

AUDIOVISUAL NARRATIVES

to Counter Rumors About Immigration:

RESULTS FROM THE **TRANCHAR** PROJECT



This report presents the findings of an experimental study developed within the framework of the TRANCHAR (Transitional characters in entertainment-education narratives designed to reduce prejudice against immigrants: Attributes, boundary conditions and explanatory mechanisms) project, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, led by Juan José Igartua Perosanz and developed within the framework of the "Observatorio de Contenidos Audiovisuales" at the University of Salamanca.

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The study explores how **short audiovisual narratives** can be used as tools to **reduce prejudice toward immigrants**. It examines the **persuasive effects** of short, professionally produced video stories designed to improve attitudes toward immigrant populations.

Specifically, Study 2 aimed to understand how the **configuration of the main character** in inspiring audiovisual narratives with an **Education-Entertainment (EE) component** can help **reduce prejudice toward immigrants**.



Through a **pre-registered online experiment**, participants were randomly exposed to different video narratives. Participants viewed one of **nine versions of the same story**, each differing in specific details. In every narrative, a **negative rumor about immigration** was introduced, and depending on the condition, the protagonist confronted that rumor in a casual setting (a conversation at a bar).

Three immigration-related rumors were addressed — crime increase, unfair job access, and public assistance abuse — and **three protagonist types** were used: positive role model, transitional character, and control group. This study used three types of protagonists:

- **Positive role model:** A character who consistently demonstrates inclusive attitudes and prosocial values, serving as a moral compass and aspirational example.
- **Transitional character:** A character who begins the story with a prejudiced attitude but gradually evolves toward empathy and acceptance, following a process of attitudinal change.
- **Control group:** A version in which the protagonist's attitude toward immigration is never revealed because the story is interrupted (by a phone call).

This study **analyzes the psychological processes** activated in people exposed to these narrative messages. In particular, it examines the role of **identification with the protagonist** and **psychological insight** (a transformative cognitive response linked to attitudinal change), while also considering **individual differences**, especially participants' prior levels of modern racism.

Main **results** reveal that:

- Among participants with **low levels of modern racism**, stories featuring a **positive role model** promoted **stronger identification with the protagonist**, which in turn led to **greater psychological insight**. This narrative experience translated into **higher story appreciation, greater willingness to share the message, and more positive attitudes toward immigrants**.
- In contrast, participants with **high levels of modern racism** **identified less** with both **positive role model** and **transitional characters** compared to the control character, which hindered insight processes and limited attitudinal change.
- **Transitional characters** were not effective in this short format, although further research should explore whether they might work better in longer narratives (films, TV series, soap operas).

These results have important implications for the design of **public communication policies** and **social campaigns** aimed at combating xenophobia and racism.



Context & Justification

Immigration has been one of the most significant social phenomena in both Europe and Spain over the past decades, becoming a driver of **cultural and economic enrichment**.

Reducing prejudice toward immigration yields positive outcomes not only for immigrants themselves—since the perception of discrimination is linked to psychological distress and health problems—but also for the overall “health of society”: **a society open to immigration is, quite simply, a healthier one.**

However, data from the **2024 Eurobarometer** reveal that 31% of European citizens perceive non-EU immigration as a threat, a perception fueled by several factors:

- The spread of **rumors and misinformation**, such as “immigrants take our jobs,” “immigrants increase crime,” or “immigrants receive excessive benefits.”
- The influence of **negative media narratives** that portray immigration as a problem or threat.
- The rise of **far-right political discourse** that exploits fear of foreigners for political gain.

In this context, it becomes crucial to explore **innovative communication strategies** capable of **neutralizing stereotypes** and **fostering inclusive attitudes**.

The TRANCHAR project proposes a communication model that combines **narrative persuasion**, **inspiring messages**, and **Education-Entertainment** to create a particularly powerful tool—one that resonates emotionally and cognitively with audiences.



Conceptual framework

Narrative persuasion

Narrative persuasion is a communication strategy that designs fictional stories **not only to entertain** but also **to convey an implicit prosocial message** about a specific issue or social group — such as prejudice against immigrants.

A wide range of **processes and mechanisms** are involved in narrative persuasion; some have been thoroughly examined throughout the years, whereas others still await exploration. This study explores two central mechanisms that may account for the persuasive effects of narratives: **identification with the protagonist** and **psychological insight**.



