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# Identification With Characters, Elaboration, and Counterarguing in Entertainment-Education Interventions Through Audiovisual Fiction

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The aim of this article is to further knowledge of the explanatory processes of narrative persuasion in the field of health communication, using data obtained in a research study of entertainment-education based on audiovisual fiction. Participating in the study were 208 young persons between the ages of 14 and 20, randomly distributed to three different groups. Each of the groups was exposed to a different episode of the Colombian television series *Revelados, desde todas las posiciones*. The results showed that greater identification with the main character of the episode transmitting a prevention message was associated with greater cognitive elaboration, which in turn led to more favorable attitudes toward the topics addressed. However, counterarguing was not observed to play a significant mediating role. The findings of this study allow us to conclude that getting people to think and reflect can help persuade them, which suggests that narrative persuasion models and dual models of rhetorical persuasion can be compatible in certain contexts, such as when messages are designed in such a way that characters make explicit arguments that endorse a prosocial message through dialogues.

Narrative persuasion models applied to the field of health communication posit that entertainment-education formats can cause changes in attitudes through identification with characters. The extended elaboration likelihood model (E-ELM; Slater & Rouner, 2002) and the entertainment overcoming resistance model (EORM; Moyer-Gusé, 2008) consider that identification reduces counterarguing, and therefore the message is assimilated by the audience with no resistance (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004). Nonetheless, empirical research on this topic is in its early stages, and it has also been observed that identification with characters stimulates or is associated with cognitive elaboration (Igartua, 2010). The aim of the present study is to contribute to this debate and analyze the relations between identification, cognitive elaboration, counterarguing, and attitudinal impact using data obtained in a research study addressing entertainment-education based on audiovisual fiction.

## Narrative Persuasion and Identification With Characters

A *narrative* has been defined as “a representation of connected events and characters that has an identifiable structure, is bounded in space and time, and contains implicit or explicit

messages about the topic being addressed” (Kreuter et al., 2007, p. 222). Empirical evidence has shown that narrative formats are more effective than nonnarrative formats (information messages) when the aim is to provide information and change attitudes regarding health topics (Murphy, Frank, Chatterjee, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2013). In this context, the field of narrative persuasion explores how information located within narratives can alter perceptions of reality (Dahlstrom, 2010).

A large part of the theoretical reflection on narrative persuasion is based on affirming that traditional persuasive messages (such as commercial advertisements) are processed differently from narratives (such as television series or movies). It is assumed that traditional persuasive messages contain lists of arguments that are presented in an explicit way, whereas narratives are thought not to contain explicit arguments but rather to illustrate them through the presentation of events, as the action is focused on the main characters in the story. Moreover, it has been noted that traditional persuasive messages show a clear educational-attitudinal goal, whereas narrative formats are presented as entertainment and are designed for enjoyment (Slater & Rouner, 2002). For these reasons, dual models of rhetorical persuasion, such as the heuristic systematic model (Chaiken, 1980) and the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), are not considered to be suitable for explaining narrative persuasion processes (Green & Brock, 2000, 2002).

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Models used in the study of narrative persuasion (and in particular the E-ELM and EORM) posit that involvement with the narrative (transportation, absorption, or narrative engagement) or with the characters (identification) are two relevant mechanisms for understanding how the persuasive process takes place (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). In fact, the findings of a recent meta-analysis demonstrated that narrative transportation and identification with characters “were the most critical components of narrative persuasion and education-entertainment effects” (Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013, p. 311). The present study focuses on the role of identification with characters as an explanatory mechanism of narrative persuasion.

Identification 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 process is linked to different aspects, such as cognitive empathy; emotional empathy; and the sensation of becoming the character or temporarily taking on his or her identity, goals, and motivations (*merging*; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Cohen (2006) posited that identification is an opportunity to try on other identities and adopt the feelings and thoughts of another. For these reasons, Moyer-Gusé (2008) pointed out that identification with characters increases the likelihood that people will accept the beliefs and attitudes implicit in fictional narratives.

