c, two more analyses were conducted, again with one for reward/punishment and one for character type. First, for reward/punishment, a 3 (content age: toddler, tween, teen) X 2 (consequence: reward/punishment) X 5 (exemplar: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, purity) chi-square analysis was conducted, again only using scenes that featured an exemplar associated with reward or punishment. Results suggested differences by age,  $\chi^2(4, N = 180) = 13.12, p = .01$ , Cramer's  $V = .27$ . Fairness exemplars were more likely than any other intuition to be punished in content popular among toddlers (adjusted standardized residual = 2.3) and tweens (adjusted standardized residual = 2.5). Additionally, in content popular among toddlers, care exemplars were more likely to be rewarded than any other intuition (adjusted standardized residual = 2.7). Second, for character type, a 3 (content age: toddler, tween, teen) X 2 (character type: heroic, villainous) X 5 (exemplar: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, purity) chi-square analysis was conducted, again only using scenes identified as featuring a heroic/villainous character perform a moral exemplar. Results were not statistically significant,  $\chi^2(4, N = 250) = 6.80, p = .15$ , Cramer's  $V = .15$ .

H1 predicted that the lower the age group of popularity, the more narrative television content would feature clear reinforcement through both (a) consequences and (b) character type. To test this, two one-way ANOVA with linear trend analyses were conducted using the Nielsen-provided age groups as a predictor of (a) consequence clarity and (b) character type clarity outcomes. In the first ANOVA for consequence clarity, the overall analysis was significant,  $F(2, 267) = 15.78, p < .01, \omega^2 = .10$ , as was the linear contrast,  $F(1, 267) = 30.83, p < .01, \omega^2 = .10$ . Post-hoc pairwise comparisons indicated that consequence clarity was more prevalent in content popular among the toddler age group ( $M = 1.75, SD = .48, 95\% CI = 1.62, 1.88$ ) compared to content popular among tweens ( $M = 1.38, SD = .75, 95\% CI = 1.22, 1.53, d = .59$ ) and teens ( $M = 1.11, SD = .77, 95\% CI = 0.97, 1.25, d = 1.00$ ). Additionally, consequence clarity was more prevalent in content popular among tweens compared to teens,  $d = .36$ ; see [Figure 1](#)).

In the second ANOVA, this time for character type clarity, the overall analysis was statistically significant,  $F(2, 267) = 16.59, p < .01, \omega^2 = .08$ , as was the linear contrast,  $F(1, 267) = 29.01, p < .01, \omega^2 = .08$ . Post-hoc pairwise comparisons indicated that character type clarity was more prevalent in content popular among toddlers ( $M = 1.96, SD = .27, 95\% CI = 1.89, 2.04$ ) compared to content popular among tweens ( $M = 1.40, SD = .89, 95\% CI = 1.22, 1.58, d = .85$ ) and teens ( $M = 1.21, SD = .92, 95\% CI = 1.04, 1.37, d = 1.11$ ). Character clarity in content popular among tweens did not significantly differ from content popular among teens,  $d = .21$ ; see [Figure 2](#)). Taken together, the results of both analyses for H1 suggest moral clarity, in terms of consequence and character congruity, decreases in television content as the age group of popularity increases. Means associated with post-hoc comparisons are displayed in [Table 3](#).

## Discussion

In order to understand the extent to which popular media can serve as an effective source of moral education for children, it is necessary to understand not only what moral values are emphasized in content, but also the extent to which content reinforces