Inspiring message

An inspiring message **addresses self-transcendent themes** such as the meaning of life, human connection, or moral values.

Previous research suggests that for a story to be considered inspiring, it must include at least **one transformative scene** — a key narrative moment that triggers profound change in the characters or plot.

Inspiring narratives **leave a lasting impression** and **encourage reflection**, often **evoking a sense of social connectedness** and **elevation** — a positive emotion experienced when witnessing moral excellence or kindness in others.

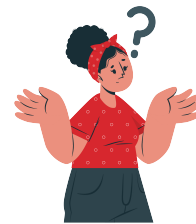
Education-Entertainment (EE)

Education-Entertainment integrates **educational or prosocial messages** into **engaging and entertaining stories**. It has been successfully applied in fields such as public health (e.g., HIV prevention, vaccine promotion), gender equality, and prejudice reduction toward immigrants.

Within Education-Entertainment narratives, numerous elements and variations come into play, one of the most relevant being the ***type of main character***.

In this study, three types of protagonists were used:

- **Positive role model:** A character who consistently embodies an inclusive and supportive worldview, serving as a moral reference and example to follow throughout the story.
- **Transitional character:** A character who begins with negative beliefs and attitudes but undergoes a transformation that ends with an empathetic and open stance toward immigrants.
- **Control:** A version in which the narrative interaction is interrupted before the protagonist reveals any opinion or stance on immigration.



While Education-Entertainment narratives traditionally rely on these protagonist types—especially the positive role model and the transitional character—each with its persuasive function, research comparing their relative impact (particularly regarding prejudice reduction) remains limited.

This study aims to shed light on that gap and explore how the type of protagonist influences audience identification with the protagonist and the psychological processes triggered during story reception.

Identification with the protagonist

Refers to the psychological process through which individuals **adopt the perspective, emotions, and goals of the story's main character**, temporarily merging their own self-concept with that of the protagonist.

Psychological insight

Beyond enjoyment, narratives can provoke a **“moment of revelation”** or **“eureka moment”**, in which individuals suddenly and clearly understand something about themselves or about society.



This psychological insight represents a kind of epiphany — a **spontaneous realization or reappraisal of meaning** — that can lead to **lasting attitudinal change**.

Modern racism

Modern racism refers to a **subtle and socially acceptable** form of racial prejudice, expressed through the denial of discrimination, opposition to equity policies, or blaming immigrants for their difficulties. This study analyzes **how individuals with different levels of modern racism respond differently to protagonist configurations**, particularly in terms of identification and openness to persuasive influence.

