

Decoding “The Code”: Reception Theory and Moral Judgment of *Dexter*

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Dexter is a popular television show because it uses the narrative devices of classic cop shows while adding the twist of having a protagonist as an antihero who kills people. Accordingly, this study examines how audiences read the text of *Dexter* and offers unique implications for the field of entertainment studies. This study uses a mixed-method approach for a more holistic understanding of audiences. The findings show four dominant audience perspectives, each of which coincides with both a mode of audience engagement and a theory of moral reasoning. This study suggests that future research must look at audience interpretations to fully understand the dynamic between texts, audiences, and effects.

Keywords: audience engagement, moral reasoning, antiheroes, Q-methodology, media psychology

Dexter was an original series that aired for eight seasons on Showtime. The series followed the exploits of Dexter Morgan. By day, he is a blood-spatter analyst employed by Miami Metro Police Department. But at night, he is sociopathic serial killer who functions outside of the written law, and dispenses punishment to those who “deserve” it. The allure of the character is the service that he provides. Dexter’s role is to make us safe by ridding the world of those who slip through the cracks of the legal system. This is what Dexter refers to as “The Code of Harry.” It is the standard by which others are judged. When they meet the code, only then can Dexter punish the guilty.

In its review of the pilot episode, *The Wall Street Journal* articulated the moral complexity of the show:

If this sounds nauseating—and it was, literally, to me—try opening your mind to what the show’s producers call the “situational ethics” here. *Dexter*, you see, kills only bad people, such as murderous men and women who have gotten off due to a legal technicality. (Dewolf-Smith, 2006, p. 3)

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The newspaper also questioned the effects such a show has on an audience:

Either way, the grotesqueries of *Dexter* are not something that can easily be dismissed with the old "you don't have to watch" line. We don't have to watch. [But w]e do have to live among the viewers who will be desensitized, or aroused, by this show. (Dewolf-Smith, 2006, p. 3)

This is a common criticism of violent media. Yet it leaves a question unanswered—how do actual audiences read the violence of the show and the moral ambiguity of the Dexter Morgan character?

The show uses the classic narrative devices of cop shows, while adding the twist of having the protagonist as an antihero who kills people. Consequently, this show requires the audience to question concepts inherent to the genre: justice, morality, and good versus evil. Several critical-cultural essays have examined *Dexter* as a text (see, e.g., Arellano, 2012; DePaulo, 2010; Force, 2010; Green, 2012; Howard, 2011; Smith, 2012), but few articles have actually studied how actual audiences interpret the text (Gregoriou, 2012).

This study attempts to fill the gap by understanding how audiences negotiate this text, particularly its questions about morality and justice. Accordingly, the study is grounded in the theories of moral reasoning (e.g., Bandura, 1999; Haidt, 2001; Zillmann 2000) and how audiences read morally ambiguous characters. But it also applies the composite multidimensional model of audience reception (Michelle, 2007), which examines how audiences read texts. This study posits that moral reasoning and textual interpretation may be closely related. The study uses Q methodology, a mixed-methods approach that uses quantitative factor analysis and qualitative interpretation to extract several readings of the show. Q methodology was chosen because it can discover the shared viewpoints of a cluster while also revealing the complexity and nuance of textual interpretation. Q methodology has recently reemerged as a method to study such audience phenomena (Hedges, 2014; McKeown, Thomas, Rhoads, & Sundblad, 2015; Michelle, Davis, & Vladica, 2012; Robinson, Callahan, & Evans, 2014).

This study contributes to the further understanding of audience reception and moral judgment of morally complex characters. Ultimately, the study suggests that traditional effects research falls short of understanding the complex dynamic of media consumption when it ignores how audience actually interpret texts.

How Audiences Engage Texts

Research into how audiences interpret media messages "saw a veritable boom in the production of audience ethnographies" in the 1980s and 1990s, when the seminal works in the field of critical cultural studies were published. But since that time, there has been little applied research in the area, with much of the writing being "quite theoretical" (Press, 2006, p. 94).

In response to the lack of grounded audience reception theory, Michelle (2007) proposed a more systematic framework to categorize dominant modes of audience reception of media texts. In her meta-

analysis of reception studies, she categorized four different modes of audience reception which form the composite multidimensional model of audience reception.

The first mode of audience engagement is *transparent*. In this mode, audiences read the "text as life" (Michelle, 2009, p. 141). The individual may suspend his or her disbelief and get "lost" in the fictional world of the text. Individuals may experience a strong immersion into the text and feel strong emotion toward characters and themes. The second mode is *referential*. In this mode, an individual reads the "text as like life" (Michelle, 2009, p. 141). In assessing the meaning of the text, the individual moves outside of the text itself and compares it to his or her own real life for interpretation. The third mode is *mediated*. In this mode, an individual reads the "text as a production" (Michelle, 2009, p. 141). The individual interprets a text based upon its aesthetics and his or her own media production literacy. Because the individual is more concerned with the grammar of media production, he or she is less likely to engage the themes and messages of the text. The final mode is *discursive*. In this mode, an individual reads the "text as a message" (Michelle, 2009, p. 141). The individual analyzes the intended meaning of the text. In doing so, the individual takes an ideological position on the message, by making a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional reading (Michelle, 2007, p. 194).