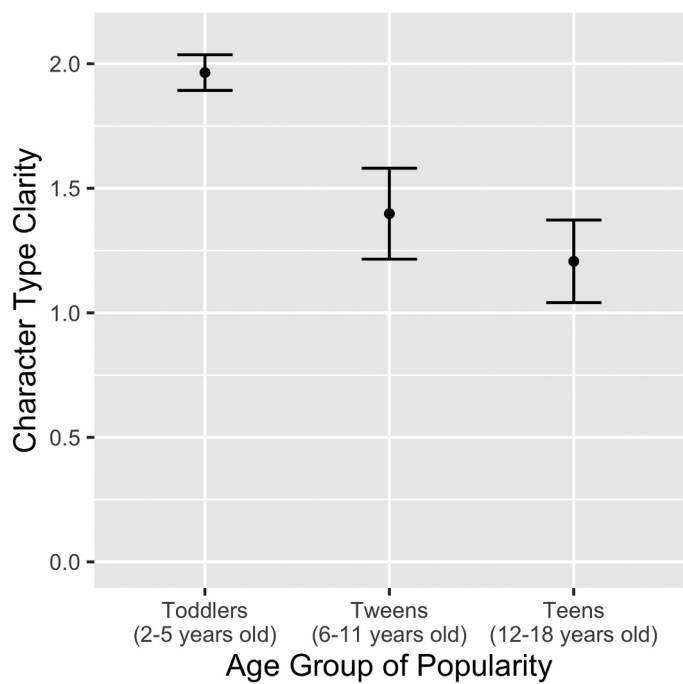


**Figure 1.** Consequence clarity by content's age of popularity.

the social desirability of these values. The present study attempted to provide an initial understanding of the representation of moral values in popular children's television content by examining how frequently moral intuition exemplars were depicted, and to what extent these exemplars were portrayed as clearly socially desirable through the use of narrative reinforcement. Results demonstrated that as the age of popularity increases, content features more ambiguous social desirability cues. Results also revealed a preponderance of care and fairness exemplars across all content, and a preponderance of different moral exemplars depending on the age group in which the content is popular. In the sections that follow, both the theoretical and practical implications of these results are considered.

### Theoretical implications

The MIME conceptualizes children's learning from media content in terms of shifting the salience of audience's moral intuitions. That is, because the existence of moral intuitions in audiences' minds is thought to be innate (Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008), media's ability to teach moral values is defined by its capacity to make one (or some) moral intuition domain(s) relatively more salient than others. With the expectation that narratives depicting moral values alongside clear social desirability cues would have the greatest capacity for increasing the salience of moral intuitions in audiences, the present study attempted to lay the foundation for future experimental or field studies that might examine popular



**Figure 2.** Character type clarity by content’s age of popularity.

television’s ability to shift the temporary or chronic (i.e., long-term), salience of moral intuitions in child audiences. Intuition salience is thought to produce predictable patterns of subsequent social behaviors in audiences (Hahn et al., 2019; Tamborini, 2013), depending on how clearly those exemplars are reinforced through accompanying narrative cues (e.g., Bandura, 2001).

*Predicting media’s influence on children’s social behaviors*

The results of the present study suggest that toddlers, whose popular television content most often emphasizes fairness accompanied by clear consequence and character-type reinforcement patterns, would be expected to place greater importance on the fairness

**Table 3.** Average Reinforcement Clarity by Content’s Age Group of Popularity.

Age Group of Popularity	N	Average Consequence Clarity	Average Character Type Clarity
Toddlers (2–5 years old)	56	1.75 (0.48) <sup>A</sup>	1.96 (0.27) <sup>A</sup>
Adolescents (6–11 years old)	93	1.38 (0.75) <sup>B</sup>	1.40 (0.89) <sup>B</sup>
Teens (12–18 years old)	121	1.11 (0.77) <sup>C</sup>	1.21 (0.92) <sup>B</sup>

N denotes the number of scenes. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Superscripts that are different in each column indicate statistical significance at  $p < .01$ .



intuition compared to other intuitions in the long-term. For instance, repeatedly observing the hero, Jake, from *Jake and the Neverland Pirates* rewarded for returning treasure that was stolen by Captain Hook to its rightful owners should lead toddlers to place greater importance on the fairness intuition (Hahn et al., [in press](#)). According to the MIME, greater cognitive importance on an intuition is expected to manifest in audiences' subsequent decision-making and behaviors, suggesting that toddlers may be more likely to engage in behaviors motivated by fairness, such as sharing or honesty, relative to behaviors motivated by other intuitions (Hahn et al., [2019](#); Tamborini, [2013](#)).

