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Changing Real-World Beliefs With Controversial Movies: Processes and Mechanisms of Narrative Persuasion

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Empirical research has found that exposure to specific fictional narratives exerts significant effects on attitudes and beliefs. However, there is little research about the persuasive impact of controversial movies. We present an experimental research study designed to analyze the attitudinal impact of one controversial film (Camino), according to narrative persuasion theoretical models. Because of its critical message toward Opus Dei, this film triggered some controversy in Spain during its release. The results reveal that the experimental exposure to the movie induced negative opinions toward Opus Dei and religion, and weakened the relationship between political self-positioning and the aforementioned beliefs. Furthermore, the attitudinal impact was mediated by identification with the protagonist. These results are convergent with the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model.

The influence of fiction on people's attitudes has emerged in the last few years as a new research topic in Communication and Media Psychology called *narrative persuasion* (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2002; Green & Brock, 2000). This new field of study is different from classic research on *rhetorical* persuasion (Petty, Briñol, & Priester, 2009) in that emphasis is placed on analyzing how exposure to fictional narratives designed to entertain or cause enjoyment, but containing implicit *arguments* about different topics or social actors, can also cause persuasive effects (Green & Brock, 2005). Numerous studies have shown that it is possible to persuade people by exposure to written (Appel & Richter, 2007; Green & Brock, 2000) or audiovisual (Slater, Rouner, & Long, 2006) fictional narratives. Furthermore, audiovisual fiction has also been used as a technique to persuade people regarding health issues (Lapinski & Nwulu, 2008; Morgan, Movius, & Cody, 2009).

Most studies on narrative persuasion have tested narratives that are not about controversial or polemical topics, or associated with values[1] that are important

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for people. For example, the text entitled *Murder at the Mall* (used by Green & Brock, 2000) was effective in inducing a change in the opinions of the participants, considering that "Malls are not safe places" and "Psychiatric patients who have passes to leave their institution should not be free of supervision." Neither of these beliefs is related to strong personal values. Other studies have used fiction to stimulate changes in beliefs with a clear pro-social content, such as raising awareness of AIDS (Lapinski & Nwulu, 2008). Nonetheless, research into the impact of public narratives that sow controversy or agitate public opinion by addressing topics that are directly related to personal values is scarce. For example, the film *The Da Vinci Code* raised doubt about many postulates of the Catholic Church by positing a conspiracy theory relating to the Holy Grail and the role of Mary Magdalene in Christianity. This film was openly criticized by the Catholic hierarchy for its *biased* message, unleashing a strong controversy about its possible impact on audiences. Indeed, the religious organization called Opus Dei issued a press release on its Web site to warn of inaccuracies in the film and showing concern for the effect the film could have on people's opinions of Opus Dei.[2]

According to the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model (E-ELM), fictional contents can be effective tools of persuasion because *involvement in the narrative* (narrative absorption or transportation) and *involvement with the characters* (identification with characters) are processes that limit counterarguing or make it incompatible, thus reducing individuals' *resistance* and favoring their acceptance of the message contained in the narrative (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Given that the large majority of studies on narrative persuasion have used normative messages, we wondered if it would be possible to persuade people with films involving controversial topics, or rather, in contrast, whether individuals' cognitive defenses would be activated, causing less impact or provoking reactance. In this context, the study presented here is intended to add to our knowledge of the processes or mechanisms of narrative persuasion, and in particular, to contribute data regarding the validity of the E-ELM as the theory of reference for explaining narrative persuasion processes in general (both with normative messages and with controversial messages).

Changing real-world beliefs with controversial movies

History, or more specifically, certain episodes in history, is a central theme in numerous audiovisual productions. The Second World War, slavery, the Holocaust, or the Kennedy assassination, to cite a few examples, are the focus of the plot in many feature films (Igartua & Páez, 1997). As these kinds of narratives are linked to conflictive episodes in history, they have often caused public controversy.[3] Although research into this topic is scarce, certain experimental and quasi-experimental evidence has come to light regarding the impact of *historical-fiction* films on attitudes and beliefs, despite their controversial contents (Butler, Koopman, & Zimbardo, 1995; Koopman et al., 2006; Schofield & Pavelchak, 1989).

In the United States, an exhaustive research study was carried out regarding the impact of the film *The Day After* (Meyer, 1983) on audience attitudes (e.g., Schofield & Pavelchak, 1985, 1989). Schofield and Pavelchak (1989) performed a quasi-experimental study with pre- and posttest measures to assess the impact of the film after it was shown on television. It was observed that the film had a significant impact on what people thought about the chances for survival after such an event and on their predisposition to engage in antinuclear behavior. Butler et al. (1995) performed an empirical analysis of the impact of the feature film *JFK* (Stone, 1991) on political attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The participants in the research were 107 spectators who went to movie theaters in the normal way to see *JFK*. All of the participants were interviewed either *before* going into the theater (control group) or *after* having seen the film (experimental group). The results of this study showed that the spectators who had just seen the film believed to a greater extent than those interviewed before seeing the film that Cuban exiles, arms manufacturers, Pentagon officials, or the CIA and Lyndon Johnson took a decisive part in the matter; they also showed a lesser degree of agreement with the idea that Oswald was involved, thus rejecting the *official* government version. With a similar design, Koopman et al. (2006) analyzed the impact of the feature film *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore, 2004) on beliefs about the reasons that led to the Iraq War in 2003. They compared the responses of those who answered the questionnaire before seeing the film (control group) with those of the participants interviewed after having seen the film (experimental group) and found that the latter showed a greater degree of agreement with the idea that the war was waged owing to the express wishes of the President (George W. Bush) and the Vice President (Dick Cheney), to pressure from the oil industry, and to the Bush family's relations with the powerful families of Saudi Arabia, and were less in agreement that the cause of the invasion was the capture of Saddam Hussein, the elimination of weapons of mass destruction or promoting democracy in Iraq.