The model recognizes that audiences "approach the process of meaning construction in different ways" (Michelle, 2009, p. 140), depending on their attunement to the text's form and ideological content. The model recognizes that some audiences rely on extratextual resources, whereas others rely solely on the text itself when interpreting. Michelle (2007) also contends that the four different modes may not be exclusive, nor are they consistent between media texts, and, over time, individuals may change their mode(s) of engagement for a single text.

Furthermore, within each mode there is polyvalence as consumers interpret the same texts differently (high quality or poor quality aesthetics, good or bad message, etc.). Most important, this model takes a holistic approach to message production, transmission, and interpretation. Michelle (2007) argues that by applying this model, it may be possible that reception studies can:

provide a common language with which to speak to each other about what is, and is not, typical as opposed to idiosyncratic, and on that basis to formulate general principles that rely on more solid foundations than interesting but largely anecdotal examples. (p. 216)

How Audiences Engage Morality in Texts

For many decades, media psychologists have also been interested in how audiences interpret texts, especially media that contains behavior that is considered to be morally reprehensible, such as violence, sex, and antisocial behaviors. Most of this research has focused on how media texts affect audience behaviors. But several theories developed to explain how audiences receive morally complex characters by trying to define the "process or consequence of moral judgments directly" (Eden, Grizzard, & Lewis, 2013, p. 11).

Bandura's research in media psychology posited how audiences relate to morally ambiguous characters. His theory of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999) stated that viewers use rationality to either excuse immoral behavior or redefine it as moral. For example, a character who steals food may be seen as immoral, but if he steals food to feed his family, then viewers may redefine the action as moral (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Klimmt, Schmid, Nosper, Hartman, & Vorderer, 2006; Schafer, 2007).

In contrast, Haidt (2001) developed the social intuition theory, which posited that judgments of morality are based upon the emotion felt in response to "moral infringements." This is used to explain "moral dumbfounding," or moral reactions that are not justified through reasoning. A well-known example is the almost universal censure of consensual incest, even when there is no victim or harm. This moral dumbfounding is an initial emotional reaction. It is not insurmountable, but it can often delay or restrict moral cognition. Therefore, the social intuition model is "a dual-process model of morality based both in moral intuition [or emotion] as well as moral cognition [or reasoning]" (Eden et al., 2000, p. 9). This dual process is important in understanding how people make judgments that run counterintuitive to rational responses (Greene & Haidt, 2002).

Dolf Zillmann put forward the theory of empathy (Zillmann & Bryant, 1975), which explains reactions to media texts as a three-step process that balances emotional responses and rational processes. The first and second responses are automatic physiological responses, such as goose bumps followed by a flight response. The third response is a cognitive process where the consumer judges and then regulates the physiological response (Zillmann, 1991). So, a viewer consuming violent media content may have to justify and regulate their excitation to watching others get hurt.

Zillmann expanded on the theory of empathy with the creation of the affective disposition theory, which states that viewers empathize with those characters whose actions are in concordance with the viewer's own moral code. Conversely, a viewer does not empathize with those characters whose actions are discordant with the viewer's moral code (Zillmann, 2000). Thus, an individual's "morality serves as the gatekeeper for all entertainment experiences" (Eden et al., 2000, p. 14). This may explain why stories so often have plotlines of good defeating evil, because most people can accept the moral code of the "good guy."

Zillmann (2000) also argued that there are "moral subcultures" within any population. Thus, when examining reactions to media texts, audiences can be broken down into groups based upon how they perceive certain questionable actions (morally acceptable, morally unacceptable, or different levels of moral relativism). This perception is based upon how the subculture evaluates and applies moral domains. Haidt and Joseph (2007) found that there are five universal moral domains: (1) harm/care, (2) fairness/reciprocity, (3) liberty/oppression, (4) authority/subversion, and (5) purity/sanctity. They discovered that these domains occur in every culture and are an evolutionary necessity to the species' survival. Without them, families and clans may have been wiped out by violence or disease. Nonetheless, different cultures (and subcultures) apply different evaluations and levels of importance to each of these moral domains (Eden et al., 2000, p. 10). For example, one culture might justify a war (violating the harm domain) by rationalizing it as the spreading of democracy (fulfilling the liberty domain). Nonetheless, within a culture, individuals who act against any of these universal domains (or the culture's perception or

importance of the domain) are judged as evil. Accordingly, many survey studies have showed an individual's traits predict whether or not they enjoy certain texts. For example, Raney and Bryant (2002) showed that individual enjoyment of crime drama is based upon attitudes toward vigilantism and punishment.

How Audiences Engage Morally Complex Characters

The current landscape of entertainment is filled with controversial antiheroes. Examples in television shows include *House*, *Breaking Bad*, and *House of Cards*. These antiheroes conflict with our traditional notions of the "morally pure" protagonist who battles against an evil antagonist. But the question remains—why are these shows so popular if the protagonist's actions seem to be in conflict with the viewer's moral code?

