

# Identification with characters and narrative persuasion through fictional feature films

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## *Abstract*

*This article presents three studies examining the importance of identification with characters in research on media entertainment. In Study 1 it was found that identification with characters was associated with spectators' degree of enjoyment of feature films of different genres. Study 2 showed that identification with characters predicts the affective impact of a dramatic film and, also, it was associated with greater cognitive elaboration and a more complex reflexive process during the viewing of the dramatic film. In Study 3 it was observed that identification with characters predicted the incidental impact of a full length fictional film on attitudes and beliefs. These results support the centrality of the construct of identification with characters in narrative persuasion research.*

*Keywords: identification with the characters; narrative persuasion; media entertainment; feature films*

## **Identification with characters, film involvement and narrative persuasion**

Vorderer, Steen and Chan (2006) have defined entertainment as a process that “involves the exploration of relationships through simulations that permit individuals to identify with substitute agents and thus create the subjective experience of relationships” (p. 14). From another point of view, for entertainment to be able to exist, a basic need must be satisfied: the need to come into contact with or relate to media characters. In this context the notion of identification with characters has become one of the concepts with the longest tradition in the theory of the impact of fiction (written and audiovisual) and in the study of media entertainment (Cohen, 2001, 2006; Oatley, 1994, 1999, 2002). Nonetheless, empirical research on the effects of identification with characters is still scarce within this field (Cohen, 2001). The main objective of the present article

is to analyze the effects of identification with characters as an explanatory variable of narrative persuasion and to analyze its predictive validity in relation to film enjoyment, affective impact, cognitive elaboration and counterarguing during film reception. Although research on the relation between identification with characters and persuasion is not new (e. g., Kelman, 1961), it is novel in the field of narrative persuasion by means of fictional feature films. In this context, this work presents three studies which examine the centrality of the construct of identification with characters that will explain the following: enjoyment of fictional feature films of different genres, Study 1; the affective and cognitive impact of exposure to a dramatic film, Study 2; and the incidental persuasive impact of exposure to a fictional feature film, Study 3.

#### *Definition and dimensions of identifying with characters*

Identification with characters is a construct with a long tradition in media research; however, the definitions that have been contributed are quite diverse (see, Moyer-Gusé, 2008, for a comprehensive revision). Cohen (2001) carried out one of the most complete reviews of the concept of identification with characters in communication research. For this author, identifying with characters is a mechanism “through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them” (Cohen, 2001, p. 245). This author differentiates identification conceptually from the rest of the processes related to involvement with characters (parasocial interaction, similarity or attraction), and postulates its basic dimensions: emotional empathy (the ability to feel what the characters feel and become effectively involved in a vicarious way), cognitive empathy (adopting the point of view of or putting oneself in the place of the characters), sharing or internalizing the character’s goal and absorption (having the sensation of becoming the character or a temporal loss of self-awareness and imagining the story as if one were one of the characters). This definition converges with the proposal made by Oatley (1999), who defined identification with literary characters as *empathy* and *merging*: “The meeting of identification is a species of empathy, in which we do not merely sympathize with a person, we become that person” (p. 446).

With regard to measuring identification with characters, certain instruments exist that are based on self-report scales (Cohen, 2001; de Graaf et al., 2009a; Igartua and Páez, 1998), although Moyer-Gusé (2008) admits that “there is no agreed-upon scale to measure identification” (p. 421). Cohen (2001) developed a scale composed of 10 items that provides an overall indicator of identification, which has been used in several empirical studies (e. g., Busselle and Bilandzic, 2009; Chory-

Assad and Cicchirillo, 2005). It has adequate internal consistency, although to date its structural validity has not been analyzed. Igartua and Páez (1998) devised a scale composed of 17 items to evaluate identification with characters (EDI scale). They analyzed the structural validity of the EDI scale using exploratory factor analysis and observed that four factors or dimensions emerged: emotional empathy, cognitive empathy, attraction to characters and the sensation of becoming the characters, or merging. Nevertheless, that study was carried out within the context of experimental research with a small sample size ( $n = 64$ ), and therefore the results of the factor analysis should be interpreted with caution. In another, more recent study, de Graaf et al. (2009a) developed a measurement instrument (composed of 39 items) to evaluate engagement with a written story whose main characters were a job applicant with a disability and a computer programmer (a member of the selection committee). Exploratory factor analysis extracted five factors: Being in Narrative World, Identification with Programmer, Identification with Applicant, Attentional Focus on Story and Emotion. Each of the factors of identification with characters was composed of eight items that were in turn related to items designed to measure empathy (e. g., “I put myself in the position of the programmer”) and the sensation of becoming the character or merging (e. g., “In my imagination it was as if I was the programmer”). These last two studies suggest that identification with characters is a latent construct with at least two dimensions: empathy (cognitive and emotional) and the sensation of becoming the character, or merging. However, the dimensional structure of identification with characters has not been firmly analyzed, and the aim of the present study is to make a contribution to this effect.

### *Effects of identification with characters*

Although abundant research has been done on the factors preceding identification with characters (e. g., Cohen, 2001, 2006), there is less empirical evidence regarding the possible consequences or effects. It has been pointed out that identification with characters can play a fundamental role in explaining both the process of affective induction and enjoyment (Busselle and Bilandzic, 2009; Davis, Hull, Young and Warren, 1987; de Wied, Zillmann and Ordman, 1994), and narrative persuasion (Cohen, 2001; Green and Brock, 2000; Slater and Rouner, 2002).

### *Identification with characters and enjoyment*

Although enjoyment has been considered a central process in the experience of media entertainment, its definition and operationalization are

still diffuse (e. g., Nabi and Kremer, 2004). Sometimes it is compared to the experience of pleasurable emotional states as the result of consuming a determined fictional product (Oliver, 2003). However, enjoyment also occurs when facing contents designed to stimulate negative emotional states (de Wied et al., 1994; Oliver, 2008; Vorderer, 2003). Finally, it has been pointed out that it can be defined as an overall judgment about the value of entertainment that persons make after exposure to specific contents (Oliver, Weaver and Sargent, 2000; Tan, 1996).