Processes and mechanisms of narrative persuasion

The theoretical development that has taken place in an attempt to understand the mechanisms and processes involved in narrative persuasion has been quite recent (Dal Cin et al., 2002; Green & Brock, 2005; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Currently a good part of the research into narrative persuasion is being developed in reference to two theoretical models: the *Transportation-Imagery Model* (Green & Brock, 2000, 2002) and the E-ELM (Slater, 2002; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Whereas the former model concentrates exclusively on the mediating role of narrative transportation, the E-ELM assumes that identification with characters is also an important mediating variable.

Slater and Rouner (2002) posit that the two principal mechanisms for explaining the effects of narrative persuasion are absorption (a concept comparable to Green & Brock's 2000 *transportation*) and identification with characters. In their view, fictional narratives are an effective tool for cultivating beliefs regarding polemical topics or for weakening strongly consolidated attitudes, as it is assumed that counterarguing

during the reception process (i.e., having "negative or critical thoughts" about the arguments implicit in the narrative) and identification with characters are incompatible and inversely related processes (Dal Cin et al., 2002). Identification should reduce motivation and the ability to counterargue because identification is an enjoyable and immersive process (Cohen, 2001; Igartua, 2010; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010).

Slater et al. (2006) performed an experimental study in order to test E-ELM empirically. In that study they analyzed the persuasive impact of an episode of the television series *Law and Order* whose message was favorable to the death penalty. The participants were randomly assigned either to the treatment condition (viewing the *Law and Order* episode) or the control group (viewing an alternative audiovisual content). After viewing the audiovisual stimulus, the participants gave information about their political ideology, performed a thought-listing task, and completed one questionnaire designed to assess their identification with the main characters and another to assess their attitudes toward different political topics (including the death penalty). First of all, it was observed that their output of critical commentary with respect to the message was low, which suggests that viewing had interfered with the production of counterarguments. Secondly, the individuals who had seen the *Law and Order* episode showed greater support for the death penalty than the control group. Thirdly, it was observed that in the control group the most liberal participants showed a greater rejection of the death penalty than the conservative participants, whereas among the persons exposed to the *Law and Order* episode no statistically significant differences were found between these two groups, in that both liberals and conservatives showed a similar attitude toward the death penalty, in congruence with the narrative content. This result of *suppressing* the effect of ideology on attitudes toward the death penalty endorses the E-ELM model: Audiovisual fiction may facilitate persuasion by interfering with counterarguing processes, reducing the distance between persons with different ideologies.

According to the E-ELM, identification with characters is one of the mechanisms responsible for persuasion through fiction. Identification with characters is a construct with a long tradition in media research; however, the definitions that have been contributed are quite diverse (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Cohen (2001) carried out one of the most complete reviews of the concept of identification with characters in communication research. This author differentiates identification conceptually from the rest of the processes related to involvement with characters (para-social interaction, similarity or attraction), and postulates its basic dimensions: emotional empathy (the ability to feel what the characters feel and become emotionally involved in a vicarious way), cognitive empathy (adopting the point of view of or putting oneself in the place of the characters), sharing or internalizing the character's goal, and having the sensation of becoming the character (or a temporal loss of self-awareness and imagining the story as if one were one of the characters). This definition converges with the proposal made by Oatley (1999), who defined identification with literary characters as *empathy* and *merging*: "The meeting of identification is a species of

empathy, in which we do not merely sympathize with a person, we become that person'' (p. 446).

Cohen (2006) posits that identification provides an opportunity to try on other identities, and adopt the feelings and thoughts of another. Seen thus, identification with characters allows individuals to overcome their natural tendency to limit their view to a single perspective by taking on the character's point of view (Cohen, 2001). Moyer-Gusé (2008) points out that identification with characters can increase the likelihood that individuals will accept the beliefs and attitudes implicit in the fictional narratives. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence regarding the role of identification with characters in narrative persuasion processes is still incipient (de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2009; Igartua, 2010; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010) observed that identification with the main characters in a television series with a health message (*The OC*) was associated with a lower degree of counterarguing. Igartua (2010) confirmed the existence of a statistically significant positive correlation between identification with the characters in the film *A Day Without A Mexican* (whose message highlighted the contribution of immigrants to the economies of the host countries) and positive attitudes and beliefs with respect to immigration among the participants in the treatment group (who completed a scale regarding attitudes and beliefs about immigration after seeing the film), but not among those in the control group (who completed the attitudinal measures before seeing the film). Finally, in the experimental study carried out by de Graaf et al. (2009), it was found that identification with characters in a written narrative (manipulated by subtle modifications in the text, presenting the story from different perspectives) influenced the attitudes of the participants.

