"If it hooks you, share it on social networks". Joint effects of character similarity and imagined contact on the intention to share a short narrative in favor of immigration

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Abstract
Introduction: This paper analyzes the effect of imagined contact and similarity with the protagonist of a written first-person short-narrative whose goal was the improvement of the attitudes towards stigmatized immigrants. **Method**: The participants of the experiment (N =400) received imagined intergroup contact instructions (versus control instructions) immediately before reading a first-person narrative describing the experiences of a Moroccan immigrant with high or low similarity with the audience. After reading the narrative, participants filled out a questionnaire with the dependent variables. **Results**: It was observed that the optimal reception condition, induced a greater

identification and transportation than the control condition, which in turn provoked a greater intention to share the message through social networks. **Conclusions**: Results are discussed in the context of the research on narrative persuasion and on prejudice reduction.

Keywords
Narrative persuasion; identification with characters; transportation; character similarity; imagined intergroup contact; immigration.

Contents

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1. Introduction

In 2013, the Spanish television network Antena 3 began to broadcast the prime-time series *El tiempo entre costuras* ("The time in between"), an adaptation of the homonymous novel by Maria Dueñas. The series revolves around Sira Quiroga, a young seamstress living in Madrid at the beginning of the 20th century. The series became a major ratings success (reaching a 25% audience share) and caused two interesting side effects: sales of sewing machines increased 135% (especially, during the broadcast of the series) and sales of the novel increased four times since the broadcast of the first episode (Igartua, 2015). These facts show very clearly that narratives and their leading characters can have substantial effects on audiences' attitudes and behaviors.

Beyond these facts, empirical research has shown that narrative messages (ranging from a testimonial advertisement, to a novel, a television series or a video game) have a significant effect on people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviors (Braddock & Dillard, 2016). This has not only resulted in a theoretical breakthrough in the understanding of the processes of narrative persuasion, but has also given rise to the application of such knowledge to the design of interventions whose ultimate goal is to try to solve social problems (Cohen, Tal-Or, & Mazor-Tregerman, 2015; Igartua & Frutos, 2017; Wojcieszak, Azrout, Boomgaarden, Alencar, & Sheets, 2017; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016) and/or improve people's health (Igartua & Vega, 2016; Moyer-Gusé, Chung, & Jain, 2011; Murphy, Frank, Chatterjee & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2013). A second theoretical breakthrough is the development of theoretical models on the mechanisms or processes that explain the influence of narrative messages on people (Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). In this context, two of the most relevant processes studied to date are identification with characters and narrative transportation (Tukachinsky, 2014; Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013). Identification is an imaginative process that involves the gradual loss of self-consciousness and the assumption of the affective and cognitive point

of view of a narrative's protagonist (Cohen, 2001; Igartua, 2010). On the other hand, narrative transportation is also a psychological process that implies a state of engagement or immersion with a narrative product (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Green & Brock, 2000). Given that these processes are relevant to achieve attitudinal changes in the consumption of narrative messages, current research focuses on understanding how to amplify these processes, i.e., on identifying what variables related to the construction of characters (for example, the similarity between the protagonist and the audience of the message) or the design and presentation of the narratives (e.g., the perspective or narrative voice of the story) have an effect on these processes and, indirectly, on attitudinal variables (de Graaf, Sanders, & Hoeken, 2016). This work focuses precisely on the study of the factors that increase identification and narrative transportation. In addition, this study presents a second innovation which consists in considering a new dependent variable beyond attitudes and behavioral intention, which have been already addressed in previous studies (Igartua & Frutos, 2017).

The narrative messages used in the experiment were written first-person stories that focused on the life of immigrants and sought to improve attitudes towards this stigmatized group in the Spanish context. Previous studies have been able to confirm that intergroup contact with immigrants and prejudice exert a significant effect on the coexistence and well-being of immigrants themselves (Sevillano, Basabe, Bobowik, & Aierdi, 2014). For its part, this work considers that a message with these characteristics can be considered to be effective if it is shared by the audience through social networks, and for this reason the dependent variable of our study focuses, not on the attitudes towards immigration but in the behavioral intention to share the narrative message through social networks. In this context, two factors are analyzed: similarity and imagined intergroup contact. The first aspect has been studied in numerous studies, although empirical evidence has produced conflicting results (Tukachinsky, 2014). Imagined intergroup contact constitutes a variable widely studied in research on prejudice reduction (Miles & Crisp, 2013), although its inclusion in communication research is very scarce and incipient (Chen, Joyce, Harwood, & Xiang, 2017; Harwood et al., 2017). The theoretical proposal of our research is based on the integration of both variables, by introducing the concept of *optimal reception condition*, which is understood as the *training* of the imagination (through imagined contact instructions) before the reading of a story whose protagonist is an immigrant with high similarity to the audience and whose goal is the improvement of inter-group attitudes.

1.1. Narrative persuasion: the impact of character similarity on identification with characters and transportation

It can be argued that a message is narrative if it tells a story that contains information about one or more events, has a clearly identifiable structure, and narrates the ups and downs of one or more characters and the motivations of their behaviors (Kreuter et al., 2007). Narrative messages can take simple forms like testimonials in advertising or first-person messages shared on social networks, and even audiovisual narratives in the form of television series or feature films. Research begins to proliferate in this field, to confirm whether narratives are effective as a persuasive tool (Braddock & Dillard, 2016) or just another type of messages (Murphy et al., 2013; Wojcieszak et al., 2017). In addition, there are also systematic reviews on the processes that are relevant to explain the impact of narratives (Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013), the experimental manipulations that are most effective for increasing engagement (narrative transportation, identification, etc.) with narrative messages

(Tukachinsky, 2014) and on the characteristics of narrative messages that increase their impact (de Graaf et al., 2016).

