

The Concept of 'Villain Characters' Based on Readers' Point of View: A Cognitive Linguistics Study

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Abstract

This study investigates how villain characters are conceptualized by readers through metaphorical expressions found in online reading platforms. Employing a descriptive qualitative design within a cognitive linguistics framework, the data consist of reader comments containing metaphorical language collected from Webtoon and Kakaopage. A total of 60 comments were purposively selected from three popular stories, focusing exclusively on sentences that contain metaphorical expressions referring to villain characters. The data were analyzed using Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Blending Theory. The findings reveal that readers conceptualize villain characters through multiple source domains, including animals, non-living objects, daydreamers, supernatural beings, and plants. Among these, structural metaphors are the most frequently employed, indicating a systematic mapping between concrete source domains and abstract character traits. The analysis further demonstrates that these metaphorical constructions are influenced by factors such as physical appearance, behavioral patterns, narrative roles, and personality traits of the characters. Through blending processes, readers integrate these features to construct coherent mental representations of villains. This study contributes to cognitive linguistics by extending the application of metaphor and blending theories to user-generated discourse in digital reading environments. It highlights how readers actively participate in meaning-making by creatively conceptualizing fictional characters through everyday experiences and culturally grounded knowledge.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor; villains; blending; cognitive Linguistics

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Introduction

Language functions as a fundamental tool for constructing ideas, conveying information, and facilitating communication (Li et al., 2023). One important mechanism through which meaning is constructed is metaphor. As argued by (Lakoff et al., 1980) metaphor is not

merely a linguistic device but a conceptual system that shapes human thought and action. This perspective suggests that metaphor is deeply embedded in everyday communication, including informal contexts such as social media interactions.

With the rapid development of digital technology, online reading platforms such as Webtoon and Kakaopage have become spaces where readers not only consume narratives but also actively express their interpretations. In these interactive environments, readers frequently employ metaphorical language to describe characters and events. Such expressions provide valuable insights into how readers conceptualize fictional entities, particularly villain characters, who often attract significant attention in narrative discourse.

This study examines how readers conceptualize fictional characters, with a particular focus on villain characters. Observations of comment sections in online reading applications indicate that readers frequently express explicit evaluations of various characters, including protagonists, antagonists, and supporting figures. Among these, villain characters appear to attract a particularly high level of attention, as evidenced by the frequency and intensity of reader responses. Furthermore, the conceptualizations of villains expressed in these comments are notably diverse, reflecting a range of interpretive perspectives. In light of this phenomenon, the present study aims to analyze how villain characters are conceptualized by readers through the lens of cognitive linguistics.

The concept of villainy has been widely examined across disciplines, particularly in relation to character construction in literary and audiovisual texts. One major line of research focuses on the psychological and narrative construction of villains. For example, (Alqaryouti & Sadeq, 2016) analyze villainy in Shakespeare's *Othello*, highlighting how motivations such as jealousy, anger, and revenge shape Iago's destructive actions. Similarly, (Khan & Khan, 2023) reinterpret Iago as a tragic figure, emphasizing internal conflict and psychological complexity rather than purely moral deviance. Extending this perspective to contemporary media, (Schubert, 2017) investigates the linguistic construction of antiheroes in television series, demonstrating how metaphor and register variation contribute to morally ambiguous character portrayals. In a similar vein (Linares-Barrones & Martínez-García, 2025)

explore the deconstruction of villain archetypes in *Once Upon a Time*, showing how modern narratives challenge traditional binary oppositions between good and evil. Meanwhile, (Maržić, 2019) examines the linguistic and visual construction of villains in Disney films, revealing how features such as accent, language use, and representation contribute to the formation of a recognizable villainous identity. Taken together, these studies highlight that villainy is not a fixed category but a dynamic construct shaped by narrative, linguistic, and psychological factors.

Another important strand of research concerns the role of metaphor in meaning construction across discourse contexts. (Xiaqing, 2017) demonstrates that metaphor in advertising reflects creative conceptual thinking and facilitates audience interpretation, while (Hardiyanti, 2019) shows that structural metaphors dominate in social media discourse, particularly in Instagram captions. More recent studies further illustrate the adaptability of metaphor analysis across domains. (Jamal & Zhang, 2025), for instance, apply Conceptual Blending Theory within a critical metaphor analysis of political discourse, demonstrating how blending processes contribute to ideological meaning construction.

