COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Influence of character type and narrative setting on character design for fictional television series

Abstract

The importance of characters in fictional audiovisual productions has received much emphasis in research on media entertainment. However, despite the centrality of characters, analysis of the factors that influence their design is a topic that has scarcely been approached. The objective of this research study was to analyze the process of designing fictional audiovisual characters. Participants (N = 303) were audiovisual communication students whose task was to create a fictional character while being manipulated experimentally (through instructions) as to the type of character to design (general versus immigrant character) and the fictional setting (hospital versus police station). The dependent variables were related to the attribution of narrative characteristics, socio–demographic characteristics, personality traits and potential for audience identification with the character. The results show that the type of character and narrative setting influenced the occupation assigned to that character: when the character to be designed was an immigrant and the action was to take place in a police station they were most frequently considered criminals. It was also confirmed that the character type to be designed affected the narrative role, role in the plot, educational level and socio–economic status assigned to the created character. In addition, the immigrant character was assigned a lower identification potential and this, in turn, influenced the personality traits assigned to the character.

Keywords
TV fiction, immigration, identification with characters, experimental research, mediation analysis

1. Introduction

It is quite common to hear that audiovisual fiction fosters or reinforces stereotypes about ethnic minorities and immigrants by selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of reality and hiding or failing to address many others (Harwood, 2010). Previous studies of content analysis show that a noticeable bias occurs in the cases of immigrant (Igartua, Barrios & Ortega, 2012) or ethnic minority characters (Mastro, 2009a, 2009b).

However, to what extent are the screenwriters themselves swayed by stereotypes when creating characters? The main goal of the research described here was to analyze the audiovisual creation process in a sample of audiovisual communication students at university level who were asked to act as screenwriters and design a character for a fictional television series. The idea was to find out whether being instructed to create an immigrant character would affect the narrative characteristics, socio-demographic characteristics, and personality attributed to the character. Furthermore, we sought to test whether the (supposed) differential configuration of personality attributes of the character would be mediated by the "identification potential" that the students themselves had assigned to the character they created (*To what extent do you think that the average viewer of the series would identify with the character you have designed for it?*). The present study is an attempt to integrate different research lines regarding media entertainment, narrative persuasion, stereotypes in audiovisual fiction, and intergroup media contact and immigration.

1.1. *Fictional characters, reception processes and media effects*

Research into media entertainment has found that fictional characters stimulate processes that foster involvement with the messages or programs viewed, such as affective disposition or appreciation, perceived similarity, parasocial interaction and identification (Cohen, 2001, 2006, 2009; Soto-Sanfiel, Aymerich-Franch & Romero, 2014; Soto-Sanfiel, Aymerich-Franch & Ribes Guàrdia, 2010). Indeed, Vorderer, Steen and Chan (2006) went so far as to define entertainment as a process that "involves the exploration of relationships through simulations that permit individuals to identify with substitute agents and thus create the subjective experience of relationships" (p. 14). Such processes of involvement with characters are important in creating a favorable atmosphere for narrative engagement and the perception of realism in a fictitious story (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). It has also been observed that the greater the identification with the characters, the greater the enjoyment and affective impact (Igartua & Muñiz, 2008).

Identification with characters (meaning that one feels involved with the characters, experiences reactions of cognitive and emotional empathy, and has the sensation of being the character; Cohen, 2001) is also associated with another type of media consequences or effects by acting as a mediating variable (de Graaf et al., 2012). It explains the impact that audiovisual fiction has on negative behavior such as violence (see, for example, Fernández, Revilla & Domínguez, 2011), but also the prosocial or positive effects related to attitudes towards health topics (see Murphy, Frank, Chatterjee & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2013). In the context of narrative persuasion, identification with characters has been observed to favor changes in attitudes; that is, when people identify with a fictional character they assume that character's perspective from the cognitive and affective point of view, momentarily changing their identity, and experience an altered state of consciousness, all of which leads to changes in beliefs and opinions (Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Moyer-Gusé, Chung & Jain, 2011). Finally, Park (2012) has proposed that consumption of audiovisual fiction can facilitate positive inter-group contact (and reduce prejudice towards ethnic minorities and immigrants, for example) as long as identification with the ethnic minority character is promoted. In fact, it has been shown that identification with an immigrant character is a relevant process in facilitating the reduction of prejudice (Igartua, 2010; Müller, 2009).