With respect to the relationship between identification with characters and enjoyment, Cohen (2001) has suggested that given that empathy is a central component of identification with characters, greater identification is likely to lead to greater enjoyment of the messages. In this sense, in the study carried out by de Wied et al. (1994), a positive correlation was observed between the degree of empathic sadness experienced during the viewing of the film *Steel Magnolias* and the degree of enjoyment it caused, evaluated at the end of its viewing. For their part, Igartua and Páez (1997) observed that enjoyment caused by viewing dramatic feature films about the Spanish Civil War was associated with greater identification with the characters. Finally, Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) observed that the enjoyment caused by viewing the film *The Station Agent* correlated positively with identification with characters. The results of these studies corroborate the thesis of Cohen (2001), although more research is necessary to analyze whether this relationship holds for film productions of a different genre.

#### *Identification with characters and affective induction*

The emotional experience has been considered one of the principal effects caused by media entertainment (Oatley, 2002; Vorderer et al., 2006). In media psychology research, the types of affects most studied in relation to media entertainment are mood and emotions (Zillmann, 2003). Research has shown that listening to music, reading narratives, and viewing parts of a film or whole films induce emotions and also provoke changes in mood (Frijda, 1989; Tan, 1996). Identification with characters can be an explanatory factor in the emotional response to fiction, because the process entails putting oneself in the place of the characters and sharing their emotional states (Cohen, 2001). Davis et al. (1987) found that when individuals with high empathic ability were given instructions to observe objectively a series of scenes from dramatic films (*Who's Afraid Virginia Wolf* and *Brian's Song*), positive emotional reactions and compassion were induced. On the other hand, when these participants were instructed to observe the narration empathically, a mainly negative emotional reaction occurred. Davis et al.'s (1987) study

allows us to conclude that identification with dramatic film characters (manipulated by instructions) affects emotional reactions. However, one of the problems of this study is that it used short segments of films and not feature-length films. One would suppose that the longer the exposure to a film, the greater the identification with the characters, since there is greater vicarious contact with the main characters (Oliver et al., 2000).

#### *Identification with characters and narrative persuasion*

Empirical evidence exists indicating that fictional narratives exert significant effects that go beyond pure entertainment and affective impact. Research has found that exposure to fictional contents such as written narratives (Green and Brock, 2000), feature films (Butler, Koopman and Zimbardo, 1995; Igartua and Páez, 1997; Schofield and Pavelchak, 1989), television series (Slater et al., 2006) or audiovisual productions developed in the field of education-entertainment (Wilkin, Valente, Murphy, Cody, Huang and Beck, 2007) exert significant effects on attitudes and beliefs regarding the topics approached in those narratives. However, the level of theoretical development for understanding the mechanisms and processes involved in narrative persuasion is still limited (Dal Cin, Zanna and Fong, 2002; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). In this context, there are several models that give an account of the different aspects of the process of incidental persuasion through fiction, the most representative being the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model (Slater and Rouner, 2002) and the Transportation-Imagery Model (Green and Brock, 2000, 2002). In both models identification with characters is considered to play an important role in narrative persuasion processes.

The Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model has been proposed by Slater and Rouner (2002) in an attempt to understand the persuasive impact of fictional narratives used in education-entertainment interventions. These authors suggest that identification with characters is a relevant factor in understanding the effects of narrative persuasion, assuming that the individuals who identify with the characters of a narration are incapable of generating criticisms and counter-arguments regarding the implicit contents of the message, a kind of *short circuit* occurring in the processes of scrutiny of the narration (Slater, 2002). This model was empirically tested by Slater, Rouner and Long (2006) in a study about the impact of the feature film *If These Walls Could Talk II* (with a favorable message regarding gay marriage). They observed that the production of critical commentaries with respect to the message of the film (evaluated by means of a thought-listing technique) was low, which suggests that the viewing of the film had interfered in the production of counterarguments. It was also observed that there was a positive correla-

tion between the degree of identification with the movie's protagonist and the degree of support for gay marriage and social policies that would give more rights to gay couples.

The concept of *transportation* is a construct linked to focusing attention on the story, the activation of mental images and emotional response, and has been proposed by Green and Brock (2000) as the principal explanatory mechanism of narrative persuasion. The research on narrative transportation has the individuals read short written texts, and then the impact that the implicit beliefs in the story have on the beliefs of the individuals is evaluated. It was observed that the individuals experiencing the greatest transportation during the reading of the text (evaluated by means of a scale or manipulated through instructions) showed a greater degree of agreement with the beliefs implicit in it (Green, 2004; Green and Brock, 2000). Green and Brock (2002) propose that transportation favors an incidental persuasive influence because critical capacity is diminished during exposure to a fictional narrative.

### *Rationale and hypotheses*

Taking as a reference the theoretical reflections of Cohen (2001) and the empirical evidence reviewed above, in this paper we have considered that identification with characters is a central mediating process to explain the effects of filmed fictional narratives on the processes of narrative reception and persuasion. Characters are a central component of fictional film narratives, and therefore it is appropriate to expect that a greater identification with the main characters in films (greater *merging* with them) will lead to greater enjoyment and affective impact. Thus, we assume that enjoyment and affective impact will increase in those individuals who have more intensely identified with the main characters in a film narrative. A second aim of the present research is to analyze the effects of identification with characters as an explanatory variable of narrative persuasion and to test the relation between identification and cognitive processes during film reception.

