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The Effect of Similarity to a Transitional Role Model of an Entertainment–Education Narrative Designed to Improve Attitudes Toward Immigrants: Evidence from Three European Countries

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the factors that increase the persuasive impact of entertainment – education (EE) narrative messages designed to improve attitudes toward immigrants. Specifically, the effect of the demographic similarity between the protagonist of the narrative message (a transitional character) and the audience is studied. Three online experiments were carried out simultaneously in Greece ($N = 286$), Italy ($N = 295$), and Spain ($N = 294$) to evaluate the indirect effect of demographic similarity on identification with the protagonist through perceived similarity, as well as the specific indirect effects on attitude, perceived threat, intergroup anxiety, and prosocial behavior toward immigrants, while including perceived similarity, identification, meaningful affect, and cognitive elaboration as mediating mechanisms. The results obtained in the three countries were in accordance, indicating that demographic similarity increased perceived similarity and, in turn, identification. Furthermore, identification was associated with greater cognitive elaboration and meaningful affect, and both processes, in turn, were associated with more positive attitudes toward immigrants (in all three countries) and also with less perceived threat and more prosocial behavior (in two countries). The findings are discussed in relation to the reduction of prejudice using EE narratives that inspire audiences through cognitive and emotional processes.

"Since before media existed, stories have been used as a tool to change the world." (Frank et al., 2021, p. 4)

"Son of a bitch. I've got more in common with these goddamned gooks than my own spoiled-rotten family" (Walt Kowalski in "Gran Torino") (Eastwood, 2008).

A narrative is a sequence of causally connected events involving one or more characters from whose experience people can learn a lesson (Hoeken et al., 2016; Toolan, 2001). Narrative messages have been considered an appropriate and effective vehicle for communicating attitudes, cultivating beliefs,

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delivering information, and stimulating certain behaviors (Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Green & Brock, 2000), thus the study of narrative impact has increased significantly in the field of media psychology (Valkenburg & Oliver, 2019; Walter et al., 2018). Such narratives can adopt different formats, extension, and presentation modality, from being presented as brief, written testimonial messages with a single protagonist (such as a first-person message published on social networks) to large, complex, audiovisual productions including various characters (such as television series, feature films, or video games). In addition, applications derived from research on narrative persuasion are occurring in different fields, from disease prevention and improving people's health (e.g., Kim, 2019) to reducing prejudice and stigma (e.g., Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019; Murrar & Brauer, 2018).

This work focuses on the impact of entertainment – education (EE) narratives designed to reduce prejudice toward immigrants. More specifically, this study addresses the factors that increase the persuasive impact of EE narrative messages on improving attitudes toward immigration on the basis of research on narrative persuasion (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002) and the impact of inspiring messages (Oliver et al., 2021). Our work integrates concepts from research on mediated intergroup contact (Banas et al., 2020; Park, 2012; Wong et al., 2022), the reduction of prejudice and stigma through EE messages (Murrar & Brauer, 2018), narrative persuasion and the reduction of prejudice toward stigmatized groups (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019; Zhuang & Guidry, 2022), and the positive effects of inspiring media messages (Raney et al., 2021). In this context, the results of three online experiments carried out simultaneously in three European countries (Greece, Italy, and Spain) are presented herein.

The EE strategy is based on the intentional incorporation of educational content into entertainment formats, usually of a narrative type (Wang & Singhal, 2021). This type of format has been used to carry out interventions to reduce prejudice, taking as a reference the research on narrative persuasion and mediated intergroup contact (Müller, 2009; Murrar & Brauer, 2018; Siem et al., 2021). This type of media intervention typically includes characters playing positive and negative roles, as well as transitional characters. A transitional character "is one whose behavior evolves over the course of a story in keeping with the underlying message the program aims to get across" (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019, p. 186). However, little research has been carried out on the characteristics of transitional characters that could enhance the audience's identification with the protagonist, one of the most relevant mediating mechanisms to explain the attitudinal impact (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2016; Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013). In this way, our work aims to address this knowledge gap by analyzing the effect of the demographic similarity between the protagonist of a narrative message (a transitional character) and the audience, applying the "multiple

matching" strategy (Kim, 2019; Kim et al., 2016), on reception processes and indirectly on intergroup attitudes and prosocial behavior.

The second main objective of this work is to integrate research on narrative persuasion with the study of the effect of inspiring narratives (Oliver et al., 2021). We believe that an EE narrative that incorporates a transitional character who evolves from an attitude of rejection toward immigrants to a positive attitude and contact behavior can be regarded as an inspiring message by its audience. Showing in the EE narrative that a prejudiced person can develop a behavior in favor of the stigmatized outgroup, upon experiencing an inner change, can be regarded as a virtuous behavior. In this sense, a narrative message with such characteristics could stimulate mixed affect or affective ambivalence, as well as meaningful affect (such as inspiration, feeling touched, excited, or tender), and induce a process of deep reflection (increase cognitive elaboration). This work thus proposes and empirically tests a dual cognitive – affective mediation model that includes mediating mechanisms traditionally considered in narrative persuasion (perceived similarity and identification with the protagonist) as well as processes and effects linked to the impact of inspiring narratives (in particular, meaningful affect and cognitive elaboration).

Prejudice Reduction Through EE Narratives

Migratory movements generally invoke resistance to social inclusion from host societies, manifested through reactions such as discrimination, racism, and xenophobia. This phenomenon of rejection can currently be observed in Southern European countries that have traditionally been subjected to strong migratory pressure, such as Greece, Italy, and Spain (European Commission, 2018, 2019).

The strategies commonly used to reduce prejudice toward immigrant populations (information campaigns) are frequently ineffective because they induce reactance and counterarguing, and suffer from selective exposure (Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016). On the other hand, more subtle forms of persuasion through narrative messages may be more effective given the fact that they induce positive mediated intergroup contact (Dale & Moyer-Gusé, 2021; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019; Murrar & Brauer, 2018, 2019). Mediated intergroup contact is a form of indirect contact that can be an analogous experience to face-to-face meetings with people from the outgroup. In this way, people in the audience who are part of the ingroup are exposed to media content that offers positive (or negative) representations of members belonging to stigmatized groups (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Park, 2012; Schiappa et al., 2005). The meta-analysis carried out by Banas et al. (2020) concluded that positive mediated intergroup contact (showing collaborative or cooperative behaviors, or a nonstereotyped image of stigmatized groups) reduces prejudice.

Moreover, another recent meta-analysis concluded that narratives are effective tools for reducing stigma (Zhuang & Guidry, 2022).

Media strategies designed to favor the reduction of prejudice toward stigmatized groups (ethnic minorities, immigrants, etc.) have increased in recent years (Dale & Moyer-Gusé, 2021; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019; Müller, 2009; Murrar & Brauer, 2018; Siem et al., 2021). More specifically, research on the impact of EE narrative messages on the reduction of prejudice has focused on the analysis of the impact of exposure or follow-up of such content on the improving of intergroup attitudes (e.g., Müller, 2009; Murrar & Brauer, 2018, experiment 1), on the effectiveness of interventions based on this type of messaging compared with other strategies of intergroup contact (e.g., Murrar & Brauer, 2018, experiment 2; Siem et al., 2021), or on the analysis of the explanatory mechanisms of said impact (e.g., Dale & Moyer-Gusé, 2021; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019; Murrar & Brauer, 2018). Nevertheless, an element that remains unexplored to date is the analysis of the characteristics of EE messages and their protagonists.

EE narrative messages typically include characters playing positive and negative roles, as well as transitional characters (Frank et al., 2021). Taking Bandura's (2004) socio-cognitive theory as a reference, positive role models are those that support the behavior to be modeled, whereas negative role models are provided by the characters who reject such behavior and symbolize the negative consequences of a problematic attitude or behavior, while finally, transitional characters are those who initially show a negative attitude or behavior but who change their minds in favor of prosocial behavior, according to the underlying messaging that the EE message aims to convey.

Transitional characters are a critical element of EE narratives designed to promote healthy behaviors, initially showing unhealthy behaviors, but evolving as the story progresses toward preventive behaviors (e.g., Bouman, 2004; Vaughan & Rogers, 2000). In addition, they are important in the context of reducing prejudice toward stigmatized groups (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019), and consequently, we believe that they will also be important for improving attitudes toward highly stigmatized immigrants. However, a challenge for the creators of EE fiction is to mask the persuasive intent of the message in order to reduce possible resistance from the audience, because those who feel pressured to change their attitudes may reject the message in order to maintain their freedom (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). In this context, on the basis of the arguments presented by Dal Cin et al. (2004), which in turn are founded on social judgment theory (Sherif & Hovland, 1961), we consider that transitional characters are particularly useful to *attract* audience members who show some *resistance* to the behavior or attitude being modeled.