Similarly, (Jiang & Jiménez, 2024) employ Critical Metaphor Analysis to examine money metaphors in Chinese comic books, revealing how metaphor encodes cultural values and socio-economic perspectives. In literary studies, Nurhaliza & Wibowo (2025) analyze ontological metaphors in *The Secret Garden*, showing how abstract emotional experiences are conceptualized through concrete entities, while (Dũ & Uyên, 2024) explore conceptual metaphors related to the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*, illustrating how metaphor structures complex cultural ideals. Complementing these perspectives, (Wnuk & Ito, 2021) provide a cross-cultural analysis of spatial metaphors of affect, demonstrating that metaphorical conceptualizations are shaped by cultural and embodied experiences. This finding reinforces the view that metaphor is not universal but contextually grounded, which is particularly relevant for analyzing reader-generated discourse in specific cultural settings.

A further relevant perspective is provided by research on multimodality and cognitive integration. (Hart & Marmol Queralto, 2021) propose a cognitive linguistic approach to language-image relations, arguing that meaning in multimodal texts emerges through the interaction between linguistic and visual elements. Similarly, (Oji, 2019) examines conceptual blending patterns in Nigerian television talk shows, demonstrating how speakers dynamically integrate multiple mental spaces to construct meaning in discourse. These studies highlight the importance of blending processes in real-time meaning construction, supporting the analytical framework adopted in the present study.

Despite these extensive contributions, existing studies predominantly focus on how meanings, characters, or ideologies are constructed within texts or media, rather than how they are interpreted and reconstructed by audiences. Moreover, while previous research has applied Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Critical Metaphor Analysis, or Blending Theory in various contexts, these approaches are rarely integrated to examine user-generated discourse in participatory digital environments.

The present study addresses these gaps by investigating how readers conceptualize villain characters through metaphorical expressions in online reading platforms such as Webtoon and Kakaopage. By focusing on reader-generated comments, this study highlights the active role of audiences in meaning-making processes and extends the application of cognitive linguistics to digital discourse. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research question: How are villain characters conceptualized by readers through metaphorical expressions in online reading platforms?

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach within the framework of cognitive linguistics. Cognitive linguistics is particularly suitable for analyzing metaphor because it views language as a reflection of human conceptualization and mental processes (Lakoff et al., 1980); (Turner & Gilles, 2002). Since this study focuses on how

readers conceptualize villain characters through metaphorical expressions, this approach enables a deeper understanding of the relationship between language, cognition, and meaning construction.

The data consist of 60 reader comments containing metaphorical expressions related to villain characters. These comments were collected from three selected stories on Webtoon and Kakaopage, chosen based on their popularity and high level of reader interaction. The data selection was conducted using purposive sampling, where only comments that explicitly contain metaphorical language referring to villain characters were included. Comments without metaphorical expressions were excluded from the analysis.

Data collection was carried out through non-participant observation using a note-taking technique (Sudaryanto, 2015). The researcher manually collected the data by reading comment sections, identifying relevant entries, and recording them in a data sheet. In addition, screenshots were taken to ensure data accuracy and to preserve the original context of the comments. The note-taking method allows for systematic documentation of naturally occurring language while maintaining authenticity. Since the data were originally in Indonesian, they were translated into English with careful attention to preserving the original meaning, nuance, and conceptual mappings, which are central to the analysis.

Data analysis proceeded in several steps. Each comment was first read to identify metaphorical expressions referring to villain characters. Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory, each metaphor was analyzed to determine the source domain (familiar concept, such as an animal or object) and the target domain (the villain character). For instance, a villain described as a "snake" was interpreted with *snake* as the source domain, highlighting traits such as cunning or danger. Metaphors were then grouped thematically to reveal shared conceptual patterns and dominant conceptualizations. Blending Theory was applied in parallel to examine how these domains integrate in readers' minds, illustrating how meaning is dynamically constructed through metaphorical mapping.

The analysis emphasized interpretive insights into cultural associations, nuanced traits, and readers' mental representations, providing a comprehensive understanding of how villain characters are conceptualized.

Results and Discussion

As stated by (Nirmala, 2014), metaphorical expressions reflect a conceptualization process in which one concept is understood in terms of another. Building on this perspective, the present study examines how villain characters are conceptualized by readers through metaphorical expressions found in the comment sections of online reading platforms, namely Webtoon and Kakaopage. The analysis reveals that readers construct a range of conceptualizations of villain characters, drawing on diverse source domains to interpret and evaluate them. The following sections provide a detailed discussion of these conceptual patterns, supported by representative data excerpts.

