

When Obsession Leads to Abuse: How Your Favorite Villains are Changing Your Perceptions on Violence

Sidney Mitchell

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Darci Thoune, English Department

ABSTRACT

This study asked participants to find connections between their own lives and the villains they see on their screen. I aimed to answer two questions: (1) Are these antihero narratives normalizing the abuse of women and (2) what types of villains are most intriguing to audiences? This research lists off several examples of villains in popular culture, as well as the results of the survey all with the use of a lens of rhetorical analysis to find the relationship between abuse in our own lives and violence on our screens.

INTRODUCTION

Popular films and TV shows have been impacting audiences since the beginning of film. Watching TV after a long day of work or school is now the normal pastime of people across the United States. But how are these TV shows and movies impacting us off the couch? Does the media we consume on a daily basis have an effect on our thoughts, feelings, emotions and opinions? These are some of the questions that I have in regards to antihero and villain narratives specifically. Nowadays the violence and rage displayed by the bad guys become more and more heinous as years go on, and yet there is a fondness that people have for these types of characters. They are often cast with attractiveness in mind, as producers would prefer a pretty face on our television screens, but is that pretty face having an impact on how audiences view abuse?

It has been proven that “as many as one in three women will experience some form of violence during their lives and tens of millions of children will be exposed to violence as witnesses of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in their homes” (Lenahan, P. M. 2009). These types of behaviors are an unfortunate norm within American households. And oftentimes people will use TV shows and movies as a form of escapism from the abuse in their homes, but what happens when that same portrayal of violence is occurring on their screens as well. And worse, that it is being glorified by audiences who continuously ask for more.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Adoration and favoring of villainous characters has risen in surprising popularity within the last ten years (2014-2024). Similarly, redemption arcs for popular villains have been occurring more and more in recent years: “Narratives featuring antiheroes are more abundant than ever on the entertainment media landscape” (Shafer & Raney, 2012). By redemption arc I am describing a change in narrative within a specific character where they transition from good to bad. This is well known in TV shows and movies by forgiving an antihero and changing the audience's perspective of specific characters. In this project the words antihero and villain are being used interchangeably as these terms refer to characters whose evil actions or motives are important to the plot and they are a central character in a story, movie, or drama who lacks conventional heroic attributes. The reasoning behind these redemptions vary. It may be caused by something behind the scenes, like the actor of the protagonist quits the production so the writers need a new lead, thus comes in the villain turned hero. Or it can be done because audiences of the show or movie have shown interest in this villain and therefore causing the writers to give these antiheroes a bigger role in the story. There can be a myriad of reasons why a character evolves the way they do. Writers, directors and producers of TV shows and movies are taking advantage of audiences favoritism for “the bad guys” and twisting that character's narrative into something positive.

For my own research I created a list of character examples and archetypes that they fall into. One of my examples was Loki from the popular Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) franchise who was originally introduced in the movie *Thor* (2011) as a villain. Fast forward to 2021 and Loki has a spin off TV show where he is the central protagonist. This specific redemption arc was written for several reasons: to stay true to the *Marvel* comics, to further expand the MCU, and because of Tom Hiddleston's (who plays Loki) rising popularity. People were making profit off of Loki's success which made it easier to change his character's narrative. Other franchises have done this as well: Draco Malfoy in *Harry Potter* (2001), Johnny Lawrence from *The Karate Kid* (1984), Joe Goldberg from

You (2018), etc. As the movies or TV series continue to expand, writers and producers have romanticized the villain. Thus producing a storyline where abuse and violence is forgiven and washed away.

Within the last ten years, research has been conducted regarding Affective Disposition Theory (ADT) and how this concept helps in understanding why audiences favor specific characters. In initial studies of ADT, the consensus was that Affective Disposition Theory “explains media enjoyment by focusing on viewers' moral evaluations of and emotional bonds with media characters” (Ramasubramanian, S., & Sanders, M., 2008). It was initially understood that most audiences favored the heroes and protagonistic characters because the moral values and ideals of those characters matched up with their own. Though, now as social media, television, movies and franchises as a whole get bigger and bigger, people’s emotional bonds are becoming more attached to characters. Therefore it is not just about a character's morality, but also how tethered a person feels to the character themselves.

