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Touching Tales for Touchy Topics? Engaging Contentious Issues through Narrative Persuasion

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Abstract

Scholarly inquiry has yielded a wealth of evidence in support of narrative-based strategies for persuasion, and yet support for this approach is less consistent in relation to contentious or controversial issues. To better understand why this might be the case, the first part of this dissertation reports a theoretically-guided content analysis of narrative representations of abortion on U.S. streaming services ($N = 136$). Following the predictions of social cognitive theory, the extended elaboration likelihood model, and the model of narrative comprehension and engagement, the content analysis offers insight into how the features of these representations might shape the audience's involvement with the narrative and its characters and subsequently influence their perspective on reproductive rights. Following this analysis, I offer recommendations for how storytellers might better utilize these theories to engage with abortion decision-making in a fashion that maximizes the potential for involvement and minimizes unintended stigma.

To test whether these predictions regarding the relationship between narrative/character features and involvement hold true in practice, the content analysis is followed by an experimental study that examines the influence of two key contextual features of abortion narratives. Using a 3 (*character disposition)* x 2 (*consent status*) design ($N = 438$), the study tests the impact of a storyline from the television show *13 Reasons Why*. By manipulating both the context of the sexual encounter (a *narrative* feature) and the affective disposition toward the main character (a *character* feature), the experiment sought to better understand the role such contextual features play in shaping audience response directly as well as through their influence on identification. The findings indicate a need for caution in presenting controversial issues on screen: a worrying asymmetry emerged, where negative context promoted less favorable

attitudes while positive context had no observable effect. Accordingly, abortion depictions could potentially contribute to anti-abortion sentiments if focal characters are not presented sympathetically.

In light of the findings from the content analysis and experiment, I conducted an additional experiment utilizing a 2 (*anecdotal evidence*) x 2 (*statistical evidence*) design (*N* = 403) that contrasts narrative and non-narrative approaches to persuasion regarding contentious topics. Specifically, I consider the differential influences of statistical and anecdotal evidence in order to propose a "blended narrative" format that utilizes both forms of evidence to potentially maximize the impact on a broader array of message-consistent outcomes. The study also proposes that individual differences (need for cognition, need for affect, prior attitudes) might play a moderating role in the processing of these messages, in addition to examining whether there are differences in cognitive/emotional evaluations of the messages. The findings further gesture toward the challenges of persuasion when dealing with polarized topics, while also highlighting potential advantages of the blended narrative format that might be explored through future research. Following the presentation of these three studies, the theoretical and practical implications of their findings are discussed.

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Dedication

To my family for their boundless love and support;

To the friendships that kept me grounded and offered a reprieve from the stresses of academia;

And to the power of stories, which has always given me hope for a better future.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The potency of a good story has been understood since long before there was empirical evidence to support this contention: storytelling is a convention shared across cultures, borders, and seemingly the breadth of human history (Gottschall, 2012; Sugiyama, 2001). As explicated by Bruner (1991), despite humanity's propensity to explain the natural world in terms of science, human experience and memory are primarily presented in narrative form. Indeed, one of the fundamental presuppositions of Fisher's (1987) narrative paradigm of communication is that "the world as we know it is a set of stories that must be chosen among in order for us to live life in a process of continual re-creation" (p. 65). Through this lens, stories function as microcosms of human existence that can convey understanding of something yet-to-be-experienced by the listener.

Much like how children learn from observing their parents (Bandura, 1971), the human capacity for imagination—specifically our ability to envision another's reality—can allow us to learn vicariously from the experiences of characters in a story (Bandura, 2001). Consequently, stories become exemplars that might have an enduring impact on one's attitudes and behaviors (Slater & Rouner, 2002) through their capacity to model the outcome of actions not-yet-taken (Bandura, 2001). However, there is also something special about stories that transcends mere observation: As the audience forms mental representations of key story elements in order to understand the story, they may imagine themselves within the narrative (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). When this process is smooth, it can enhance the cognitive and emotional experience of a narrative such that one might feel as if they are present within the story (Green & Brock, 2000) and especially connected to its characters (Cohen, 2001).

Given the potential for storytelling to yield new insights regarding the world around us, researchers have granted considerable empirical and theoretical attention to the study of narrative as an avenue for influence (e.g., Oschatz & Marker, 2020; Shen et al., 2015; Zebregs et al., 2015). In narrative persuasion, it is proposed that the allocation of one's cognitive and emotional resources to the story (Dal Cin et al., 2004) can attenuate resistance (Moyer-Gusé, 2008) and improve one's ability to process (Bullock et al., 2021) the information contained therein. In this state, one is less willing to counterargue against the message (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004), instead refocusing one's faculties on gaining greater understanding of the story (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Through this cognitive and emotional engagement, the individual feels intimately involved with the narrative and its dramatis personae such that they are transported into the world of the story (transportation; Green & Brock, 2002) and/or temporarily assume the identity of one of the characters (identification; Cohen, 2001)—these immersive experiences can further enhance the impact of a narrative message (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010) in addition to audience enjoyment (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011; Green et al., 2004).

Scholarly inquiry has yielded a wealth of evidence in support of narrative-based strategies for persuasion. Studies have demonstrated the utility of narrative experience in promoting change related to outcomes such as beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (e.g., de Graaf et al., 2016; Green, 2006; van Laer et al., 2014) in a variety of health and social contexts (e.g., Hoeken et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2013; Schiappa et al., 2006). However, findings in support of narrative persuasion are most uniform when addressing largely uncontroversial contexts like organ donation (Khalil & Rintamaki, 2014), smoking cessation (Kim et al., 2012), or cancer screening (Borrayo et al., 2017). When narratives seek to engage more contentious or polarized issues (e.g., gun violence, partisan conflict, transgender rights,

etc.), findings are much more mixed: Although some studies have reported successful persuasive outcomes regarding emotionally and politically charged issues (e.g., Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Slater et al., 2006), others have yielded mixed or counter-intentional effects (Niederdeppe et al., 2011; Tukachinsky Forster et al., 2022).

Accordingly, this dissertation details three studies that utilize the context of reproductive rights to elucidate how mediated narratives might shape societal attitudes toward contentious topics, how the features and elements of these stories interplay with the psychological experience of narrative to produce change, and how the format of a message might differentially shape audience response. From their findings, I seek to inform narrative approaches to persuasion on contentious topics through contributions that center the role of audience involvement with the narrative and its characters in relation to these processes. More specifically, I offer (a) greater insight into how the landscape of abortion representation is (in)conducive to facilitating involvement through an examination of key theoretical variables in these narratives; (b) evidence of the impact of contextualizing features on audience involvement with and reception of a narrative message; and (c) a comparison of message formats that highlights the potential benefits of blending non-narrative and narrative styles to facilitate involvement and enhance message processing.

<div align="center">**Chapter Summaries**</div>

Chapter Two: The Significance of Narrative in Persuasion

This chapter first contextualizes the study of narrative persuasion within its historical roots, highlighting the sociocultural value of narrative as a vehicle of understanding. From this, it outlines how this value is captured in foundational theories of the discipline, summarizing the ways they engage with the core concepts of involvement with a narrative and its characters as

well as the proposed outcomes of narrative experience. The chapter then illustrates the tension

between theory and practice in relation to contentious topics through a review of findings from

the narrative persuasion literature. This review highlights the myriad potential complications that

arise when utilizing theories of narrative persuasion to engage with controversial issues, and

seeks to explain how features of these narratives could account for past findings. In turn, it

provides the groundwork for a content analysis that considers how the features of real-world

storylines align with the predictions of theory, using the context of abortion as a case study in

contentious topics.

Chapter Three: A Content Analysis of Involvement-Related Features of Abortion

Storylines on U.S. Streaming Television

In this chapter, I report a content analysis (Study 1), guided by the propositions of social

cognitive theory, the extended elaboration-likelihood model, and the model of narrative

engagement and comprehension, which identifies longitudinal trends in theoretically relevant

features of abortion representations from television storylines accessible via U.S. streaming

platforms. From these findings, I offer recommendations for storytellers to further enhance the

efficacy and appeal of these depictions such that they better embody the guidance of theory, and

thereby can maximize involvement with the story while minimizing inaccurate or stigmatizing

beliefs. Given the findings of this content analysis, an experimental test of character and

narrative features is needed to assess whether the predictions regarding involvement and

persuasion which underlie these recommendations can be demonstrated empirically.

Chapter Four: Contentious Entertainment

I build upon the findings of the content analysis through an experiment (Study 2) that

manipulates both a narrative and a character feature common to abortion stories to investigate

how they facilitate (or impede) involvement and persuasion in relation to reproductive rights. Using an excerpted storyline from the Netflix original series *13 Reasons Why* (Yorkey, 2017-2020), I examine the contextualizing influence of both consent status (consensual vs. non-consensual) and character disposition (positive vs. negative vs. neutral) on audience identification with the protagonist and their subsequent attitudes toward abortion. The results suggest an asymmetrical effect of character disposition on identification, such that a negative initial disposition toward the character significantly impeded identification (and subsequent persuasion),but a positive initial disposition did not correspondingly enhance identification.

Chapter Five: Bearing the Weight of Evidence: Comparing the Effects of Message Format on Contentious Topics

Building upon the findings from Studies 1 and 2, this chapter details an experimental comparison of three message formats (narrative, non-narrative, or blended narrative, plus a no-message control) which differ in terms of their provision statistical and/or anecdotal evidence. More specifically, I designed three persuasive messages that engage the topic of abortion in order to determine whether the blended narrative, and its combination of both forms of evidence, might yield stronger persuasive effects. Further, the experiment considers the moderating role of individual differences (need for cognition, need for affect, and prior attitudes toward abortion) in terms of the promotion of message-consistent outcomes, in addition to examining whether there are significant differences between conditions in terms of involvement and cognitive/emotional evaluation. The findings further gesture toward the challenges of persuasion when dealing with polarized topics, while also highlighting potential advantages of the blended narrative format that might be explored through future research.