First, media functions as a form of "play" and place for self-enhancement and entertainment (Stephenson, 1987). This world of play allows for viewers to confront difficult real-world issues in the refuge of a safe, virtual environment (Klimmt et al., 2006). It is this forum that can allow audiences to form a more perfect world, where the injustices of society can be resolved. Conversely, it can also allow a viewer to explore the darker side of humanity. A viewer can fantasize about being reckless or acting out against norms. Then, once the story is over, the viewer can return to the safety of the real world (Raney & Bryant, 2002; Zillmann, 2000).

Television shows are often popular because audiences form parasocial relationships with the characters, in which the viewer behaves as if the character is a real friend. As a result, audiences have empathy for these characters, and this allows for viewers to forgive many moral transgressions (Raney, 2004), similar to how one would forgive a real friend or family member (Rawlins, 1992). In fact, this liking may be more important than any moral judgment (Raney, 2013). For example, Raney (2013) found that viewers of the television series *24* liked the morally ambiguous Jack Bauer because they sympathized with him.

Morally complex characters may also be easier to identify with because they are more realistic and relatable to the viewers as compared to the idealistic superheroes of the past (Hoorne & Konijn, 2005; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2009; Shafer, 2007). Their actions are usually duplicitous, being both moral and immoral, and there is often a justification for their "immoral" actions (e.g., killing to protect their families). Moreover, contemporary audiences are very media literate. They understand (and reject) traditional storytelling conventions, so it takes creative plotlines to entice them. Contemporary audiences seek out more unconventional narratives and characters. Because more morally ambiguous characters are appearing in entertainment, consumers may have developed a different story schema than that of traditional "good versus evil" stories.

Finally, consumers are able to discern fantasy from reality and may be applying a different moral code when engaged with the media. Audiences may love these morally ambiguous characters because they exist in a fantasy world and break the social and legal rules that we ourselves wish we could break in our real worlds. Thus, in some ways, shows with morally ambiguous characters may be cathartic for the

audience (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Though all these theories are interesting, there are limited studies into audiences and moral judgments of antiheroes, so there is yet to be a definitive answer (Raney & Janicke, 2013).

Method

Concepts like morality and justice are subjective. Thus, positivist social scientists often avoid studying the issue (Tamborini, 2013, p. xi). So outside of studies on the social influence of violent media, there is a large gap in the empirical research on morality (Tamborini, 2013), especially on how audiences read such messages.

By having a protagonist that is an antihero who kills people, *Dexter* certainly posits complex moral questions about justice, morality, and what is good and evil. Accordingly, this study examines how viewers of the show *Dexter* make meaning of such concepts by asking:

RQ1: How do audiences reconcile the conflicting norms of morality within the Dexter text?

RQ2: Do audience interpretations of Dexter fit within a certain mode of engagement?

RQ3: Do audience interpretations of Dexter fit within a theory of moral engagement?

RQ4: Is there any connection between an audience's mode of engagement and its moral engagement with the text?

Q methodology is an appropriate approach to studying how consumers interpret media messages because it is a methodology that holistically studies subjectivity (Brown, 1980). It is also a method that has been widely used in mass communication research, including audience analysis (Rhoades, 2014). Q methodology is a rigorous mixed-methods approach used to discern people's shared subjective viewpoints (Michelle et al., 2012). Unlike other methods, Q methodology aims to develop typologies of people by focusing on respondents rather than the variables (Farquhar & Meeds, 2007).

Q methodology is a "projective instrument" intended to study the "operant subjectivity" or "inner thoughts" of the subject (Stephenson, 1953, p. 88). First, respondents model their perspective through a "Q sort," which is a ranking of statements on a chosen continuum (e.g., agree/disagree, most important/most unimportant, does describe/does not describe; Watts & Stenner, 2012). The set of statements that are ranked is called the "Q sample." It is representative of the "communication concourse" on the particular topic (Brown, 1980). The Q sorts are then correlated and factor analyzed by person, allowing for the researcher to statistically locate shared viewpoints (Brown, 1980). From there, the researcher has a representative sort for each perspective (the factor) based upon statistical software (e.g., PCQMethod). The researcher then qualitatively analyzes the factor scores, the respondents who belonged to the factor (significantly loaded), and the postsort survey questions that those respondents have answered (see Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Research Design

Q methodology is less concerned about the randomness of the respondents sampled as it is concerned about the representativeness of the Q sample (Watts & Stenner, 2012). To build the Q sample, a researcher must select statements that best represent the concourse (the universe of opinions). In this study, the Q sample was chosen from reviews about the first season of *Dexter*. The first season was chosen because the reviews would be the initial interpretations of the show and its underlying themes (versus analyses of changing characters, relationships, and plotlines in later seasons). These reviews were accessed from the online database, metacritic.com, which stored hundreds of unique and diverse reviews that were published in popular press articles when the show first aired.

The authors conducted a “long preliminary soak” (Hall, 1975, p. 15) of reviews of the show’s first season posted on the Metacritic site. Open coding was then used to sort the data from all 27 professional reviews and 50 amateur reviews (out of 435 total amateur reviews). Metacritic ranks the reviews from 0–100 (100 being a perfect score), which allowed the reviews to be sampled so to get diverse viewpoints on the show.