Narrative transportation and identification with characters are two of the most relevant mechanisms in research on narrative persuasion (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Narrative transportation is a psychological process by which the audience gets involved with the story, to the point of experiencing a trance-like state and the feeling of being lost in the story and disconnected from the reality that is external to the story that is told in the narrative (Green & Brock, 2000). Therefore, a first element in the definition of narrative transportation is the focus of attention in the story and the reality it describes. A second process associated with narrative transportation is the activation of the imagination and the induction of mental images. In other words, the viewer engaged with a narrative is capable of imagining the narrated situation with great vivacity. In this sense, when a person is in a state of immersion by exposure to a fictional story, he or she is aware of the formation in his or her mind of very clear and vivid images of the different elements of the narrated story (characters, scenarios, etc.). And this process may be partly responsible for the persuasive impact: "narrative persuasion (belief change) occurs, others thigs equal, to the extent that the evoked images are activated by psychological transportation" (Green & Brock, 2002, p. 323). Thirdly, narrative transportation involves an emotional effect on the subject. The person who is absorbed by the fictional narrative also experiences more relevant emotions during the process of exposure or consumption of the story. According to Green and Brock's (2002) Transportation-Imagery Model, the three processes would account for the state of narrative transportation, and this in turn, would lead to changes in beliefs about the social world represented in the narrative. Research on the role of narrative transportation as a mechanism that explains the impact of narrative messages in audiences' attitudes and beliefs is consistent and abundant (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008; Cohen et al., 2015).

Identification with characters is a cognitive-affective process that occurs during the reception (reading, viewing) of narrative message and is linked to different processes: the adoption of cognitive perspective or empathy (taking the place of the character), the emotional empathy (feeling the same emotions as the character) and the temporary loss of self-consciousness (the receiver of the narrative imagines being the character, assumes its identity and momentarily merges with the character) (Cohen, 2001; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Identification is "an imaginative experience in which a person surrenders consciousness of his or her own identity and experiences the world through someone else's point of view" (Cohen, 2001, p. 248).). Identification provides an opportunity to test other identities and adopt the feelings and thoughts of another person. Understood in this way, identification allows the individual to overcome the natural tendency to limit the view of things to a single perspective by taking the point of view of the character. For these reasons, identification with characters can increase the likelihood that individuals accept the beliefs and attitudes implicit in the narratives. In this context, empirical research has discovered that when a person identifies with the protagonist of a narrative message, he or she adopts the perspective of that character, which leads to changes in beliefs and opinions (de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders & Beentjes, 2012; Hoeken, Kolthoff & Sanders, 2016; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011).

Transportation and identification with characters are mechanisms that facilitate persuasion through narrative messages. Thus, it is important to know what strategies or elements in the construction of messages or in the design of the characters are effective in increasing both processes. Thus, the crucial

question is what experimental manipulations can increase transportation and identification. Although both concepts are usually strongly correlated, they have been effectively manipulated in experiments and their differential effects have been verified (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010, 2015). Thus, identify or isolate the characteristics of the messages that maximize audiences' engagement with them can prove very useful for people who are dedicated to the design of media interventions to deal with social problems or improve people's health.

Research on the effect of the experimental manipulations to increase or reduce involvement with narrative messages (transportation and identification in our case) has focused on two areas: varying the *exposure conditions* through instructions given prior to exposure to the story (for example, to analyze the effect of distraction on narrative transportation or to induce empathy with the protagonist of a story) and altering the *characteristics of the narrative messages* (such as varying the similarity between the audience and the main character of the message and altering the perspective from which the story is told) (see Tukachinsky, 2014, for a systematic review).

The first element of analysis in this work is the similarity of the audience with the protagonist of the message, given that evidence is not conclusive in this area (Chen, Bell, & Taylor, 2016; Cohen, Weimann-Saks & Mazor-Tregerman, 2017; de Graaf, 2014; de Graaf et al., 2016; Hoeken et al., 2016; Kim, Shi, & Cappella, 2016; Tukachinsky, 2014). Similarity describes a process through which the person who is exposed to a narrative message assesses to what extent he or she shares certain traits with the protagonist. Similarity can be based on objectives traits (such as demographic aspects, gender and nationality), but also on psychological or subjective features (such as personality, beliefs, opinions, values and biographical experiences). It is assumed that perceived similarity and the similarity based on objective attributes increase identification and indirectly affect attitudes and that, therefore, "if there is a considerable social distance between the audience and the characters (...) persuasion is less likely to occur" (Walter, Murphy, & Gillig, 2017, p. 2).

However, empirical evidence on the effect of similarity yields inconsistent results. Tukachinsky's review (2014) notes that the manipulation of similarity (in objective terms) increases narrative transportation and the perception of similarity, but not identification. These results allow to conclude that a narrative led by a character that is similar to the audience (in such features as gender or ethnicity) makes the audience to consider the story to be more relevant from a personal point of view and therefore induces greater transportation. Also, the null effect of similarity on identification is consistent with the results obtained by Cohen et al. (2017), in which similarity in demographic terms (sex, nationality, age, city of residence) did not exercise a significant effect on identification or attitudes related to the content of the message.

It should be noted that similarity is a complex construct, with various dimensions, and has not always been manipulated in the same way, which could explain the inconsistent results. For instance, Tukachinsky's review (2014) only took into account works that had manipulated similarity in demographic variables such as sex, age and ethnicity. Secondly, this review does not include more recent works that have found an effect of similarity on identification and attitudes (Chen et al., 2016; Hoeken et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2016). Thirdly, it has been found that sometimes similarity has no effect on identification, but it does have an indirect effect on attitudes (de Graaf, 2014; Igartua & Fiuza, 2017). Finally, Kaufman and Libby (2012) observed an effect of the interaction between the narrative

voice (a story written in the first or third person) and similarity with the protagonist (who belonged or not to the same university as participants) on identification, so that "sharing a group membership with a character from a story told in first-person voice promoted an enhanced level of experience-taking" (p. 10). This result implies that it is possible for similarity to influence identification only in certain reception conditions. And, secondly, it is also possible for certain types of similarity to cause identification and narrative transportation states with greater efficiency and intensity. Therefore, it is necessary to further explore this line of research and explore the specific conditions in which the effect of similarity can be increased.