Chapter Six: General Discussion

      The final chapter offers a review of the findings of the three studies in relation to each other, weighing the evidence and limitations of the present research in order to offer future directions of the study of contentious topics in narrative persuasion.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NARRATIVE IN PERSUASION

On Stories as a Vehicle for Understanding

The discipline of narrative persuasion is premised upon the fundamental assumption that narratives (a representation of an event or sequence of events wherein characters encounter and potentially resolve a conflict) facilitate the process by which humans understand the world around them (Bruner, 1986). In essence, stories become an organizing unit of human consciousness and memory; in the form of excuses, stories, reasons for doing or not doing something, myths, and the like, narratives convey the full array of human intentions (Bruner, 1986). According to Bruner (1991), this is in part due to the inextricability of narrative thought and narrative discourse—that is, the way that we share our experiences with others (*discourse*) and our comprehension of their experiences, as well as our own (*thought*), mutually influence each other to the point that the question of which precedes the other can't be known. Our ability to represent and construct a mental model of "reality", therefore, is largely contingent upon our capacity for narrative comprehension.

Consequently, narrative "operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality" (Bruner, 1991, p. 6); we use narrative to understand the breadth of human interaction, molding the contours of these stories into a coherent social reality. That is, we learn how to *be* in the world by aggregating the stories of our (and others') daily occurrences and drawing connections between cause and effect. Through this lens, our memories become a collection of stories that explain why and how things happened in the past, and therefore might be conveyed to others in order to share the acquired knowledge. As a result, collective memories (e.g., history, traditions, and culture) can be represented as an amalgam of significant narratives constituting a larger whole (Bruner, 1991). Further, narratives need not be "true" in order to influence our

understanding of the world; fictions are an essential component of human consciousness. They

need only *seem* to be true, as stories are invariably shaped by convention, perspective, and

necessity rather than falsifiability (Bruner, 1991).

Much like how Bruner establishes narrative as an essential component of consciousness,

Fisher (1984) further distills the narrative essence of human existence. As a contrast to the

rational world paradigm of human communication (and its attendant assumptions about the

reason and logic that drive interaction with the world), Fisher advances a narrative paradigm of

communication which proposes that humans create and share stories to guide their behavior,

bring order to human existence, and establish community with others (1984). An individual's life

can be represented as a story that intersects with the stories of others (past, present, and future),

all of which are woven into the fabric of social reality for humankind (Fisher, 1987). Building

upon this, Fisher posits that narratives allow us to understand the actions of others because we

live and understand our own lives in terms of similar stories (1987). This potential resonance

helps to explain the power of stories to shape one's understanding of oneself and how one exists

in the world, in addition to the enduring and universal presence of storytelling.

The presuppositions of this paradigm offer an explanation for the persistence of stories in

human communication: (1) humans are natural storytellers, (2) humans take actions for "good

reasons," (3) these practices are governed by the contexts in which they occur (historical,

cultural, personal, etc.), (4) rationality is guided by our awareness of narrative probability

(whether a sequence of actions tell a coherent story) and narrative fidelity (whether the story

rings true in relation to human experience), and (5) the world as we know it is a selection of

stories that we reproduce to determine what constitutes "good reasons"—in other words, to

explain why we do things (Fisher, 1987). Thus, in the narrative paradigm of communication,

humans tell stories to impose reason on the world: to explain what we do and why, to discern

what is plausible from what is not, and to perpetuate the way we live in the world. In turn,

narrative becomes not only fundamental to the way humans think, but the way we communicate

with each other.

What makes stories even more essential to human existence is the unique cognitive

response they elicit: a good narrative, whether fact or fiction, serious or humorous, is laden with

possibility for a departure from "the here and now" (Gerrig, 1993, p. 3) Thus, even the mundane

stories of daily life can whisk us away to an imagined world wherein we can temporarily

experience a new reality. Using the metaphor of a traveler, Gerrig (1993) characterizes this

experience as analogous to a literal journey: one is transported by a story from the real world into

a narrative world, as one might be transported by airplane to another continent. Importantly, the

experience of this world is not tied solely to the particulars of a text (be it aural, written,

audiovisual, etc.) but to the imagery that it evokes. Because narrative worlds are bounded with

respect to an endpoint (the enactment of mental processes that transport the individual) rather

than a starting point (a text with features that meet certain criteria), there are few limits on what

can stimulate such a journey, from a single utterance of "Paris" to a lengthy travelogue (Gerrig,

1993). Although there are few limits on what *can* spur such a departure, Gerrig also takes pains

to clarify that a text cannot *force* such an experience on the individual—texts may be too

complex or indeterminate to construct a coherent representation of the narrative, and some

individuals are more willing to be transported than others (1993).

In a narrative world, real-world knowledge is less accessible, helping one to acclimate to

the reality of the story, and the boundary between the listener and the speaker (or reader and

narrator, viewer and character) is temporarily collapsed (Gerrig, 1993). Thus, during that time, it

feels as if actions taken by the character are our own, even as we are unable to directly influence the events of the story. Critically, Gerrig contends that we "adapt willingly to the local conditions" (1993, p. 6) as required by the narrative, taking on new characteristics in our role as *narratee*: the version of oneself that is "living" the story. Presciently, Gerrig (1993) acknowledges that this concept was virtually unexplored in cognitive psychology, which "emphasized the way the reader constructs the narrative world rather than the way the narrative world reconstructs the reader" (pp. 11-12). Gerrig suggests that, upon returning from the narrative world, the reader must reconcile their experience as the narratee, who has already been changed to meet the demands of the narrative (Gerrig, 1993). It is this process of reconciliation that might open the door to changing one's real-world attitudes and behaviors—in other words, the experience of a narrative world can be truly transformative under the right conditions.

In sum, narratives are fundamentally intertwined with human existence: they help us to comprehend the world around us, to communicate important ideas and share experiences, and to imagine worlds and realities beyond our own. This essential connection is how stories resonate with one's own experiences and lend them such potency. Accordingly, the study of narrative persuasion builds upon these essential functions to establish its theoretical and empirical foundations.

Foundations of Narrative Persuasion

Given the significance of stories to human comprehension, cognition, and communication, it is unsurprising that scholars have conceptualized narrative experience and influence from many perspectives in order to explain why stories are effective agents of change. In narrative persuasion, particular attention has been given to the ways in which stories can occupy the cognitive and emotional faculties of the audience and make them feel *involved*.

Involvement comprises two fundamental ways in which we relate to stories: narrative involvement (the extent to which one is immersed in the world of the narrative) and involvement with characters (the ways in which we connect with narrative personae.)

Following Gerrig (1993), Green and Brock (2002) propose the transportation-imagery model (TIM) to explain how the feeling of "getting lost" in a good story (i.e., narrative involvement) can foster belief change. In their model, *transportation* [into a narrative world] is associated with the experience of vivid mental imagery alongside cognitive and emotional involvement which can blur the boundary between reality and fiction for the audience (Green & Brock, 2000; 2002). The greater one's involvement and the more vivid the imagery generated in response to the story, the stronger its persuasive effects (Green & Brock, 2002). Transportation can facilitate a suspension of disbelief and distance from real-world knowledge that reduces one's capacity to argue against the implications of the narrative: When highly engaged with the events of a story, one is both unmotivated and unable to disrupt the experience with counter-cognitions (i.e., counterarguing; Green et al., 2004). In short, the experience of being transported into the world of the story occupies one's faculties in a way that makes one particularly receptive to a narrative message.

In contrast, involvement with characters describes the differing ways in which an individual might relate to actors within a story. From liking (Giles, 2002) to parasocial engagement (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019) to identification (Cohen, 2001), involvement with characters encapsulates different configurations of both psychological distance from and relational intensity with a given character. Of these, identification is considered to be especially potent: In a state of identification, one feels as if they have "become" the character and thus adopts their perspective, feelings, and goals (Cohen, 2001). Each of these dimensions

(absorption, cognition, empathy, motivation) might be engaged to differing degrees by the

narrative, but the greater their alignment, the greater their potential to promote change after the

story has concluded (Cohen, 2006). That is, the words and actions of a character are most

impactful when the audience member identifies with them, thereby encouraging the adoption of

story-consistent attitudes (e.g., Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014). Crucially, the reasons for an audience

member's involvement with a character are likely to vary considerably from one individual to

another. Although research suggests that characters who are presented as virtuous (Tal-Or &

Cohen, 2010) or possess similar demographics and attitudes (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005) to the

audience member are likely to encourage greater involvement, these conditions are not fully

inclusive and involvement may occur in surprising circumstances (see Oliver et al., 2019).

　　　According to social cognitive theory (SCT), involvement with characters can also help

explain the processes by which behaviors are adopted, perpetuated, modified, and discarded. In

relation to human development, Bandura (1986) proposes that new behaviors are acquired more

efficiently when guided by the observation of others in addition to direct experience. Adapting

this theory to the context of mass communication, the human capacity for symbolic

communication—the ability to draw upon symbolic representations (as in a story) to interpret,

comprehend, and organization information—enables one to derive meaning from the events of

the story and perceive its characters as behavioral models (Bandura, 2001). More specifically,

individuals seek to emulate characters whom they find appealing in some fashion (e.g., physical

attractiveness, valued character traits, virtuous conduct, etc.) This does not mean that every

modeled behavior will be reproduced: Beyond the appeal of the model, one's decision to enact or

eschew a given behavior is guided by both *self-efficacy* (the belief that one can enact the

behavior successfully) and *outcome expectancies* (what one believes will happen if one performs

the behavior) (Bandura, 2004). Thus, under optimal conditions, an attractive model promotes greater involvement with the character, which in turn promotes the belief that one could replicate/avoid the modeled behaviors and lends weight to whether the they are rewarded or punished by the events of the narrative. In short, involvement with characters enhances the impact of abstract modeling, thereby shaping the beliefs that guide behavioral acquisition (and by extension, attitudes and affective relations [Bandura, 2001]).