In a study done by Srividya Ramasubramanian and Meghan Sanders they asked the question “Are there feelings beyond positive-negative dichotomy that viewers experience toward characters? What types of character traits lead to which types of discrete emotions (especially admiration, pity, envy, and contempt)” (Ramasubramanian, S., & Sanders, M., 2008)? Their results yielded that people are most fascinated by the characters who possess good *and* bad characteristics. It was also shown that people have a strong connection to characters who exhibit both good and bad behavior as well. Whereas initial theories proved that audiences were more connected to “heroes,” because of their good morality, recent studies are showing that the character does not simply have to be good in order to be well liked.

Other studies focus on the similarities of villains across different media as well as why audiences enjoy antiheroes in the first place. Several of these antihero “characters are of questionable morality, at best, if not downright evil. At the same time, however, viewers seem not only to tolerate these types of characters, but also to decidedly like many villainous heroes” (Oliver, et al., 2019). There is an aspect of unsaid forgiveness that audiences utilize with villainous characters. One article touched on how “our liking of characters allows us to empathize with them” (Shafer & Raney, 2012), which makes perfect sense when it comes to a story where the protagonist is a hero; it becomes questionable when we begin empathizing with the bad guys.

The justification and forgiveness of antihero narratives is extremely similar to how some people view intimate partner violence (IPV). People will romanticize the abuser and, in a way, “forgive” them of their actions because of our society’s normalization of abuse. In a similar sense, “the victim's forgiveness may let the offender ‘off the hook’ and reduce their perceived need to engage with their wrongdoing (Wenzel, M., et al., 2023). This can lead to abusers engaging in a pseudo-self-forgiveness instead of genuine self-forgiveness. The difference “between the processes of pseudo self-forgiveness or self-punitiveness and that of genuine self-forgiveness is the offender's renewed commitment to, and belief in, sharing in a social consensus about the validity of the violated values” (Wenzel, M., et al., 2023). If someone employs a form of pseudo self-forgiveness instead of true self-forgiveness, the difference is evident among offenders. Though there is a stigma and force that seems to push women towards forgiving the people who hurt them. Oftentimes suggesting that victims of abuse should forgive their offenders even if they do not truly feel that it is the right thing to do. This can result in “[o]ffenders perceiv[ing] the victim's forgiveness and belief in value consensus as implying there was nothing much wrong with their behavior” (Wenzel, M., et al., 2023). Which could then lead to the abuser enacting this behavior over and over again because there were no consequences the first time and they had been forgiven for their actions.

Other research has been conducted to show the differences and similarities between forgiveness and self-forgiveness. Though they are not necessarily separate acts, and “they tend to be exchanged and negotiated as part of a dyadic process of moral repair” (Wenzel, M., et al., 2023). Both victims and offenders of IPV may engage in self-forgiveness as they move forward in their lives. Studies do show that forgiveness can be a useful form of therapy in the process of recovering from abuse for both the victims and offenders: “forgiveness helps victims beyond mere symptom reduction for anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Forgiveness facilitates the process of forgiving the self and the perpetrator and reducing the feelings of resentment, shame, worthlessness, and bitterness” (You, M. K., 2022). Specifically, forgiveness therapy involves both intrapersonal forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness. The difference being that intrapersonal forgiveness is the process of forgiving yourself, whereas interpersonal forgiveness is the process of forgiving others. Though both play an important role in the practice of forgiveness therapy.

With my research I want to find the connections, if any, between how audiences perceive villains and if these perceptions have any effect on their personal lives. Similarly, I want to understand if people can find connections between common antihero behaviors and the behaviors displayed by the people around them. Overall, my goal is to determine if there is any relationship between the surge of redemption arcs, forgiveness, justification for fictional characters and existing abusers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do antihero narratives in popular culture normalize the abuse of women?
 - How do viewers' personal experiences shape their reactions to these narratives?
- What kinds of villains (manipulators, bullies, predators, authority figures, henchmen, anti-villains, etc.) are most compelling to audiences?

METHODOLOGY

Character Archetypes

For my study, I wanted to specifically try and understand audience's reactions to certain types of villains. I came up with a list of villain archetypes and found at least one example for each:

- **Manipulators:** seeks to trick and manipulate the protagonist into making bad decisions rather than causing direct harm
 - Loki from *The Marvel Cinematic Universe*
 - Billy Loomis from *Scream*
- **Bullies:** A person who is cruel to others, especially those who are weaker or have less power
 - Johnny Lawrence from *The Karate Kid Franchise (Cobra Kai)*
 - Draco Malfoy from *Harry Potter franchise*
- **Authority Figures:** this villain often takes on a position of power or authority, but abuses this authority for their own evil ends
 - President Snow from *The Hunger Games franchise*
 - Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader) from *Star Wars*
- **Henchmen:** a faithful follower or political supporter, especially one prepared to engage in crime or dishonest practices by way of service
 - Rafe Cameron from *Outer Banks*
- **Predator:** a person who ruthlessly exploits others
 - Joe Goldberg from *You*