According to social judgment theory (Sherif & Hovland, 1961), when a person is exposed to a persuasive message, they do so equipped with previous attitudes that have certain latitudes of acceptance and rejection.

In this way, persuasion will be more likely to be successful if the attitudinal proposal conveyed by the message's protagonist falls into the latitude of acceptance of the attitudes of the individual exposed to said content. In contrast, there will be greater resistance when the person faces a protagonist who endorses arguments that support an attitudinal position that falls into their latitude of rejection (Dal Cin et al., 2004).

In an EE narrative message designed to reduce prejudice toward immigrants that incorporates a transitional character, the counter-attitudinal proposal can be presented slowly, subtly, or unexpectedly, so that the audience does not perceive that the message falls within their latitude of rejection. In this way, the attitudinal proposal conveyed by the transitional character will be more easily assimilated by the individual. For example, the audience of the message observes, through vicarious contact, that at first the protagonist of the narrative (Walt Kowalski in *Gran Torino*; Eastwood, 2008) maintains a strong attitude of rejection and avoids contact with his neighbors (immigrants of Asian origin who reside in his neighborhood). However, as the story progresses, the audience observes that this transitional character begins to maintain positive interactions with members of the outgroup, improves his knowledge about the outgroup, discovers that he has more in common with them than he originally thought, develops a positive attitude toward the stigmatized group, manifests less intergroup anxiety, increases the opportunities for intergroup contact, and even develops prosocial behaviors in favor of his immigrant neighbors. Consequently, the audience of this message is more easily able to assimilate the point of view of the transitional character, since the message conveyed will have been presented gradually and subtly, and will not have the appearance of a counter-attitudinal message.

One of the gaps in research on the impact of EE narrative messages designed to reduce bias toward stigmatized groups is the absence of programmatic research on the effects of the characteristics of transitional characters on audiences. Given that a significant part of the impact of narrative messages can be explained by the processes of connection that people establish with the characters (in particular, identification; Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013), more research is needed in this field to determine how to increase involvement with this type of characters through a careful design of their characteristics. Conversely, Wang and Singhal (2021) pointed out that research on EE currently rests on theoretical approaches linked to narrative persuasion. In this context, we believe that it is relevant to integrate research on narrative persuasion with the study of the characteristics of transitional characters in EE messages. An important element in this context is the study of the effect of similarity to the protagonist in processes such as perceived similarity and identification, two mediating mechanisms that explain the impact of EE messages (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Audience – Character Similarity, Perceived Similarity, and Identification

According to the Entertainment Overcoming Resistance Model (EORM; Moyer-Gusé, 2008), two of the main mechanisms through which people engage with EE narrative messages are identification and perceived similarity. Identification with the protagonist constitutes a psychological phenomenon by which members of the audience mentally adopt the position of the narrative's protagonist, thereby experiencing the events from the protagonist's point of view, sharing their emotions, perspective or point of view, and goals, and temporarily developing the illusion of being the character (Cohen, 2001; A. de Graaf et al., 2012; Igartua & Barrios, 2012). On the other hand, perceived similarity (sometimes called homophily) refers to the degree to which an individual perceives that they are similar to a character. This similarity may refer to physical attributes, demographic variables, beliefs or attitudes, personality, values, or social identity (e.g., Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Igartua et al., 2019). Therefore, while identification constitutes a temporary cognitive – affective process of merging with a character during exposure to a narrative message, perceived similarity is an exclusively cognitive process that does not include an emotional component (Cohen, 2001; Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Theoretical models of narrative persuasion have established that similarity to the protagonist can be a relevant factor to increase identification and perceived similarity (Cohen et al., 2018; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Similarity implies that the individual exposed to a narrative message shares certain traits or attributes with the protagonist (Ooms et al., 2019). Although similarity to a character can take various forms, experimental research in the field of narrative persuasion on the effect of similarity has focused primarily on the demographic dimension (e.g., Cohen et al., 2018; A. D. de Graaf et al., 2016; Ooms et al., 2019). In this regard, the manipulation is operationalized by highlighting the attributes that the audience shares with the protagonist of the narrative message (for example, being informed about their age and/or gender) (Hoeken et al., 2016; Kim, 2019).

Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) state that the audience of narrative messages "tend to feel similar to characters who are like themselves in terms of demographic characteristics" (p. 328). In addition, according to the similarity – identification hypothesis (Cohen et al., 2018), people form more intense affective and cognitive links with protagonists of narrative messages who are similar in demographic, social, or psychological terms. For this reason, similarity should also increase identification with the characters. However, previous research on the effect of demographic similarity has yielded contradictory results. For example, Cohen et al. (2018) and A. de Graaf et al. (2012) observed that similarity to the protagonist did not increase identification. However, Hoeken et al. (2016) observed that similarity increased both perceived similarity and identification. Similarly,

Ooms et al. (2019) observed that age-based similarity (but not gender-based similarity) increased perceived similarity and identification with the protagonist.

Despite the relevance of similarity in narrative persuasion research, the meta-analysis review by Tukachinsky (2014) concluded that demographic similarity did not significantly influence identification ($d = 0.10$, $p > .10$), although it did influence perceived similarity or perceived homophily ($d = 0.85$, $p < .001$). Indeed, Tukachinsky (2014) suggested that "researchers should fine-tune the theory to specify the conditions under which the similarity will be associated with identification" (p. 2). Moreover, we consider that our work addresses this direction by taking into account the two following results obtained in previous research.

Firstly, it has been observed that, the greater the number of shared attributes, the greater the involvement with the message (Kim, 2019; Kim et al., 2016). This idea is connected to the tailoring strategy of narrative messages that is used, for example, in health communication interventions (Ooms et al., 2019). In the study of Kim et al. (2016), the similarity scores were computed on the basis of the coincidence of demographic factors (age, gender, and ethnic group) and motivational factors (situation of quitting smoking) between the audience and the protagonists of public service announcements. It was observed that, the greater the number of coincidences between the audience and the protagonist of the announcement (greater degree of similarity), the greater the involvement with the message. Secondly, it has also been observed that perceived similarity can act as a *psychological trigger* for identification (Ooms et al., 2019; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Namely, similarity should intensify identification because it is easier to put oneself in the place of someone who is perceived to be similar. In our work, the similarity to the protagonist (a transitional character) was established by considering four demographic variables (age, gender, academic level, and employment situation), establishing two conditions of high similarity (coincidence in all four attributes) and low similarity (coincidence in no attributes) between the audience and the protagonist. In this context, the present study proposes a mediation model in which demographic similarity influences perceived similarity, which, in turn, induces greater identification with the protagonist, leading to our first hypothesis:

H1: Demographic similarity will induce an indirect effect on identification with the protagonist through perceived similarity.

EE Narratives as Inspiring Media: Cognitive Elaboration and Meaningful Affect

Identification with the protagonist of a narrative message promotes the assimilation of their beliefs and attitudes, so that the audience *borrows* the

protagonist's point of view. Through identification, the protagonist of a narrative message *yields* their point of view to the viewer, hence the relevance of this process. Cohen (2001) considered identification to be a very useful persuasive tool because it helps the audiences of narrative messages to overcome the natural tendency to limit thoughts and feelings about a given social object from a single perspective by empathizing from a cognitive point of view with the protagonists.

Previous studies on EE narratives and prejudice reduction have shown that identification is a relevant mechanism to achieve an attitudinal impact (Müller, 2009; Murrar & Brauer, 2018). However, this research field has not reached a conclusion regarding which mechanisms initiate the identification leading to the assimilation of the protagonist's attitudes from the message by the audience. The two main theoretical models regarding the persuasive impact of EE narratives (EORM; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; E-ELM; Slater & Rouner, 2002) assume that identification decreases the production of counterarguing or critical cognitive responses with respect to the attitudinal proposal conveyed by the message, and the reduction of counterarguing leads to the attitudinal assimilation of the protagonist's point of view by the audience. However, the empirical evidence on the role of counterarguing is not conclusive, so alternative models that give greater weight to cognitive elaboration have been proposed (A. de Graaf & Van Leeuwen, 2017; Igartua & Vega, 2016). In this context, it has been proposed that identification may stimulate cognitive elaboration during the reception of a message, since it constitutes a process of temporary involvement with the character (Cohen, 2001). Identification increases the involvement with narrative messages (Igartua, 2010; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2016), provoking greater reflection in the audience, and this could affect the assimilation of the attitudinal message carried by the protagonist of the narrative message.

