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ESCAPING INTO DARKNESS: DISSOCIATION AND THE APPEAL OF
PSYCHOPATHIC CHARACTERS

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By

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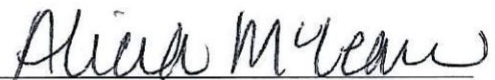
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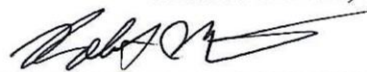
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A Thesis APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

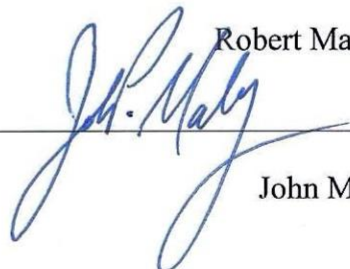
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Abstract

Considering the mainstream success of entertainment that depicts sensationalized psychopathic characters, it is prudent to explore the factors that might influence individual attraction to psychopathy. Prior literature has highlighted increased individual maladaptive personality traits as a potential predictor to psychopathic characters. To examine other potential factors, this current study sought to examine how dissociative experiences influenced attraction towards five sensationalistic psychopathic representations portraying both real and fictitious psychopaths (“Deadpool,” “Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story,” “American Psycho,” “Ted Bundy,” and “You”). Individuals who experienced higher levels of dissociative experiences in their daily lives were not significantly more drawn to sensationalized psychopathic portrayals than individuals who experienced less dissociative experiences. However, individual dark personality traits did significantly predict attraction to sensationalistic psychopathic portrayals. Specifically, dark personality traits positively predicted attraction to sensationalistic psychopathic portrayals for most psychopath portrayals. These results suggest that variation in individual personality characteristics could contribute to an increased vulnerability to being drawn towards sensationalized psychopathic depictions represented in popular media.

Escaping into Darkness: Dissociation and the Appeal of Psychopathic Characters

Historically, psychopathy, and individuals who portray characters with psychopathic traits have been viewed in a negative connotation by the public. In recent years, however, there has been a rise in both the prevalence and popularity of content depicting central characters espousing dark traits, including, psychopathy. Research examining the factors that may influence an attraction to psychopathic characters has been limited to evaluating the link between individual personality traits and attraction to dark content. However, there is little to no research on factors like media sensationalism or personal dissociation on individual attraction to these psychopathic representations. Analyzing the influence of sensationalism and variation in personal dissociation may aid in understanding the complex mechanisms that underlie attraction to psychopathic characters presented in popular media.

Background

Sensationalism and Media Portrayals

The past literature regarding the nature of news and media sensationalism has largely focused on the idea of how sensationalized reporting influences the level of societal fear (Callanan, 2012; Gushue et al., 2018). In the arena of psychopathy, this usually has resulted in very negative perception for individuals who express “psychopathic traits” publicly (Durand et al., 2017). However, recent research suggests that a strictly negative perception of psychopathy may not be an accurate description across the board (Allen et al., 2022; Jonason et al., 2012). In today’s digital age, the constant and abundant flow of content has made portrayals of psychopathic traits more accessible than ever before. In a recent study examining the relationship between the

amount of exposure to violent video games and the perceived humor in “dark personality traits”, researchers found increased perceived humor in dark traits when exposure to violent media was high (Allen et al., 2022). More specifically, when participants in the study self-reported higher levels of consumption of stylized (or sensationalized) violent media, their respective self-reported humor of psychopathic traits was also higher than participants who reported less consumption of sensationalized violence (Allen et al., 2022). These findings provide at least some evidence for the claim that the consumption of sensationalized media can have a unique influence on individualized perception of the portrayals of “dark personality” traits.

Individual Differences in Predicting Perception

Although sensationalism shapes societal attitudes broadly, individual differences play a critical role in determining which portrayals resonate most strongly. Research suggests that exposure to sensationalized stimuli can significantly influence societal and individualized perceptions (Kleemans et al., 2017; Parrott & Parrott, 2015; Van Scoy et al., 2021). These findings can provide a solid foundation for exploring new research regarding perceptions in an intriguing subset of sensationalized topics portrayed in the media: psychopathy. Much of the past literature surrounding psychopathic perception has focused on the intersection between individual personality traits and the media portrayal of those traits (Coyne et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2020). A common theme has been established: people are drawn to what is like them (Allen et al., 2022; Egan et al., 1999). Positive perceptions of psychopathy have been correlated with individuals whose traits of psychopathy have also been high (Allen et al., 2022). In simpler terms, individuals are more likely to relate to something in the media that they themselves have experience

with. Generally, however, in the absence of individual personality factors, “psychopathic traits” that are portrayed in the media tend to be viewed less favorably than other traits (Parrott & Parrott, 2015). Even the simple presence of a label of “psychopath” has been shown to be an alienating factor in the perception of psychopathic traits, as defendants labeled as a “psychopath” were more likely to be recommended the death penalty during a criminal trial by a mock jury than defendants who were not labeled as a psychopath (Boccaccini et al., 2008). Interestingly, research has shown the opposite in some cases with other dark personality traits like narcissism or Machiavellianism. In certain areas, they have been shown to have had higher levels of positive perception than psychopathy (Jonason & Sherman, 2020; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012). This phenomenon can be attributed, in part, to the way that narcissism and Machiavellianism can be portrayed with more subtlety across contexts than the unforgiving and merciless portrayal of a traditional “psychopath” presented in the media.

There also appears to be individual differences at play when discussing the perceptions of psychopathic traits. Research has illustrated that younger age groups are potentially more drawn towards psychopathic traits than older age groups (Harrison & Frederick, 2020). One of the potential reasons that the younger age groups could be drawn more (comparatively) to psychopathic traits is the way those traits can be sensationalized in the media. Sensationalism in news media has been shown to particularly attract younger age groups more heavily than older age groups (Kleemans et al., 2014; Kleemans et al., 2017). Thus, with psychopathy containing elements that can be prone to sensationalism (Egan et al., 2001; James et al., 2014), it stands to reason that the younger age population could be potentially more attracted to those traits.