Distinct from SCT's designation of involvement as a response to an appealing model, the model of narrative comprehension and engagement (MNCE) conceptualizes it as a byproduct of one's efforts to comprehend the story (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Busselle & Bilandzic (2008) propose that one makes meaning of a story by constructing mental models of the plot in which to situate the characters, locations, and events—to ease this process, the individual performs a "deictic shift" (p. 262) that transplants their consciousness from the real-world to the world of the story. When the construction of this model proceeds smoothly, one feels a sensation of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) that amplifies feelings of transportation and identification, thereby promoting story-consistent outcomes. Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) further distinguish the "unique but interrelated engagement processes" (p. 341) at play during narrative experience, proposing that one's ease of understanding and ability to focus, in addition to involvement with the narrative/characters, are "foundational sensations" (p. 343) that make narratives more engaging, rewarding, and persuasive.

In a similar fashion to how the model of narrative engagement and comprehension positions involvement in a mental models framework, the extended elaboration likelihood model (E-ELM) conceptualizes involvement from a messaging processing perspective (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Adapting Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) elaboration likelihood model (ELM) to

the context of narrative messages, the E-ELM proposes engagement with the narrative and identification with its characters, rather than issue involvement and the central/peripheral processing paths, are key to the persuasive process. Instead, attributes of the narrative (e.g., quality of production, subtlety of message, audience appeal) facilitate absorption into the narrative and identification with characters, which in turn shape one's response to the message and spur attitude or behavior change (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Put another way, meaningful involvement should prevent counterarguing—even when the persuasive message is not consistent with prior beliefs, attitudes, or values.

A common feature of these models is that they highlight how narratives can make audiences more receptive to its underlying persuasive message; either implicitly or explicitly, they leverage the properties of narrative to bypass or overcome resistance—the "antithesis of persuasion" (Knowles & Linn, 2004, p. 3). Advancing that perspective, the entertainment overcoming resistance model (EORM) synthesizes theorized relationships between entertainment features and forms of psychological resistance to explain how narrative and character involvement motivate story-consistent outcomes (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Drawing upon SCT, the E-ELM, and related scholarship, the EORM proposes involvement as a way to reduce psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966) and counterarguing (Slater & Rouner, 2002), reshape perceived norms and outcome expectancies (Bandura, 2001), and improve self-efficacy (Bandura, 2004). Although not all of its propositions have firm empirical support, its theoretical framework clarifies how engagement produces outcomes that ostensibly might not be achieved by didactic messages.

In summation, narrative persuasion is founded upon the concept that our engagement with stories holds transformative potential. Through the mechanisms of involvement, stories can

render one's real-world knowledge temporarily inaccessible (Green & Brock, 2002); foster

emotional and psychological connections between the audience and the characters (Cohen,

2001); provide opportunities for vicarious experience through behavioral models (Bandura,

2001); enhance the audience's comprehension of its plot (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008); improve

reception to the its counter-attitudinal arguments (Slater & Rouner, 2002); and overcome various

forms of resistance to persuasion (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Taken together, these qualities of

narrative experience can establish conditions under which the story's core ideas can be conveyed

with minimal interference and the audience is most motivated to internalize them.

The Tension Between Theory and Practice on Contentious Topics

From the perspective of these foundational models of narrative persuasion, the argument

that stories might be especially effective tools of persuasion in the context of value-laden or

emotionally-charged issues has great validity on its face. Consider the transportation-imagery

model: if the reader is thoroughly transported into the narrative world such that they feel they are

witnessing the story unfold, they may not have the available cognitive resources to access their

real-world knowledge and engage in counterarguing (Green & Brock, 2002). Similarly, the

model of narrative comprehension and engagement links the ease with which the listener

constructs a model of the narrative with favorable personal and persuasive outcomes: the deictic

shift from reality that facilitates involvement might temporarily separate the viewer from their

pre-existing beliefs in order to fully engage with the story (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Because

the E-ELM posits that narratives employ involvement with the narrative and characters in lieu of

issue involvement and central/peripheral processing (as in the ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986),

the strongly-held beliefs that might impede traditional persuasion can be held at bay through

absorption and identification—provided the narrative is well-designed and appeals to the viewer

(Slater & Rouner, 2002). Further, given how many distinct forms of resistance are influenced by involvement, the propositions of the EORM position narrative as a superior approach for addressing topics that are likely to provoke defensive responses, whatever the origin. Although these models conceptualize the impact of narrative messages through the application of distinct strands of research, the centrality of involvement to these processes emphasize the role it should play in engaging with contentious topics. However, the empirical evidence relating to this prospect is less straightforward than the models would suggest.

There is not a vast pool of scholarship on involvement with narrative messages to address polarized issues, but the breadth of available findings are exceedingly mixed. In the context of sexual diversity and decision-making among adolescents, Igartua and Vega Casanova (2016) found that involvement via identification with the protagonist of the Colombian teen drama *RDTP* generated greater cognitive elaboration and reduced counterarguing, which in turn promoted more favorable attitudes toward these topics as predicted by the E-ELM and EORM. Their findings contrast with Tukachinsky Forster et al. (2022), in which these same models provide a theoretical foundation for a study on character discordance in the context of gun policy narratives. The results indicate that exposure to a counter-attitudinal character is a negative predictor of character involvement and a positive predictor of counterarguing, such that prior beliefs were reinforced by the individuals' oppositional thought generation (Tukachinsky Forster et al., 2022). However, Slater et al. (2006) exposed participants to a television drama that addressed either same-sex marriage (less supported by conservatives) or the death penalty (less supported by liberals): It offers support for the link between involvement and reduced counterarguing, and even suggests it might suppress the influence of political ideology, but greater policy support was only found for the death penalty.

Drawing more explicitly upon the E-ELM and TIM, Igartua and Barrios (2012) find additional support for involvement as a path to reducing counterarguing (via suppressed political beliefs), which promoted more critical attitudes toward the organization *Opus Dei* and religion. However, the effect of identification is explained in part by participants' prior beliefs, such that those who reported more negative attitudes prior to viewing did not strongly identify with the protagonist, who is pious at the outset but renounces her faith over the course of the film, compared to those with more positive initial attitudes (Igartua & Barrios, 2012). The significance of prior belief echoed Niederdeppe et al. (2011), which found that a narrative on obesity was effective in shaping beliefs related to obesity policy, but only among liberals (who were already more likely to support such policies). Further, Oschatz et al. (2022) report an experiment where prior beliefs about marijuana legalization were predictive of transportation and identification, but prior beliefs were also a much stronger predictor of post-exposure attitudes than involvement—it seems unlikely that the narrative would successfully involve those who did not already agree.

Despite the apparent weight of prior attitudes, a meta-analysis by Zhuang and Guidry (2022) suggests that narratives may be capable of reducing the stigma that informs these attitudes. Prior research in this domain has manipulated a variety of factors, including the nature of mediated intergroup contact with the outgroup (Igartua et al., 2019); the arousal of empathy (Igartua & Frutos, 2017; Igartua & Cachón-Ramon, 2023); narrative point-of-view (Ma et al., 2022); timing of the revelation of stigmatized group membership (Kaufman & Libby, 2012); the use of visuals (Kennedy-Hendricks et al., 2022); demographic similarity (Guerrero-Martin & Igartua, 2021); interactivity (Fong & Mak, 2022); and attributions of responsibility (Heley et al., 2020) to successfully attenuate stigmatized attitudes. However, many of these successes come with important caveats: In the case of Igartua and Frutos' (2017) examination of stigma

reduction toward immigrants through empathy arousal, the effects on identification and subsequent attitudes held true only when prejudice levels were low or moderate. Similarly, Kaufman and Libby's (2012) studies on perspective-taking, a key component of identification, found that experience-taking was inhibited when the story featured an outgroup character whose stigmatized racial/sexual identity was revealed early in the story, suggesting that audiences may need to be involved prior to these revelations (which may not be feasible in many cases.) Further, not all stigmatized issues are equivalent: While Heley et al. (2020) found that narratives were able to reduce stigma surrounding opioid use disorder through shifting attributions of responsibility, the results were more mixed in the case of obesity stigma and did not hold true for cigarette smoking stigma.

From these findings, it seems clear that reliably establishing the conditions for involvement with a narrative and/or its characters to successfully overcome prior belief (and other forms of resistance) is a challenging proposition. However, giving consideration to proposed explanations for their findings may prove fruitful in offering direction for developing narratives that can actually communicate across the cognitive, social, and affective divides that characterize contentious topics. By way of example, the study on marijuana legalization notes as potential limitations the news article format in which the narrative was conveyed and the overtness of and the overtly persuasive presentation of the stimuli—it is possible that defensive processing was activated and the potential for transportation inhibited by these features (Oschatz et al., 2022). In regard to differences in story-consistent support between same-sex marriage and the death penalty, the authors also proposed the explicitness of the persuasive position as an impediment to overcoming prior attitudes, even when individuals were involved with the narrative and characters (Slater et al., 2006). Thus, following the conventions of fictional

presentation might facilitate greater involvement by removing the trappings of "the real world" from the experience and more subtly conveying the message's position through events of the story. In a similar fashion, the experiment on gun rights hypothesizes that readers' disposition toward the protagonist (Zillmann, 2000) may have potentially inhibited involvement with the narrative (Forster et al., 2022). This dovetails nicely with explanation from the studies about religious attitudes, which cites the association between character similarity and greater identification (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010) to explain the weight of prior beliefs on involvement (Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Igartua & Vega Casanova, 2016). The propositions from these studies suggest that perhaps one might be able to promote involvement by designing the narrative such that the protagonist is established in a positive and relatable light prior to any controversial content.