Empirical research has found that identification with the main character of a narrative induces changes in beliefs and attitudes. Both when identification was manipulated through subtle modifications in the narrative text—such as changing the perspective from which the story is told (de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012; Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014) or changing the attractiveness of the main character (Hoeken & Sinkeldam, 2014)—and when this process was measured with self-report scales (Moyer-Gusé, Chung, & Jain, 2011; Murphy et al., 2013), it was observed that greater identification with the main character is associated with or predicts greater attitudinal impact.

### Identification, Counterarguing, and Cognitive Elaboration

Research in narrative persuasion has progressed over the past few years by trying to explain how narrative transportation and identification with character have an attitudinal impact. Moyer-Gusé (2008) pointed out that involvement with the characters (e.g., identification) and involvement in the narrative (e.g., transportation) reduce individuals’ resistance to counterattitudinal messages inserted into entertainment-education narratives, emphasizing mechanisms such as counterarguing, selective avoidance, or reactance, among others. In this context, *counterarguing* is considered a relevant process for understanding how narrative persuasion takes place and has been defined as “the generation of thoughts that explicitly refute a message’s intended persuasive theme” (Niederdeppe, Kim, Lundell, Fazili, & Frazier, 2012, p. 758).

Slater and Rouner (2002) affirmed that individuals immersed in a narrative have difficulty critically reviewing the information present in the story, with a consequent reduction in their ability to counterargue; therefore, they are more easily influenced by it. These authors also postulated that identification with characters and counterarguing are incompatible responses, as identification means that the individual takes on the identity of the character and there is an ensuing loss of self-awareness. In other words, involvement or connection (with the narrative and the characters) and critical reflection are incompatible processes (Slater, Rouner, & Long, 2006).

Two studies have attempted to test empirically whether identification reduces counterarguing (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010) tested the persuasive effect caused by viewing an episode of the television series *The OC* (about the consequences and difficulties caused by an unwanted pregnancy in an adolescent couple) compared to exposure to a nonnarrative audiovisual format (an informative program). It was observed that the narrative format induced greater identification with the adolescent characters than the nonnarrative format. Moreover, identification with characters in the narrative format was negatively associated with counterarguing. Moyer-Gusé and colleagues (2011) observed that identification with the characters in an episode of the television series *Sex and the City* that broached the topic of sexually transmitted diseases and modeled prevention behaviors reduced counterarguing, and this in turn was negatively associated with preventive behavior.

Other scholars have opposing views and state that cognitive elaboration could play an important role as an explanatory variable in narrative persuasion. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) have defined *cognitive elaboration* as a process of reflection on the contents of a persuasive message, and Suckfüll and Scharkow (2009) described it as “the intensity of information processing” (p. 373). Up until now, cognitive elaboration has been considered a relevant process in explaining persuasion processes through openly persuasive communication, as these types of messages contain explicitly presented arguments that individuals can easily recognize. However, even though narrative formats do not explicitly present arguments from an external source, they can appear in dialogues taking place among characters during certain moments of the story (Igartua, Cheng, & Lopes, 2003).

In two experimental studies it was found that including a scene in a written narrative in which two characters discussed a topic with each of them contributing arguments did indeed provoke reflection (more than half of the participants generated cognitive responses related to the central topic of the story). Moreover, the polarity of these cognitive responses predicted the attitude toward the topic addressed in the story. However, these authors also found that identification with the main character of the narrative predicted attitudinal impact, such that identification became a second mechanism of narrative persuasion (Fikkers & Hoeken, 2011; Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014).