1. The concept of villain characters as animals

From the data analysis, it is found that readers often conceptualize villain characters as animals, as can be seen in the data below.

Data 1: - *Ular ijo baju ga ganti-ganti lagi... Dasar ular ijo.*

'That **green snake** never changes her clothes... such a snake.'

...lo gak tau apa si *ular ijo* nyebar2 rahasia luu. Masih aja dibela2...

'You don't even know that **the green snake** has spread your secret, but you still defend her...'

The data indicate that readers frequently conceptualize villain characters through animal-related metaphors. One prominent example is the expression *ular ijo* ("green snake"), which is used to refer to a villainous female character. This expression constitutes a metaphorical mapping that can be formulated as *VILLAINNESS IS A SNAKE*, where *SNAKE* functions as the source domain and *VILLAINNESS* as the target domain. Within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this mapping reflects a systematic transfer of

attributes from the animal domain to the characterization of the villain.

From the perspective of Blending Theory, the meaning construction involves two input spaces: one representing the villainess and the other representing the snake. In the narrative, the villainess, Irene, is portrayed as a manipulative and deceptive character who employs various underhanded strategies to harm the protagonist. She is also linguistically strategic, using persuasive and misleading language to deceive others. These traits correspond to culturally salient attributes associated with snakes, which are commonly perceived as dangerous, cunning, and harmful due to their venom (Loar et al., 2025). The notion of "slickness" attributed to snakes metaphorically aligns with Irene's deceptive and elusive behavior, while the presence of venom parallels her ability to inflict harm through language and manipulation.

Thus, the metaphorical association between the villainess and the snake is grounded in both behavioral and symbolic similarities, reinforcing the conceptualization of the character as a "snake." Furthermore, the visual cue of the character's green clothing reinforces this mapping, motivating the specific expression *ular ijo*. This example illustrates how readers integrate behavioral, linguistic, and visual information to construct metaphorical interpretations.

Data 2: *memang harus ada cacing biru dulu biar dua orang ini maju*

There really has to be a '**blue worm**' first for these two to progress...'

The data above are drawn from reader comments on the comic *Pura-pura Cinta*, in which the expression *cacing biru* ("blue worm") is used to refer to a villainous female character. This expression can be classified as a metaphorical construction, as it conceptualizes the villainess through another domain. Accordingly, the underlying conceptual metaphor can be formulated as *VILLAINNESS IS A WORM*, where *WORM* functions as the source domain and *VILLAINNESS* as the target domain. From the perspective of Blending Theory, this metaphor involves the integration of two input spaces: the behavioral characteristics of the villainess

and those associated with worms. In the narrative, the villainess is portrayed as persistently interfering with the protagonist and continuously seeking the attention of the male lead character. These behaviors parallel the culturally perceived characteristics of worms, which are often associated with constant movement or wriggling. Through the blending process, these shared attributes are projected into the blended space, resulting in a conceptualization in which the villainess is understood in terms of a worm. This mapping is therefore motivated by perceived behavioral similarities between the two domains.

Data 3: - *...kita nggak ngomongin tentang babi yg ngerencanain segitunya cuma buat gelar kah?*

'... Can we talk about a **pig** who has planned everything just for a title?

-*Disini ribet yak dah ada uler berbisa ratu geblek sekarang ada babi lagi ...*

'This story is complicated, right? There are already vipers, a stupid queen, and now there is a **pig**...'

In the data above, *babi* "pig" is used to conceptualize villain characters. If "snake" and "worm" is used to refer to villainess character, "pig" is used for villain characters. Based on the sample, it can be made a metaphorical expression VILLAIN IS PIG where PIG is the source domain and VILLAIN is the target domain. By using blending theory, the relations between villain characters and pig can be revealed. In the story, villain characters are drawn as fat and short men and they always use dirty tricks to disturb the main characters' life. These traits are similar to pig in which a pig is often described as fat animal and live in dirty places. This concept can be seen in conceptual blending as seen in figure 1.