It has also been observed that the attributes selected to build a character can condition audience responses. In particular, Raney (2004) points out that the moral character of fictional characters conditions the affective disposition that audiences develop towards them: characters who are considered morally good stimulate favorable affective dispositions, whereas those considered villains arouse negative affective dispositions. In addition, Weaver (2011) affirms that the ethnic or racial origin of the main character in a

fictional program acts as a kind of cue that leads the viewer to experience greater or lesser similarity, assess the character in a differential way and manifest a greater or lesser desire to continue to consume specific audiovisual contents. Thus, in his experimental research he observed that exposure to fictional programs was less likely if the main character belonged to an ethnic minority. Likewise, Mastro, Behm-Morawitz and Kopacáz (2008) empirically proved that the ethnic profile of a character and his/her stereotypical representation (for example, presenting a Latino character as a bad student who does not spend enough time studying, a widespread stereotype in the US context) induced a more negative assessment than when the character was presented in a less stereotyped way. Finally, Chung and Slater (2013) found that the presence of a stigma in the protagonist of an audiovisual fictional production (in which a mother was represented as a drug addict in comparison with the same character being represented without any information about her history with drugs) influenced identification, leading to less perspective-taking (being able to put oneself in another's place) and a more negative assessment of that character when she was presented with the stigma.

1.2. *Ethnic minorities and immigrants in television fiction*

Content analysis studies have shown that there is a low presence of ethnic minority or immigrant characters in fictional television contents (Igartua, Barrios & Ortega, 2012). Furthermore, they usually have relatively unimportant roles in the narrative structure of fictional programs and are represented in a distorted or stereotyped way (Greenberg, Mastro & Brand, 2002; Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Mastro, 2009a, 2009b; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). Studies carried out in Spain regarding immigration and television fiction have shown that immigrant characters are predominantly represented as low-skilled and illegal; there is a high presence of immigrants acting as criminals; and only infrequently do immigrants have a central role in the narrative plots (Galán, 2006; Lacalle, 2008; Ruiz-Collantes et al., 2006). Moreover, foreign-immigrant characters are also portrayed showing more violent behavior and being on the receiving end of more acts of violence than natives and they are also defined as less hard-working, intelligent or tolerant (Igartua, Barrios & Ortega, 2012).

It has been observed that screenwriters of fictional television series base their ideas for creating plots and characters on the news (Galán, 2006), and the media usually provide a very partial view of reality in regard to immigration, emphasizing the problematical side and a link to lack of safety in the streets and delinquency (Igartua & al., 2007). This circumstance has some very direct consequences on the propagation of stereotypes about immigrants. In this context, stereotypes are shared cognitive ways of thinking and beliefs about the characteristics of a particular social group (Gómez, 2007). Thus, the social category "immigrant" is turned into a stereotype when attributes such as "criminal" or "marginal" are repeatedly associated with them, and then this perspective is applied to all the members of that social category. In audiovisual fictional contents, stereotypes are frequently used to get the public to identify more quickly with the characters and to make consumption as light and as efficient as possible (Areste, 2003). Furthermore, stereotypes also condition how reality is perceived, both by viewers (when they judge immigrants according to the image of them offered by the media, Mastro, 2009b) and by media professionals themselves (stereotypes can condition how they work). For example, it has been shown that journalists who scored higher on a test assessing prejudice towards immigrants published less news about immigration (Palacios & Sánchez, 2014). However, to date no studies have investigated how stereotypes condition the processes involved in designing characters for television fiction.

1.3. *Research context and hypotheses*

For the research study presented here we asked a sample of audiovisual communication students to create characters in order to find out whether they reproduced the stereotypes documented previously in studies of content analysis. Audiovisual communication students usually receive training for participating in audiovisual creation processes, as one of the professional profiles associated with the degree is related to audiovisual production, direction, and screenwriting, (see the *Libro Blanco de los Títulos de Grado en Ciencias de la Comunicación* –White Book on Undergraduate Degrees in Communication Sciences, 2005). In this context, the aim of the research presented here was to analyze the process of character creation for television series. To do so, we employed an experimental methodology that consisted in manipulating the instructions given to the students concerning the type of character they were asked to create ("design a character for a national TV series" versus "design a character who comes from another culture and lives in Spain, an immigrant, for a national TV series") and the setting in which the series would take place (a police station versus a hospital). Manipulation through instructions is a habitual practice in experimental research in the field of Communication, and, in particular, in the study of media stereotypes by adopting the paradigm of pre-activation or priming (Mastro, 2009b), which is aimed at activating stereotypes (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). Taking into account previous studies in content analysis regarding ethnic minorities and immigrants in television fiction, we posited the following hypotheses:

H1: The character type to be designed and the setting in which the action is to take place will determine the profession or occupation assigned; it is more likely that "criminal" activity will be assigned to the immigrant character with the action taking place in a police station.