An innovative feature of this work is the joint analysis of the effect of similarity on identification and transportation. In addition, the effect of a new type of similarity is contrasted: *similarity in terms of social identity*, which involves inducing in the audience the perception of an identity shared with the protagonist of the story, emphasizing their similarities not in demographic terms (*place of origin*) but in subjective aspects such as national sentiments (*group of identification*) and attachment to cultural elements (such as language or culinary preferences). In the context of the reduction of prejudice, it is a complex task to promote identification and transportation when narrative messages feature stigmatized immigrants and the audience members obtain no personal or specific benefit by changing their attitudes, unlike what happens in health campaigns (Walter et al., 2017). Therefore, in this case, the manipulation of similarity in terms of social identity can lead to more significant effects than the manipulation of similarity in demographic terms, by making salient cultural commonalities and the sense of social identity ("we are all part of the same group"). Understood in this way, similarity would be especially effective to stimulate greater identification and transportation if it is combined with an additional strategy: the *training* of the imagination (via imagined intergroup contact instructions) before the reading of the narrative message.

Previous research has found that, by default, stigmatized characters foster less identification (Chung & Slater, 2013), and that people with more racist sentiment find it more difficult to identify with this type of characters (i.e., to *imagine* they are the character and take its perspective) (Igartua & Frutos, 2017). Therefore, a procedure intended to increase the capacity to imagine a positive encounter with a stigmatized immigrant may also have a direct impact on identification and narrative transportation provided the character is presented as similar to the audience. In this way, we hope that our experimental findings will shed light on the conditions under which similarity increases identification and transportation and indirectly impacts on the dependent variables.

1.2. Imagined intergroup contact as an exposure condition

In the field of social psychology, it has been confirmed that one of the most effective strategies to reduce prejudice towards stigmatized groups is to facilitate interaction and direct contact between people from the ingroup and the outgroup (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006). In addition, it has been noted that the positive effects of the contact can be, although in an indirect way, vicarious or merely symbolic. The methods of indirect contact include intergroup media contact and imagined intergroup contact (Harwood, 2010; Park, 2012). Our work focuses on this last form of indirect contact, whose inclusion in communication research is very scarce and incipient (Chen et al., 2017; Harwood et al., 2017).

The *imagined intergroup contact* hypothesis (Crisp & Turner, 2009) proposes that the mere fact of imagining a positive encounter with a person belonging to an outgroup (e. g., an immigrant) leads to the reduction of prejudice. Imagined contact is defined as "the mental simulation of a social interaction with a member or members of an outgroup category" (Miles & Crisp, 2013, p. 4). The imaginary contact is indirect "in the sense that no actual contact occurs, but it does involve an interaction that takes place between the self and the outgroup" (Crisp & Husnu, 2011, p. 276). Experimental studies on this field manipulate the imagined contact by means of instructions, inducing participants to think of a positive meeting with a person of the outgroup (versus imagining another experience unrelated with an interaction), and observe the effect of such instructions on the attitudes, emotions, behavioral intention or behavior toward the outgroup (Crisp, Husnu, Meleady, Stathi, & Turner, 2010; Miles & Crisp, 2013; Turner & Crisp, 2010).

An important aspect of the research on imagined contact is that it assumes that "imagined contact may be valuable as a means of *preparing* people for future contact" (Miles & Crisp, 2013, p. 4). In other words, the imagined contact can make people more receptive and make them seek future opportunities of intergroup contact, or can also prepare people to engage in interactions with an open and positive mind. In addition, it has been pointed out that this strategy of using imagined contact as *warming-up*, as a preparatory phase or as a first step for a future contact would be particularly beneficial with stigmatized outgroups and when ingroup members demonstrate a high prejudice (Crisp & Husnu, 2011), since "prejudiced individuals experience resistance and anxiety concerning intergroup communication" (Harwood et al., 2017, p. 531).

Our proposal goes beyond the *direct* effect of imagined contact in prejudice reduction. We believe that it may constitute a facilitating condition, given that it implies a process of mental simulation which also occurs when people immerse themselves in the reading of stories (Oatley, 2017). What we propose is that the combination of imagined intergroup contact and the promotion of similarity in terms of social identity could be what we have called an *optimal reception condition* for narratives against prejudice. Given that the ability to form mental images about the story and the narrated events (a dimension of narrative transportation) and the ability to imagine being the character (the central defining aspect of identification) are two elements identified in the research on narrative persuasion as catalysts for the impact of the consumption of narrative messages on attitudes and beliefs, it can be expected that any procedure that increases the ability to imagine, to *train* the imagination before the exposure to the narrative, can increase the transportation and identification processes and, indirectly, have an effect on the dependent variables under consideration.

1.3. Sharing narrative messages to amplify attitudinal impact

It has been considered that "the object of narrative persuasion is to change attitudes" (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 19). However, the attitudinal effect does not have to be limited only to the person who is exposed to the message, as it could have an impact on other individuals who receive a favorable (or unfavorable) comment on the content of the message. In this sense, people can become agents of change or facilitators in the dissemination of certain messages (prosocial, in this case) if they share the narrative through their social networks. In this way, a narrative intervention that seeks to change attitudes (e.g., improving inter-group attitudes toward stigmatized groups) can be considered successful if the people exposed to these messages share the narrative to through social media

(Facebook, Twitter). Thus, this research includes as a dependent variable an alternative to classical attitudinal measures: the intention to share the message through social media, taking as a reference the work of Barbour, Doshi & Hernández (2016), whose study found out that messages with a narrative format (in comparison to no narrative messages) generated greater intention to be shared, with the narrative transportation variable acting as a mediator of such effect. Our work seeks to confirm whether the optimal reception condition increases identification and narrative transportation and this, in turn, has an impact on the intention to share the message through social media.

Due to the mechanism of selective exposure (Knobloch-Westerwick & Johnson, 2014), it is to be expected that people with high levels of prejudice will avoid messages in favor of stigmatized groups (such as immigrants), especially if these messages are supplied by institutional sources. Just as rumors against immigration spread quickly through social networks (Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016), it is to be expected that if messages with favorable content toward immigration come from personal contacts, they can have a greater persuasive impact, because that would increase trust in such messages, as they come from people's own contacts on social networks.

Research on the dissemination of online content through social media has confirmed that the most shared messages (news, health information) are those that cause greater emotional activation, more fun and more favorable attitudes toward the content of the message (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Crook, Stephens, Pastorek, Mackert, & Donovan, 2016). Given that identification with character and narrative transportation are factors that predict enjoyment and emotional involvement with narrative messages (Cohen, 2001; Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004; Igartua, 2010), it can be expected that that these variables will also predict the intention to share a narrative message through social networks.