Dark Tetrad Traits as Predictors

Maladaptive personality traits are commonly studied through the Dark Tetrad model, which includes narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism and sadism (Book et al., 2016; Paulhus et al., 2018). Historically, the dark triad (the previous personality framework) represented the umbrella that encapsulated the traditionally maladaptive personality traits of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. In recent years, however, research into the topography of personality traits associated with the dark triad evoked the need to add a fourth dimension (in sadism) to more fully account for the encompassing nature of dark personality traits expressed (Paulhus et al., 2021). As a result, the dark traits of narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and sadism encompass the dark tetrad (Book et al., 2016; Blötnner et al., 2021). In addition to providing a sound framework for examining dark personality traits, research into the dark tetrad also provides a fertile ground for analyzing how specific individual dark traits correlate to trends in the consumption of popular media.

Narcissism. One of the well-researched personality traits encompassed in the dark tetrad is the personality trait of narcissism. Narcissism broadly, represents an individual's elevated capacity or ability to maintain a positive self-image through the utilization of a variety of regulatory strategies (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Oftentimes this concept will represent itself in the form of an inflated and grandiose view of oneself and a general lack of care for others. As a similarity to other personality constructs, research in recent years has conceptualized individual narcissism levels on a continuum (Miller et al., 2021). More specifically, research has examined the idea that narcissism, to an extent, has adaptive qualities (i.e., high self-esteem) when expressed in a normal

amount on an individual level (Barry et al., 2007; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2020). However, a great swath of research has delineated the maladaptive outcomes of the pathological expression of narcissism on both an individual and societal level (Judith Ray & Fritzon, 2024; Stone et al., 2021; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2011).

In the arena of perception, research has highlighted some illuminative trends regarding attraction to narcissistic individuals and characters. Notably, literature examining mating patterns has posited evolutionary theory as a potential mechanism for instances of narcissistic attraction (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Holtzman & Strube, 2010). For example, research has highlighted that one circumstance that could be conducive to attraction to narcissistic individuals is short term sexual attraction (Dufner et al., 2013; Holtzman & Strube, 2010). Particularly, narcissists' traits of physical attraction and elevated social boldness may be alluring in short term sexual interactions, but less attractive in general interactions and overall perception (Dufner et al., 2013; Jonason et al., 2009). Ultimately, aside from short term mating, the fleeting initial positivity of narcissistic perception often subsides into negativity when individuals are given more time to interact with narcissistic traits on a personal level.

Machiavellianism. Another maladaptive trait embodied in the dark tetrad is the personality trait of Machiavellianism. More specifically, the malevolent trait of Machiavellianism broadly encapsulates elevated levels of personal manipulation, coldness, and the overt exploitation of others for individual gain (Mills-Koonce et al., 2023; White et al., 2024). In turn, literature on Machiavellian tendencies has found a link between high trait Machiavellianism in individuals who work in specific highly

competitive job fields (e.g. business) where making “ruthless” decisions without regard for others may offer individual financial benefit (Gruda & McCleskey, 2024).

Efforts to acutely quantify perception to individuals expressing Machiavellian traits has been a difficult endeavor, as “Machiavellian traits” tend to overlap with other maladaptive personality traits. Expansive research into the perception of individuals expressing Machiavellianism in the workplace has been overwhelmingly negative, with employees interacting in an environment with high Machiavellian tendencies reporting higher levels of mental health problems (Pilch & Turska, 2015) and lower levels of job satisfaction (Valentine & Fleischman, 2018). Intriguingly, opposed to real life scenarios, research into Machiavellian perception has linked attributes towards individuals enjoying movie villains expressing Machiavellian tendencies. Namely, individuals who were higher in trait Machiavellianism were more attracted to dark fictional characters present in film than individuals that were lower in trait Machiavellianism (Black et al., 2019; Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). This trend may suggest that the fantastical nature of film and television may provide an alluring outlet for individuals to engage with (or even pursue) elements of Machiavellian tendencies in a non-threatening context.

Psychopathy. One of the most notable, and often misrepresented, personality traits of the dark tetrad is psychopathy. A psychopathic personality is generally one that is characterized by a lack of affect, disregard for social norms, pathological lying, lack of remorse, and evident callousness (Thompson et al., 2014). Of the typically researched maladaptive personality traits embodied in the dark tetrad; psychopathy is particularly tied to a host of negative outcomes. Research has linked individuals with elevated psychopathic traits to be at a higher risk for antisocial behavior, increased aggression

(resulting in violent acts), and criminal offenses (Leistico et al., 2008; Salekin & Andershed, 2022). Furthermore, multiple longitudinal research endeavors have highlighted the immense maladaptive predictability that evident childhood psychopathy has on a sizeable increase in maladaptive adult criminal conduct problems (Bergström & Farrington, 2022; Colins et al., 2014).

Research into the individual perception of psychopathic traits, and psychopathy more broadly, is overwhelmingly negative in nature (Davis et al., 2020; Callanan, 2012; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012). One example of the inherently negative aspect of psychopathy in relation to perception is the label of psychopath. For example, literature examining juror decision making has linked labeling a defendant as a “psychopath” during a trial to higher conviction rates (Cox et al., 2016) and more death penalty recommendations (Boccacini et al., 2008) than not labeling a defendant as a psychopath. The largely negative perception of psychopathy as a construct even persists into the fantastical realms of popular media such as television and filmography. Research into psychopathic perception has cited the highly exaggerated negative characteristics of psychopathic traits as a driving vehicle for the unanimous disdain for fictional psychopaths. Historically, psychopaths have typically been represented in popular media as ruthless antagonists, dangerous outsiders, and even in some cases, the pure embodiment of evil (Hesse, 2009; Keesler & DeMatteo, 2017; Leistedt & Linkowski, 2014; Lipczynska, 2015). This largely unilateral nature of psychopathic portrayals has been a driving force to psychopathy carrying an inordinate negative perception among most of the populace.