Both Green and Brock (2000) and Slater and Rouner (2002) postulate that identification with characters and counterarguing are incompatible responses, since identification means that the individual takes on the identity of the character and there is an ensuing loss of self-awareness. On the other hand, Cohen (2001), basing himself on Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model, posits as a hypothesis that "(...) identification increases involvement with messages, which, in turn, increases the elaboration of messages and their potential persuasive effects" (Cohen, 2001, p. 260). The term "cognitive elaboration" has been

used both in research on persuasion and in studies about film reception (Petty and Cacioppo, 1996; Suckfüll and Scharkow, 2009) and it is a different process from counterarguing. Slater et al. (2006) define counterarguing “as negative comments about the topic or implicit persuasive theme [in the narration]” (p. 244). For its part, cognitive elaboration is a process of reflection on the contents of a persuasive message (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) that in research concerning film reception processes has been linked to “the intensity of information processing” (Suckfüll and Scharkow, 2009, p. 274).

To date no empirical research has been carried out regarding the relation between identification with characters and cognitive processes (elaboration and counterarguing). Empirical evidence exists supporting a positive relation between cognitive elaboration and induction or emotional impact during reception of fictional feature films (Vorderer, 1993). Vorderer found that two modes of reception (analytical and involved mode) were positively correlated during the viewing of a feature film and thus immersion in cinematographic fiction does not impede reflection, although there were oscillations between involvement (in this case, emotional induction) and analytical reception (reflection during reception). Moreover, it has also been empirically verified that during reception of fictional films there is a low frequency of critical commentaries or counterarguments (Slater et al., 2006). Nevertheless, no empirical studies have been done about the relation between identification with characters and cognitive elaboration, although a positive relation between the two variables can be expected (Cohen, 2001).

To test the hypothesized relations between identification with characters and film reception processes and to analyze the role of identification as an explanatory variable of narrative persuasion, we carried out three different studies. In the first study presented here, the participants were interviewed upon leaving various movie theaters (where films of different genres were being shown). They were given a questionnaire that assessed their identification with characters and the enjoyment they experienced when viewing the film. In this context, taking as a reference the above argument and previous empirical studies, (for example, Busselle and Bilandzic, 2009), the following hypothesis was posed:

H1: The individuals who identify more with the characters will enjoy the film more.

In Study 2, university students were exposed to a dramatic feature film and their mood was evaluated before and after viewing the film. We thus

intended to assess the *change* in mood caused by exposure to the film. The objective of this second study was to find out whether the affective impact caused by exposure to the film was related to identification with the characters (see, Davis et al, 1987), and the following hypothesis was established:

H2: To the extent that viewers identify with the characters in a dramatic film, they will experience a greater increase in negative affect from viewing the film.

We also set out to analyze the relationship between identification with characters and the cognitive elaboration or reflection deployed during the viewing of the film. As can be inferred from the theoretical approach of Cohen (2001), a positive relationship is expected between the two variables, and we advanced the following hypothesis:

H3a: To the extent that viewers identify with the characters in a dramatic film, they will experience greater elaboration during viewing.

According to Slater and Rouner (2002), identification with characters impedes counterarguing, and therefore a negative relation is posed between identification and the production of critical commentaries with regard to the message of the narrative. To test this idea, we had the participants in Study 2 list their thoughts immediately after viewing the film (thought-listing technique) and then the positive, neutral or negative character of the cognitive responses was evaluated (creating a polarity index) (see also, de Graaf et al, 2009b). In this context, the following hypothesis was posed:

H3b: To the extent that viewers identify with the characters in a dramatic film, they will experience fewer negative cognitive responses during viewing (the total polarity of all cognitive responses will become more positive).

Finally, with Study 3 we sought to verify whether identification with characters explains the persuasive impact caused by the viewing of a film (*A Day Without A Mexican*) which has been explicitly created by its director (Sergio Arau, in 2004) to provoke a change in the image of immigration in receiving societies<sup>1</sup>. By means of an experimental study we wished to test whether exposure to the film in question had a significant effect on attitudes towards immigration, on beliefs about the consequences of immigration in receiving societies and on emotions towards immigrants. Next, we analyzed the relationship between identification

with characters and these dependent variables. Therefore, the following hypotheses were established:

- H4: Exposure to the film *A Day Without A Mexican* (which promotes a favorable image of immigration), will generate film-consistent positive attitudes toward immigration.
- H5: The relationship between exposure to the film *A Day Without A Mexican* and film-consistent positive attitudes toward immigration will be mediated by identification with characters.

## **Study 1, Method**

### *Participants*

A convenience sample was obtained composed of 300 individuals (64.7% women;  $M_{age} = 28.69$  years,  $SD = 10.47$ ). The participants were interviewed coming out of several movie theaters where the films selected for the research were being shown.

### *Design and procedure*

The interviewers (10 students of the University of Salamanca) went to the movie theaters where the films were showing at two different times (afternoon and evening). After the film was shown they waited at the exit of the theater and handed a copy of the questionnaire to the individuals who agreed to respond to it.

The feature-length films were selected by the research team taking into account two parameters: that they were commercial successes at the time the research was carried out and that they pertained to different genres (comedy, thriller and drama). Based on these criteria, the following films were selected: *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (comedy, 108 minutes, produced in the UK in 2004, directed by Beeban Kidron), *El Lobo (The Wolf)* (thriller, 122 minutes, produced in Spain in 2004, directed by Miguel Courtois) and *The Sea Inside* (drama, 125 minutes, produced in Spain in 2004, directed by Alejandro Amenábar (information obtained from *The Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/>).

### *Variables and instruments*

*Mood.* The PANAS (*Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule*; Watson, Clark and Tellegen, 1988) scale was used to evaluate the mood of the individuals upon leaving the movie theater. This instrument assesses mood (positive and negative affectivity) fixing a determined time interval

Table 1. *Principal components factor analysis (Oblimin Rotation) of the identification with characters scale (Study 1).*

Items	Factors	
	1	2
• I thought I was like the characters or very similar to them	.93	
• I thought that I would like to be like or act like the characters	.85	
• I identified with the characters	.83	
• I felt “as if I were one of the characters”	.82	
• I had the impression that I was really experiencing the story of the characters	.72	
• I felt as if I “formed part of” the story	.65	
• I myself have experienced the emotional reactions of the characters	.61	
• I understood the characters’ way of acting, thinking or feeling		.83
• I tried to see things from the point of view of the characters		.80
• I tried to imagine the characters’ feelings, thoughts and reactions		.80
• I understood the characters’ feelings or emotions		.74
• I was worried about what was going to happen to the characters		.67
• I felt emotionally involved with the characters’ feelings		.55
• I imagined how I would act if I found myself in the place of the protagonists		.48
Eigenvalue	7.10	1.39
% Explained Variance	50.76	9.94

*Note:* Only factor loadings equal to or higher than .30 are included.

