FULL PAPER

Two sides of the same coin?
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Die Überzeugungskraft von Alternativen Narrativen und Counternarrativen im Kontext der Radikalisierungsprävention

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Abstract: Societal organizations aim at challenging online extremist messages by counter-posing with different narratives such as alternative narratives (one-sided narrative) and counter-narratives (two-sided narratives). The current study examined which type of narrative is more efficient in changing attitudes accounting for narrative involvement and reactance regarding the narrative. We employed a 2(one-sided vs. two-sided narrative) × 2 (ease of identification vs. no ease of identification) between-subjects design ($N = 405$) using a controversial topic: the ongoing debate about how to deal with the number of refugees in Germany. We found an indirect effect of the narrative on attitude change. People who read the two-sided narrative showed less reactance. The smaller the reactance, the more they felt involved in the narrative, which, in turn led to more positive attitudes towards refugees. We discuss these findings regarding their theoretical contribution to create customized narratives challenging extremist messages.

Keywords: Two-sided narratives, narrative persuasion, narrative involvement, attitude change, reactance.

Zusammenfassung: Viele zivilgesellschaftliche Organisationen wollen extremistische Online-Botschaften herausfordern, indem sie diese mit alternativen Narrativen (einseitige Narrative) und Gegennarrativen (zweiseitige Narrative) zu kontern versuchen. Die vorliegende Studie untersucht, welche Art von Narrativ effizienter im Hinblick auf Einstellungs-änderungen ist. In diesem Zusammenhang wird narratives Involvement und Reaktanz bezüglich des Narrativs berücksichtigt. Es wurde ein 2 (einseitiges vs. zweiseitiges Narrativ) × 2 (Identifikation vs. keine Identifikation mit den Protagonist:innen) Between-Subjects-Design ($N = 405$) mit einem Text über ein kontroverses Thema durchgeführt: die Debatte über den Umgang mit der Geflüchteten in Deutschland. Wir fanden einen indirekten Effekt des Narrativs auf die Einstellungsänderung. Personen, die das zweiseitige Narrativ lasen, zeigten weniger Reaktanz. Je geringer die Reaktanz, desto mehr fühlten sie sich in die Erzählung einbezogen, was wiederum zu einer positiveren Einstellung gegenüber Geflüchteten führte. Wir diskutieren diese Ergebnisse im Hinblick auf ihren theoretischen Beitrag zur Erstellung maßgeschneiderter Narrative in der Radikalisierungsprävention

Schlagwörter: Counternarratives, narrative Persuasion, narratives Involvement, Einstellungsänderungen, Reaktanz

1.   Two sides of the same coin?

In reaction to the increasing appeal and growing number of antidemocratic, extremist ideas and messages – both online and offline – (e.g., Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2020; Schwarz-Friesel, 2018), political and societal organizations aim at challenging these with different communication strategies in order to refute prejudices and respectively temper radical attitudes (e.g., against asylum seekers), and foster pro-social and pro-democratic behaviors (e.g., Briggs & Feve, 2013). Some of these narratives (1) *offer alternative perspectives*, others (2) try to *deconstruct extremist narratives*. While the first predominantly include *one-sided* narratives – as only one message is delivered offering alternative, pro-social views – the latter favors *two-sided* narratives – as they contain controversial perspectives trying to detect and counteract radicalism (Braddock & Horgan, 2016).

For radicalization prevention, narrative style seems to be a crucial factor for the agency of messages, reinforcing its processing and persuasiveness and fostering its reception or corresponding behavioral willingness (Frischlich, Rieger, Morten, & Bente, 2018). Overall, the narrative style in which arguments are presented is considered as an important predictor for attitude changes and behavioral intentions (e.g., Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Cohen, Tal-Or, & Mazor-Tregerman, 2015). In contrast to classic persuasion theories (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), narrative persuasion approaches posit that using narrative elements in messages with a persuasive goal can circumvent resistance to attitude change by processes that make the audience unaware of the persuasive attempt (e.g., Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Studies focusing on the persuasive potential of one-sided messages argue that *narrative involvement*, influences the adoption of beliefs matching with those in the narrative. We refer to the term *narrative involvement* to encompass research perspectives on identification processes with characters (Cohen, 2001) as well as being transported into a narrative (Green & Brock, 2000). Cohen and colleagues (2015) hypothesized that two-sided narratives may create less reactance (i.e., people feel less threatened by the narrative). This may be because such narratives feature characters representing one's own opinion by presenting arguments *in favor of* a certain opinion but also considering *the opposing arguments*. That, in turn, may foster recipients' transportation into the narrative, as the recipients do not have the impression to be forced towards one position, finally leading to tempered attitudes. Indeed, pre-existing attitudes for a topic can promote or hamper transportation depending on whether people agree or disagree with the position of the narration (Sukalla, 2018). Moreover, with regard to two-sided messages, Cohen and colleagues (2015) found that identification with an attitude-concordant character polarizes attitudes whereas identification with a discordant protagonist tempers attitudes. This is in line with various other studies showing that the reader's personal connection to a story's protagonist (i.e., identification) plays an essential role to the extent to which the narrative succeeds in persuasion (e.g., Frischlich et al., 2018; Green, 2004; Murphy, Frank, Chatterjee, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2013). Thus, two-sided narratives that offer arguments and characters that argue for both positions make it more likely that people get transported into the narration independently of their own attitudes and belief.

