

## **Enhancing Attitudes Toward Stigmatized Groups With Movies: Mediating and Moderating Processes of Narrative Persuasion**

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This study is linked to research into narrative persuasion and the techniques used to reduce rejection of stigmatized groups. Upper-secondary school students were assigned to one of two conditions: viewing a film that arouses empathy toward immigrants or seeing a film that underscores positive intergroup contact. One month before viewing the films the participants completed the Modern Racism Scale. After they viewed the films, researchers measured their identification with ingroup and outgroup characters and their attitudes toward immigration. Results showed that viewing the empathy-arousing film caused greater identification with the outgroup characters, which in turn induced more positive attitudes toward immigration, but only when previous prejudice was low or moderate. We discuss findings in the context of narrative persuasion research.

*Keywords: narrative persuasion, identification with characters, feature films, immigration, modern racism.*

Narrative formats (such as movies or television series) offer nonthreatening contexts in which individuals can experience vicarious parasocial contact with characters belonging to discriminated outgroups, which could cause discomfort or unease in situations of direct interpersonal social contact (Chung & Slater, 2013). Thus, exposure to such narrative formats can reduce attitudes of rejection toward minorities or stigmatized groups such as immigrants (Park, 2012). Previous research in this context has shown that vicarious or parasocial contact between individuals of an ingroup and individuals of an outgroup through feature films or television narratives can reduce negative attitudes toward immigration. In addition, it has shown that identification with characters in an outgroup plays an important mediating role (Müller, 2009). However, to date there has been no confirmation of the extent to which previously held prejudice toward an outgroup may moderate that process. The aim of this study was thus to analyze the mediating and moderating processes linked to the impact of films about immigration on attitudes toward immigrants as a basis for advancing our knowledge of the processes or mechanisms involved in narrative persuasion.

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### **Reduction of Prejudice and Mediated Intergroup Contact**

Prejudice is a negative attitude or feeling of rejection toward an individual because he or she belongs to a certain group (Dovidio, Kawakami, Smoak, & Gaertner, 2009). Because prejudice is a phenomenon that can be analyzed at different levels, different approaches have been established in an attempt to reduce it (Harwood, 2010; Park, 2012). In the context of social psychology, one of the strategies shown to be most effective in reducing prejudice is facilitating direct contact between individuals in the ingroup and those in the outgroup (see the meta-analysis by Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). But it has also been found that the positive effects of contact can be achieved even when the contact is indirect.

The parasocial contact hypothesis (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005) maintains that exposure through the media to examples of positive intercultural relations between individuals in the ingroup and in the outgroup provides an opportunity for parasocial contact that reinforces ingroup members' attitudes of acceptance toward outgroup members. In this context, Park (2012) defines mediated intergroup contact as the parasocial interaction that takes place (a) between a spectator who belongs to an ingroup and a fictional character who belongs to the outgroup, (b) when that spectator observes how a character from the ingroup interacts with a character from the outgroup, and (c) when an individual from the ingroup identifies with a fictional character from his or her own group who becomes involved in friendly or favorable interactions with a character from the outgroup.

Previous empirical evidence shows the importance of parasocial interaction and identification with characters. In this sense, Ortiz and Harwood (2007) found that viewing series that provide a positive image of minorities and identification with minority characters was associated with positive attitudes toward these minorities. Second, Müller (2009) observed that exposure to a multicultural drama series with a favorable message about intergroup contact (compared to viewing a series used as a control) reduced the perception of intercultural threat, and identification with characters of the outgroup explained this effect. Finally, an experimental study (Igartua, 2010) found that exposure to the feature film *A Day Without a Mexican* (with a positive message about immigration) reinforced a favorable attitude toward immigration, and identification with characters played a mediating role. These last two findings are in agreement with those of research into strategies aimed at reducing prejudice based on affective processes (Batson et al., 1997; Finlay & Stephan, 2000). From this perspective, it has been found that an effective way to improve attitudes toward a stigmatized group (cultural or ethnic minorities, immigrants, persons with disabilities, etc.) is to foster empathy and perspective taking with respect to a member of the stigmatized outgroup. Thus, it can be posited that certain audiovisual productions (such as *The Color Purple* or *Rain Man*) that present the particular cases of persons in stigmatized groups could be used to improve the image of such groups by allowing audiences to feel empathy toward or to identify with the characters in them, and this would lead to attitudinal changes.

### **Narrative Persuasion and Identification With Characters**

Narrative persuasion research (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004; de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012; Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002) is a field that

investigates how the information within narratives can alter people's perceptions of reality. Empirical studies have confirmed the power of cinematographic fiction specifically for changes of attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Baumert, Hofmann, & Blum, 2008; Chen & Lin, 2014; Igartua & Barrios, 2012). Furthermore, a variety of models have been developed about the mechanisms of narrative persuasion, the most representative being narrative transportation (Green & Brock, 2000), the extended elaboration likelihood model (E-ELM; Slater & Rouner, 2002), and the entertainment overcoming resistance model (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). In these models, identification with character is considered to play a relevant role in the narrative persuasion processes (Cohen, Tal-Or, & Mazor-Tregerman, 2015; Dal Cin et al., 2004; Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014).