Ultimately, our work represents a contribution to the study of narrative persuasion processes through the incorporation of a new dependent variable unrelated to the attitudinal content of the message. It is assumed that the fact of sharing a message through social networks is also an indicator of its impact (Barbour et al., 2015). However, so far very few research works have measured this variable in the field of narrative persuasion. Our study goes one step further and asks whether the optimal reception conditions of a narrative message also have an (indirect) effect on intention to share this message with others through social networks, amplifying its persuasive influence.

1.4. Objectives and hypothesis

Our research aims to advance in the understanding of the processes of narrative persuasion in two senses. First, by determining how the combination of imagined contact and protagonist similarity with a message in favor of immigration increases significantly identification and narrative transportation, causing an indirect effect on the dependent measures under consideration. Second, by integrating a new measure for the impact of the narrative messages on the audiences, the intention to share the message through social media. To test our theoretical model (see Figure 1) an experiment was carried out in Spain, with a narrative revolving around a stigmatized immigrant of Moroccan origin. The experimental design consisted of manipulating imagined intergroup contact prior to the reading of a first-person story whose protagonist is an immigrant who had high or low similarity in terms of identity with the audience of the message. This work, defines optimal reception condition as one that *trains* intergroup contact through imagination, before the reading of a story led by an immigrant with high

similarity to the audience. While previous research throws contradictory results on the effects of similarity on identification and transportation, we think that similarity in terms of social identity can exert greater effect than similarity in demographic terms. In addition, we assume that this effect can be boosted with procedures based on training or *warming-up* of imagination, prior to the reading of the narrative message, through imagined intergroup contact instructions, which would activate an exposure condition to facilitate the reception of the message. In this context, the following hypotheses were established:

H1: The optimal reception condition of the narrative message will foster greater identification with the protagonist (H1a) and greater narrative transportation (H1b) than the control condition (with no imagined intergroup contact and the reading of a story with a low-similarity character).

H2: The optimal reception condition, in comparison to the control condition, will foster a greater intention to share the message.

Hi3: The optimal reception condition will exercise a positive indirect effect on the intention to share the message, thanks to the performance of the identification and narrative transportation that will act as mediators.

Figure 1. **Hypothesized mediation model (H3)**
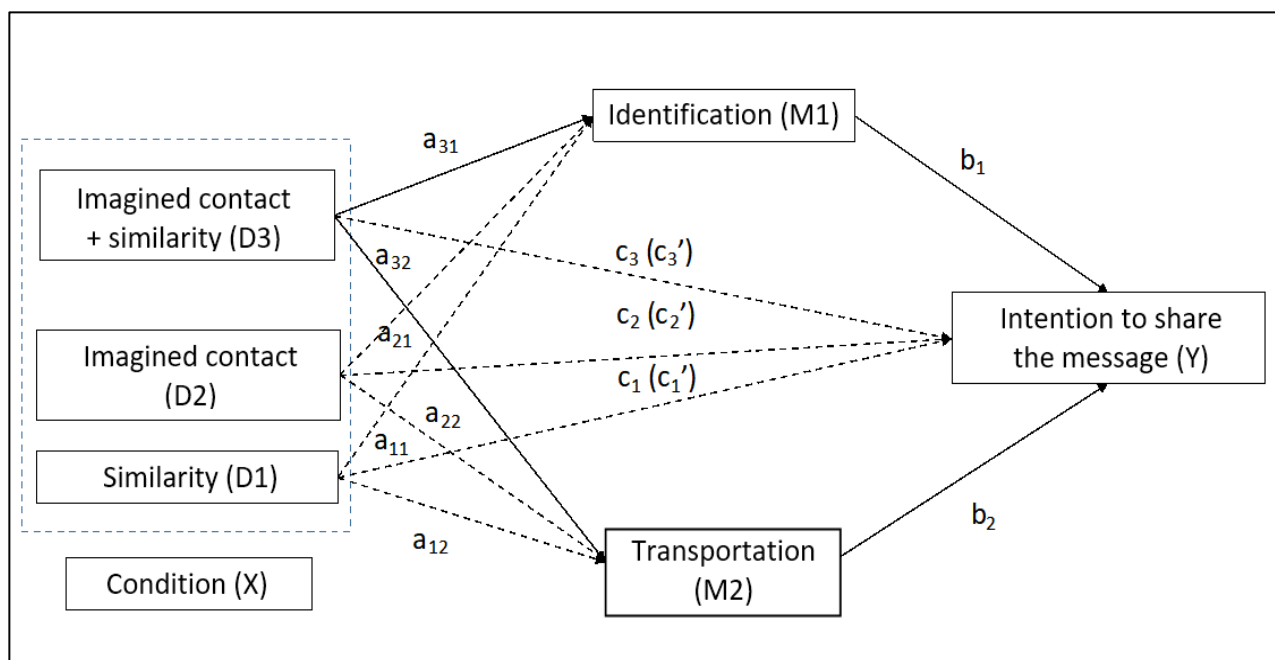
2. Method
2.1. Design and participants

The experiment design and the field work were carried out with Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com/es/). We used the internet to get access to a panel of 400 people of Spanish origin, and whose parents were

also Spanish. Qualtrics maintains panels of potential participants who are invited to participate in studies in exchange for a small reward. For this study, sex and age quotas were set to form a representative sample of the Spanish population, although the sample was not chosen through a probabilistic method but via an invitation of the company. 50% of the participants were women, and the average age was 40.41 years (SD = 12.16, range: 18-65 years).

The questionnaire designed for the experiment had three main sections: pre-test measures, experimental manipulation and post-test measures. Pre-test measures were the level of contact with Moroccan immigrants and sociodemographic variables (sex, age, and political self-positioning). After completing this block of questions, participants were randomized to four experimental treatments given that a 2x2 independent factorial design was used. First, participants were randomly assigned to two conditions (imagined intergroup contact): half received imagined intergroup contact instructions and the other half received instructions to imagine a scene or landscape (control group). These instructions appeared on one screen for two minutes. Afterwards, participants were randomly distributed to two conditions (similarity with the protagonist of the story in terms of social identity): participants read a first-person narrative featuring a stigmatized (Moroccan) immigrant who was similar (versus not similar) to participants in terms of social identity. After the reading of the story, post-test measures were presented to evaluate the perception of similarity with the narrative's protagonist (experimental manipulation check), the attention paid to the narrative, the identification with the protagonist, the narrative transportation, the perceived realism of the narrative, and the intention to share the message.

