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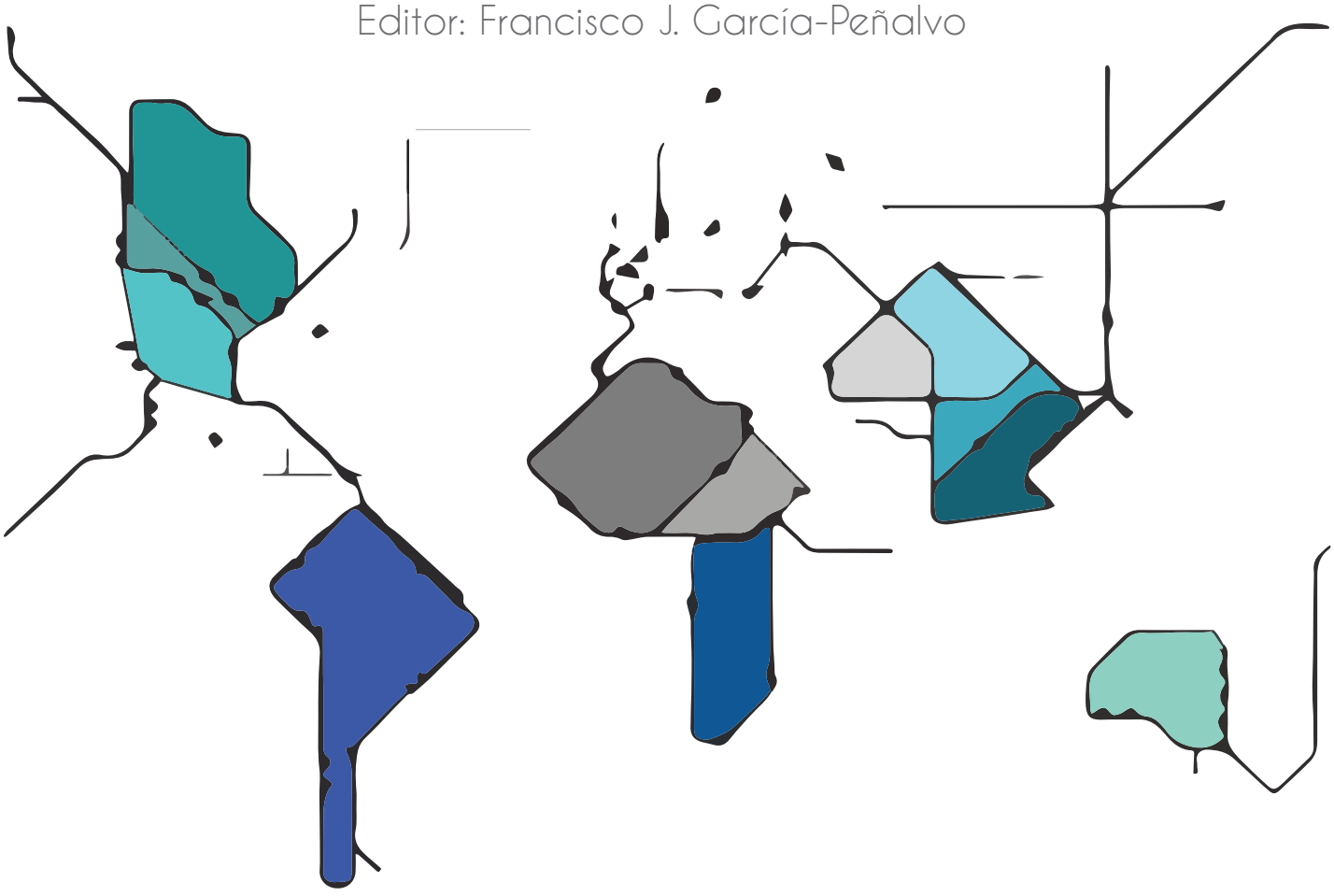

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Francisco José García-Peñalvo
University of Salamanca

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Designed by:

Felicidad García Sánchez
Research GRoup in InterAction and eLearning (GRIAL)

