FIGHTING FOR POWER IN GAME OF THRONES: SOCIAL DOMINANCE ORIENTATION, CHARACTER MORALITY, AND COLLECTIVE VERSUS INDIVIDUAL INTERESTS WORLDVIEWS

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Focusing on the "Game of Thrones" saga, we investigated among fans ($N = 338$) whether social dominance orientation (SDO) is associated with morality attributed to characters of TV fictions and, in turn, individuals' worldviews. We further considered the distinction in SDO-Dominance (SDO-D) and SDO-Antiegaliatarianism (SDO-A). Results revealed that SDO-D was positively associated with morality attributed to characters using harsh power-achievement strategies; SDO-A was negatively associated with morality attributed to characters fighting for collective interests and supporting equality principles. Morality attributed to some characters mediated the associations of the two SDO dimensions with participants' worldview about pursuing collective rather than individual interests.

Adapted from George R. R. Martin's book series "A Song of Ice and Fire," the HBO series "Game of Thrones" (GoT) debuted on television in 2011 and rapidly became a fan-favorite, being aired in 173 countries worldwide and earning HBO about 2.28 billion dollars as its most-viewed show of all times (Beaumont-Thomas, 2014). GoT U.S. viewership kept increasing throughout the years; season one had an average of 9.3 million viewers, while the last seasons had over 40 million (Feldman, 2019). The show was also critically acclaimed and won 59 Emmy awards (Beaumont-Thomas, 2014). Apart from the direction and the spectacular sets, a key to the success of GoT lies in the psychological representation of human nature, (especially) with all its flaws and sins (Wilson & Leckelt, 2019). Can such a popular TV show contribute to shaping people's worldviews, and if so, how and in which direction? The present study aimed to answer these theoretical questions.

Research has mostly focused on character identification and its consequences (e.g., Vezzali et al., 2014). However, there is growing interest in the study of morality judgments of characters (Eden et al., 2017; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016). Research on character moral judgments has been mainly aimed at understanding their role in the enjoyment of characters and narratives (Raney, 2011; Shafer et al., 2016). Departing from this research, our aim is to examine for the first time social dominance orientation (SDO; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) as an individual-differences variable that can predict morality attributions to characters in a (fictional) context characterized by social inequalities and fight for power between social groups. The theoretical interest in this test is boosted by the fact that GoT is populated by many characters which, in contrast to other popular shows, are not clearly defined in terms of positivity or negativity, or, in other words, are morally ambiguous, leaving therefore more room for individuals' interpretation. We are also interested in whether morality attributed to characters contributes to shaping individuals' worldviews on personal versus collective interests, a topic of primary societal relevance and a main theme of GoT.

We considered two different facets of SDO, SDO-Dominance (SDO-D) and SDO-Antiegalitarianism (SDO-A) (Ho et al., 2012), since they may be differentially associated with morality attributed to the main GoT characters. We also included worldviews related to the importance of individual versus collective interests as a potential outcome of SDO and character morality, with the aim of investigating whether watching Game of Thrones may contribute to shaping perceptions related to the broader society. This test is important since it may show that watching engaging TV series contributes to our behavior and worldview in everyday life, therefore shedding light on the key elements that can shape the show's perceptions. To address these questions, we conducted a correlational study with fans of the show using an adult sample. Before providing the theoretical rationale, we briefly present the main aspects of Game of Thrones relevant to our aims and their connection with group-based power dynamics.

A Song of Ice and Fire, but also a Fight between Personal and Collective Advantage

Main Characters

The story of GoT takes place within the fictional continent of Westeros and begins when, after the suspicious death of his previous counsellor, King Robert Baratheon visits the northern castle of Winterfell to ask its lord, Ned Stark, to be his right-hand. After these events, eight seasons of intrigue, betrayal, and power struggles follow, during which many contestants aim at conquering the Iron Throne and, therefore, supremacy on the continent. Westeros is divided into Seven Kingdoms, each one ruled by a House, which exerts its authority over vassals and territories and answers to the Iron Throne in the capital, King's Landing.

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Among the most prominent Houses, the House Stark of Winterfell rules the North region of Westeros, and is known for its sober costumes and loyalty to the crown. Among the most relevant characters from House Stark are the sisters Sansa and Arya. Sansa is educated in female duties and spent her childhood dreaming of marrying a prince. She will get engaged to Prince Joffrey Baratheon, soon realizing, however, his brutal cruelty. Numerous vicissitudes will transform Sansa into a refined politician and strategist, ready to reign over the North. Arya is Sansa's younger sister but differs from her in all respects: she is not interested in female duties, while she is passionate about sword fighting. After witnessing the brutal execution of her father, Arya, at the age of 9, embarks on a journey that will see her become a skilled fighter and the avenger of her family. Among the "children" of House Stark, there is also Jon Snow, a "bastard" (terminology used in the series) who is sent to take up service with the Night Watch, a group of soldiers charged with protecting a barrier that divides Winterfell from the wildling population and other mysterious threats. Despite being an illegitimate child, Jon lives by the customs and the rules of the Starks.

Among the vassals of the Stark family, House Bolton is infamous for its practice of flaying their enemies alive, which makes them despised and feared. The heir of House Bolton, Ramsay, also an illegitimate child, is known for its ruthlessness and the habit of having his enemies devoured alive by his hounds.