2.2. Materials: manipulation of independent variables

To manipulate imagined intergroup contact, the works of Crisp and collaborators were taken as reference, in particular experiment number 2 of the study carried out by Husnu & Crisp (2010) about imagined contact. The instruction given to participants to foster imagined intergroup contact was as follows: "You are going to read a short story, in which a person shares his experiences about his life in Spain. Before reading the story, we would like you to spend the next 2 minutes imagining that you have an encounter with a Moroccan immigrant for the first time. While you imagine this encounter think specifically *when* (for example, next Thursday) and *where* (for example, at the bus stop) this conversation could take place. Imagine that the interaction is positive, relaxed and enjoyable. It can be useful to close your eyes as you imagine the conversation". Participants in the control group received the following instructions: "You are going to read a short story, in which a person shares his experiences about his life in Spain. Before reading the story, we would like you to spend the next 2 minutes imagining an outdoors scene. Try to imagine different aspects of the scene that are relevant for you (for example, a beach, a forest, trees, hills, what you see on the horizon). It can be useful to close your eyes as you imagine the outdoors scene.

We wrote a first-person narrative whose protagonist was a Moroccan immigrant who narrated his experiences since his arrival in Spain. We chose to narrate the experience of an immigrant of Moroccan origin because it is currently one of the most stigmatized immigrants groups in Spain (Cea D'Ancona & Valles, 2014). In the narrative, Saîd (a fictitious name used to identify the Moroccan immigrant) referred to different events, circumstances and feelings related to: his arrival in the country, his first jobs, his current employment situation, his family situation, his feelings about living in Spain, his

social life, the raising of his children, his mastery of the Spanish language and his sense of belonging. He also alluded to two issues related to the rejection of immigrants: many people think that immigrants take away the jobs from native Spaniards and that many people consider that there is a relationship between immigration and criminality. The protagonist of the story demanded greater tolerance towards immigrants and proposed measures such as punishing labor exploitation and developing educational campaigns and activities against racism and xenophobia.

The experimental manipulation of the narrative was designed to stimulate a high (506 words) or low similarity (523 words) with participants in terms of social identity. To reinforce the similarity with the protagonist of the story certain aspects were taken into account: the fact of feeling Spanish (versus Moroccan in the condition of low similarity), telling he has Spanish friends (Moroccan), telling his favorite dish is of Spanish (Moroccan) origin, telling he regularly speaks with his children in Spanish (Arabic), telling they read mostly British (Pakistani) newspapers, telling he wants to continue living in Spain (or go back to Morocco), and telling he identifies himself with the Spanish (Moroccan) culture and flag. To strengthen the experimental manipulation, the narrative was accompanied by a photograph of Saîd in his room and one of the walls had a Spanish (Moroccan) flag.

Two pilot tests were carried out. The first to select the photo accompanying the story and the second one to verify whether the manipulation of similarity was effective. 21 Spanish university students participated in the first pilot study (N=21). They valued three photographs of people of Moroccan origin (taken from catalogues with no copyrights) in terms of attractiveness, appearance, honesty, threatening and friendly character (with a 0-10 scale). We chose the photograph that obtained the highest score in the positive aspects (attractive, nice appearance, honesty and friendly character) and the lowest score in the negative aspects (threatening character).

The second pilot test involved 54 students who were randomly assigned to two groups and whose task consisted of reading the narrative and answering a series of questions about it: "the message is clear and comprehensible", "the message is credible" and "the message is interesting" (from 1 "strongly disagree", to 7 "strongly agree") and "to what extent do you think you have some things in common with Saîd" (from 0 "nothing" to 10 "very much"). No significant differences were obtained in the perception of clarity and understanding, credibility and interest of the message according to the type of narrative (with all the scores over 5 in all cases). In addition, participants who had read the narrative of high similarity with the protagonist gave significantly higher scores on the perception of similarity with the character ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 2.49$) than those who had read the narrative designed to stimulate low similarity ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 2.99$) ($t(48.80) = -2009$, $p <. 05$).

2.3. Measures

Direct contact with Moroccan immigrants. Participants were asked: "how much contact do you have with immigrants from Morocco in your everyday life" (from 1= not at all to 5= a great deal; $M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.01$).

Political self-positioning. Participants were asked to report their political ideology using a standard scale ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right) ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 2.53$).

Perceived similarity with the protagonist of the story. To test the experimental manipulation, participants answered the following questions immediately after reading the narrative: "to what extent do you think you have things in common with Saîd?" and "to what extent do you consider he is like you?" (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Since both items were strongly correlated (r(398) =.76, $p < .001$), they were merged to form an index of perceived similarity with the protagonist (α = .86; M = 3.96, SD = 1.69).

Attention to the narrative. Participants were asked to evaluate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (from 1 = strongly disagree, to 7 = strongly agree) with two items: "I put a lot of attention to this message" and "I read this message thoroughly" (r = .70, $p < .001$; α = .84; M = 5.49, SD = 1.17).

Identification with the protagonist. Identification was assessed with a scale composed of 11 items (e. g., "I felt as if I was Saîd", "I felt I was living Saîd's story"; 1 = not at all, 5 = very much; α = .95, M = 2.97, SD = 1.22; Igartua & Barrios, 2012).

Narrative transportation. We used a scale based on previous studies (Green & Brock, 2000; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016), composed of 5 items that measure the degree of absorption or engagement with the narrative (e.g., "I felt very involved or engaged during the reading of the story", "the text affected me emotionally", from 1 = strongly disagree, to 7 = strongly agree; α = .89, M = 4.58, SD = 0.95).

Perceived narrative realism. We used a scale based on the one developed by Cho, Shen, & Wilson (2014), composed of 4 items (e.g., "what happens to Saîd is what often happens to immigrants in real life in Spain", "Saîd's testimony was realistic", from 1 = strongly disagree, to 7 = strongly agree; α = .85, M = 5.49, SD = 1.52).

Intention to share the message. We used a scale developed by Barbour et al. (2016), composed of 6 items that measured the intention to share the story with others through social media (e. g., "I would be willing to post a link to this information on Facebook", "I would retweet a link to this information", from 1 = strongly disagree, to 7 = strongly agree; α = .94, M = 4.26, SD = 1.18).

