# Story-Driven Insights: How Transitional Characters and Positive Role Models in Entertainment-Education Narratives Shape Outgroup Attitudes

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## Abstract

This study presents the results of a pre-registered online experiment with Qualtrics panelists ($N$ = 927), examining the impact of Entertainment-Education (EE) stories through the lens of narrative persuasion and inspiring narratives. It focuses on the effect of character type (transitional character and positive role model) on identification with the protagonist and also examines the mediating role of psychological insight in the context of improving attitudes toward stigmatized groups (immigrants). The hypothesis suggests that EE stories featuring positive role models can improve attitudes by fostering identification and triggering insight (a process of sudden understanding, illumination or revelation), especially in individuals with low modern racism. This conditional-indirect effects model was tested using a 3 x 3 between-subjects factorial design, manipulating character type (control, transitional character, positive role model) and type of negative immigration rumor ("immigration increases crime," "immigrants are taking our jobs," "immigrants receive more public assistance"). Short EE narratives designed to debunk negative rumors about immigration were produced. Before watching the videos, participants' demographics and modern racism were measured. After viewing, identification with the protagonist, psychological insight, and dependent variables (e.g., attitudes toward immigrants) were assessed. Results indicate that modern racism moderates the effect of character type on identification. Identification also activates psychological insight, which significantly impacts outcome measures. This study advances understanding of how EE narratives improve outgroup attitudes through character driven psychological insights.

## Hypotheses

This study focuses on how the attitudes of protagonists in EntertainmentEducation (EE) narratives shape audience attitudes toward stigmatized groups in this case, immigrants. Our work integrates research on EE and narrative persuasion (Frank & Falzone, 2021) with contemporary theories of entertainment processing, particularly those related to eudaimonic or inspiring media (Moyer-Gusé & Wilson, 2024; Oliver et al., 2021).

EE narratives are storytelling formats that aim to entertain while simultaneously delivering educational or pro-social messages (Wang & Singhal, 2021). Typically, EE narratives feature three types of characters (e.g., Bandura, 2004). Negative role models exhibit the undesirable attitudes and behaviors the narrative seeks to change (for example, a character with openly racist views). Positive role models consistently express supportive attitudes, such as a character who openly advocates for immigrants in conversations. Lastly, transitional characters evolve over the course of the narrative, shifting from negative to positive attitudes (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019). Despite the relevance of character types in EE narratives, there is surprisingly little research examining their specific roles and effects. Our work examines how protagonists' attitudes in EE narratives shape audience responses toward immigrants, exploring the mechanisms behind this influence.

Previous studies on EE and prejudice reduction have shown that identification is a key mechanism influencing attitudes (e.g., Igartua, González-Vázquez, & Arcila, 2024). Our study introduces a second mechanism— psychological insight—to understand how EE narratives influence attitudes toward stigmatized groups. Psychological insight (informally referred to as the "Aha! Moment"; e.g., Kounios & Beeman, 2009) is defined as a cognitive reception process involving a sudden discovery and a sense of enlightenment or inner revelation, often triggered by exposure to inspiring narratives (Igartua, Oliver et al., 2025). We propose that identification with characters initiates the process of psychological insight, resulting in a significant impact on attitudes.

In line with recent calls to explore differential susceptibility to mediated communication (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), we also examine the moderating role of participants' levels of modern racism (McConahay, 1986). Modern racism represents a more subtle form of prejudice, characterized by ambivalent reactions toward immigrants. In this context, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H1:** Individuals with low levels of modern racism will identify more strongly with a positive role model, as the character's supportive attitudes toward immigration align with these individuals' own beliefs.

**H2:** Individuals with high levels of modern racism are expected to identify less with both positive role models and transitional characters, as these characters convey messages that are counter to their previous attitudes.
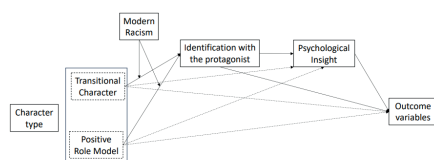


In addition, we hypothesize a conditional indirect effect of character type on liking the story, intention to share the narrative, attitudes toward immigrants, and prosocial behavior, mediated serially by identification with the protagonist and psychological insight.