(in the present study the interval used was “at this time.” The PANAS scale has 20 emotional terms grouped into two dimensions, which yield two indicators, one of positive affect ( $\alpha = .80$ ) and the other of negative affect ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

*Identification with characters.* This was evaluated using the EDI scale by Igartua and Páez (1998)<sup>2</sup>. This scale is made up of 14 items, and the response format is a 5-point intensity scale (ranging from 1 = not at all, to 5 = very much). Principal components factor analysis was carried out with oblique rotation (oblimin method). This analysis extracted two factors that together explained 60.71% of the variance (see results and scale items in Table 1). The first factor was composed of 7 items that refer to the experience of becoming the character and the loss of self-awareness ( $\alpha = .90$ ). The second factor was also composed of 7 items, linked to the cognitive and emotional empathic reactions to the characters ( $\alpha = .86$ ). The correlation between the two factors was very high ( $r(292) = .68, p < .001$ ). Taking as a reference the results of exploratory factor analysis, we ran a second-order confirmatory factor analysis using the AMOS program (Byrne, 2001). In this analysis it was assumed that

identification with characters would be a second-order latent factor, explained in turn by two first order latent factors (cognitive and emotional empathy, and the sensation of becoming the character or merging). The results of this analysis were statistically satisfactory, as we obtained the following goodness-of-fit indices:  $\chi^2(72, N = 300) = 222.89, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 3.09, GFI = .91, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .08$ . Based on this result we created an overall indicator of identification with characters ( $\alpha = .92$ ), using the simple sum of the scores obtained on the 14 items making up the scale.

*Evaluation of the film.* Enjoyment was rated by a single item: “to what extent did you like the film?” (ranging from 0 = I didn’t like it at all, to 10 = I liked it very much). The participants also filled out an aesthetic assessment scale by means of a semantic differential composed of 7 bipolar 5-point scales: unpleasant-pleasant, bad-good, fictitious-realistic, pretty-ugly, boring-entertaining, tense-relaxed and sad-happy. The aesthetic assessment scale was used to test whether the films viewed by the participants received different assessments according to the genre to which they pertained.

## Results

Significant differences were found among the audience attending the three films in the variables gender ( $\chi^2(2, N = 291) = 21.41, p < .001$ ) and age ( $F(2, 297) = 4.65, p < .010, \eta_p^2 = .030$ ). The effect of these variables was thus controlled for statistically in the subsequent analysis.

The differential impact of the three films was tested on enjoyment, aesthetic assessment, mood induction and identification with characters using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), including gender and age as covariables. As was expected, there were significant differences in the negative affect ( $F(2, 283) = 33.80, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .193$ ), and in the aesthetic assessment of the films (see Table 2). Moreover, the perception of enjoyment ( $F(2, 286) = 17.34, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .108$ ) and identification with characters ( $F(2, 281) = 18.14, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .114$ ) were higher among the spectators who had seen the drama.

In order to determine the role played by identification with characters in explaining the enjoyment of the films (hypothesis 1), four partial correlation analysis were carried out (controlling for gender and age). Overall, and supporting H1, a strong positive correlation was observed between identification with the characters and enjoyment ( $r_{\text{partial}}(280) = .51, p < .001$ ). For its part, the analysis differentiated by film showed a positive and significant association between the two variables for *The Sea Inside* ( $r_{\text{partial}}(85) = .57, p < .001$ ), *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* ( $r_{\text{partial}}(93) = .50, p < .001$ ) and *El Lobo* ( $r_{\text{partial}}(90) = .26, p < .005$ ).

Table 2. Differential impact of Feature-Length Films on identification with characters, enjoyment, aesthetic evaluation and mood. Analysis of covariance, controlling for gender and age (Study 1).

	BJ		EL		SI		F	df	p	$\eta_p^2$
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD				
Identification with characters (14–70)	46.36 <sup>a</sup>	13.15	39.47 <sup>a</sup>	10.66	49.49 <sup>b</sup>	10.88	18.14	2, 281	.000	.114
Enjoyment:										
• To what extent did you like the film (0–10)	7.73 <sup>a</sup>	1.92	7.87 <sup>a</sup>	1.29	8.90 <sup>b</sup>	1.12	17.34	2, 286	.000	.108
Aesthetic evaluation:										
• Unpleasant (1)–Pleasant (5)	4.52 <sup>a</sup>	0.74	3.40 <sup>b</sup>	1.07	3.95 <sup>c</sup>	1.02	29.25	2, 286	.000	.170
• Bad (1)–Good (5)	3.64 <sup>a</sup>	1.10	4.06 <sup>b</sup>	0.99	4.62 <sup>c</sup>	0.60	27.35	2, 286	.000	.161
• Fictitious (1)–Realistic (5)	2.97 <sup>a</sup>	1.23	4.31 <sup>b</sup>	1.05	4.64 <sup>c</sup>	0.78	65.85	2, 286	.000	.315
• Pretty (1)–Ugly (5)	2.23 <sup>a</sup>	1.12	2.93 <sup>b</sup>	1.01	1.91 <sup>c</sup>	1.11	17.83	2, 286	.000	.111
• Boring (1)–Entertaining (5)	4.19 <sup>a</sup>	1.25	3.41 <sup>b</sup>	0.98	3.69 <sup>c</sup>	0.92	11.53	2, 286	.000	.075
• Tense (1)–Relaxed (5)	3.85 <sup>a</sup>	1.21	2.32 <sup>b</sup>	1.05	2.76 <sup>c</sup>	1.16	43.26	2, 286	.000	.232
• Sad (1)–Happy (5)	4.35 <sup>a</sup>	0.98	2.44 <sup>b</sup>	0.94	1.89 <sup>c</sup>	1.25	149.26	2, 286	.000	.511
Mood:										
• Positive affect	25.85 <sup>a</sup>	7.80	28.29 <sup>b</sup>	6.23	28.01 <sup>c</sup>	7.67	2.55	2, 276	.079	.018
• Negative affect	13.61 <sup>a</sup>	5.29	20.77 <sup>b</sup>	7.93	18.94 <sup>b</sup>	6.41	33.80	2, 283	.000	.193