Predicting patterns of resulting intuition salience and accordant behaviors in tweens and teens is not as straightforward, as the present study's results demonstrate that moral exemplars depicted in television content popular among these age groups are likely to be accompanied by more ambiguous reward patterns and character reinforcement cues. For instance, heroic, liked characters in *The Walking Dead* are frequently praised for their ability to kill zombies and other human enemies (i.e., a harm exemplar). The relatively ambiguous representation of morality in older children's programming is perhaps not surprising when considering that older children have a developed capacity to make sense of morally complex content, compared to younger viewers (e.g., Lewis, [2012](#); Piaget, [1948](#)). Thus, the fact that moral clarity is greater in content popular among very young audiences may be related to selection, as young children (and those selecting content for them) would likely not choose to consume content with overly complex storylines unable to be comprehended by young viewers. Although beyond the scope of the present study, we might speculate that this finding could point to a shift in viewer's selection motivations from those that are hedonic (purely pleasure-based motivations) for young children to those that are more eudaimonic (motivations to consume meaningful or thought-provoking content) for older children (e.g., Wirth, Hofer, & Schramm, [2012](#)). For older children who can comprehend these storylines, the implications of exposure to morally ambiguous reinforcement patterns on their adoption of exemplar-accordant social behaviors have yet to be determined with experimental research. However, insight from media entertainment research with adults provides a foundation for making such predictions, as it offers insight into how audiences process moral complexity in narratives.

### *Integrating logic from affective disposition theories*

Affective disposition theories suggest that audiences enjoy narratives that depict good characters being rewarded for their moral actions and bad characters being punished for their immoral actions (Zillmann, [2000](#)). In line with the present study's findings that television popular among very young audiences featured (A) heroes who were most likely to be associated with moral exemplars and rewarded for it and (B) villains who were most likely to be associated with immoral exemplars and punished for it, we might expect audiences of this content to exhibit clear patterns of disposition formation toward characters and liking of the overall storyline (Eden, Daalmans, & Johnson, [2017](#); Eden, Oliver, Tamborini, Limperos, & Woolley, [2015](#); Raney, [2004](#); Sanders, [2010](#); Tamborini et al., [2018](#); Zillmann, [2000](#)). Importantly, these same features of content have been noted for their ability to effectively reinforce child audiences' learning from entertainment content (Bandura, [2001](#); also see Fisch, [2005](#)). In morally complex narratives, achieving these same exposure outcomes requires relatively greater effort on the part of the viewer.

Recent entertainment research has begun to consider how audience responses and appraisals can be influenced as a result of exposure to morally ambiguous consequences (Lewis, 2012) and characters (Eden et al., 2015, 2017; Raney, 2004; Tamborini et al., 2018). In this area of research, scholars have suggested that older children and adults weigh the narratives' surrounding contextual cues alongside the im/moral exemplar to attempt to make sense of narratives' moral complexity (Grizzard, Huang, Fitzgerald, Ahn, & Chu, 2018; Lewis, 2012; Raney, 2004; Tamborini et al., 2018). That is, although interpreting content requires more rational and deliberate (i.e., less intuitive) processing, audiences can ultimately still like narratives featuring good characters who commit moral transgressions and bad characters who behave morally (see Lewis, Tamborini, & Weber, 2014; Tamborini et al., 2018).

Taken together with existing research on moral learning and the results of the present study, we might still expect older children's content that emphasizes authority, loyalty, and purity exemplars to produce chronically heightened intuition salience in tweens (aged 6–11) and teens (aged 12–18) despite the narratives' moral complexity, but this learning may be attenuated, and would likely require more effortful processing by the viewer in order to determine right from wrong (also see Lewis, 2012). This may still produce an influence on older children's resulting social behaviors, but it may be relatively smaller than the effect on younger children.