**H3:** For individuals with low modern racism, exposure to a positive role model (versus control) will enhance identification, triggering psychological insight and resulting in greater liking of the story, higher intentions to share the narrative, more positive attitudes toward immigrants, and increased prosocial behavior.

**H4:** For those with high modern racism, exposure to either positive role models or transitional characters (versus control) will lead to lower identification, reducing psychological insight and negatively affecting liking of the story, intentions to share, attitudes toward immigrants, and prosocial behavior.

## Method

To test our predictions, a pre-registered online experiment with Qualtrics panelists was carried out ($N$ = 927, M$_{age}$ = 45.36 years, $SD$ = 13.57; 49.2% men and 50.7% women), setting quotas for sex, age, and education.

To determine the sample size a power analysis was carried out using the G*Power program (Faul et al., 2007) (Appendix 1 in the extended abstract).

Additionally, a pilot study ($N$ = 245) was conducted using short written narratives based on the scripts (Appendix 2 in the extended abstract).

**Design:** the main study employed a 3 × 3 between-subjects factorial design, manipulating two independent variables: the type of character (protagonist's attitude towards immigration: control group, transitional character, and positive role model) and the type of negative rumor against immigration focused on in the story (in a critical incident at the end of the story).

To enhance the study's external validity, we opted for audiovisual narratives that covered three different negative rumors against immigration.

The online questionnaire consisted of three blocks: pre-test measures, experimental manipulation, and post-test measures (Footnote 5 and Appendix 5 in the extended abstract).

The first block collected information on sociodemographic variables, political ideology, modern racism scale (McConahay, 1986; Igartua et al. 2019), and the Ten-Item-Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling et al., 2003).

The participants were then subjected to experimental manipulation by viewing an EE audiovisual narrative (Appendix 3 in the extended abstract). We used nine different fictional videos professionally produced ad hoc.

After viewing the EE audiovisual narrative, the post-test measures were presented using questions to evaluate the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation as well as the outcomes variables.
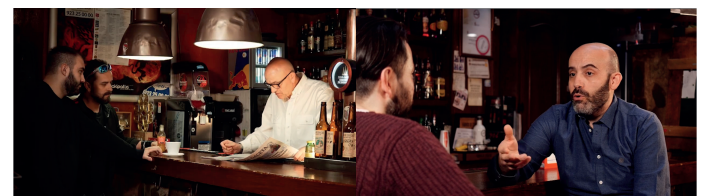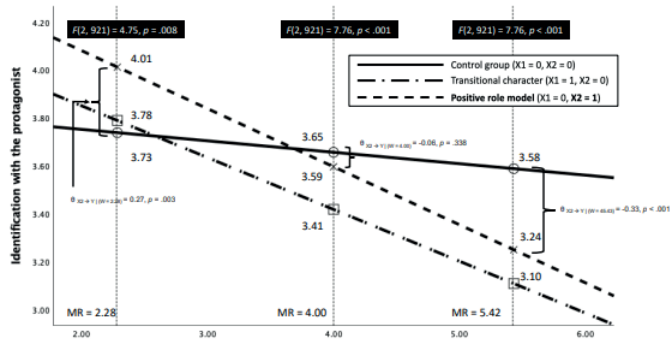


*Stills from the scene 3 of the experimental stimuli*

**Full study materials available at:**

# Results

**Moderating role of participants' levels of modern racism:** To test H1 and H2, the PROCESS macro was used (model 1; Hayes, 2022). The results showed that modern racism moderated the effect of character type on identification with the protagonist.