Due to the variety of complications that arise in the empirical study of narratives to engage contentious topics, it seems clear that further observation of these stories as they exist "in the wild" may be needed to design narratives that promote persuasion more consistently. Because audience members possess an implicit understanding of both genre conventions and "unreality," failures of narrative and external realism might disrupt the involvement process (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). As involvement with the narrative and its characters appears to be necessary to suppress the influence of prior beliefs and bypass resistance, fidelity to the conventions and structure of stories is an important consideration for developing narratives to engage contentious topics. Such an evaluation should also consider the content of these representations: how is the character depicted? How are they treated by others? How central is the contentious topic to the story? The answers to these questions should help us better understand what attitudes and behaviors related to the contentious topic are modeled within the

story and whether they are likely to be emulated (Bandura, 2001), in addition to providing deeper understanding of how engagement with the issue can shape involvement (Slater & Rouner, 2002). However, what is contentious is subject to taste and time: issues that were once subject to exhaustive debate and political theater can eventually fade from discussion as they gain support among a firm majority of the population (e.g., same-sex marriage; Gallup, 2021). Thus, rather than striving to capture the qualities of narratives that address every possible value-laden or polarizing issue, it may be more effective to extrapolate from the perspective of a single, presently contentious issue. Accordingly, the following examination draws upon the animating theories of narrative persuasion to analyze the features of entertainment narratives that center the matter of reproductive rights (Gallup, n.d.a).

CHAPTER THREE: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF INVOLVEMENT-RELATED

FEATURES OF ABORTION STORYLINES ON U.S. STREAMING TELEVISION

Despite the fact that abortion is a safe, common, and necessary medical procedure in the United States (e.g., National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018), public opinion has been locked in a stalemate for over two and a half decades: A majority (62%) of Americans support the right to choose whether to carry a pregnancy to term, but the partisan disparity has reached its highest point in recent decades (84% of Democrats vs. 38% of Republicans; Pew Research Center, 2022). Taken in hand with recent legal (Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, 2022) and political (Sullivan, 2022; Wang & Kitchener, 2022) developments, the threat of greatly curtailed access to abortion care (Gonzalez, 2022) ensures that the debate around reproductive rights is unlikely to abate under current conditions.

In light of these ongoing tensions, scholars have sought to better understand how environmental influences such as mediated representations shape societal support for reproductive rights. Recent research has indicated that mass media depictions of reproductive healthcare have contributed to negative perceptions of abortion by dramatically misrepresenting the risk of abortion care as well as the demographics and motivations of those who seek it, alongside other inaccuracies (e.g., Norris et al., 2011; Sisson & Kimport, 2014). Further, the recent prevalence of medication abortion over surgical abortion (54% vs. 46% ; Guttmacher Institute, 2022) and other advancements in the safety and efficacy of reproductive care may not yet be accurately presented in the representational landscape, contributing to outdated and potentially stigmatizing perceptions of the procedure among the general population (Hanschmidt et al., 2016).

Conversely, thoughtfully-constructed abortion narratives might also be used to improve public opinion—as demonstrated by Sisson et al. (2021), abortion stories that strive to accurately represent the reality of reproductive decision-making and care can improve attitudes toward and knowledge about abortion. However, relevant scholarship suggests that, in the context of a polarized topic, the typical mechanisms of narrative persuasion—particularly involvement with the narrative and its characters—do not always produce the expected persuasive outcomes (e.g., Slater et al., 2006; Tukachinsky Forster et al., 2022). In light of the steep increase in the quantity of abortion representations in recent years (Herold & Sisson, 2020), the potential for harm, intentional or otherwise, from unconscientious portrayals of abortion on television suggests an urgent need for critical consideration of the qualities and conventions of these stories, both past and present.

To advance this conversation, the current study draws upon three key theories of narrative persuasion (social cognitive theory, the extended elaboration likelihood model, and the model of narrative comprehension and engagement) to conduct a content analysis of abortion storylines on television available via U.S. streaming services. Notably, the advent of streaming technology offers unprecedented access to the past and present of abortion representations through the expansive back catalogs of content maintained by services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, and others (Frank et al., 2020). By offering a theoretically-guided assessment of their features in relation to their potential for promoting or inhibiting involvement with the narrative and its characters, this content analysis offers insight into how the landscape of abortion representations may contribute to public attitudes toward abortion. From these findings, I offer best practices for storytellers seeking to engage with abortion decision-making in a fashion that maximizes potential for involvement and minimizes unintended stigma or harm.

Facilitating Involvement through Character and Narrative Features in Abortion Storylines

Social Cognitive Theory

One of the most potent ways in which narratives can influence viewers' attitudes and behaviors is by modeling the affective, cognitive, and social consequences of a particular action (Bandura, 2001). According to social cognitive theory (SCT), one's psychosocial functioning is guided by the interrelated and mutually dependent influences of personal (one's thoughts, emotions, experiences), behavioral (what one does and says), and environmental factors (external stimuli such as people and objects), resulting in cognitive models that guide our judgments and actions (*triadic reciprocal causation*; Bandura, 1986). Due to humans' "advanced capacity for observational learning that enables them to expand their knowledge and skills rapidly" it is proposed that "virtually all behavioral, cognitive, and affective learning from direct experience can be achieved vicariously by observing people's actions and its consequences for them" (Bandura, 2001, pp. 270-271). Although this understanding of the self in relation to society is strongly shaped by influences in one's immediate environment, mass media narratives can also transmit great quantities of information about human values, behaviors, and ways of thinking through an extensive array of behavioral models (Bandura, 2001).

In other words, abortion storylines on television convey knowledge about the process of obtaining reproductive care through the experiences of characters who might serve as behavioral models (Bandura, 2001). That said, whether this knowledge is internalized and applied is deeply intertwined with the viewer's involvement with the character: In order to determine whether a character might serve as a suitable model, viewers first evaluate the character's appeal, often in regard to perceptions of similarity, attractiveness, morality, etc., such that a more favorable evaluation is predictive of greater involvement. Then, should the character be selected as

potentially worthy of emulation, the depth of involvement is further shaped through the narrative's depiction of the character's actions and their consequences, in relation to both personal outcomes and the responses they receive from others (Bandura, 2001). Viewers draw upon the character's positive and/or negative experiences to construct a cognitive model of abortion that informs their feelings of self-efficacy (beliefs regarding their capacity to enact a modeled behavior) and outcome expectancies (the anticipated consequences should they take a given course of action) related to reproductive care (Bandura, 2001; 2004). Therefore, viewers are most inclined to experience involvement with, and consequently emulate, a character who is personally appealing and successfully undertakes actions that yield positive and rewarding outcomes.

In the present context, it seems clear that the *valence of the representation* of the abortion-seeking character is a key determinant of whether they are likely to be perceived as an attractive model. As supported by complementary scholarship on affective disposition theory (e.g., Raney, 2004) and identification (e.g., Cohen & Tal-Or, 2010), a viewer's evaluation of a character is likely to depend on whether they judge the character's qualities and actions to be "good" or "bad." Thus, when a storyline casts the abortion-seeking character in a positive light, they are likely to elicit deeper involvement from the viewer and be perceived as a desirable behavioral model—and when the character is presented negatively, the viewer's disapproval should impede involvement and inhibit their desire to emulate the character. However, not all representations of abortion decision-making are as clear-cut: in some stories, the abortion-seeking character may demonstrate positive and negative qualities in equal measure, complicating the viewer's evaluation, or the abortion-seeking character may be featured peripherally, in a limited capacity with minimal context. In these circumstances, it is respectively

unclear or unlikely that the audience would perceive them as a suitable model, bringing into question their potential influence.

While an attractive model may invite the viewer's involvement, it is their words and actions that are most likely to shape the audience's feelings of self-efficacy. As self-efficacy is a core motivational components in the acquisition of new attitudes and behaviors from mass media, the viewer must believe they are capable of emulating the model—and so the model must offer evidence to that effect. Because one of the most effective ways of instilling self-efficacy is to demonstrate the model successfully enacting a behavior (Bandura, 2001), the depiction of the experience surrounding an abortion could demystify the procedure and promote the development of efficacy beliefs. It need not be presented in graphic medical detail, as this may disrupt the audience's engagement with the character, but establishing "what to expect" in the moments leading up to, during, and following the abortion through some combination of audio and visual elements seems crucial. For example, observing a character in the operating room as the medical professional talks them through the process of a surgical abortion, watching them manage the cramping during a medication abortion, or seeing the character resting afterward could provide specific knowledge about the experience that could influence subsequent perceptions of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). In contrast, an abortion storyline that elides these crucial moments by having the process occur entirely off-screen may fail to convey sufficient knowledge about the experience to impact perceived self-efficacy. Thus, the *depiction of procedure* is also an important feature when evaluating abortion storylines.

In addition to an appealing model and efficacy beliefs, the adoption of attitudes and behaviors from mass media depends on the viewer's outcome expectancies, which are shaped by the anticipated consequences of a behavior and resultant responses from others (Bandura, 2001).