Demographic and Recruiting Breakdown

When recruiting participants for this survey I was specifically looking at students at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse as these students were the most accessible to me as an undergrad. I initially gave out my survey to three college class rosters: An American Literature course, a literary journal production class, and my own capstone class. Similarly I also gave my survey out to coworkers at my on campus job. I then asked the students and coworkers in each course to take the quiz if my project was of interest to them and also asked each participant to send the survey to 2-3 friends who would find it interesting as well. That way I would reach a broader audience of students throughout campus. My hope was that every participant would then send the survey to another and the cycle would repeat itself, resulting in a snowball effect of participation. I did not ask for a particular gender in participants, as I believe that my research could be conducted without preference for a specific gender. Though I was only looking at responses from ages 18-22 years old. In the end I received over 40 responses to the survey in total.

Survey Questions (Appendix A)

Using villain archetypes and character examples, I compiled TikTok fan edits of each of the villains into a short video with the character's name and franchise they are a part of. In each clip the character was displaying some form of abusive behavior: verbal abuse, threats, stalking, bullying, gaslighting, manipulating, fighting, lying, narcissism, anger, lashing out, jealousy, etc. Then in a survey I asked people to watch the video and give their honest reactions after finishing it. From there, I asked several questions regarding the participants' familiarity, favoritism, justification, humility, attractiveness, etc. I did this in order to gauge participants preferences as other questions and answers could be skewed by favoritism instead of initial reaction.

After understanding where the participant stood in regards to the villains I chose, I asked if the participants could identify any events in their lives that were reflected in the clips (verbal abuse, threats, stalking, bullying, gaslighting, manipulating, fighting, lying, narcissism, anger, lashing out, jealousy, etc.). This question was asked in order to find connections between real life and the behaviors established on screen. I was trying to find the relationship that audiences have with the media and if they viewed any of their personal experiences with the same gaze as they interpret television and movies. This was done in order to understand if audiences' perceptions of villain narratives have any effect on their own lives at all.

The very last question I asked participants in the survey was whether or not their opinions regarding these villains have changed as a result of partaking with this research. I wanted to make note of any specific instances where people came into the survey with one train of thought and left with something different. Initially, I was unsure if this research idea was only something that I personally was making note of, or if others also had made the same conclusions as myself. By asking for a final reaction from the participants, I could have a clearer understanding of people's response to the research itself.

These questions gave me a wide range of answers and responses from participants. They also helped me connect back to my research questions regarding one's own personal experiences affecting their perceptions on violence and if there is a specific type of villain that is more preferred over others.

RESULTS

First Reactions

To start, after watching the compilation video of villainous characters there was an array of responses to the clips. Several reactions noted the attraction that they felt towards the characters right from the start even if they had not felt an initial interest beforehand:

This compilation made the characters look attractive. I have seen some of the movies included but did not find the villains attractive, but the compilation using slowed down effects changed my mind.

Other participants noted how uncomfortable they were with the videos themselves. In one instance, a participant explained that they did not find the characters attractive especially because of the rage that was being expressed. Writing about how the extreme acts of violence made them uneasy. One wrote about how as the video progressed they "could almost notice [their] heart starting to beat faster. [They] also feel overwhelmed by the rapid changing of pictures and videos and all the different scenes going on." Which was a surprising observation as not many other participants wrote about the editing process and format specifically.

There were several participants that clarified that they felt differently towards specific characters because they "knew" them:

Of the characters that I know not gonna lie I think they are total hotties. Of the ones that I am not familiar with they creep me out.

In these responses about familiarity, the idea of redemption arcs came up frequently as well. Two responses directly noting that watching the abusive behavior was easy "because they're attractive and by the end of their character arcs, they end up being good people." Within that same response, this participant also mentioned how they did end up feeling uncomfortable watching the unfamiliar characters display these same reactions and said, "the other videos were uncomfortable because the villains portrayed are sort of being glorified for their toxicity/psychopathy." This was the only response that mentioned the glorification that some of these characters possess within their franchise. Another response used the word "alluring" when talking about the characters they were familiar with, mentioning how it was easier and less uncomfortable to watch because the backstories were already understood and therefore this participant could excuse the bad behavior because they "know the full picture" by already consuming some form of media from those characters.