H2: The immigrant character is more likely to be assigned the position of antagonist and secondary character, and to a lesser extent, the main character.

H3: The immigrant character will have a lower level of education and a lower socio-economic level.

H4: Negative and less positive personality traits will be assigned to the immigrant character, and even more so if the action takes place in a police station.

H5: The previous effect is expected to be mediated by the "identification potential" assigned to the character, such that a lower identification potential will be assigned to the immigrant character, and this, in turn, will promote a greater attribution of negative personality traits and a lesser attribution of positive traits.

2. Method

2.1. *Participants*

The study participants consisted of 303 audiovisual communication students from different Spanish universities; 51.2% were women and the mean age was 23.92 ($DT = 6.08$) years. These students were in undergraduate audiovisual communication programs at the University of Salamanca, University of the Basque Country, Rey Juan Carlos University and the Complutense University of Madrid, and in Master's degree programs specialized in screenwriting and specific professional workshops (at the Carlos III University, Autonomous University of Barcelona, and the Pontifical University of Salamanca). Their participation was voluntary and professors from these universities collaborated in the field work under the supervision and assistance of this paper's second author.

2.2. *Design and procedure*

Experimental research was carried out with a 2 x 2 factor design using a split–ballot type questionnaire. Split–ballot or experimental questionnaires are based on the manipulation of certain elements in the questionnaire itself (in this study, the instructions given to the participants for designing a fictional character), while including other questions in common for all cases (dependent variables). Thus, instead of having a single model of questionnaire there are several different versions that are distributed randomly to a sample of participants (Igartua, 2006; Petersen, 2008). In the present study the two independent variables were the type of character to design (a character in general and an immigrant character) and the context or setting of the series in which that character would be participating (police station or hospital). The dependent variables were the attributes assigned to the character and their identification potential.

Four versions of the same questionnaire were devised, differentiated only by the design instructions included on the cover (see Table 1).

Table 1. Outline of the design employed. Instructions given to the participants on the cover of the split-ballot questionnaire (four conditions or treatments)

Narrative setting of the action	Type of character to be designed	
	General character	*Immigrant character*
Police Station	Now we would like you to **imagine that you are a screenwriter** of fictional TV series commissioned to **design a character** for a national series **about the relationships that develop in a** specific **workplace**: <u>**a police station**</u>. This series will be aired in prime time (when audience numbers are at a maximum). Please turn the page and answer the following questions:	Now we would like you to **imagine that you are a screenwriter** of fictional TV series commissioned to <u>**design a character from another culture who lives in Spain (an immigrant)**</u> for a national series **about the relationships that develop in a** specific **workplace**: <u>**a police station**</u>. This series will be aired in prime time (when audience numbers are at a maximum). Please turn the page and answer the following questions:
Hospital	Now we would like you to **imagine that you are a screenwriter** of fictional TV series commissioned to **design a character** for a national series **about the relationships that develop in a** specific **workplace**: <u>**a hospital**</u>. This series will be aired in prime time (when audience numbers are at a maximum). Please turn the page and answer the following questions:	Now we would like you to **imagine that you are a screenwriter** of fictional TV series commissioned to <u>**design a character from another culture who lives in Spain (an immigrant)**</u> for a national series **about the relationships that develop in a** specific **workplace**: <u>**a hospital**</u>. This series will be aired in prime time (when audience numbers are at a maximum). Please turn the page and answer the following questions:

The questionnaire was entitled "Study on the creation of characters for television fiction" and then the following information was added: "the aim of this questionnaire is to analyze the work of screenwriters of fiction when creating characters for TV seriesIt thus contains questions about the typical activities of screenwriters when they decide to create a

character for a television series. Now we would like you to imagine you are a screenwriter for a television series and have been commissioned to design a character for a national TV series [a character who comes from another culture and lives in Spain (an immigrant) for a national TV series] concerning the relationships that develop in a particular work place: a police station [a hospital]. This series will be aired in prime time (when audience numbers are at a maximum)". The following pages described the dependent variables, which are related to the attributing of narrative and socio-demographic characteristics, personality traits and "identification potential" to the character being designed. Most of the items were drawn up based on a code book used in a previous study addressing content analysis (Igartua et al., 2012). That study, an analysis of the image of immigrants in prime time audiovisual fictions, shed light on the biased or stereotyped construction of immigrants/foreigners in television fiction (see also, Igartua, Barrios, Ortega & Frutos, 2014).

2.3. *Dependent variables*

Type of character. The participants could select one of the following options for designing their character (in parenthesis we include the information on the questionnaire to help the participants to design the character): 1 = main character (his/her presence is essential to the development of the narrative, and he or she appears in approximately 50% or more of the program); 2 = secondary character (involved in the narrative line but not essential to it, appearing in less than 50% of the program); 3 = *background* (a non-essential presence, although appearing in the program in a very episodic way).

Narrative role of the character. The options offered to the participants were the following: 1 = protagonist (the person who carries out the most important actions of the story; the dramatic structure rests on this individual and his/her actions); 2 = antagonist or villain (main character who opposes the actions of the protagonist); 3 = secondary protagonist (those who are closely related to the main character; their participation in the story is important and their actions go in the same direction as those of the protagonist); 4 = non-protagonist secondary (their participation in the story is not so important, as they have a non-essential role and may have some kind of relation or not to the protagonist or antagonist).

Socio-demographic characteristics. The participants were told the following: "now we would like you to choose some socio-demographic characteristics for YOUR character". A total of ten socio-demographic variables were considered (sex, age, marital status, etc.), the relevant variables for the present study being: educational level (1 = illiterate; 2 = no formal education; 3 = primary; 4 = secondary; 5 = university), socio-economic status (1 = low; 2 = middle; 3 = high) and occupation ("indicate what occupation the character would have in the series"). The character's occupation was posited as an open question to give the participants more freedom in the creative process. The responses were subsequently categorized, giving rise to a list of 21 professions and occupations. Among these occupations, the participants also included "criminal" (mentioned overall by 8.3% of the participants). The questionnaire also asked about the geographical origin (1 = Spain; 2 = another European country; 3 = The United States; 4 = Canada; 5 = Latin America; 6 = Asia; 7 = Africa; 8 = Oceania) and ethnic group of the character being created (1 = Caucasian; 2 = Black; 3 = Hispanic; 4 = Asian; 5 = Roma; 6 = has several ethnic traits), in order to test the efficacy of the experimental manipulation.

Personality profile of the character created. Participants were asked to "indicate on a scale of 1 (none at all) to 5 (very high) the intensity of each trait in association with the design of YOUR character". Fourteen personality traits were included (seven positive and seven

negative): friendly, open, good, disloyal, unfair, treacherous, aggressive, intelligent, hard-working, distrustful, grateful, troubled, racist, and tolerant. Two personality indices were created: positive traits (M = 3.61, SD = 0.65, range from 1 to 5; α = .70) and negative traits (M = 2.35, SD = 0.74, range from 1 to 5; α = .77).

Potential for identification with the character being designed. Participants were asked: "To what extent do you think the average viewer watching the series would identify with the character you have created for it?" (from 0 "not at all" to 10 "very much").

3. Results

3.1. *Verification of experimental manipulation*

We tested to what extent the manipulation of the setting (locating the action in a police station or a hospital) had given rise to significant differences in the determination of the occupation of the character being designed, and, as expected, statistically significant differences were observed (χ^2 [20, N = 303] = 159.95, p < .001). The characters designed for a series taking place in a police station had occupations typical of that setting, such as police officer (27.6% versus 0.7% when the series is located in a hospital), high-ranking police official (15.1% versus 0%), criminal (13.2% versus 3.3%), detective (3.3% versus 0%) and Civil Guard –a member of a police force in Spain whose jurisdiction lies outside cities and towns (1.3% versus 0%). In contrast, when the action was to take place in a hospital, the professions or occupations most assigned to the character being designed were doctor (38.4% versus 3.3% if the series was to take place in a police station), nurse (16.6% versus 0.7%), waiter or proprietor (4.6% versus 0.7%) and high-ranking doctor (3.3% versus 0%).