Another powerful House is the Lannisters of Casterly Rock, the richest dynasty of Westeros; thanks to their money, Lannisters "always pay their debts" and always have their way in conflicts. Heirs of the House Lannister are the twins Cersei and Jaime, who entertain an incestuous relationship. Cersei is cunning and manipulative, even ruthless when it comes to protecting her family. Similarly, Jaime easily comes to terms with violence when it means protecting Cersei. Tyrion is the youngest Lannister; he is a dwarf, disliked by his own father and sister. Not as gifted as Jaime in the art of fighting, he resorts to knowledge and strategy as the best ways to defeat enemies, hence his motto: "That's what I do, I drink, and I know things." The Lannisters, Cersei and Jaime in particular, are united by a total disregard for the common well-being, over which they place their own interests and that of their family.

Finally, the House Targaryen of Dragonstone is also called "the House of the Dragon" because its members can tame and fly dragons. Daenerys is the last Targaryen, and, driven by her charisma and sense of social justice, quickly wins a large following of admirers and soldiers, becoming a solid pretender to the Iron Throne, that she perceives as rightfully hers.

Power Dynamics in Game of Thrones

Thanks to its complex plot and the chiaroscuro characterization of the characters, GoT has struck the imagination not only of fans but also of numerous researchers, who have discussed its most recurring themes. Among these, the most explored are the agency attributed to female figures (Schubart & Gjelsvik, 2016), the culture of violence (Abi-Khalil, 2020), and the dynamics of power (Olesker, 2020).

Indeed, the key point around which GoT is built is represented by the affirmation of power; the Houses are described as always fighting for supremacy over the Seven Kingdoms. This conceptual macro-theme is well exemplified by Cersei's iconic statement "When you play the Game of Thrones, you win or you die"; the throne (i.e., social dominance) is the goal for which every means is legitimate. In this fight, the alternative is either supremacy or death. In this sense, every act of violence in the narrative can be read as an act of power: from the representation of the culture of rape to mass murder (in the metaphorical form of either dragons or the wildfire), to the attempted murder of children (Olesker, 2020). According to Fathallah (2017), the construction of authority in GoT can be described through Weber's (1922/1978) typology of

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"legitimate rule," considering three (sometimes overlapping) types of authority, namely traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic. Traditional authority is well represented in GoT: kings, lords, and fathers are legitimized to rule by history ("how things have always been done"). A magnificent example of this model is represented by the Lannisters, who base their dominion on the tradition and wealth of their family. Rational-legal authority is legitimized by law and reason and, given the thirst for power of the individual Houses leading to continuous political overturns, it is the least represented in the show. Charismatic leadership is depicted as the most relevant form of leadership in GoT, especially through the "Mother of Dragons" Daenerys, and it is mainly based on charisma. Unlike the Lannisters, who act primarily to maintain their privilege, Daenerys appears interested in "breaking the wheel" which entails the oppression of the weak. For this reason, one of her first acts of power is the mass murder of the "Masters" of Slaver's Bay by the hand of their ex-slaves, made free under her leadership. This event grants Daenerys one of her iconic appellations, "Breaker of Chains." Throughout the series, Daenerys appears increasingly obsessed with gaining power over Westeros to guarantee social justice.

Although the theme of social dominance is a red thread underlying the entire series, GoT fans' social dominance orientation has not yet been investigated in its possible association with their precedence of personal to collective advantage (which, again, is a relevant topic in the struggle for power described in GoT). This study investigates this relationship, also taking into consideration the moral attributions of the fans to the characters described above.

Morality Attributions to Characters

Research on engagement to TV and literature has largely investigated liking of and identification with characters, which typically increases engagement with the fiction and emotional transportation (Cohen, 2001; Oatley, 2016). Such liking of and identification also drive individuals' attitudes and behaviors in the direction indicated by the character (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019; Joyce & Harwood, 2014; Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Vezzali et al., 2014, 2021).

There is reason to believe that fiction has a relevant moral function and that also moral attributions to characters are crucial (Raney & Janicke, 2013, 2014). Importantly, fiction exposure is related to individuals' morality attributions (Black & Barnes, 2021). Social psychological research has consistently shown that moral information is central — as compared to information about competence or sociability — when we form an impression about social targets, whether about individuals or groups (e.g., Brambilla et al., 2021; Ellemers et al., 2013). Moral information also represents the primary determinant of the likelihood that people will approach rather than avoid others (Brambilla et al., 2013; Pagliaro et al., 2016). Given its centrality in impression formation and behavioral tendencies toward social targets, perceived morality may also play a central role in character evaluation, and in the way this evaluation shapes their general worldviews.

According to the disposition-based integrated model of enjoyment (Raney, 2002, 2004; see also Zillmann & Cantor, 1976), moral evaluation is an important component of character evaluation and identification with it. Raney (2004) argued that individuals, by relying on mental schema concerning the character's role, can understand whether a character is good or bad (e.g., the hero should be a morally good character). The character's role and associated schema, therefore, provide us with lenses through which to interpret its actions. Importantly to the present aims, however, the character's role is not always precisely defined, impeding in these cases individuals from relying on preexisting schema (e.g., about the hero or the antagonist). Relatedly, characters may not always be "clearly" morally good or morally bad. Rather, their morality can

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be blurred. And people may be fascinated by morally ambiguous, or even morally deviant characters (Sanders, 2010). To the extent that we like individuals who are moral (see Brambilla et al., 2021), it follows that to like a negative or a morally ambiguous character we should be able to attribute morality to it. In other words, the liking of the characters should be a function at least in part of moral approval of the characters' behavior and underlying motivations (Raney, 2011). But what happens when the character role is undefined, and/or it acts in a morally ambiguous way? It is possible that, when a schema is not readily available, other factors concur to determine judgments about the character morality.