Familiarity and Favoritism

The next several questions were all in regards to familiarity and favoritism of the characters and franchises. The highest percentage of familiarity was with Loki and *The Marvel Cinematic Universe*, Draco Malfoy and the *Harry Potter* Franchise, Coriolanus Snow and *The Hunger Games* franchise, and Anakin Skywalkers and the *Star Wars* franchise. The results showed that these four characters and franchises were familiar to over 70% of the participants (Figure 1). Which makes sense when considering how much media has been created within the franchise themselves and how long they have been around. The first *Harry Potter* book was released in 1997 and there is still new media being created for the *Harry Potter* franchise today. The first Marvel comic was released in 1939 and there are still TV series and movies being released within this universe every year. The same goes for *Star Wars*. The only contrary of these four is with *The Hunger Games*, as the first book was only released 2012 and there was a hiatus of media between 2015 when the film *Mockingjay* part 2 was released and in 2020 when the novel *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* was published.

Figure 1. Familiarity of Characters or Franchises Results

Q. Are you familiar with any of the characters/franchises shown in the video? Percentage

Loki	76%
The Marvel Cinematic Universe	72%
Billy Loomis	36%
Scream	44%
Johnny Lawrence	24%
The Karate Kid (or Cobra Kai)	60%
Draco Malfoy	92%
Harry Potter Franchise	100%
Coriolanus (President) Snow	76%
The Hunger Games (or Ballad of Song Birds and Snakes)	84%
Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader)	84%
Star Wars	88%
Rafe Cameron	44%
Outerbanks	52%
Joe Goldberg	72%
You	72%

When asked if participants were an “avid fan of the characters/franchises” it was shown a much lower percentage in comparison to the previous responses. The highest scoring Franchise being *The Marvel Cinematic Universe* (52%), with the *Harry Potter* Franchise falling shortly behind (48%) (Figure 2). Regarding characters themselves the highest scoring was Loki (43%) and then Anakin Skywalker and Coriolanus Snow tying for second with 35% (Figure 2). The franchise and character with the least amount of fans was *Karate Kid* with (9%) and Johnny Lawrence (4%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Avid Fan of Characters or Franchises Results

Q. Are you an avid fan of any of these characters/franchises? Percentage

Loki	43%
The Marvel Cinematic Universe	52%
Billy Loomis	13%
Scream	13%
Johnny Lawrence	4%
The Karate Kid (or Cobra Kai)	9%
Draco Malfoy	30%
Harry Potter Franchise	48%
Coriolanus (President) Snow	35%
The Hunger Games (or Ballad of Song Birds and Snakes)	43%
Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader)	35%
Star Wars	35%
Rafe Cameron	30%
Outerbanks	35%
Joe Goldberg	13%
You	26%

This trend was similar when asking for personal favorites within a franchise to the participants. The results showed that Loki was a personal favorite of *The Marvel Cinematic Universe* with 35% (Figure 3). Though falling shortly behind was Draco Malfoy from the *Harry Potter* franchise with 29% (Figure 3). And in the lower end of the spectrum Johnny Lawrence was a personal favorite to only 6% of the participants (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Personal Favorite Results

Q. Are any of these characters your personal favorite within their franchise? Percentage

<i>Loki: The Marvel Cinematic Universe</i>	35%
<i>Billy Loomis: Scream</i>	18%
<i>Johnny Lawrence: The Karate Kid (or Cobra Kai)</i>	6%
<i>Draco Malfoy: Harry Potter Franchise</i>	29%
<i>Coriolanus (President) Snow: The Hunger Games (or Ballad of Song Birds and Snakes)</i>	18%
<i>Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader): Star Wars</i>	24%
<i>Rafe Cameron: Outerbanks</i>	12%
<i>Joe Goldberg: You</i>	12%

Attraction and Justification

There were several questions in which I asked participants to rate from a scale of 1-10 in regards to different aspects of the characters. The first question asked “How much would you say you like the character?” With all the villains the average rating was below a 5, with Draco Malfoy sitting at 4.71 at the highest and Joe Goldberg with the lowest at 2.71 (Figure 4). Rafe Cameron was rated a 10 by a participant, but only averaged at 4.29 (Figure 4). Another aspect worth noting with this question is that every single character was rated a 0 by at least one participant. Showing an array of appreciation for all the characters in total (Figure 4).