In terms of the former, mass media representations of abortion have historically overemphasized the risk of negative consequences from the procedure through exaggerated rates of lasting harm and death, thereby contributing to social myths about abortion (Sisson & Kimport, 2014). Since "the observed detriments and benefits experienced by others influence the performance of modeled patterns in much the same way as do directly experienced consequences" (Bandura, 2001, p. 274), it seems evident that depictions of negative *physical* (e.g., infertility) and *mental* (e.g., suicidal ideation) *consequences*, as well as *death*, resulting from abortion could cultivate outcome expectancies that encourage negative perceptions of reproductive care.

In tandem with the perceived consequences of the procedure, the reinforcements a character receives from others related to the abortion decision may play a key role in shaping viewers' outcome expectancies. Given that "socially approvable behavior is a source of self-pride, and socially disapprovable behavior is self-censured" (Bandura, 2001, p. 274), then it is probable that positive reinforcement (e.g., support, comfort) from others will promote more favorable personal beliefs about abortion, resulting in positive outcome expectancies. In that same vein, negative reinforcement (e.g., scolding, shaming) should have the opposite effect, contributing to unfavorable personal beliefs and stigma that cultivate negative outcome expectancies related to the procedure.

Following this discussion of how involvement-related features of abortion storylines contribute to the core constructs of social cognitive theory, I propose my first research question:

RQ1: How are abortion storylines on U.S. streaming services characterized in terms of (a) character valence, (b) depiction of the procedure, (c) reinforcement from others, and (d) consequences?

Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model

In addition to involvement through behavioral modeling, one might also consider involvement from a message processing perspective. Much like how the personal relevance of a topic (issue involvement) guides the extent to which one is engaged by a non-narrative message in the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), the extended elaboration likelihood model (E-ELM) contends that involvement with a narrative and its characters fills a similar role (Slater & Rouner, 2002). In the E-ELM, it is proposed that the extent to which a narrative meets the needs and goals of the audience—in terms of storyline appeal, quality of production/text, subtlety of the persuasive message, and perceived homophily with the characters —predicts how deeply viewers are absorbed into the narrative and identify with characters (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Consequently, both transportation (Green & Brock, 2000) and identification (Cohen, 2001) are proposed to enhance viewers' engagement with the narrative, thereby attenuating potential counterarguing and promoting greater favorability toward the implicit persuasive message (Green, Garst, & Brock, 2004; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Further, the extent to which one is absorbed into the story is connected with subsequent communication behaviors such as peer discussion, which can further promote favorable persuasive outcomes through extended processing of the message (Slater & Rouner, 2002).

Thus, from the perspective of the E-ELM, an abortion narrative should be able to minimize the likelihood that the viewer will process the story as an explicitly persuasive message in comparison to a traditional persuasive message. Through a combination of cognitive and emotional involvement with the narrative and its characters, high production quality, and a subtly embedded persuasive message, a narrative should be able to suppress viewers' ideological responses to the controversial topic and subsequently shape policy support for the issue (Slater, Rouner, & Long, 2006). Accordingly, the audience's familiarity with the character seeking an

abortion, their reasons for pursuing care, and the significance of abortion subject matter to the overall narrative may all shape the extent to which the audience is involved by the story.

When storylines engage with a contentious topic, previous studies signal a need to carefully consider the weight and placement of the issue within the narrative (e.g., Igartua & Barrios, 2012). Positioning the issue as the focus of the episode could activate defensive processing that might impede absorption into the narrative (Slater et al., 2006), leading those with strongly contrary opinions to preemptively derogate the message and diminish its potential persuasive impact. However, in narrative television it is common practice for a single episode to incorporate one or more storylines that vary in terms of allocated time and attention (commonly termed the A Plot, B Plot, and C Plot). It is possible that the abortion storyline could hold less narrative priority in comparison to other storylines, and this peripheral position may minimize the appearance of persuasiveness to the viewer. Thus, the centrality of the topic to the narrative should be considered.

By the same token it might make little difference if the audience does not connect with the character in spite of (rather than because of) their prior beliefs (Tukachinsky Forster et al., 2022). Much like how character valence is likely to shape the audience's disposition toward the character, whether the character seeking an abortion is a member of the main cast or a guest actor may influence the extent to which the audience feels involved with the character and their experiences. Prior research suggests that viewers' ongoing relationships with television characters can lead to greater involvement and message-consistent outcomes, even for stigmatized characters/behaviors (e.g., Bond, 2021)—therefore it seems likely that a member of the main cast might benefit from preexisting empathy or perceptions of similarity that could enhance involvement (Slater & Rouner, 2002), relative to a guest actor for whom the audience

has comparatively less context and familiarity. It follows that concerns about the centrality of the character seeking reproductive care to the narrative are also warranted: from the perspective of the E-ELM, the combination of a main cast member in a peripheral storyline about abortion should yield the greatest involvement by maximizing likely involvement and minimizing the explicitness of the persuasive subject.

Further, the character's motivations for pursuing care could factor into viewer's involvement. Beyond their potential value in enhancing the quality of the message or appeal of the storyline, the character's reasoning offers insight into their perspective that may facilitate involvement by increasing perceptions of similarity (Slater et al., 2006) and/or mitigating stigma (Chung & Slater, 2013). The reasoning may stem from personal considerations (e.g., a character's goals or preferences), external constraints (e.g., financial circumstances, other responsibilities), or some combination of both, but these reasons may play a noteworthy role in how the audience responds to the story.

This elaboration on the features of abortion narratives which might facilitate involvement in relation to the E-ELM motivates my second research question:

RQ2: How are abortion storylines on U.S. streaming services characterized in terms of (a) centrality of the subject matter, (b) centrality of the abortion seeker, and (c) abortion reasoning?

Model of Narrative Comprehension and Engagement

In a related vein, the model of narrative comprehension and engagement (MNCE) proposes that individuals transplant their consciousness into the world of the story in order to craft a "situation model" (Wyer, 2003) which enhances their understanding by contextualizing the relationship between characters, events, and locations (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). The ease

with which viewers construct this model facilitates greater engagement with the story: By promoting a state of flow, a loss of self-awareness, and emotional connections with the characters (as well as focusing attention on the narrative at the expense of external stimuli), the experience of a narrative can promote story-consistent outcomes (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009).

A distinctive component of this model is its emphasis on prior knowledge and genre conventions in the development of the situation model. Because narratives cannot make explicit every facet of detail that might be needed for coherent interpretation (Rapaport & Shapiro, 1995), the text of the narrative provides cues to the viewer which activate real-world knowledge and narrative schemas to smoothly construct their mental model. Unexplained violations of the "logic" of reality (e.g., the conspicuous absence of the internet in a contemporary tale) and storytelling (e.g., a police procedural where no crime occurs) can prompt critical thinking during reception, which in turn inhibit the creation of the model and impede engagement processes by promoting counterarguing (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Accordingly, disruptions of realism and conspicuous absences of information needed to construct the situation model seem likely to influence the extent to which viewers become involved with the story.

Given the audience's need to rely on narrative schema and real-world knowledge to ease their construction of a situation model, it seems evident that the realism of abortion storylines might influence viewers' involvement with the story. Narratives are most persuasive when the viewer is fully engaged and focused on the story, and inconsistencies in the plot or logic of the tale can provoke online realism judgments that reallocate viewers' attention away from the story (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Thus, when abortion storylines fail to conform to the expectations of narrative (whether the storyline conform to its own reality) and external (whether it could

happen in our reality) realism, viewers' counterarguments should disrupt engagement and, subsequently, persuasion.

That said, a lack of information can invite scrutiny in much the same way as the provision of inconsistent or incoherent information. The viewers' narrative schema anticipate that the story will provide certain details to "complete" their situation model, and the absence of those details can diminish involvement by drawing viewers' attention to the incomplete elements (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). These details might include the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy or the character's reasoning among others, but the status of the man responsible for the pregnancy may provide important context to many of these other narrative details. This important figure's presence in the narrative is likely to influence viewers' ability to mentally represent the relationships between characters and situations within the storyline—as a result, his absence might draw attention to an inconsistency between the real world and narrative world that promotes counterarguing (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008).

Given how these features of abortion narratives may facilitate viewers' comprehension of and involvement with the narrative as predicted by the MNCE, I ask my third research question:

RQ3: How are abortion storylines on U.S. streaming services characterized in terms of (a) external realism, (b) narrative realism, and (c) status of man responsible?

Finally, given the salience of the abortion debate in the present moment, it might be instructive to consider how abortion representations have materially changed with the passage of time. Tracing the evolution of abortion narratives over the past 5 decades could offer greater insight into trends in representation that might reflect (or contribute to) shifts in cultural understandings of the issue, and further consideration of these shifts in relation to the theories

underlying the coding scheme should expand the implications of our analysis. Accordingly, I propose the final research question:

> **RQ4:** How have abortion representations changed over time in terms of variables associated with (a) social cognitive theory, (b) the extended elaboration likelihood model, and (c) the model of narrative comprehension and engagement?

Method

Sample and Inclusion Criteria

The analysis was conducted utilizing a subset of data from the Abortion Onscreen Project Database (Sisson et al., 2022) collected by Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health (ANSIRH), which documents media representations of abortion on television and film, to establish the corpus. This dataset included all narrative representations that (a) were in a television format (e.g., television show, limited series, made-for-TV movie), (b) aired between 1962 (the first documented abortion storyline) and 2020 (the last full year of data collection) and (c) had been previously coded by ANSIRH as containing an abortion decision ($N = 192$). Of these, 26 narratives were excluded because they were not available via subscriptions to any of the major streaming platforms (e.g., Netflix, HBO Max, Hulu, Apple TV+, Amazon Prime Video, Paramount Plus), and thus unlikely to be encountered by and potentially influence contemporary audiences. For the present study, the operational definition of an abortion narrative was "a representation of abortion decision-making spread across one or more episodes of a single program." However, due to the fact that more than one character in a narrative may consider terminating a pregnancy, this study uses the "storyline"—or "the experiences of a single character seeking an abortion across one or more episodes"—as the unit of analysis. In total, the final sample included 183 storylines from 166 total abortion narratives.