Note: Feature-length Films: BJ (*Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*), EL (*El lobo*), SI (*The Sea Inside*). The means that do not share the same superscript letter are differentiated from each other with a significance level of  $p < .05$  (comparisons among the films).

## Discussion

The results of Study 1 lead us to conclude that identification with characters is an important factor for explaining the enjoyment of feature-length films of different genres, which supports hypothesis 1. Furthermore, it was observed that identification with the characters and enjoyment were greater among the individuals who had seen the dramatic film (*The Sea Inside*).

## Study 2, Method

### *Participants*

Fifty-four Communication students of the University of Salamanca (56.6% women;  $M_{age} = 23.44$  years,  $SD = 4.01$ ) participated. All the participants had Spanish nationality and participated in the study voluntarily, obtaining academic credit for doing so. They were informed that they were going to take part in a study of film reception, but were not told the title of the film.

### *Design and procedure*

The film was viewed in a hall for audiovisual projection of the University of Salamanca. Immediately before and immediately after viewing the film, the participants had to fill out a mood evaluation scale. After viewing, the participants carried out a thought-listing technique and filled out several self-applied scales. The film chosen for this study, *Poniente* (directed by Chus Gutiérrez, 2002), pertains to the drama genre and the main theme deals with the labor exploitation of immigrants (see <http://www.imdb.com>). Only two of those participating in the study had seen the film previously and they were dropped from the analysis.

### *Variables and instruments*

*Mood.* The PANAS (Watson et al., 1988) scale was administered immediately before (pre-test) and immediately after (post-test) viewing. In both cases, mood was analyzed using the time interval *at the present moment*. Two mood indicators were obtained: positive affect ( $a$  pre-test = .84,  $a$  post-test = .84) and negative affect ( $a$  pre-test = .86,  $a$  post-test = .88). An indicator called “induction of positive affect” was created by subtracting the pre-test positive affect from the post-test positive affect; and an indicator called “induction of negative affect” was created by subtracting the negative affect of the pre-test from the negative affect of the post-test.

*Identification with characters.* This was evaluated with the EDI scale of Igartua and Páez (1998) ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

*Cognitive responses.* These were assessed using the thought-listing technique (Slater et al., 2006). The students were asked to “write down all the thoughts, ideas or reflections that the film you have just seen aroused, that is, those impressions you had while viewing it.” Taking each of the ideas written down as a unit of analysis, two analysts evaluated the number of written cognitive responses, the number of words contained in each response, and the polarity of the cognitive response in relation to the film: a critical or negative comment (value  $-1$ , e. g., “The character Cuca didn’t really work that well, since although the way she treated the immigrants was different ...”), an ambivalent, non-evaluative or descriptive comment (value  $0$ , e. g., “The film tells us that we all have the same roots”) or a favorable comment (value  $1$ , e. g., “I thought the plot was good; I believe it is an important topic that we are now experiencing”). An indicator was created called “complexity of the cognitive responses” by dividing the number of written words by the total number of cognitive responses (Adrián and Igartua, 1996; Pennebaker, Mehl and Niederhoffer, 2003).

Fifty percent of the questionnaires were selected at random and the cognitive responses contained in them were coded independently by two analysts. As a result of this analysis, the following intercoder reliability values were obtained: number of written cognitive responses ( $r = .99$ ,  $p < .001$ ), number of written words ( $r = .92$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and polarity of the cognitive responses (Cohen’s Kappa =  $.74$ ). The students wrote a total of 198 cognitive responses, for a mean of 4.85 ideas per participant, and an average of 16.17 written words in each cognitive response.

*Cognitive elaboration.* Petty and Cacioppo (1986) have defined cognitive elaboration as a process of reflection on the contents of a persuasive message. In the present study, a 5-item scale was employed: “I have reflected on the topic it dealt with,” “I have thought about the situation and the motivations of the characters,” “I have tried to see how the plot of the film relates to other topics that interest me,” “I have tried to reach some conclusions about the main theme of the film,” and “I have tried not to think about it too much and let myself be transported by the film” (ranging from 1 = not at all, to 5 = very much). The items used to construct this scale were taken from a previous study (Igartua and Páez, 1997) and were meant precisely for collecting information about the intensity or degree of reflection deployed by participants about different elements of the film while viewing it. Principal components factor analysis (with varimax rotation) extracted two factors that explained

66.68% of the variance. The first factor was composed of the first four items (with loads above .67), whereas the second factor comprised only one item (“I have tried not to think about it too much and let myself be transported by the film”). The four items making up the first factor were added together to obtain an indicator of the elaboration or reflection that took place during the viewing of the film ( $\alpha = .75$ ).

*Enjoyment.* The participants were asked: “To what extent did you like the film?” (ranging from 0 = I didn’t like it at all, to 10 = I liked it very much).

## Results

It was found that viewing the film *Poniente* had a significant affective impact (see table 3): the participants showed a statistically significant increase of negative affect from the pre-test measure to the post-test measure ( $t(46) = -6.45, p < .001, d = 1.106$ ). It was also found that the induction of negative affect was associated with greater enjoyment ( $r(44) = .48, p < .001$ ). The association between induction of positive affect and enjoyment was not as intense and was only marginally significant ( $r(43) = .21, p < .078$ ).