Finally, the data were axially coded to derive the prominent themes (Fürsich, 2009). After reducing the redundancy and repetition, a total of 59 statements were kept, representing the distinct common themes: (1) the entertainment value, (2) moral of the story. (3) evaluation of the moral of the story, (4) evaluation of the viewers’ use and gratification, and (5) the perceived effect that *Dexter* had on viewers.

Respondents for this study were chosen from a midsize Northeastern public university. They were all students in upper-level communication courses. Sixty-two respondents (33 females and 29 males) were shown the pilot episode of the show (because it explained the characters and the moral question that underline the series). The respondents were then asked to sort the 59 statements based on a condition: “Sort the following statements by placing statements that you agree with in one pile, those that you disagree with in a separate pile, and those that you are unsure about or do not understand in a middle pile.” The respondents were then asked to rank the statements on a quasnormal distribution from +5 (*strongly agree*) to -5 (*strongly disagree*) with a set number of statements being forced into each score (see Table 1):

Table 1. Q Sort Distribution.

VALUE										
-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5
FREQUENCY										
3	4	5	6	7	9	7	6	5	4	3

After sorting the statements, the respondents answered an open-ended questionnaire about their Q sorts, which provided the qualitative comments used in the interpretation of the factors. They were also given a postsort survey that collected demographic information, media usage, and their views on crime and violence in the media.

Findings

The following results were based on a statistical and factor analysis of 62 Q sorts using the PQMethod software. Four factors were extracted with eigenvalues greater than 2.5 (Watts & Stenner, 2012), which accounted for 34% variance. The four factors were chosen because they were not strongly correlated (ranging between -.16 and .31), indicating unique perspectives. The factors also included the highest number of significant loadings (as compared to other factors). Loadings in excess of .33 were significant at the .01 level (see Table 2) as calculated by the formula for the standard error of a zero-order loading (Brown, 1980).

Table 2. Factor Matrix by Defining Sorts.

Q SORT #	<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>
1	48	28	9	-2
2	-4	5	73	13
3	7	-6	9	48
4	57	19	15	-1
5	-7	41	15	22
6	40	24	19	26
7	50	2	16	-8
8	43	21	5	40
9	69	0	-39	2
10	-27	32	17	43
11	10	25	20	27
12	70	2	-3	9
13	-14	35	33	43
14	-5	37	51	-11
15	9	44	49	14

16	36	-4	-5	0
17	68	-6	-11	-11
18	2	42	0	26
19	19	28	-5	63
20	56	23	-11	18
21	10	28	39	4
22	15	72	-1	17
23	30	37	4	31
24	45	23	-4	26
25	36	5	10	37
26	27	37	-5	1
27	58	9	-4	27
28	55	-14	3	25
29	3	27	23	-22
30	-22	37	25	61
31	11	45	6	22
32	4	23	28	22
33	-10	50	16	1
34	35	33	5	19
35	16	20	-15	20
36	2	6	0	7
37	-33	-2	75	-4
38	19	11	32	0
39	60	14	23	6
40	34	58	1	8
41	2	-22	49	24
42	12	61	12	0

43	31	7	33	36
44	-5	13	31	8
45	5	36	13	4
46	15	-15	39	-5
47	60	-16	16	-5
48	22	34	41	28
49	49	9	4	-22
50	2	50	17	-1
51	35	41	22	16
52	19	17	40	39
53	-2	18	52	-15
54	23	30	3	9
55	8	72	-6	1
56	59	5	-30	5
57	43	36	20	17
58	54	7	18	-5
59	36	32	37	27
60	-18	-5	55	48
61	51	14	-17	23
62	34	52	-1	1
<i>Variance %</i>	12	9	7	6
<i>Total</i>	12	21	28	34

Note= Bold Numbers are significant loadings on each factor

A total of 54 of 62 respondents (87%) significantly loaded on one of the four factors. Of the 54, 17 respondents were confounded, loading significantly on two factors. As per Q-methodology convention, those confounded respondents were removed from the interpretation (Watts & Stenner, 2012). The factors were then analyzed by examining (1) the statements that receive high/low scores (+5, +4, +3, -3, -4, -5); (2) the statement scores that are statistically distinguishable; and (3) the statements in relation to each other (Michelle et al., 2012, p. 125).

Table 3. Statement and Factor Arrays.