Cognitive elaboration is defined as a process of reflection around the content of a message and provides a measure of the intensity with which a topic is reflected on during the reception process (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). According to Cohen (2001), "identification increases involvement with messages, which, in turn, increases the elaboration of messages (…) and their potential persuasive effects" (p. 260). In this context, we suggest that identification is an opportunity to adopt the thoughts of another (the protagonist) and accept the beliefs and attitudes implicit in fictional narratives. The role of cognitive elaboration has already been studied in other works on EE in the context of health promotion (Igartua & Vega, 2016). Additionally, the mediating role of cognitive elaboration in research on reducing prejudice toward stigmatized groups (people with mental illnesses or those with disabilities) has also been contrasted through short advertising videos (Bartsch et al., 2018; Hecht et al., 2022). However, their role in research on reducing prejudice through EE messages has not been analyzed. In the present study, it is

proposed that cognitive elaboration acts as a mediating mechanism of the effect of identification on attitudes. We assume that a person who identifies with the protagonist of an EE fictional message will reflect intensely on the narrated situation (e.g., wondering what they would do in the character's situation). Given that the protagonist undergoes an attitudinal transformation, the individual will internalize the attitudes conveyed in the narrative by the protagonist, and an adjustment of their attitudes toward immigration will occur[1] All this leads us to propose the following hypotheses:

H2: Identification with the protagonist will be associated with greater cognitive elaboration.

H3. Demographic similarity will induce an indirect effect on attitudes toward immigrants (H3a), threat perception (H3b), intergroup anxiety (H3c), and prosocial behavior (H3d) through perceived similarity, identification with the protagonist, and cognitive elaboration (Figure 1).

Our work proposes a second way to explain the indirect effect of identification on attitudes, that is, through the experience of meaningful affect. This proposal is supported by research on positive media effects (Raney et al., 2021), eudaimonic entertainment (Bartsch et al., 2018; Janicke-Bowles et al., 2021), and the impact of inspiring messages (Oliver et al., 2015, 2021).

Research on positive media psychology focuses on the positive and prosocial impact of media communication. In this context, it has been pointed out that "entertainment (...) becomes more than an opportunity for escape or

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[1] Note that we use the concept of attitude toward immigration in a broad sense. Psychosocial research on prejudice has found that attitudes toward immigration are associated with perceived threat, intergroup anxiety, and stereotypic beliefs (e.g., Cowling et al., 2019; Jedinger & Eisentraut, 2020; Stephan et al., 1998). It follows that any intervention designed to reduce prejudice should have an impact on attitudes, but also on those variables that are associated with a negative attitude toward the outgroup (such as perceived threat and intergroup anxiety). Indeed, experimental studies on prejudice reduction using EE narrative messages often use several measures as dependent variables, referred to as "outcome prejudice measures" (Murrar & Brauer, 2018, Experiment 1, p. 1059: feelings thermometers, modern racism scale, Implicit Association Test and behavioral measures of prejudice), "prejudice measures" (Murrar & Brauer, 2018, Table 1, p. 1063), "outgroup variables" (Murrar & Brauer, 2018, Table 1, p. 1063), "outgroup variables" (Dale & Moyer-Gusé, 2021, Figure 1, p. 8: willingness to interact with outgroup, African Americans, and attitudes toward outgroup, measured using a feelings thermometer), or "prejudice" (Siem et al., 2021, p. 53: prejudice toward Muslims on feelings thermometers, and attitudes toward Muslims on semantic differentials based on a modified version of the Modern Racism Scale). Likewise, research on the impact of inspirational messages designed to reduce prejudice has found that the intention of prosocial behavior represents an important outcome variable (Oliver et al., 2021). Exposure to inspirational content can orient people toward issues beyond themselves, promote greater connection with others, and stimulate altruistic behaviors (Raney et al., 2021). For example, Bartsch et al. (2018), in their work on reducing stigma toward persons with disabilities, included a measure on behavioral intentions toward persons with disabilities (e.g., participants' willingness to engage in different behaviors to assist people with disabilities). In this context, our work employs a design with multiple dependent variables, including measures of attitudes (toward immigrants), but also measures of threat perception, intergroup anxiety, and prosocial behavioral intention. It is worth mentioning that the content of the EE narrative messages used in the present study was linked to these measures (see "Design and procedure" section and also the full description of the EE narrative message in Appendix 2, available via the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/95m7s/).
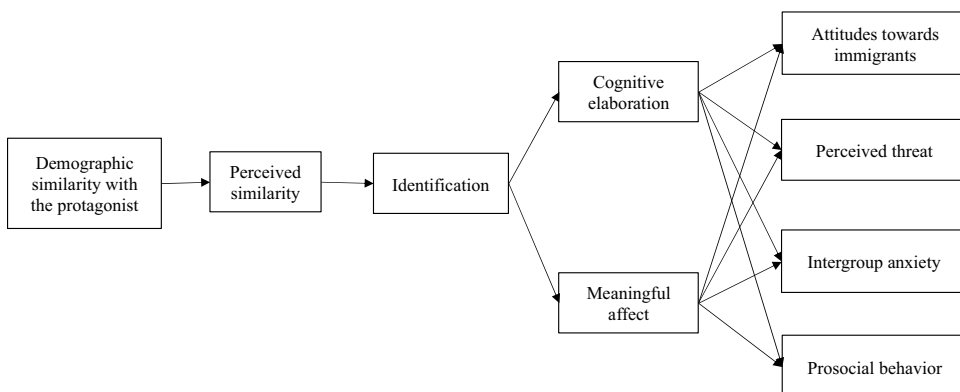
Figure 1. Hypothesized serial and parallel multiple mediation model.

pleasure, but a chance for character development and personal growth" (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2021, p. 375). In this sense, a distinction is established between hedonic entertainment and eudaimonic entertainment (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011). The former is linked to the experience of positive emotions and the search for enjoyment, whereas eudaimonic entertainment is related to more complex processes, such as the experience of mixed affect, meaningful affect or elevation, appreciation, cognitive elaboration, and the search for meaning (Raney et al., 2021). There are numerous examples of moving dramatic films (such as "Schindler's List," "Life Is Beautiful," and "Manchester by the Sea") that can trigger these types of eudaimonic effects (making one think, inducing compassion, wonder, inspiration, or admiration), while inspiring testimonial narrative messages also abound on social media (Oliver et al., 2021).

We believe that EE narrative messages that incorporate transitional characters (in our case because they modify their attitudes and behaviors toward immigrants from rejection to empathy and prosocial behavior) can be regarded as eudaimonic narratives. We consider that the transitional character thus conceived is a type of character that evolves, that has the capacity to undergo a process of personal growth (or transformation) in relation to prejudice, and that could therefore be considered a virtuous model and stimulate and inspire the audience of the message. On the other hand, an EE narrative that incorporates a transitional character can also be considered to be a restorative narrative, a type of narrative message that is commonly used in the field of health communication to induce attitudinal changes and stimulate prosocial behavior (Fitzgerald, Paravati, et al., 2020). Restorative narratives focus on the experience of a person faced with a negative situation and relate the character's progress of improvement in their life trajectory, while highlighting positive character traits such as psychological strength and resilience (Fitzgerald, Green, et al., 2020).

Given that audiences have been observed to identify to a greater extent with characters who are presented as virtuous or display positive traits (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2016), we believe that transitional characters are especially relevant as models to favor the improvement of intergroup attitudes. Despite initially presenting themselves as individuals with a negative attitude toward immigration, they have been able to evaluate their problem (the rejection of immigrants on the basis of stereotypes) and modify their attitudes and behavior. In this way, observing the inner change suffered by the transitional character could stimulate prosocial behavior toward the stigmatized group, that is, the "desire to be a better person," in the audience. Ultimately, an EE narrative message with these characteristics could induce meaningful affect in the audience (feeling moved, tender, aware, sentimental, compassionate, inspired, and excited; Oliver et al., 2012) that would act as a mediating mechanism of the effect of identification on intergroup attitudes and prosocial behavior in favor of immigrants, leading to the following hypotheses:

H4: Identification with the protagonist will be associated with a greater experience of meaningful affect.

H5. Demographic similarity will induce an indirect effect on attitudes toward immigrants (H5a), threat perception (H5b), intergroup anxiety (H5c), and prosocial behavior (H5d) through perceived similarity, identification with the protagonist, and meaningful affect (Figure 1).

Method

To test our predictions, three online experiments were conducted simultaneously using Qualtrics in three European countries: Greece ($N = 286$), Italy ($N = 295$), and Spain ($N = 294$). Since our focus was on the impact of EE messages regarding attitudes toward immigrants, in a broad sense, the samples in each country only included people who were themselves and their parents born in Greece, Italy, and Spain, that is, who were citizens of those countries. Participants came from various opt-in online panels who were contacted by Qualtrics in all three countries. The data were collected from 12th July to 8th September 2021. In each of these three countries, quotas were set based on gender, age, educational level, and employment status to obtain different demographic profiles. All materials related to the online experiments (narrative messages, measures, datasets, syntax files, and results) are available via the Open Science Framework (OSF): https://osf.io/95m7s/.