However, by now, it remains unclear whether (1) one-sided or two-sided narratives engender more transportation and identification (i.e., narrative involvement) which, in turn, correspond to attitude change, and (2) which role reactance regarding the narrative may play for attitude change. These questions are especially relevant for the construction of narratives in the context of radicalization prevention. Moreover, considering the above-mentioned line of research, we are also interested in the role of the recipient's connection with the narrative's protagonist for narrative involvement in one-sided and two-sided narratives and attitude change. We conducted an online experiment by manipulating different degrees of identification with the protagonist as well as the sidedness (one-sided vs. two-sided) of the narrative. We evaluated how these manipulations connected to reactance regarding the narratives, narrative involvement (i.e. identification, transportation), and attitude change.

2. Message sidedness as a factor for attitude change

To counter the appeal of violent extremism (CVE) respectively to prevent violent extremism (PVE), civil society organizations and governmental institutions publish messages including mainly two kinds of narratives: alternative narratives and counter-narratives. *Alternative narratives* focus "on what we [as society] are 'for' rather than 'against'" by delivering a "positive story about social values, tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy" (Briggs & Feve, 2013, p. 13). They can be regarded as *one-sided* messages as they present "only arguments in favor of a particular proposition" (Allen, 1991, p. 390) by ignoring opposing arguments (O'Keefe, 1999). So-called *counter-narratives* are "designed to contradict the themes that fuel and sustain terrorist narratives, and by extension, discourage the support for terrorism they foster" (Braddock & Horgan, 2016, pp. 381-382). They are meant to challenge and question terrorist narratives contesting the analogical arguments contained therein (Braddock & Horgan, 2016). Moreover, they can be regarded as (refutational) *two-sided* messages as they actively deal with arguments of extremist narratives by contradicting their claims and presenting arguments in favor of a democratic, open-minded opinion (O'Keefe, 1999).

Especially in radicalization prevention, the question arises which kind of narrative is most effective regarding attitude change and the promotion of pro-democratic behaviors (RAN, 2018). Until now, there are no studies investigating potentially differing effects of one-sided and two-sided narratives on attitude change; in general, research regarding the effectiveness of CVE/PVE narratives is scarce (see also Carthy, Doody, Cox, O'Hora, & Sarma, 2020). Yet only one study shows that videos challenging extremist content which presented one-sided arguments against extremism evoked fewer positive emotions and were remembered worse than videos providing different perspectives (Frischlich et al., 2018).

However, early advertising and psychological research provide evidence dealing with the comparison of one-sided and two-sided messages regarding attitude change (e.g., Allen, 1991; Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949; Lawson, 1970; O'Keefe, 1999). Such research shows that messages including different perspectives seem to be more helpful (Schlosser, 2011) and credible (Kamins, Brand, Hoeke,

& Moe, 1989) than one-sided messages. The latter are even rather perceived as biased towards a certain opinion (Lawson, 1970; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Moreover, numerous studies concordantly found that two-sided messages are more persuasive than one-sided messages – upon condition that they are *refutational* (Allen 1991; Hale, Mongeau, & Thomas 1991; O'Keefe, 1999), meaning that they "discount the negative information, attempting to inoculate the audience against possible counterclaims or opposing messages provided by competitors" (Eisend, 2007, p. 618). For example, Igartua and Barrios (2012) found higher rejection of conservative religious beliefs and the religious organization *Opus Dei* after watching a movie about this topic containing both arguments *in favor* of this organization (protagonist is member of Opus Dei) as well as arguments *against* it (protagonist's deadly disease is not taken seriously and as the will of god). Incompatible pre-existing attitudes did not weaken this effect. The direct refutation of opposing arguments may increase the perceived strength of the arguments presented (Hale et al., 1991) and reduce counter arguing (for an overview see Crowley & Hoyer, 1994). The presented arguments will be processed more thoughtful and systematic (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In line with these assumptions, Kamins and Assael (1987) found that attitudes formed by two-sided messages show even greater resistance to change. Based on this rationale, we predict the following:

> *Hypothesis 1: People exposed to two-sided narratives show more attitude change compared to people exposed to one-sided narratives challenging extremist messages.*

2.1 Narrative involvement and its role for the persuasiveness of a story

There are different lines of research analyzing and discussing psychological mechanisms which facilitate the engagement – narrative involvement – with messages making narratives effective tools for persuasion (e.g., Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Cohen, 2001; Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2016). Two of these central mechanisms are *identification* with main characters (Cohen, 2001) and *transportation* into the narrative (Green & Brock, 2000). In the context of radicalization prevention, Braddock and Horgan (2016) even argue that those two variables are essential for the understanding of how narratives are capable of changing attitudes.

Identification plays an essential role to the extent to which the narrative succeeds in persuasion. Readers understand the narrative by taking the character's perspective, may adopt her or his goals, and develop empathy (Cohen, 2001). Frischlich and colleagues (2018) showed that identification with a character in videos aiming at preventing extremist radicalization positively influences persuasive processes: (1) the recipients' behavioral intentions with regard to the amplification of the videos (i.e., sharing the videos), (2) cognitive inducement, and (3) the videos' general attraction. They found similar results regarding extremist propaganda videos.