As predicted by H2, identification with characters was associated with a greater induction of negative affect ( $r(43) = .45, p < .001$ ), but was only marginally associated with the induction of positive affect ( $r(40) = .22, p < .077$ ). Furthermore, identification with characters was associated with greater enjoyment ( $r(44) = .58, p < .001$ ). In addition, the findings support H3a, since identification with characters was associated with greater cognitive elaboration ( $r(45) = .55, p < .001$ ). Moreover, it was also associated with greater cognitive productivity in the thought-listing technique ( $r(45) = .23, p < .053$ ), and developing higher quality cognitive responses ( $r(45) = .19, p < .091$ ) (though the last two results were marginally significant). However, no significant correlation was observed between identification with characters and the polarity of the cognitive responses ( $r(45) = .06, p = .330$ ), as posited in H3b.

Table 3. *Affective impact caused by viewing the Feature-Length Film ‘Poniente’. Student’s t for related samples (Study 2).*

Mood indicators	Pre-test		Post-test		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
• Positive affect (10–50)	23.32	6.37	23.41	6.62	-0.12	45	.901	0.013
• Negative affect (10–50)	14.48	5.75	22.04	7.77	-6.45	46	.000	1.106

Table 4. *Identification with characters and cognitive and affective processes. Pearson's correlation coefficients (Study 2).*

Scales	Identification with characters	Enjoyment	Induction of Positive Affect	Induction of Negative Affect
- Identification with characters	—	.58 ***	.22 +	.45 ***
- "I tried not to think too much but rather let myself be carried away by the film"	.06	-.08	.01	-.26 *
- Cognitive elaboration	.55 ***	.39 **	.30 *	.45 ***
Thought listing technique:				
- No. of written cognitive responses	.15	.02	-.08	-.09
- No. of written words	.23 +	.21 +	-.14	.09
- Complexity of cognitive responses	.19 +	.31 *	-.00	.25 *
- Polarity of cognitive responses.	.06	.27 *	.11	.20 +

+  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

## Discussion

The results of Study 2 show that viewing the dramatic film *Poniente* induced a negative mood state in the participants and that this was associated with greater enjoyment, which is consistent with previous research and the *drama paradox* (Oliver, 1993). It was also found that the induction of a negative mood was most intense among those individuals who had most identified with the film's characters. Third, identification with the characters was associated with greater cognitive elaboration and with developing a reflective process of greater quality or complexity. Hypotheses 2 and 3a were thus confirmed. Finally, identification with characters was not linked to the polarity of the cognitive responses, which means that Hypothesis 3b could not be confirmed (see *Conclusions and General Discussion*).

## Study 3, Method

### *Participants*

Ninety-three students of the University of Salamanca (55.9% women;  $M_{age} = 22.61$  years,  $SD = 1.90$ ) participated in the study. All the students had Spanish nationality and participated in the study voluntarily, obtaining academic credit for doing so. They were informed that they were going to take part in a study on film reception, but not informed about the title of the film or its theme.

### *Design and procedure*

The research was a randomized experiment, with a two group design. The film was presented under two conditions. In the control condition the participants filled out a questionnaire about their attitudes, beliefs and emotions towards immigrants before watching the film in order to establish attitudinal measures without having watched the movie. In the treatment condition, all the dependent measures were completed after watching the film. Therefore, the *independent variable* was related to the moment when attitudes, beliefs, and emotions relating to immigrants were measured: before (control condition) or after (treatment condition) viewing the film, the participants being randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. Butler et al. (1995) used a similar design to analyze the attitudinal impact of the feature film *JFK* (see also, de Graaf et al, 2009b).

The film was shown in a movie theatre (the Film Library of Castile and Leon, Spain). So that the participants would not realize the real objective of the research, two different questionnaire models were de-

signed (and two showings of the film), the only difference being the placement of the dependent variables (attitudes, beliefs, and emotions relating to immigrants) within it. In addition, all participants completed a measure of mood (immediately before and after viewing the film) and a measure of identification with the film's characters (after viewing the movie; see below, *Variables and Instruments* section).

The film used in the research, *A Day Without A Mexican*, is a Mexico-US co-production directed by Sergio Arau in 2004, with a running time of 95 minutes. Regarding its genre, it has been classified as a comedy, a satire and a *mockumentary*, and it concerns the lives of immigrants in receiving societies (<http://www.imdb.com>). None of the participants had seen the film previously. In order to evaluate the implicit message of the film with respect to immigration, a pilot study was done in which 15 persons participated (80% women,  $M_{age} = 28.07$  years) who had previously seen the film. The results of this pilot study showed that the film projects a positive attitude towards immigration (80% of the participants considered it as such). Regarding its implicit beliefs, the participants considered that the following ideas were very present in the film (on a scale ranging from 1 "not at all present" to 5 "very present"): "in general, every society needs immigrant workers" ( $M = 4.47, SD = 0.74$ ), "it is difficult for a society without immigrants to function well and make progress" ( $M = 4.33, SD = 0.72$ ), "immigrants do jobs that native-born citizens do not want" ( $M = 4.27, SD = 0.79$ ), "in general, immigration contributes to the development of the host country" ( $M = 4.27, SD = 0.88$ ) and "an increase in immigrants favors the economy of the country receiving them" ( $M = 3.93, SD = 0.79$ ). On the other hand, they considered that the following ideas were not very present in the film: "an increase in immigration favors an increase in crime" ( $M = 1.60, SD = 0.91$ ), "by accepting lower wages, foreign workers bring down the salaries of native-born citizens" ( $M = 1.93, SD = 0.79$ ), "there is a close relationship between immigration and a decline in law and order" ( $M = 1.53, SD = 0.64$ ), "immigrants take away jobs from native-born citizens" ( $M = 2.20, SD = 1.08$ ), "in general, immigrants cause many problems in the society that takes them in" ( $M = 1.93, SD = 0.59$ ) and "immigrants occupy jobs that should be occupied by native-born citizens" ( $M = 1.93, SD = 0.96$ ). The dominant emotions towards immigrants were sympathy ( $M = 4.07, SD = 0.88$ ) and admiration ( $M = 3.13, SD = 1.06$ ), with the following emotions considered as having little presence in the film: fear ( $M = 1.27, SD = 0.45$ ), mistrust ( $M = 1.60, SD = 0.73$ ), lack of safety ( $M = 1.60, SD = 0.73$ ), and indifference ( $M = 1.93, SD = 0.88$ ).