Even with psychopathic traits typically being cast in a negative light, in recent years, research has highlighted factors that contribute to a more positive perception of psychopathy and psychopathic traits presented in popular media. For instance, variation in individual personality traits has been a factor linked to positive perception of fictional psychopathic characters. Specifically, individuals that have higher levels of dark tetrad traits (including psychopathy) have been correlated with a higher rating of fictional psychopathic characters than individuals with lower levels of individual dark tetrad traits (Allen et al., 2022; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen et al., 2021; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005).

Another factor influencing some elements of positive psychopathic perception is the shifting paradigm of character representation. Namely, although fictional psychopaths still occupy traditionally antagonistic roles, research in this area has highlighted an uptick in psychopaths inhabiting protagonist roles (Black et al., 2019; Ulqinaku et al., 2021). The term that colloquially encapsulates a fictional character with dark personality traits not typically associated with a traditional protagonist hero role is an “antihero” (Jonason et al., 2012). Intriguingly, research into the rise of the “antihero” has highlighted that these dark fictional characters may be more alluring when in a protagonist role than a strictly antagonistic role (Doyle et al., 2024; Greenwood et al., 2021; Shafer & Raney, 2012). This detour in recent research may be indicative of more complexity in psychopathic perception than previously studied before, particularly when dark characters are placed in more subtle (and engaging) contexts than ever before.

Sadism. One of the most recent dark personality traits to be added to the dark tetrad is the personality trait of sadism. Generally, sadism is characterized by the enjoyment, or in some cases, outright pleasure of seeing other individuals suffer (Chester

et al., 2019). Although sadism can manifest itself in different forms, historically, research on the topic has placed an emphasis on examining sexual sadism. For instance, literature has tied sexual sadism (taking pleasure in inflicting sexual punishment on others) as a key characteristic of individuals who commit serial rape or serial homicide (Healey et al., 2013; Stefanska et al., 2019). Although aspects and subcategories of sadism are certainly tied to violent crime, research in recent years has highlighted a less studied offshoot of sadistic tendencies: everyday sadism. The subcategory of everyday sadism represents aspects of sadism or a sadistic personality that can manifest outside of an extreme criminal or sexual context (Buckels et al., 2013). Everyday sadism can best be exemplified by the rising popularity of violent video games, ruthless sporting endeavors and graphic filmography which provides individuals outlets to engage in sadistic tendencies in socially acceptable contexts (Buckels et al., 2013; Emer & Poepsel, 2021; Greitemeyer, 2022).

Research into the perception of sadistic tendencies in popular media is less examined compared to other dark tetrad traits (Foulkes, 2019). However, like literature regarding the perception of psychopathic traits, the allure of sadistic personalities presented in the media seems to be influenced by variation in individual personality traits. For instance, a study examining the perception of humor towards fictional characters expressing psychopathic and sadistic traits found a link between individual levels of sadism and their perceived humor in sadistic tendencies (Allen et al., 2022). More specifically, individuals that had higher levels of sadism, particularly vicarious sadism (taking pleasure in observing others suffer) found fictional characters engaging in violent sadistic tendencies more humorous than individuals that rated lower on vicarious sadism

(Allen et al., 2022). Although humor does not completely correspond to all measures of attraction, it is indicative of a positively slanted perception towards sadistic personality characteristics and tendencies that are associated with a bevy of maladaptive outcomes (Buckels et al., 2013; Meere & Egan, 2017). This trend, in conjunction with the other dark tetrad personality traits, suggests that elevated levels of sadism on an individual level could potentially predispose someone to an increased enjoyment of dark attributes presented in popular media.

Exposure to Psychopathic Portrayals

Although personality traits help explain differential perceptions, environmental exposure also shapes attraction to psychopathic portrayals (Lee, 2005; Vu et al., 2019). Research has shown that increased exposure to portrayals of psychopathy in the media has been associated with greater levels of perceived psychopathic attraction (Allen et al., 2022; DeMatteo & Keesler, 2017). In conjunction with exposure, the perceived “relatability” also appears to exert influence on perception. The perceived humor in psychopathic traits portrayed in television shows or movies has increased when individuals can “relate” to the essence of the character portrayed compared to when individuals have low relatability to the characters that they interact with (Allen et al., 2022). This concept of relatability may be more pronounced as popular media slowly transitions from strictly conventional depictions of psychopaths as solely “crazy” towards a more nuanced psychopathic portrayal in the modern era.

Horror Genre and Underlying Enjoyment Mechanisms

A particularly relevant domain in which exposure to psychopathic traits is concentrated in the horror genre (Clasen et al., 2020; Leistedt & Linkowski, 2014;

Scrivner et al., 2022). In addition to broader theories examining the mechanisms that drive an attraction to horror, there is variation in individual differences that drive horror consumption. For example, past literature has highlighted sex differences when it comes to the enjoyment (and consumption) of horror related content. In that, males tend to enjoy and consume horror at higher rates than females do (Clasen et al., 2020; Tamborini & Stiff, 1987). However, apart from sex differences in attraction to horror, past literature has illustrated another important factor in predicting what individuals may be predisposed to horror: personality. There is a significant correlation between sensation seeking and attraction to horror (Greene & Krcmar, 2005; Hoffner & Levine, 2005; Zuckerman, 1979). Specifically, individuals with higher levels of trait sensation seeking tend to be more attracted to horror related content than individuals with lower levels of sensation seeking (Clasen et al. 2020, Martin, 2019). Furthermore, some research has shown that specific subcategories underlying trait sensation seeking seem to best predict horror attraction. Namely, under the wide umbrella of sensation seeking, high disinhibition (inability to control impulsive behavior) has consistently been linked to increased attraction to horror content (Martin, 2019; Zuckerman & Litle, 1986). Ultimately, individual differences in personality, especially differences in sensation seeking, contribute to the underlying mechanisms predicting an attraction to horror.