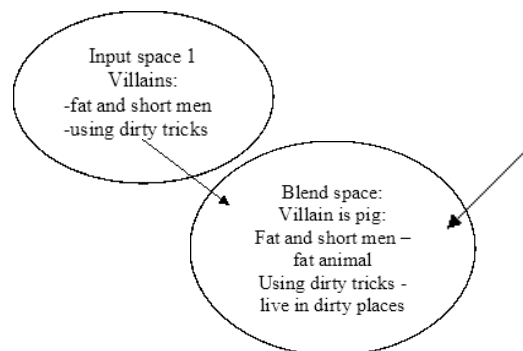


Figure 1. Conceptual blending diagram

Based on the diagram above, villain characters are conceptualized in terms of pigs due to perceived similarities in both physical characteristics and behavioral traits. Specifically, attributes such as body shape and associations with undesirable behavior are mapped from the source domain PIG onto the target domain VILLAIN. Drawing on the three data examples presented, it can be inferred that both villain and villainess characters are frequently conceptualized as animals. This pattern suggests that readers rely on shared behavioral tendencies, physical features, and culturally embedded traits to construct metaphorical representations of villainy.

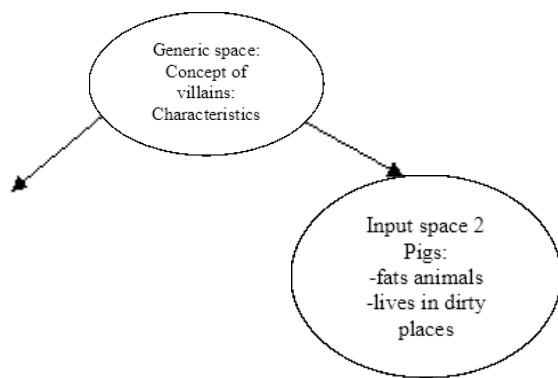
2. The concept of villain characters as non-living things

In addition to conceptualizing villain characters as animals, the data also indicate that readers frequently conceptualize such characters in terms of non-living objects. The following examples illustrate this pattern.

Data 4: -*ati-ati count, nona Cailon sedang datang untuk mengempeskan anda.*

'Be careful count, ms. Cailon is coming to **deflate** you.'

Based on the data, the term *mengempeskan* ("deflate") can be categorized as a metaphorical expression, as it is used in relation to the villain character. This expression suggests an underlying conceptualization in which the villain is understood in terms of a balloon, leading to the metaphorical mapping VILLAIN IS A BALLOON, where BALLOON functions as the source domain and VILLAIN as the target domain. Within the narrative, the villain is depicted as a corpulent older man, and this



physical characterization motivates the metaphorical association. From the perspective of Blending Theory, the relationship between the villain and the balloon emerges through the integration of two input spaces: the physical attributes of the villain (e.g., roundness and size) and the shape-related properties of a balloon (e.g., inflated form and capacity to deflate). These shared features are projected into the blended space, resulting in a conceptualization in which the villain is understood in terms of a balloon.

In addition to this example, readers employ various other expressions to conceptualize villain characters with similar physical traits, particularly those associated with a large or rounded body shape, as illustrated in the following data excerpts.

Data 5: a)...*udah jelek, gendut, cebol pula, otaknya juga ikut-ikutan hancur, gue tendang loe.*

a) "...already unattractive, overweight, and short, with a similarly impaired mind—I would **kick you**."

b). *aduh gentong air kamu itu cari masalah ya!*

b). "Ugh, you **water barrel**, are you looking for trouble?!"

The word *tendang* ("kick") in sentence (a) can be categorized as a metaphorical expression, as it implies a conceptual association beyond its literal meaning. Specifically, the act of "kicking" evokes the image of a ball, an object that is conventionally associated with being kicked. This association suggests an underlying conceptualization in which the villain character is understood in terms of a ball, giving rise to the metaphorical mapping VILLAIN IS A BALL. Similarly, the expression *gentong air* ("water barrel") in sentence (b) also constitutes a metaphorical construction, as it is used to refer to the villain character. Within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, both *BALL* and *WATER BARREL* function as source domains, while *VILLAIN* serves as the target domain.

From the perspective of Blending Theory, the relationship between the villain and these objects can be explained through the integration of two input spaces: the physical characteristics of the villain and the salient

properties of the objects. In the narrative, the villains are depicted as short and corpulent men, whose body shapes resemble the roundness and volume associated with a ball and a water barrel. These shared features are selectively projected into the blended space, resulting in a conceptualization in which the villains are understood in terms of these objects. Thus, the metaphorical mapping is primarily motivated by perceived physical similarity. In addition to these examples, the data also reveal that readers employ a range of other metaphorical expressions to conceptualize villain characters, as illustrated in the following excerpts.