Identification with characters is a mechanism through which people experience and interpret a narrative from the inside, as if the events being narrated were actually happening to them. This process is linked to aspects such as cognitive empathy (taking the perspective of the character), emotional empathy (sharing in the emotional experience of the character), and the sensation of becoming the character or of temporarily assuming his or her identity, goals, and motivations (merging) (Cohen, 2001; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Identification provides an opportunity to try on other identities and to adopt the feelings and thoughts of another. Considered in this way, identification allows the individual to overcome the natural tendency to limit one's view to a single perspective by taking on the character's point of view. For these reasons, Moyer-Gusé (2008) points out that identification with characters can increase the likelihood that individuals will accept the beliefs and attitudes implicit in fictional narratives. In this context, empirical research has found that identification with characters fosters a change in attitude; that is, when a person identifies with a fictional character, he or she takes on that character's cognitive point of view, which leads to changes in beliefs or opinions (e.g., de Graaf et al., 2012; Moyer-Gusé, Chung, & Jain, 2011).

Cohen (2001) points out that the main factors leading to identification with characters are related to audience characteristics and the characters' attributes. Thus, a positive relation has been observed between a person's perceived similarity with the character and identification (Chory-Assad & Cicchirillo, 2005). Moreover, it has empirically been found that the perception of positive personality traits in the character is positively associated with identification (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). It has also been shown that empathy (as a personality trait) predicts greater identification with fictional characters (Calvert, Strouse, & Murray, 2006).

In the context of intergroup relations and contact with immigrants, modern racism (as a measure of prejudice toward immigrants) could be a relevant variable that influences the degree of identification with main characters who are immigrants in fictional feature films. Modern racism is a subtle, indirect, rationalized, and cold form of prejudice (McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981). It is linked to distrusting and avoiding contact with persons in the outgroup and with feelings of discomfort, insecurity, and mistrust and a manifestations of fewer positive feelings (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Navas, 1998). In an experimental study on the impact of a film with a message against racism (involving African Americans in the United States), it was found that people's previous level of prejudice (as measured using the modern racism scale by McConahay et al. [1981]) influenced their interpretation of the film and their reactions to it (Eno & Ewoldsen, 2010). That study shows the importance of considering the role of individual differences (such

as the previous level of prejudice toward immigrants) in attempting to understand the impact of fictional feature films with immigrants as the main characters.

However, considering the role of individual differences (in the present study, modern racism) also allows us to test whether identification with characters behaves as a mediating variable at all levels of the moderating variable. Identification with characters involves feeling empathy for their situations, taking on their points of view (seeing the world from their perspectives), and having the feeling of taking on their actual identities, a kind of *fusion* of identities that does not always take place. For example, it has been observed that there was less identification (understood as taking characters perspectives) when the characters were presented as stigmatized in a fictional feature film (Chung & Slater, 2013). One would expect that when a person with a high degree of prejudice against immigration is exposed to a film whose lead characters are immigrants, that person will experience difficulties in identifying with immigrant characters.

The above explanation is consistent with the social judgment theory (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Sherif & Hovland, 1961), which posits that any attempt to explain persuasive effects has to start by considering the previous position or attitude of the individual and its degree of consolidation. From this perspective, it is posited that the distance perceived (or degree of discrepancy) between an individual's previous attitude and the attitude in the message determines attitudinal impact (Perloff, 2010). For these reasons, we posit that people with a high degree of modern racism, that is, those who show more extreme previous attitudes in regard to immigration, will experience a low degree of identification with immigrant characters and that therefore the message will have a low attitudinal impact. Thus, individuals with a low or moderate level of previous prejudice will be the ones that identify to a greater degree with immigrant characters and that this will lead to an attitudinal impact in consonance with the message of the film.

### **Research Context and Hypotheses**

The present study, of a quasiexperimental nature, is an attempt to clarify the moderating role of previous attitudes (in this case, prejudice evaluated as modern racism) in the reception processes of feature films about immigration. In addition, we also sought to obtain evidence of the processes responsible for persuasive impact, specifically identification with outgroup characters. Thus, not only do we analyze the possible attitudinal effects of exposure to films about immigration that provide a different image of the phenomenon, but we also delve deeper into the analysis of the mediating mechanisms or processes of narrative persuasion.

The study participants were upper-secondary school students distributed into two experimental conditions: The first group viewed a film that reinforces a message denouncing racism and stimulates empathy toward immigrants (*Poniente*), whereas the second group watched a film showing positive and nonconflictive examples of close relations between natives and immigrants (*El Próximo Oriente*). In both films the immigrant characters were Muslims, one of the most stigmatized immigrant groups in Spain (Cea D'Ancona, 2004). One month prior to being shown the film, the participants were asked to complete a first questionnaire (presented to them as part of a different study) that included a measure of their prejudice toward immigrants (using the modern racism scale by McConahay et al. [1981]) and control variables.

They were asked to complete a second questionnaire immediately after viewing the film. This second questionnaire assessed different criteria related to reception processes (identification with ingroup and outgroup characters) and the dependent variable in the study: attitude toward immigration.