Threat-Simulation Theory as an Underlying Explanatory Framework

To explain why fear-based content is appealing despite its aversive nature, scholars have proposed several theoretical models, including threat simulation theory (Anderson et., 2020). Threat simulation theory suggests that the consumption of frightening material can serve as an avenue to experience elements of danger in a safe context (Anderson et al.,

2020; Clasen et al., 2020; Scrivner et al., 2022). As a function of acquiring experience with frightening stimuli, threat simulation theory asserts that individuals can use these interactions as a learning experience for dealing with negative emotions such as anxiety or dread (Kerr et al. 2019). These learning experiences have even, in some cases, served as outlets to learn more about how the individual self operates (Yeung, 2020). Although threat-simulation theory provides a theoretical basis to the underpinnings of consuming and engaging with horror related content, a recent study provided evidence for the notion that engaging with horror can go further than a simple “learning experience.” In examining the motivations for horror enthusiasts participating in a haunted house attraction, the study found evidence for horror serving as an outlet for “recreational play” (Anderson et al., 2020). That is, individuals participating in the haunted house reported higher levels of enjoyment when they simultaneously experienced optimal (moderate) levels of fear (Anderson et al., 2020). Conversely, when self-reported fear was low or when self-reported fear was high, participants reported lower overall levels of enjoyment (Anderson et al., 2020). The findings from this study, in conjunction with the tenets of threat-simulation theory, provide support for the idea that learning (and “playing”) with negative emotions in a risk-free environment are critical factors that guide (at least at a macro level) the desire to engage with horror, and subsequently, the dark characters that oftentimes accompany the horror genre.

Cognitive Underpinnings: Reality Monitoring

These motivational theories highlight emotional mechanisms, but cognitive processes also influence how individuals interpret frightening or extreme characters. The complex cognitive processes that underlie how an individual conceptualizes and

perceives their world are paramount to understanding what draws an individual to a particular stimulus. Reality monitoring refers to these cognitive processes at play when an individual attempts to distinguish the origins of a particular memory or event (Metzak et al., 2015; Simons et al., 2017). These monitoring processes are crucial for helping an individual identify whether an idea was internally generated or externally derived from the outside world. When individuals encounter errors to reality monitoring processes, the line between lived and imagined experiences can become blurry.

There are several external and internal forces at work that influence the likelihood that an individual may experience an error in their reality-monitoring framework. For instance, research has highlighted that individual's diagnosed with an acute mental illness, like schizophrenia, have a higher probability to experience an error in their reality monitoring framework than individuals who are not diagnosed with a mental health disorder (Garrison et al., 2017; Stephane et al., 2010). Another factor examined in the literature surrounding errors in reality monitoring relates to age-related cognitive function. More specifically, studies have found that errors in reality monitoring, such as misremembering an event or incorrectly recalling a memory, are more prevalent in older adults than younger adults (Lyle et al., 2006; McDaniel et al., 2008). One potential reason for this phenomenon is that the complex cognitive processes that underlie the efficient and accurate recall of events deteriorate as individuals enter late stages of life compared to younger individuals (Gonzales et al., 2022). As a result, in addition to personality factors, cognitive processing mechanisms such as those involving distinctions between reality and fantasy may shape how individuals engage with sensationalized psychopathic characters.

Dissociation as a Specific Mechanism

One key cognitive vulnerability relevant to this interpretation is dissociation, which reflects disruption in reality monitoring. Dissociation, in the context of reality monitoring, represents the tendency for an individual to “disengage” from reality and compartmentalize their respective thoughts or behaviors (Lotfinia et al., 2020). Furthermore, by disengaging, individuals prone to dissociation may encounter experiences characterized by being unaware of their external environment or experience “out of body sensations.” These experiences, broadly speaking, can be defined as dissociative experiences.

There are a multitude of factors, both internal and external, that influence the likelihood that an individual experiences a dissociative experience. For instance, prior literature has cited individual differences as a contributing factor in driving the frequency of dissociative experiences. More specifically, individuals diagnosed with mental health disorders, especially post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) and depressive disorders, have been linked to an increase in the frequency of dissociative experiences compared to individuals that are not diagnosed with a prominent mental health disorder (Baker et al., 2007; Cernis et al., 2022). Another factor that can influence dissociative experiences are individual events (or episodes) that an individual endures throughout their development. Individuals that experience risk factors such as traumatic events (Cernis et al., 2022), long periods of intensive stress (Samanta et al., 2024) or experimentation with hallucinatory drugs (Ricci et al., 2021) are external factors that have been linked to an uptick of dissociative experiences. In recent years, research has even examined whether the content of the media an individual consumes contributes to the derivation of

individual differences in dissociative symptomology (Baughan et al., 2022). The increasing trend of excessively scrolling social media platforms has been correlated with an increase in self-reported of “out of body” experiences (Baughan et al., 2022). The mass availability and accessibility of social media, in conjunction with the fast-paced fractured nature of “scrollable content”, may provide users a fertile modern ground to experience dissociation when consuming content enshrouded in a sensationalistic and stylized background.

Current Study

Because dissociation involves blurred boundaries between internal and external experiences, it may increase immersion in or identification with stylized characters. Individuals who are experiencing reality monitoring failures in the form of dissociation might be drawn to sensationalized portrayals of characters high in psychopathy for a variety of reasons. First, these characters might provide a form of escapism that allows individuals to engage with intense experiences without real-life consequences. Second, the characters might provide an opportunity for identification with others who engage in extreme behaviors and report altered states of mind. Third, individuals might experience curiosity or appreciate validation of their own experiences. As such, it is possible that this day-to-day disconnect creates difficulty monitoring differences between fictitious and real experiences, and, in turn, predicts attraction to sensationalized psychopathy.

Considering the mainstream success of entertainment that depicts sensationalized psychopathic characters, it is prudent to explore the factors that might influence individual attraction to psychopathy, and as an extension, sensationalized psychopathic characters presented in the media. To answer this question, the current study sought to

examine how dissociative experiences influence attraction towards sensationalistic psychopathic portrayals. In the study, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the relationship between dissociative experiences and attraction to psychopathy. The central hypothesis of the study is that individuals who experience higher levels of dissociative experiences in their daily lives will be more drawn to sensationalized psychopathic portrayals than individuals who experience less dissociative experiences.