Data 6: *Wah pengen wa santet tuh ban serep!*

"Wow, that '**spare tire**' really makes me want to put a curse on him!"

The expression *ban serep* ("spare tire") is used by readers to refer to a supporting villain character and can therefore be categorized as a metaphorical construction. This usage gives rise to the conceptual metaphor SUPPORTING VILLAIN IS A SPARE TIRE, in which *SPARE TIRE* functions as the source domain and *SUPPORTING VILLAIN* as the target domain. Within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this mapping is grounded in functional correspondence rather than physical similarity. From the perspective of Blending Theory, the relationship between the two domains can be explained through the integration of two input spaces: the narrative role of the supporting villain and the functional properties of a spare tire.

In the narrative, supporting villains typically occupy a secondary role, serving to assist or reinforce the actions of the primary antagonist. Similarly, a spare tire functions as an auxiliary or backup component, used only when needed and not as the primary element. These shared functional attributes are selectively projected into the blended space, resulting in a coherent conceptualization in which the supporting villain is understood in terms of a spare tire. This example illustrates that metaphorical conceptualization in reader discourse is not limited to physical resemblance but also extends to functional and relational similarities.

3. The concept of villain characters as

daydreamers

The data indicate that some readers conceptualize villain characters as daydreamers, as illustrated in the following example.

Data 7: *Si halu dari komik ini muncul juga. Soalnya si halu 1 lagi dari komik tetangga lagi hiatus.*

“The ‘**daydreamer**’ from this comic appears as well, as the other ‘daydreamer’ from a different comic is currently on hiatus.”

The conceptualization of the villainess as a “daydreamer” can also be interpreted from a cross-cultural perspective on metaphor. Previous studies have demonstrated that metaphorical mappings are not entirely universal but are shaped by cultural and contextual factors, particularly in the domain of affect and cognition (e.g. (Wnuk & Ito, 2021)). In this case, the Indonesian expression *si halu* carries culturally specific connotations that extend beyond the literal meaning of “daydreamer,” often referring to individuals who are perceived as delusional or detached from reality in a socially inappropriate way. This culturally embedded meaning influences how readers evaluate the villainess, framing her not only as irrational but also as socially deviant in her perceptions and judgments.

From a cognitive linguistic perspective, this suggests that the mapping VILLAINESS IS A DAYDREAMER is grounded in culturally shared models of acceptable reasoning and social behavior. Furthermore, the use of such expressions in online discourse highlights how metaphor functions as a tool for collective evaluation, allowing readers to align their interpretations through culturally recognizable labels. Therefore, this finding supports the view that metaphorical conceptualization in reader-generated discourse is both cognitively motivated and culturally situated, reinforcing the importance of considering cross-cultural variation in the analysis of metaphor.

4. The concept of villains as ghosts/supernatural beings

The data further reveal that readers frequently conceptualize villain characters through

references to supernatural beings, as illustrated in the examples below.

Data 8: - *Pantesan katanya ga boleh ngeliat ke belakang, eh ternyata ada kunti nyasar.*

“No wonder people say you shouldn’t look back—there’s apparently a ‘kunti’ (**female ghost**) wandering behind.”

-gua kira setan... eh ternyata dedemit.

“I thought it was a ghost... but it turns out to be a ‘dedemit’ (**a type of spirit**).”

The expressions *kunti* and *dedemit* are used by readers to refer to a villainous female character in the comic *Flawless*. Both terms denote types of supernatural beings in Indonesian cultural contexts and thus function as metaphorical labels. These usages give rise to the conceptual metaphor VILLAINESS IS A SUPERNATURAL BEING, in which SUPERNATURAL BEING serves as the source domain and VILLAINESS as the target domain. From the perspective of Blending Theory, the relationship between the two domains can be explained through the integration of two input spaces: the culturally shared characteristics of supernatural beings and the narrative portrayal of the villainess. Supernatural beings such as *kunti* and *dedemit* are typically associated with attributes such as fearfulness, sudden appearance, and the ability to evoke anxiety in others.