Rationale and hypothesis

The previous studies reviewed above enable us to confirm that exposure to films with controversial messages can have an impact on beliefs and attitudes. However, in the studies performed by Butler et al. (1995) and Koopman et al. (2006), the participants were selected in commercial movie theaters, so there may have been a selective exposure effect that could explain the results (Bryant & Davis, 2006). This problem has been addressed in the research we present here, since: (a) the participants were asked to participate voluntarily in a research study about processes in film reception; (b) at no time were they told the title or the theme of the film (thus they were exposed to a film that they had not chosen themselves); and (c) they were randomly assigned to the two conditions, using the same procedure as Butler et al. (1995) and Koopman et al. (2006). Given that the film in question (*Camino*) presents a negative view of Opus Dei and the role of religion in society, we posited the following hypothesis:

> H1: The participants exposed experimentally to the feature film *Camino* (which cultivates a negative image of Opus Dei and of religion) will manifest a greater degree of agreement with negative beliefs about Opus Dei and religion than an equivalent control group.

The great majority of studies on narrative persuasion have used normative messages (e.g., Green & Brock, 2000). It is therefore worth investigating whether it is possible to persuade people with films that broach controversial topics, as controversial narratives may activate individuals' cognitive defenses, causing a lesser impact or provoking reactance. However, given that one of the main postulates of the E-ELM is that fiction impedes a critical reception or counterarguing (as these are incompatible with immersion in the story and identification with characters), it can be expected that the *natural* differences existing between people of different ideologies with respect to their beliefs about Opus Dei and religion will be reduced as a result of exposure to the film *Camino*. In this context, taking as a reference the findings of the study by Slater et al. (2006), we would expect two types of effects from exposure to this film: (a) a rapprochement regarding beliefs about religion and Opus Dei between individuals with different ideologies (center-right vs. leftist or progressive) and, (b) a reduction in the strength of the association between ideology and beliefs immediately after viewing the film:

> H2a: The impact of viewing the film *Camino* on beliefs about Opus Dei and religion will be moderated by the political self-positioning of the participants.

> H2b: Viewing the film *Camino* will lead to a weakening of the relation between political self-positioning and beliefs about Opus Dei and religion.

The few previous studies on the mediating role of identification with characters in narrative persuasion processes have mainly used brief written texts created by the researchers themselves (e.g., de Graaf et al., 2009), which throws doubt on their *artistic quality*, a variable that affects identification with characters (Cohen, 2006). Therefore, in the research we describe here the narrative stimulus used was a feature film (*Camino*) whose quality could be considered quite high, as it was an original artistic creation that furthermore won awards in numerous film festivals.[4] In this context, and taking as a reference the previous research and theorizing regarding identification with characters and narrative persuasion, we posited the following hypothesis:

> H3: A stronger association between identification with the protagonist of the film *Camino* and greater agreement with beliefs critical towards Opus Dei and the role of religion in society will be observed in the participants exposed experimentally to this film than in the participants in the control group.

Method

Participants
Participants in the study were 132 students from the University of Salamanca (Spain) (62.1% women, $M_{age} = 23.18$ years, range 18–38 years). All the participants participated in the study voluntarily, obtaining academic credit for doing so. They were informed that they were going to take part in a study of film reception, but were not told the title of the film. The film was viewed in a hall for audiovisual projection at the University of Salamanca.

Design and procedure
The research was a randomized experiment with a two-group design. The independent variable was related to the moment at which the beliefs or opinions about Opus Dei and religion were measured: before (control group) or after (treatment group) seeing the film *Camino* (a similar design was used by Butler et al., 1995; Koopman et al., 2006; Igartua, 2010, Study 3). Participants were randomly assigned to conditions to create initially equivalent groups and to minimize the need for a pretest. Identification with the main character in the film and political self-positioning were measured immediately after the participants (both from the control and treatment groups) viewed the film. Moreover, the following variables were also measured: mood, motives for seeing films, preferences for the different film genres, enjoyment caused by the film, and cognitive elaboration during viewing. These variables (which are not described for reasons of space) were included in the questionnaire in order to conceal the real objectives of the study and also to test the equivalence between the control and treatment groups.

Instruments and variables
Identification with the protagonist (Camino)
This was assessed with a modified version of the scale created by Igartua (2010). The scale contains 11 items with a 5-point response format, from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) and all the items were worded to ascertain the respondent's identification with the protagonist of the film (Camino). The measurement model proposed was tested (with the AMOS program) using second-order confirmatory factor analysis, since we hypothesized that identification with characters was a general latent factor, explained in turn by three first-order factors: *emotional empathy* ("I felt emotionally involved with Camino's feelings"; "I understood how Camino acts, thinks and feels"; "I understood Camino's feelings or emotions"), *cognitive empathy* ("I imagined how I would act if I were Camino"; "I was concerned about what was happening to Camino"; "I tried to imagine Camino's feelings, thoughts and reactions"; "I tried to see things from Camino's point of view") and the *sensation of becoming the character or merging* ("I felt as if I were Camino"; "I myself experienced Camino's emotional reactions"; "I had the impression of living Camino's story myself"; "I identified with Camino"). The results of this analysis were statistically satisfactory (Brown, 2006), and the following indicators of the goodness of fit of the model proposed were obtained: $\chi^2(41, N = 126) = 70.65$, $p = .003$, $\chi^2/gl = 1.72$, GFI = .91, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .07 (see Figure 1). Based on these results we created an indicator of identification with the protagonist of the film ($\alpha = .87$) by adding up the scores obtained in the 11 items ($M = 32.17$, $SD = 8.55$).