Method

Participants

One-hundred and ten participants undergraduate students from a large, Midwestern university and individuals solicited through online social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) participated in this study. Students registered via Sona-Systems (a student recruitment system that tracks participation in exchange for course credit) and other participants responded to an online advertisement.

Of these 110 participants, 71.56% identified as female, 22.94% identified as male, 2.75% identified as transgender; and 2.75% identified as gender variant/other (answered by “please specify”). Most of the 110 participants identified themselves as White/Non-Hispanic (53.20%), followed by Asian (17.40%), Hispanic or Latino/a (10.10%), Black or African American (9.20%), Multiracial (5.50%), American Indian or Alaska Native (2.80%), and Other (1.80%). In addition, inclusion criteria required that participants be at least 18 years of age to participate in the study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 75 ($M = 26.01$, $SD = 11.31$).

Participants identified their current legal marital status as single/never been married (77.10%), married (16.50%), other (2.80%), divorced (1.80%), legally separated (0.90%), or widowed (0.90%). They reported their sexual orientation as straight/heterosexual (77.10%), bisexual/pansexual (13.80%), gay/lesbian (5.50%), asexual (2.80%), or other (0.90%). For religious affiliation, the greatest number of participants identified as Christian (49.60%), followed by agnostic (13.80%), atheist (11.90%), Hinduism (5.50%), Islam (3.70%), Buddhism (1.80%), Unitarian/Universalist (1.80%), East Asian (0.90%), Indian (0.90%), pagan (0.90%), and Other (9.20%).

Finally, participants chose the political with which they most identify with as Democrat (34.90%), Republican (22.00%), Independent (25.70%), or Other (17.40%). In the 2024 Presidential election, they reported voting for Donald Trump/Mike Pence (16.50%), Kamala Harris/Tim Walz (28.40%), or someone else (1.80%), although some were registered at that time to vote and did not (8.30%) or were not registered to vote at that time (45.00%).

Materials

Attraction to psychopaths. In the study, participants were provided five video clips commensurate with a sensationalized portrayal of psychopathy. The video clips included sensationalized psychopathic portrayals from the following: *Deadpool*, *Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story*, *American Psycho*, *Ted Bundy*, and *You*. More specifically, participants were shown a four-minute video clip from the film *Deadpool*, in which, Deadpool (a comedic superhero) slams a pizza delivery driver against a wall to obtain more information regarding missing personal items. In the *Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story* portrayal, participants were shown a two-minute video clip of a dramatized

Jeffery Dahmer (a real-life convicted serial killer and cannibal) berating an apartment neighbor for not eating a sandwich that he prepared. In *American Psycho*, participants were shown a two-minute video clip of Patrick Bateman (a fictional serial killer) walking into work and sexually fantasizing/objectifying his female secretary. In *Ted Bundy*, participants were shown a two-minute video clip of a dramatized Ted Bundy (a real-life convicted serial killer and rapist) smirking when discussing the graphic murder of a young girl to his romantic partner. In *You*, participants were shown a four-minute video clip of Love Quinn (a fictitious female serial killer) describing murdering past romantic partners to her husband, and subsequently, poisoning her husband when he mentions dissolving their marriage.

The perceived attraction of each of the psychopathic portrayals was measured by 7-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), consistent with previous research in measuring attraction (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; McCroskey & McCain, 1974). Higher scores on the Likert scales represent greater perceived attraction towards a respective psychopathic portrayal (“I am drawn to this particular character” and “I would like to see more of this character”). To control for potential bias, participants were also given a Likert scale to assess how “familiar” they were with a particular character (“I am familiar with this character”).

Dissociative experiences. To assess the number of dissociative experiences that participants have, individuals were given the Dissociative Experiences Scale II (DES-II; Carlson & Putnam, 1993), which is a validated and reliable 28-item self-report measure that tracks the frequency of daily occurrences of dissociative experiences that occur in the absence of the influence of drugs or alcohol. The DES-II specifically utilizes an eleven-

point Likert scale, ranging from 0% (this daily dissociative experience does not occur) to 100% (this daily dissociative experience constantly occurs). Higher scores on the Dissociative Experiences Scale II (DES-II; Carlson & Putnam, 1993) represent higher occurrences of daily dissociative experiences than lower scores (e.g., “Some people have the experience of finding themselves in a place and having no idea how they got there”).

Dark personality traits. To measure individual variation in “dark personality traits,” the Short Dark Tetrad (SD4; Paulhus et al., 2021) was provided to assess for individual levels of trait psychopathy (e.g., “I tend to fight against authorities and their rules”), narcissism (e.g., “Group activities tend to be dull without me”), Machiavellianism (e.g., “I love it when a tricky plan succeeds”), and sadism (e.g., “It’s funny when idiots fall on their face”). The SD4 is a 30-item self-report measure that tracks these occurrences of dark tetrad traits by utilizing a five-point Likert scale, in which, participants rated to what degree they agreed with statements ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scale has previously demonstrated reliable internal consistency; with narcissism: $\alpha = .66$, psychopathy: $\alpha = .68$, Machiavellianism: $\alpha = .72$, and sadism: $\alpha = .87$ (Buckels et al., 2013). Finally, several measures assessing personality attributes and demographic characteristics were administered.

Procedure

In the online study, participants were given electronic informed consent, informing them of the basic parameters of the study. Following informed consent, participants were asked to complete several counterbalanced measures assessing multiple personality attributes and attitudes towards various stimuli (several of which were outside of the purpose of this study). Most notably, participants completed the DES-II (Carlson &

Putnam, 1993) and the SD4 (Paulhus et al., 2021) to assess daily dissociative experiences and dark personality traits, respectively. Subsequently, participants were asked to view five video clips (counterbalanced to control for order effects) representing sensationalized portrayals of psychopathic characters (Patrick Bateman, Deadpool, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer and Love Quinn). Following each clip, participants indicated their “attraction” to and familiarity with each character. Finally, participants answered a variety of demographic questions.

