Extended Abstract

The Effect of Similarity with a Transitional Role Model of an **Entertainment-Education Narrative Designed to Reduce Xenophobia. 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 in reducing xenophobia. 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 Spain (N = 294), Italy (N = 295), and Greece (N = 286) to evaluate the indirect effect of demographic similarity on identification with the protagonist through perceived similarity (H1), as well as the specific indirect effects on attitude, perceived threat, and intergroup anxiety, while including perceived similarity, identification, and cognitive elaboration as mediating mechanisms (H2). 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 this, in turn, was associated with a more positive attitude toward immigrants, with less perceived threat and intergroup anxiety. The findings are discussed in relation to the reduction of racism using EE formats that enhance intergroup media contact.

Keywords: intergroup communication, racism, prejudice, immigration, entertainmenteducation, transitional character, narrative persuasion, character-audience similarity, identification with the protagonist, cognitive elaboration.

Migratory movements generally have to face 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 Spain, Greece, and Italy (European Commission, 2018; European Commission, 2019).

The strategies commonly used to prejudice toward immigrant populations (information campaigns) are

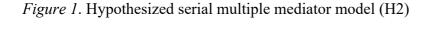
frequently ineffective because they induce reactance and counterarguing, and suffer from selective exposure (Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016). On the other hand, other, more subtle forms of persuasion through narrative messages may be more effective for favoring intergroup media contact (Murrar & Brauer, 2018, 2019; Park, 2012). The meta-analysis carried out by Banas et (2020)concluded that positive intergroup media contact (showing collaborative or cooperative behaviors, or a nonstereotyped image of stigmatized groups) reduces prejudice.

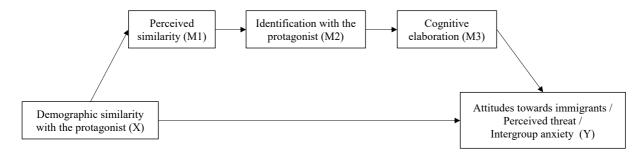
Entertainment-education (EE) formats are one of the important narrative persuasion strategies in this field (Müller, 2009; Murrar & Brauer, 2018; Siem et al., 2021). This type of media intervention usually includes characters playing positive and negative roles as well as transitional characters. A transitional 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 features of transitional characters that could enhance identification in the audience, one of the most relevant mediating mechanisms to explain the attitudinal impact (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002).

Theoretical models of narrative persuasion have established that the similarity with the protagonist can be a relevant factor to increase identification. However, the meta-analysis review by Tukachinsky (2014)concluded that (demographic) similarity did not significantly influence identification. although it did influence perceived similarity. It has also been observed that perceived similarity can act

psychological trigger for identification (Guerrero-Martín & Igartua, 2021; Ooms et al., 2019; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). In this context, the present study proposes a mediation model in which demographic similarity has an effect on perceived similarity, which, in turn, induces greater identification with the protagonist (H1).

Previous studies on EE prejudice reduction have shown that identification is a relevant mechanism to achieve an attitudinal impact (Müller, 2009: Murrar & Brauer, 2018). However, why identification leads to this impact on attitudes has not been investigated to date. The current work addresses this question by analyzing the role of cognitive elaboration. 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, 1996). Cohen (2001) points out that identification constitutes a process of temporal involvement, making it possible that cognitive elaboration will increase during the reception of a message. The role of cognitive elaboration has already been studied in other works on EE in the context of health promotion (Igartua & Vega, 2016). However, their role in research on reducing prejudice through EE messages has not been analyzed. The current study analyzes the effect of the similarity with a transitional character who is the protagonist of an EE narrative message focused on the reduction of xenophobia. It is hypothesized (H2) that demographic similarity will increase the perceived similarity, which will turn be associated with greater identification. This process, in turn, will be associated with greater cognitive elaboration, which will lead to a greater attitudinal impact (Figure 1).





Method

To test our predictions, an online experiment was conducted using Qualtrics in three European countries simultaneously: Spain (N = 294), Italy (N = 295), and Greece (N = 286) (Appendix 1). In each of these three countries, quotas were set based on age, educational level, gender. employment status, to obtain different demographic profiles.

The online questionnaire consisted blocks: three pre-test measures, experimental manipulation, and post-test measures. The first block collected sociodemographic information on 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, national identification, and frequency of contact with immigrants. The participants were then subjected to experimental manipulation by viewing an audiovisual piece of EE fiction (see Appendix 2).