Beliefs about Opus Dei and religion
A 12-item scale was created taking into account the beliefs implicit in the film *Camino*, comments about it in Internet forums and news published in the press about it. The wording of the question was: "We would like to know your opinion about the role of religion and religious organizations in society. Please indicate how
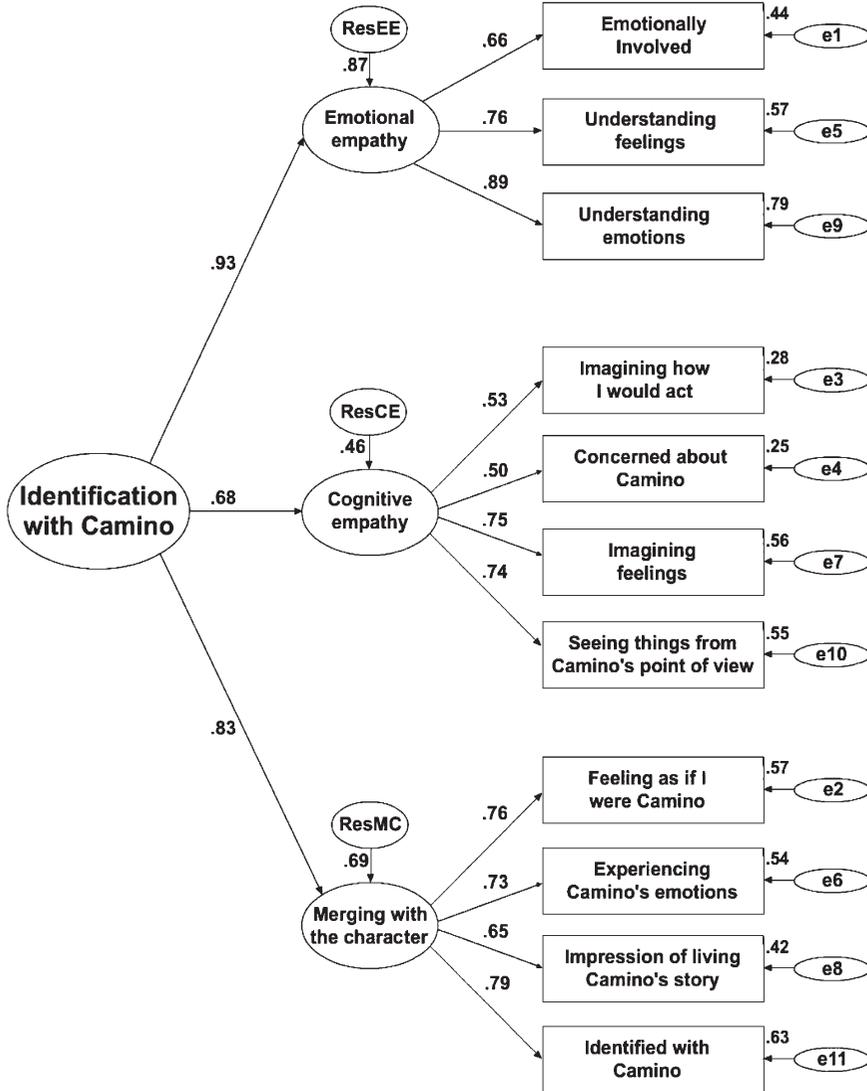
Figure 1 Second-order confirmatory factor analysis of the scale concerning identification with the protagonist (Camino), using AMOS.

Note: $N = 126$. Standardized factor loadings are shown. All factor loadings are statistically significant ($p < .001$).

much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements on a scale ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*)." The 12 statements contained different points of view or opinions about Opus Dei and religion: (1) "religious beliefs are an obstacle to living a full life," (2) "having religious beliefs helps us to face the negative events in life, such as a serious illness," (3) "religious persons make better citizens than those who have no faith," (4) "persons belonging to Opus Dei are usually

quite fanatical about religion," (5) "living in accordance with religious beliefs can be harmful for people," (6) "in general, religious persons are more intolerant than nonreligious persons," (7) "Opus Dei is just another sect," (8) "when a person is ill, having religious faith can help them recover faster," (9) "religious organizations such as Opus Dei can help us overcome the negative events in our life," (10) "Opus Dei discriminates against women," (11) "religion can be an impediment to the social progress of women," and (12) "the work of Opus Dei is negative and harmful to society." Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was carried out, yielding three dimensions of beliefs, which became the dependent variables of the study: "Opus Dei is an organization harmful for society" (items: 4, 7, 10, and 12; $\alpha =$ .78; $M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.34$), "religion is an obstacle to living a full life" (items: 1, 5, 6, and 11; $\alpha = .71$; $M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.41$) and "religion and Opus Dei may be of help in overcoming negative events, such as a serious illness" (items: 2, 3, 8, and 9; $\alpha = .71$; $M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.19$).

Political self-positioning
The participants were asked the following question: "When we talk about politics, the expressions 'left' and 'right' are normally used. Taking into account the following scale, which number best represents your political position?" A 10-point scale was used, in which 1 is "left" and 10 is "right" ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 2.02$). No participants identified with value 10, and both the median and the mode of the distribution were located at value 3. A second political self-positioning variable was created in two groups of "left" (values 1, 2, and 3; 59.1% of the participants) and "center-right" (values 4 to 9; 40.9% of the participants).

The film "Camino"
Camino (Fesser, 2008) is a melodrama inspired by real events: A 14-year-old girl died in 1984 after a painful illness; she was the daughter of a family belonging to Opus Dei and is currently undergoing a process of beatification. The film has a runtime of 2 hours and 33 minutes and the main character or protagonist is Camino, played by a young actress in her first film role. The film caused controversy because of its critical message with respect to Opus Dei and religion.