3. Results
3.1. Preliminary analysis

First, the study contrasted whether the random allocation to the four experimental conditions had been successful. There were no statistically significant differences between the conditions in sociodemographic terms (gender (χ^2(3, N = 400) = 1.55, p = .669; age (F(3, 396) = 0.36, p = .780); political self-positioning (F(3, 386) = 0.61, p = .607), and direct contact with Moroccan immigrants (F (3, 396) = 0.73, p = .531).

Secondly, the study confirmed the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation of the similarity of the protagonist of the story with the audience of the message. The Student's t-test for independent samples indicated that there were statistically significant differences (t(398) = -6.98, p <.001). Participants who had read the narrative with a similar protagonist in terms of social identity considered

that Saîd was similar to them (M = 4.47, SD = 1.64) to a greater extent than participants who read the narrative in which the protagonist showed low similarity (M = 3.35, SD = 1.56). However, the manipulation of similarity did not influence the perceived realism or the attention given to the narrative ($t(398)$ = -0.89, p = .374 and $t(398)$ = -1.78, p = .075, respectively).

3.2. Joint effect of imagined contact and similarity on identification and transportation (H1)

Hypothesis 1 proposed that participants would experience greater identification with the narrative's protagonist (H1a) and narrative transportation (H1b) in the optimal reception condition of the message (imagined contact plus narrative led by an immigrant with high similarity), in comparison with the condition of reference (no imagined contact plus narrative led by an immigrant with low similarity). To contrast this hypothesis two ANOVA were performed, including as the independent variable the experimental condition (composed of four reception conditions) and as dependent variables identification and narrative transportation. In addition, since the optimal reception condition was expected to obtain higher values in identification and narrative transportation, compared with the control or reference condition, we also performed a planned contrast analysis (-1, 0, 0, 1) that compared condition 4 (imagined contact and high similarity with protagonist, coefficient 1) with condition 1 (no imagined contact and low similarity with protagonist, coefficient -1).

Results showed that there were statistically significant differences in identification ($F(3, 396)$ = 12.19, p < .001, η_p^2 = 0.085) and narrative transportation ($F(3, 396)$ = 9.34, p < .001, η_p^2 = 0.066) according to experimental condition. In addition, both planned contrasts were statistically significant (identification: $t(396)$ = 4.68, p < .001, r = .22; transportation: $t(396)$ = 9.34, p < .001, r = .17). Participants in the optimal reception condition showed greater identification (*mean difference* = 0.59, *ES* = 0.12) and narrative transportation (*mean difference* = 0.66, *ES* = 0.18), than participants in the condition without imagined contact and protagonist with low similarity. Therefore, H1 received empirical support.

3.3. Joint effect of imagined contact and similarity on message-sharing intention (H2)

Hypothesis 2 proposed that participants in the optimal reception condition of the message (imagined contact plus narrative led an immigrant with high similarity), in comparison with the condition of reference (no imagined contact plus narrative led by an immigrant with low similarity) would show greater intention to share the message through social networks. As in the previous case, we carried out an analysis of variance (ANOVA) and an analysis of planned contrast (-1, 0, 0, 1) to compare condition 4 (imagined contact and high similarity with the protagonist, coefficient 1) with condition 1 (no imagined contact and low similarity with the protagonist, coefficient -1).

Results showed that there were statistically significant differences in the intention to share the message through social networks ($F(3, 396)$ = 4.12, p < .01, η_p^2 = 0.030) according to the experimental condition. In addition, the contrast showed statistically significant results ($t(396)$ = 2.84, p < .01, r = .14). Participants in the optimal reception condition showed a greater intention to share the narrative (*mean difference* = 0.59, *ES* = 0.21) than participants in condition without imagined contact and protagonist with low similarity. Therefore, H2 was confirmed by data.

3.4. Mediation analysis (H3)

The third hypothesis proposed that the effect of the optimal reception condition of the narrative message on the intention to share the message would be mediated by identification and the narrative transportation. In order to examine whether the joint effect of the imagined intergroup contact and the similarity with the protagonist of the story had a significant indirect effect on the dependent variable, the PROCESS macro for SPSS was used (Model 4; 10,000 bootstrap samples with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (Hayes, 2013).

Figure 2. Results of the mediation analysis: indirect effect on the optimal reception condition (imagined contact and narrative with high similarity, D3) on the intention to share messages through identification and narrative transportation
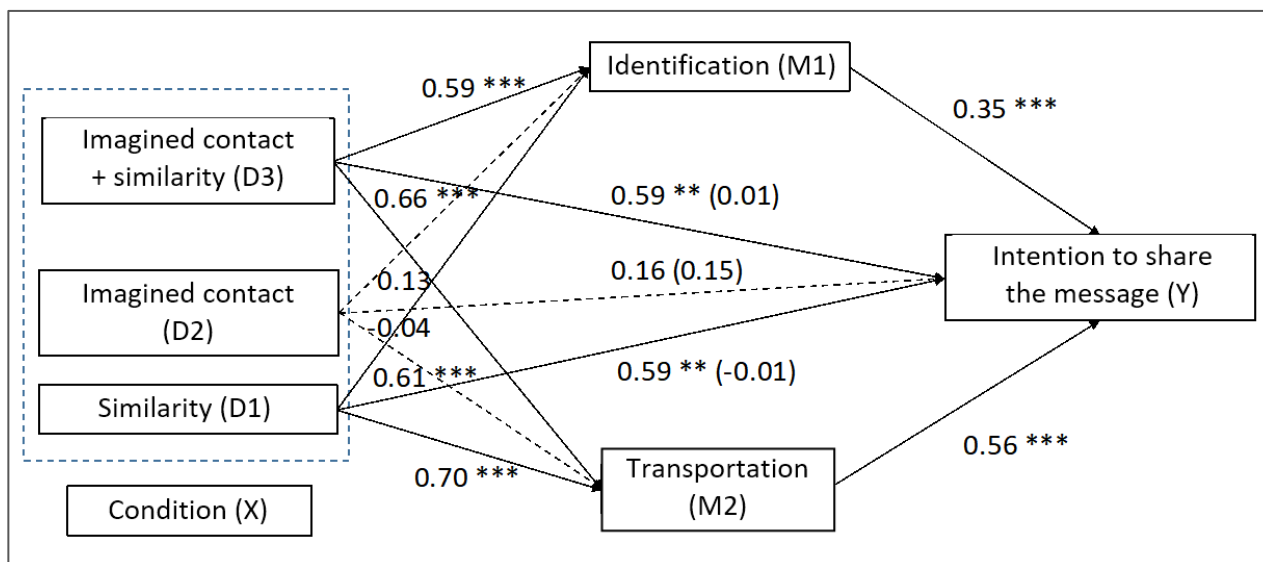
Note. The figure shows non-standardized regression coefficients, B. The coefficients of the relative direct effects appear in parentheses. The dashed line represents non-significant coefficients. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