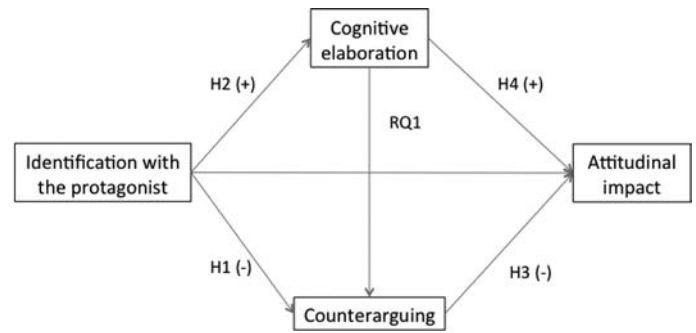
Taking the study reported by Fikkers and Hoeken (2011) and Hoeken and Fikkers (2014) as a reference, one would

expect that if an argument in favor of a specific proposal is presented explicitly in a narrative message (as occurs in the fictional audiovisual messages of entertainment-education, in which the preventive message is reinforced in the characters' dialogues as well as visually), reflection or cognitive elaboration would be aroused during viewing, and this process would be associated with greater attitudinal impact. Furthermore, one could posit that identification with the characters who express the preventive arguments in their dialogues (given that the narrative messages of entertainment-education seek to change attitudes and are carefully designed to achieve that goal) can lead to a process of high cognitive elaboration.

Cohen (2001) pointed out that one of the consequences of identification is that it stimulates reflection during reception of the fictional message. Taking into account that one of the fundamental dimensions of identification is cognitive empathy (putting oneself in the character's place), identification "is useful as a persuasion tactic because it can overcome the natural tendency to limit one's thoughts and feelings to a single perspective" (p. 260). Moreover, this time supported by the elaboration likelihood model, he also pointed out that identification can stimulate involvement with the messages, "which, in turn, increases the elaboration of messages and their potential persuasive effects" (p. 260). This argument has received certain empirical support in research addressing the impact of fiction. In this sense, identification with characters has been found to be a process related to a more intense *temporary involvement* during the processing of fictional narratives, as it is associated with greater emotional impact and enjoyment (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Hoeken & Sinkeldam, 2014) and also with greater cognitive elaboration (Igartua, 2010).

**Rationale and Hypotheses**

The empirical evidence available to date seems to indicate that identification with characters reduces counterarguing and that the latter acts as an explanatory mediating variable of persuasive impact (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). Nonetheless, the two studies in question were carried out exclusively with commercial television series produced in the United States, and therefore it could be useful to test whether these results can be replicated in other cultural contexts and with series specifically designed to model prevention behaviors and attitudes in audiovisual interventions of entertainment-education. In addition, the existing empirical evidence on the relation between identification and cognitive elaboration has been gathered in the context of research into film reception (Igartua, 2010) and has therefore not been tested specifically in the field of narrative persuasion, although Cohen (2001) considered that elaboration can play a mediating role in that process. In this context, the main objective of the present study was to test to what extent the attitudinal impact caused by exposure to fictional audiovisual content designed as entertainment-education platforms (through the Colombian television series *Revelados, desde todas las posiciones* [RDTP]; see "RDTP") is explained



**Fig. 1.** Hypothesized mediation model: Indirect effects of identification with the characters on attitudes through cognitive elaboration and counterarguing. H = hypothesis.

because identification leads to greater reflection, or rather to greater counterarguing. The model proposed is based on the E-ELM and EORM and on the results of previous studies (see Figure 1).

We hypothesize that identification will be negatively associated with counterarguing (Hypothesis 1) and positively associated with cognitive elaboration (Hypothesis 2). Furthermore, we also hypothesize that counterarguing will be associated with a lower attitudinal impact (Hypothesis 3), and thus we expect an indirect effect of identification on attitudes through critical thinking. In contrast, we hypothesize that cognitive elaboration will be associated with a higher attitudinal impact (Hypothesis 4), and thus we expect an indirect effect of identification on attitudes through reflective thinking. However, given that the research in this field is incipient, we also posit as research questions whether cognitive elaboration is associated with greater or lesser counterarguing (Research Question 1) and whether an indirect effect of identification with characters can be observed through elaboration and counterarguing acting sequentially.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participating in the study were 208 young people between the ages of 14 and 20, with a mean age of 15.85; 51.9% were women.