To test the effectiveness of the second experimental manipulation, regarding the type of character to be created, we analyzed the relation between this variable and the variables of geographic origin and ethnic origin of the character. Statistically significant differences were observed in the geographical origin of the character according to the character type to be designed (χ^2 [7, N = 303] = 77.57, p < .001). Immigrant characters came from Latin America (26.8%), Africa (22.8%) and Asia (11.4%), whereas 44.8% of the general characters were from Spain. Statistically significant differences were also observed in ethnic origin (χ^2 [5, N = 303] = 40.64, p < .001). When a general character was being designed most of the participants assigned it a Caucasian ethnicity (59.7%), something which occurred to a much lesser extent in the case of an immigrant character (24.2%). The immigrant characters were assigned Hispanic (22.1%) or Black (20.8%) profiles or else showed traits of several ethnic groups (21.5%).

3.2. *Hypothesis 1: Effect of the character type to be designed and the setting of the series on the occupation assigned to the character*

We analyzed whether the type of character the participants were instructed to design and the setting of the action they were given determined the profession or occupation they assigned to their character (specifically whether they were "criminal" or not). It was observed that when the narrative action was set in a hospital there were no statistically significant differences in the selection of the occupation of "criminal" as a function of the character type to be designed ($\chi^2_{hospital}$ [17, N = 151] = 14.76, p = .612). In contrast, statistically significant differences were observed when the action was located in a police station ($\chi^2_{police station}$ [19, N = 152] = 33.71, p < .020). In this setting, if an immigrant character was being designed, it doubled the likelihood that the character would also carry out criminal activity

in comparison to a general character (17.9% versus 8.1%; Figure 1). Hypothesis 1 thus received empirical support.

Figure 1. "Criminal" activity as a function of the character type to be designed (general character, immigrant character) and the setting of the action (police station, hospital)
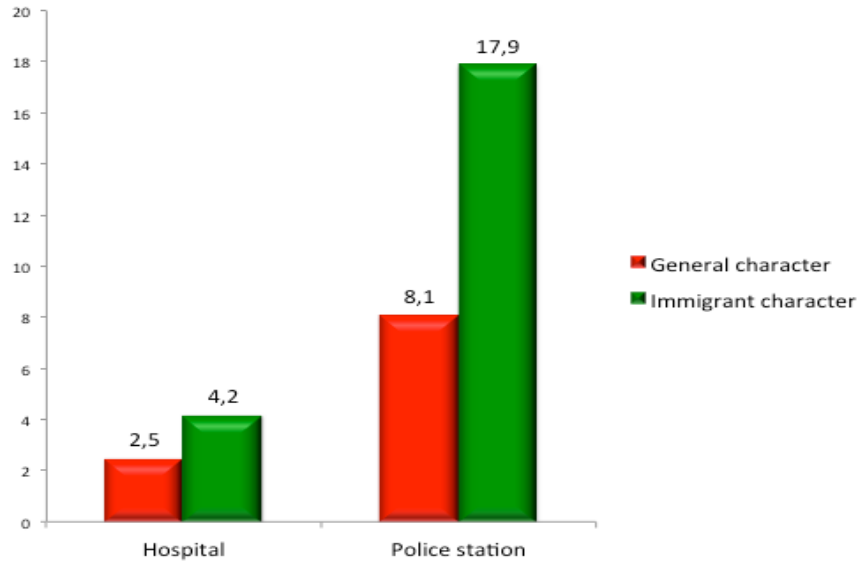
3.3. *Hypothesis 2: Effect of the character type to be designed on the importance assigned to this character in the narrative*

A statistically significant relation was observed between the type of character to be designed and the narrative role it was assigned by the participants (χ^2 [2, N = 303] = 16.21, p <.000). The characters designed as immigrants were given more secondary roles (49%) than the general characters (26.6%). At the same time, 70.1% of the general characters were designed as the main character, something which only occurred with 48.3% of the immigrant characters. A statistically significant relation was also found between the type of character to be designed and whether it was a protagonist or antagonist (χ^2 [3, N = 303] = 37.76, p <.000). The general character was more likely to be designed as a protagonist (42.2% versus 28.9%) or antagonist (26% versus 6.7%), whereas the immigrant character was more likely to be conceived as a secondary protagonist (59.1% versus 28.6%). Thus, hypothesis 2 is partially confirmed by the data: although the immigrant characters were not assigned the role of antagonist to a greater extent than the general characters, they did occupy more secondary roles and fewer main roles than the latter (see Table 2).