Statements	Factor A	Factor B	Factor C	Factor D
1. Fantasy	3	1	-4	1
2. Provocative	2	-2	2	0
3. Fascinating	3	3	-2	1
4. Creepy	-3	0	4	-1
5. Charming	2	-4	-4	0
6. Grotesque	-1	0	5	-2
7. Distasteful	-4	-4	2	-5
8. Terrifying	-2	-3	-1	-4
9. Unrealistic	-2	-4	1	0
10. I have seen worse	0	1	0	0
11. It is sometimes difficult to watch	-4	-1	4	-3
12. Violent	1	0	5	2
13. Edgy	3	1	2	0
14. Twisted	0	2	4	2
15. Suspenseful	2	3	3	2
16. Parody/twist on classic crime shows	1	2	1	0
17. Grim joke	-2	-2	-2	1
18. Similar to film noir	-1	0	0	-2
19. Oddity	1	-1	2	-1
20. Funny	0	-3	-2	1
21. It is situational ethics	0	2	-1	3
22. It is an "eye for an eye"	3	-3	1	1
23. He pursues justice	3	0	2	-1
24. It glorifies murder	0	-5	4	-1
25. It questions convention/normalcy	2	3	2	3
26. Dexter is using his impulse for good	5	-2	-2	-3
27. Dexter is a crazy sociopath	-3	1	5	4
28. It is a dark comedy	2	1	0	3
29. Dexter is unemotional—simply reacting	-1	5	1	-4
30. Dexter shouldn't kill, even if it is justified	-5	-1	3	-1
31. It represents the duplicity of humans: civilization vs. primal instincts	0	2	0	4
32. Dexter is able to keep his alter ego hidden	1	5	3	1

33. He is an antihero	-5	1	-1	5
34. Dexter is a tortured soul	-1	2	-3	2
35. "The Code" is a response to the ineptitude of the legal system	0	0	-1	-2
36. Dexter should not be taking the law into his own hands	-3	0	3	0
37. In the end, he will be caught	-4	-2	-1	5
38. We never know who people really are	1	5	0	4
39. It is unemotional	-2	4	-1	-5
40. Dexter misuses revenge as a justification for murder	-4	-4	1	3
41. It desensitizes us	-2	-1	-2	1
42. I take pleasure in the punishment of criminals	5	2	-2	-3
43. It is cathartic	-1	-1	-3	-2
44. Dexter does what we can't do in real life	4	0	1	1
45. It simply entertains	4	3	-4	3
46. I would feel safer if Dexter was real	2	-1	-4	-5
47. Other people may be affected by this, but I won't	1	1	0	-1
48. What he is doing is wrong, but fun to watch	-2	3	-2	2
49. It is a guilty pleasure	0	-1	-1	-2
50. I can enjoy this without being immoral myself	4	4	0	2
51. I am a fan of gory scenes	0	0	-5	-3
52. Sometimes I feel bad enjoying this	-3	-3	-3	-4
53. I have a sick sense of humor	-1	-2	-3	4
54. I would like to do what he does	-3	-5	-5	-4
55. I am captivated by horror and crime stories	1	4	0	0
56. Someone may copycat	-1	-3	0	-3
57. People have always had a fascination with serial killers	4	4	1	5
58. I find myself admiring him	5	-5	-5	-2
59. I would not want to be friends with Dexter	-5	-2	3	0

The interpretation then moved onto examining the information provided by the respondents who significantly loaded on the factor. After analyzing the factors and the information provided by the respondents, four factors were labeled, representing the unique perspectives on *Dexter*: (1) Justified Vigilante (17 unique loadings); (2) Psychological Puzzle (12 unique loadings); (3) Gratuitous Violence (5 unique loadings); and (4) Deviant Escapism (3 unique loadings) (see Table 3).

Interpretation of the Factors

Factor 1: Justified Vigilante

Factor 1 does not believe that Dexter Morgan is a crazy sociopath (-3 on #27). Instead, they believe that he is a hero (-5 on #33). They believe that he is using his impulses for good (+5 on #26) and is not misusing revenge (-4 on #40). As one respondent stated, "Dexter is performing a good deed for society. . . . He does not kill the innocent" (Respondent 16). This factor also reported a parasocial relationship with the character stating that they admire Dexter Morgan (+5 on #58) and they would like to be his friend (-5 on #59). Predictably, 71% of the respondents on this factor reported being avid fans of the show.

This factor also believes that Dexter Morgan pursues justice (+3 on #23) and that he should take the law into his own hands (-3 on #36). They believe that killing is permissible if it is justified (-5 on #30). One respondent even reported feeling "relief when I know a horrible person is gone" (Respondent 51). The factor also believes that the moral of the show is "an eye for an eye" justice (+3 on #22). Ultimately, they do not believe that he will be caught (-4 on #37).

Many on this factor reported being a victim of a crime (65%). Therefore, it is not at all surprising that they hail Dexter Morgan for doing what they cannot do in real life (+4 on #44). Many on this sort reported in the postsort questionnaire that the world would be a better place if immoral people were removed (65%) and that criminals need harsh punishment (82%). They also agreed that they take pleasure in the punishment of criminals (+5 on #42):

"Dexter will find those who have wronged. The ones that have wronged will be dead at the bottom of the lake" (Respondent 25).

"I feel like people need to be or even possibly 'taken care of' for the sick inhumane action some people commit" (Respondent 34).

For this factor the show is not distasteful (-4 on #7), nor is it difficult to watch (-4 on #11). They believe the show simply entertains (+4 on #45) and that audiences can enjoy the show without being immoral themselves (+4 on #50). They note that people have always been fascinated with serial killers (+4 on #57). "Dexter is fascinating because he is using his DARK PASSENGER to kill those like him" (Respondent 25). As one respondent put it, "It is a cathartic fantasy world" (Respondent 17).