Our first hypothesis has to do with the impact that viewing the films had on attitudes toward immigration. We posited that the film *Poniente*, by showing situations involving discrimination of immigrants and situations of suffering that can induce empathy in the average spectator, and with a message denouncing racism, would induce a positive attitude toward immigration in the viewers.

*H1: Viewing the film that based its strategy on reducing prejudice by appealing to empathy toward immigrants (Poniente), as compared to viewing the film that emphasized positive intergroup contact (El Próximo Oriente), will induce a more positive attitude toward immigration.*

Because empathy is considered one of the main techniques in reducing prejudice (Batson et al., 1997; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008) and because one of the fundamental dimensions of identification with characters is empathy, one would expect that a film that shows conflictive situations between ingroup and outgroup characters and discrimination of immigrants while denouncing xenophobia and racism will cause a greater empathic reaction toward immigrants that will manifest in a high identification with the immigrant characters in the film as compared with a film lacking these elements.

*H2: The feature film with an empathy appeal (Poniente) will induce greater identification with immigrant characters than the film with a positive intergroup contact appeal (El Próximo Oriente).*

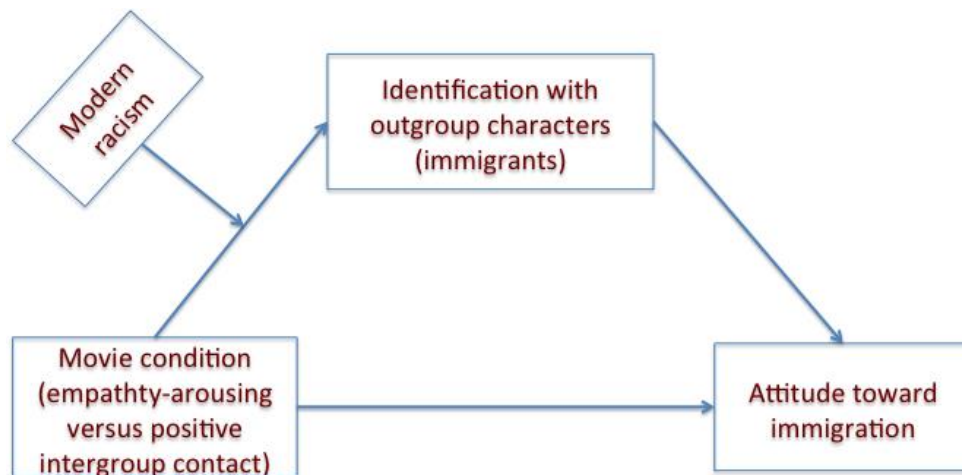
Previous studies have demonstrated that prejudice is associated with more negative attitudes and emotions toward immigrants in everyday contexts and with avoidance behaviors. It is logical to think that this effect can also manifest in a situation of mediated intergroup contact, such as when watching a film with immigrants as the main characters. Furthermore, given that an individual's similarity to characters is positively associated with identification (Chory-Assad & Cicchirillo, 2005), it is highly likely that persons with a high level of modern racism toward immigrants will experience lower empathic identification with immigrant characters. Likewise, it is expected that the film with the message denouncing racism will induce greater identification with immigrant characters than the film that does not address this topic, but this effect should be more pronounced among individuals with low or moderate modern racism.

*H3a: A negative relation will be observed between the participants' degree of modern racism toward immigrants and the level of identification with immigrant characters in the films viewed.*

*H3b: The effect that viewing the film with an empathy appeal (Poniente) has on identification with its immigrant characters will be moderated by the participants' degree of modern racism. Thus, among the participants exposed to this film, the level of identification with the immigrant characters will be greater when their level of modern racism is low or moderate.*

Narrative persuasion models consider identification with characters to be an important mediating process in a fictional narrative's impact on attitudes and beliefs. In the context of research on reducing prejudice through mediated content, Park (2012) posits three relevant processes in mediated intergroup contact: parasocial interaction with outgroup characters, parasocial interaction with an ingroup character who interacts with an outgroup character in the story, and identification with ingroup characters who interact with outgroup characters in the story. However, Müller (2009) has observed that identification with outgroup characters (and not identification with ingroup characters) is associated with less intergroup anxiety and a more positive attitude toward immigrants. Thus, we posit that identification with immigrant characters acts as a possible mediator because empathy (a central component in identification with characters) is a relevant variable in reducing prejudice (Batson et al., 1997). Thus, taking social judgment theory (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Perloff, 2010) as a reference, one would expect the hypothesized mediating process to manifest only when the previous level of prejudice toward immigrants is low to moderate.

*H4: Viewing the film with an empathy appeal (Poniente), as compared to viewing the film with a positive intergroup contact appeal (El Próximo Oriente), will induce high identification with the immigrant main characters of the film, which in turn will be associated with a more positive attitude toward immigration. However, and in accordance with a moderated mediation model (Hayes, 2013), this mediating process will only take place among individuals with low or moderate prejudice toward immigrants (Figure 1).*



**Figure 1. Moderated mediation model.**

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participating in the research were 142 students with Spanish nationality in their first year of upper-secondary education at four public secondary schools located in a provincial capital of Spain. Researchers entered into a collaboration agreement with the school prior to the study. Students were between 16 and 20 years of age, with a mean age of 16.86 ( $SD = 1.02$ ; 92.3% between 16 and 18 years of age); 50% were men and 50% were women.