Previous work showed that the approachability of the character is enhanced by the narrative perspective (e.g., first-person narrator; de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012) or by portraying the protagonist as virtuous, successful, or caring (Cohen et al., 2015). Similarities between audience and character (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity) and longer exposition to the character are reinforcing factors of identification (Hoeken, Kolthoff, & Sanders, 2016). In line with previous research on identification, we hypothesize that participants will change their attitudes more towards those attitudes that have been expressed by a character, which seem to be approachable and they can easily identify with:

> *Hypothesis 2: People adapt a protagonist's attitude for a specific topic more likely when reading a story about an approachable protagonist compared to reading a story about a comparably neutral and distant protagonist.*

The second line of research dealing with narrative involvement focusses on how people pay attention to and have a sense of being within the narrative world (transportation; Green & Brock, 2000). During this process, the audience temporally loses access to reality and enters the world presented in the narrative. Green and Brock (2000) demonstrated that the more the audience was transported into a story, the more they endorsed story-consistent beliefs, which indicates an association between transportation and persuasion that has been replicated and extended for a multitude of topics ranging from health disparities (e.g., Murphy et al., 2013) to advertising messages (Escalas, 2004).

Indeed, there is an overlap between experiences of identification with characters and experiences of transportation because involvement into the narrative can be even stronger when readers identify with a story's protagonist(s). Green (2004), for example, found that especially those participants reading a story about a homosexual protagonist were transported into the narration who had personally connecting factors such as homosexual friends or family members. Similarly, Murphy and colleagues (2013) emphasized that character involvement heightens transportation and emotion, which, in turn, influence attitudes and behavior of readers. Thus, a close connection with a story's character appears to be an antecedent of narrative involvement. Drawing from these lines of research, we pose the following hypothesis.

> *Hypothesis 3: People show higher narrative involvement when reading a story about an approachable protagonist compared to reading a story about a comparably neutral and distant protagonist.*

Previous research discussed how narrative involvement evokes attitude changes when exposed to different types of narratives. Studies examining one-sided narratives found similar patterns for transportation as for identification: people temper or change their attitudes because they do not counter-argue with an opposing position (e.g., Slater & Rouner, 2002). Results regarding two-sided narratives revealed that the narratives might counteract resistance caused by transportation, because they already suggest contrary arguments within the story (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Given these ambiguous findings, we raise the following question regarding narratives challenging extremist messages:

Research Question 1: How does the sidedness of a narrative (one-sided vs. two-sided) influence the narrative involvement (i.e., transportation, identification) in the narrative?

2.2 The role of reactance for narrative involvement

Cohen and colleagues (2015) revealed a polarization of previous attitudes if a narrative features an attitude-concordant character, whereas people being transported into a two-sided narrative and identifying with an attitude-discordant character tempered their attitudes. The authors' interpretation was that controversial two-sided narratives – given that they deliver messages in a balanced way – might induce less psychological reactance. Reactance can be defined as a physiological arousal in reaction to a certain external stimulus which occurs if people feel that their freedom of opinion is being threatened (Fransen, Smit, & Verlegh, 2015; Miron & Brehm, 2006; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). With that said, freedom threat is seen as essential condition of reactance and functions as necessary antecedent of further affective and cognitive aspects of experiencing reactance (Dillard & Shen, 2005). The more people perceive reactance, the less accepting receivers are to the persuasive message of the narrative (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Moyer-Gusé, Jain, & Chung, 2013). Also, people experiencing reactance may be kept from engaging deeper into the narration (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Drawing from this, one-sided narratives may hold back intended persuasion effects as they foster reactance reactions from readers. At worst, such narratives may even strengthen extremist attitudes by increased reactance towards the positive democratic narrative. Two-sided narratives may reduce reactance by weakening oppositional messages without giving recipients the impression to be forced towards one position and allow narrative involvement (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong 2004).

From there, less reactant behavior may also promote transportation into the narrative, which leads to extenuation of attitudes in the end. This seems to be in line with assumptions made in the extended-elaboration likelihood model (E-ELM; Slater & Rouner, 2002) and the entertainment overcoming resistance model (EORM; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). These authors argue that entertainment education (more subtle persuasion) may overcome different forms of resistance (e.g. reactance, counter-arguing) because of the involvement in the narration (transportation) and involvement with the characters (identification) favoring the message contained in the narrative (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Thus, we assume regarding narratives challenging extremist messages that:

Hypothesis 4a: A two-sided narrative (compared to a one-sided narrative) reduces reactance (represented by freedom threat), which, in turn, increases narrative involvement (i.e., transportation, identification). Narrative involvement, in turn, leads to more attitude change (mediation hypothesis).

Hypothesis 4b: People show lower reactance (represented by freedom threat) when reading a story about an approachable protagonist compared

to reading a story about a comparably neutral and distant protagonist, which, in turn, increases narrative involvement (i.e., transportation, identification). Narrative involvement, in turn, leads to more attitude change (mediation hypothesis).

Figure 1 gives an overview over all assumed relationships.