Factor 2: Psychological Puzzle

Factor 2 does not believe that the focus of the show is on the "eye-for-an-eye" justice (-3 on #22); instead, they believe that the shows focuses more on the complexity of humans. For this factor, the show is about how Dexter Morgan is hiding his alter ego (+5 on #22) and reinforces the idea that we never know who people really are (+5 on #38).

When interpreting the morality of the show's character, this factor seems to justify it as something akin to an insanity defense. Factor 2 describes Dexter Morgan as unemotional (+4 on #9) and that he is simply reacting—not thinking about his actions (+5 on #29). They do not believe that Dexter is misusing revenge (-4 on #40). Unlike the other factors, this perspective neither condones nor condemns the behavior. To them, the morality of Dexter's actions is not so clear:

"Morality [is] not simply black and white" (Respondent 30).

"There a lot of reasons why he shouldn't kill" (Respondent 5).

"I almost understand why he is doing what he is doing" (Respondent 14).

It is important to note that in contrast to Factor 1, only 18% of the respondents on Factor 2 reported having ever been a victim of a crime. Also, 81% of the respondents on this factor rejected the idea that people should "not get mad, [they should] get even."

Nonetheless, this factor does not believe that the show is a fantasy world meant for escapism (-4 on #9). As far as the character, they do not admire him (-5 on #58). He is not charming (-4 on #5), nor is he funny (-3 on #20). They would certainly not like to do what he does (-5 on #54).

Though they believe what he is doing is wrong, they also admit that it is fun to watch the show (+3 on #48). Furthermore, they do not believe that audiences are immoral for enjoying this show (+4 on #50). It is not distasteful (-4 on #7). It does not glorify murder (-5 on #24), and they are not worried about anyone becoming a copycat (-3 on #56). It simply entertains (+3 on #45).

Ultimately, they are captivated by crime stories (+4 on #55) and believe that audiences have always been fascinated with sociopaths (+4 on #57). As one respondent summarized: "I am fascinated by killers . . . [and] how they justify it" (Respondent 42).

Factor 3: Gratuitous Murder

Factor 3 was turned off by the show and found it to be gratuitous violence and celebrating murder. They described the show as grotesque (+5 on #6) and violent (+5 on #12). They believe that the show glorifies murder (+4 on #24). It is twisted (+4 on #14), creepy (+4 on #4) and it is difficult to watch (+4 on #11). These respondents were not fans of the show, and all of the respondents reported being first-time viewers.

For this factor, they are unable to justify the actions of Dexter Morgan, even if the actions are fictional. One respondent found the show "to be disturbing, messed up and morally abhorrent" (Respondent 60). For this factor, there is no insanity defense—he is not a sympathetic tortured soul that can be forgiven (-3 on #34). He should not kill, even if it is justified (+3 on #30). As one respondent argued, "Two wrongs don't make a right" (Respondent 2). They do not believe that he should take the law

into his own hands (+3 on #36): "He is committing the same crimes that the criminals are committing" (Respondent 41).

The factor did not find any value in the character. He is not charming (-4 on #5) and he is not funny (-2 on #20). They would not want to be friends with him (+3 on #59). They would not feel safer if Dexter was real (-4 on #46). They certainly do not admire him (-5 on #58). Instead, they believe that Dexter Morgan is a crazy sociopath (+5 on #27).

They said that they do not have the sick sense of humor (-3 on #53) needed to enjoy the show. They are not fans of gore (-5 on #51). They also warned that this show is not just a cathartic (-3 on #43) fantasy (-4 on #1) that simply entertains (-4 on #45). As one respondent expressed, "People do this every day in real life—it is a sad reality" (Respondent 2).

Though the factor rejected the character and condemned his action, there was some forgiveness in the postsort responses. Some on this factor saw this as a reflection of a broken legal system and blamed the law enforcement for not doing its job:

"The legal system cannot finish, provide justice, too many deals and agreements" (Respondent 53).

"Dexter wouldn't need to kill people if the Miami PD was not so inept" (Respondent 37).

Factor 4: Deviant Escapism

This factor labeled Dexter Morgan as an antihero (+5 on #33). They believe that he is a crazy sociopath (+4 on #27). Moreover, he is not simply reacting (-4 on #29), instead they believe that he knows what he is doing is wrong. As far as the message of the show, they believe that the focus of the show is on the deviance of the character. Audiences have long been fascinated with serial killers (+5 on #57). This show represents the primitive nature of humans (+4 on #31) and that we never know what people are capable of doing (+4 on #38).

This factor claimed that they do not take pleasure in the punishment of criminals (-3 on #42), nor are they fans of gory scenes (-3 on #51). But they do not feel bad for liking the show (-4 on #52). To them, it is a dark comedy (+3 on #28), and they admittedly have a sick sense of humor (+4 on #53). They do not find it difficult to watch (-3 on #11). It is not distasteful (-5 on #7). It is not terrifying (-4 on #8). They like it because it is stirring and emotional (-5 on #39) and it entertains (+3 on #45).