Literature has broadly identified two sets of factors that can be predictive of character morality. The first was expressed by Raney (2004, 2011), who explained the liking for these characters by relying on the concept of moral disengagement (Bandura, 2006), implying a set of cognitive justifications that reduce the moral negativity of a given behavior (Janicke & Raney, 2018).

The second set of factors refers to individual-difference variables. Black et al. (2019) found that moral purity (i.e., the idea that one should strive to live in an elevated and more noble way, and that the body is a temple which can be desecrated by immoral activities), machiavellianism (i.e., tendency to manipulate others for personal interest), imaginative resistance (i.e., resistance to accepting immoral behavior in fictions as moral), and personality variables like neuroticism and agreeableness, predicted identification with morally ambiguous or negative characters. This research however used the dark character scale, which required individuals to think about dark characters that came to their mind rather than assessing identification with specific media characters. Shafer et al. (2016) explored dispositional empathy, punitiveness (i.e., tendency to endorse punitive measures), and vigilantism (i.e., tendency to support vigilante justice) as individual-difference variables potentially associated with character moral judgment, liking, and identification. Results provided mixed support for the hypotheses, with the different paths between individual-difference variables, moral judgments, and character liking moderated by the interactive or noninteractive nature of the film evaluated. In the present study, we focused on SDO as an individual-difference variable relevant to the context examined.

Social Dominance Orientation, Morality, and Worldviews

SDO can be defined as the preference for unequal relations between groups and for dominance by powerful groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Individuals characterized by high levels of SDO endorse traits related to coldness and aggression, display low empathy, and perceive the world as a zero-sum game, a competitive jungle where the most powerful groups deserve to win. This construct perfectly aligns with the situation depicted in GoT, characterized by group-based competition to achieve power in a world characterized by violence and deep social inequalities. SDO typically predicts prejudice toward a wide series of groups; it also predicts social ideologies and worldviews related to power disparities, such as political conservatism and just world beliefs, and hierarchy-enhancing policies like support for the death penalty and lower social welfare (Duckitt & Sibley, 2017; Ho & Kteily, 2020; Pratto et al., 2006).

Ho et al. (2012; see also Cadamuro et al., 2021) conceptually and empirically differentiated two dimensions of SDO. The first reflects group-based dominance (SDO-D). Items refer to oppression of groups over other groups, and support for the importance of group hierarchies and the idea that some groups are superior. The second dimension refers to opposition to equality among groups (SDO-A). People high in SDO-A do not endorse the equality principle and are against reducing social inequality. These individuals prefer that high-power groups maintain their advantage over low-power groups, for instance by denying access to resources. While SDO-D refers to old-fashioned, blatant forms of prejudice, SDO-A is more related

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to modern forms of prejudice refusing equal treatment (McConahay, 1986; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Consistently, SDO-D has been shown to be associated more strongly than SDO-A with blatant forms of prejudice toward, zero-sum competition perceptions, denial of rights to the low-power group, especially in contexts with rigid and contested hierarchies. In contrast, associations with subtle forms of racism, opposition to redistributive social policies, support for system justification were stronger for SDO-A than for SDO-D (Ho et al., 2012).

Following initial research showing an association between SDO and morality constructs (Hadarics & Kende, 2018; Lucas & Kteily, 2016), we hypothesized that SDO-D and SDO-A would be differentially associated with morality attributed to characters that behaved differently on the GoT chessboard to change the direction of group-based power.

We also aimed to test whether morality attributed to characters can in turn be associated with individuals' worldviews related to power dynamics, and specifically with attitudes toward pursuing individual versus collective interests (a core theme of GoT). With character identification, viewers adopt the character's point of view, they vicariously impersonate the character, by including its traits into the self-concept and by mimicking its actions (Cohen, 2001; Sestir & Green, 2010). Kaufman and Libby (2012; see also Green & Brock, 2000; Oatley, 2016) define the phenomenon of experience-taking as a fusion with the character implying that characters' traits are attributed to the self. As a consequence, character identification can contribute to shaping individuals' attitudes in line with the characters' views. According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2004), by observing others (in our case, media characters), individuals may acquire their attitudes and behaviors. Similarly, according to cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 2002), viewers translate internalized media messages to the real world, to the extent that fictional and real-world are perceived as similar.