*Variables and instruments*

*Mood.* The PANAS (Watson et al., 1988) scale was administered immediately before and after viewing the film, two indicators being obtained at each time: positive affect ( $\alpha$  pre-test = .75,  $\alpha$  post-test = .83) and negative affect ( $\alpha$  pre-test = .82,  $\alpha$  post-test = .80). As in Study 2, two indicators of affective change were created: induction of positive affect and induction of negative affect.

*Identification with characters.* This was assessed using the EDI scale by Igartua and Páez (1998) ( $\alpha$  = .91).

*Beliefs and opinions concerning immigration.* We used a scale with 11 statements of different opinions about immigration in general. It asked for the degree of agreement or disagreement (ranging from 1 = totally disagree, to 5 = totally agree) with each statement (the same items used in the pilot study). Principal component factor analysis with orthogonal rotation (varimax) extracted two factors that explained 51.21% of the variance. Based on this analysis, two indicators of beliefs were created: “immigration causes problems: an increase in crime and unfair competition with native-born workers” ( $\alpha$  = .80) and “immigration contributes economically to the host country” ( $\alpha$  = .70).

*Attitude towards immigration.* The participants were asked the following: “As you know, all developed countries receive immigrants. Do you think that, in general, immigration is more positive or more negative for these countries?” (ranging from 0 = very negative, to 10 = very positive).

*Emotions towards immigrants.* We used a scale based on the Subtle and Blatant Prejudice Scale by Pettigrew and Meertens (1995), translated and validated for the Spanish context by Navas, Pumares, Sánchez-Miranda et al. (2004). This version of the scale has a sub-scale of subtle affective prejudice, which measures the expression of positive emotions towards the exogroup (admiration and sympathy), and a sub-scale of subtle negative emotions, which measures the expression of non-openly hostile negative emotions towards the exogroup (fear, lack of safety, mistrust, discomfort and indifference). In the present study, the participants were asked the following: “To what extent do immigrants arouse the following emotions in you: fear, admiration, mistrust, lack of safety, sympathy, discomfort, and indifference? (ranging from 1 = not at all, to 5 = very much). Principal component factor analysis with orthogonal rotation

Table 5. Effect of exposure to the Feature-Length Film 'A Day Without A Mexican' on attitudes, beliefs and emotions towards immigrants. Analysis of variance (Study 3).

	Control group		Treatment group		F	g.l.	p	$\eta_p^2$
	M	SD	M	SD				
Attitude towards immigration (0–10)	6.05	1.66	6.88	1.55	6.32	1, 90	.014	.066
Beliefs about the consequences of immigration:								
• "Immigration causes problems: an increase in crime and unfair competition for native-born workers" (1–5)	2.38	0.73	2.19	0.70	1.61	1, 91	.207	.017
• "Immigration contributes economically to the host country" (1–5)	3.53	0.64	3.83	0.62	4.94	1, 91	.029	.052
Emotions towards immigrants:								
• Negative emotions (1–5)	2.12	0.84	1.98	0.71	0.36	1, 89	.368	.009
• Positive emotions (1–5)	3.37	0.81	3.54	0.71	1.15	1, 91	.286	.012
Identification with characters (14–70)	40.81	11.02	37.65	9.89	1.91	1, 82	.170	.023

(varimax) extracted two dimensions that explained 67.53% of the variance. Based on this information, two indicators were created: negative ( $a = .87$ ) and positive emotions towards immigrants ( $a = .62$ ).

## Results

### *Preliminary analyses*

No differences were observed between the control and treatment groups in regard to age ( $t(91) = -1.17, p = .242, d = 0.245$ ), gender ( $\chi^2(1, N = 91) = 2.31, p = .128$ ), identification with characters ( $t(82) = 1.38, p = .170, d = 0.301$ ), or induction of positive affect ( $t(82) = 1.28, p = .204, d = 0.282$ ) and negative affect ( $t(79) = -0.76, p = .449, d = 0.166$ ).

### *Persuasive impact of the film 'A Day Without A Mexican'*

As predicted by H4, exposure to the film *A Day Without A Mexican* had a significant impact on attitudes towards immigration ( $F(1, 90) = 6.32, p < .014, \eta_p^2 = .066$ ): the participants in the treatment group showed a more positive attitude than the participants in the control group (Table 5). Moreover, the students in the treatment group showed a greater degree of agreement than the students in the control group with the belief "immigration contributes economically to the host country" ( $F(1, 91) = 4.94, p < .029, \eta_p^2 = .052$ ).

### *The impact of identification with characters on attitudes, beliefs and emotions regarding immigration*

To address hypothesis 5, we compared the correlation between identification with characters and attitudes, beliefs and emotions towards immigrants in the participants in the treatment group and the participants in the control group (in this case, to observe the impact of previous attitudes, beliefs and emotions regarding immigrants on the degree of identification with the characters of the film) (Table 6). Analysis of the data of the treatment group showed that the individuals that most identified with the characters of *A Day Without A Mexican* showed a more positive attitude towards immigration ( $r(43) = .38, p < .004$ ), greater agreement with the belief "immigration contributes economically to the host country" ( $r(44) = .33, p < .012$ ), felt more positive emotions towards immigrants ( $r(43) = .29, p < .023$ ) and fewer negative emotions towards them ( $r(44) = -.26, p < .040$ ). However, neither of the correlations between

Table 6. *Association between identification with characters and the attitudes, beliefs and emotions regarding immigrants in the control and treatment groups. Pearson's correlation coefficients (Study 3).*

	Identification with characters	
	Control group	Treatment group
• Attitude towards immigration	.12	.38 **
• “Immigration causes problems: an increase in crime and unfair competition for native-born workers”	-.01	-.15
• “Immigration contributes economically to the host country”	.09	.33 *
• Negative emotions towards immigrants	-.02	-.26 *
• Positive emotions towards immigrants	.08	.29 *

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

identification with characters and the attitudinal and emotional variables mentioned was statistically significant in the control group. These findings support H5.