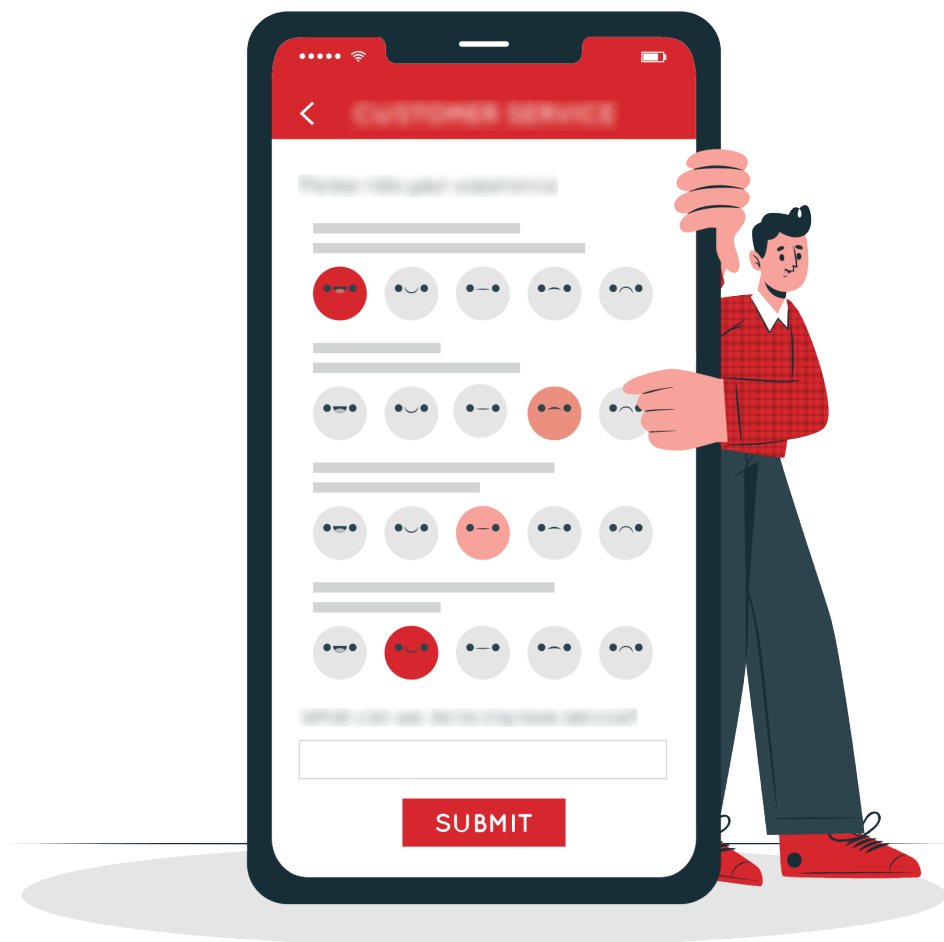
Research methodology

Design

Pre-registered online experiment.

Sample

A total of 927 participants residing in Spain and of Spanish origin, selected to be representative of the Spanish population in terms of gender, age, and education level.



Stimuli

9 short, professionally produced videos (each lasting 4–5 minutes).

- **Scenario:** A bar setting in which the protagonist — Antonio, a middle-aged Spanish man — overhears a negative rumor about immigration.
- **Three protagonist-type conditions (main independent variable):**
 - Positive role model
 - Transitional character
 - Control group
- **Three addressed rumors:** increase in crime and delinquency, immigrants taking jobs from natives, immigrants receiving excessive public benefits.

Moderating variable

- Modern racism

Mediating variables

- Identification with the main character
- Psychological insight

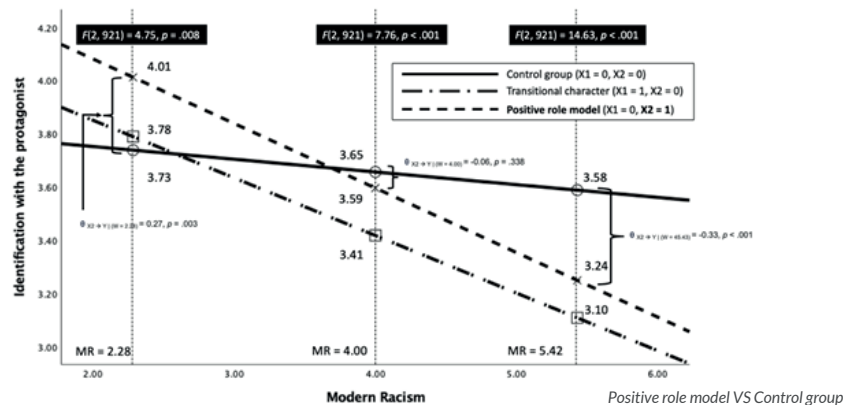
Dependent variables

- Story liking
- Intention to share the video
- Attitudes toward immigrants
- Behavioral intention to donate to a pro-immigrant NGO

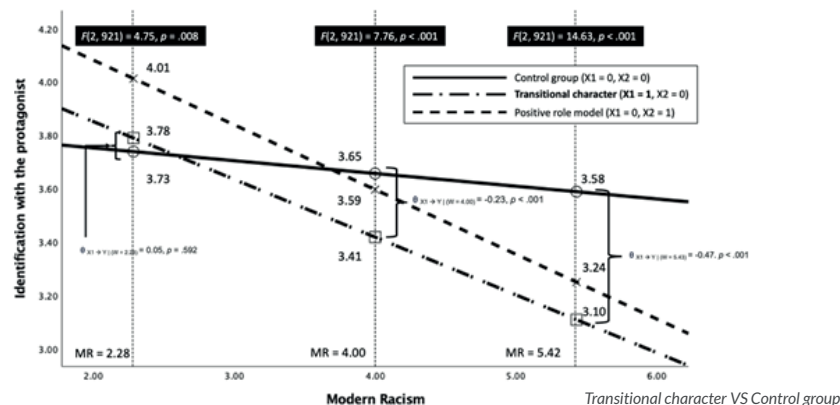
Main results

Type of character and modern racism

Participants with **low levels of modern racism identified more strongly** with the protagonist who embodied a **positive role model**, compared to the control protagonist.