### ***Design and Procedure***

A posttest-only two-group design was used, the independent variable being the audiovisual strategy used to reduce prejudice, using two films: one with empathy appeal (*Poniente*) and one with positive intergroup contact appeal (*El Próximo Oriente*). Given the nature of the participants (upper-secondary school students at four schools), it was not possible to distribute the students randomly to the two experimental treatments (the film viewed), and therefore two schools were randomly distributed to each condition, which is why the research is considered quasiexperimental. The absence of a random process in assigning individual participants to the experimental conditions means that the quasiexperiment is subject to more concerns of internal validity than experimental research per se. To tackle these concerns, particularly the possibility of there being significant differences among the participants assigned to the different treatments prior to the experiment, a pretest questionnaire was administered to measure relevant variables such as political self-positioning, level of previous prejudice toward immigrants, level of contact with immigrants in interpersonal contexts, and the perception of immigration as a problem for the country. Previous research has found that these variables are linked to attitudes toward immigration (Cea D'Ancona, 2004). Thus, in the first stage of analyzing the results, we checked whether the participants assigned to the two experimental groups showed any differences in these variables.

We carried out the research in two stages. First, we administered a pretest questionnaire evaluating the following: the perception of social problems, modern racism toward immigrants, level of contact with immigrants, political self-positioning, and sociodemographic data. This questionnaire was administered in the four schools during the same week in February 2014. Four weeks after administration of the pretest questionnaire (March 2014), we again went to the schools and showed the films in question. In their classrooms, the students viewed an edited version of one of the selected films (67 viewed *El Próximo Oriente* and 75 viewed *Poniente*). Immediately after viewing, the participants completed the posttest questionnaire designed to assess their reception processes (identification with the main characters), the dependent variable (attitude toward immigration), and sociodemographic data such as country of birth (to exclude the questionnaires of any foreign-born participants).

### ***Description of the Films and Pilot Study***

Participants viewed two feature films produced in Spain, *Poniente* (Gutiérrez, 2002) and *El Próximo Oriente* (Colomo, 2006), selected because they present two different views of the immigration phenomenon. Taking as a reference studies about the role of empathy and identification in the reduction of prejudice (Batson et al., 1997; Müller, 2009), we considered that a film with the potential to reduce prejudice toward immigrants should cause empathy identification with the members of the outgroup (immigrants). We considered *Poniente* the most appropriate film for fulfilling this requirement. It posits intercultural conflict as a basic ingredient by showing examples of violence and racism in the working world and by observing how immigrants are exploited, deprived of their rights, and discriminated against by people in the place they live. As a counterpoint, we used the film *El Próximo Oriente*, which shows several positive examples of romantic relationships between Spanish citizens and Asian immigrants with Muslim beliefs. It tells the love story of a Spanish man and an Islamic Asian woman and is a kind of celebration of multiculturalism and the mixing of races. The film also portrays several examples of friendship and work relations between natives and immigrants. Plot synopses of the films appear in Table 1.

**Table 1. Plot Descriptions of *Poniente* and *El Próximo Oriente*.**

<i>Poniente</i>	<i>El Próximo Oriente</i>
Lucia returns to her native land following the death of her father. There she finds a new situation: the arrival of immigrants who have come to work as farm laborers and racism in the local population. Lucia decides to stay in the village to continue with her father's business, and she meets Curro, a man who was brought up in Switzerland during the years when many Spanish emigrants went to work there. Both of them feel alone and uprooted and have good relations with the immigrants, especially with two Muslim immigrants, Abdembdi and Saïd, who undergo several experiences of discrimination and racism and attempt to fight peacefully for their rights as workers. As the film progresses, the conflict between the immigrant workers (who are demanding higher wages) and the inhabitants of the village becomes clear, until an outbreak of xenophobic violence occurs that will end in tragedy.	Caín is a shy young man, unsuccessful in establishing affective relations with women. He works as a butcher in a neighborhood in Madrid where many immigrants live, along with Milagros, a Spanish woman who is in a relationship with a Muslim. Caín becomes involved in a misunderstanding with a family of immigrants: The oldest daughter of the family, Aisha, tries to kill herself in Caín's house when she finds out she is pregnant. Her family thinks that Caín is the father, and he decides to admit to being the father of the child, get married, and convert to Islam. At the wedding, Aisha's father, Shakir, has a stroke, which leaves him in a coma. Caín assumes the leadership position in the immigrant's family business. After the child is born, Shakir regains consciousness and discovers that Caín is not really the father of the child. Caín decides to leave to avoid problems, but Shakir lets him know that he approves of his actions, and Aisha happily takes up her life again with Caín.



To underscore the message of each film most efficiently, the films were edited (initially both were approximately 90 minutes long) to create versions approximately 45 minutes long, respecting the plot lines of the script and without depleting the story in any of its aspects. In the case of *Poniente*, a 47-minute version was created that emphasized the discrimination the immigrants were subject to at work, making very clear how much the immigrants suffered because of their status. In contrast, the 46-minute edited version of *El Próximo Oriente* underscored the intimate and positive contact between characters of the ingroup and of the outgroup.