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Francisco José García-Peñalvo
Research GRoup in InterAction and eLearning (GRIAL)
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Department of Computer Science and Automatics
University of Salamanca

Plaza de los Caídos s/n, 37008 Salamanca, Spain
(+34) 923 294400 ext. 1302
Email: fgarcia@usal.es

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Portraying Immigration in Spanish Prime-Time TV Fiction

Isabel M. Barrios Vicente
Observatorio de los Contenidos Audiovisuales
University of Salamanca
Edificio F.E.S.
Avda. Fco. Tomás y Valiente, s/n
37007
(+34) 923 294640
imbv@usal.es

Juan José Igartua
Observatorio de los Contenidos Audiovisuales
University of Salamanca
Edificio F.E.S.
Avda. Fco. Tomás y Valiente, s/n
37007
(+34) 923 294640
jigartua@usal.es

Félix Ortega
Observatorio de los Contenidos Audiovisuales
University of Salamanca
Edificio F.E.S.
Avda. Fco. Tomás y Valiente, s/n
37007
(+34) 923 294640
fortega@usal.es

Javier Frutos
Observatorio de los Contenidos Audiovisuales
University of Salamanca
Edificio F.E.S.
Avda. Fco. Tomás y Valiente, s/n
37007
(+34) 923 294640
frutos@usal.es

María Marcos
Observatorio de los Contenidos Audiovisuales
University of Salamanca
Edificio F.E.S.
Avda. Fco. Tomás y Valiente, s/n
37007
(+34) 923 294640
mariamarcos@usal.es

Valeriano Piñero
Observatorio de los Contenidos Audiovisuales
University of Salamanca
Edificio F.E.S.
Avda. Fco. Tomás y Valiente, s/n
37007
(+34) 923 294640
vale.naval@usal.es

ABSTRACT

The following text presents the results of a content analysis study focusing on the image of immigration in Spanish prime-time television fiction with Cultivation theory as a reference. Two representative samples were recorded in 2011, out of the six main national channels. The analysis derived from the analysis of these fiction programs (series and films) derived provided results showing that: (1) Immigrant/foreign characters were underrepresented when taking into account real [14] data; (2) Immigrant/foreign characters were usually presented in non-protagonist (mainly antagonist or villain) narrative roles; and (3) Socio-demographic features of immigrant/foreign characters such as their education, socio-economic status, or occupation tended to entail lower levels than those in natives. The results are discussed considering the importance of the reduction of prejudice in television fiction.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4 [**Social and Behavioral Sciences**]: Psychology.

General Terms

Documentation, Experimentation.

Keywords

Immigration, Television fiction, Content Analysis, Cultivation Theory, Prejudice, Stereotypes, Spain.

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1. INTRODUCTION

For decades now, Television has been a part of our lives and therefore has become important to Society, determining our knowledge and views on the world [31] through the enormous quantity of (fictional and non-fictional) messages that we receive, especially when considering the amount of time that we usually spend in front of it: In Spain, 89.6% of the population watch it daily, at an average of 244 minutes per day, as shown on the latest summary of the *Estudio General de Medios* [2].

Let us take into account one topic of such content, quite relevant to Society, in that it is part of it: Immigration. Although much research has been developed on its importance in non-fiction such as news, and how its presentation may explain (especially negative) reactions towards immigrants [11] [13] [29], there is much less systematic research on this same topic in television fiction, especially the one occurring in prime-time, when most people watch it.

Thus, the following content analysis study focuses on the portrayal of immigrants in prime-time Spanish television fiction as present in two random weeks in the year 2011: A total amount of 1,788 characters from 77 television shows and films broadcast on the main six national channels of the country.

1.1 Television and the perception of Society

Back in the 1960s, George Gerbner and his collaborators developed the Cultural Indicators project, which would later lead to *cultivation theory*, which tries to determine the social consequences of the messages presented in fictional/narrative television shows. Their work helped determine that television is an instrument that helps shape our image of social reality [22] [23], be it negative —keeping a sense of mistrust, vulnerability,

and insecurity [6] [23]—, or positive —we live in a just world [3]. Thus, there is a great necessity for the analysis of social matters, such as *diversity*, on television programming, as its contents clearly have an effect on audiences [15].