**Design and Procedure**

The study was carried out in Colombia in 2013 within the framework of a project on entertainment-education that used as an intervention tool the television series *RDTP*. The field work was carried out in six different towns in Colombia, and the same procedure was used in each place. The participants were randomly divided into three groups, and each group was shown a different episode of the series (each one focusing on a particular topic; none of the participants had seen the television series before). We used a questionnaire composed of different scales to measure reception processes and attitudinal impact. The questionnaire was

administered to the participants immediately after they viewed the episode.

### **RDTP**

*RDTP* is a television series addressed to young people between the ages of 12 and 19, coproduced by the Fundación Imaginario and Canal 13 in Colombia.<sup>1</sup> The series includes educational content about sexual relations, gender violence, and sexual diversity. The making of this fictional melodramatic series was based on research into entertainment-education carried out by *Soul City* (South Africa) and results obtained through entertainment-education in topics of sexual and reproductive health in other contexts (Goldstein, Usdin, Schleepers, & Japhet, 2005; Usdin, Scheepers, Goldstein, & Japhet, 2005; Whittier, Kennedy, St. Lawrence, Seeley, & Beck, 2005). The first season of *RDTP* has 20 episodes lasting about 15 minutes each and presents a story with continuity from one episode to another. The main characters are Camila, Vanessa, Sebastián, and Juan Carlos. Three episodes of the series were selected by the research team, taking into account the topics broached in each of them: adolescent sexuality ( $n = 69$ ), gender violence ( $n = 75$ ), and sexual diversity ( $n = 64$ ).<sup>2</sup>

In the episode on adolescent sexuality, Camila goes to her boyfriend Rex's house to listen to music. He makes a sexual move that Camila rejects, and she leaves his house upset. This episode thus attempts to reinforce positive beliefs about sexual decision making. The episode on gender-based violence presents a more dramatic component, and two incidents of gender violence are shown. The first involves Sebastian's parents and the second, Sebastian and Vanessa. In the latter instance, Vanessa is seen dancing with another boy during some dance lessons. Sebastian gets jealous and tells Vanessa that now that they are going out she has to "respect" him. Vanessa reacts strongly and tells Sebastian, "You respect me, don't treat me like your father treats your mother." The episode is designed to reinforce an attitude of rejection of gender violence. The last episode broaches the topic of expressing homosexual feelings and defending the rights of persons with that sexual orientation. Juan Carlos confesses to a friend that he is gay, which causes a bit of consternation at first. But then his friend tells him that he can count on him, that he is his friend. Later on, in the classroom where Juan Carlos is, a new student (Felipe) appears, and the others in the class say that he is gay and start making fun of him. Given the situation, Juan Carlos defends Felipe and ends up telling them all that he is gay as well. This episode thus attempts to reinforce a positive attitude toward gay men who decide to openly express their sexual orientation.

<sup>1</sup>The program forms part of the *Eduentretenimiento + Movilización = Cambio Social* (Edutainment + Mobilization = Social Change) strategy that was a response by the national government of Colombia to the conditions and needs of Colombian young people in matters of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

<sup>2</sup>These episodes of *RDTP* are available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/user/REVELADOSDTP?feature=watch>.

### **Instruments and Variables**

#### *Identification With the Main Characters*

This was assessed using an 11-item scale whose reliability and validity had been tested in a previous study (Igartua & Barrios, 2012). The instrument was designed to measure retrospectively an individual's degree of identification with a specific character (e.g., "I felt emotionally involved with Camila's feelings"; from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a lot*). Identification with the four main characters of the series (Camila, Vanessa, Sebastián, and Juan Carlos) was measured. To facilitate the task, a photograph of the characters was included. Four identification indices were created: identification with Camila ( $\alpha = .86$ ;  $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ), identification with Vanessa ( $\alpha = .89$ ;  $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ), identification with Sebastian ( $\alpha = .91$ ;  $M = 2.39$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ), and identification with Juan Carlos ( $\alpha = .89$ ;  $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ).

#### *Cognitive Elaboration*

This was measured using a scale created by Igartua (2010), consisting of four items: "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 was related to other topics that interest me," and "I've wanted to draw some conclusions about the topic addressed there" (from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a lot*;  $\alpha = .83$ ;  $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ).

