Improving Attitudes Toward Immigration with Testimonials. Indirect Effects of Empathy and Audience-Character Similarity through Identification, Transportation and Counterarguing

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Abstract

Testimonial messages are frequently used in public information campaigns to cope with health and social problems. In this type of messages, somebody offers a first-person account of their situation, calls for attention on a specific problem, and encourages the audience to behave in a certain way. In the present research a narrative strategy is proposed aiming to improve attitudes toward immigration in the context of the European Union. Two online experiments were carried out in Spain and the Netherlands.

Introduction

Transportation and identification with the protagonist are two relevant mechanisms through which narratives produce their impact on attitudes (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Because transportation and identification facilitate persuasion, it is important to know how to increase both processes.

The present study focuses on two factors: similarity between the protagonist of the message and the recipient, and empathy.

Similarity describes a situation in which the audience shares certain features with the protagonist of the message. We focus on the effect of similarity in terms of social identity, which involves emphasizing the feeling of a shared social identity (what people have in common; Igartua, Wojcieszak & Kim, 2018).

We propose that the effect of similarity on identification and transportation can be amplified if instructions to increase empathy are given beforehand. In this context, empathy is considered as an exposure condition (Tukachinsky, 2014):

H1: The joint effect of “training” empathy before reading a high-similarity narrative will increase identification and narrative transportation.

Narrative persuasion models also suggest that identification and narrative transportation reduce counterarguing, which, in turn, would facilitate attitudinal impact:

H2: This research tests a parallel and serial mediator model, in order to contrast the indirect effect of the experimental condition that combines empathy with exposure to a high-similarity narrative on attitudes toward immigration, through identification and narrative transportation (primary mediators) and counterarguing (secondary mediator).

Method

Two experiments were carried out via QUALTRICS opt-in on line panels in Spain (N = 383, 50.1% women, mean age 40.15, SD = 12.48) and the Netherlands (N = 416, 50.2% women, mean age 42.79, SD = 13.75).

Design: We employed a two (empathy versus no empathy instructions) by two (low versus high similarity) factorial design.

Results

H1: The condition that combined empathy with reading a high-similarity narrative induced the highest levels of identification and narrative transportation (Figure 1).

H2: In the mediation analysis (PROCESS), a significant indirect effect was observed on attitudes toward immigration through identification and counter-argumentation. However, transportation did not act as a significant mediator.

Conclusions

Our work improves our understanding of the mechanisms that explain the impact of testimonial messages. The results are convergent with the predictions of narrative persuasion models in relation to the role of identification and counterarguing.

References