In 2006, Pettigrew & Tropp [26] determined that prejudice —which [21] defines as a negative or rejecting attitude towards an individual because of his or her belonging to a specific group— may be reduced by allowing interaction among members of the in- and the out-group; and that intergroup contact reduces intergroup anxiety and increases empathy towards the ones in the out-group. Other authors [24] [30] have gone further, establishing that this contact can be indirect, vicarious, or simply symbolic, as it happens in television fiction. Park (2012) [25], for example, refers to *mediated intergroup contact* as the parasocial interaction produced between an in-group spectator (e.g. native), and an out-group fictional character (e.g. immigrant or foreigner), or when the former identifies him-/herself with another character belonging to his/her own group and who has a favorable interaction with a character belonging to the latter. Moreover, even the mere *imagining* of a positive encounter with an out-group member (e.g. an immigrant) may lead to the reduction of prejudice [4], as extended and imagined happens when applied to Media fiction [10] [24]. Thus, it is possible to conclude that indirect Media contact with immigrant or foreign characters may lead to the reduction of prejudice towards their (out-)group, as long as there is a positive, non-prejudicial representation of the interactions between them and natives (the in-group).

1.2 Immigration (and ethnic minorities) in television fiction

Much research has been developed pertaining the portrayal of immigration in non-fiction television content (such as the news), and how its presentation may explain (especially negative) reactions towards immigrants [11] [13] [29]. Those same effects should also be studied in television fiction, since it is a very relevant (and present) element of its content and, therefore, may account for the formation, reinforcement, and internalization of prejudicial attitudes towards immigrants/foreigners.

So far, research on the representation of television fictional characters belonging to ethnic and cultural minorities in the United States concludes that (1) they are usually under-represented [17] [18]; (2) they tend to occupy less relevant roles in the narrative structure [7] [20]; (3) and they are usually portrayed with a distorted or stereotypical vision, tied to a negative image of lazy, low-skilled, non-intelligent people who have difficulty communicating themselves [8] [19].

As for the case of Spain, there is even much less empirical research on the depiction of immigration in television fiction [5] [12] [16] [28], but the results show a similarly negative portrayal: this latest study, which analyzed data from July and October, 2010, concluded that immigrant/foreign characters were underrepresented —as compared to the actual numbers of population—, and shown with lower levels of studies and less stable jobs.

1.3 Hypotheses

Considering the previous research on the representation of immigration and ethnic minorities in news and in television fiction, three hypotheses were established:

H1. – There will be under-representation of immigrant and foreign characters in prime-time television fiction.

H2. – Immigrant and foreign characters will be shown more frequently as antagonists or villains, as compared to natives.

H3. – Immigrant and foreign characters will be shown as having lower educational levels, lower socio-economic status, and performing low-skill occupations, as compared to natives.

2. METHOD

2.1 Sample of contents

For this study, two randomly chosen complete weeks —January 31 until February 6, and September 26 until October 2— of prime-time Spanish television (those programs starting between 20.00 and 24.00) in the main six national channels (TVE1, La2, Antena 3, Cuatro, Telecinco, and La Sexta) were recorded. According to the summary of the *Estudio Genenal de Medios* [1], these channels include a 65% share of television consumption from February to November in 2011. The total amount of non-fiction programs considered was 77 (47 television series and 30 films), their production origins being 62.4% from the United States of America, 31.2% from Spain, 3.9% from Europe, and 2.6% from other countries. As for the selection of characters, the notion of *talking individual* [15] was applied, meaning that, in order to be considered, they had to appear visually throughout the narrative and have some line of dialogue with at least another character. With this in mind, 1,788 characters were identified.

2.2 Codebook

For the analysis of the fictional shows and their characters, a codebook was created based on previous studies [8] [12] [15] [19] [20] [27].