However, we are not aware of studies testing the association between perceived character morality (rather than identification) and worldviews/attitudes. To the extent that individuals like and identify with characters perceived as moral (Raney, 2004, 2011; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976), and can embrace their attitudes and behaviors (Bandura, 2004; Gerbner et al., 2002), we expect that morality attributed to characters will be associated with their worldviews about pursuing individual or collective interests.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

The present study aims to test whether SDO-D and SDO-A are associated with morality attributed to characters of GoT and whether character morality, in turn, relates to worldviews about pursuing individual or collective interests. There is a lack of studies investigating morality attributions to complex characters from popular sagas. In a notable exception, Sanders and Tsay-Vogel (2016) investigated the process of moral attributions to characters in the context of the Harry Potter saga. They found that exposure to the series was associated with greater identification and in turn greater morality attributed to characters. These indirect effects however were found for the most moral character (Harry Potter), but not for other morally ambiguous (Severus Snape, Draco Malfoy) or negative characters (Voldemort). Building on these findings, our study aims to understand determinants of morality attributed to complex characters of popular sagas. In GoT, roles (in terms of who is the hero or the antagonist) are not clearly defined, therefore viewers cannot rely on preexisting schema for morality attribution (Raney, 2004). The situation is complicated by the fact that the complexity of characters, their motivations and actions make their morality especially fluctuant and ambiguous.

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In such a context, individual-difference variables can represent valid anchors to interpret the characters' intentions and behaviors and consequently to understand whether they are or are not moral. As a dependent variable, we focused on the worldview that individual or collective interests should be pursued. This variable is also strongly related to the GoT plot, where the main characters try to achieve personal interests (also in terms of favoring their group/family) or support equality principles and the society as a whole.

Based on the psychology of characters presented in the previous sections and the general plot, we selected eight main characters, representative of all the relevant families (power groups) of the series: Arya Stark, Sansa Stark, Jon Snow, Cersei Lannister, Jamie Lannister, Tyrion Lannister, Ramsay Bolton, Daenerys Targaryen. We make the following hypotheses:

H1: SDO-A refers to the tendency to approve actions against social equality or, in other words, actions for personal interests at the expense of collective interests. Therefore, it should be negatively associated with morality attributed to characters acting for the benefit of the society as a whole (Jon, Daenerys, Tyrion, but also Arya and Sansa, who express a sense of an unbiased justice although they do not explicitly fight for the benefit of the society), and positively associated with morality attributed to characters fighting for personal interests including interests for their own family (Cersei, Jamie, Ramsay).

H2: SDO-D is focused on dominance against others to achieve power. Therefore, it should be positively associated with morality attributed to characters showing harsh actions to achieve power and/or extreme violence toward subordinates (Cersei, Jamie, Ramsay, but also Daenerys and Tyrion, who believe that power is a tool to promote a fairer society but still needs to be concentrated in the hands of a deserving few); we do not expect associations with morality attributed to the other characters.

H3: character morality should be associated with worldviews about supporting individual versus collective interests, this way mediating associations of the two SDO dimensions with the dependent variable. The direction of the association of character morality with worldview (coded so that higher scores reflect a greater endorsement of the worldview defending collective interests) should be positive when the character generally acts for the collectivity and/or supports justice beliefs (Jon, Daenerys, Tyrion, Arya, Sansa), and negative when the character acts for personal/family interests (Cersei, Jamie, Ramsay).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants and Procedure

The sample is composed of 338 Italian participants (257 females, 81 males) with a mean age of 31.80 years ($SD = 10.00$). After providing informed consent, participants completed a questionnaire administered online; the link was disseminated via social networks, mainly through Game of Thrones fan pages. All participants indicated that they had seen all of the eight seasons of GoT.[1]

Measures

All measures were administered with a 5-step scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).

Social dominance orientation (SDO). SDO$_6$ (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) was used to assess participants' endorsement of inequality. The scale was used as bidimensional (see Cadamuro et al., 2021; Ho et al.,

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2015), namely, eight items expressed Antiegalitarianism (SDO-A; e.g., "We should strive to make incomes as equal as possible"; "We should increase social equality"; both reverse-scored), eight items assessed Dominance (SDO-D; e.g., "Inferior groups should stay at their place"; "To get ahead in life, it is sometimes necessary to step on groups"). Alpha were .85 and .87, respectively.[2]

GoT characters morality. Three items, adapted from items generally used in literature (for a review, Brambilla et al., 2021), were administered to measure attribution of morality for each of the selected main characters of GoT: "[character] has a strong morality," "[character] usually does the *right thing*," "All in all, [character] is a positive person." Reliabilities were acceptable: Arya (alpha = .81), Jon (alpha = .77), Sansa (alpha = .85), Cersei (alpha = .67), Tyrion (alpha = .74), Jamie (alpha = .80), Daenerys (alpha = .81), and Ramsay (alpha = .75).

Worldview. Five items were created to assess endorsement of a worldview directed at favoring collective rather than personal interests. For each item, participants rated their preference for actions aimed at personal or collective interests: "If I earned 10,000 euros a month, I would donate part of it to the poor"; "I would give up free healthcare for ending world hunger"; "Killing someone's child for the good of society would be immoral" (reverse-scored); "I'd use a significant part of my Country's GDP to fight world hunger"; "I would sacrifice something very important to me to benefit the collective" (alpha = .65). Items were coded so that higher scores indicated a stronger tendency to favor collective rather than personal interests.

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and correlations are reported in Table 1. As can be seen in the Table, participants assigned higher levels of morality to Arya, Daenerys, Jon, Jamie, Sansa, and Tyrion (means significantly above the mid-point point of the scale, $ts(337) \geq 2.13$, $ps < .05$), while Cersei and Ramsay were assigned lower levels of morality (means significantly below the mid-point point of the scale, $ts(337) \geq 44.32$, $ps < .001$).

PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2013, Model 4) was used to test hypotheses. We ran eight mediation models, one for each of the characters we considered. In each model, SDO-A and SDO-D were the independent variables, morality attribution to the character was the mediator, worldview was the dependent variable. Significance of the indirect effects was tested with bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples. As can be seen in Table 2 and Figure 1, largely supporting H1, SDO-A was negatively related to morality ascribed to Arya, Sansa, Tyrion, and Daenerys. On the other hand, providing large support for H2, SDO-D was positively associated with morality ascribed to Cersei, Jamie, Tyrion, and Daenerys.

In turn, as shown in Table 3 and Figure 1, morality attributed to Arya, Sansa, Tyrion (marginal effect), and Daenerys, was positively associated with the dependent variable. Providing substantial support for H3 (especially for SDO-A), both SDO dimensions were indirectly related to the dependent variable via character morality. Specifically, and in line with predictions, the negative association between SDO-A and worldview was mediated by reduced morality attributed to Arya, Sansa, Tyrion, and Daenerys; as predicted, SDO-D was indirectly associated with greater endorsement of the worldview via greater morality attributed to Tyrion and Daenerys (Table 4).

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TABLE 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables ($N = 338$)

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	SDO-A	–										
2	SDO-D	.40***	–									
3	Morality Arya Stark	−.19***	−.09†	–								
4	Morality Jon Snow	−.05	−.08	.24***	–							
5	Morality Sansa Stark	−.16**	−.09	.28***	.26***	–						
6	Morality Cersei Lannister	.05	.20***	.06	−.21***	.05	–					
7	Morality Jamie Lannister	.05	.20***	.06	−.06	.06	.28***	–				
8	Morality Tyrion Lannister	−.07	.12*	.17***	.14**	.23***	.07	.22***	–			
9	Morality Daenerys Targaryen	−.16**	.10†	.22***	.11*	.02	.01	.11*	.08	–		
10	Morality Ramsay Bolton	.10†	.08	.02	−.10†	−.03	.29***	.11*	.02	.05	–	
11	Worldview	−.47***	−.36***	.19***	.11*	.18***	−.14*	−.07	.09†	.14*	−.12*	–
M		1.95	1.91	3.76	4.48	3.50	1.50	3.16	4.06	3.11	1.11	3.37
SD		0.79	0.73	0.84	0.67	0.89	0.62	0.88	0.70	0.94	0.40	0.76

Note. The response scale ranged from 1 to 5 for all measures. SDO = social dominance orientation; SDO-A = SDO-Antiegalitarianism; SDO-D = SDO-Dominance. Worldview: higher scores reflect more positive attitudes toward pursuing collective rather than personal interests.
†$p < .10$; *$p \le .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p \le .001$.

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TABLE 2
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables ($N = 338$)

Independent variable	Arya Stark	Jon Snow	Sansa Stark	Cersei Lannister	Jamie Lannister	Tyrion Lannister	Daenerys Targaryen	Ramsay Bolton
				Morality				
SDO-A	−.19** (.06)	−.02 (.05)	−.16* (.07)	−.02 (.05)	−.03 (.07)	−.12* (.05)	−.27*** (.07)	.04 (.03)
SDO-D	−.03 (.07)	−.07 (.05)	−.04 (.07)	.18*** (.05)	.25***(.07)	.16** (.06)	.24** (.07)	.02 (.03)
F	6.21	1.25	4.37	7.19	7.03	5.15	9.46	2.03
R^2	.04**	.01	.03*	.04***	.04***	.03**	.05***	.01
df				(1, 335)				

Note. SDO = social dominance orientation; SDO-A = SDO-Antiegalitarianism; SDO-D = SDO-Dominance.
*$p \leq$ .05; **$p <$ .01; ***$p \leq$ .001.

TABLE 3
Multiple regressions testing the association of SDO dimensions and characters' perceived morality with worldview ($N = 338$)

	Independent variable: Morality								Independent variable: SDO	
	Arya Stark	Jon Snow	Sansa Stark	Cersei Lannister	Jamie Lannister	Tyrion Lannister	Daenerys Targaryen	Ramsay Bolton	SDO-A	SDO-D
Dependent variable										
Worldview$_{sep}$	.09* (.04)	.08 (.05)	.08* (.04)	−.09 (.06)	−.01 (.04)	.10† (.05)	.08* (.04)	−.13 (.09)	Range: −.18***/−.37***	Range: −.20***/−.24***
F_{sep}	40.24	39.25	40.07	39.28	38.13	39.75	40.11	39.08	−	-
R^2_{sep}	.27***	.26***	.26***	.26***	.26***	.26***	.27***	.26***	−	-
df_{sep}					(3, 334)					
Worldview$_{tot}$	.06 (.05)	≈.00 (.06)	.06 (.04)	−.08 (.06)	−.01 (.04)	.07 (.05)	.07† (.04)	−.11 (.10)	−.32*** (.05)	−.22*** (.06)
F_{tot}					13.50					
R^2_{tot}					.29***					
df_{tot}					(1, 335)					