   A pilot study was carried out in order to analyze the message cultivated by the film *Camino*. Eighteen analysts ($M_{age} = 37.44$ years, 61.1% women) who had previously seen the film gave their opinion on it by means of a closed 14-item questionnaire. The first two questions inquired as to the image the film conveyed about Opus Dei and religion, and respondents could choose from 0 "very negative" to 10 "very positive." The remaining 12 questions were formulated on the basis of the general statement: "to what extent does the film *Camino* reinforce each of the following ideas about religion, religious organizations, and Opus Dei?" The respondents were offered a list of 12 beliefs (see the scale on *beliefs about Opus Dei and religion*) and were asked to respond using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very strongly*). The judgment of the analysts was that the film conveyed a negative image of the both Opus

Dei ($M = 1.72$, $SD = 1.36$) and religion ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.36$); furthermore, there was a high correlation between the image of Opus Dei and the image of religion in the film, $r = .73$, $p < .001$, suggesting that in *Camino* the critical stance is addressed to both these institutions).Taking as a reference the results of the factor analysis applied to the scale of beliefs about Opus Dei and religion used in the main study, the 12 items were grouped to make three new variables. The mean of each new variable was then calculated, and it was found that there was a strong consensus as to the presence in the film of the following beliefs "Opus Dei is an organization harmful for society" ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.60$) and "religion is an obstacle to living a full life" ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.95$). There was less consensus as to the belief that "religion and Opus Dei may be of help in overcoming negative events, such as a serious illness" ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.11$).

Results

Preliminary analyses

Only 19 persons (14.4%) had already seen the film before participating in the research, and there were no differences in this variable between the control (12.3%) and the experimental (16.4%) groups (χ^2 $(1, N = 132) = 0.45$, $p = .501$). The participants who had seen the film were dropped from all the analyses shown below. In order to test the homogeneity of the experimental groups, we analyzed whether there were any statistically significant differences between the participants in the control group and those in the treatment group as regards sociodemographic variables, the motivational factors associated with film consumption and the reception processes with regard to the film *Camino*. None of the analyses showed statistically significant differences between the control group ($n = 57$) and the treatment group ($n = 56$), which means that the process of randomization of the participants to the different conditions had been effective.[5]

Hypothesis 1: Attitudinal impact of "Camino"

To test Hypothesis 1 regarding the impact of the film on the dependent variables, three analysis of variance test (ANOVA) were run. Significant effects of the experimental condition were observed in the variables "Opus Dei is an organization harmful for society" ($F_{condition}(1, 109) = 4.66$, $p < .033$, $\eta_p^2 = .041$) and "religion is an obstacle to living a full life" ($F_{condition}(1, 109) = 4.43$, $p < .038$, $\eta_p^2 = .039$). However, no statistically significant differences were observed between the control group and the treatment group regarding the variable "religion and Opus Dei may be of help in overcoming negative events, such as a serious illness" ($F_{condition}(1, 109) = 2.24$, $p = .137$). These results allow us to conclude that exposure to the film *Camino* induced a negative attitude toward Opus Dei and religion (see Table 1), providing empirical support for hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2: Attitudinal impact of "Camino" and political self-positioning

Hypothesis 2a predicted that the impact of viewing *Camino* would be moderated by the political self-positioning of the participants. To test this hypothesis, ANOVA was

Table 1 Effects of Experimental Exposure to the Film "Camino" and Political Self-Positioning in Beliefs Concerning Opus Dei and Religion (analysis of variance)

Main and Interaction Effect	Belief A		Belief B		Belief C	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Experimental condition						
-Control group	5.32	1.50	4.27	1.50	2.86	1.32
-Treatment group	5.74	1.19	4.72	1.28	2.58	1.01
$F_{condition}(1, 109)$	4.66*		4.43*		2.24	
η_p^2	.041		.039		.020	
Political self-positioning						
-"Left"	5.90	1.14	4.77	1.22	2.60	1.06
-"Center-right"	4.98	1.50	4.09	1.58	2.90	1.32
$F_{political\,self-positioning}(1, 109)$	13.73***		6.56*		1.59	
η_p^2	.112		.057		.014	
Condition × political self-positioning						
-Control group, "left"	5.98	0.95	4.78	1.20	2.62	1.07
-Control group, "center-right"	4.41	1.66	3.56	1.61	3.20	1.55
-Treatment group, "left"	5.28	1.31	4.76	1.25	2.58	1.07
-Treatment group, "center-right"	5.61	1.01	4.67	1.35	2.56	0.93
$F_{condition×political\,self-positioning}(1, 109)$	8.01**		4.82*		1.82	
η_p^2	.069		.042		.017	

Note: The dependent variables are: *Belief A:* "Opus Dei is an organization harmful for society." *Belief B:* "Religion is an obstacle to living a full life." *Belief C:* "Religion and Opus Dei may be of help in overcoming negative events, such as a serious illness." For the three attitudinal indicators: 1 *totally disagree* to 7 *totally agree*.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

run including as independent variables the experimental condition and the political self-positioning of the participants. A significant interaction effect was observed between these two variables in regard to the beliefs "Opus Dei is an organization harmful for society" ($F_{condition\,x\,ideology}(1, 109) = 8.01$, $p < .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .069$) and "religion is an obstacle to living a full life" ($F_{condition\,x\,ideology}(1, 109) = 4.82$, $p < .030$, $\eta_p^2 = .042$). These results indicate that the impact of the film *Camino* on the beliefs considered was moderated by political ideology, yielding empirical support for hypothesis 2a (see Table 1).