It included information on the television series or film, such as basic identification and program information. As for characters, several features were assessed: their narrative role, gender, sexual orientation, age, educational level, nationality, geographic origin, ethnic group, social and economic status, religion, occupation, marital status (including whether it changed through the show), physical features, infliction of violent behavior, victimization (i.e. portrayal as a victim of violent behavior), risky health behavior, conversational topics, and personality traits.

With the formerly presented hypotheses in mind, the codebook included the following data with regard to the characters:

For all hypotheses, the most relevant feature was the identification of the character as immigrant, foreign or native. Since in many occasions the *nationality* was expected to be difficult to discern, it was inferred through a few attributes evaluated jointly or separately: (a) birthplace, as explicitly mentioned in the program; (b) birthplace the parents; (c) biological characteristics or phenotypic traits (e.g. the shape of eyes, color of skin, type of hairstyle); (d) cultural characteristics (e.g. way of dressing, name, accent); and (e) motivation to be in (an)other country (e.g. working, studying, on holidays). The evaluation of each character's nationality was always considered taking into account the country where the action took place *longer* in the narrative. Therefore, considering all these features, it was coded as: 0: Not clearly identifiable; 1: Native; 2: Foreigner (coming from another country but staying transitorily, e.g. due to studies, holidays, business); 3: Immigrant (having abandoned his/her original country and arrived in another to live in it, with a specific work project; or, also, second-generation immigrant when at least one of his/her parents was considered as such).

Regarding hypothesis 2, the *narrative role* was assessed as follows: 1: Protagonist (performing the most important actions in the story; the dramatic structure revolves around him/her and his/her actions); 2: Antagonist or villain (main character who opposes the protagonist); 3: Secondary leading (closely related to the protagonist, his/her participation in the story is relevant, and his/her actions move in the same direction as the protagonist's); 4: Secondary non-leading (his/her participation in the story is not as relevant, since he/she has a non-essential presence and may or may not relate to the protagonist or the antagonist).

Hypothesis 3 focused on the socio-demographic aspects of the character, including: his/her *educational level*, *socio-economic status*, and *occupation*. His/her *educational level* was coded as 0: Unable to identify; 1: Illiterate (cannot read or write); 2: Non-formal education; 3: Primary school; 4: Secondary, upper secondary, or vocational school; 5: Higher (college or university). His/her *socio-economic status*, was assessed as: 0: Unable to identify; 1: Working class or lower class (cannot satisfactorily meet his/her basic needs with his/her income); 2: Middle class (works for a living, meets his/her needs, and can afford a few luxuries); 3: Upper class (does not need to work to maintain his/her living standard, or has a job that allows him/her to enjoy many luxuries not available to the majority. Finally, the character's *occupation* was classified according to a list established by the *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, which lists 17 different jobs, which include: 1: Senior manager, official, and officer (e.g. large-company owner or CEO, having a high-responsibility post that usually requires higher education); 2: Middle manager, official, and officer (e.g. SMB owner, having a not-so-high responsibility post that usually requires higher education; 3: Office staff (usually wanting at least medium education); 4: Small businessperson or independent worker; 5: Qualified worker who requires specific skills; 6: Non-qualified worker; 7: Primary-sector worker; 8: Member of a religious order; 9: Police, military, or law-enforcement agent; 10: Sportsperson, artist, or show business person; 11: Retired or pensioner; 12: Unemployed; 13: Student; 14: Houseperson; 15: Person with unstable occupations; 16: Criminal; 17: Other occupation; a further category 0: Unable to identify was also included; if the character could fit in more than one category, the one with a higher status/skill should be marked.

2.3 Coding

The coding of all 1,788 characters according to the codebook was undertaken by 8 analysts who had studied Audiovisual Communications and were trained in research methodology.

After that, the reliability of the process was measured by analyzing 284 of those characters, randomly selected. By means of Krippendorff's Alpha coefficient [9], the variable *nationality* showed a very acceptable value (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .80$), as well as that of the *country where the main part of narrative takes place* (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .81$).