A pilot study was carried out with the participation of 45 students of audiovisual communication (68.9% women and a mean age of 20.51 years). The participants in the pilot study were distributed into two groups, and each group was shown a different film. After viewing, they completed a short questionnaire that asked (on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 = "not at all" to 7 = "very much") to what extent they considered that the following affirmations could be applied to the film they had viewed: (a) "It can be seen that peaceful and harmonious co-existence between immigrants and Spaniards is possible"; (b) "Although it shows some conflictive situations between immigrants and Spaniards, the average viewer would feel empathy for the immigrants"; (c) "It offers a positive view of immigrants and Spaniards getting along"; (d) "The film contains a message denouncing racism and xenophobia"; (e) "Conflictive situations between immigrants and natives are shown"; (f) "The average viewer would feel uneasy or sad seeing the situation in which the immigrants in the film have to live"; (g) "The idea the film reinforces is that it is possible for immigrants and Spaniards to have close relations (as couples or friends)"; (h) "It shows a positive image of immigrants"; and (i) "It shows a positive view of intercultural contact, that is, contact between persons from different cultures." Two indices were then created based on these items: positive intercultural contact present in the film (items 1, 3, 7, 8, and 9;  $\alpha = .87$ ), and empathy and a condemnation of racism present in the film (items 2, 4, 5, and 6;  $\alpha = .76$ ).

The results of the pilot study showed that the two films each emphasized a different view of immigration. The idea of positive intercultural contact was more present in *El Próximo Oriente* ( $M = 5.31$ ;  $SD = 0.67$ ) than in *Poniente* ( $M = 3.08$ ;  $SD = 1.07$ ;  $t(41.70) = 8.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In contrast, *Poniente* ( $M = 5.93$ ;  $SD = 1.14$ ) presented a message that reinforced empathy toward immigrants and condemned racism to a greater extent than *El Próximo Oriente* ( $M = 4.63$ ;  $SD = 0.60$ ;  $t(41.21) = -4.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### ***Instruments and Variables***

**Perception of the importance of several issues as problems for the country.** This was used to measure the perception of immigration as a problem for the country. The question was phrased as follows (my translation): "Please indicate to what extent you believe the following matters are important problems for the country," followed by a list of 11 issues (among them, immigration) and an 11-point scale for responding ranging from 0 = "not important at all" to 10 = "extremely important."

**Prejudice toward immigrants.** Prejudice was assessed using the modern racism scale by McConahay et al. (1981), translated and adapted to the Spanish context by Navas (1998). This scale was included to assess the participants' level of prejudice toward immigrants before being exposed to the film. It comprises 9 items (e.g., "In recent years, immigrants have gotten more economically than they

deserve”) with responses items chosen from a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree”). We created a modern racism index ( $\alpha = .89$ ) by adding up all the items. Thus, the higher the score, the higher the negative prejudice toward immigrants.

**Level of contact with immigrants.** Each participant was asked if he or she currently or in the past had some type of relation with immigrants (as family, friends, boy- or girlfriend, coworkers, classmates, or neighbors; 1 = yes, 0 = no). We then created an index of personal contact with immigrants based on the simple sum of the six dichotomous variables considered (theoretical range of points from 0 to 6).

**Political self-positioning.** The question was based on sociological surveys carried out in Spain (Cea D’Ancona, 2004): “When we talk about politics we generally use the expressions ‘left’ and ‘right.’ Taking into account the following scale, which number best represents your political position?” (where 1 = left, 10 = right).

**Enjoyment.** This was assessed with the three-item scale by Oliver and Bartsch (2010): “It was fun for me to watch this movie”; “The movie was entertaining”; and “I had a good time watching this movie” (from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree;  $\alpha = .84$ ).

**Identification with the main characters.** This was assessed with an 11-item scale whose reliability and validity were confirmed in a previous study (Igartua & Barrios, 2012). The instrument has 11 items designed to measure in retrospect the respondents’ degree of identification with a specific character (e.g., “I felt emotionally involved with X’s feelings” and “I had the impression of actually experiencing what X did”) with possible responses ranging from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much. For each film, we analyzed the identification with two outgroup characters (immigrants) and two ingroup characters (natives). Thus, participants had to fill out four scales to measure identification with four characters in total. To facilitate the task, we used two versions of the posttest questionnaire, one that asked about the characters in *Poniente* and the other about the characters in *El Próximo Oriente*. A photograph of the characters was included in each case. Based on the application of the identification scale for two main characters of the ingroup and two main characters of the outgroup, and following the procedure used by Müller (2009) and Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010), we created two identification indices: identification with ingroup characters ( $\alpha = .92$  for *El Próximo Oriente*;  $\alpha = .94$  for *Poniente*) and identification with outgroup characters ( $\alpha = .92$  for *El Próximo Oriente*;  $\alpha = .96$  for *Poniente*).