Figure 4. How Much Do You Like This Character Results

Q. On a scale of 1-10 how much would you say you like this character? Average Minimum Maximum

	Average	Minimum	Maximum
<i>Loki</i>	4.46	0.00	9.00
<i>Billy Loomis</i>	3.62	0.00	8.00
<i>Johnny Lawrence</i>	4.20	0.00	8.00
<i>Draco Malfoy</i>	4.71	0.00	9.00
<i>Coriolanus (President) Snow</i>	4.27	0.00	9.00
<i>Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader)</i>	3.48	0.00	8.00
<i>Rafe Cameron</i>	4.29	0.00	10.00
<i>Joe Goldberg</i>	2.71	0.00	8.00

When the participants were asked to rate how good of a person each character was, Loki received the highest average at 5.38 and Billy Loomis with the lowest at 2.39 (Figure 5). Billy Loomis also received the lowest maximum rating at a 5 (Figure 5). Only two of the villains did not have a low of zero, both Loki and Draco Malfoy’s minimum rating was over a 1 (Figure 5). Not a single one of the characters were given a 10 with this question (Figure 5).

Figure 5. How Good of a Person is This Character Results

Q. On a scale of 1-10 how good of a person do you think this character is? **Average** **Minimum** **Maximum**

	Average	Minimum	Maximum
<i>Loki</i>	5.38	1.00	9.00
<i>Billy Loomis</i>	2.39	0.00	5.00
<i>Johnny Lawrence</i>	4.26	0.00	9.00
<i>Draco Malfoy</i>	4.75	2.00	8.00
<i>Coriolanus (President) Snow</i>	2.61	0.00	7.00
<i>Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader)</i>	3.78	0.00	9.00
<i>Rafe Cameron</i>	3.57	0.00	7.00
<i>Joe Goldberg</i>	2.43	0.00	7.00

The next question asked participants “How much are you attracted to this character?” The highest average was Anakin Skywalker with 5.62 and lowest was Johnny Lawrence with 2.53 (Figure 6). Though several participants rated the villains at a 10 for attraction: Loki, Billy Loomis, Coriolanus Snow, Anakin Skywalker and Rafe Cameron (Figure 6).

Figure 6. How Much are You Attracted to this Character Results

Q. On a scale of 1-10 how much are you attracted to this character

	Average	Minimum	Maximum
<i>Loki</i>	3.95	0.00	10.00
<i>Billy Loomis</i>	4.21	0.00	10.00
<i>Johnny Lawrence</i>	2.53	0.00	8.00
<i>Draco Malfoy</i>	3.05	0.00	9.00
<i>Coriolanus (President) Snow</i>	4.91	0.00	10.00
<i>Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader)</i>	5.62	0.00	10.00
<i>Rafe Cameron</i>	4.57	0.00	10.00
<i>Joe Goldberg</i>	2.71	0.00	7.00

Within the final question of the rating scales, participants were asked how justifiable the actions displayed by the villains were. These answers also never averaged above a 5 for any villain and all had at least one participant rate their actions at a zero (Figure 7). The highest average rating was for Loki at 4.46 and Rafe with 4.29, while Joe Goldberg at 2.71 was sat at the bottom (Figure 7). Each villain was given a maximum rating of over an eight by at least one participant and Rafe Cameron in particular was the only villain who was given a 10 at their maximum (Figure 7).

Figure 7. How Justifiable are the Actions Results

Q. On a scale of 1-10 based on the TikTok's shown, how justifiable were the actions displayed by each character?

	Average	Minimum	Maximum
<i>Loki: Manipulation/Narcissism</i>	4.46	0.00	9.00
<i>Billy Loomis: Verbal Abuse/Gaslighting</i>	3.62	0.00	8.00
<i>Johnny Lawrence: Bullying/Fighting</i>	4.20	0.00	8.00
<i>Draco Malfoy: Bullying</i>	4.71	0.00	9.00
<i>Coriolanus (President) Snow: Verbal Abuse/Threatening</i>	4.27	0.00	9.00
<i>Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader): Anger/Betrayal</i>	3.48	0.00	8.00
<i>Rafe Cameron: Fighting/Lashing out</i>	4.29	0.00	10.00
<i>Joe Goldberg: Stalking/Lying</i>	2.71	0.00	8.00

Connections to Real Life

When asked if the participant could identify any events in their personal lives or close friends lives the responses were more catered towards actions of lying, gaslighting, threatening and yelling. Not a single response included the retelling of a woman displaying the behavior. Instead each response used a non gendered word “kid, person, they, etc.) or a masculine term (boy, man, him, etc.). Several people mentioned how they knew a person who would manipulate them and make the participant feel like everything they were doing was wrong. One specific participant said this person “made their life a living hell” and that it felt similar to the Rafe Cameron clips. Several participants specifically mentioned that they could identify traits and behaviors that were reflected in their personal lives were done by boyfriends or partners.