Figure 1. Overview over the assumed relationships, (+/-) indicating the valence of the hypotheses
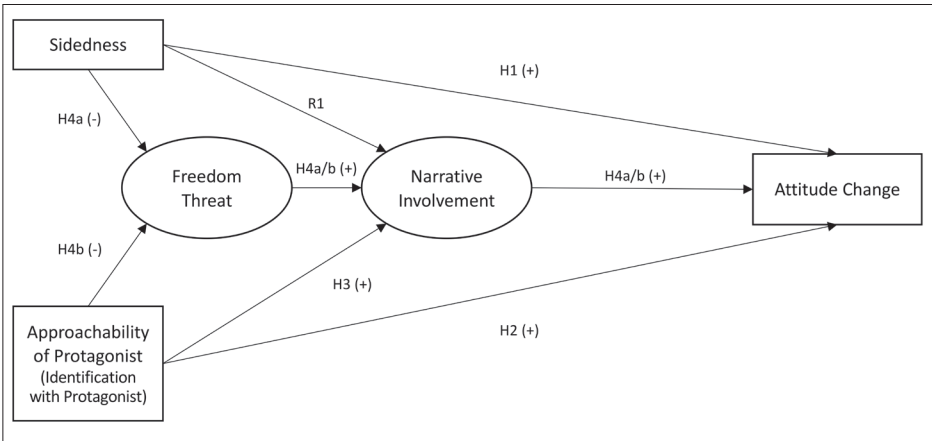
3. Method

3.1 Participants

We collected data of 419 German participants via a non-probability online access panel (Leiner, 2016) in spring 2017. We excluded twelve participants as they stated to have not thoroughly read the text stimuli and two participants due to straight lining. Further analyses based on 405 datasets (M_{age} = 40.68, SD_{age} = 15.15, 63.2 % female, 54.3 % university degree). We found no significant differences between the experimental groups concerning age, gender, and educational level.

3.2 Study design and materials

We employed a 2(sidedness: two-sided or one-sided) × 2(identification condition: ease of identification vs. no ease of identification) experimental design with sidedness and identification as independent variables and attitude towards refugees as dependent variable. A pretest (N = 132) confirmed the successful manipulation of the narrative conditions (counter-narrative (two-sided) vs. alternative narrative (one-sided)) leading to corresponding perceptions, $F(1,128)$ = 85.88, $p < .001$. The manipulation of identification with the narratives' protagonist did not show

the expected effects in the pretest, $F(1,128) = 0.54$, $p = .465$. One explanation for this failed manipulation was the description of the character from a third-person perspective. To increase the main character's salience and, thereby, ease identification processes, we revised the narratives. We used the first person-perspective, a more detailed description of the main character, and a more frequent use of the character's name (Cohen et al., 2015; de Graaf et al., 2012; Hoeken et al., 2016).

3.3 Manipulation and Material

The manipulation of the independent variables was operationalized by four alternating text stimuli. Each narrative presented a description of a young woman named Lena, who has strong positive attitudes towards refugees in Germany. Lena meets her long-term friend Anne. By chance, they start talking about the refugee-crisis in Germany. As proposed by Cohen and colleagues (2015), in the ease of identification condition, one character, Lena, is portrayed more positive, virtuous, and described in detail, whereas these attributes are missing for the other character (without portraying it negatively). The story was drafted from the first-person viewpoint of Lena. Subjects were instructed to focus on Lena's perspective and feelings. The additional information about Lena was omitted in the no ease of identification condition, the narratives were written from a third-person viewpoint, the instructions asked to focus on the plot in general.

Concerning the sidedness manipulation, two political opinions about refugees were presented: one character (Lena) expressed pro-refugee-arguments whereas the other character (Anne) represented contra-refugee-attitudes. In this condition, the two friends start to debate about the topic. Arguments pro asylum seekers as well as arguments contra asylum seekers were presented alternatingly. The debate got increasingly emotionally loaded and ended with the suggestion of Anne to talk about something else to prevent a serious fight. The one-sided narrative presented only the pro-asylum seekers arguments of Lena, whereas Anne is a neutral audience to Lena's arguments resulting in no emotional debate.

3.4 Procedure

First, we informed participants about the alleged occasion of the study, namely a training on interpersonal communication, which we used as cover story. Next, they received the informed consent. This was followed by a pre-exposure version of the attitude scale concerning refugees embedded within several distractor items[1]. Afterwards, we instructed participants to read the provided narrative thoroughly. In the ease of identification condition, the narratives were preceded by separate instructions to increase identification and a page with short additional information, which put a more positive complexion on Lena. After reading the narrative, we asked participants to answer questions regarding their narrative involvement (i.e., identification, transportation) with the story. The subsequent atti-

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1   The distractor items referred to general political attitudes. They were employed to disguise the topic of the study and to prevent memory effects.

tude scale (identical to the pre-attitude scale) measured the attitude towards refugees after reading the narrative. After measuring reactance (represented by freedom threat), the survey ended with a collection of socio-demographic data. Finally, participants were debriefed. Participation took about 20 minutes.

3.5 Measures

Manipulation check. To examine the sidedness manipulation, participants rated their agreement to two statements on a range from 0 to 100 (0 = *strongly disagree*; 100 = *strongly agree*). The first statement was "the conversation contained two opposing opinions" and the second was "the conversation presented only one perspective" (see Table A in the supplementary material[2] for all survey items in original language). The identification scale served as dependent variable for the manipulation check of the second independent variable (see paragraph about narrative involvement).

Attitudes. Based on the *Attitudes towards Asylum Seekers Scale* (ATAS; Pedersen, Attwell, & Heveli, 2005), seven items measured the dependent variable with five items coded reverse. The questions included statements to aspects of the debate concerning refugees. Participants answered them on a 7-point-Likert-scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). Item five was adopted unaltered from the ATAS. We adapted the remaining six items with the aim to match the presented arguments in the narrative to these critical items. One item was excluded from analyses since several participants stated ambivalent understanding of the corresponding item.