Results

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Characteristics, Measures of Attraction/Familiarity, Dark Tetrad scores and Dissociative Experiences

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Demographics		
Age	26.01	11.31
Attraction		
Deadpool	8.65	3.80
Dahmer	5.58	3.54
American Psycho	7.17	3.61
Bundy	5.71	3.15
You	8.23	3.70
Familiarity		
Deadpool	4.77	2.22
Dahmer	4.62	2.36
American Psycho	4.28	2.20
Bundy	4.30	2.14
You	3.84	2.36
Dark Tetrad		
Narcissism	3.16	0.69

Psychopathy	1.95	0.73
Machiavellianism	3.30	0.54
Sadism	2.43	0.93
Dissociative Experiences		
Dissociative Amnesia	2.90	1.97
Dissociative Depersonalization	3.03	2.24
Dissociative Absorption	4.72	2.26

Note. $N = 109$. Table illustrates demographic characteristics; dark tetrad scores of narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism, sadism; attraction/familiarity scores; and dissociative experience subscales of dissociative amnesia, dissociative depersonalization and dissociative absorption. M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between dissociative experiences and attraction to five depictions of sensationalized psychopathic characters (see Table 1). More specifically, in the first step of the regression model, an individual's familiarity with a sensationalized psychopathic portrayal was entered into the model. Subsequently, in the second step of the model, dissociative depersonalization (e.g. individual dissociative experiences), narcissism, Machiavellianism, sadism and psychopathy were entered into the regression model.

Deadpool

A regression model was utilized to assess the relationship between dissociative experiences and attraction to a sensationalized depiction of *Deadpool*. Familiarity with the character of *Deadpool* was first entered into the model and accounted for a significant portion of variance, $R^2 = .39$, $F(1, 108) = 70.20$, $p < .001$. In the second step of the model, dissociative depersonalization, Machiavellianism, sadism, psychopathy and narcissism added to the model. This model accounted for a significant increase in explained variance, $R^2 = .49$, $F(5, 104) = 3.88$, $p = .003$. That is, familiarity with the

character, dissociative depersonalization, and dark tetrad personality characteristics accounted for 49% of the variability in attraction to a sensationalized depiction of the character. Specifically, familiarity with character of *Deadpool* predicted attraction, $\beta = .63$, $t(108) = 8.38$, $p < .001$, such that as familiarity increased, attraction increased. Additionally, sadism predicted attraction, $\beta = .30$, $t(104) = 3.49$, $p < .001$, such that as sadism increased, attraction increased. All remaining predictors were not significantly predictive in the model ($ps > .05$).

Dahmer

A regression model was utilized to assess the relationship between dissociative experiences and attraction to the sensationalized character of Jeffery Dahmer portrayed in *Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story*. Familiarity with the character of Dahmer was entered into the model and accounted for a significant portion of variance, $R^2 = .05$, $F(1, 108) = 5.71$, $p = .02$. In the second step of the model, dissociative depersonalization, Machiavellianism, sadism, psychopathy and narcissism added to the model. This model accounted for a significant increase in explained variance, $R^2 = .15$, $F(5, 104) = 2.33$, $p = .05$. That is, familiarity with the character, dissociative depersonalization, and dark tetrad personality characteristics accounted for 15% of the variability in attraction to a sensationalized depiction of the character. Specifically, familiarity with the character of Dahmer predicted attraction, $\beta = .22$, $t(108) = 2.39$, $p = .02$, such that as familiarity increased, attraction increased. Additionally, Machiavellianism predicted attraction, $\beta = .19$, $t(104) = 1.97$, $p = .05$, such that as Machiavellianism increased, attraction increased. All remaining predictors were not significantly predictive in the model ($ps > .05$).

American Psycho

A regression model was utilized to assess the relationship between dissociative experiences and attraction to a sensationalized depiction of Patrick Bateman portrayed in *American Psycho*. Familiarity with the character of Patrick Bateman was first entered into the regression model and accounted for a significant portion of variance, $R^2 = .10$, $F(1, 108) = 11.96$, $p < .001$. In the second step of the model, dissociative depersonalization, Machiavellianism, sadism, psychopathy and narcissism added to the model. This model accounted for a significant increase in explained variance, $R^2 = .29$, $F(5, 104) = 5.33$, $p < .001$. That is, familiarity with the character of Patrick Bateman, dissociative depersonalization, and dark tetrad personality characteristics accounted for 29% of the variability in attraction to a sensationalized depiction of the character. Additionally, familiarity, $\beta = .32$, $t(108) = 3.46$, $p = .03$, narcissism, $\beta = .20$, $t(104) = 2.17$, $p = .03$, and sadism, $\beta = .29$, $t(104) = 2.27$, $p = .008$, predicted attraction towards the character of Patrick Bateman (see Table 2). More specifically, as familiarity, narcissism and sadism increased, attraction towards the sensationalistic depiction also increased. All other predictors were not significant predictors in the model ($ps > .05$).

Table 2

Attraction to American Psycho

Predictor	Model 1			Model 2			ΔR^2
	B	β	sr^2	B	β	sr^2	
(Intercept)	4.96			-3.49			
Familiarity	0.52**	0.32	0.32	0.28	0.17	0.17	0.19
Machiavellianism				1.02	0.15	0.14	
Narcissism				1.06*	0.20	0.18	
Psychopathy				-0.04	-0.01	0.01	

Sadism	1.11**	0.29	0.23
Depersonalization	0.03	0.02	0.02

Note. $N = 109$. Table illustrates hierarchical regression analysis results predicting attraction to *American Psycho* psychopathic depiction. B = unstandardized coefficient; β = standardized coefficient; sr^2 = semi partial correlation squared (unique variance explained).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Bundy

A regression model was utilized to assess the relationship between dissociative experiences and attraction to a sensationalized depiction of Ted Bundy portrayed in *Ted Bundy*. Familiarity with the character of Ted Bundy was first entered into the regression model, $R^2 = .08$, $F(1, 108) = 9.61$, $p = .003$. In the second step of the model, dissociative depersonalization, Machiavellianism, sadism, psychopathy and narcissism added to the model. This model accounted for a significant increase in explained variance, $R^2 = .22$, $F(5, 104) = 3.75$, $p = .004$. That is, familiarity with the character of Ted Bundy, dissociative depersonalization, and dark tetrad personality characteristics accounted for 22% of the variability in attraction to a sensationalized depiction of the character. Specifically, familiarity to Ted Bundy predicted attraction, $\beta = .28$, $t(108) = 3.01$, $p = .02$, such that as familiarity increased, attraction increased. All other predictors were not significant in the final model ($ps > .05$).