Conversely, participants with **high levels of modern racism identified less** with both the **positive role model** and the **transitional character** than with the control protagonist.



Type of character and dependent variables

Identification with the main character was positively associated with higher levels of:

- Story liking
- Intention to share the video
- Favorable attitudes toward immigrants
- Willingness to donate to pro-immigration NGOs

Identification with the protagonist was also linked to a stronger experience of psychological insight.

In turn, psychological insight was positively associated with each of the previously mentioned outcomes, except for the willingness to donate to pro-immigration NGOs.



Viewer's inner process

The study confirms a **sequential mediation model**:



- For **open-minded audiences**, the full chain **operates effectively**.
- For **resistant audiences**, the chain **breaks down** due to a lack of initial identification.

These results suggest that **short narratives are more effective as reinforcement tools** for inclusive attitudes than as instruments to transform strongly negative attitudes toward immigration.



Discussion

- **Positive role models** function as **aspirational mirrors** for those who already value inclusion. They reinforce existing prosocial attitudes and provide emotional validation for inclusive worldviews.
- We assume that **transitional characters** require longer exposure time to be perceived as credible, to generate empathy, and to overcome resistance to persuasion. Their effectiveness **may therefore depend on longer narrative formats**, where attitudinal change unfolds gradually.
- We also propose that **modern racism** acts as a cognitive anchor, shaping how audiences receive these stories: individuals with higher prejudice levels tend to reject pro-immigrant characters, perceiving them as distant or ideologically opposed to their own views.

These findings refine classical Education-Entertainment Theory, showing that **the same content does not work equally well for all audiences**. Segmentation and adaptation strategies are therefore crucial when designing persuasive narratives and communication campaigns.



Recommendations

Public policies & Communication

In an audiovisual context where short-form narrative content consumption is on the rise, testing Education-Entertainment mechanisms in these formats becomes especially relevant. The evidence found can be applied in various ways:

1. **Short campaigns** on social media and digital platforms featuring inclusive protagonists, to reinforce attitudes among receptive audiences.
2. **Long-form productions** (series, documentaries, films) for resistant audiences, where transitional characters can gradually develop changes.
3. **Transmedia strategies**, combining short- and long-form formats for different audiences
4. **Educational integration:** use of audiovisual narratives in schools and awareness-raising programs.
5. **Continuous evaluation:** measuring the impact of campaigns to adjust content according to the target audience.



Future research directions

- Analyze the impact of transitional characters in **long-form narratives**.
- Study the effectiveness of the developed model in **other European cultural contexts**.
- Explore **generational differences** in reception.
- Assess the role of **social media** in the dissemination of these narratives.

Conclusions

The TRANCHAR project demonstrates that **short fictional narratives with an Education-Entertainment component and an inspiring tone** can be a powerful tool to reinforce inclusive attitudes toward immigration, especially among individuals with low levels of modern racism.

The research confirms that **identification with the protagonist** and **psychological insight** are key mechanisms in the **impact of different types of protagonists** within inspiring Education-Entertainment narratives applied to the fight against xenophobia and racism.

References

- Igartua, J. J., González-Vázquez, A., Rodríguez-Contreras, L., Slater, M. D., Marcos-Ramos, M., & González-González, W. (2025). Story-driven insights: How transitional characters and positive role models in video narratives shape outgroup attitudes [Preprint]. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/es7bj_v1
- Press note - Sala de Prensa USAL (2025). *Un estudio liderado por la Universidad de Salamanca explora cómo las narrativas audiovisuales pueden contribuir a combatir los rumores contra la inmigración*. Observatorio de los Contenidos Audiovisuales, Universidad de Salamanca.

Materials (stimuli)

This text block will redirect you to a YouTube playlist on the OCA channel, where you can find the nine videos used as stimuli in the experiment. Click on each of the buttons below to access each individual version.

	Positive role model	Transitional character	Control group
Rumor 1 (delinquency)	V1	V2	V3
Rumor 2 (jobs)	V4	V5	V6
Rumor 3 (public benefits)	V7	V8	V9