Another response mentioned how they were once in a relationship with someone who treated them poorly and it has not had an effect on their relationships since:

I was in a relationship with someone who physically and verbally abused me, gaslit, and manipulated me. Unfortunately due to this, I find myself being attracted to people who are portrayed as such. To add on to the question above, this is not always the case, but it is the case often. I acknowledge that it is because of what has happened to me that I feel that way, and not always because of the way the characters are portrayed (although it is that too).

The concept of rejection and how that played a role in the behavior was mentioned frequently as well. Several participants wrote about how men became angry after a request of theirs was denied. Once someone had said no to a drink offer, or a ride home, or a relationship then the man would react in a threatening and angry manner. Similarly, the term “excuse” came up several times from participants' responses. One noted specifically that they had been involved with a man who would accuse them of lying and try to guilt-trip them into having feelings for him and then would later “make excuses and play innocent” which felt similar to Joe Goldberg from *You*.

Other responses also included mention of the behavior in relation to a professor or adult figure in their lives. Oftentimes, the parent or professor would convince the participant that they were in the wrong. One commented about how their father would blow up at the smallest thing which made them have to “walk on eggshells to avoid such

outbursts.” This behavior felt similar to the sudden rage enacted by Rafe Cameron from *Outer Banks*. Versus another response which noted that it was the *Star Wars* clips that reminded them of a parent’s behavior because of how someone’s character changed dramatically once the relationship furthered. In regards to professors, participants commented on how they felt manipulated into a bad grade.

There was only one response that turned the question back onto themselves and wrote about how they have felt jealous a lot in their lives by the accomplishments of others:

Jealousy has played a big part in my life. I have been jealous of things that others have gotten and others have also been jealous of the opportunities that I have been given. It is similar to Johnny, as people make fun of me for things that I cannot control. Jealous people take their emotions out on others because they cannot accept that they do not have what the other person does.

One participant explained a situation where after a boy had sexually assaulted them, he began apologizing, crying and asking for comfort from the participant. And later the boy would purposely seek out the participant to ask for forgiveness. In this situation, begging for forgiveness was probably done for peace of mind of the abuser and not the participant themselves.

Final Reactions

The last question of the survey asked participants “Have your feelings for any of these characters or franchises changed as a result of this survey?” and once again the answers varied. Several noted how they often justify the characters actions, and the survey made them realize that may not necessarily be best. One participant mentioned that they “have realized that I may put some of these characters on a pedestal even though they do some bad things.” And another wrote about how they oftentimes want to know both sides of the story and they have realized they tend to victim blame and favor the villains in order to humanize them. It was also noted from a participant that they can overlook the characters bad behaviors simply because they are attractive:

I would say it's given me some perspective on how even I can be quick to overlook a character's evilness if I think or perceive them as cool or good-looking. I can personally say that I've rooted for Anakin when watching the Star Wars movies for the first time just because I thought he looked cool in Revenge of The Sith. Obviously, I still understand that he's done terrible, inexcusable things, but it's interesting that I was rooting for him instead of the "good guys". My opinion of all of these characters has gone down, I would say most specifically Joe Goldberg and Anakin Skywalker.

Others participants clarified that the survey made them reflect a bit more on their interpretations and perspectives of villains. It was observed that the survey itself put into “perspective how most shows/movies use attractive villains to get us to like them.” And similarly, one person reflected on how their initial feelings had not changed, but their overall consciousness of how they will perceive characters in the future is bound to change. And several participants made a point to mention that they still stand behind their initial feelings towards the characters they are already familiar with:

Knowing the context of most of these characters' actions, I generally still extremely dislike the ones I didn't like prior to this survey, and am still okay or mid about the ones that I was okay/mid about prior as well. This specifically pertains to characters like Loki, Anakin, and Draco. [...] For the other characters like Billy, Joe, and Coriolanus: They're just murderous psychopaths and there's not really a path of redemption there. Finally, I really don't know a ton about the guy from Karate Kid or the guy from Outer Banks, but it seems like they're just kind of cruddy people, so I suppose my neutral opinion of those characters has definitely become more of a negative opinion since I've been provided with a bit more context to the characters and their actions.