Hypothesis 2b predicted that the principal effect of viewing the film would be to *weaken* the relation between political self-positioning and beliefs about Opus Dei and religion. To test hypothesis 2b, a Pearson's correlation analysis was performed between the three dimensions of belief and the political self-positioning; this analysis was carried out separately for the participants in the control group and for those in the treatment group. It was observed that among the participants in the control group, a political self-definition of being "on the right" was associated with a

Table 2 Correlations Between Political Self-Positioning and Beliefs Regarding Opus Dei and Religion, by Experimental Condition

Correlations Between Political Self-Positioning and Beliefs	Experimental Condition		$Z_{diff.}$ r	p
	Control Group	Treatment Group		
"Opus Dei is an organization harmful for society"	−.54***	−.21+	−2.03	.021
"Religion is an obstacle to living a full life"	−.59***	−.06	−3.12	.000
"Religion and Opus Dei may be of help in overcoming negative events, such as a serious illness"	.32**	.06	1.28	.083
N	54	55		

Note: The variable for political self-positioning was measured with a 10-point scale from 1 ("*left*") to 10 ("*right*"). As for the indicators pertaining to beliefs about Opus Dei and religion, a higher score denotes greater agreement with the statement. To test whether the correlation coefficients between political self-positioning and beliefs were statistically different according to experimental condition, we used the Z-contrast, based on Fisher's transformation of coefficients r to z procedure. To carry out the operations and obtain the correct significance level, we used an automatic resource available at http://faculty.vassar.edu/lowry/rdiff.html.
+$p < .10$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

greater degree of disagreement with the beliefs "Opus Dei is an organization harmful for society" ($r(52) = −.54$, $p < .001$) and "religion is an obstacle to living a full life" ($r(52) = −.59$, $p < .001$), and greater agreement with the belief "religion and Opus Dei may be of help in overcoming negative events, such as a serious illness" ($r(52) = .32$, $p < .009$). On the other hand, among the participants in the treatment group, the magnitudes of the correlation coefficients were lower in a statistically significant way (see Table 2). This result empirically supports Hypothesis 2b and means that viewing the film *Camino* weakened the relation existing between political self-positioning and the beliefs in question.

Hypothesis 3: Identification with the protagonist and beliefs about Opus Dei and religion

In order to test Hypothesis 3 we used correlation analysis, calculating the association between identification with Camino and the belief dimensions. The analysis was carried out separately for the control group and the treatment group. It was observed that the three dimensions of beliefs considered predicted the identification with the film's protagonist (see Table 3). However, the most significant result was obtained when comparing, by experimental condition, the correlation coefficients between identification with the protagonist and the belief "religion is an obstacle to living a full life." There was a positive correlation between identification with Camino and

Table 3 Correlations Between Identification With the Protagonist (Camino) and the Beliefs Related to Opus Dei and Religion, by Experimental Condition

Correlation Between Identification With Camino and Beliefs	Experimental Condition		$Z_{diff.}$ r	p
	Control Group	Treatment Group		
"Opus Dei is an organization harmful for society"	$-.22^+$	$-.00$	-1.12	.131
"Religion is an obstacle to living a full life"	$-.30^*$	$.27^*$	-3.05	.001
"Religion and Opus Dei may be of help in overcoming negative events, such as a serious illness"	$.37^{**}$	$.11$	1.46	.072
N	55	55		

Note: Identification with the protagonist (Camino) was measured with an 11-item scale ($\alpha = .86$); the higher the score, the stronger the identification with Camino. As for indicators of beliefs concerning Opus Dei and religion, a higher score denotes more agreement with the statement. To check whether the correlation coefficients between identification and beliefs were statistically different according to experimental condition, we used the Z-contrast, based on Fisher's transformation of coefficients r to z procedure. To carry out the operations and obtain the correct significance level, we used an automatic resource available at http://faculty.vassar.edu/lowry/rdiff.html.
$^+p < .10.$ $^*p < .05.$ $^{**}p < .01.$

this belief among the persons in the treatment group ($r(53) = .27, p < .020$); on the other hand, the correlation between these two variables in the control group was negative ($r(53) = -.30, p < .012$), the difference between the two coefficients being statistically significant ($z = -3.05, p < .001$). These results indicate that among the participants in the treatment group, a greater identification with the protagonist was associated with a high degree of agreement with this belief cultivated by the film *Camino*, providing empirical support for Hypothesis 3.

Conclusions and discussion

The results of the study are consistent with the predictions derived from the E-ELM (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater, 2002; Slater & Rouner, 2002). As posited in Hypothesis 1, we found that experimental exposure to the film *Camino*, in comparison with the control group, induced a greater degree of agreement with the beliefs "Opus Dei is an organization harmful for society" and "religion is an obstacle to living a full life," two of the main ideas cultivated by the film. These results are consistent with previous research into the attitudinal effects of exposure to commercial audiovisual productions with a controversial or polemical message (Butler et al., 1995; Koopman et al., 2006; Schofield & Pavelchak, 1989; Slater et al., 2006). Furthermore, there was a greater impact on the individuals ideologically most removed from the message

cultivated by the film (Hypothesis 2a), and experimental exposure to the film reduced the strength of the association between political self-positioning and beliefs about Opus Dei and religion (Hypothesis 2b). These results converge with the results obtained by Slater et al. (2006) regarding the impact of viewing the series *Law and Order* on persons with different political ideologies. Finally, it was observed that identification with the protagonist of the film was associated with greater agreement with beliefs that are critical of the role of religion in society, which is consistent with the message cultivated by the film (Hypothesis 3). These findings raise certain questions that merit discussion.