Table 2. Narrative role, educational level and socio-economic level as a function of the type of character to be designed (general character, immigrant character)

	% total	Character to be designed		χ^2	gl	p
		General	Immigrant			
Narrative role						
• Protagonist	35.6	42.2+	28.9-	37.76	3	.000
• Antagonist or villain	16.5	26.0+	6.7-			
• Secondary protagonist	43.6	28.6-	59.1+			
• Secondary non-protagonist	4.3	3.2	5.4			
Character type						
• Main	59.4	70.1+	48.3-	16.21	2	.000
• Secondary	37.6	26.6-	49.0+			
• Background	3.0	3.2	2.7			
Educational level						
• Illiterate	1.7	0.0	3.4+	19.43	4	.000
• No formal education	5.3	3.9	6.7			
• Primary	8.9	4.5-	13.4+			
• Secondary	16.5	13.6	19.5			
• University	67.7	77.9+	57.0-			
Socio-economic level						
• Low	17.2	13.0-	21.5+	7.42	2	.024
• Middle	62.7	61.7	63.8			
• High	20.1	25.3+	14.8-			
N	303	154	149			

3.4. *Hypothesis 3: Effect of the character type to be designed on the educational level and socio-economic status assigned to the character*

As hypothesized, statistically significant differences were observed in the educational level assigned to the characters according to the type of character to be designed (χ^2 [4, N = 303] = 19.43, p < .001). When a general character was being designed most participants assigned them a university level education (77.9%); this educational level was less present when the character type was an immigrant (57%). In contrast, the immigrant character had a greater likelihood of being illiterate, (3.4% versus 0%) or having only a primary level education (13.4% versus 4.5%). Statistically significant differences were also observed in regard to socio–economic status (χ^2 [2, N = 303] = 7.42, p < .024). Immigrant characters were more likely to be assigned a low socio–economic status (21.5% versus 13%), whereas general characters were more likely to enjoy a high socio–economic level (25.3% versus 14.8%; see Table 2).

3.5. *Hypothesis 4: Effect of the character type to be designed and of the setting on the psychological characterization of the character*

To test hypothesis 4 we ran two factor analysis of variance tests (ANOVA), the independent variables being the character type to be designed and the setting. The two indices of positive and negative personality traits were the dependent variables. No statistically significant differences were observed in regard to the positive traits as a function of the character type to be designed ($F_{character\ type}$ (1, 299) = 1.21, p = .272), or as a function of the setting ($F_{setting}$ (1, 299)

= 0.13, p = .711); neither was an interaction effect found ($F_{\text{character type x setting}}$ (1, 299) = 0.01, p = .901). In relation to the index of negative traits, no statistically significant differences were found either as a function of the character type to be designed ($F_{\text{character type}}$ (1, 299) = 1.30, p = .255), or setting (F_{setting} (1, 299) = 0.53, p = .465), nor was there a significant interaction effect ($F_{\text{character type x setting}}$ (1, 299) = 1.72, p = .190). These results suggest that the attribution of (positive and negative) personality traits was similar in the case of both types of characters to be designed and that the setting had no impact either (see Table 3). Hypothesis 4 was therefore not confirmed by the data.

Table 3. The effect of character type and narrative setting on the psychological characterization of the character (ANOVA)

Principal and interaction effects	Positive personality traits		Negative personality traits	
	M	DT	M	DT
Type of character				
- General	3.57	0.67	2.40	0.77
- Immigrant	3.65	0.63	2.30	0.70
F $_{\text{character type}}$ (1, 299) =	1.21		1.30	
Narrative setting				
- Police Station	3.63	0.61	2.32	0.71
- Hospital	3.60	0.69	2.39	0.77
F $_{\text{narrative setting}}$ (1, 299) =	0.13		0.53	
Character type x setting				
- General, police station	3.59	0.62	2.31	0.68
- General, hospital	3.55	0.72	2.49	0.84
- Immigrant, police station	3.66	0.60	2.33	0.74
- Immigrant, hospital	3.65	0.66	2.28	0.65
F $_{\text{character type x setting}}$ (1, 299) =	0.01		1.72	