Future researchers should attempt to examine the extent to which narrative enjoyment or appreciation, as well as antecedent character disposition formation, might moderate content's ability to communicate the social desirability of moral values to child audiences. This type of investigation would also help to unify understandings of narrative enjoyment and appreciation, which are typically focused on adult audiences, with understandings of children's media and its influence on young, uncritical audiences' social behaviors. Moreover, and building on previous work (e.g., Cingel & Krccmar, 2019; Hahn et al., *in press*; Hamlin, 2013; Lewis, 2012; Mares & Acosta, 2008; Mares & Braun, 2013; Mares & Woodard, 2005), future work should attempt to examine differentially-aged children's ability to comprehend morally-laden content – especially when that content features morally ambiguous characters performing morally-motivated actions with morally ambiguous consequences.

## Practical implications

Practically speaking, the results of the present study also offer several important insights. First, for parents seeking to use television content to cultivate their children's social development, the results of the present study and others like it can be useful for identifying which content might be best at inculcating specific moral values. For instance, previous MIME-content analyses have suggested a preponderance of egoistic, self-serving values in Grammy-nominated songs (Hahn et al., 2019), television (Aley et al., 2021; Tamborini et al., 2017), and books (Tamborini et al., 2020). The present study adds to this knowledge base by demonstrating the prevalence of moral values in popular children's television as well. If the MIME is well-founded, we might expect to see similar patterns of moral intuition salience in child audiences who frequently consume this content (see Prabhu, Hahn, Tamborini, & Grizzard, 2020 for evidence of this relationship in adults). Another important insight stems from the finding that moral values are

depicted with varying degrees of social desirability. Notably, this finding may add to a wide body of research (e.g., see Nathanson, 2001) suggesting the importance of parental mediation techniques for helping children make sense of what they watch on television, especially considering young children's limited ability to engage in deliberative cognitive processing (see Lewis, 2012; also see Piaget, 1948).

## Limitations

Four main limitations were present in this study. First, although this study attempted to sample a wide range of content, it sampled only 30 shows (10 for each age group) from popular television. Related to this, only 272 out of the 553 scenes contained moral exemplars, and the majority of these were found in content popular among the oldest age group. Although the present study demonstrated moderate-effect sizes in the results despite these sampling limitations, future studies should attempt to sample a wider range of content, and potentially more episodes within each television program. Given that this study's sample of content is from 2013–2014, we also note the need for replicating the present work using more recent television content. Second, we established intercoder reliability using a subsample of the study's content at only the beginning of the coding procedure. Although our coding procedure lasted less than three weeks in total, it is possible that within this time, inter- and intra-coder reliability "slippage" may have occurred, making some variables no longer as reliable as they were during our initial reliability check.

Third, although The Nielsen Company provided a population of the most popular television programs among three age groups (2–5, 6–11, and 12–18), it is worth noting that many of the shows in the teen age group are not television programs that one would typically associate with children's content. Shows such as *The Walking Dead*, *Glee*, and *American Dad* all appeared in the sample of content popular among teens. Although the ultimate goal of this study was to content analyze shows that were *popular* among different age groups, future investigations might consider inspecting television shows that are *targeted* toward these age groups.

A final limitation lies in the fact that the Nielsen-identified age groups of popularity are limited in the extent to which they indicate content that child audiences select for themselves. Especially in the toddler age group, it is likely that children do not select content to watch themselves, and thus the shows included in the toddler-sample are perhaps a better indicator of the types of shows adults *want* children in this age category to consume. Future research could attempt to overcome this limitation by interviewing young children to determine what programming appeals the most to them.

## Conclusion

Although emerging research indicates that exposure to media can indeed influence the importance child audiences place on moral domains (Hahn et al., *in press*; also see de Leeuw & van der Laan, 2018; Mares & Braun, 2013), the bulk of this controlled research has focused on the educational value of clear, unambiguous moral content. Yet the results of the present study suggest a preponderance of moral content in popular television that is presented with some degree of ambiguity. Given the prevalence of ambiguous moral content in popular children's media, future work should focus on uncovering the social

values children might acquire from morally laden content in the wild, which may be presented alongside varying degrees of social desirability.

## Disclosure

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Lindsay Hahn** (Ph.D., Michigan State University) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York where she directs the Media Psychology and Morality Lab. Her research investigates the cognitive processes surrounding media use and effects in audiences across the lifespan.

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