**Attitude toward immigration.** The dependent variable was assessed as in previous research (Igartua, 2010; Igartua & Cheng, 2009) by asking participants: “As you know, all developed countries receive immigrants. Do you think, generally, that immigration is a more positive or a more negative thing for Spain?” (0 = very negative to 10 = very positive).

## Results

### ***Equivalence of the Experimental Groups***

Given the quasiexperimental nature of the study, we tested whether the two groups of participants differed in relation to the following variables: political self-positioning, level of previous prejudice as assessed by the modern racism scale, the perception of immigration as a problem for the country and personal level of contact with immigrants. The results showed that there were no statistically significant differences between the groups in any of the four variables considered (in all cases,  $p > .150$ ). In addition, 22.5% of the participants indicated that they had a current or previous family relationship with immigrants, although there were still no significant differences as a function of experimental condition ( $\chi^2[1, N = 141] = 0.66, p = .415$ ). However, we did find statistically significant differences in enjoyment ( $t[138] = 3.69, p < .001, r = .29$ ). The comedy film (*El Próximo Oriente*;  $M = 4.16, SD = 1.61$ ) induced more enjoyment than the more dramatic movie (*Poniente*;  $M = 3.24, SD = 1.31$ ). For this reason, we included enjoyment as a control variable in the following statistical analysis. We also decided to include having a current or previous family relationship with immigrants as a second covariate to increase the statistical robustness of the analyses and address rival explanations for the results, as suggested by Hayes (2005).

### ***Impact of Viewing the Films on Attitude Toward Immigration***

Hypothesis 1 posited that viewing the film that based its strategy on reducing prejudice by appealing to empathy (*Poniente*) would induce a more positive attitude toward immigration than viewing the film emphasizing positive intergroup contact (*El Próximo Oriente*). Using Student's  $t$ -test, we found that the participants who watched the film *Poniente* showed a more positive attitude toward immigration ( $M = 5.60, SD = 2.08$ ) than the participants who viewed *El Próximo Oriente* ( $M = 4.82, SD = 2.34; t[140] = -2.10, p < .038, r = .17$ ). Moreover, this effect continued to be statistically significant ( $F_{\text{condition}}[1, 131] = 7.26, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .05$ ), even when including in the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) the covariates of the modern racism index ( $F_{\text{modern\_racism}}[1, 131] = 46.68, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .26$ ), family contact with immigrants ( $F_{\text{family\_contact}}[1, 131] = 17.48, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .11$ ) and enjoyment ( $F_{\text{enjoyment}}[1, 131] = 9.04, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .06$ ).

### ***The Moderating Role of Modern Racism in Identification with Outgroup Characters***

Hypothesis 2 posited that the film with empathy appeal (*Poniente*) would induce greater identification with immigrant characters than the film with positive intergroup contact appeal (*El Próximo Oriente*). ANCOVA confirmed this hypothesis because greater identification with the outgroup characters was observed among the participants who had viewed *Poniente* ( $M = 2.84, SE = 0.09$ ) than among those who had seen *El Próximo Oriente* ( $M = 2.19, SE = 0.11; F_{\text{condition}}[1, 122] = 18.55, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .13$ ),

even controlling for enjoyment ( $F_{\text{enjoyment}}[1, 122] = 4.58, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$ ) and family contact with immigrants ( $F_{\text{family\_contact}} [1, 122] = 1.66, p = .200$ ).<sup>1</sup>

Hypothesis 3a posited that there would be a negative relation between participants' previous degree of modern racism toward immigrants and their level of identification with the immigrant characters in the films viewed, whereas Hypothesis 3b predicted that the effect of viewing the film with an empathy appeal on identification with its immigrant main characters would be moderated by the participants' degree of modern racism. To test these two hypotheses, we used the PROCESS macro (model 1) developed by Hayes (2013), which is based on multiple linear regression (moderated multiple regression). This technique has been considered the most suitable choice for analyzing the interaction between an experimental independent variable (a dichotomous one in this case, coded as 0.5 = *Poniente* and -0.5 = *El Próximo Oriente*) and a continuous independent variable (in this case, the score obtained on the modern racism scale) (Hayes & Matthes, 2009). Again, enjoyment and family contact with immigrants were included as control variables in the moderation analysis.

The results of the analyses showed that, in agreement with Hypothesis 3a, there is indeed a negative relation between the modern racism of the participants and their degree of identification with the characters of the outgroup ( $B = -0.24, p < .001$ ). In addition, and in confirmation of Hypothesis 3b, a significant interaction effect was observed between the experimental condition and the level of modern racism in the identification with outgroup characters ( $B = -0.23, p < .038$ ). Thus, it was confirmed that the participants exposed to the film with empathy appeal (*Poniente*), as compared to those who viewed the film with positive intergroup contact appeal (*El Próximo Oriente*), experienced a high degree of identification with the immigrant characters when the level of modern racism was low ( $B = 0.90, p < .001$ ) or moderate ( $B = 0.60, p < .001$ ), but that association was no longer statistically significant when the level of modern racism was high ( $B = 0.31, p = .111$ ).