Note. SDO = social dominance orientation; SDO-A = SDO-Antiegalitarianism; SDO-D = SDO-Dominance. Worldview: higher scores reflect more positive attitudes toward pursuing collective rather than personal interests. Worldview$_{sep}$: separated mediation models, one for each mediator. Worldview$_{tot}$ = mediation model including all mediators simultaneously. In the row referred to Worldview$_{sep}$, the two direct paths from SDO-A and SDO-D to the dependent variables refer to the final analyses including SDO-A and SDO-D, and each of the mediators separately (therefore, they indicate the range of betas across the eight mediation analyses).
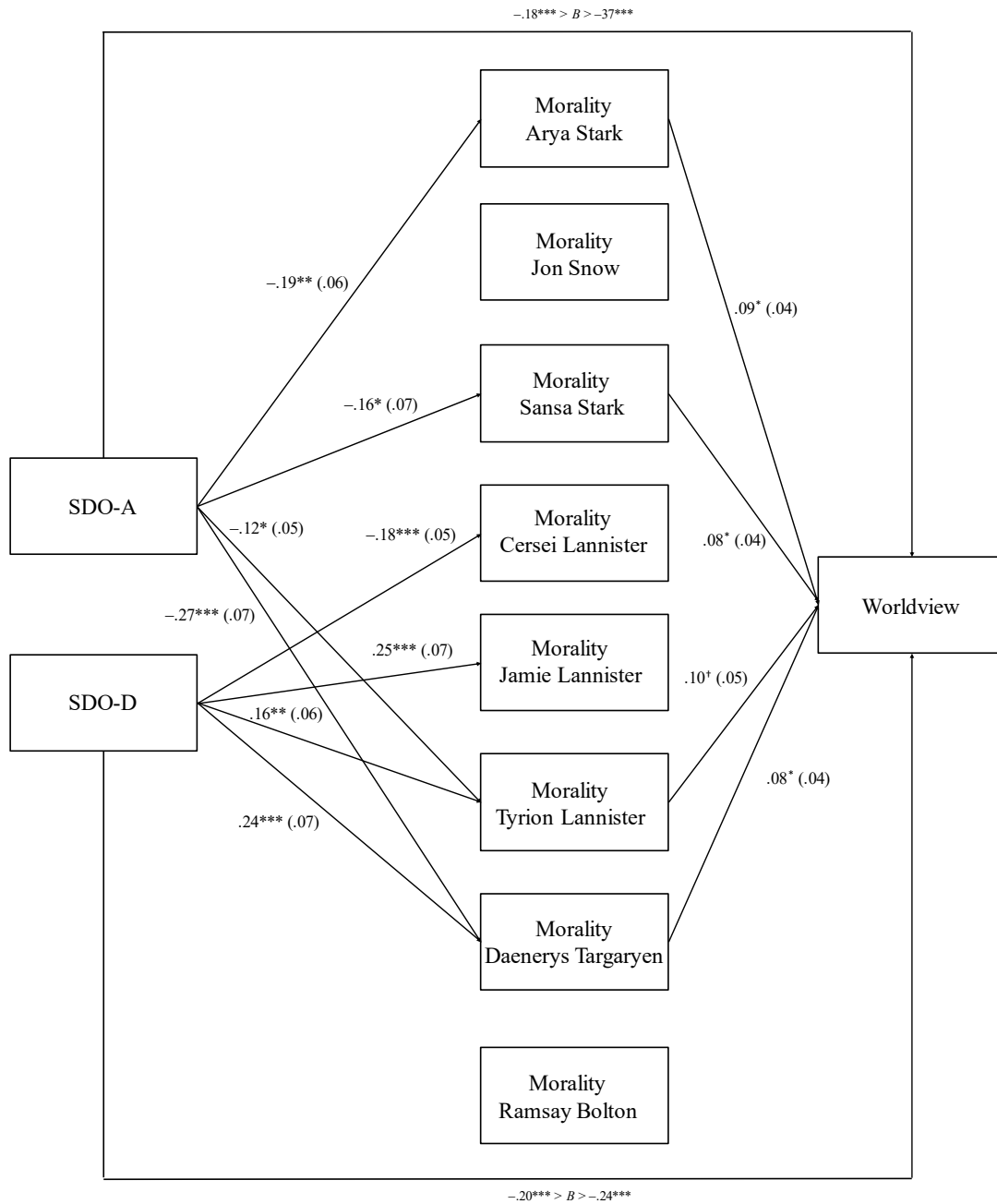† $p < .10$; * $p \leq .05$; *** $p \leq .001$.

FIGURE 1

Associations of SDO-Antiegalitarianism and SDO-Dominance with worldview via perceived characters'
morality. Unstandardized coefficients are presented (standard errors in parentheses) ($N = 338$)

Note. SDO = social dominance orientation; SDO-A = SDO-Antiegalitarianism; SDO-D = SDO-Dominance. Worldview: higher scores reflect more positive attitudes toward pursuing collective rather than personal interests. The figure has descriptive purposes and depicts findings from separate mediation models, one for each character. The two direct paths from SDO-A and SDO-D to the dependent variables refer to the final analyses including SDO-A and SDO-D, and each of the mediators separately (therefore, they indicate the range of betas across the eight mediation analyses).

[†]$p < .10$; [*]$p \leq .05$; [**]$p < .01$; [***]$p \leq .001$.