For the analysis of data with PROCESS, we introduced the experimental condition (variable X) as the multicategorical variable (with four levels). This procedure required the creation of three dummy variables (D1, D2, D3), which acted separately as independent variables, allowing the remaining dummy variables to act as covariables. This allowed us to quantify the *relative indirect effects* of being in an experimental group (condition 2, D1: no imagined contact and high similarity; condition 3, D2: imagined contact and low similarity; condition 4, D3: imagined contact and high similarity) in comparison with the reference group (condition 1: no imagined contact and low similarity) (see Hayes and Preacher, 2014, for an explanation, as well as Walter et al., 2017, for an application). Thus, our model allowed us to estimate the indirect effect of the optimal reception condition (the joint effect of imagined intergroup contact and high similarity with the protagonist, D3), in comparison to the reference group, on the intention to share the message, including identification and narrative transportation as mediating variables.

Table 1. **Regression coefficients of the mediation model (PROCESS, model 4).**

Models	Coefficients	*SE*	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
Identification with protagonist $F(3, 396) = 12.19, p < .001, R^2 = .08$						
Constant	2.64	0.08	29.47	.000	2.46	2.81
Similarity, D1 (a_{11})	0.61	0.12	4.80	.000	0.36	0.87
Imagined contact, D2 (a_{21})	0.13	0.12	1.01	.311	-0.12	0.38
Imagined contact + similarity, D3 (a_{31})	0.59	0.12	4.68	.000	0.34	0.84
Narrative transportation $F(3, 396) = 9.34, p < .001, R^2 = .06$						
Constant	4.25	0.13	32.57	.000	3.99	4.51
Similarity, D1 (a_{12})	0.70	0.18	3.74	.000	0.33	1.06
Imagined contact, D2 (a_{22})	-0.04	0.18	-0.25	.800	-0.41	0.32
Imagined contact + similarity, D3 (a_{32})	0.66	0.18	3.55	.000	0.29	1.02
Intention to share the message $F(5, 394) = 77.17, p < .001, R^2 = .49$						
Constant	0.60	0.20	2.92	.003	0.19	1.00
Identification with protagonist (b_1)	0.35	0.12	2.92	.003	0.11	0.59
Narrative transportation (b_2)	0.56	0.08	6.77	.000	0.39	0.72
D1 (relative direct effect; c_1')	-0.01	0.15	-0.09	.922	-0.32	0.29
D2 (relative direct effect; c_2')	0.15	0.15	0.97	.332	-0.15	0.45
D3 (relative direct effect; c_3')	0.01	0.15	0.09	.922	-0.29	0.32
Total effects $F(3, 396) = 4.12, p = .006, R^2 = .03$						
Constant	3.92	0.14	26.59	.000	3.63	4.21
Similarity, D1 (c_1)	0.59	0.21	2.81	.005	0.18	1.01
Imagined contact, D2 (c_2)	0.16	0.21	0.79	.424	-0.24	0.58
Imagined contact + similarity, D3 (c_3)	0.59	0.21	2.84	.004	0.18	1.01
Mediation (through identification)						Bootstrapped IC
$\vartheta = 0.02$ (95% IC: 0.005, 0.06)	*ab*	*SE*			LLCI	LLCI
Relative indirect effect of D1 ($a_{11}b_1$)	**0.21**	**0.09**			**0.06**	**0.44**
Relative indirect effect of D2 ($a_{21}b_1$)	0.04	0.05			-0.02	0.17
Relative indirect effect of D3 ($a_{31}b_1$)	**0.21**	**0.09**			**0.06**	**0.44**
Mediation (through transportation)						Bootstrapped IC
$\vartheta = 0.03$ (95% IC: 0.01, 0.06)	*ab*	*SE*			LLCI	LLCI
Relative indirect effect of D1 ($a_{12}b_2$)	**0.39**	**0.11**			**0.19**	**0.66**
Relative indirect effect of D2 ($a_{22}b_2$)	-0.02	0.11			-0.26	0.18
Relative indirect effect of D3 ($a_{32}b_2$)	**0.37**	**0.12**			**0.16**	**0.65**

Note. Table includes the B coefficients, which are non-standardized regression coefficients. Given that the experimental condition (X) was codified by creating three dummy variables (D1, D2, D3), each coefficient reflects the means difference in the intention to share the message in comparison to the reference group (condition 1: no imagined contact / low similarity). D1: no imagined contact / high similarity; D2: imagined contact / low similarity; D3: imagined contact / high similarity. The significant relative indirect effects are highlighted in bold (when the confidence intervals estimated through the bootstrapping method do not include the value zero). θ = omnibus test on the relative indirect effects.