#### *Counterarguing*

We used the counterarguing scale created by Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010), which is also composed of four items: "While watching the program, I sometimes felt like I wanted to 'argue back' to what was going on onscreen," "While watching the program, I sometimes found myself thinking of ways I disagreed with what was being presented," "While watching the program, I couldn't help thinking about ways that the information being presented was inaccurate or misleading," and "I found myself looking for flaws in the way information was presented in the program" (from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a lot*;  $\alpha = .72$ ;  $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ).

#### *Attitudinal Measures*

To measure attitude, we designed three groups of scales, each comprising several items and relating to topics of adolescent sexuality, gender violence, and sexual diversity. Each scale presented items that reflected the educational content of the episodes, together with other items that posed more general issues not directly addressed in the episodes and that were meant to camouflage the real objectives of the study.

To evaluate the attitudinal impact of viewing the episode addressing the topic of adolescent sexuality, we included six items (e.g., "Teenagers have the right to decide when they want to have sex"). For each item the participants had to mark yes (1) or no (0). An indicator of a favorable attitude toward sexual decision making was created by adding together the scores of the six items. To assess the attitudinal impact of the episode concerning gender violence, we included two items: "A man must not insult his partner" and "A man must not tell his partner what to do" (from

1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Based on these items we created an index of the attitude of rejecting gender violence ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Finally, the attitudinal impact of the episode addressing acceptance of sexual diversity was evaluated with a single item: “Gay men who have ‘come out of the closet’ should be admired for their courage” (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

**Data Analysis Strategy**

When we chose to work with three different episodes, it was not to compare attitudinal differences or differences in reception processes as a function of the theme in question but rather to focus on the analysis of narrative persuasion processes in the context of an entertainment-education approach. This strategy is similar to the one developed by Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010), as the “focus is on the process by which narrative messages exert persuasive effects” (p. 37). Three different episodes (three different themes) were used in order to be able to rule out the possibility that the mechanism proposed only functions with one theme or with one specific character profile. The participants were randomly assigned to the episodes in order to have homogeneous groups and to give the mediation results more validity (this being especially relevant given the correlational nature of the research design).

To test the model proposed (see Figure 1), we used the PROCESS macro for SPSS developed by Hayes (2013),

and in particular Model 6, which posits a mediation model with two mediating variables that operate in sequence. The analysis was carried out on three different subsamples as a function of the episode viewed, given that the attitudes reinforced by the different episodes focused on different aspects and also that the characters involved in the preventive or educational message were different in each episode. Thus, we based our analytical strategy on this procedure in order to evaluate the *indirect effect* of identification with characters on the participants’ attitudes by means of the mediating processes of cognitive elaboration and counterarguing, with the two mechanisms operating sequentially. In this study the indirect effect was calculated using 10,000 bootstrap samples for bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (CIs). An indirect effect is considered statistically significant if the CI established (CI at 95%) does not include the value 0. If the value 0 is included in the CI, the null hypothesis positing that the indirect effect equals 0—that is, that there is no association between the variables involved (Hayes, 2013)—cannot be rejected.

**Results**

The analysis run to test Hypothesis 1 (see Table 1) revealed that identification was not negatively associated with counterarguing. In fact, a statistically significant effect was only observed among the participants who watched the episode

**Table 1.** Mediation model (PROCESS, Model 6): Indirect effects of identification with the characters (IV) on attitudes (DV) through cognitive elaboration (Mediator Variable 1) and counterarguing (Mediator Variable 2)