3.6. *Hypothesis 5. Mediational analysis: The indirect effect of character type on the construction of the character's personality*

Hypothesis 5 is related to mediational analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hayes, 2009). A variable acts as a mediator to the extent that it explains the relation between an independent variable and a dependent variable. The mediational process involves an *indirect effect* in two steps: the independent variable influences the mediating variable and the latter in turn affects the dependent variable (Hayes, 2013; Igartua, 2006). The traditional approach for carrying out mediational analyses, developed by Baron and Kenny (1986), posited that there had to be a significant effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable in order to be able to do mediational analysis. However, this approach has been criticized, and the current view is that mediational analysis can be carried out even when there is no significant effect of the independent variable on the dependent one (Hayes, 2009). In this context, the most appropriate statistical approach is based on the bootstrapping method, which can be carried out with the PROCESS macro for SPSS developed by Andrew F. Hayes[1] and which allows the significance of the indirect effect to be tested. According to the bootstrapping method, an indirect effect is statistically significant if the confidence interval established (*CI* at 95%) does not include the value 0. If the value 0 is included in the

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[1] This macro is available for download free of charge from Andrew F. Hayes' website: http://www.afhayes.com/

confidence interval, the null hypothesis that posits that the indirect effect is equal to 0 cannot be rejected, that is, that there is no association between the variables involved (Hayes, 2013).

In the present study, and in order to test hypothesis 5, the relevant variables were as follows: the independent variable "character type" ("general character" coded as 0; "immigrant character" coded as 1), the identification potential that the participants assigned to the character they were designing, acting as the mediating variable, and, as dependent variables, the two indices of positive and negative personality traits. Two mediational analyses were run (one for each dependent variable) by applying the PROCESS macro (model 4), each of them calculated using10,000 bootstrap samples (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Mediational analysis: Indirect effect of character type on the construction of personality (positive traits and negative traits)
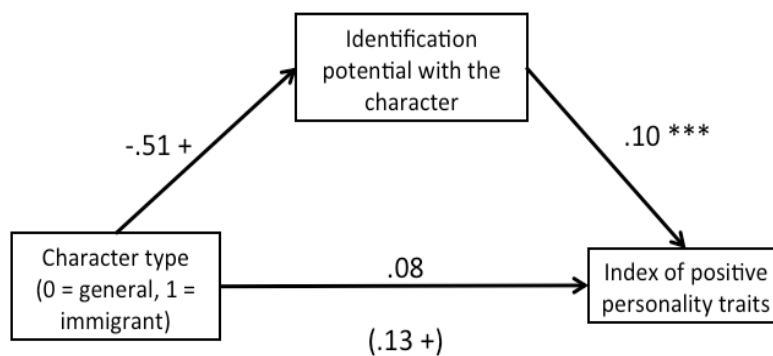
Character type -> Identification potential -> Index of positive personality traits
$B = -.05$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI $[-.11, -.002]$
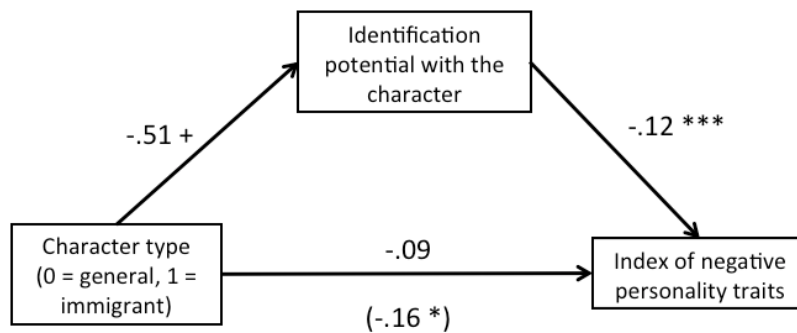
Character type -> Identification potential -> Index of negative personality traits
$B = .06$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI $[.003, .14]$

Note. The Figure shows the non–standardized regression coefficients, *B*. The coefficient of the direct effect appears in parentheses. $+ p < .10$, $* p < .05$, $*** p < .001$.