You

A regression model was utilized to assess the relationship between dissociative experiences and attraction to a sensationalized depiction of Love Quinn portrayed on the television series *You*. Familiarity with character Love Quinn was first entered into the regression model, $R^2 = .17$, $F(1, 108) = 22.83$, $p = < .001$. In the second step of the

model, dissociative depersonalization, Machiavellianism, sadism, psychopathy and narcissism added to the model. This model accounted for a significant increase in explained variance, $R^2 = .32$, $F(5, 104) = 4.55$, $p < .001$. That is, familiarity with the character of Love Quinn, dissociative depersonalization, and dark tetrad personality characteristics accounted for 32% of the variability in attraction to a sensationalized depiction of the character. Specifically, familiarity with the character of Love Quinn predicted attraction, $\beta = .42$, $t(108) = 4.78$, $p < .001$, such that as familiarity increased, attraction increased. Additionally, Machiavellianism predicted attraction, $\beta = .31$, $t(104) = 3.51$, $p < .001$, such that as Machiavellianism increased, attraction increased. All remaining predictors were not significantly predictive in the model ($ps > .05$).

Discussion

The purpose of the current study is to investigate and examine the potential factors that influence attraction to sensationalistic portrayals of psychopathic characters. The current study examined the impact that dissociative experiences, along with individual dark personality characteristics, had on attraction to five sensationalistic psychopathic portrayals represented in popular media. To achieve this, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was run to assess the relationship between dissociative experiences and an attraction to sensationalized psychopathic portrayals. With regards to attraction to psychopathic characters, an increased occurrence of daily dissociative experiences did not significantly predict attraction to these sensationalistic portrayals. However, individual levels of Dark Tetrad traits did significantly predict attraction to sensationalistic psychopathic portrayals. In that, individuals that had higher levels of

narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy and sadism were more drawn to a variety of psychopathic representations than individuals that were lower in these traits.

The implications of these findings could be very insightful. In the technologically driven society of the modern era, individuals have easy access to an incessant flow of information right at their fingertips. More access to digitized forms of information and content directly leads to more avenues to experience exposure to sensationalized media forms. In the arena of psychopathy, this is no exception. Understanding what influences the perception of psychopathic traits, and potentially, the uptick in positive attitudes held towards psychopathy is paramount.

In conjunction with past literature regarding the importance of personality traits (Allen & Anderson, 2022), gender differences (Harrison & Frederick, 2020), and exposure (Keesler & DeMatteo, 2017) in understanding the perception of psychopathic traits; this current research sought to extend the understanding of perception by evaluating the potential impact of dissociative experiences and individual dark personality traits on attraction to sensationalistic psychopathic portrayals presented in popular media.

Personality and the Dark Tetrad

Prior literature has examined a multitude of factors associated with the consumption of content featuring dark characters (Black et al., 2019). For instance, research surrounding individuals with higher levels of sensation seeking has been correlated with more enjoyment towards horror related content (Kiss et al., 2024; Zuckerman & Litle, 1986). More specifically, individuals with higher disinhibition, or the inability to control risky impulses, has been associated with greater levels of enjoyment

of morbid content than individuals with lower disinhibition (Martin, 2019; Zuckerman & Litle, 1986).

In addition to sensation seeking, research in the field of maladaptive personality traits have also examined the impact of the dark tetrad traits of narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism and sadism on enjoyment of fictional psychopathic characters. For example, recent literature found that individuals that have higher levels of trait sadism are more likely to find psychopathic characters humorous than individuals that had lower levels of trait sadism (Allen et al., 2022). Furthermore, the results from the current study replicated and extended these findings as sadism was a significant predictor of attraction towards the sensationalistic psychopathic portrayals of *Deadpool* and *American Psycho*. In that, as individual sadism increased, attraction to the psychopathic portrayals of *Deadpool* and *American Psycho* also increased. Additionally, sadism was not the only dark tetrad trait that garnered significance as a predictor in the regression model. In alignment with past research suggesting that individuals with higher dark tetrad scores (and Machiavellianism scores) were more attracted to Machiavellian villains represented in popular media (Black et al., 2019; Doyle et al., 2024), Machiavellianism was a significant predictor of attraction to the psychopathic portrayals of Jeffery Dahmer in *Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story* and Love Quinn in *You*. More specifically, as individual Machiavellianism increased, attraction to the psychopathic portrayals of Jeffery Dahmer and Love Quinn also increased. Lastly, as embodied in previous literature regarding higher dark tetrad scores predicting enjoyment of characters displaying typically maladaptive personality traits (Allen et al., 2022; Synder et al., 2019), higher narcissism was a significant predictor of attraction towards Patrick

Bateman represented in *American Psycho*. In that, as individual narcissism increased, attraction to the psychopathic portrayal of Patrick Bateman also increased. The current study, in conjunction with personality literature, points to a potentially striking association when it comes to attraction: individuals tend to prefer media characters that mirror their own personality characteristics, including maladaptive traits.