#### **Mediation Analysis: Testing of the Moderated Mediation Model**

To test Hypothesis 4, we again used the PROCESS macro (model 7 in particular). It permits calculation of the conditional indirect effects (based on the bootstrapping technique), that is, the effect of an independent variable (movie condition) on a dependent variable (attitude toward immigration) through a mediating variable (identification with the outgroup characters) for different levels of a moderating variable (modern racism) and controlling for enjoyment and family contact with immigrants. In this study,

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<sup>1</sup> Statistically significant differences were also observed in the level of identification with ingroup characters (*Poniente*,  $M = 3.10, SE = 0.09$ ; *El Próximo Oriente*,  $M = 2.12, SE = 0.09$ ;  $F(1, 120) = 52.19, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30$ ). Moreover, among the participants who viewed *El Próximo Oriente*, there were no significant differences between identification with the ingroup characters ( $M = 2.18, SD = 0.63$ ) and the outgroup characters ( $M = 2.23, SD = 0.70$ ;  $t[48] = -0.94, p = .349$ ). However, among the participants exposed to *Poniente*, statistically significant differences were indeed detected ( $t[64] = 3.71, p < .001$ ) between identification with the ingroup characters ( $M = 3.07, SD = 0.79$ ) and immigrant characters ( $M = 2.78, SD = 0.89$ ).

the conditional indirect effects were calculated using 10,000 bootstrapping samples, generating confidence intervals of the bias-corrected bootstrap type. A conditional indirect effect is considered statistically significant if the confidence interval established (*CI* at 95%) does not include the value 0.

The results of the analysis allow us to conclude that exposure to the film with empathy appeal induced greater identification with the outgroup than exposure to the movie with a positive intergroup contact message ( $B = 1.33, p < .001$ ) and that, in turn, the identification was associated with a more positive attitude toward immigration ( $B = 0.63, p < .005$ ). However, the existence of a statistically significant interaction effect between the film viewed and the participants' level of modern racism ( $B = -0.23, p < .038$ ) meant that the conditional indirect effects were only statistically significant when the previous degree of modern racism was low ( $B_{\text{indirect\_effect}} = 0.57, SE = 0.24, CI\ 95\% [0.17, 1.12]$ ) or moderate ( $B_{\text{indirect\_effect}} = 0.38, SE = 0.16, CI\ 95\% [0.12, 0.79]$ ; see Table 2). Moreover, the index of moderated mediation was also significant (index =  $-0.14, SE = 0.09, 95\% CI [-0.38, -0.01]$ ). In short, identification with outgroup characters did indeed play a relevant mediating role for understanding the impact of exposure to the film with empathy appeal (*Poniente*) on attitudes toward immigration, but only when the previous level of modern racism toward immigrants was low to moderate.

**Table 2. Results of the Moderated Mediation Analysis (PROCESS, Model 7).**

Mediating variable model (identification with outgroup characters)				
Predictor variables ( $R^2 = .28, p < .001$ )	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	2.64	.23	11.36	.000
Movie condition	1.33	.38	3.49	.000
Modern racism (MR)	-.24	.05	-4.30	.000
Interaction movie condition × MR	-.23	.11	-2.09	.038
Family contact with immigrants	.18	.16	1.09	.277
Enjoyment	.15	.04	3.23	.001
Dependent variable model (attitude toward immigration)				
Predictor variables ( $R^2 = .18, p < .001$ )	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	2.97	.67	4.38	.000
Identification with outgroup characters	.63	.22	2.83	.005
Movie condition (direct effect)	.61	.40	1.52	.129
Family contact with immigrants	1.28	.43	2.96	.003
Enjoyment	.12	.12	1.00	.317
Conditional indirect effects				
Mediator	Moderating variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Boot 95% <i>CI</i>
Identification with outgroup characters	Low MR (1.80)	.57	.24	[.17, 1.12]
Identification with outgroup characters	Medium MR (3.05)	.38	.16	[.12, .79]
Identification with outgroup characters	High MR(4.30)	.19	.15	[-.02, .63]

*Note.* The variable "movie condition" was coded as 0.5 when participants viewed *Poniente* (empathy appeal) and -0.5 when they viewed *El Próximo Oriente* (positive intergroup contact appeal) following the recommendations of Hayes (2013). The table includes the *B* coefficients, which are nonstandardized regression coefficients.

### Conclusions and Discussion

The findings of this study allow us to conclude that the strategy based on fostering empathy is more effective as an intervention tool to improve attitudes toward immigration than an audiovisual strategy that shows positive and intimate situations of intergroup contact. This is consistent with the research done by Batson et al. (1997). We observed that the film with a message that reinforced empathy toward immigrants by showing situations of conflict and discrimination and by denouncing racism and xenophobia (*Poniente*), as compared to the film that reinforced the positive message of romantic intercultural contact with immigrants (*El Próximo Oriente*), provoked a more positive attitude toward immigration in the participants, even when controlling for the effects of relevant variables such as the modern racism index and family contact with immigrants.