As for the morality of Dexter Morgan's action, this factor believes that it is situational ethics (+3 on #21). He is not using his impulses for good (-3 on #26) and he is misusing revenge to justify murder (+3 on #40). They would not feel safer if he was real (-5 on #46). But they can rationalize their enjoyment of the show by believing that in the end, he will be caught (+5 on #37).

It seems as though this factor is morally detached and not placing a judgment on the character. As one respondent explained: "The more people see something, the more they become comfortable with it. . . . I don't find myself admiring him, but I also don't find myself hating him" (Respondent 19).

The factor is not concerned about any adverse effect from watching the show. This factor does not believe that anyone will copycat *Dexter* in real life (-3 on #56). The respondents' comments illustrated this factor's ability to separate the immorality of the fiction from the morality of real life:

"I can distinguish between entertainment and actually participating. . . . I do not think that watching the show reflects on the viewer" (Respondent 3).

The respondent's comments also showed a mediated reading by focusing on the producers and what "they" were trying to accomplish: "They attempt to convey a typical villain as the hero" (Respondent 10). One respondent rationalized Dexter's actions as a need for entertainment: "If he didn't murder, then it wouldn't be a good show" (Respondent 60).

Just three respondents expressed the Deviant Escapism viewpoint, the only one that admits to enjoying violence and immorality. For this factor, they "know" what Dexter is doing is wrong—but they like it. For them it is safe because it is in a world of fantasy. But for them it is simply voyeurism and they enjoyed the violence and immorality. But, ultimately, everything will stabilize as he will be caught and justice will be served.

Analysis

Factor 1: Affective Disposition Through a Transparent Reading

To accept the show's character, those on Factor 1 (Justified Vigilante) reframed Dexter's actions as serving justice. They did not say that murder was acceptable, but for them, the universal domain of *justice* was more important than the universal domain of *no harm*. Thus, it fits into their moral subculture and they could accept the character (Zillmann, 2000). To them, Dexter is a hero, and they condone his actions.

Applying the composite model of audience engagement (Michelle, 2007), this factor can be categorized as being in a *transparent* mode. Respondents have lost themselves in the text. They seem to describe a parasocial relationship by wanting to be Dexter's friend. They also argue that Dexter acts for the good of society. The respondents are speaking as if he is real and that the world he exists in is ideal (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005).

Interestingly, many respondents on Factor 1 reported being a victim of a crime and not trusting the justice system. The respondents on this perspective also gave a high ranking to the statement that "they take pleasure in the punishment of criminals" (+5 on #42). This would obviously put them in a frame to celebrate Dexter and feeling a need for his services in their real lives. They like what he is doing,

thus they like him (so there are elements of a *discursive* mode as well, with this perspective accepting the message of justice).

Factor 2: Empathy Through a Referential Reading

For Factor 2, the respondents' comments illustrate that these individuals are morally relativistic (in sharp contrast to individuals on Factors 1 and 3, who condone/condemn respectively). Respondents on Factor 2 do not judge the message of revenge (as Factors 1 and 3 seem to do). They are neither infatuated nor disgusted by Dexter. Instead, those on Factor 2 empathized with the character (Zillmann & Bryant, 1975) and his psychological issues allowed them to mostly excuse his actions (Raney, 2004). A morally complex character such as Dexter Morgan speaks to individuals on Factor 2 because he reflects an amplified version of reality (Hoorne & Konijn, 2003).

Respondents on Factor 2 seemed to be using a *referential* mode of engagement. Many of the statements that they scored highly were statements that included "I," suggesting a comparison. Thus, it is not total escapism (as with Factor 1), as having empathy for a character requires an audience to compare themselves to the character.

Factor 3: Moral Dumbfounding Through a Discursive Reading

Conversely, respondents on Factor 3 (Gratuitous Violence) could not reframe or rationalize Dexter's actions. To them, the thought could not be separated from the action. His actions infringed upon the universal moral domain of *do no harm*. For those on this factor, the harm outweighs any perceived justice, especially when it infringes on the other universal moral domain of *order* (Haidt & Joseph, 2007). Arguably, this lack of rationalizing is similar to moral dumbfounding (Haidt, 2001), in that this perspective instinctively rejects the fictional text, despite the rational fact that there is no real harm because it is make-believe. As one respondent posed it, "Do I think killing is wrong and unjust? No matter what? Yes." (Respondent 21).

Respondents on Factor 3 found that the text had importance and did not dismiss it as simply entertainment. Perspective 3 seemed to be predominantly in a *discursive* mode in engaging the show. For them, the "message" of the show was the most determinative factor in their reading. Specifically, they rejected the messages of the show that condones Dexter as a justified or sympathetic character. To them Dexter is an evil person, and they condemn his actions.

Interestingly, this perspective consisted entirely of first-time viewers. Arguably, they have not spent enough time to form a relationship with the character to allow them to overlook his moral transgressions (Raney, 2004).