DATA ANALYSIS

The first reactions had several collective answers: varying from attraction to the characters, familiarity and uncomfot. Looking at the attraction comments specifically, there is an understanding from the audience that these villains are being portrayed in a pleasing manner. If not done by production themselves, then it is done through edits and media by the fans. Hundreds of edits are made to glorify these types of characters and they will continue to do so until audiences stop interacting with them (liking, commenting, sharing, reposting, etc.). In some instances, a participant wrote that in their initial experience with a specific villain they originally did not find them attractive, but because of the slowed down music and effects of the edit, their opinion was changed. Sometimes the characters themselves are not seen in a certain light until after their scenes have been manipulated by the audience.

Though there were also reactions on the opposite spectrum of attraction, where several participants wrote about how the videos made them feel uncomfortable. These participants realized that the violence and rage being romanticized within the edits displayed was frightening.

These first responses overall were generally more brief as it was the participants first experience with the compilation video and research. Though the reactions were what was expected, a spectrum of attraction to uncomfot for the audience. If the participants were familiar with a character or franchise they were more likely to enjoy the video. Which goes to show that violence can be accepted if it's a familiar action. Overall, there was a large variety of reactions to the video and the answers shown above portray a mixed series of emotions and feelings towards the videos and villains themselves. This connects to the discussion of intimate partner violence (IPV) in real life scenarios. Similarly, participants wrote about how in regards to the characters they already know and like, they have positive feelings for, and when it comes to those that are unfamiliar and new, the feelings were negative. Showing that someone is more likely to find a stranger's violence and anger as a real threat versus if it comes from someone they already have a relationship with.

This was backed up a bit through the questions asking about familiarity, favoritism, attractiveness and justification: those who had the highest percentages of familiarity and favoritism also happened to be the highest of ratings regarding attraction and justification for their actions. Loki from *The Marvel Cinematic Universe* was constantly rated highly in almost every question and this lies in the fact that people are intimately familiar with the character and franchise. Similarly this connects to forgiveness to abusers and general abusive behavior as those who were the highest rated of justifiable actions were one and the same as those that had avid fans of them. Aside from Rafe Cameron, who was rated a 10/10 of justifiable actions even though he only held a 12% personal favorite percentage, 35% avid fan percentage, and 44% familiarity percentage, though I believe this result is regarding how relevant Rafe Cameron is specifically in the current time period.

Time in and of itself has a great impact on the scale of attraction and justification as well. The franchises who have had more recent releases rated the highest in attractiveness (Rafe Cameron and Coriolanus (President) Snow). Both of the characters were a part of TV shows and movies that had releases in the last year, versus Johnny Lawrence whose film was first premiered in 1984 was rated the lowest in attractiveness. Time also had an impact on familiarity of characters and franchises as those that had films and TV shows spanning the last ten years (*The Marvel Cinematic Universe*, *The Harry Potter* Franchise, and *Star Wars*) were all found to be the most familiar as well as highest scores of personal favorites and avid fans. Draco Malfoy and Loki were also the only characters who did not receive a minimum of 0 when asked how good of a person they were.

Age overall could be a potential factor as well considering all participants were of the ages of 18-23 and therefore they may be unfamiliar with certain characters simply because their franchises had not been popular during a specific time period.

One result that stood out in particular though was how Anakin Skywalker had the highest rated average in attractiveness (5.62) and only received an average of 3.48 in regard to justification, so this means that not all those that are familiar and attractive are also seen as justifiable in their actions.

Almost every participant could pinpoint events in their personal lives that were mirrored in the clips. And each response either used a non-gendered word to describe the people involved or a masculine term, which means that not a single incident was recalled that included a woman portraying the abusive behavior. Most of the responses described the behaviors of lying, gaslighting, and manipulation. These responses spoke on how these behaviors were unjustified and made the person on the other end feel guilty or in the wrong.

Two responses specifically mentioned that the person displaying the abusive behavior was attractive and good looking to some degree which led to them getting away with saying and doing these actions. Which unfortunately makes sense based on the results from the attractiveness in connection to justification for the villainous characters.

Several responses wrote about the behavior in relation to a boyfriend or close male friend they had had. Mentioning how they are no longer on speaking terms because of their behavior. A lot of the responses were used in the past tense in order to convey that the person is no longer in the life of the participant.

Other behavior that was described by participants was general anger and rage as well as yelling and threatening done by a person in their life. Three of the responses were written about parents and father figures whose behavior would change dramatically within seconds which led to the participants feeling overwhelmed.