First of all, we should ask ourselves why a controversial film (such as the one addressed in this study) did not activate the *cognitive defenses* of the participants ideologically most removed from the message of the film, which would have reduced its impact on such individuals.[6] According to the E-ELM of Slater and Rouner (2002), the persuasive impact of fiction is explained as follows: When people identify with the characters, their capacity to generate criticism and counterarguments to the persuasive content of the message is reduced, and therefore their *resistance* to the persuasion is weakened (Dal Cin et al., 2002; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). Thus, one of the possible reasons for the persuasive impact of the film *Camino*, and for the fact that it did not activate the ''cognitive defenses'' of the participants whose previous beliefs were most removed from the message of the film (persons on the center-right in this case) may be the dramatic or tragic nature of the film. The strong emotional content of the film (remember that exposure to *Camino* had a significant effect on negative affectivity from pretest to posttest) and the construction of the main character (who shows a strong religious faith but also suffers enormously from her illness, leading her to deny her faith at some points in the narrative because she is not resigned to dying) would be elements able to foster deep involvement in the narrative and a high degree of identification with the protagonist, thus *short-circuiting* or attenuating the counterarguing process. It is precisely the E-ELM that points out that an *involved reception* causes a reduction in the cognitive activity of counterarguing because the two processes are incompatible for two reasons: (a) a person involved in a fictional narrative does not wish to criticize it, and, (b) a person involved in a narrative does not have the cognitive capacity to counterargue as all of that person's attention is focused on the story, and identification with characters leads to a temporary loss of self-awareness and of one's own perspective (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). It could be that the persuasive impact of *Camino*, which was stronger among the persons of the center-right, finds its explanation in the fact that these participants had not developed a critical reception of the narrative, and thus their resistance to persuasion may have been weakened (see Endnote 5). The fact that political ideology was no longer a predictive variable of beliefs about Opus Dei and religion among the persons in the treatment group (as compared to the control group), also converges with this theoretical approach.

Now, an important limitation of this study is that we did not measure counterarguing, and that has impeded us from testing its mediating role in explaining

the relation between identification with Camino and beliefs that are critical of Opus Dei and religion. Although according to the E-ELM counterarguing is an important mediating process for explaining the relation between identification with characters and persuasive impact, in a previous study it was found that the polarity of cognitive responses (measured through a thought-listing technique) was not significantly associated with identification with characters (Igartua, 2010, Study 2). For their part, Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010) observed that identification with characters correlated negatively with counterarguing (measured with a 4-item scale), although the latter did not mediate the relation between identification and the dependent variables.

Finally, our findings regarding the relation between identification with the film's main character and greater agreement with beliefs critical of Opus Dei and religion are not as conclusive as we had hypothesized. Unlike the findings of previous studies (Igartua, 2010, Study 3), in this study identification with the characters in a film (with a controversial message, in this case) is in part explained by the participants' prior beliefs. In this sense, we observed that the participants in the control group who showed a more negative view of Opus Dei and religion identified less with the protagonist than the participants who held a more positive view of Opus Dei and religion. This may suggest that the spectators most critical of Opus Dei and religion, when confronted with a film whose main characters were members of Opus Dei, were less predisposed to identify with the film's main character. This finding is consistent with those of the study by Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010), who observed that a person's similarity to the character was associated with greater identification with that character. The results obtained can also be interpreted in light of how the main character (Camino) develops during the film, the course of her evolution in the narrative plot as it unfolds. A detailed analysis of this evolution shows that from the beginning (and during most of the film), Camino shows a favorable attitude toward religion and Opus Dei. However, her attitude evolves negatively as the narrative unfolds and she becomes gravely ill, even to the point of showing a certain rejection of God for having allowed her to become so ill. It is thus reasonable to suppose that the individuals in the control group with a negative view of Opus Dei and religion would identify less with Camino. And it is also reasonable to suppose that among the participants in the treatment group, a greater identification with Camino would be associated with beliefs more critical of the role of religion in people's lives after having empathized with her suffering and having shared her point of view.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 In this context, *values* are defined as broad and general principles that serve as a basis for *beliefs*. The latter, for their part, are specific manifestations that people consider to be

true. Thus, values are more abstract propositions as to how things should be, whereas beliefs refer to more specific matters, about which judgments are made as to whether they are true or false (Fernández & Basabe, 2007).

2 See the press release "*The Da Vinci Code*, the Catholic Church and Opus Dei: A response to *The Da Vinci Code* from the Prelature of Opus Dei in the United States," published on November 16, 2006 on the Opus Dei Web site: http://www.opusdei.org/art.php?w=32&p=7017.

3 The Web site of *Entertainment Weekly* (http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1202224_3,00.html) offers a list of the 25 most controversial films in the history of film. *The Da Vinci Code* appears in 13th place on the list, whereas *JFK* occupies 5th place and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, 3rd place.

4 This film won six Goya Awards in 2009, including the award for Best New Actress (Nerea Camacho, in the role of Camino). It also won the Gaudí Award for the Best European Film (http://www.caminolapelicula.com/prensa.html).