It was observed that being instructed to build an immigrant character (as opposed to a general character) induced a lower potential for identification with that character ($B = -.51$,

$p < .051)^2$; in turn, a lower identification potential was associated with a lower number of positive personality traits in the character constructed by the participants ($B = .10$, $p < .001$). In addition, the indirect effect of character type on the positive personality traits assigned to that character through the mediation of the "identification with character potential" variable turned out to be statistically significant[2] ($B_{\text{indirect effect}} = -.05$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [−.11, −.002]). That is, the fact that students were instructed to construct an immigrant character (as opposed to a general character) led them to assign their character fewer positive personality attributes, and this effect can be explained because the character was attributed a lower identification potential on the part of audiences.

Secondly, a significant indirect effect of character type was also observed on the negative personality traits assigned to the character through mediation by the "identification with character potential" variable ($B_{\text{indirect effect}} = .06$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [.003, .14]). That is, the fact that the participants had been told to construct an immigrant character (as opposed to a general character) led them to assign more negative personality traits to their character and this effect is the result of attributing that character a lower identification potential on the part of audiences.

4. Conclusions and discussion

These results provide strong support for four of the five hypotheses initially posited. First of all, the type of character to be designed and the narrative setting influenced the participants' assigning the occupation of "criminal" to their character, and more frequently so in the case of immigrant characters in the police station setting. It was also confirmed that character type influenced the narrative role and the character's role in the plot: immigrant characters were less likely to be protagonists or main characters. Character type also affected the educational level assigned to the characters, such that when the character to be designed was an immigrant, he or she was more likely to be illiterate or have only a primary level education and less likely to have studied at a university. In this same sense, 21.5% of the participants instructed to create an immigrant character selected a low socioeconomic status for that character, whereas only 13% of the participants instructed to create a general character did so.

We also found that thinking about the design of an immigrant character as opposed to a character with no specific ethno-cultural references affected expectations of viewer identification with that character (less identification was expected for an immigrant character) and that this determined, in turn, that more negative and fewer positive personality traits were assigned to the characters. In other words, audiovisual communication students, when facing a task of designing or creating a character for a television series, modify their expectations about the identification potential of that character according to the type of character assigned (immigrant or general), and this determines in turn the psychological traits assigned to the character.

These findings are important because they reveal that the dynamics involved in the creation or design of fictional characters are altered by stereotypes, thus extending previous studies about the effects of stereotype activation on audiences (Mastro, 2009b). In turn, they are also consistent with content analysis studies that have found that the image of immigrant characters in prime time TV series broadcast in Spain is negative and reproduces

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[2] Using Student's t test we also found that the type of character to be designed significantly influenced the identification potential ($t(301) = 1.95$, $p < .025$, 1-tailed probability). The mean of the identification potential of the immigrant character ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 2.23$) was lower than the mean assigned to a general character ($M = 5.97$, $SD = 2.26$).

stereotypes reinforced by news items, such as a link between immigration and delinquency (Galán, 2006; Igartua et al., 2012; Igartua et al., 2014; Lacalle, 2008; Ruiz-Collantes et al., 2006). Likewise, it was found that audiovisual communication students recognize that identification with characters is a relevant process in explaining the success of a fictional production (a position that is consistent with research into media entertainment; Cohen, 2001, 2006, 2009; Igartua & Muñiz, 2008; Soto et al., 2010), and based on this idea, they feel that an immigrant character will induce less identification on the part of audiences than a character that is a non-immigrant. This finding is consistent with the study done by Chung and Slater (2013), in which they observed a lower social acceptance of a stigmatized character (in this case, a mother represented as a drug addict), compared to when negative information is not revealed about the main character (information about her history with drugs was left out and her desire to be a good mother was emphasized) and that this effect is explained by identification with the main character in the film. In that study, the stigmatized character induced less identification (perspective-taking) which in turn was associated with lower social acceptance of the character. Nonetheless, it was also observed that a narrative including a stigmatized character did not lead to less narrative transportation nor did it reduce the enjoyment caused by viewing the film. It is thus clear that provoking identification with a stigmatized character (such as the immigrants in our study), and thus indirectly favoring positive attitudes towards inter-group contact, is a challenge that screenwriters and creators of fictional contents must face (Müller, 2009; Park, 2012).

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