Forgiveness was brought up by one participant who explained a situation where the abuser in their life would constantly cross paths and seek out the participant and ask for forgiveness and comfort until they got their way. Which led to the participant getting back into a relationship with the boy where he displayed the same behaviors over and over again. This highlights how cycles of abuse persist, with answers repeating the same destructive actions.

For final thoughts and perceptions, participants had the opportunity to write if their perspectives had changed as a result of taking the study. Several did note that there were not any changes to their initial thoughts and feelings overall, though I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of responses that mentioned an evolution of awareness and perspective.

Some mentioned how they did not realize how quickly they overlook violence and abusive behavior for characters because of how attractive they are. This has been reflected in real life situations as well where stereotypical good looking men are given a pass for their behavior because of the way they look. Likewise, participants mentioned putting several of the characters on a pedestal even though they would not normally surround themselves with that type of person in real life. Though the same thing has been done in our personal lives as well: People in positions of power like political figures, celebrities, athletes, etc. are seen as greater than thou and then have less consequences for their actions because of the “respect” they have.

Other responses wrote about how they will continue to feel positively for the characters they already were fans of beforehand. Once again making a point to write that even though they may realize the negativity, they excuse it because it's familiar.

Overall, the results from the survey displayed that the most compelling characters to audiences were not necessarily those that fell into a specific category, but the ones who had been familiar. Loki, a manipulator, was rated the highest in several categories whereas Billy Loomis, also a manipulator, was rated the lowest. Similarly, Draco Malfoy, a bully, was an attractive and justifiable character according to the participants while Johnny Lawrence, also a bully, fell onto the opposite spectrum. When it comes to asking what types of villains are compelling, it all boils down to timing. The most recent releases of media with villains were seen as the most attractive, and the characters who had been around the longest were the fan favorites. The type of villain they were did not seem to have any effect on preference.

In regard to the normalization of the abuse of women in connection to antihero narratives, I think it is safe to say there seems to be a disconnect between the two. Audiences are able to connect their own personal experiences with abuse and abusive behavior in relation to villains with ease. Though several participants' feelings did not change because of the survey, they still keep their initial thoughts that the characters are attractive and justified in their actions of violence. Not a single participant mentioned in any response that the characters have impacted their own personal lives and decision making. Even though we can find connections between what is happening on screen to what is occurring in our lives, they may not be affecting one another.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, our own experiences with abuse will have an affect on the media we perceive. If someone is a victim of intimate partner violence or sexual assault, they may be more keen on finding similarities to their abusers and fictional characters than someone who has not had the same experiences. Though based on the survey results, several participants noted their discomfort in the violence and actions displayed even if they could not find connections in their own lives. All of these participant responses found a connection between them and the videos and characters shown beforehand. Showing that you can pinpoint the actions on a screen and understand how they mirror in your own personal lives. There is not a detachment when it comes to the connection between media and real life. Though there is not a complete connection between the romanticization of antiheroes and the abuse of women, but people are able to specify certain actions that feel similar to their real lives. Similarly, participants did not point out a specific type of villain as more familiar, favorable, justified, etc. and instead the main factor was timing. The release of more recent media and franchises that have existed for multiple years were the ones with the most fans and attractive characters according to participants.

For future research in this area one could look into media impact on perceptions in cases other than villain and antiheroes, looking more closely at redemption arcs for villains in connection to forgiveness with abusers, and how much society is influenced overall by media. And similarly how any of these results can impact producers, educators, policymakers, storytellers, etc. This type of research with the constant thrum of new media is bound to stir up and affect audiences in both negative and positive ways.

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Please write out your age below
2. In at least 2 sentences explain your reactions to watching this compilation of characters
3. Are you familiar with any of the characters/franchises shown in the video? (select all that apply)
4. Are you an avid fan of any of these characters/franchises shown in the video? (select all that apply)
5. Are any of these characters your personal favorite within their franchise?
6. On a scale of 1-10 how much would you say you like this character?
7. On a scale of 1-10 how good of a person do you think this character is?
8. On a scale of 1-10 how much are you attracted to this character?
9. Based on the TikToks shown, how justifiable were the actions displayed by each character?
10. Can you identify any events in your life that are reflected in the clips (verbal abuse, threats, stalking, bullying, gaslighting/manipulating, fighting, lying, narcissism, anger, lashing out, jealousy, etc.)
11. Have you observed this in someone close to you?
12. In at least 2 sentences can you explain what the event/situation was
13. In 2-3 sentences please describe how this feels similar to the clips
14. Have your feelings for any of these characters or franchises changed as a result of this survey? If yes, please explain in at least 2 sentences. Also please share any questions or comments regarding this survey