Factor 4: Moral Disengagement Through a Mediated Reading

Respondents on Factor 4 reframed the show through a fantasy/reality dichotomy (Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003). This allowed them to rationalize their enjoyment of the show, even though they believe

what Dexter is doing is wrong and criminal. For he is the new antihero that audiences love because, as one respondent noted, "The show represents the feelings and actions that people joke about doing and brings it to life" (Respondent 30).

Individuals on this factor are applying a different moral code when judging the actions of fictional characters: "It is a dark show, in which, the viewer[s] must turn off their own emotions to empathize with Dexter" (Respondent 25). Interestingly, this cognitive dissonance is balanced by the fact that they believe that, eventually, Dexter Morgan will be caught (+5 on #37).

Respondents on Factor 4 can be best described as taking on a *mediated* mode of engagement. They were very aware that this is just a show. The respondents were cognizant of the producer's intent, talking about how the producers were trying to make a morally complex character. The perspective evaluated the show's entertainment value as a crime drama and the need for violence. They were very aware that it was a dark show meant to titillate. In the end, Factor 4 believes that Dexter Morgan will be caught because—as media savvy fans know—the "bad" guy is always caught, and justice is always served.

Relationship Between Mode of Engagement and Moral Judgment

For viewers to accept a morally ambiguous character, they have to rationalize his or her actions. As seen above, there are several ways to do this. First, a viewer can simply be morally disengaged, but to do this, the viewer must dismiss the character and its actions as pure fiction. But if this is the case, then the viewer must never totally suspend disbelief. Somewhere in his or her mind there is the reassurance that this is all make-believe. This type of engagement with the text, being cognizant of the production, is a mediated engagement. It is arguable that the moral disengagement would most often be related to a mediated reading, because the audience is then interpreting the text "as a production" meant to entertain. This type of detached analysis, which is inherently separate from the emotion of the story, is then used to rationalize the actions of the morally ambiguous character.

Another way to accept a morally ambiguous character is to excuse his or her actions. To do this, a viewer must empathize with the character and like him or her. By empathizing with a character, the audience is seeing the "text like life." This type of engagement is a positive referential reading based on the individual's experiences. Thus, it is arguable that a positive referential reading and empathy for a morally ambiguous character will most often be related in an audience analysis. But this does not mean all referential readings would be empathetic, because an individual's experiences may differ and change the interpretation (e.g., viewer who does not believe this character could get away with these actions, people are not like this in real life).

Another way to justify a morally ambiguous characters is to redefine their actions as moral. If viewers do not do this, then they will not accept the character because it does not fit into their moral code. In either case, this is best described by the affective disposition theory. If viewers redefine the character's action to fit into their own moral code, then the viewers will likely become enamored with the show, the characters, and its message. Thus, they will become avid fans and likely have a transparent

engagement with the text. If viewers cannot accept the moral ambiguity, then they will reject the message of the show and will likely perform a negative discursive reading.

Of course, in this study, three of the four perspectives included viewers who were fans of the show. Their modes of engagement included a positive reading, no matter what mode they were engaged in. But if the writing, acting or production of the show had been poor, many people would have probably dismissed the show through a mediated reading, no matter the morality of the character. Furthermore, if Dexter Morgan was not morally ambiguous, but rather outright murderous, then it is arguable that most people would have dismissed the show through a negative discursive reading, as few absolutely evil characters are ever popular.

Implications

This study is unique in several respects. First, it is one of only a few academic studies on *Dexter*. Second, it is one of only a few analyses of how audiences read morally complex characters. Third, it uses Q methodology in reception study to get a more holistic understanding of audience interpretation of a media text. Finally, it combines theories from the growing field of morality and media with the evolving field of reception analysis.

The findings of this study suggest that there is a clear relationship between a person's mode of engagement with the text and how they judge the moral actions of the characters, as an audience member's preexisting frameworks for moral reasoning may lead them to adopt particular modes of reception. Thus, future research into mediated morality must consider the agency of the audience and how they approach the text itself.

Finally, this study shows that the dynamic between text and audience is quite complex. Unfortunately, most effects research of violent media tends to simplify the relationship as either/or. This study shows that to completely understand the relationship, future research into the effects of violent media must take into consideration the audience interpretation of the text.

Conclusion

The television landscape is now filled with antihero protagonists, and scholars are just beginning to research how audiences, who traditionally gravitated toward stories with clear lines of good and evil, now celebrate these moral ambiguous characters who commit reprehensible acts. These studies on how moral processes affect media enjoyment have mostly been in the field of media psychology and, unfortunately, have suggested disparate theories. But with a reemergence in the study of media and morality (Tamborini 2012), scholars may want to look at the field of audience reception for guidance.

The research presented here has identified patterns of relationships between moral reasoning and modes of audience engagement, using analytical concepts from reception studies and the literature on moral reasoning, allied with Q methodology. This theoretical and methodological approach appears to yield fruitful results and could be extended to the analysis of other morally ambiguous characters, such as those

found in *Breaking Bad*, *Scandal*, and *House of Cards*. Ultimately, research adopting the approach presented here may help to explain the complex ways in which audiences make meaning and find enjoyment from texts that seemingly celebrate immorality.

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