The independent variable in this study was demographic similarity with the protagonist (a transitional character), adopting a two-group randomized design. To generate the similarity with the protagonist of the message, the variables gender, age, employment status, and educational level were varied in the messages, resulting in 16 different versions of the audiovisual piece for each country

Results

Randomization was successful with regard to demographic, ideology, national identification with the country, and contact with immigrants, in all countries. In all three countries, it was also observed that people assigned to the high-similarity condition showed greater perceived

⁽thus a total of 48 messages) (see Appendix 2). In the high-similarity condition, the participants were exposed to a message protagonist whose had the sociodemographic characteristics as them. For example, an unemployed young (18-39year-old) woman with a low academic level saw an audiovisual piece whose protagonist was an unemployed young (35-year-old) woman with a low academic level¹. On the other hand, in the low-similarity condition, a participant with the profile of an young (18–39-year-old) unemployed woman with low academic level watched an audiovisual piece whose protagonist was an employed middle-aged (50-year-old) man with a high academic level². After viewing the audiovisual EE message, the post-test measures were presented using questions to evaluate the effectiveness experimental manipulation of demographic similarity (perceived similarity), as well as measures on identification with protagonist, cognitive elaboration, attitudes toward immigration, intergroup anxiety, and perceived threat (see Appendix 3).

¹ Link to video (example of "high-similarity condition"): https://youtu.be/5LgaMudR5E4

² Link to video (example of "low-similarity condition"): https://youtu.be/fRGRuITYMRc

similarity with the protagonist of the message than those assigned to the lowsimilarity condition (see Table 1).

However, demographic similarity did not significantly influence identification with the protagonist.

Table 1. Effect of the experimental condition (low versus high similarity with the protagonist) on perceived similarity and identification. Student's t test

(a) Country: Greece

		Mean	SD	t	df	p
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		284	206
	High-similarity condition	2.83	0.89	-1.26		.206

(b) Country: Italy

		Mean	SD	t	df	р
Perceived similarity with the	Low-similarity condition	3.65	1.41	-5.13	293	.000
protagonist	High-similarity condition	4.45	1.26	-3.13		.000
Identification with	Low-similarity condition	2.92	0.92	0.42	293	
the protagonist	High-similarity condition	2.96	0.90	-0.43		.665

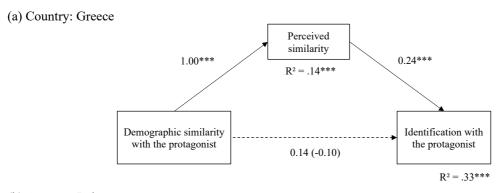
(c) Country: Spain

		Mean	SD	t	df	р
Perceived similarity with the	Low-similarity condition	3.40	1.30	-7.93	292	.000
protagonist	High-similarity condition	4.48	1.00			.000
Identification with	Low-similarity condition	2.83	0.91	0.04	202	244
the protagonist	High-similarity condition	2.73	0.89	0.94	292	.344

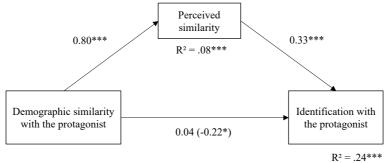
To test the first hypothesis, the PROCESS macro was used (model 4, using 10,000 bootstrapping samples to generate 95% confidence intervals by the percentile method; Hayes, 2018). In all three

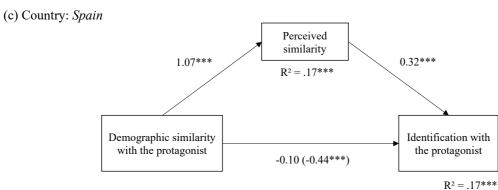
countries, it was observed that demographic similarity increased identification through perceived similarity, thus confirming H1 (see Table 2 and Figure 2).

Figure 2. Results of the mediation analysis (H1). PROCESS (model 4)



(b) Country: Italy





Note. The figures show the unstandardized regression coefficients, B. The coefficients of the direct effects appear in parentheses. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant coefficients. + p < 0.10, *** p < 0.01.

