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on Technological Ecosystems
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Entertainment-Education Strategies to Defuse Anti-Immigration Rumors Through Fiction. The Roles of Protagonist's Attitudes and Modern Racism

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Abstract. This dissertation, based on the research on narrative persuasion, the education-entertainment strategy, and the Inspiring media model, will contrast the indirect effect of the protagonist's attitude towards immigration on the attitudes towards immigration through the variables of identification with the protagonist, narrative transportation, cognitive elaboration, mixed emotions, and insight with modern racism acting as a moderating variable in a parallel serial moderated mediation model. It will analyze the effect of the protagonist's attitude towards immigration in deactivating an anti-immigrant rumor, being one of the protagonists a transitional character, i.e. a character who changes their perspective over the course of the narrative. Three online experiments using Qualtrics will be conducted to empirically test the proposed theoretical model. The first one, also part of the TRANCHAR project, will have a 3×3 factorial design and will use a sample of 900 participants (Qualtrics panelists) and nine audiovisual fictional contents that will differ in 3 types of protagonists' attitudes towards immigration (ambivalent, positive, and control group) and 3 types of anti-immigrant rumors ("immigration increases citizens' insecurity", "immigrants take advantage of social aid", and "immigrants steal our jobs"). Experiments 2 and 3 will have similar characteristics, but will be conducted with written and auditory narratives, respectively. It is expected that this work will shed light on the psychological process of persuasion and its underlying mechanisms.

Keywords: Narrative Persuasion · Education-Entertainment · Inspiring Media Model · Transitional Character · Insight

1 Context and Motivation

The flow of migrants to Spain, with a positive net increase in the last 10 years and a peak of more than 666,000 migrants in 2019 [1] complements the depopulation processes experienced by some provinces over the past 40 years [2] and the decline in birth rates over the last 7 years [3]. However, this social transformation, which brings cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity to Spanish society, also generates pressures and increases the complexity of interactions between migrants (or the outgroup) and natives (or the ingroup), who experience anxiety and uncertainty [4, 5].

In terms of communication, these changes have been accompanied by an anti-immigrant discourse as a vehicle of fear [6–8], which far-right movements have incorporated into their rhetoric and political campaigns [9–11]. This narrative, which gives a negative focus to migrant dynamics, not only dehumanizes them [12, 13], but can also lead to crimes that manifest latent racism or xenophobia in Spanish society [14], accounting for 35.46% of all hate crimes committed in Spain in 2021 [15]. In response, contact between people from different social groups has been established as a tool to reduce intergroup prejudice [16–20], with a media-based version in mediated intergroup contact [21], while empathy has been proposed as an alternative to improve relations and attitudes between social groups [22].

It is worth noting that the research proposed in this doctoral thesis, under the Doctoral Programme Education in the Knowledge Society at University of Salamanca, is associated with the activities encompassed in the project “Transitional characters in entertainment-education narratives designed to reduce prejudice against immigrants: Attributes, boundary conditions and explanatory mechanisms” (TRANCHAR), which aims to study the characteristics of audiovisual fictional education-entertainment narratives that may be useful in efforts to reduce anti-immigrant attitudes. The TRANCHAR project, financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (PID2021-122655NB-I00), is directed by Professor Juan José Igartua together with members of the Observatorio de Contenidos Audiovisuales (OCA), a recognized research group at the University of Salamanca, and a Consolidated Research Unit (UIC 313) of Castilla y León. Thus, this doctoral thesis integrates into a larger effort to study the mediating and moderating mechanisms that serve to dismantle anti-immigrant attitudes through audiovisual fiction content using characters in transition.

The paper begins with the State-Of-The-Art section, which reviews current knowledge and the theoretical areas that support it. The Research Objectives and Hypothesis sections outline the objectives of the study and the central hypothesis, and the Methodology section details the research design and methods used. The Results section presents the way the data from the proposed model will be analyzed. The Dissertation Status updates the progress of the work, while the Expected Contributions highlights the expected impact. The dissertation ends with a conclusion that summarizes the main ideas and their implications.

2 State-of-the-Art

This doctoral thesis takes an innovative approach and relies on a strategy supported by three theoretical domains: First, narrative persuasion, as a field of study, or the power of narratives to change the audience’s perception [6, 13, 23–26], whose small but significant effect in beliefs ($r = .17$), attitudes ($r = .19$), intentions ($r = .17$) and behaviors ($r = .23$) has been found in consistently in 20 years of research [27]. For the purposes of this research, it’s also worth noticing that the impact of narrative persuasion on reducing prejudice has been studied and confirmed [28].

Second, the education-entertainment communication strategy, understood as the intentional incorporation of educational elements in the creation, production, and distribution of entertainment content to generate favorable attitudes, change social norms,

and transform behaviors [29–31], which can be more effective than overtly persuasive messages [32]. This strategy has presented an effect on beliefs, attitudes, behavioral intentions and behaviors, even though it is rarely large [33].