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TABLE 4
Significant indirect effects of the tested models (*N* = 338)

Predictor	Mediator	Mean bootstrap effect (*SE*)	95% CI
SDO-A	Morality Arya	−.0179 (.01)	[−.0501, −.0008]
SDO-A	Morality Sansa	−.0136 (.01)	[−.0391, −.0008]
SDO-A	Morality Tyrion	−.0122 (.01)	[−.0343, −.0008]
SDO-D	Morality Tyrion	.0161 (.01)	[.0012, .0439]
SDO-A	Morality Daenerys	−.0224 (.01)	[−.0562, −.0039]
SDO-D	Morality Daenerys	.0196 (.01)	[.0032, 0481]

Note. SDO = social dominance orientation; SDO-A = SDO-Antiegalitarianism; SDO-D = SDO-Dominance. Mean bootstrap estimates are based on 5,000 bootstrap samples.

As an additional analysis, to comparatively test whether character morality (and, if so, whose morality) had a prominent role in mediating the associations of SDO, we conducted a further mediation analysis, by simultaneously including moral attributions to the eight characters. This analysis was also run by using PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2013, Model 4). SDO-A and SDO-D were included as independent variables; the eight morality measures were included as simultaneous mediators; worldview was included as dependent variable. Results are displayed in Table 3. Results only revealed a marginal association between morality attributed to Daenerys and the dependent variable. However, indirect effects were fully significant: bootstrapping analysis confirmed that the two indirect were significant; specifically, for the path from SDO-A, mean effect = −.0196 (*SE* = .01), 95% CI [−.052, −.001]; for the path from SDO-D, mean effect = .0171 (*SE* = .01), 95% CI [.002, .045].

DISCUSSION

We conducted a study among GoT fans to test whether SDO-D and SDO-A are associated with perceived character morality and in turn worldviews directed at collective rather than personal interests. This study has important theoretical implications, as it aims to shed light on whether individual-difference variables like SDO shape moral appraisal of popular TV shows's characters, and whether these, in turn, contribute to changing individual worldviews on topics of primary societal relevance. At the practical level, the findings can shed light on the power of TV shows to influence the attitudes of hundreds of millions of viewers relevant to everyday social interactions and policies.

Results generally provided support to our hypotheses. SDO-A was generally associated negatively with characters supporting justice beliefs and/or behaving for collective rather than personal interests (H1). SDO-D was associated positively with perceived morality of most characters showing a greater thirst for power (H2). Finally, in line with H3, both SDO dimensions were indirectly associated with individuals' worldviews via perceived morality of characters: SDO-A was associated with lower support for the worldview via lower morality attributed to characters promoting justice and/or the interest for the collectivity; SDO-D was associated with greater endorsement of the worldview supporting collective interest via greater morality attributed to characters that crave power to bring about social change in favor of collectivity.

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Theoretical Implications

A main finding is that individual-difference variables relevant to the fiction considered were associated with perceptions of character morality. This finding is not trivial. Various studies rested on the assumption that even negative characters can be liked if there is a way to attribute morality to them, for instance with a process of moral disengagement (Raney, 2011) or that liking or identifying with a character provides the motivation to consider it as moral (Grizzard et al., 2020; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016). Our study shows that individuals do not have an inherent motivation to value character morality, even when characters are popular and likely appreciated by viewers. Rather, individual dispositions like SDO may contribute to determining how characters' actions and intentions are interpreted, resulting in higher or lower perceived morality.

In line with existing research (Pratto et al., 2006), the present results support the role of SDO in guiding individuals' perceptions in hierarchical contexts. They also sensibly extend current research. First, they show that SDO can be relevant to the appraisal of character morality of popular fiction. Second, they support the distinction of SDO in two dimensions: being concerned with group-based power and dominance, SDO-D was mostly related to greater perceived morality of characters taking advantage of harsh actions and methods to achieve power, and especially to those who most firmly believe that they/their family deserve dominance over the Iron Throne because of their lineage or inheritance right. But it also was associated positively with characters acting ambiguously, who despite favoring the interests of the collectivity, are convinced that only they deserve the power because are rightfully meant to (Daenerys) or more deserving to exercise it (Tyrion). In contrast, SDO-A, which expresses support for actions aimed at refusing social equality and therefore inconsistent with collective interest, was negatively associated with characters pursuing collective rather than personal interests. Such differential predictivity is especially evident for two characters: while Daenerys' perceived morality was positively associated with SDO-D, presumably because of her behavior aimed at conquering the Iron Throne at whatever cost, it was also negatively associated with SDO-A, likely because of her interest in not achieving power per se, but for a future better society; associations which emerged for Tyrion may be explained by the character's double standards, both favoring own family (especially at the beginning of the series) but also turning to supporting broader justice beliefs (in later episodes). Moreover, Tyrion declares on several occasions that power must be centralized in the hands of a select few; unlike other characters, however, his eligibility criteria are based on the ability to exercise it, rather than on lineage, which is why, in the end, he places his trust and hope in Daenerys, in open conflict with his own family.

Unexpectedly, no association was found between SDO-A and SDO-D and perceived morality of Jon Snow, a very relevant character of the series. The lack of association with SDO-D could have been determined by Jon's ambivalent relation to power within the story. The lack of association with SDO-A could instead be explained by Jon's origins as an illegitimate child, which could have made his propensity for egalitarianism less salient than that of characters in a dominant social position, such as Daenerys.