Coder Training and Reliability

      A team of five coders were employed for the study, with each coder receiving 2 hours of preliminary training during an initial project meeting on July 14, 2021. This training session was centered around providing clear definitions for and detailed explanations of each of the variables of interest, and subsequently establishing coders' understanding of the instrument through a review of the study's coding sheet. Following this project meeting, coders were trained on a randomly selected sample of 7 abortion narratives. The training divided the narratives between two rounds of preliminary coding and discussion during the period from July 15 to August 5, 2021. These sessions provided an additional two hours of training to resolve coding discrepancies and establish sufficient reliability (kalpha $\geq$ .67) for each variable prior to independent coding.

      The independent coding period spanned from August 5, 2021 to February 7, 2022. In addition to primary coding assignments, twenty-five percent of the sample was coded by a second coder to conduct final reliability analyses. Accordingly, each coder was assigned an average of 37 narratives to code during that period.

Instrument

      The codebook was developed through collaboration between the study lead and two research associates in a series of preparatory discussions that occurred throughout April and May of 2021. In these discussions, the study team drew upon theoretical perspectives from narrative persuasion (i.e., SCT, E-ELM, and MNCE) and empirical studies of abortion representation, in addition to prior social and cultural understandings of the reproductive rights debate, to develop a preliminary codebook of relevant variables. This preliminary codebook was then tested in relation to three sample abortion narratives to determine its adequacy and further refine the

instrument. In particular, additional consideration was given to common narrative (e.g., the presence or absence of the man responsible) and character (e.g., reasoning for terminating the pregnancy) features in these storylines that might influence audience member's involvement with the story and its characters.

Results

Variables Coded and Descriptive Statistics (RQ1-RQ3)

To answer the first three research questions, the abortion narratives were coded according to the specified variables derived from social cognitive theory, the extended elaboration likelihood model, and the model of narrative comprehension and engagement, in addition to some supplementary indexing items (e.g., year, episode title, title of show, etc.). Below I describe the sample in terms of these variables.

Abortion Representation

To ensure that the storylines in our sample fit the inclusion criteria and distinguish different forms of engagement with the topic, coders answered "Did the storyline include an abortion procedure?" (Yes: 110; 60.1%; No: 73; 39.9%; kalpha = .798). For storylines that were coded as not including an abortion procedure, they were instructed to label the storyline as an "abortion consideration" (character considers but ultimately does not terminate: 26; 35.6%), abortion disclosure (character discloses an abortion prior to the events of the storyline: 26; 35.6%), abortion discussion (abortion is discussed in general terms: 12; 16.4%), or no abortion content (8; 12.4%). In accordance with our inclusion criteria, only episodes that were coded as featuring an abortion procedure or abortion consideration were included in the subsequent analyses ($n = 136$).

Social Cognitive Theory

Character valence. Coders were asked to evaluate whether "the character seeking the abortion [was] presented in a positive, negative, neutral, or mixed light within the storyline," to assess the favorability of their depiction. Positive was most common (46; 33.6%), followed by neutral (38; 27.7%), negative (33; 24.1%), and mixed (19; 13.9%) (kalpha = .761).

Depiction of procedure. To capture the extent to which the act is modeled for viewers, coders answered the question "Is the abortion depicted with audio, visuals, both, or neither?" Neither was most common (87; 63.5%), followed by both audio and visuals (34; 24.8%), only visuals (10; 7.3%), and then audio only (3; 2.2%) (kalpha = .673).

Reinforcement from others. To assess the frequency and valence of the reinforcements received by abortion-seeking characters, coders answered "What kinds of reinforcement did the focal character receive from others?" Most characters received either positive (43; 31.6%) or both positive and negative reinforcement (46; 33.8%). Characters receiving only negative (26; 19.1%) or no reinforcement (21; 15.3%) from others were less common.

Positive reinforcement source. Coders were also instructed to define the nature of the relationship between the protagonist and the individual(s) that provided positive reinforcement according to their most salient role in their narrative (e.g., if someone were a friend of the character as well as a healthcare provider, coders were instructed to choose one based on which was most important to the narrative), so if two relationships were selected that would indicate three separate sources of reinforcement. The most common affiliations were friend (35; 25.5%), healthcare provider (28; 20.4%), man responsible for the pregnancy (23; 16.8%), or parent (11; 8%).

Negative reinforcement source. As above, coders were asked to define the relationship between the protagonist and source(s) of negative reinforcement. The man responsible for the

pregnancy was the most frequent source (21; 15.3%) followed by healthcare provider (12; 8.8%),

other family members (not a parent or a sibling; 9; 6.6%), and parent (9; 6.6%).

Consequences. To understand how abortion narratives shape outcome expectancies

related to reproductive care, coders answered the following questions:

*Serious physical consequenc*es. "Does the storyline indicate any serious physical health

consequences?" Most storylines did not suggest serious physical consequences (e.g., infertility,

infection, etc.) from the procedure (111; 81%), though about one-fifth of storylines featured

negative physical outcomes (26; 19%) (kalpha = .737).

Serious mental health consequences. "Does the storyline depict any serious negative

mental health consequences?" Most storylines did not present any serious mental health

consequences (e.g., depression, suicidal ideation, etc.; 131; 95.6%), but a smattering of storylines

associated these consequences with the procedure (6; 4.4%) (kalpha = .678).

Death. "Does the storyline conclude with the death of the character seeking an abortion?"

Again, the vast majority of storylines did not end in the protagonist's death (129; 94.2%), but

there were a few instances where this was the case (8; 5.8%) (kalpha = .661).

Elaboration Likelihood Model

Centrality of subject matter. To evaluate the extent to which abortion was the focus of

the storyline, coders were asked "Does the abortion occur as part of the main storyline of the

episode or as part of a side storyline (sub-plot)?" Abortions occurred in the context of a

peripheral storyline more often (93; 67.9%) than a central storyline (44; 32.1%) by a ratio of

roughly two-to-one (kalpha = .842).

Centrality of character. To assess the importance of the character to the show, coders

answered "Is the character considering an abortion a member of the main cast or a guest actor?"

Storylines most frequently featured a member of the main cast (78; 56.9%), but guest actors also appeared frequently (59; 43.1%) (kalpha = .843).

Abortion reasoning. The reasons for terminating the pregnancy were captured through the question "What kind of reasons are provided for terminating the pregnancy?" Nearly half of characters reported internal reasons (e.g., a character's goals, desires, or needs; 65; 47.8%), with external reasons (e.g., financial challenges, non-consensual intercourse; 37; 27.2%) as the next largest group. Both internal and external reasons (19; 14%) and no stated reasoning (15; 11%) were less frequent.

Model of Narrative Comprehension and Engagement

Narrative realism. Acknowledging that fictional television may not have the same rules as our reality, coders were instructed to capture the extent to which the storyline "makes sense" in the context of the show through the question "Does the storyline feel 'true' to the universe of the show?" Coders did not report any violations of narrative realism in the sample (136; 100%) (kalpha = 1.00).

External realism. Coders answered "Could this storyline, as presented, happen in our reality?" to assess external realism. Similar to narrative realism, most storylines conformed to expectations of external realism (123; 89.8%), though a small proportion did not (14; 10.2%) (kalpha = .823).

Status of man responsible. To determine the extent to which the narrative features the man responsible for the pregnancy, coders answered the following questions:

Man responsible: presence. "Is the man responsible for the pregnancy present or not present in the storyline?" This individual was present in most of the most storylines (91; 66.9%),

but absent in a fair number (37; 27.2%). Storylines where this answer was unclear or ambiguous were coded as Other (8; 5.9%) (kalpha = .857).

Man responsible: living. "Is the man responsible for the pregnancy alive or dead?" The man responsible was most frequently indicated to be alive, even if not present in the narrative (105; 77.2%), while ambiguous or unknown status (26; 19.1%) and dead (5; 3.7%) were less common (kalpha = .891).

**The Evolution of Abortion Narratives On Television (RQ4)**

To better characterize trends in abortion representation over time, I organized the storylines in the sample by decade. Although this distinction is somewhat arbitrary, the frequency and nature of abortion representations can differ considerably from year to year, regardless of the salience of abortion in public discourse. Thus, an emphasis on 10-year periods may help to articulate broader shifts in representation by smoothing these disparities. The variable summaries are accompanied by a graph that charts the frequencies by year to illustrate this variation in relevant cases.

Social Cognitive Theory

In terms of character valence, the 1970s featured only 1 abortion storyline, and the protagonist was depicted quite positively (as is appropriate for the star of a situation comedy). This groundbreaking narrative, "Maude's Dilemma: Parts 1 and 2" (Lear et al., 1972), is often credited as the first television storyline centering a woman's decision to end a pregnancy (Melendez, 2021). In the 1980s, a new outgrowth of representation led to a total of 10 storylines, which included equal parts positive (4; 40%) and neutral (4; 40%), with a smattering (2; 20%) of negatively-valenced depictions—this held mostly true in the 1990s (*positive*: 5; 50%; *negative*: 2; 20%; *neutral*: 3; 30%). In the 2000s, the number of representations more than doubled from

the previous decade, though a smaller proportion were positive (6; 23.1%). In addition to greater

levels of negative (8; 30.8%) and neutral (8; 30.8%) representations, this decade gave rise to

more complicated character depictions as well (*mixed*: 4; 15.4%). The 2010s saw triple the total

number of representations (81) compared to the previous decade, with positively- (27; 33.3%)

and neutrally-valenced (23; 28.4%) characters making up the majority and negative (18; 22.2%)

and mixed (13; 16.0%) portrayals composing the remainder. Thus, the overall growth in

representations of abortion has been accompanied by greater diversity in character depictions,

though the proportion of positive depictions is trending upward despite this variation.