Third, the inspiring media model, which refers to eudaimonic narratives or media messages that create a transcendent experience or raise awareness of concerns or issues beyond the individual [24, 34], This blend of perspectives is virtuous because it incorporates the proven effectiveness of the education-entertainment strategy in reducing prejudice [35], and advances character development theory by studying characters in transition whose attitudes and behaviors evolve throughout the plot based on the underlying messages of the narrative [5].

3 Research Objectives

This doctoral thesis employs a novel strategy supported by research on narrative persuasion [6,13,23,], the education-entertainment strategy [31], and the inspiring media model [34], to address the deactivation of negative rumors about immigration by working with transitional characters, i.e., characters who change their life or perspective over the course of the narrative [29]. To accomplish this, three experimental studies will be conducted with the following research objectives:

1. Analyze the effect of the protagonist's attitude towards immigration (ambivalent versus positive attitude) in deactivating an anti-immigrant rumor, as a feature related to the configuration of protagonists in education-entertainment narratives aimed at reducing prejudice towards migrants.
2. Analyze the effect of modern racism as a moderating variable that may condition the effect of the main character's features in the education-entertainment message to activate identification and narrative transportation as reception processes.
3. Propose and empirically test a theoretical model on the effect of variables related to the configuration of the protagonist in the education-entertainment fiction narrative developed to reduce prejudice towards migrants, including as mediating mechanisms identification with the protagonist, narrative transportation, mixed emotions, cognitive elaboration, and insight, with modern racism as a moderating condition.

4 Hypothesis

With these goals in mind, four hypotheses will be tested in three experimental studies in which the type of stimulus (i.e., audiovisual content, written narrative, and auditory narrative) is varied. The four research hypotheses are:

H1: The message featuring a protagonist who is a character in transition (ambivalent attitude toward immigration) will produce greater identification (H1a) and greater narrative transportation (H1b) than a message featuring a protagonist with a consistently positive attitude toward immigration, but these effects will manifest only among people with high levels of modern racism.

Identification, understood as the emotional and cognitive empathy that allows the audience to abandon their identity and adopt the perspective of the fictional character [36], is proposed as a mediating variable. Another variable considered in the analyses

is narrative transportation, which is defined as the mixture of attention, images, and feelings focused on the narration of a story [37].

H2: Identification (H2a) and narrative transportation (H2b) will be associated with greater cognitive elaboration and a greater experience of mixed emotions.

Thus, it is proposed that identification and narrative transportation will have an indirect effect on attitudes toward immigration through cognitive elaboration [36, 38, 39], and mixed emotions [40].

H3: Cognitive elaboration (H3a) and the experience of mixed emotions (H3b) will be associated with a greater manifestation of insight.

The mediation process will conclude with psychological insight or the “aha!” moment as an internal illumination process that provokes attitudinal change [41, 42].

H4: Compared to exposure to a message with a protagonist who has a consistently positive attitude toward immigration, exposure to a message with a protagonist who is a character in transition will have an indirect effect on attitudes toward immigration, explained by the activation of a serial mediation process including identification with the protagonist, narrative transportation (primary mediators), cognitive elaboration and the experience of mixed emotions (secondary mediators), and the manifestation of a psychological insight response (tertiary mediator), but this indirect effect will manifest only among people with high levels of modern racism.

Thus, the model of parallel serial moderated mediation based on the inspiring media model [34] is presented below (Fig. 1).

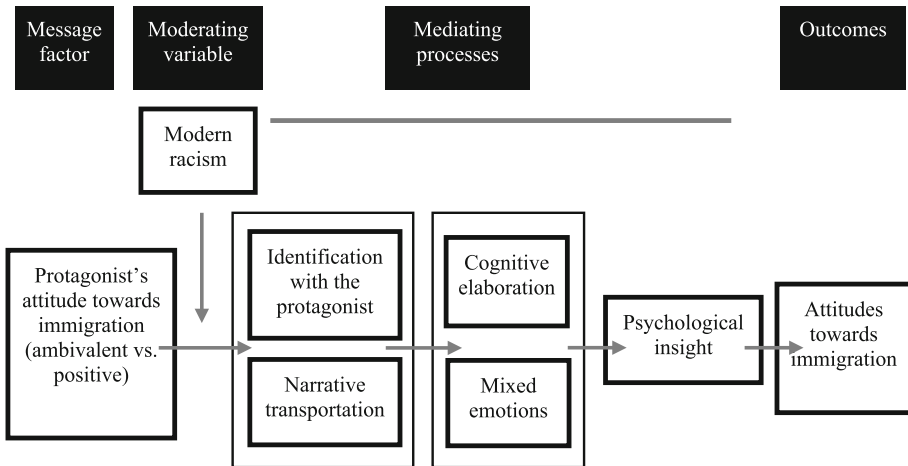


Fig. 1. Parallel serial moderated mediation model.