## Discussion

The results of Study 3 allow us to conclude that the experimental exposure to the film *A Day Without A Mexican* reinforced a positive attitude towards immigration and beliefs about the positive contribution of immigrants to the economies of receiving countries (thus, H4 was supported). It also shows that identification with characters plays an important role in explaining the incidental persuasive impact caused by the viewing of the film (which means that H5 was supported).

## Conclusions and general discussion

Identification with characters has been defined as a multidimensional construct, its basic dimensions being cognitive and emotional empathy, and the sensation of becoming the character or merging (Cohen, 2001, 2006; de Graaf et al., 2009a; Igartua and Páez, 1998; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Oatley, 1999). The results obtained in the three studies support the centrality of this construct in analyzing the effects of media entertainment, in particular fictional feature films. It was confirmed empirically that identification with characters not only gives rise to enjoyment of audiovisual narration (hypothesis 1), but also contributes to explaining its affective (hypothesis 2) and cognitive impact (hypothesis 3a). These results are in agreement with the proposal of Cohen (2001, 2006) and

also with the results of empirical research studies to this end (Busselle and Bilandzic, 2009; Davis et al, 1987; de Wied et al., 1994).

The results concerning the incidental persuasive impact of exposure to a feature film with a message favorable to immigration are congruent with previous research into the effects of exposure to commercial audiovisual productions (Butler et al., 1995; Igartua and Páez, 1997; Schofield and Pavelchak, 1989; Slater et al., 2006), and those carried out in the field of education-entertainment (Wilkin et al., 2007). The results of Study 3 are also important in the context of research into ethnic prejudice, television and vicarious parasocial interaction (see, Müller, 2009; Ortiz and Harwood, 2007). Batson et al. (1997) have pointed out that an effective way to improve attitudes towards a stigmatized group (ethnic minorities, etc.) is to promote empathy with a member of that group. In this sense, certain audiovisual productions (*The Colour Purple*, for example), which present the particular cases of persons forming part of the stigmatized groups, can be used to improve the image of these groups by allowing audiences to empathize with the characters; this then leads to attitudinal changes. The results of Study 3 concur with this approach, since exposure to a feature film presenting a positive image of immigrants caused a change in the attitudes and beliefs regarding that group (hypothesis 4), and this effect was explained by identification with the characters of that film (hypothesis 5).

One of the most important results of Study 3 is the observation of a statistically significant correlation between identification with the characters in the film *A Day Without a Mexican* and positive attitudes and beliefs with regard to immigration among the participants in the treatment group, but not in the control group. Given that the individuals in the control group filled in the attitudinal measures before viewing the film, whereas the treatment group filled them in after seeing the film, the results obtained allow us to conclude that a causal connection between identification with characters and the attitudinal variables in question exists. In other words, the results allow us to refute the possibility that it was the previous attitudes and beliefs that influenced the identification with the characters in the film, providing us with a solid argument about the importance of identification in the narrative persuasion process.

The results of Study 2 allow us to confirm that identification was associated with greater reflection during reception of the film, and with developing a more complex discourse. These results are consistent with what is postulated by the explanatory models of narrative persuasion of Green and Brock (2000) and Slater and Rouner (2002). In this sense, the correlation between identification with characters and indicators of the quality (complexity of cognitive responses) and intensity of reflection (cognitive elaboration) does not necessarily mean that the reflection

would have been critical of the film's message, since the degree of counter-argumentation generated by the participants during the viewing of the film (polarity of cognitive response) was not associated with identification with characters in a statistically significant way ( $r(45) = .06$ ,  $p = .330$ ). Since a negative correlation was not observed, the results of Study 2 reveal that identification with characters is not associated with a critical approach to the arguments implicit in the film (although neither was it associated with the production of more positive cognitive responses), and therefore Hypothesis 3b could only be partially verified.

The research presented here has some limitations. In the first place, the identification with characters scale used in the three studies contained items that were formulated in a generic way (for instance, "I felt as if I were one of the characters"). In subsequent studies it would be advisable to adapt the scale used in the three studies described here by asking the participants about identification with the main character or with a specific character in the narrative. A second limitation is related to the measurement of enjoyment in the first two studies. In both cases a single item was used, in the understanding that enjoyment can be conceptualized as a kind of attitude towards an offer of media entertainment (Nabi and Krcmar, 2004). Currently, some authors have posited that a more suitable concept for referring to individuals' reactions to film productions is that of *appreciation*, given that the expression "I enjoyed this movie" can mean different things to different people (Oliver, 2008; Oliver and Bartsch, 2010). Thirdly, it should be pointed out that much of the empirical evidence is based on correlational data, though this is a common flaw in studies in this area (Chory-Assad and Cicchirillo, 2005; Chory-Assad and Yanen, 2005). In future research, experimental designs should be used in which identification with characters is manipulated, for example, through instructions (see Davis et al., 1987; de Graaf et al., 2009a).

### **Bionote**

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### **Notes**

1. This aspect has been recognized by the director in numerous interviews, especially after the impact the film in question had on the demonstrations held on May 1, 2006 by Hispanics in the US (called "A Day Without Immigrants") to protest against plans to pass new legislation on immigration that would toughen up policies on illegal aliens and those that help them (Cancino, 2006).
2. In the present study three items were eliminated from the original version to improve the internal consistency of the scale. The items eliminated were the following:

“I like the way the characters are or the way they act,” “I tried to carefully observe each of the actions or the behavior of the characters” and “I was capable of anticipating what was going to happen to the characters”.

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