3. RESULTS

3.1 Hypothesis 1

The *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* numbered the population of foreigners registered as living in Spain on January 1, 2011, in 5,252,667, which amounts to 11.2% of the 46,815,916 total [14]. The present study determined that 89.8% of the characters were natives, 4.2% foreigners, and 5.1% immigrants (a further 0.9% was unable to be determined). Since the INE does not difference foreigners and immigrants, a new variable had to be created where the characters without a nationality were eliminated and a sole unified "immigrant/foreigner" group was generated (9.3%).

These data help infer that there is under-representation of immigrants/foreigners in the analyzed shows.

Moreover, there are statistically significant differences (χ^2 [2, N = 1772] = 146.43, $p < .001$) considering the origin of the program: Those produced in Spain show a percentage of immigrant/foreign characters substantially reduced (up to 4.4%).

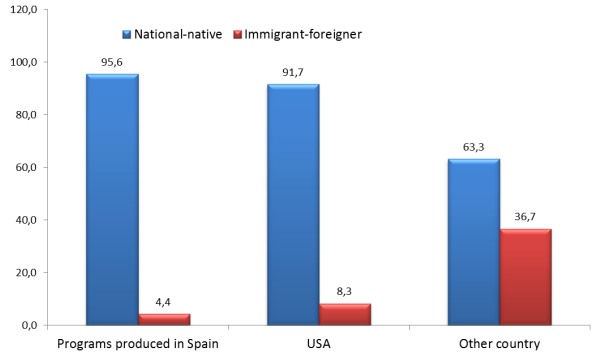

Figure 1. Origin of the program

In this sense, hypothesis 1 (*there will be under-representation of immigrant/foreign characters in prime-time television fiction*) was confirmed.

3.2 Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 focused on the narrative role of the character. Once again, the results showed statistically meaningful differences (χ^2 [3, N = 1772] = 15.20, $p < .001$): Natives and immigrants/foreigners were similarly distributed in *protagonist* roles (11.9% versus 15%) and *secondary-leading* (17.6% versus 22.8%). However, the role of *antagonist or villain* was more frequent in immigrants/foreigners (12%) than in natives (6%).

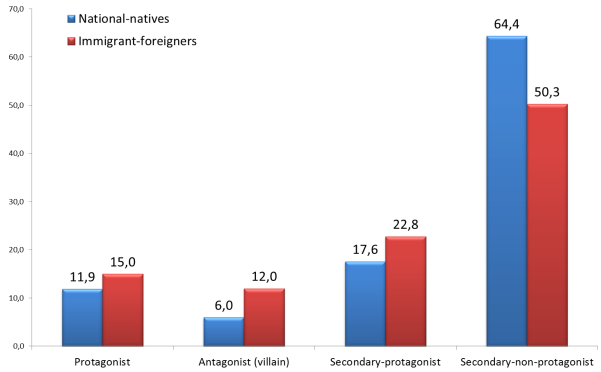

Figure 2. Narrative role

Thus, the data support hypothesis 2 (*immigrant/foreign characters will be shown more frequently as antagonists or villains, as compared to natives*).

3.3 Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 focused on the socio-demographic aspects of the character.

Educational *level* showed statistically meaningful differences (χ^2 [5, N = 1772] = 28.99, $p < .001$) where a very high percentage of immigrants/foreigners could not be identified (38.9%), although this did not happen among natives (30.7%). Regarding illiteracy, however, the percentage was higher among immigrants/foreigners

(4.2%) as opposed to the national-natives (0.6%), and the rest of the variables showed lower percentages regarding the former than the latter (Primary: 6% versus 9.6%; Secondary: 19.8% versus 24.7%; and Higher: 26.3% versus 31.1%), except in non-formal education (4.8% versus 3.4%).