Participants

In Greece, a sample of 286 people aged 18–69 years was accessed ($M = 40.85$, $SD = 11.04$, 48.3% were aged 18–39 and 51.7% were aged 40–69), with 50.3% being men and 49.7% women. In terms of educational attainment, 0.3% had (compulsory) primary education, 26.6% had secondary and/or high school studies, 23.4% had technical education (vocational training), and 49.7% had university education. In relation to employment situation, 50.3% were active workers, 38.1% were unemployed, 4.2% were students, 0.3% were engaged in unpaid domestic work, and 7% were inactive persons (pensioners or dependents).

In Italy, a sample of 295 people aged 18–70 years was accessed ($M = 41.59$, $SD = 12.06$, 49.2% were aged 18–39 and 50.8% were aged 40–70), and 50.5% were men and 49.5% were women. Regarding education level, 2% had primary education, 8.5% had secondary and/or high school studies, 39% had technical training studies, and 50.5% had university studies. In relation to employment situation, 49.8% were active workers, 28.8% were unemployed, 1.4% were students, 14.2% performed unpaid domestic work, and 5.8% were inactive.

Finally, in Spain, in a sample of 294 people aged 18–66 years ($M = 41.60$, $SD = 11.25$, 49.7% were aged 18–39 and 50.3% were aged 40–66), 50% were men and 50% women. Regarding education level, 2.7% had primary education, 17% had secondary and/or high school studies, 31% had technical training studies, and 49.3% had university studies. In relation to employment situation, 51.7% were active workers, 41.5% were unemployed, 2.4% were students, 2% performed unpaid domestic work, and 2.4% were inactive.

Design and Procedure

All three studies followed the same procedure. The online questionnaire consisted of three blocks: pretest measures, experimental manipulation, and posttest measures. The first block collected information on sociodemographic variables, as well as place of birth (including only those people born in the countries where the study was carried out and whose parents also originated from those countries), political ideology (0 = left, 10 = right; Greece: $M = 4.96$, $SD = 2.20$; Italy: $M = 5.01$, $SD = 2.81$; Spain: $M = 4.62$, $SD = 2.65$), national identification (evaluated using a scale composed of four items, e.g., "I'm proud to be Greek/Italian/Spanish;" from 1= strongly disagree, to 7 = strongly agree; Greece: α = .61, $M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.12$; Italy: α = .64, $M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.20$; Spain: α = .68, $M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.16$; Igartua & Guerrero-Martín, 2022), and frequency of contact with immigrants (0 = not at all, 10 = very much; Greece: $M = 4.56$, $SD = 3.00$; Italy: $M = 4.68$, $SD = 2.39$; Spain: $M = 5.54$, $SD = 2.75$). The participants were then subjected to experimental manipulation by viewing an audiovisual piece of EE fiction (see a full description of the EE narrative message in Appendix 2 in OSF).

The independent variable in this study was demographic similarity to the protagonist (a transitional character), adopting a two-group randomized design. To generate the similarity to the protagonist of the message, the variables of gender (male or female), age (being between 18–39 years old versus 40 or older), employment status (being employed versus not being employed), and educational level (having university studies versus not having them) were varied in the messages, resulting in 16 different versions of the audiovisual piece for each country (thus a total of 48 messages). In the high-similarity condition, the participants were exposed to a message whose protagonist had the same socio-demographic characteristics as them. For example, an unemployed young woman (18–39 years old) with a low academic level saw an audiovisual narrative whose protagonist was an unemployed young woman (35 years old) with a low academic level. On the other hand, in the low-similarity condition, a participant with the profile of an unemployed young woman (18–39 years old) with a low academic level watched an EE message whose protagonist was an employed middle-aged man (50 years old) with a high academic level.

After viewing the audiovisual EE message, the posttest measures were presented using questions to evaluate the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation of demographic similarity (perceived similarity), as well as measures on identification with the protagonist, cognitive elaboration, emotions felt during the viewing of the short, attitudes toward immigration, intergroup anxiety, perceived threat, and prosocial behavior. It is necessary to mention that the content of the EE narratives was linked to the main outcomes variables of the current study: the protagonist of the story (designed as a transitional character) improved their attitude toward immigrants, reduced their intergroup anxiety and perceived threat, and showed prosocial behavior toward the immigrant character by the end of the story.

Since Qualtrics allows a series of quality controls to be implemented, the questionnaire was designed in such a way that it could only be completed in a single session. The average duration to complete the entire process (pretest, video viewing, and posttest) was around 20 minutes (Greece: $M = 16.48$, $SD = 7.70$, Mdn 14.80, Mo 12.97; Italy: $M = 16.75$, $SD = 12.31$, $Mdn = 13.56$, $Mo = 15.35$; Spain: $M = 19.49$, $SD = 21.89$, $Mdn = 14.60$, $Mo = 11.25$). In addition, only the results from participants who took between 225 and 270 seconds to watch the video (Greece: $M = 241.44$, $SD = 11.14$; Italy: $M = 238.77$, $SD = 11.73$; Spain: $M = 238.79$, $SD = 11.58$), and correctly answered a control question included in the questionnaire, were counted as valid cases.

Measures

Descriptive statistics and reliability indices for all measures are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for main variables.

Main variables	Greece (N = 286)		Italy (N = 295)		Spain (N = 294)	
	Cronbach's α	M (SD)	Cronbach's α	M (SD)	Cronbach's α	M (SD)
Perceived similarity	.74	3.92 (1.34)	.80	4.06 (1.39)	.76	3.94 (1.28)
Affective responses: meaningful affect	.94	4.53 (1.50)	.92	3.85 (1.43)	.95	4.26 (1.57)
Affective responses: positive affect	.90	4.06 (1.52)	.83	2.79 (1.27)	.93	3.52 (1.52)
Affective responses: negative affect	.86	3.93 (1.51)	.78	3.36 (1.37)	.82	3.50 (1.40)
Identification with the protagonist	.93	2.75 (0.94)	.93	2.94 (0.91)	.94	2.78 (0.90)
Cognitive elaboration	.77	4.84 (1.28)	.81	4.53 (1.47)	.89	4.85 (1.39)
Attitudes toward immigrants	-	56.95 (27.63)	-	54.11 (26.20)	-	60.55 (23.94)
Perceived threat from immigrants	.95	2.73 (1.27)	.94	2.69 (1.25)	.94	2.54 (1.23)
Intergroup anxiety	.67	2.52 (0.69)	.85	2.37 (0.83)	.83	2.23 (0.72)
Prosocial behavior	.90	3.28 (1.63)	.92	3.31 (1.74)	.93	3.40 (1.65)

Perceived Similarity

To confirm that the manipulation of demographic similarity had been effective, the participants completed a scale composed of four items immediately after watching the video (e.g., "[protagonist's name] has demographic characteristics [such as gender or age] that are very similar to mine;" from 1 = strongly agree, to 7 = strongly disagree; Ooms et al., 2019). These items were averaged into reliable scales.

Identification with the Protagonist

Identification was assessed using an 11-item scale (Igartua & Barrios, 2012) that measures the degree of identification with a specific character (e.g., "I felt as if I were [protagonist's name];" from 1 = not at all, to 5 = very much). The 11 items were averaged into reliable scales.

Affective Responses

Affective responses to the EE messages were assessed by presenting participants with 15 affect terms and having them rate how much they experienced each affect while watching the narrative (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). This scale was developed by Oliver et al. (2012) and measured three different affective responses that were averaged into reliable scales: meaningful affect (touched, moved, emotional, meaningful, compassion, inspired, and tender), positive affect (cheerful, happy, joyful, and upbeat) and negative affect (sad, gloomy, depressed, and melancholy).

Cognitive Elaboration

An adapted version of the Igartua and Vega (2016) cognitive elaboration scale was used, made up of three items (e.g., "As I read, I tried to draw

conclusions to adjust my opinions about immigration;" from 1 = strongly disagree, to 7 = strongly agree). The three items were averaged into reliable scales.

Attitudes Toward Immigrants

A feelings thermometer scale was used (Wojcieszak et al., 2020) in which participants indicated their feelings toward immigrants ("How do you feel about immigrant people?;" from 0 = very cold feelings, to 100 = very warm feelings).

Perceived Threat from Immigrants

This was evaluated using a scale comprising six items (Navas et al., 2012), asking as a general stem: "To what extent do you feel that the following issues are in danger in Greece/Italy/Spain because of immigrants?" (e.g., "Access to the public aid system, for example, housing aid, unemployment aid;" 1 = not at all, 5 = very much). The six items were averaged.