At the theoretical level, it is also interesting to note that, in partial contrast with predictions, associations emerged for SDO-A only related to characters acting for collective interests and justice, but not to characters acting for personal interests. This adds to the differential predictivity of the two SDO dimensions, and is in line with the idea that SDO-A is mainly concerned with promoting equality, rather than with supporting inequality.

Third, our results support the existence of an association between SDO and worldviews, showing that morality attributed to characters mediates SDO associations with worldviews. This finding adds to research on SDO and morality and extends it by showing that morality perceptions regarding others (in this

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case, fictional others) depend on the level of SDO. This is theoretically relevant since perceptions of morality are crucial to evaluate a social target and decide whether to approach or avoid them: our study showed that such perception of moral character are associated with individual ideological instances. Note that ironic indirect effects of SDO-D emerged for Tyrion and Daenerys, whose morality is positively predicted by SDO-D (due to the fact they crave, use, and defend power, even with violence), but in turn relates to *higher* endorsement of the worldview (because of their behavior aimed at also supporting the welfare of society as a whole in the pursuit of equality principles). We believe these effects are especially interesting, since they are due to the complex nature of the morality characterizing the motivation and actions of some characters. In this case, paradoxically, the complex nature of the two characters allows individuals high in SDO-D to perceive these two characters as moral and approve their actions (which however also point to supporting equality rather than inequality).

The fact that additional analyses revealed a prominent role of morality attributed to Daenerys may be due to the specific nature of the character. Daenerys represents a unique stand-up character who is not apologetic in her thirst for power but, differently from the other "dominant" characters, whose antiegalitarianism "goes in the expected direction" (e.g., the Lannisters), she makes it very clear that power is meant to "break the wheel" in favor of the oppressed. These peculiar characteristics make Daenerys a salient champion of pursuing collective interests, despite using violence to achieve power.

It is important to note that, while we focused on SDO dimensions, there might be other individual-difference variables that shape how individuals interpret characters' morality. As an example, right-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1998) is strongly concerned with morality violation. Therefore, it may be expected that right-wing authoritarian individuals are more inclined to make extreme evaluations of characters as possessing high or low morality. Also dispositional empathy may play a role, with the direction of the effect depending on the type of empathy implied (e.g., cognitive, affective) and the target of empathy. For instance, affective empathy toward a victim may lead to a more severe moral evaluation of the characters' actions, while cognitive empathy toward the character perpetrator may allow to be more indulgent about its morality. More broadly, several other individual difference variables (e.g., Big Five personality traits) can be involved in how individuals interpret characters' morality: future research may test them comparatively in order to isolate the most influential.

Policy Implications

Given that shows like GoT are viewed by hundreds of millions of people, they should be considered as tools by policymakers and film producers. Our society is dominated by frequent intergroup interactions and by often marked social inequalities. Although less dramatically, there is some analogy with GoT, which presents a fictional society where powerful groups compete in a zero-sum game for power, and it is not a case that individuals translate character perceptions into personally endorsed worldviews on collective versus personal interest (i.e., in a domain that is the main focus of the study). Ideally, film producers and policy makers should discuss the potential impact of shows on the population, and on helping the audience to make sense of the shows (e.g., with talk shows where experts discuss main aspects of the plot and the characters). Going even further, discussions may be directed on how to structure the show and the plot to maximally influence the audience in order to increase cooperation between individuals and groups in society. We strongly believe popular shows can maintain their audience while at the same time have (at least in part) a social purpose.

Limitations

First, data are correlational. In particular, it is entirely possible that for instance worldview mediates the effects of the different types of SDO on character morality perceptions. We decided to investigate character morality as mediator because, to the extent that engaging TV series may contribute to shape individuals' attitudes and behavior (Bandura, 2002), we were interested in the idea that individual dispositions would contribute to interpret TV series (in our case, in terms of perceived character morality), and this would be especially important in TV series where character morality is blurred. However, we acknowledge that other causal relations are also possible, and we call for longitudinal and experimental evidence. Second, other individual-difference variables, like personality traits, may also be relevant. Third, our findings are limited to GoT; future studies should replicate them with other TV series. Fourth, we did not include perceptions of own morality. Broom et al. (2021) found that individuals highly identified with GoT characters revealed greater neural overlap between the self and the characters. Assessing the alignment between perceived character's and own morality would provide direct evidence as to when and why morality attributed to characters is incorporated into the self and used as the basis for forming own attitudes.

CONCLUSION

We showed that an individual difference variable like SDO contributes to shaping the interpretation of morality of popular show characters and in turn worldviews relevant to extant society. We encourage researchers and practitioners to further investigate the effects that popular shows can have on everyday life, to understand how to design shows that promote social equality and cooperation.

FUNDINGS

NOTES

1. Study data available at the following link:
   https://osf.io/qh479/?view_only=2c021b63e7064f6a9386bf6221a551ab
2. A confirmatory factor analysis showed that the bifactorial solution adequately fitted to the data, $\chi^2(94) = 213.66$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .06; CFI = .95; TLI = .94; SRMR = .07; AIC = 13492.30; BIC = 13714.03. In addition, the two factors solution presented a better adaptation to the data, along with smaller AIC and BIC indexes, compared to the one-factor model, $\chi^2(104) = 930.60$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .15; CFI = .67; TLI = .62; SRMR = .12; AIC = 14189.24; BIC = 14372.74.

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