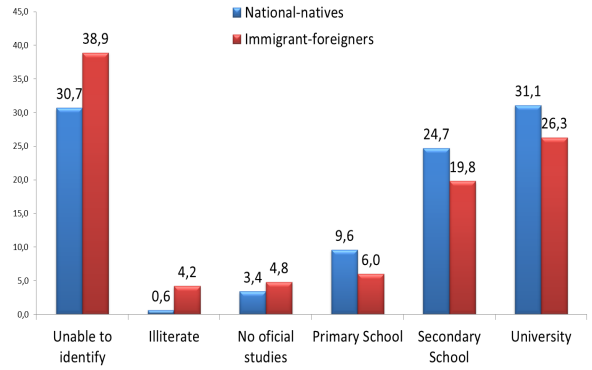

Figure 3. Educational level

Socio-economic status also showed a statistically significant association with nationality (χ^2 [3, N = 1772] = 10.63, p < .014): Immigrants/foreigners had a lower socio-economic status (19.2%) than natives (10.8%). Medium (67.1% versus 73.6%) and Higher (13.2% versus 14.3%) were also lower for the former than for the latter.

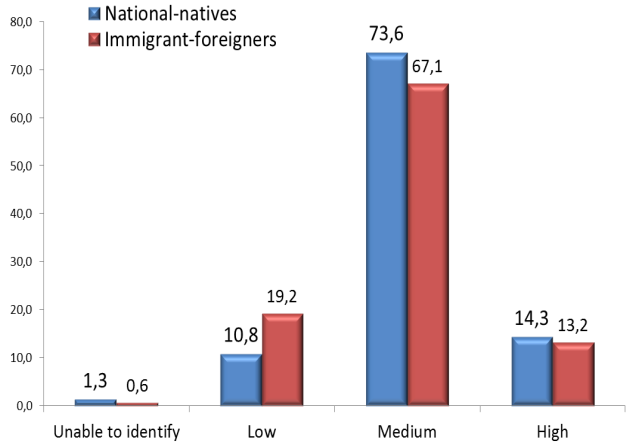

Figure 4. Socio-economic status

Lastly, there were also statistically meaningful associations considering the character's *occupation* (χ^2 [17, N = 1772] = 92.24, p < .001). This implied that immigrants/foreigners, as compared to natives, tended to carry out more criminal activities (21% versus 5.7%), performed more low-skill jobs (10.2% versus to 4.7%), or were less frequently performed as students (3% versus 9.4%).

Therefore, hypothesis 3 (*immigrant/foreign characters will be shown as having lower educational level, lower socio-economic status, and performing low-skill occupations, as compared to natives*) was corroborated.

4. DISCUSSION

The results for these hypotheses show that there is (still) a stereotypical portrayal of immigrants/foreigners in prime-time television fiction in Spain: Their under-representation, as opposed to the real numbers in society (9.3% as opposed to 11.2%, according to INE, 2013 [14]) is even more poignant in those series and films with a Spanish origin, where they reach only 4.4% of the total amount. This low presence is further pressed by the fact that these characters are usually featured in non-protagonist narrative roles, especially as 12% of them —as opposed to a 6% in natives— are depicted as antagonists or villains, and also by their portrayal of having lower levels of educational and socio-economic status (including lower-skill or criminal occupations) than their native counterparts.

This lower-than real presence of immigrants, together with their being less portrayed as antagonists or villains, and their socio-demographic depiction as usually lower than natives is convergent with previous results, such as those of Mastro & Greenberg (2000) [20], Mastro & Behm-Morawitz (2005) [19], or those focused on Spain, such as Igartua et al. (2012) [12].

The lack of visibility of immigrants (and therefore of diversity) distilled from the results, as well as their proof that television fiction tends to portray a distorted (or stereotypical) view of immigrants/foreigners, helps the formation, reinforcement, and internalization of negative attitudes towards immigration, thus damaging the possibility of a *vicarious* or *parasocial contact* among Spanish natives and individuals from other origins, something that more research should contrast.

Nevertheless, being part of the problem, production companies of fictional content in television could become part of the solution, were they to decide to change all this and develop series and films that portray a more real and positive image of immigration. This could therefore lead to the modelling of more positive social behaviours by means of the positive interaction among in-group members (natives) and those belonging to a (stigmatized) out-group (immigrants/foreigners), through the development of positive (such as friendly) interactions and even through plots and narratives with the main gist of solving conflicts emanating from prejudice or stereotypes. With all this, there could be a reduction of perception of inter-group threat, and thus a (positive) improvement on the attitudes towards immigration.

5. NOTE

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