Intergroup Anxiety

This was evaluated using a scale comprising six items (Paolini et al., 2004), asking as a general stem: "If you had to deal directly with an immigrant person (for example, talk to this person in an elevator where there are no other people), how would you feel?" (e.g., "awkward," "relaxed" [reverse coding]; 1 = not at all, 5 = very much). These items were averaged.

Prosocial Behavior

A scale developed from Murrar and Brauer (2018) and Igartua and Guerrero-Martín (2022), composed of four items (e.g., "I am considering actively collaborating as a volunteer in a non-governmental organization [NGO] that supports immigrants," 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), was used. These four items were averaged.

Data Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS 26 statistical software. Descriptive analyses (means and standard deviations) and reliability (Cronbach's alpha) were calculated for all the measures in the three countries (Table 1). Student's *t*-test and chi-squared test were used to check successful randomization (see results in Appendix 3 in OSF). Student's *t*-test was also performed to determine the impact of demographic similarity on perceived similarity and identification with the protagonist. Correlations between the mediating and dependent variables were analyzed by using the Pearson correlation coefficient (see Appendix 4 in OSF). To test our hypotheses, the PROCESS macro (version 4.1) for SPSS was used (Hayes, 2022). These analyses were

carried out separately in each country, which increases the external validity of the results (their generalization in different contexts) and provides robustness to the proposed mediation models. The independent variable (demographic similarity to the protagonist) was dummy coded, such that high-similarity condition was coded as 1 and low-similarity as 0. The PROCESS macro makes it possible to test different mediation models on the basis of the bootstrapping technique. We used 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals on the basis of 10,000 bootstrap samples for statistical inference of the indirect effects. An indirect effect is considered statistically significant if the established confidence interval (95% CI) does not include the value 0. If the value 0 is included in the confidence interval, then the indirect effect is equal to 0; that is, there is not an association between the variables considered.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

In all three countries, it was observed that people assigned to the high-similarity condition showed greater perceived similarity to the protagonist of the message than those assigned to the low-similarity condition (Table 2). However, demographic similarity did not significantly influence identification with the protagonist.

It was found that people with a more conservative ideology showed greater identification with the protagonist of the EE narrative message (Greece: $r(284) = .18$, $p < .001$; Italy: $r(293) = .17$, $p < .001$; Spain: $r(292) = .30$, $p < .001$). These results are consistent, as it has already been observed that conservative ideology is associated with a greater rejection of immigration (Cea D'Ancona, 2018). In this context, the protagonist presented himself as a transitional character, harboring negative attitudes toward immigration for most of the narrative.

As mentioned above, we propose that the EE narratives designed for this research can be considered to be inspirational narratives. Research (e.g., Oliver et al., 2021) in this field has indicated that eudaimonic narratives of an inspiring nature are characterized by stimulating meaningful affect, inducing mixed affect or emotional ambivalence (feeling at the same time positive and negative emotions with a similar intensity), and provoking reflection, that is, stimulating a process of cognitive elaboration of high intensity (thinking deeply about the topic addressed in the message during receipt of the same). In this context, before testing the hypotheses, we checked whether these conditions (which we call boundary conditions of our model) were met.

First, it was tested whether the EE narrative messages induced affective ambivalence. To do this, we analyzed (using the paired Student's t-test) whether there were significant differences in the intensity of the positive

Table 2. Effect of the experimental condition (low versus high demographic similarity with the protagonist) on perceived similarity and identification. Student's t test.

		Mean	SD	t	df	p
(a) Country: *Greece* (N = 286)						
Perceived similarity with the protagonist	Low-similarity condition	3.42	1.25	−6.81	284	.000
	High-similarity condition	4.42	1.23			
Identification with the protagonist	Low-similarity condition	2.68	0.99	−1.26	284	.206
	High-similarity condition	2.83	0.89			
(b) Country: *Italy* (N = 295)						
Perceived similarity with the protagonist	Low-similarity condition	3.65	1.41	−5.13	293	.000
	High-similarity condition	4.45	1.26			
Identification with the protagonist	Low-similarity condition	2.92	0.92	−0.43	293	.665
	High-similarity condition	2.96	0.90			
(c) Country: *Spain* (N = 294)						
Perceived similarity with the protagonist	Low-similarity condition	3.40	1.30	−7.93	292	.000
	High-similarity condition	4.48	1.00			
Identification with the protagonist	Low-similarity condition	2.83	0.91	0.94	292	.344
	High-similarity condition	2.73	0.89			

and negative emotions experienced by the participants in the three countries. In a complementary way, the correlation between these variables was also analyzed. It was observed that there were no significant mean differences (Table 3) in the experience of positive and negative emotions in Greece ($t(285) = 1.19$, $p = .233$) and Spain ($t(293) = 0.24$, $p = .806$) but there were differences in Italy ($t(294) = −6.14$, $p < .001$, $r = .33$). Convergently in the three countries, a positive and statistically significant correlation was observed between the experience of positive and negative emotions (Greece: $r(284) = .25$, $p < .001$; Italy: $r(293) = .28$, $p < .001$; Spain: $r(284) = .40$, $p < .001$).

On the other hand, it was found (using the one-sample Student's t-test) that the mean value for meaningful affect was statistically higher than the theoretical midpoint of the measurement scale used (4 as test value) in Greece ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.50$, $t(285) = 6.02$, $p < .001$, $r = .33$) and Spain ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.57$, $t(293) = 2.89$, $p = .004$, $r = .16$) but not Italy ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.43$, $t(294) = −1.70$, $p = .078$, $r = .10$). Regarding cognitive elaboration, it was observed that the mean value was significantly higher than the theoretical midpoint of the scale (4 as test value) in all three countries: Greece ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.28$, $t(285) = 11.09$, $p < .001$, $r = .54$), Italy ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.47$, $t(294) = 6.18$, $p < .001$, $r = .33$) and Spain ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.39$, $t(293) = 10.53$, $p < .001$, $r = .52$). Overall, it can be concluded

Table 3. Emotional impact: negative and positive emotions. Paired Student's t test.

	Positive emotions		Negative emotions				
Country	M	SD	M	SD	t	df	p
Greece	4.06	1.52	3.93	1.51	1.19	285	.233
Italy	2.79	1.27	3.36	1.37	−6.14	294	.000
Spain	3.52	1.52	3.50	1.40	0.24	293	.806

that the EE narratives used in the three experiments acted as inspiring messages, inducing meaningful affect and affective ambivalence (albeit to a lesser extent in Italy) and stimulating reflection.

### Indirect Effect of Demographic Similarity on Identification (H1)

To test the first hypothesis, the PROCESS macro was used (model 4, using 10,000 bootstrapping samples to generate 95% confidence intervals by the percentile method; Hayes, 2022). Supporting H1, and in all three countries, it was observed that demographic similarity increased identification through perceived similarity (Greece: indirect effect = 0.24, SE = 0.06, 95% CI [0.135, 0.379]; Italy: indirect effect = 0.27, SE = 0.06, 95% CI [0.155, 0.399]; Spain: indirect effect = 0.34, SE = 0.05, 95% CI [0.239, 0.459]). Figure 2 shows the unstandardized regression coefficients included in the path model.

Indirect Effects of Demographic Similarity on Outcome Variables Through Cognitive and Affective Mediation (H2, H3, H4, and H5)

To test H2–5, a serial and parallel multiple mediation model (customized with PROCESS) was used, including perceived similarity, identification, cognitive elaboration, and meaningful affect as mediating variables. In this model, the statistical effect of identification on cognitive elaboration (H2) and on meaningful affect (H4) was analyzed. In addition, the specific indirect effects of demographic similarity on attitudes toward immigrants (H3a, H5a), perceived threat (H3b, H5b), intergroup anxiety (H3c, H5c), and prosocial behavior (H3d, H5d) were also analyzed through two mediation routes (H3: perceived similarity, identification with the protagonist, and cognitive elaboration; H5: perceived similarity, identification with the protagonist, and meaningful affect). We present the significant pathways in Figure 3 and summarize specific indirect effects in Table 4.