5 It was observed that there were no significant differences between the control and treatment groups in the induction of positive affectivity from pretest to posttest ($t(105) = 1.65$, $p = .101$), the induction of negative affectivity from pretest to posttest ($t(107) = -1.61$, $p = .109$), enjoyment of the film ($t(110) = 0.74$, $p = .458$), cognitive elaboration ($t(111) = -0.14$, $p = .887$), or identification with the main character ($t(108) = 0.35$, $p = .721$). Neither were any differences observed according to political self-positioning (being on the left or on the center-right) in the induction of positive affectivity ($t(105) = 0.00$, $p = .996$), induction of negative affectivity ($t(107) = 1.51$, $p = .133$), enjoyment ($t(110) = -0.17$, $p = .858$), or identification with the main character ($t(108) = -0.03$, $p = .972$). The only significant difference was found for cognitive elaboration, which was lower in the center-right participants than in the leftist participants ($t(111) = 2.25$, $p < .026$). Finally, we also tested whether viewing *Camino* had had an affective impact on the participants (assessed with the PANAS scale, administered before and immediately after viewing of the film; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). They showed a lower positive affect after viewing the film, as compared to the pretest measure ($t(106) = 3.50$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, an increase in negative affect was observed from the pretest to the posttest ($t(108) = -11.24$, $p < .001$). These results are consistent with what was expected, given the dramatic nature of the film, which had been described on several Internet forums as "heavy."

6 From a psychological viewpoint, and taking as a reference previous research studies on *rhetorical* persuasion, a controversial film would be one that contains a contra-attitudinal message (i.e., it presents a message that is contrary to the participants' previous attitudes), or its message is *perceived* by the participants as highly divergent from their previous attitudes. From the viewpoint of Social Judgment Theory it is assumed that when people face persuasive communications, they not only evaluate the validity of the arguments put forth, but also compare the position represented in that message with their own initial attitude, and from there determine whether they should accept the message or not (Perloff, 2010). In this context, it is assumed that contra-attitudinal messages are processed in a biased way because they would fall within individuals' *latitude of rejection* (Dal Cin et al., 2002). Thus, taking this theoretical position as a reference we would expect individuals on the center-right to manifest a more extreme attitude with a large latitude of rejection, (and thus there would be a low

persuasive impact) when faced with a theme of high ego involvement (the role of religion in social life and opinions of Opus Dei, in a country where both institutions developed symbiotically during the years of the Franco dictatorship).

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Changer des croyances dans le monde réel avec des films controversés : processus et mécanismes de la persuasion narrative

Juan-José Igartua & Isabel Barrios

La recherche empirique a démontré que l'exposition à des narratifs fictifs spécifiques a des effets importants sur les attitudes et les croyances. Cependant, il existe peu d'études sur l'impact persuasif des films controversés. Nous présentons une étude de recherche expérimentale conçue pour analyser l'effet attitudinal d'un film controversé (*Camino*), selon les modèles théoriques de la persuasion narrative. En raison de son message critique à l'égard de l'Opus Dei, ce film a généré une certaine controverse en Espagne à sa sortie. Les résultats révèlent que l'exposition expérimentale au film a entraîné des opinions négatives à l'égard de l'Opus Dei et de la religion, et a affaibli l'association entre l'autopositionnement politique et les croyances susmentionnées. De plus, l'effet attitudinal était médié par l'identification avec le protagoniste. Ces résultats sont conformes au modèle de la probabilité d'élaboration étendue.

Mots clés : persuasion narrative, modèle de la probabilité d'élaboration étendue, identification aux personnages, films controversés, recherche expérimentale

Wie kontroverse Filme realweltliche Überzeugungen verändern: Prozesse und Mechanismen der narrativen Persuasion

Empirische Befunde zeigen, dass die Rezeption bestimmter fiktionaler Narrationen signifikante Wirkungen auf Einstellungen und Überzeugungen hat. Allerdings existiert bislang wenig Forschung zur persuasiven Wirkung von kontroversen Filmen. Wir präsentieren eine Experimentalstudie, die den Einfluss eines kontroversen Films (*Camino*) auf Einstellungen unter Rückgriff auf theoretische Modelle der narrativen Persuasion untersucht. Wegen seiner kritischen Botschaft zum Opus Dei führte der Film zu einigen Kontroversen in Spanien. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die experimentelle Rezeption des Films negative Meinungen zu Opus Die und Religion hervorrief und die Beziehung zwischen politischer Selbstpositionierung und den genannten Überzeugungen schwächte. Außerdem war der Einfluss auf Einstellungen durch die Identifikation mit dem Protagonisten vermittelt. Diese Ergebnisse stehen im Einklang mit dem Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Narrative Persuasion, Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model, Identifikation mit den Charakteren, kontroverse Spielfilme, experimentelle Forschung

Cambiando las Creencias sobre el Mundo Real Mediante Películas Controversiales:

Los Procesos y los Mecanismos de la Narrativa Persuasiva

Resumen

La investigación empírica ha encontrado que la exposición a narrativas ficcionales específicas ejercen efectos significativos sobre las actitudes y las creencias. No obstante, hay poca investigación acerca del impacto persuasivo de las películas controversiales. Presentamos una investigación experimental diseñada para analizar el impacto actitudinal de una película controversial (*Camino*), de acuerdo con los modelos teóricos de la narrativa persuasiva. Dado su mensaje crítico hacia el Opus Dei, este film desencadenó alguna controversia en España durante su estreno. Los resultados revelan que la exposición experimental a la película indujo opiniones negativas hacia el Opus Dei y la religión, y debilitó la relación entre el auto-posicionamiento político y las creencias mencionadas anteriormente. Más aún, el impacto actitudinal fue mediatizado por la identificación con el protagonista. Estos resultados son convergentes con el Modelo Extendido de Elaboración Probable.

Palabras Claves: Narrativa de persuasión, Modelo Extendido de Elaboración Probable, Identificación con los caracteres, Películas Controversiales, Investigación experimental.