Dissociative Experiences

Individuals use a variety of cognitive processes and mechanisms to evaluate and make sense of the world around them. Broadly speaking, these cognitive processes fall under the framework of an individual's reality monitoring system (Garrison et al., 2017). Dissociative experiences, or the tendency to "disengage" from reality, occur when individuals experience failures in their respective reality monitoring systems (Schimmenti, 2016). It was hypothesized that an increased occurrence of these dissociative experiences would significantly predict attraction to sensationalized depictions of psychopathic characters. In the study, dissociative experiences were not a significant predictor of attraction to sensationalized psychopathic portrayals for a multitude of reasons.

Potential Limitations

First and foremost, significant results were not garnered potentially due to construct limitations in measuring individual dissociative experiences. Dissociative experiences were measured through the Dissociative Experiences Scale II (DES-II; Carlson & Putnam, 1993), a scale primarily oriented around assessing individual dissociative experiences in clinical settings. Furthermore, the subsection of amnesia, a central tenet of the scale, heavily focuses on gaps in memory and awareness in

individuals with traumatic brain injuries (Carlson & Putnam, 1993; Mangiulli et al., 2022). Although traumatic brain injuries represent a valid aspect of dissociative experiences in general, this study aimed to operationalize dissociative experiences more so as instances of depersonalization and immersion into hyper stylized environments (film/television/video games/etc). Significant results could potentially be obtained by remedying the juxtaposition surrounding the classification of dissociative experiences by deriving a new, more modern, scale that assesses depersonalization in the content of sensationalized media content.

Another potential reason that non-significant results were obtained revolves around the representativeness of the study's sample pool. More specifically, college-aged participants and students at the university represented the primary population sample for this research study. Their responses may not be representative of population samples of different ages, socio-economic backgrounds, and geographic locations that could lead to different results. Furthermore, another representative factor at play in the study is sex. In the study, just under three quarters of the sample of participants were female (71.56%). Considering that past literature has linked males to greater enjoyment of horror content (Clasen et al., 2020) and a higher prevalence rate of experiencing a traumatic event (Gavranidou & Rosner, 2003), a common risk factor for more frequent daily dissociative experiences, it is possible that a future study with more male representation could provide results that more closely mirror the current study's central hypothesis. Lastly, because the study relied on self-reported data from participants, responses could have been influenced by social desirability bias or the desire to conform to norms aligned with social consensus. Although this study utilized anonymity to reduce the impact of social

desirability bias, future research could incorporate additional objective measures to take steps to dampen social desirability bias in self-reported measures.

Future Research

Future research revolving around the relationship between psychopathic attraction and dissociative experiences is abundant with avenues to explore. To most fully set out to complete this endeavor, future research should explore an appropriate outlet to measure “dissociative experiences” in a method that allows these experiences to closely match a more modern operational definition of the construct. Accordingly, future research should explore deriving a new measurement for evaluating individual dissociative experiences, with an emphasis towards examining depersonalization occurrences when engaging with sensationalistic content presented in popular media.

Another area of future research relates to further exploring the significant relationships found between the dark tetrad and attraction to maladaptive traits. More specifically, future studies should place an emphasis on examining the newest addition to the dark tetrad: sadism. In the present study, individual levels of sadism significantly predicted attraction to multiple sensationalistic portrayals of psychopathic characters. In that, individuals that were higher in trait sadism were significantly more drawn to these psychopathic portrayals than individuals that were lower in trait sadism. Considering this association, future research should evaluate the extent of sadism’s predictive power in a sensationalized media landscape. In that, individuals with higher individual levels of sadism would be hypothesized to be more drawn to these sensationalistic psychopathic depictions in a variety of contexts compared to individuals with lower individual levels of sadistic personality traits.

Future research in the arena of psychopathic attraction should not be limited to strictly the academic sphere. Specifically, more exploration in the field of psychopathic attraction could be extremely valuable in a forensic setting. For instance, as sensationalistic content surrounding central characters espousing dark personality traits continues to rise in popularity, real world manifestations of maladaptive personality traits may dampen behind the sensationalistic veneer of the popular media. Furthermore, as law enforcement personnel interact with individuals expressing maladaptive traits (including psychopathy) in real world settings, future research that examines the factors that influence an attraction to sensationalized representations of these maladaptive traits could serve as an invaluable education tool to more effectively provide the public with an accurate, and possibly less alluring, portrayal of psychopathy.

Another avenue for future studies regarding the factors that influence attraction towards sensationalistic psychopathic portrayals revolves around genre. The current study implemented psychopathic depictions from a variety of genres including comedy, action, true crime, psychological thriller and drama. Future research should examine the potential moderating role of genre in predicting attraction to psychopathic portrayals. More specifically, considering the literature connecting elevated maladaptive personality traits to greater enjoyment of horror related content (Martin, 2019), future studies should examine if individual attraction to portrayals depicted in horror related genres differ from non-horror related genres. Considering the abundant nature of these psychopathic depictions present in the horror genre, it would be hypothesized that individuals with elevated levels of trait sensation seeking and dark personality traits (e.g. Dark Tetrad)

may be particularly drawn to depictions of psychopathic characters presented in the context of the horror genre.

Spanning almost a decade, the franchise of *Deadpool* has garnered just shy of three billion dollars globally during its box office run (Tsykrun, 2022). Similarly, *Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story*, a sensationalistic portrayal of the exploits of the Milwaukee serial killer and cannibal Jeffery Dahmer, became the second highest viewed program ever on Netflix at the time of the series release (Variety, 2022). These statistics highlight the notion that production and proliferation of sensationalistic content is not a trend that appears to be going away any time soon.

Furthermore, the rise of this sensationalistic content portrayed in popular media coincides with the growing trend of content centered around dark subject matter (including psychopathy). More specifically, popular media has seen the rise in content centered around central characters representing “antihero” tendencies or traits typically associated with psychopathy. Examining the factors that contribute to attraction to dark subject matter, and more specifically, stylized psychopathic characters presented in media, is paramount to understanding what influences individual perception. As evidenced by this current study, variation in individual personality, and more specifically, increased individual rates of maladaptive personality traits (e.g. dark tetrad), may represent a risk factor that could make an individual vulnerable to being susceptible towards sensationalistic portrayals of psychopathic characters presented in the popular media.

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