	Episode on adolescent sexuality			Episode on gender violence			Episode on sexual diversity		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Mediator variable model (DV = cognitive elaboration)									
Predictor									
Identification <sup>a</sup>	.72	.13	.000	.57	.11	.000	.48	.18	.011
Mediator variable model (DV = counterarguing)									
Predictors									
Cognitive elaboration	.51	.13	.000	.34	.10	.002	.18	.11	.121
Identification	-.07	.17	.676	.28	.12	.023	.05	.17	.744
DV model (DV = attitudes) <sup>b</sup>									
Predictors									
Cognitive elaboration	.40	.18	.038	.58	.20	.007	.37	.18	.040
Counterarguing	-.16	.16	.314	-.17	.21	.427	.36	.19	.070
Identification (direct effect)	.23	.21	.283	-.12	.22	.586	-.31	.26	.231
Total effect									
Identification	.47	.17	.010	.12	.19	.521	-.07	.26	.765
Indirect effects									
Identification → Elaboration → Attitudes	.28	.16	[.01, .65]	.33	.13	[.10, .64]	.18	.12	[.02, .52]
Identification → Elaboration → Counterarguing → Attitudes	-.06	.06	[-.23, .04]	-.03	.05	[-.16, .04]	.03	.04	[-.002, .18]
Identification → Counterarguing → Attitudes	.01	.04	[-.03, .14]	-.04	.07	[-.29, .04]	.02	.08	[-.09, .26]

Note. IV = independent variable; DV = dependent variable; CI = confidence interval.

<sup>a</sup>Identification with Camila (episode on adolescent sexuality), identification with Vanessa (episode on violence against women), identification with Juan Carlos (episode on sexual diversity). <sup>b</sup>Favorable attitude toward sexual decision making (episode on adolescent sexuality), attitude of rejecting gender violence (episode on violence against women), favorable attitude toward gay men coming out (episode on sexual diversity).

addressing gender violence, and it was found that identification with the main character of the episode (Vanessa) was associated with more counterarguing ( $B = .28, p < .023$ ).

In regard to Hypothesis 2, it was observed that identification with characters was positively associated in a statistically significant way with cognitive elaboration in the episodes on adolescent sexuality ( $B = .72, p < .001$ ), gender violence ( $B = .57, p < .001$ ), and sexual diversity ( $B = .48, p < .011$ ), thus confirming the hypothesis posed.

In regard to Hypothesis 3, it was found that counterarguing did not have a statistically significant effect on attitudes, with the effect being inconsistent: In relation to the episodes on adolescent sexuality and gender violence, the association between this mediating variable and the dependent variable was negative but not significant ( $B = -.16, p = .314$ ;  $B = -.17, p = .424$ , respectively), but for the episode on sexual diversity, the effect was positive and marginally significant ( $B = .36, p < .070$ ).

In the case of Hypothesis 4, a statistically significant effect of cognitive elaboration on attitudes was observed. In this sense, greater elaboration during viewing of the episode on adolescent sexuality was associated with a more favorable attitude toward sexual decision making, which was the message reinforced in that episode ( $B = .40, p = .038$ ). Likewise, greater elaboration during the viewing of the episode on

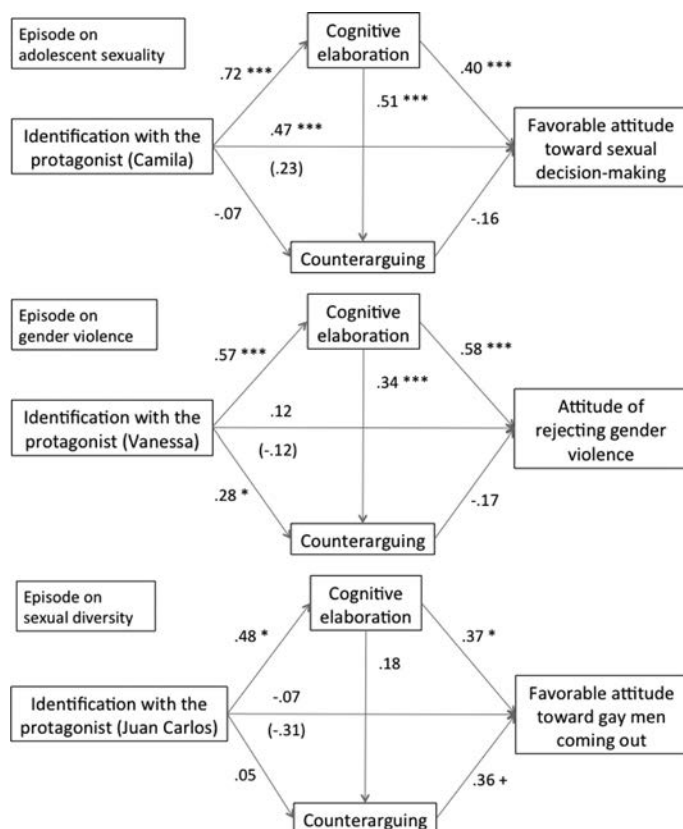
violence against women was associated with greater rejection of gender violence ( $B = .58, p < .007$ ). Finally, the participants who had reflected most while viewing the episode on sexual diversity showed a more positive attitude toward gay men openly expressing their sexual orientation without fear ( $B = .37, p < .040$ ).