Exploratory factor analyses were conducted for each of the pre- and post-exposure version of the items. Analyses revealed the same two factors underlying both scales with three items each (see Table B in the supplementary material). Confirmatory factor analyses confirmed the factor structure for the pre-exposure attitude scale, $\chi^2(8) = 12.176$, $p = .144$, CFI = .996, TLI = .993, RMSEA = .036, 90% CI (.000; .074), SRMR = .015, as well as the post-exposure version, $\chi^2(8) = 22.399$, $p = .004$, CFI = .990, TLI = .982, RMSEA = .067, 90% CI (.035; .100), SRMR = .021.

The first factor was named *attitudes towards refugees* and represents participants' assumptions on refugees' values and behavior. The second factor was named *attitudes towards refugee policy* and mirrors participants' opinion about Germany's openness to receive further refugees. For each factor, a test for measurement invariance was conducted to examine if both scales measured the same underlying constructs (Chen, 2007; Hirschfeld & von Brachel, 2014). For the first factor, the strict invariance hypothesis was supported (ΔCFI = .008), for the second factor, metric invariance can be found (ΔCFI = .003, see Table 1). For both factors, we computed the pre-/post-difference ($M_{refugees} = 0.18$, $SD_{refugees} = 0.63$; $M_{refugee\ policy} = 0.08$, $SD_{refugee\ policy} = 0.58$). These differences were used as depen-

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2   Supplementary materials can be accessed via https://kurzelinks.de/m8v1

dent variables. Positive values represent an increase in attitude after manipulation, negative values represent a decrease in attitude.

Table 1. Series of model comparisons to test for measurement invariance

Model	$CFI_{refugees}$ (ΔCFI)	$CFI_{refugee\ policy}$ (ΔCFI)
M1 Configural	1.000	.999
M2 Weak invariance (loadings)	(.004)	(.003)
M3 Strong invariance (loadings, and intercepts)	(.009)	(.012)
M4 Strict invariance (loadings, intercepts, and residual variances)	(.008)	(.007)

Note. If $\Delta CFI < 0.01$, the corresponding invariance hypothesis is supported (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002).

Narrative involvement. Narrative involvement was measured by assessing both identification (Cohen, 2001) and transportation (Green & Brock, 2000). We adapted eight items of the identification scale by Cohen (2001), for example "I was able to understand the events in the program in a manner similar to that in which character X understood them", $\alpha = .89$, $M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.24$. Moreover, we measured transportation based on Green and Brock (2000) ($\alpha = .79$, $M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.86$). The scale included 14 items of which eleven items were assessed unmodified. Three items were rephrased to the content of the applied narratives. Three items were coded reverse. The scale consists of statements, which describe the immersion into a story, such as "I was mentally involved in the narrative while reading it". Participants responded to items on a 7-point-Likert-scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*).

To check for conceptual distinctiveness of identification and transportation, we conducted two exploratory and one confirmatory factor analysis. The final factor solution confirmed a second-order factor model with four first-order factors and an overall adequate model fit, $\chi^2(100) = 275.107$, $p < .001$, CFI = .923, TLI = .908, RMSEA = .066, 90% CI (.057; .075), SRMR = .065. The existence of a second-order factor supports the notion of a more general concept of narrative involvement, which reflects theoretical and methodological similarities between identification and transportation. The first-order factors constitute subcategories of identifying and transporting processes. We named them *understanding*, *absorption, imagination*, and *distraction*. Understanding reflects to what extent the subjects comprehend the main character's actions and feelings whereas absorption mirrors immersion into the narrative on an affective level. The two latter factors indicate a person's vivid imagination of the described story and a subject's level of distraction while reading the narrative. Factor loadings, correlations between factors, and explained variances are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Standardized factor loadings, factor intercorrelations, and explained variance in the exploratory factor analysis

No.	Item	Factor 1 Under-standing	Factor 2 Absorp-tion	Factor 3 Imagina-tion	Factor 4 Distrac-tion
ID 4	I think I have a good understanding of Lena.	0.94			
ID 3	I was able to understand the events in the narrative in a manner similar to that in which Lena understood them.	0.85			
ID 5	I tend to understand the reasons why Lena does what she does.	0.83			
ID 6	While reading the narrative I could feel the emotions Lena portrayed.	0.68			
ID 8	At several moments in the narra-tive, I felt I knew exactly what Lena was going through.	0.58			
TS 7	The narrative affected me emotionally.		0.66		
TS 11	The events in the narrative have changed my life.		0.64		
TS 8	I found myself thinking of ways the narrative could have turned out differ-ently.		0.58		
ID 1	While reading the story, I felt as if I was part of the action.		0.54		
TS 10	The events in the narrative are relevant to my everyday life.		0.53		
TS 6	I wanted to learn how the narrative ended.		0.52		
TS 12	While reading the narrative I had a viv-id image of Lena.			0.96	
TS 13	While reading the narrative I had a viv-id image of Anne.			0.58	
TS 14	While reading the narrative I had a viv-id image of the situation in the cafe.			0.40	
TS 2	While I was reading the narrative, ac-tivity going on in the room around me was on my mind. (reverse coded)				0.59
TS 9	I found my mind wandering while reading the narrative. (reverse coded)				0.51
	Correlation with Factor 2	.43			
	Correlation with Factor 3	.49	.61		
	Correlation with Factor 4	.53	.35	.50	
	Explained variance (R^2)	.20	.13	.09	.05

Note. For the sake of clarity, factor loadings < .30 are not printed.