The results were mostly consistent in all three countries. Firstly, in all countries, it was observed that identification with the protagonist was associated with greater cognitive elaboration (supporting H2) and also with greater meaningful affect (supporting H4). In addition, statistically significant specific indirect effects, convergent with H3 and H5, were observed in 7 of the 12 tests performed with PROCESS (Table 4). This means that there were significant specific indirect effects from demographic similarity to attitudes toward immigrants through the dual cognitive – effective route in all three countries (Table 4). The same pattern

(a) Country: Greece
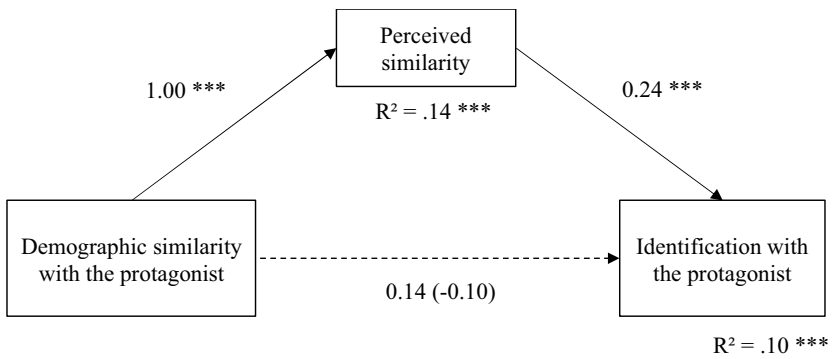
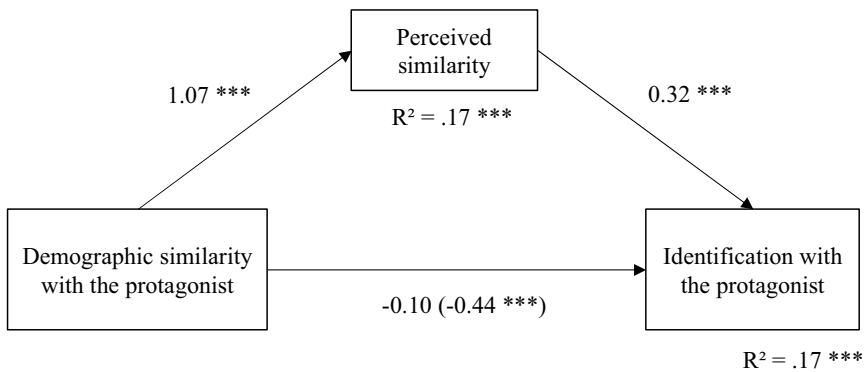(b) Country: Italy
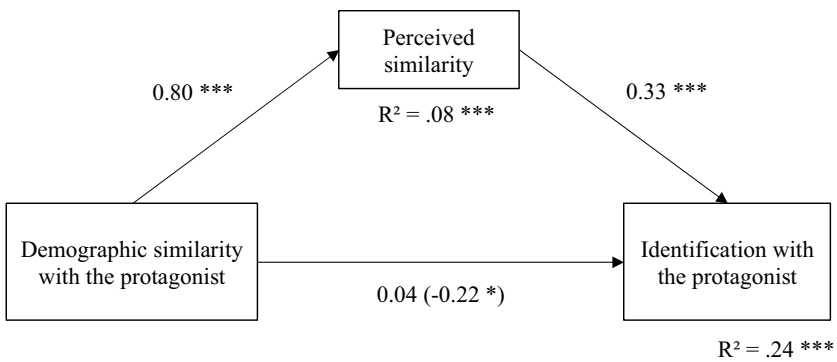

(a) Country: Greece

(b) Country: Italy

(c) Country: *Spain*

Figure 2. Results of the mediation analysis (H1) with PROCESS (model 4).
Note. The figures show the unstandardized regression coefficients, B. The coefficients of the direct effects appear in parentheses. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant coefficients. *p < .05, ***p < .001.

of dual cognitive – affective mediation was also found regarding perceived threat and prosocial behavior in two countries (Greece and Italy). Additionally, we found empirical support for the affective route regarding the specific indirect effects of demographic similarity on perceived threat
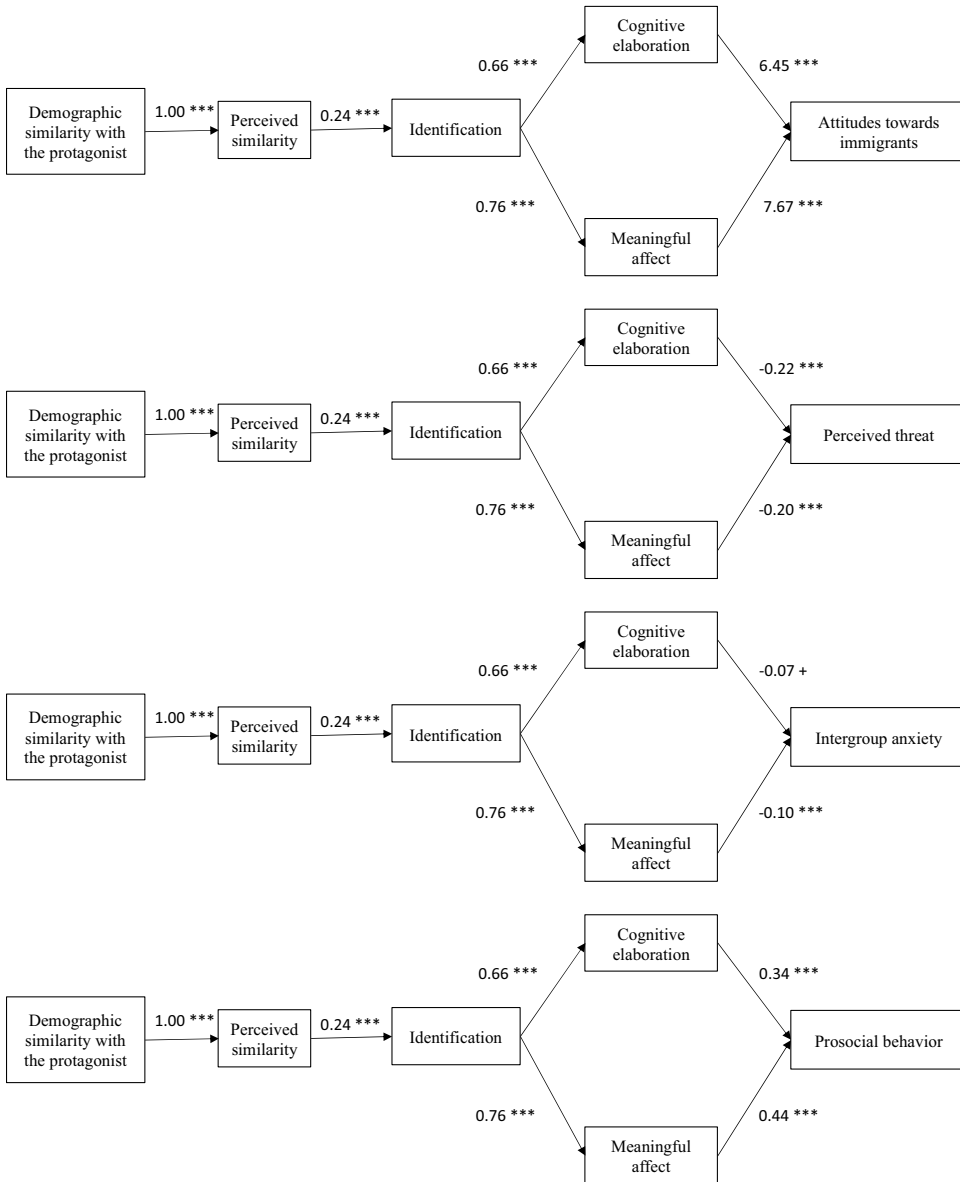
(a) Country: Greece