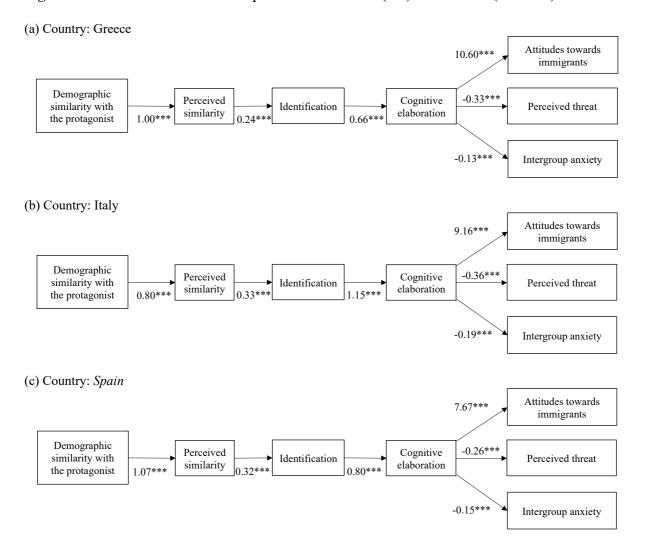
Table 2. Indirect effects of demographic similarity with the protagonist on identification through perceived similarity. Mediational models with PROCESS (model 4)

Indirect effects	Effect	Boot SE	Boot 95% CI
Similarity → Perceived similarity → Identification			
Greece	0.24	0.06	[0.135, 0.379]
Italy	0.27	0.06	[0.155, 0.399]
Spain	0.34	0.05	[0.239, 0.459]

Note: We used 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals based on 10,000 bootstrap samples for statistical inference of the indirect effects. An 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 indirect effect is equal to 0, that is, there is not an association between the variables involved (Hayes, 2018).

Finally, to test hypothesis 2, a serial multiple mediation model (model 6) was perceived used, including similarity, identification, and cognitive elaboration as mediating variables. The results were also convergent in all three countries (see Table 3 and Figure 3), revealing that identification with the protagonist was associated with greater cognitive elaboration, which, in turn, was associated with a more positive attitude toward immigrants, less intergroup anxiety, and less perceived threat.

Figure 3. Results of the serial multiple mediator model (H2). PROCESS (model 6)



Note. The figures show the unstandardized regression coefficients, $B_{+} p < .10$, ** p < .01, *** p < .01.

Conclusions and Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this project is the first to focus on reducing prejudice toward immigrants 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 (e.g.,

Guerrero-Martín & Igartua, 2019), 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 immigrants but evolved toward a positive position.

Table 3. Specific indirect effects of demographic similarity with the protagonist on attitudes toward immigrants, perceived threat, and intergroup anxiety through perceived similarity, identification, and cognitive elaboration. Serial multiple mediation models with PROCESS (model 6)

Specific indirect effects	Effect	Boot SE	Boot 95% CI
Similarity → Perceived similarity → Identification →			
Cognitive elaboration → Attitudes toward			
immigrants			
Greece	1.73	0.55	[0.830, 2.959]
Italy	2.86	0.78	[1.500, 4.563]
Spain	2.14	0.57	[1.160, 3.388]
Similarity → Perceived similarity → Identification →			
Cognitive elaboration → <i>Perceived threat</i>			
Greece	-0.05	0.01	[-0.095, -0.026]
Italy	-0.11	0.03	[-0.181, -0.057]
Spain	-0.07	0.02	[-0.122, -0.037]
Similarity → Perceived similarity → Identification →			
Cognitive elaboration → <i>Intergroup anxiety</i>			
Greece	-0.02	0.00	[-0.039, -0.008]
Italy	-0.06	0.02	[-0.107, -0.025]
Spain	-0.04	0.01	[-0.074, -0.017]

Note: 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, 2018).

The results obtained were consistent among the three countries. It was found that the demographic similarity with the transitional character exerts an indirect effect on identification through the perceived similarity, a result that is in accordance with previous studies (Ooms et al., 2019; Tukachinsky, 2014). In addition, the indirect effect of demographic similarity on the dependent variables is confirmed, through three mediating mechanisms (perceived similarity, identification, and cognitive elaboration). We hereby advance

knowledge on the psychological processes that explain the impact of EE narrative messages, going beyond models that propose that a reduction of counterarguing or reactance is the catalyst for persuasive impact (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). In this sense, we consider that an EE message whose protagonist undergoes an attitudinal transformation can serve as inspiration by stimulating deep cognitive processing, so that people question their previous opinions and adjust their attitude toward immigration.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Sample Size and Power Analysis