Freedom threat. Various researchers understand freedom threat as an essential indicator of reactance respectively its cognitive and affective components (e.g., Dillard & Shen, 2005; Fransen et al., 2015; Miron & Brehm, 2006; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Thus, we assessed freedom threat adapting the scale by Dillard and Shen (2005) as indicator for state reactance with four items (α = .87, M = 2.10, SD = 1.06, e.g., "The story tried to make a decision for me."). Answers were given on a 5-point-Likert-scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*).

4. Results

4.1 Manipulation check

To check whether our manipulation was successful, we conducted 2(one-sided vs. two-sided narrative) × 2(ease of identification vs. no ease of identification with a pro-refugee character) analyses of variance for a mean score of the identification scale and the two narrative manipulation check items separately. For the identification scale, there was no main effect of the identification manipulation, $F(1, 401)$ = 0.01, p = .926, ω^2 = .001. The identification manipulation failed. An ANOVA with the dependent variable "*the conversation contained two opposing opinions*" revealed a significant main effect of sidedness, $F(1, 401)$ = 465.3, $p < .001$, ω^2 = .677, in favor of higher ratings of counter-narratives (M = 90.0, SD = 16.6) compared to alternative narratives (M = 28.1, SD = 25.3). Similarly, a significant main effect of sidedness was found regarding the item *the conversation presented only one perspective* as dependent variable, $F(1, 401)$ = 199.8, $p < .001$, ω^2 = .429, with higher ratings of alternative narratives (M = 56.9, SD = 32.0) compared to counter-narratives (M = 11.3, SD = 18.9). Therefore, results indicate successful manipulation of sidedness.

4.2 Hypotheses testing

We employed a structural equation model using the *lavaan* package for R (Rosseel, 2012). Freedom threat and narrative involvement were estimated as latent constructs. Narrative involvement was modeled as indicated. Dummy-coding was applied for both sidedness (0 = *one-sided*, 1 = *two-sided*) and identification condition (0 = *no ease of identification*, 1 = *ease of identification*). The model fitted the data well (Hu & Bentler, 1999), $\chi^2(233)$ =460.968, $p < .001$, CFI = .930, TLI = .917, RMSEA = .049, 90% CI (.043; .056), SRMR = .060 (see Figure 2).

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Figure 2. Observed structural equation model
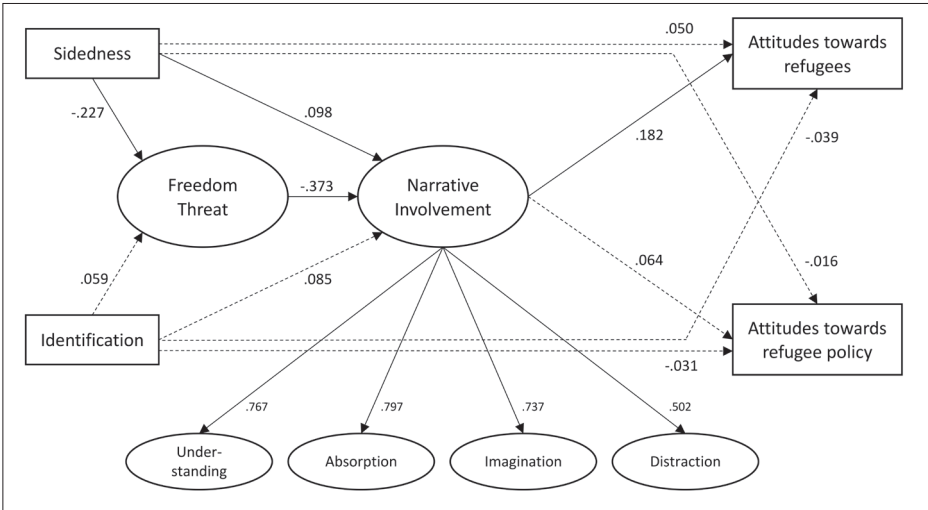
Note. For the sake of clarity, residuals are not displayed. Scores in the figure represent standardized path coefficients. Solid lines represent significant effects on *p* < .01 (⁺ indicates *p* < .10).

Contrary to H1, sidedness did not predict attitudes towards refugees directly (β = .050, *p* = .312). Also, as contrarily hypothesized by H2 and H3, the manipulation of identification with the main protagonist did not directly predict any of the attitude concepts (β_{refugees} = −.039, *p* = .426; $\beta_{\text{refugee policy}}$ = −.031, *p* = .539) nor narrative involvement ($\beta_{\text{Involvement}}$ = .085, *p* = .138). That is, a virtuous character telling a story in first-person perspective and who has positive attitudes towards asylum seekers did not lead to more positive attitudes towards refugees or more narrative involvement than telling the story about a more neutral character in third-person perspective.

Regarding RQ1, we found a relation between sidedness and narrative involvement meaning that the two-sided narrative tends to enhance involvement in the story compared to the one-sided narrative. However, this association was non-significant (β = .098, *p* = .071). Regarding H4a, sidedness was negatively associated with freedom threat (β = −.227, *p* < .001) indicating that the two-sided compared to one-sided narrative reduces freedom threat. However, contrary to H4b identification with the protagonist was not associated with freedom threat. Further, we found a negative association between freedom threat and narrative involvement (β = −.373, *p* < .001), which in turn predicts attitudes towards refugees (β = .182, p = .002). However, we did not find evidence for an association with attitudes towards refugee policy (β = .064, *p* = .308). Altogether, the analysis revealed an indirect effect of sidedness on attitudes towards refugees (β = .015, 95% CI [.007; .047]), which is mediated by freedom threat and narrative involvement supporting our serial mediation hypothesis for one attitude concept. Since sidedness did not predict attitudes towards refugees directly ($\beta_{\text{direct effect}}$ = .050, *p* = .312, $\beta_{\text{total effect}}$ = .065, *p* = .182), their relation is entirely mediated by freedom threat

and narrative involvement. In other words, people who read the two-sided narrative showed less reactance. The less they felt threatened, the more they felt involved in the narrative, which, in turn led to more positive attitudes towards refugees in Germany.[3]