Figure 3. Results of the serial and parallel multiple mediation model with PROCESS (customized model). The figures show the unstandardized regression coefficients, B. + p < .10, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
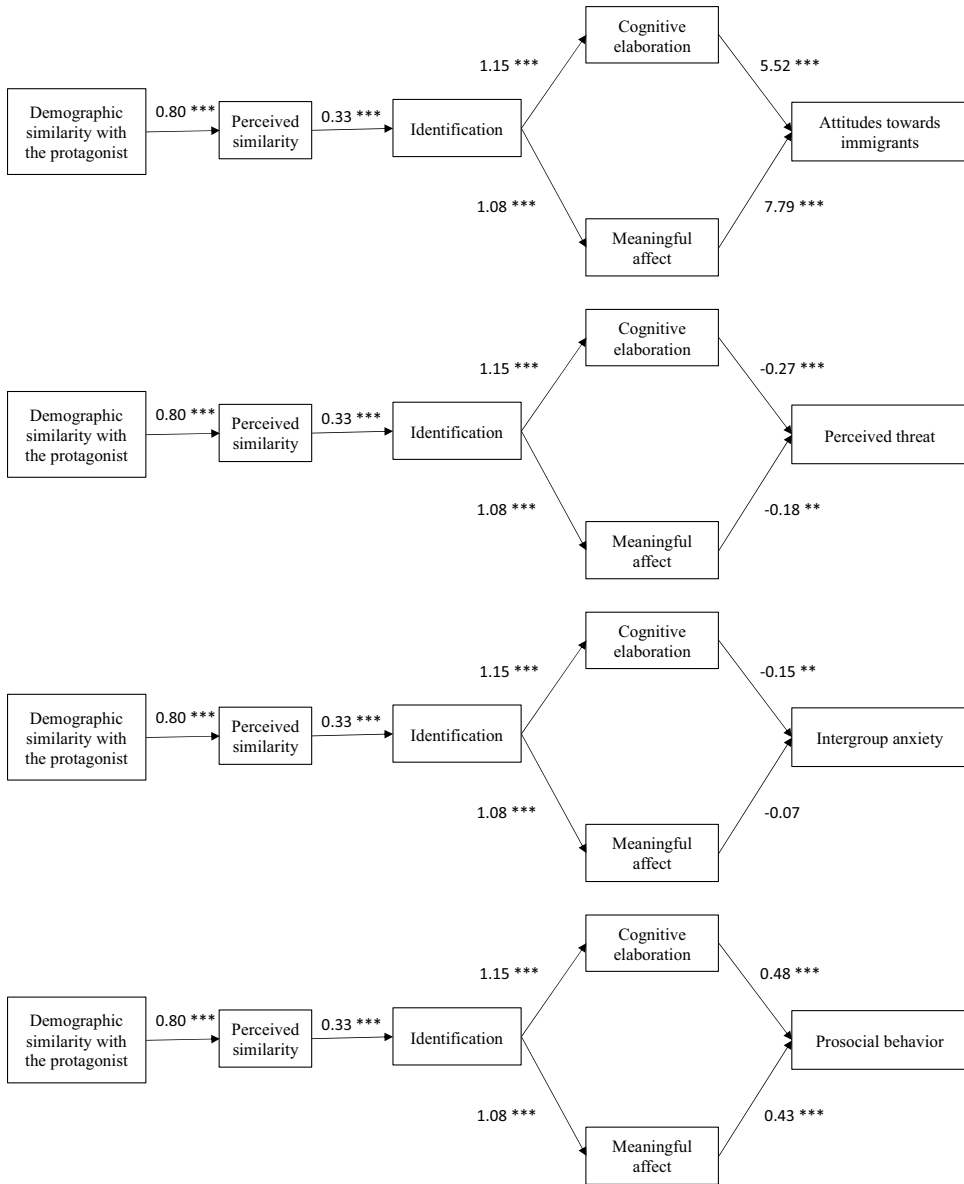
(b) Country: Italy

Figure 3. (Continued).
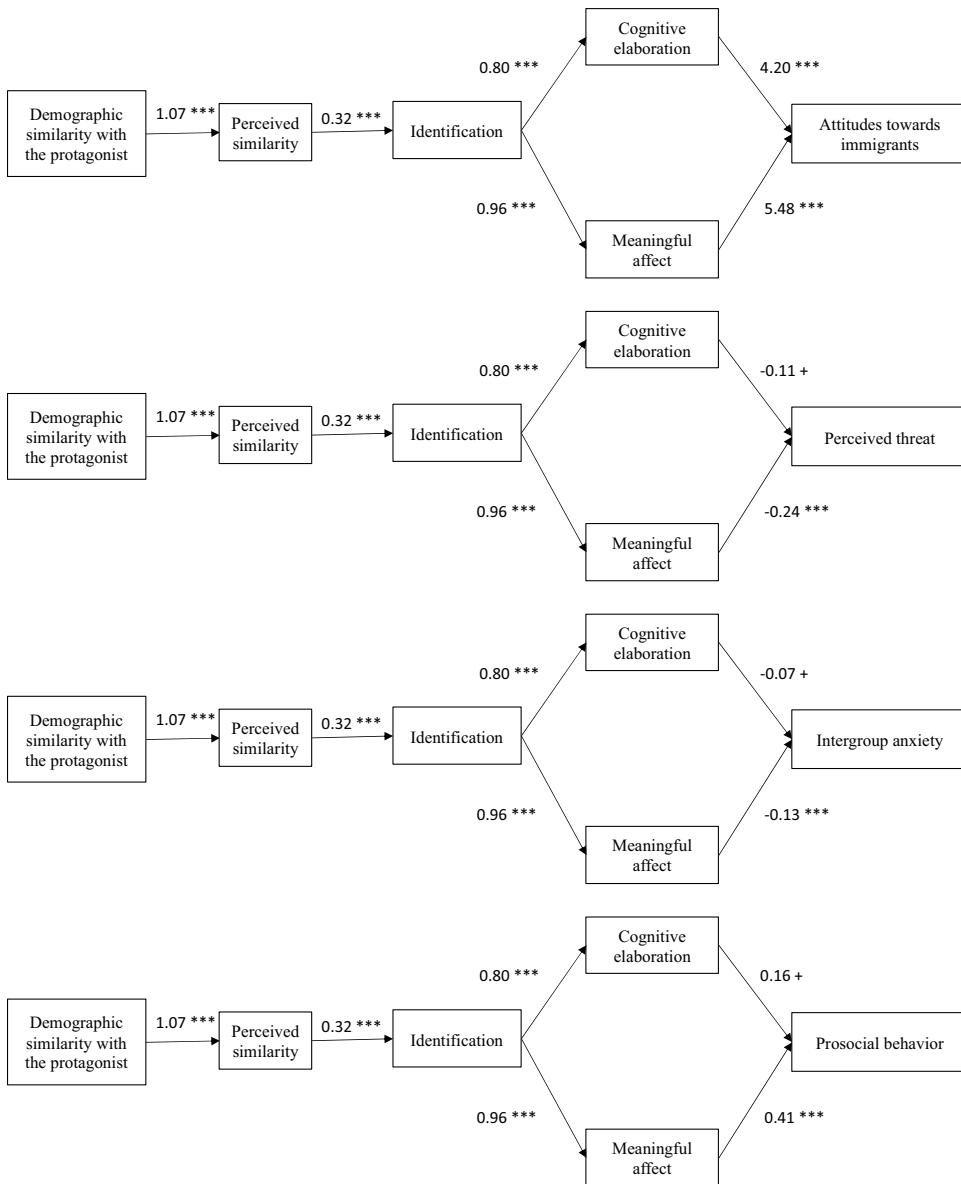
(c) Country: *Spain*

Figure 3. (Continued).

(in Spain), intergroup anxiety (in Greece and Spain), and prosocial behavior (in Spain). Finally, we obtained empirical support for the cognitive route regarding the specific indirect effect of demographic similarity on intergroup anxiety, only in Italy.

Table 4. The 95% confidence intervals of the specific indirect effects of demographic similarity with the protagonist on outcome measures through perceived similarity, identification, cognitive elaboration, and meaningful affect. Serial and parallel multiple mediation models with PROCESS (customized model).

	Greece	Italy	Spain
H3			
Similarity → Perceived similarity → Identification → Cognitive elaboration → Attitudes toward immigrants	[0.451, 1.956]	[0.708, 3.105]	[0.316, 2.263]
Similarity → Perceived similarity → Identification → Cognitive elaboration → Perceived threat	[−0.069, −0.013]	[−0.150, −0.036]	[−0.075, 0.006]
Similarity → Perceived similarity → Identification → Cognitive elaboration → Intergroup anxiety	[−0.027, 0.001]	[−0.094, −0.012]	[−0.053, 0.008]
Similarity → Perceived similarity → Identification → Cognitive elaboration → Prosocial behavior	[0.022, 0.107]	[0.073, 0.259]	[−0.001, 0.102]
H5			
Similarity → Perceived similarity → Identification → Meaningful affect → Attitudes toward immigrants	[0.730, 2.342]	[1.130, 3.733]	[0.822, 3.065]
Similarity → Perceived similarity → Identification → Meaningful affect → Perceived threat	[−0.071, −0.014]	[−0.107, −0.014]	[−0.138, −0.034]
Similarity → Perceived similarity → Identification → Meaningful affect → Intergroup anxiety	[−0.037, −0.007]	[−0.062, 0.009]	[−0.078, −0.013]
Similarity → Perceived similarity → Identification → Meaningful affect → Prosocial behavior	[0.041, 0.140]	[0.058, 0.220]	[0.072, 0.219]

We used 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals based on 10,000 bootstrap samples for statistical inference of the specific indirect effects. A specific indirect effect is considered to be statistically significant if the established confidence interval (95% CI) does not include the value 0. If the value 0 is included in the confidence interval, that means that the specific indirect effect is equal to 0, that is, there is not an association between the variables involved (Hayes, 2022).