As to Research Question 1, no consistent results were obtained. Although cognitive elaboration was positively associated with counterarguing in all three episodes, this effect was statistically significant only in the case of the episodes on adolescent sexuality ( $B = .51, p < .001$ ) and gender violence ( $B = .34, p < .002$ ), not in relation to the episode on sexual diversity ( $B = .18, p = .121$ ). In any case, the results pointed to the existence of a positive relation between cognitive elaboration and counterarguing.

Finally, when the indirect effects of identification with characters on attitudes were tested, it was observed that the only variable that had a significant mediating role was cognitive elaboration. Thus, among the participants who watched the episode on adolescent sexuality, the indirect effect of identification with Camila on favorable attitudes toward sexual decision making was explained by cognitive elaboration ( $B = .28, SE = .16, 95\% \text{ CI } [.01, .65]$ ). Among the participants who viewed the episode on violence against women, the indirect effect of identification with Vanessa on attitudes of rejection of gender violence was explained by reflective thinking or cognitive elaboration ( $B = .33, SE = .13, 95\% \text{ CI } [.10, .64]$ ). And the indirect effect of identification with Juan Carlos, the main character in the episode on sexual diversity, on a favorable attitude toward gay men who come out was also explained by cognitive elaboration ( $B = .18, SE = .12, 95\% \text{ CI } [.02, .52]$ ; see Figure 2).<sup>3</sup>

## Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this research study confirm the important role of identification with characters as one of the mechanisms responsible for narrative persuasion processes in the context of entertainment-education interventions. They furthermore constitute an advance in the research in this field, as they allow us to clarify the relations between identification, cognitive elaboration, and counterarguing. Using as stimuli three episodes of the Colombian television series *RDTP* (incorporating explicit prosocial messages in the characters' dialogues), we found that greater identification with the main character of the episode transmitting the preventive message was associated with greater cognitive elaboration, in turn leading to more favorable attitudes toward sexual decision making (episode on adolescent sexuality), a



**Fig. 2.** Mediation model results: Indirect effects of identification with the characters on attitudes through cognitive elaboration and counterarguing (unstandardized regression coefficients, with direct effects in parentheses) +  $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

<sup>3</sup>At the suggestion of one of the anonymous reviewers of the article, we also carried out mediation analyses with PROCESS including sex and age as control variables. In these analyses the results were replicated for two of the three themes or episodes. The indirect effect was no longer significant in the episode addressing adolescent sexuality ( $B = .36, SE = .18, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.01, .63]$ ), although the coefficients quantifying the association between identification and elaboration and between elaboration and attitude were positive, as in the original analyses (though the relation between elaboration and attitude was marginally significant,  $p < .054$ ).

greater attitude of rejection of violence against women (episode on gender violence), and a more favorable attitude toward gay men openly expressing their sexual orientation (episode on sexual diversity). In none of the three cases tested was it observed that counterarguing played a significant mediating role.<sup>4</sup>