Confirming the third hypothesis, the results showed that the optimal reception condition of the narrative (D3), in relation to the reference condition, significantly increased identification (*a31* = 0.59, *SE* = 0.12, *p* < .001) and narrative transportation (*a32* = 0.66, *SE* = 0.18, *p* < .001). In addition, identification (*b1* = 0.35, *SE* = 0.12, *p* < .01) and narrative transportation (*b2* = 0.56, *SE* = 0.08, *p* <

.001) were significant predictors of the intention to share messages (see Figure 2). The relative indirect effects of the optimal reception condition through identification ($a31b1$ = 0.21, SE = 0.09, IC 95% [0.06, 0.44]) and narrative transportation ($a32b2$ = 0.37, SE = 0.12, IC 95% [0.16, 0.65]) were statistically significant. Although it had been formulated as hypothesis, it was also noted that similarity (D1), in comparison to the reference condition, produced a significant relative indirect effect on the intention to share the message (see table 1) through identification ($a11b1$ = 0.21, SE = 0.09, 95% CI [0.06, 0.44]) and narrative transportation ($a12b2$ = 0.39, SE = 0.11, IC 95% [0.19, 0.66]).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The study provides results that confirm our model. The optimal reception condition, which involves delivering imagined contact instructions immediately prior to the reading of a story focused on a stigmatized immigrant who shows similarity in terms of social identity with the audience of the message, fostered greater identification with the protagonist and increased narrative transportation (compared to the control condition). In addition, both mechanisms acted as variables that explain the effect of the optimal reception condition on the intention to share the message with others through social networks. These results represent a significant advance in the knowledge on the effect of similarity with the protagonist on identification and narrative transportation, corroborating that an imagination "training" phase (the imagined contact intergroup) facilitates the impact of similarity on the measures under consideration, increasing the involvement of the audience with the message and the protagonist of the story.

Consistent with the first hypothesis, it has been observed that the optimal reception condition (compared to the control condition, without imagined contact instructions prior to the reading of a story focused on an immigrant with low similarity with audience) increased identification with the protagonist of the story and the narrative transportation. Although previous evidence on the effect of similarity on identification and narrative transportation has yielded mixed results, our study provides two important results that allow to clarify this confusing scenario.

First, we discovered that similarity in terms of social identity had a significant effect (not hypothesized) on identification and narrative transportation. In this sense, the results of our research converge with recent studies on the effect of similarity on identification and narrative transportation (Chen et al., 2016; Hoeken et al., 2016; Kaufman & Libby, 2012). However, our results come into contradiction with the results obtained by Cohen et al. (2017), although we have to keep in mind that in that work similarity did not have an influence on the perception of similarity (and neither included other measures to check the experimental manipulation, such as the memory of the protagonist's country of origin). On the other hand, our experiment detected a significant effect of the manipulation of similarity on the perception of similarity.

We can speculate that the manipulation of demographic similarity constitutes a manipulation of *low intensity*. In other words, to manipulate similarity in demographic terms it suffices to inform on the gender, age or the country of residence of the protagonist one time in the message. It would be somewhat artificial to repeat, at different times throughout the written narrative, that the protagonist has a certain age or nationality. Thus, this attribute might go unnoticed for participants, and therefore the manipulation might not be effective. In this sense, Igartua and Fiuza (2017) manipulated the

demographic similarity (the nationality of the protagonist of a short video on gender-based violence), and noted that in the condition of high similarity (the victim of gender violence was introduced as Spanish, which was the nationality of all participants) 40% did not remember the nationality of the protagonist. In addition, a significant percentage of the participants (11.4%) committed errors in the recalling of the nationality in the condition of low similarity (the protagonist of the video was Argentinean and participants recalled she was Spanish) or did not remember that piece of information (11.4%).

In our experiment, the similarity in terms of social identity constitutes a manipulation of *high intensity*, given that different parts of the narrative referred to the feelings of national identification of the protagonist and his love for the cultural aspects of the host country (favorite food, reading of local media, knowledge of the language). Consistent with this approach, the work of Kim et al. (2016), on narrative messages focused on smoking prevention, observed that the *intensity* of the similarity between the protagonist of the message and the audience (share 3 or more demographic traits) was the right condition to increase narrative engagement.

Secondly, it was observed that combining the imagined contact instructions with the manipulation of the similarity with the protagonist allows to increase identification and narrative transportation. In this way, it was corroborated that the *exposure conditions* (giving instructions prior to exposure to the narrative), can act as a condition that facilitates the effect of similarity on the processes of reception under analysis. In the experiment imagined intergroup contact instructions were given immediately before the reading of the story with a positive message towards immigration and intergroup contact. Moreover, we should keep in mind that previous research has documented that imagined intergroup contact involves the activation of the imagination and a kind of *cognitive training* for a future encounter with a person who is a part of a stigmatized group (Crisp & Husnu, 2011). Since both the narrative transportation and identification are processes that are linked to imagination (imagine the situation and the details of the story, imagine being the character), it is logical to think that this phase of *mental training* will affect both processes when participants are exposed to a narrative with a character similar to the audience.

The second hypothesis was also confirmed by the data, since the optimal reception conditions fostered a greater intention to share the message through social networks. In addition, and consistently with the third hypothesis, this effect was explained by the narrative transportation and identification, which acted as mediating variables, which is convergent with previous research on narrative persuasion (Cohen et al., 2015; de Graaf et al., 2012; Green & Brock, 2000; Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Walter et al., 2017).

An innovative aspect of our work is its consideration as dependent variable of the intention to share the message on social media. This means going beyond research works on narrative persuasion that focus exclusively on attitudinal measures related to the content of the message. Taking into account the fact that "(...) people may avoid stories about marginalized groups" (Walter et al., 2017, p. 21), managing to make a message with these characteristics to stimulate the desire of the audience to share it through social media can be an indicator of communicative efficiency. If messages with positive content toward immigration come from personal contacts, they can achieve a greater persuasive

impact, as this increases confidence in such messages and makes the message appear less threatening to the identity.

The limitations of our work include having worked exclusively with written narratives. However, this type of written messages is very frequent in online newspapers, websites, blogs and social media, and its consumption is facilitated by the high dissemination of mobile devices (smartphones, iPads). A second limitation is that our study only worked with one kind of stigmatized groups: immigrants living in Spain. In this sense, we should bear in mind that immigration has become a central aspect of the political agendas of the European Union. Therefore, any analysis of the processes that explain the reduction of prejudice towards immigrants is likely to contribute to the improvement of the quality (inclusiveness) of the societies of the countries that make up the European Union and impact indirectly on the health and well-being of immigrants themselves.

In conclusion, our work contributes to the improvement of the understanding of the mechanisms that explain the impact of narrative messages in people. In this way, our work introduces the concept of optimal reception condition, which involves the combined use of a previous phase of imagined intergroup contact (which *trains* the ability to imagine being the character and generating mental images about the story) with exposure to a narrative message offering a *portrait* of an immigrant who shares feelings and cultural traits with the audience. These results are innovative in research on narrative persuasion and help clarify, to some extent, the confusing scenario on the effects of similarity on identification and narrative transportation.

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