In the narrative, the villainess is depicted as suddenly appearing behind the main characters while carrying a weapon and displaying a threatening expression. These features closely align with culturally salient representations of supernatural entities. Through the blending process, these shared attributes are selectively projected into the blended space, resulting in a conceptualization in which the villainess is understood in terms of a supernatural being. This mapping is therefore motivated by both behavioral and perceptual similarities, as well as by culturally grounded interpretations of fear and threat.

5. The concept of villain characters as non-living things

The final category identified in the data analysis is the conceptualization of villains as

plants, as illustrated in the following data examples.

Data 9: - *kurang puas sama karmanya cabe merah tapi yauda lah ya nikmati aja.*

“I’m not quite satisfied with the karma received by the ‘**red chili**,’ but I’ll just accept it.”

- *ketika terong ungu dan cabe ijo bertemu jadilah sambel terong yang ga enak.*

“When the ‘**purple eggplant**’ and the ‘**green chili**’ come together, it results in an unpleasant eggplant dish.”

Based on the data, the expressions *cabe merah* (“red chili”), *terong ungu* (“purple eggplant”), and *cabe ijo* (“green chili”) are used by readers to refer to villain characters and can therefore be categorized as metaphorical expressions. These usages give rise to the conceptual metaphor VILLAINS ARE PLANTS, in which *PLANTS* function as the source domain and *VILLAINS* as the target domain. To explain the relationship between the two domains, it is necessary to consider the visual representation of the characters within the narrative. In the story, the three villain characters are depicted with distinct hair colors—red, purple, and green—which correspond directly to the colors associated with chili and eggplant. From the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this mapping is motivated by perceptual similarity, particularly color correspondence. Furthermore, from a cognitive standpoint, such associations are grounded in everyday experience, as red and green are commonly associated with chili, while purple is typically associated with eggplant.

From the perspective of Blending Theory, the input spaces consist of the visual features of the villain characters (hair color) and the salient attributes of the plants (color and familiarity). These elements are selectively projected into the blended space, resulting in a conceptualization in which the villains are understood in terms of plants. This process reflects how readers draw upon culturally familiar and perceptually salient categories to interpret and label characters. Thus, the metaphorical mapping is primarily motivated by visual similarity and reinforced by everyday

cognitive associations, leading to the conceptualization of villains as plants.

Overall, the findings of this study both align with and extend previous research on metaphor and character representation. Consistent with earlier studies, the results confirm that metaphor functions as a central cognitive mechanism for structuring meaning and evaluation, as seen in the use of animal, object, and supernatural domains to conceptualize abstract social roles. However, unlike prior research, which has largely focused on metaphor use within literary texts, films, or institutional discourse, the present study demonstrates how metaphor operates in reader-generated discourse within digital environments.

In particular, the findings reveal that readers actively construct and negotiate character meanings through culturally grounded and context-specific metaphors, such as *si halu*, *kunti*, and *ban serep*, which may not be fully captured in conventional metaphor frameworks. Furthermore, by integrating Conceptual Metaphor Theory with Blending Theory, this study provides a more comprehensive account of both systematic domain mappings and dynamic meaning construction processes. Thus, this research contributes to the field by highlighting the role of audience interpretation in metaphorical conceptualization and by extending cognitive linguistic analysis to participatory, digitally mediated contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that readers actively employ metaphorical expressions to conceptualize and evaluate villain characters, drawing on a wide range of source domains, including animals, objects, supernatural beings, plants, and cognitive categories. These findings highlight the dynamic role of metaphor not only as a linguistic device but also as a cognitive and social tool through which audiences interpret and negotiate meaning in digital discourse. The integration of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Blending Theory further reveals that such conceptualizations are shaped by both systematic domain mappings and

context-sensitive processes of meaning construction, often influenced by culturally embedded knowledge and shared experiences. Theoretically, this study contributes to cognitive linguistics by extending metaphor analysis beyond authored texts to reader-generated discourse, thereby emphasizing the participatory nature of meaning-making in contemporary media environments. Practically, the findings offer insights into how audience perceptions of characters are constructed and circulated, which may be relevant for studies in digital communication, media discourse, and audience reception. Nevertheless, this study is limited to a specific set of online platforms and a relatively small dataset. Future research could expand the scope by incorporating larger and more diverse datasets, exploring cross-linguistic or cross-cultural comparisons, and examining the interaction between textual and visual elements in multimodal contexts. Such investigations would further enrich our understanding of how metaphor operates across different communicative settings and cultural frameworks.

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