**Positive role model VS Control group (H1):** Participants with low levels of modern racism showed greater identification with the protagonist in the EE narrative featuring a positive role model compared to the control group narrative. Participants with high levels of modern racism showed lower identification with the positive role model compared to the protagonist of the control group narrative.
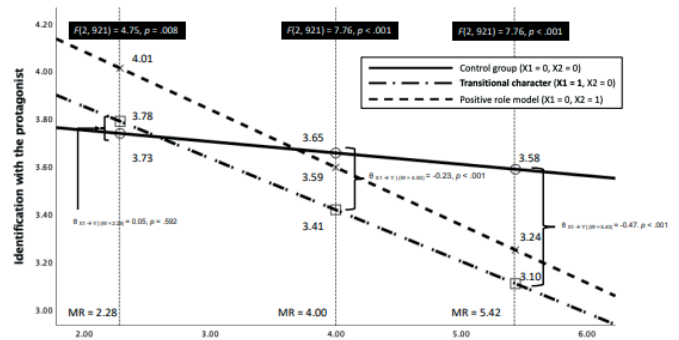
**Transitional character VS Control group (H2):** Participants with high and medium levels of modern racism showed lower identification with the transitional character compared to the protagonist of the control group narrative.

**Relative conditional-indirect effects:** To test H3 and H4, the PROCESS macro was used (model 83). It was observed that identification with the protagonist served as a significant mediating mechanism on its own. Additionally, in three of the four outcome variables considered, psychological insight was found to be a significant secondary mediator (Tables 2, 3, 4 & 5 in the extended abstract).
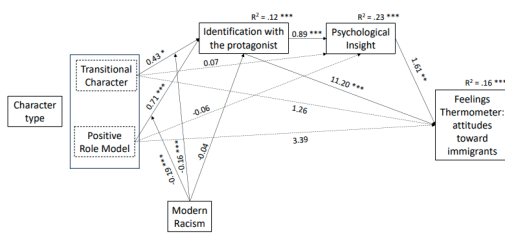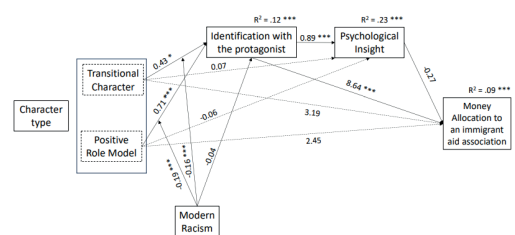


(a) Outcome variable: *liking*
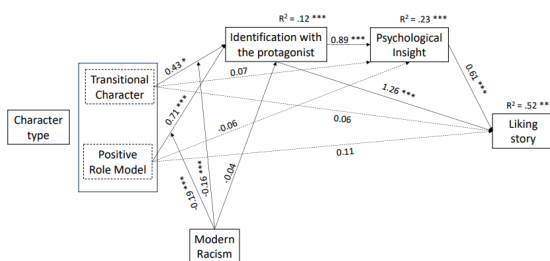


(b) Outcome variable: *intention to share the video*
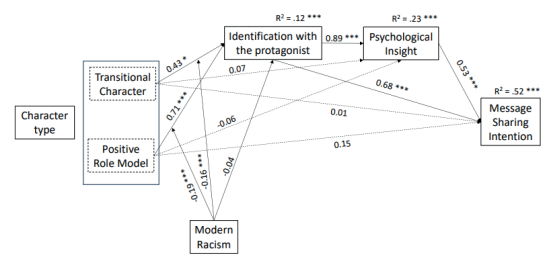


(c) Outcome variable: *attitudes toward immigrants*



(d) Outcome variable: *prosocial behavior*

# Conclusions

This study underscores the importance of character design in shaping attitudes toward deeply polarized social issues through the use of EE narratives.

The findings suggest that both identification with characters and psychological insight are key mechanisms explaining the impact of different character types in EE narratives, supporting recent theories on narrative processing (e.g., Moyer-Gusé & Wilson, 2024).

The moderating role of modern racism highlights the nuanced effects of EE narratives, revealing that individuals with low prejudice are more receptive to positive role models, while those with high modern racism resist both positive role models and transitional characters.

Overall, this study advances the understanding of EE narratives as tools for social change, offering a framework that integrates identification with the character, psychological insight, and the role of individual differences.

# Directions for future research

- Explore the role of psychological insight and other mediators to further test the incremental validity of this construct.

- Continue exploring other ways to manipulate the "type of character" in experiments, such as the transitional character, using written narratives that allow for a better representation of the character's arc and evolution through resources like temporal ellipses.

- Explore what other moderators may be relevant (e.g., involvement with the immigration issue).

- Analyse the effect of psychological insight on long-term attitudes (e.g., two weeks after exposure to the message).

# References

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