To determine the sample size, a power analysis was carried out using the G*Power program (http://www.gpower.hhu.de) (Faul et al., 2007). The calculation of the sample size depends on several factors such as the type of design, the effect size observed in previous studies (or in meta-analysis reviews), the type I error (α), and the statistical power (1 – β). Two meta-analysis studies were considered to obtain a measure of the effect size: Banas et al. (2020), about the effect of positive mediated contact on prejudice reduction (r = -.23), and Braddock and Dillard (2016) focused on the effect of exposure to a narrative on attitudes (r = .19). Thus, assuming an effect size of .19 (Cohen's d = 0.387), an α value of .05, a power of .80, and a twogroup design, the G*Power program indicated that a sample size of 212 participants would be necessary. Assuming an effect size of r = -.23 (Cohen's d = -0.473), the G*Power program indicated that a sample size of 144 participants would be required. For this reason, the study was designed to access a sample larger than 200 participants in each country.

Appendix 2: Description of EE Narrative Message

The entertainment-educational message used as an experimental stimulus was a fictional audiovisual narrative that did not include dialogues. This was done to avoid having to create pieces for each country with different actors or actresses. The model adopted in the design of the entertainment-education message drew on the plot of the film Gran Torino (Eastwood, 2008). In this film, the protagonist evolves from a position of rejection of immigrants toward a positive, accepting attitude. This change is promoted by a series of incidents and by establishing positive contact with immigrant neighbors.

In the present study, the demographic similarity with the transitional character was manipulated, taking into account four sociodemographic variables simultaneously (gender, age, employment status, and educational level). This allowed us to create 48 audiovisual pieces (16 for each country). The present design therefore addresses one of the main criticisms of experimental research in media psychology, i.e., the use of a single message per experimental condition (Reeves et al., 2016; Slater et al., 2015). Moreover, it is important to note 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.

The produced short (duration 3:30 minutes) was entitled *Neighbors* and described the daily life of a person who presented themselves as a native of each country. Its protagonist was a transitional character who showed an initial negative attitude toward immigration but evolved toward a positive attitude. At the start of the story, it is seen how the protagonist discovers that their new neighbor has common hobbies (like skating and tea) but did not know that he was an immigrant. However, an incident occurs that causes the protagonist to discover that the new neighbor is an immigrant. When the elevator in the house breaks down, the protagonist is trapped and the new neighbor comes to their aid, thereby revealing that they are an immigrant (a person from a North African or Maghreb country). In addition, in the final part of the piece, the protagonist is observed to help the immigrant change a light bulb on the landing of his/her home. In this way, the protagonist experiences a process of cognitive dissonance that leads to a change in attitude toward immigration, resulting in a reduction in intergroup anxiety and perceived threat.

Appendix 3: Key measures

	n .:	Cronbach's α			
	Response options	Greece	Italy	Spain	
National identification	1 (strongly disagree) – 7 (strongly agree)	.612	.644	.688	
 I often think of myself as a Greek/Italian/Spanish person I consider myself a typical Greek/Italian/Spanish person I'm proud to be Greek/Italian/Spanish If someone speaks badly of Greek/Italian/Spanish people, I feel as if they have said something bad about me 					
Perceived similarity	1 (strongly disagree) – 7 (strongly agree)	.744	.808	.761	
 [protagonist's name] has demographic characteristics (such as gender or age) that are very similar to mine Considering the employment situation of [protagonist's name], I think I have many things in common with this person From what I have seen in the video, I would say that the living conditions of [protagonist's name] are very similar to mine I think [protagonist's name] has a similar level of education to mine 					
Identification with the protagonist	1 (not at all) - 5 (a lot)	.938	.933	.941	
 I felt emotionally involved with [protagonist's name]'s feelings I felt as if I were [protagonist's name] I imagined how I would act if I were [protagonist's name] I was concerned about what was happening to [protagonist's name] I understood how [protagonist's name] acts, thinks, and feels I myself experienced [protagonist's name]'s emotional reactions I tried to imagine [protagonist's name]'s feelings, thoughts, and reactions I had the impression of living [protagonist's name]'s story myself I understood [protagonist's name]'s feelings or emotions I tried to see things from [protagonist's name]'s point of view I identified with [protagonist's name] 					