5 Methodology

To carry out this project, three online experiments will be conducted using Qualtrics, which will be configured in a similar way. The first study will be conducted within the framework of the TRANCHAR project and is related to the effect of the protagonist's

attitude towards immigration to deactivate an anti-immigrant rumor. Study 1 will have a 3x3 factorial design, i.e., 2 types of protagonist's attitude towards immigration (ambivalent, positive and control) and 3 types of anti-immigrant rumor ("immigration increases citizen insecurity", "immigrants take advantage of social aid" and "immigrants steal our jobs"). A sample of 900 participants (Qualtrics panelists) will be used and a pilot study will be conducted with a sample of 200 participants to test the manipulation of the fictional content of education-entertainment. The first independent variable, the protagonist's attitude towards immigration, is the one with which the research hypotheses have been raised. The second variable aims to work with a "sample of messages" in order to increase the external validity of the experiment [43, 44].

Nine audiovisual fictional entertainment-education contents with the characteristics of a narrative proper to the inspiring media model will be produced within the framework of the TRANCHAR project and will be used in this study for their ability to stimulate attitude change processes by activating the process of insight. The only difference between the nine stories will be the type of anti-immigrant rumor and the protagonist's attitude towards immigration.

A questionnaire will be developed with the pre-test measures on sociodemographic information and the scale to evaluate modern racism experiment [23, 45], and with the post-test measures to evaluate identification with the protagonist [46], narrative transportation [47], cognitive elaboration [48], mixed emotions [49], a scale to evaluate insight, which will be developed within the framework of the TRANCHAR project, and different measures to evaluate attitudes towards immigration (feeling thermometer scale) [50]. Additionally, measures will be incorporated to contrast the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation and quality control measures.

That this project is based on the inspiring media model implies taking into account different types of media that generate a transcendent experience [34], so for experimental studies 2 and 3 the factorial design is maintained, but a written narratives and an auditory narratives will be produced to validate that the model continues to explain the process in which entertainment-education messages affect anti-immigrant attitudes.

This doctoral thesis will be carried out following the fourth edition of the Ethical Code for Research in Education of the British Educational Research Association [51].

6 Results

The parallel serial moderated mediation model, that is proposed, is the representation of this thesis Hypothesis that we need to contrast, and for that moderation and mediation analysis tools will be required. A mediator variable *M* is the vehicle through which an independent variable *X* transmits its effect on the dependent variable *Y* and explains this process or mechanism by accounting for their association, while the moderator variable *W* conditions the relationship between the exogenous and endogenous variables so that it affects the strength or direction of the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable [52, 53].

To contrast these Hypothesis, we will used the model 83 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS [54]. For the moderation hypothesis H1 we expect to find significant regression coefficient of the interaction term (protagonist's attitude towards immigration *X*

modern racism), that will indicate how the relationship between the independent variable (protagonist's attitude towards migration) on the dependent variable (attitudes towards immigration) changes at different levels of the moderator (modern racism).

For the mediator hypothesis H2, H3 and H4, we expect to find significant effects between the serial mediators (identification with the protagonist), (narrative transportation) (cognitive elaboration), (mixed emotions) and (insight) and a significant indirect effect between the independent variable (protagonist's attitude towards immigration X modern racism) and the dependent variable (Attitudes towards immigration). For that purpose, 10,000 bootstrap samples will be used to assess the indirect effect, with 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals (CIs), so that we consider the indirect effect to be statistically significant if the CI obtained (CI at 95%) does not include the value 0, so that the confidence limits would be either both positive or both negative [52].

7 Dissertation Status

At the time of writing this work, the scripts for the nine audiovisual fictional entertainment-education contents have been validated on a pilot study and the contents have been produced. The main study is currently being conducted using Qualtrics panelists and we will soon start the data analysis phase. At the same time, the design of experiment 2, with written narratives is being developed.

8 Expected Contributions

With this dissertation we intend to better comprehend the psychological processes that makes possible narrative persuasion, supporting the inspiring media model that can be used as an entertainment-education strategy specifically in terms of a mediated intergroup contact that would help on reducing prejudice towards immigrants.

9 Conclusion

This dissertation works within the narrative persuasion field of study, the education-entertainment communication strategy, and the inspiring media model to propose 4 hypotheses, to be contrasted with data from three online experiments, that constitute a model of parallel serial moderated mediation, in which the protagonist's attitude towards migration (ambivalent vs. positive) has an effect on the audience's attitude towards migration, through identification with the protagonist, narrative transportation, cognitive elaboration, mixed emotions, and psychological insight, in the presence of modern racism. The results will be used to advance the knowledge about the psychological effects and processes that help to promote social harmony and the integration of immigrants.

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