5. Discussion

Against the background of the still ongoing discussion about the effectiveness of narratives challenging extremist messages (see e.g., RAN, 2018; Whittaker & El-sayed, 2019), the present study is the first aiming at investigating the effectiveness of different kinds of narratives – (two-sided) counter-narratives and (one-sided) alternative narratives – as well as the ease of identification with respectively the approachability of a character on attitude change. Moreover, this study wanted to shed light on the role of freedom threat as indicator of reactance and narrative involvement within this process.

5.1 Expanding research on the effects of different C-/PVE narratives

We did not find any direct effects of the experimental conditions on participant's attitudes – neither of the kind of the narrative (H1) nor of the identification manipulation (H2). However, we found a significant indirect effect for the counter-narrative through freedom threat and narrative involvement resulting in a significant positive shift of attitudes towards refugees – but not towards refugee policy (H4a).

This is in line with research providing evidence for two-sided messages being perceived more helpful (Schlosser, 2011) and credible (Kamins et al., 1989) whereas one-sided narratives may appear inconsiderate and biased (Lawson, 1970; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In contrast to these studies, our study provides evidence for certain underlying psychological mechanisms. As suggested by Cohen et al. (2015), we found that two-sided narratives reduced reactance by considering both positions and therefore entail a persuasive effect. This means that sidedness has no direct relationship with attitude change but plays an essential role regarding the extent to which people are willing to get involved with the narrative, which in turn influences their attitude change. In other words: The presentation of arguments does not determine what people think in a first step but may increase the extent to which people are willing to listen/read and evaluate arguments and, thus, change their attitudes in a second step. This is in line with research on selective exposure showing that people usually select attitude-consistent information (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). Therefore, the current study underlines the essential role of reactance as part of the narrative persuasion process and of sidedness as a message characteristic, that helps reducing reactant reactions such as the feeling of being threatened, thus contributing to persuasion.

Applying these findings to the question of how to challenge the appeal of extremist messages and promote pro-democratic attitudes using counter-narratives

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3   Table C in the supplementary material shows all coefficients of the structural model and corresponding measurement models.

and alternative narratives, these findings point towards the use of counter-narratives. Such narratives present arguments for both sides as they are designed to brace the audience for anticipated counterarguments to stealing their thunder (Allen, 1991; Braddock & Horgan, 2016; O'Keefe, 1999). Presenting arguments for both sides may offer a starting point to get involved in the conversation particularly for the target audience of these messages. Whereas alternative messages may be useful to amplify attitudes of those with pro-democratic values by emphasizing the goods of such a society, counter-narratives may be more appealing for those people feeling unheard being exposed to (one-sided) alternative narratives. From here, offering both sides of the same coin in a C-/PVE narrative may increase the likelihood that these audiences at least pay attention to the message.

However, these findings yet only point to the short-term effects of sidedness on attitude change. Slater and Rouner (2002) consider the unobtrusiveness of the persuasive message as a critical factor for narrative persuasion. In their study, Lee and Leets (2002) found that less obvious, implicit messages within a narrative had a stronger short-term persuasion effect, whereas explicit messages were more effective when considering long-term influence on attitudes. Although the authors used an adolescent sample, those results indicate that it would be necessary to include a repeated-measurement design to account for long-term effects. Such research is necessary to avoid unintended long-term effects such as the *sleeper effect* (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Kumkale & Albarracín, 2004). This theory assumes that information and accompanying cues (e.g., source) of a message are processed independently from each other. While information is stored safely in the long-term memory, circumstantial cues will be forgotten sooner. If a message is accompanied by a discounting cue (such as an untrustworthy source), the information will stay longer in mind while the cue at some point fades out. This may lead to a long-term persuasion effect of information from an untrustworthy source. Therefore, repeating the arguments of the opposing site (likely arguments as part of extremist messages) within two-sided narratives may also raise their salience and after a while, people may remember these (non-democratic) arguments but will not remember the context they were presented in. This may have detrimental consequences for those audiences who (before exposition to the narrative) tended to be pro-democratic. However, the meta-analysis of Kumkale and Albarracín (2004) also showed that motivation to think through arguments was a moderator of this effect. Therefore, two-sided narratives should take an objective perspective and seriously discuss both sides in order to keep persuasion low that builds upon heuristic, discounting cues. As most C-/PVE campaigns use social media as way of distribution, providers and content creators should carefully moderate online discussions to avoid sleeper effects potentially arising from related user comments (Heinbach, Ziegele, & Quiring, 2018).