Conclusions and Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first project focusing on reducing prejudice toward immigrants using narrative EE messages to be carried out in three countries simultaneously. Previous works on reducing prejudice toward immigrants have used testimonial messages with immigrants as protagonists (Paravati et al., 2022), documentary-style television shows (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019; Müller, 2009), and EE messages with immigrants as protagonists (Murrar & Brauer, 2018). In this work, we chose to give prominence to citizens of the host country who initially harbored negative attitudes toward immigrants but evolved toward a positive position.

Firstly, the decision to adopt a persuasive strategy including a transitional character was based on predictions derived from social judgment theory in the realm of persuasion (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). According to this theory, people have some "room for maneuver" around their attitudes to establish what is acceptable or unacceptable when exposed to a persuasive message. In this way, persuasion will be more likely to succeed if the attitudinal proposal conveyed by the message's protagonist falls into the *latitude of acceptance* of the attitudes of the individual exposed to said content. Given that conservative ideology is associated with a greater rejection of immigration (e.g., Cea D'Ancona, 2018), it is considered that an EE message with a native citizen who initially shows negative attitudes toward immigration as a protagonist

would induce greater identification in people with a conservative ideology. The results of this work corroborate this approach since people with a more conservative ideology indeed showed greater identification with the protagonist of the EE narrative message.

This point raises two important issues. Firstly, given that identification is a relevant process to explain the persuasive process (Cohen, 2001; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002), which characteristics of transitional characters can induce greater identification? And secondly, which psychological mechanisms are necessary for identification to stimulate attitudinal impact and prosocial behavior? In relation to the first question, our work analyzed the effect of one of the basic characteristics through which audiences engage with the protagonists of narrative messages, that is, demographic similarity and its relationship with perceived similarity (a topic widely studied in research on narrative persuasion; e.g., Cohen et al., 2018; Tukachinsky, 2014). In relation to the second question, our work is connected to research regarding the effects of inspiring messages and, in particular, the mediating role of cognitive elaboration and meaningful affect (Bartsch et al., 2018; Hecht et al., 2022; Oliver et al., 2021).

In the present work, the demographic similarity to the transitional character was manipulated by simultaneously taking into account four sociodemographic variables (gender, age, employment status, and educational level). Moreover, it is important to mention that professional actors or actresses participated in the creation of the narrative messages and that the whole production of the pieces was carried out by a professional team hired specifically for this project. All this provides a guarantee regarding the quality of the production and, at the same time, an innovation with respect to previous studies using audiovisual stimuli (such as series or commercial films) that had not been created in the context of the research (e.g., Müller, 2009; Murrar & Brauer, 2018).

The results obtained were consistent among the three countries. It was found that the demographic similarity to the transitional character exerted an indirect effect on identification through the perceived similarity. In this way, our work allows us to affirm that it is possible to manipulate demographic similarity through the "multiple matching" strategy (Kim, 2019; Kim et al., 2016) and that the perceived similarity can act as a *psychological trigger* of identification and other concomitant processes, a result that is in accordance with previous studies (Ooms et al., 2019; Tukachinsky, 2014).

In this work, we considered that an EE message whose protagonist undergoes an attitudinal transformation can serve as inspiration by stimulating deep cognitive elaboration and meaningful affect (as inspiration or compassion), so that people question their previous opinions and adjust their attitude toward immigration. In fact, a transitional character with such characteristics could be considered to represent virtuous behavior that can stimulate prosocial

behavior, as long as certain psychological processes occur. In this sense, previous research has found that narratives that induce self-transcendent emotions (such as awe, elevation, gratitude, admiration, hope, or compassion, among others) also stimulate feelings of connectedness with humanity and prosocial behavior (Dale et al., 2020). In this context, we found that the EE narratives used in our research met the basic characteristics of inspiring narratives by inducing meaningful affect, affective ambivalence, and cognitive elaboration (more clearly in Greece and Spain) (Oliver et al., 2021).

An aspect that should be analyzed in future studies is the extent to which a transitional character can arouse reactance and negative evaluations in those people with a previous conservative political ideology or strong rejection of immigrants (e.g., high modern racism). For example, it may occur that a very conservative person would consider the transitional character to be "a traitor," someone who has abandoned their initial stance on immigration. Our data do not allow us to explore this question directly. However, an important element of the present work is that a positive relationship was observed between conservative ideology and identification with the transitional character. This result is relevant because, in previous studies (using testimonial messages with immigrants as protagonists and designed to reduce prejudice), a negative relationship between political conservatism and identification with the protagonist had been consistently found (e.g., Igartua & Guerrero-Martín, 2022; Igartua et al., 2019).

Regarding the second general question, we have advanced knowledge on the psychological processes that explain the impact of narrative EE messages, going beyond models proposing that a reduction of counterarguing is the catalyst for persuasive impact (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). In all three experiments, it was observed that identification was simultaneously associated with greater cognitive elaboration and the experience of meaningful affect, and in turn, both processes were linked to a more positive attitude toward immigrants (a result reproduced in the three countries), as well as lower perceived threat and a greater intention of prosocial conduct (in two of the three countries). Thus, the results of the mediation analyses provide empirical support for the hypothesized dual mediation model of cognitive – emotional activation. These results are convergent with the study developed by Bartsch et al. (2018), in which inspiring messages of the eudaimonic type were used as experimental stimuli to reduce prejudice toward people with disabilities.

Our work has two important limitations. First, the application of an experimental design with only two conditions (low versus high similarity to the protagonist) limits our ability to drawing conclusions regarding the relevance of transitional characters in EE narratives designed to reduce prejudice toward stigmatized groups. Using the current design, we cannot determine whether the use of a transitional character represents a better strategy than showing

a positive role model who manifests a consistently positive attitude toward immigration throughout the narrative. However, previous research on EE has highlighted that transitional characters are a critical element of narratives to promote healthy behaviors, and one would not expect this process to be absent from the field of prejudice reduction (e.g., Bandura, 2004; Bouman, 2004; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019; Vaughan & Rogers, 2000). Notwithstanding, future research should verify the effect of the type of character (a transitional character versus a positive role model) on the processes proposed herein.

A second limitation of our work that must be mentioned is that we measured (but did not experimentally manipulate) the proposed mediators (perceived similarity, identification, cognitive elaboration, and meaningful affect), which prevents us from concluding on the proposed causal sequence with total certainty. This problem is present in other works that have tested mediation models in this field (e.g., Dale & Moyer-Gusé, 2021; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019). Although temporal precedence is an important element of establishing a causal inference, such inference rests on not only the research design (e.g., simultaneous manipulation of the independent variable and the mediator; Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016) but also the theoretical argumentation. In this context, we believe that our work provides a solid theoretical argumentation on the relationship between the different postulated mediating mechanisms based on predictions derived from previous research on narrative persuasion and on the impact of inspiring messages. On the other hand, the evidence on the relationship between the mediating mechanisms is based on three independent experiments carried out simultaneously in three countries.

This work proposes a research program on narrative persuasion and inspiring EE messages in the field of reducing prejudice toward stigmatized groups (in this case, immigrants). Future studies should continue to investigate other relevant characteristics of transitional characters, such as the type of arguments conveyed by such characters to communicate the persuasive proposal. Secondly, it will be useful to analyze the role of possible moderating variables, such as modern racism or involvement with the topic addressed in the message. And, third, it would be useful to explore other mediating mechanisms such as emotional flow (or emotional shifts), which have recently been incorporated into research on EE and narrative persuasion (e.g., Ophir et al., 2021; Winkler et al., 2023). One may envisage that the viewer of an EE narrative with a transitional character as protagonist (and who manifests an attitudinal change but also an *emotional journey*) will experience "an emotional rollercoaster" while viewing the message (Ophir et al., 2021, p. 103), which contributes to explain the persuasive impact.

The mentioned research program aspires to the construction of a solid theoretical model that integrates mediating mechanisms and moderating variables to explain the impact of EE narrative messages designed to

reduce xenophobia or prejudice toward other stigmatized groups. In this sense, our work constitutes a first step in this more general project but, nevertheless, provides relevant and innovative conclusions in the field of reducing prejudice through EE media messages. In particular, the present work shows that demographic similarity exerts an indirect effect on identification with the protagonist through perceived similarity. It has also been found that the simultaneous activation of meaningful affect and cognitive elaboration provides two procedural elements through which identification with the protagonist exerts an indirect effect on intergroup attitudes and prosocial behavior toward the stigmatized outgroup.

Finally, we hope that these findings will not only stimulate further studies and theorizing on prejudice, mediated intergroup contact, inspiring narratives, and narrative persuasion but also offer guidelines for practitioners working on social change through EE interventions.

Disclosure statement

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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