Regarding identification with characters, a central process in narrative persuasion (de Graaf et al., 2012; Moyer-Gusé, 2008), significant differences were also observed between the two films. Identification is linked to the experience of empathy, perspective taking, and the sensation of becoming the character, taking on his or her goals, motivations, and identity. It is logical to assume that a film that does not bring about identification with the main characters will generate less involvement and have less impact (Cohen, 2001; Igartua, 2010). Thus, this study showed that the individuals who saw the film that reinforced a message of condemnation of racism and of empathy toward immigrants (*Poniente*) experienced greater identification with the outgroup characters than the participants who viewed the film that showed only situations of positive intergroup contact (*El Próximo Oriente*). In addition, we hypothesized that participants' previous level of prejudice toward immigrants (evaluated with the modern racism scale one month before participants viewed the films) would moderate this result. First, we observed that modern racism influenced identification with characters in the outgroup: The higher the level of modern racism, the lower the identification with immigrant characters, a result consistent with the hypothesis of mediated intergroup contact (Park, 2012) and with previous studies about stigma and narrative impact (Chung & Slater, 2013). Nonetheless, our most important finding was that the film with a message against racism and with images promoting empathy toward immigrants (*Poniente*) induced greater identification with the outgroup characters (than *El Próximo Oriente*), but only when the level of modern racism was low to moderate. This finding is new and brings to light the relevant role of individual differences as moderating variables in understanding the impact of entertainment content on reception processes, particularly on identification with characters. The inclusion of moderating variables related to individual differences helps to increase the explained variance of the effects of entertainment and provides a better explanation of the effects of that mediated content (Oliver & Krakowiak, 2009).

The literature on narrative persuasion and research into mediated intergroup contact considers that parasocial contact with fictional characters, particularly identification with characters, is a mediating process or mechanism that explains attitudinal impact (Chung & Slater, 2013; Igartua, 2010; Müller, 2009; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Park, 2012; Schiappa et al., 2005). The findings of our study converge with this theoretical postulate. Nevertheless, the mediating role of identification with characters from the outgroup only took place when the participants' previous level of modern racism was low to moderate, such that the hypothesized moderated mediation model, which was an innovation with respect to previous

research (Eno & Ewoldsen, 2010; Müller, 2009), was endorsed by the study data. Thus, we observed that viewing the film reinforcing a message denouncing racism and promoting empathy toward immigrants (*Poniente*) induced greater identification with outgroup characters than viewing the film with a positive message about romantic intergroup contact (*El Próximo Oriente*), and that that process was in turn associated with a more favorable attitude toward immigration. However, this mediating process only occurred among the participants who showed (before viewing) a low or moderate level of modern racism toward immigrants.

From a theoretical point of view, and regarding the mechanisms of narrative persuasion, these findings are consistent with social judgment theory (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Perloff, 2010; Sherif & Hovland, 1961). We observed that the individuals most susceptible to having their attitudes influenced by a fictional film with a message reinforcing empathy toward immigrants were those who had already manifested a position more favorable to immigrants, with a low to moderate level of modern racism. Although we consider that the results of the study are convergent with the E-ELM model (Slater & Rouner, 2002) because they confirm the mediating role of identification with characters, it is also true that they contribute something new to the discussion on narrative persuasion: They bring to the theoretical discussion the role of the perceived distance between the previous attitude of the individuals receiving the narrative message and the attitudinal position implicit in the narrative (Cohen et al., 2015). This provides a space in the research on narrative persuasion for theoretical aspects linked to social judgment theory, which until now has not been researched empirically, although it has been mentioned in the literature (Dal Cin et al., 2004).

A major limitation of the present study is that the films used differed in a variety of ways. Despite this, they did have certain aspects in common. First, they were both Spanish productions that address aspects directly related to the situation of immigrants in Spain. Second, in both films the immigrant characters were Muslims. Third, both films were edited to eliminate aspects that were not central to the plot in relation to the research goals. However, that the two commercial films as experimental stimuli had differences in elements such as the number of close-ups, the music, the dialogue, and other formal traits has an impact on the quality of causal inferences. We recommend that future studies work with experimental designs (with homogeneous stimuli except for the manipulation of the independent variable) or, if using a quasiexperimental design, increase the number of messages so the results can be generalized (Reeves & Geiger, 1994).

A second limitation of the study has to do with the low levels of identification with both the ingroup and outgroup characters. One possible explanation is that the protagonists of both movies are adults and young adults, whereas the participants in the study were adolescents between 16 and 18 years of age. Previous research has shown that similarity influences identification with characters (Hoeken, Kolthoff, & Sanders, 2016).

Furthermore, our findings have clear practical implications: They mean that the intervention strategy based on empathy would have its limitations when applied to individuals with a high level of previous prejudice. Therefore, the challenge for future research is to make a prosocial persuasive impact (for improving intergroup attitudes) on people with a high previous level of prejudice, given that they are

the ones most in need of a change in attitude. It is clear that provoking identification with stigmatized persons (such as the immigrants in the present context) and thus indirectly favoring positive attitudes to intergroup contact is a challenge for creators of fictional content (Müller, 2009; Park, 2012).

Finally, the findings of this study allow us to progress in our knowledge of the processes or mechanisms that govern narrative persuasion when designing entertainment-education interventions aimed at achieving prosocial effects (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). This field could prove to be more effective than the classic publicity campaigns used to reduce intergroup anxiety and improve attitudes toward immigrants.

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