5.2 Expanding research on the (analytical) distinctiveness of identification and transportation

One particular finding that may drive theory development and require future research to back it up is the conceptual (and statistical) closeness of measures deemed to measure distinct constructs, namely identification and narrative transportation (Cohen, 2001; Green & Brock, 2000). Both concepts "are similar in that they assume a shift of the frame of reference on a cognitive, emotional, and attentional dimension" (Isberner et al., 2019, pp. 4–5). The concept of transportation describes a sense of being dragged into the atmosphere and narrative environment of the plot, whereas identification refers to the perceived closeness to specific characters (e.g., Isberner et al., 2019; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Sestir & Green, 2010; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2016). Despite this theoretical distinction, these constructs are not easily distinguishable from each other but rather intertwined to represent overlapping experiences within the broader category of narrative involvement as indicated by Tal-Or and Cohen (2010). In fact, our series of exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses revealed that items of both primal scales deemed to measure distinct constructs showed high cross loadings and may – in combination – represent a second-order model of narrative involvement. This accounts for 1) understanding characters, 2) affective immersion into the narrative in terms of absorption, 3) the degree of vivid imagination experienced when being involved in the story, and 4) the level of distraction perceived. As the first factor represents five out of eight items from Cohen's (2001) identification scale, this factor may represent one dimension that deals with closeness to characters. The remaining factors mainly consisted of transportation scale items (Green & Brock, 2000) (except for one item as part of the absorption factor).

It is noteworthy that this solution resembles measures developed by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) from a theory-driven mental models-approach to narrative processing. In fact, these authors derived narrative engagement consisting of four subfactors: *narrative understanding, attentional focus, narrative presence,* and *emotional engagement*. These subfactors are conceptually closely connected to the first-order factors as identified in our series of factor analyses. While narrative understanding may constitute a broader category of understanding characters, attentional focus corresponds to attentional characteristics. Similar to distraction, narrative presence appears like the vivid imagination subfactor found in our analyses, and emotional engagement might reflect affective immersion. Indeed, these findings are substantial given that they are deduced from different theoretical and statistical approaches.

Altogether, these findings may inform the debate regarding the distinctness and overlap of both constructs and may tackle future research to determine their combined value to not neglect important aspects of narrative involvement. This will set the stage for new conceptualizations accounting for a both holistic experience of narrative involvement and the factors composing it.

5.3 Limitations and methodological considerations for future research

Besides the study's practical and analytical advancements, it is important to mention some limitations and come up with methodological considerations for future research. The manipulation of identification with the narrative's protagonist, namely first person-narrator and virtuous information did not work as expected. This might have been caused by restricted possibilities for the readers to find similarities with the narrative character to identify with. A major problem concerning written narratives in online studies is that one cannot control whether participants read the story thoroughly. This insufficiency in controlling for interfering variables might have weakened the identification manipulation. Cohen (2001) accordingly argues that "identification may be ended or interrupted when the audience member is made aware of him- or herself through an external stimulus" (p. 252). In this context, it would be interesting to test our approach within an experimental laboratory setting to reduce disturbing factors and enhance the narrative impact.

In their adjustment of the elaboration likelihood model on narrative persuasive impact, Slater and Rouner (2002) included several possible influencing factors on both identification (homophily, absorption) and transportation (story line appeal, quality of production, unobtrusiveness of persuasive subtext). Possibly, the impact of identification would have been reinforced if participants had been absorbed deeper into the narrative or if the story line had been more appealing. Further research is needed to clarify if and how these proposed factors influence narrative persuasion by enhancing or inhibiting identification.

The text stimuli were quite short, which resulted in a narrowed character introduction and shortened arguments. This might have reduced the narrative impact. To provide a broader identification basis, further research is needed to test if different media channels in which the narrative is presented would be more persuasive. For example, Igartua (2010) showed that identification in a movie about immigration had a positive effect on attitudes and beliefs about immigration. Observing a film character potentially offers a wider range for possible identification aspects through visual information. Thus, using visual media might reinforce an identification manipulation. According to that, Murphy and colleagues (2013) compared narrative and non-narrative films about a health-related topic and could show that especially for the narrative movie identification and transportation lead to an attitude shift towards health awareness. Similarly, our findings are limited to the context of immigration of asylum-seekers in Germany. Thus, further research should evaluate possible benefits and disadvantages respectively of both types of narratives in different contexts.

Another refinement of the study rational could include a theoretical and resultant methodological separation of implicit versus explicit attitudes (Fazio, 1990; Fazio & Olson, 2003). Implicit attitudes are considered as inherent properties of people's beliefs and ideologies, which can be assessed by the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Fazio & Olson, 2003). Even if there seems to be a strong association between implicit and explicit attitude measures (Cunningham, Preacher, & Banaji, 2001; Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009), the application of

different measures for those attitude concepts could improve the understanding of narrative persuasion effects. In line with that, Hefner, Rothmund, Klimmt, and Gollwitzer (2011) argue that because "implicit measures tap into automatically activated and uncontrollable attitudes, they may be particularly helpful in media effects studies when socially desirable responding is likely (e.g., attitudes related to politics, sexuality, and/or ethnic groups) and when demand characteristics of the experimental setting are unavoidable" (p. 187). As both aspects could have been true for the present study, considering a socially desirable answer tendency as well as an obvious demand characteristic in terms of positive argumentation, implicit measures might be useful to bypass those influences.

6. Conclusion

The current work aimed at unveiling the role of sidedness (one-sided versus two-sided messages) for the persuasive impact of narratives challenging extremist messages. The results demonstrated that two-sidedness of a message may lower freedom threat as indicator for reactance, leading to increased narrative involvement and persuasiveness of the message, indicated by attitude change. We discussed the necessity of communicators to create narratives against extremist messages offering reliable and authentic protagonists to identify with and choose a line of argumentations that is neither too subtle nor too forcing to adopt their opinions. However, this piece of research is only a tiny step on the long journey to protect and encourage democratic values in times of increased societal conflict.

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