These results are consistent with ones posited in the E-ELM (Slater & Rouner, 2002) and EORM (Moyer-Gusé, 2008) and with previous research studies on the role of identification with characters as an explanatory mechanism of narrative persuasion (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; de Graaf et al., 2012; Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011; Murphy et al., 2013). Moreover, these findings converge with results obtained by Fikkers and Hoeken (2011), who found that a written narrative containing arguments in the characters' dialogues stimulated reflection in a majority of study participants and that the polarity of the cognitive responses predicted attitudes toward the topic addressed in the story. In that study it was also observed that reflection as a process was not incompatible with narrative engagement, a result that we also observed in the present study, as cognitive elaboration was associated with greater enjoyment<sup>5</sup> in the three episodes considered ( $r[65] = .52, p < .001$ , in the episode on adolescent sexuality;  $r[72] = .50, p < .001$ , in the episode on gender violence;  $r[62] = .36, p < .001$ , in the episode on sexual diversity), suggesting that they are not incompatible processes, which converges with the research on media entertainment and the impact of film productions (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014).

The results of the study allow us to conclude that instigating people to reflect could lead to persuading them, which suggests that the relation between identification with characters and issue-relevant thinking may be more complex. It could be ventured that identification can induce greater reflection or cognitive elaboration as long as the optimal conditions are present to stimulate a more profound or systematic processing (Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014). Thus, in situations in which arguments are made explicit in dialogues among the characters, when narratives have a clear educational objective, or when the topics addressed are relevant for the target audience, identification with characters could stimulate issue-relevant thinking, which can be considered a *second route* of narrative persuasion.

From these findings it can be deduced that perhaps narratives created exclusively to entertain (e.g., *Murder at the Mall*; Green & Brock, 2000) are not processed in the same way as fictional audiovisual narrative formats designed explicitly for an educational objective. Future research should broach this topic and test whether media entertainment narrative formats stimulate more or less reflection and counterarguing than those created in the context of specific interventions of entertainment-education. In any case,

<sup>4</sup>Cognitive elaboration was significantly greater than counterarguing ( $M = 3.31, SD = 0.93$ , vs.  $M = 2.27, SD = 0.89$ , respectively),  $t(206) = 15.11, p < .001$ .

<sup>5</sup>Enjoyment was assessed with a 3-item scale by Hall and Zwarun (2012) (e.g., "I had a really good time watching this episode of the series"; from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .85; M = 4.27, SD = 0.83$ ).

designing this kind of intervention not only to bring about identification and narrative engagement but also to cause the target audience to reflect on topics relevant to them seems a logical enough objective. As a consequence, characters and dialogues should be designed with the utmost care, given that it is a matter of fostering identification while at the same time the arguments set out in the dialogues should be convincing for the intervention target audience.

The present study has certain limitations. First of all, the mediation analyses carried out were based on correlational data, as identification with characters was not manipulated to test its effects on cognitive processes and attitudes, but rather all of the measures were taken immediately after the participants had viewed the *RDTP* episodes. With this correlational design, it is possible that cognitive elaboration and attitudes are not causally related but are simply correlates. Respondents who already had more positive attitudes also identified more and had more cognitive elaboration. Although this problem arises in much of the research on narrative persuasion, in which analysis of processes is based on correlational data (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Niederdeppe, Shapiro, Kim, Bartolo, & Porticella, 2013), future studies should continue to test the mediating role of identification with characters but by manipulating the variable. In any case, the evidence of the relation between previous attitudes and identification with characters is not conclusive, because it has been observed that an individual's previous attitude toward a theme addressed in a narrative (assessed prior to viewing a feature film) is not related to identification with characters (assessed after viewing the film; Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014; Igartua, 2010).

A second limitation relates to the fact that the internal consistency of the scale used to measure counterarguing (devised by Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010) was not as high (.72) as that of the rest of the scales, and furthermore it was slightly lower than that obtained by the authors who designed it (.84). Perhaps it would be more suitable to assess counterarguing through an alternative method based on a thought-listing task, a procedure that has been used successfully in previous studies on narrative persuasion (Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014; Niederdeppe et al., 2013; Slater et al., 2006).

In conclusion, the present study contributes new evidence regarding narrative persuasion processes in the field of audiovisual interventions of entertainment-education. The importance of cognitive elaboration has been underemphasized and underconceptualized in narrative persuasion models, and this study may prove a useful potential corrective and an advance in the literature in that regard.

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