Figure 3.1. *Frequencies for Character Valence by Year*
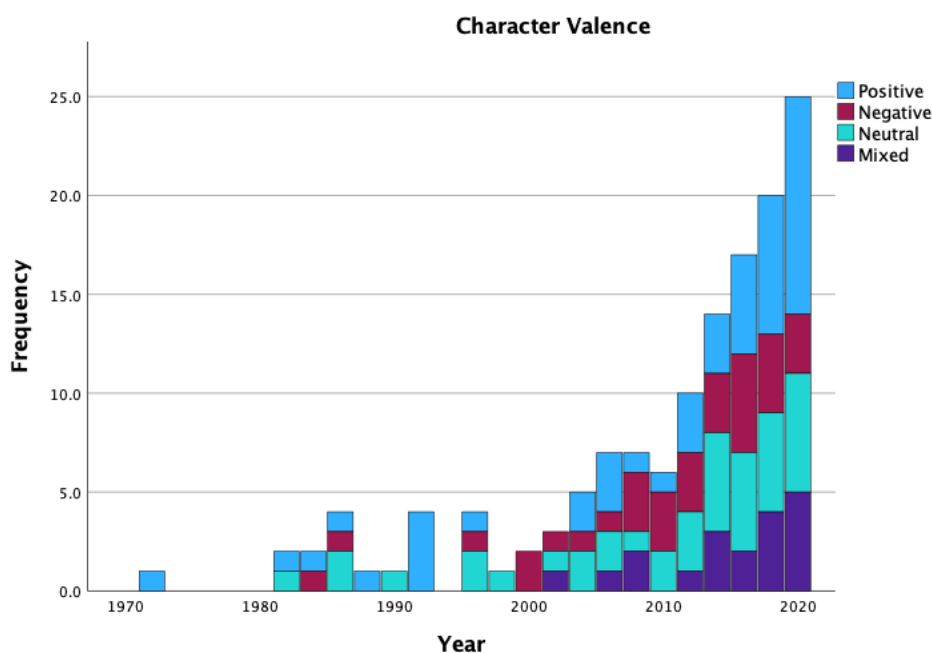

These characters tended to receive a mixture of positive and negative reinforcement: in

most decades, storylines tended to feature a blend of both types of feedback from important

individuals in the character's life (*1980s*: 5; 50%; *1990s*: 6; 60%; *2000s*: 10; 38.5%). Although

these competing reinforcements were still quite common in the 2010s (24; 29.6%), storylines

where the character only received positive feedback—which had slowly grown in proportion

through the decades (*1980s*: 1; 10%; *1990s*: 2; 20%; *2000s*: 7; 26.9%)—finally rose to

prominence (29; 35.8%). Storylines where the individual received only negative feedback

(*1980s*: 2; 20%; *1990s*: 2; 20%; *2000s*: 6; 23.1%; *2010s*: 15; 18.5%) or no feedback (*2000s*: 3;

11.5%; *2010s*: 13; 16.0%) were generally less common. These numbers reflect a heartening

trend, where the rising proportion of solely positive reinforcement may suggest fewer instances

of stigmatizing attitudes or actions in the narratives.

Figure 3.2. *Frequencies for Reinforcement by Year*
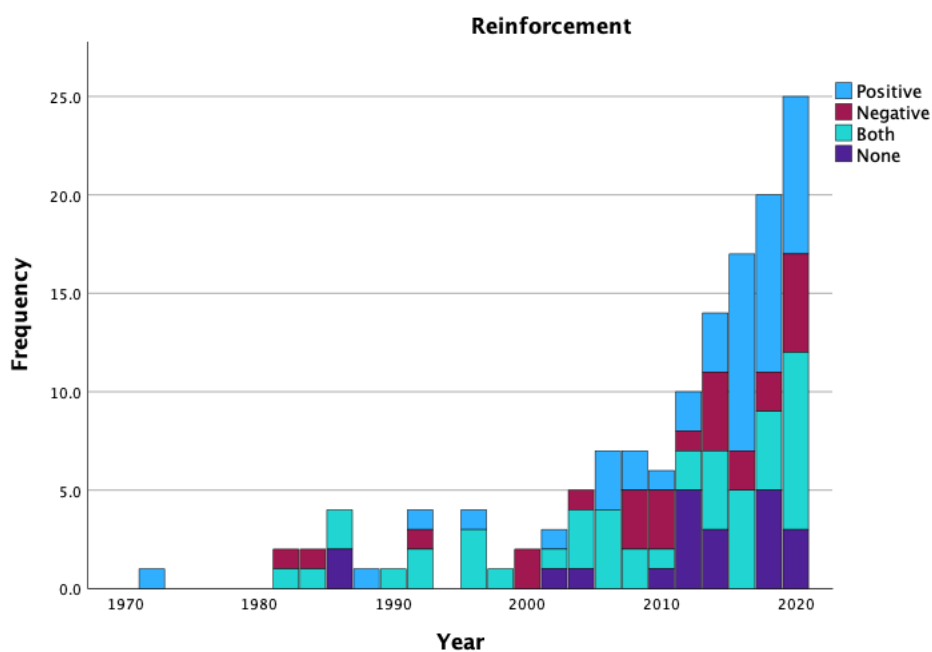
Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of abortion procedures occur entirely off-screen (*1980s*:

9; 90%; *1990s*: 7; 70%; *2000s*: 17; 65.4%; *2010s:* 48; 59.3%). In each decade, storylines that

utilized both audio and visual made up no more than 30% of the total (*1980s*: 1; 10%; *1990s*: 3;

30%; *2000s*: 7; 26.9%; *2010s:* 20; 24.7%). Depictions using only audio or visuals are quite

infrequent prior to the 2010s, where they emerged as small proportions of the whole (*audio*: 2;

2.5%; *visuals*: 9; 11.1%). However, the addition of these stylized representations may help to

mitigate the dominance of off-screen abortions: In 2020, audiovisual (3; 37.5%) and visual (1;

12.5%) depictions made up half of all abortion storylines (*neither:* 4; 50%), and future attempts

to represent the procedure could bring further clarity to the experience of abortion care.

Figure 3.3. *Frequencies for Depiction of Procedure by Year*
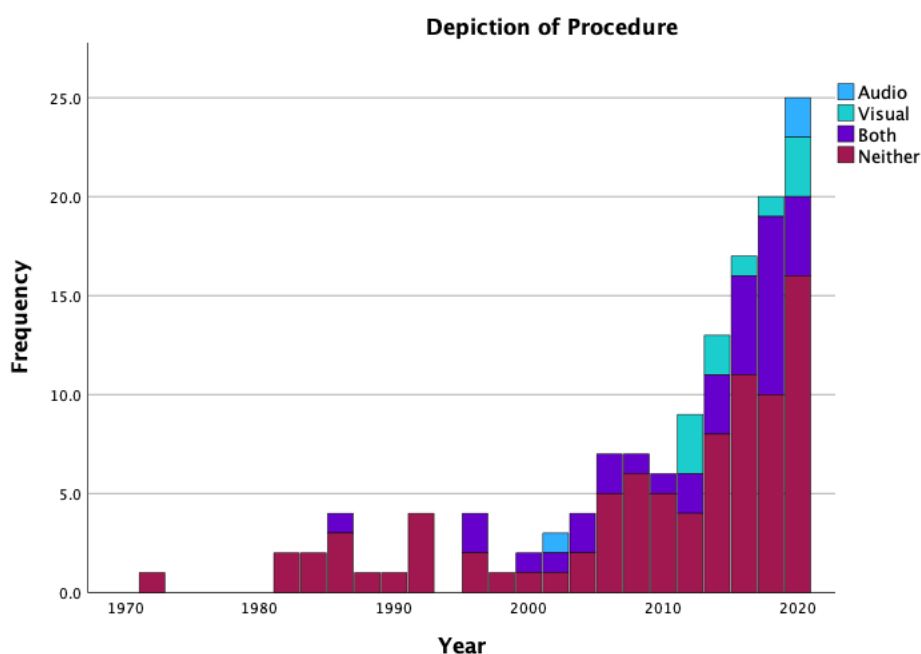
In regard to consequences, instances of serious physical consequences, mental

consequences, and death resulting from abortion were fairly infrequent and did not appear in the

sample until the 1990s. Serious physical consequences (*1990s*: 3; 30%; *2000s*: 3; 11.5%; *2010s*:

13; 16%) were more common than mental consequences (*1990s*: 1; 10%; *2000s*: 2; 7.7%; *2010s*:

1; 1.2%) and death (*1990s*: 2; 20%; *2000s*: 2; 7.7%; *2010s*: 4; 4.9%), but the vast majority of

abortion storylines did not model any negative outcomes from care. These numbers reflect a

favorable trend, where greater frequency of representation has resulted in progressively smaller

proportions of storylines featuring negative consequences, albeit still at rates that do not reflect

reality (Sisson et al., 2016).

Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model

Over time, abortion procedures have been increasingly featured as part of a peripheral

rather than main storyline. Although this proportion fluctuated in the 1980s (*main*: 3; 30%; *side*:

7; 70%) and 1990s (*main*: 7; 70%; *side*: 3; 30%), the next two decades saw the frequency of side

storylines (*2000s*: 15; 57.7%; *2010s*: 64; 79%) eclipse central storylines (*2000s*: 11; 42.3%;

2010s: 17; 21.0%). By limiting the centrality of abortion to the plot, these representations better

embody the model's prediction that the subtlety of the persuasive topic will facilitate greater

involvement with the story. On a related note, the proportion of main cast to guest actors (i.e.,

centrality of character) has tended to fluctuate between rough equivalency and favoring the main

cast through the decades: The 1980s saw equal numbers of each (*main cast*: 5; 50%; *guest actor*:

5; 50%), while the 1990s brought greater prominence to members of the main cast (8; 80%) in

lieu of guest actors (2; 20%). The proportions in the 2000s are similar to those from the 1980s

(*main cast:* 12; 46.2%; *guest actor*: 14; 53.8%;), and the 2010s featured more main cast (48;

59.3%) than guest actors (33; 40.7%) as in the 1990s. In light of the sizable overlap between

peripheral storylines and featuring main cast members, the combined benefits of one's previous

cognitive and emotional engagement with a leading character and limited focus on abortion

subject matter might facilitate deeper involvement.

Figure 3.4. *Frequencies for Centrality of Subject Matter by Year*
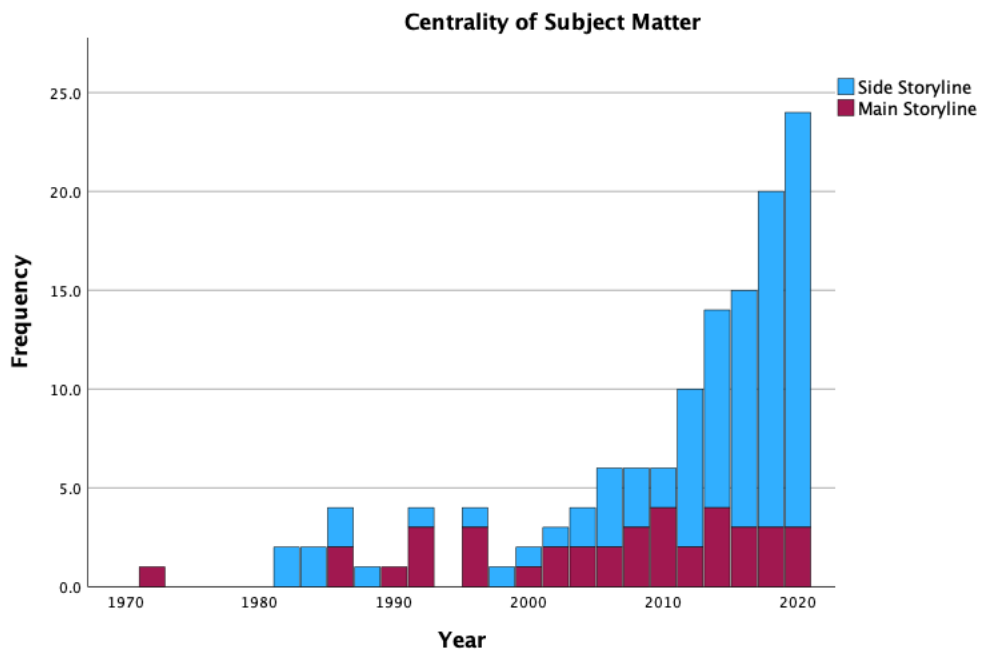
Figure 3.5. *Frequencies for Centrality of Character by Year*
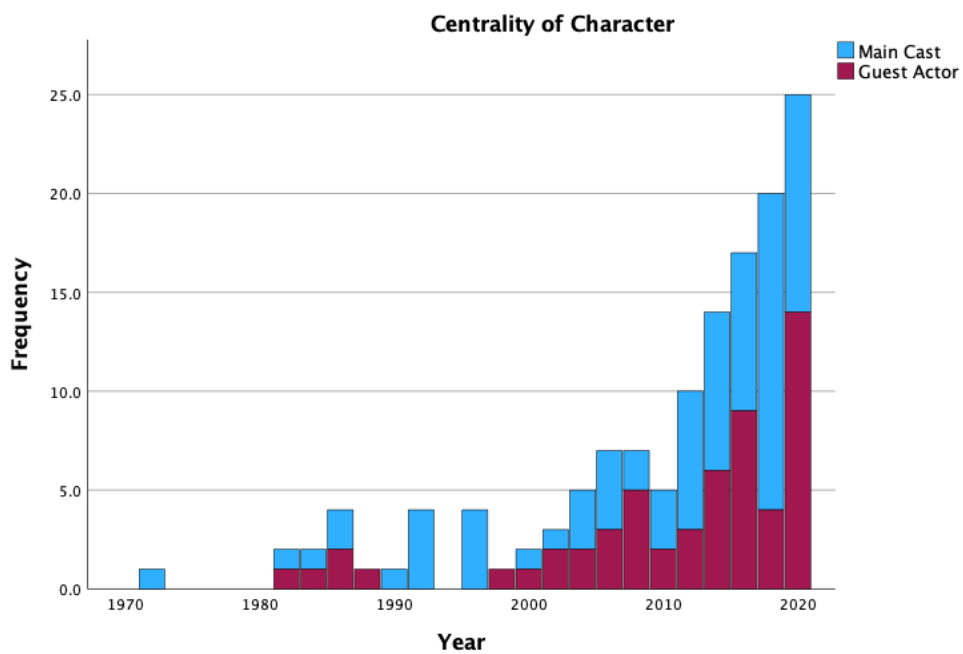
In terms of the reasons provided for seeking an abortion, the proportions of internal, external, both internal and external, or no reasoning provided tended to vary modestly from one decade to the next. The proportion of internal (*1980s*: 4; 40%; *1990s*; 5; 50%; *2000s*: 7: 26.9%) and external reasons (*1980s*: 6; 60%; *1990s*; 3; 30%; *2000s*: 10; 38.5%) were fairly constant until the 2010s, when internal reasoning (45; 55.6%) outstripped external reasoning (16; 19.8%) by a wide margin. Storylines that featured both kinds (*1990s*: 2; 20%; *2000s*; 3; 50%; *2010s*: 13: 16%) or no reasoning (*2000s*: 6; 23.1%; *2010s*: 7; 8.6%) were less common overall. In general, characters tended to provide an explanation for their choice as a way to offer insight into their decision-making and potentially help the audience to relate to the character.

Figure 3. 6. *Frequencies for Abortion Reasoning by Year*
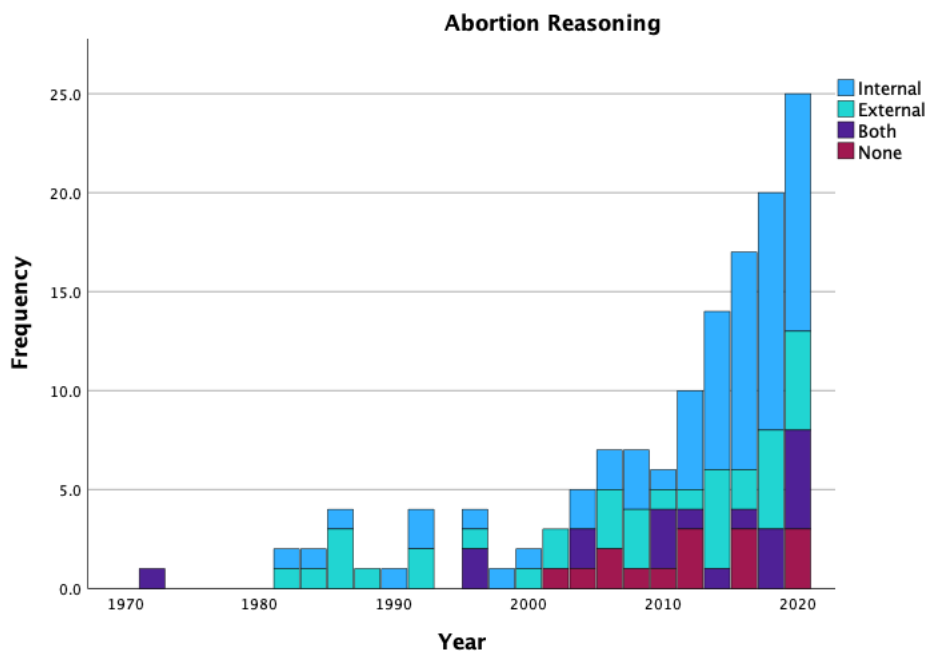
Model of Narrative Comprehension and Engagement

There were no violations of narrative reality and few violations of external reality in the sample, though instances of the latter grew slightly more common in terms of frequency if not

proportion. There were individual instances in both the 1990s (10%) and 2000s (3.8%), but six storylines in the 2010s (7.4%), from animated comedies like *Bojack Horseman* (Bob-Waksberg & Calo, 2016) and fantasy dramas such as *The Magicians* (Gamble et al., 2017), represent new ways of engaging with the topic—though their violations of external reality may interfere with the viewer's engagement with the story. Put another way, unreal forms of abortion representation occur quite rarely, but may impede audience involvement through the complications they raise in relation to the viewer's mental model.

In terms of the status of the man responsible, this individual was generally featured in the narrative. In each decade, the man responsible was present in the majority of storylines (*1980s*: 6; 60%; *1990s*: 10; 100%; *2000s:* 15; 57.6%; *2010s*: 55; 67.9%). While the remainder typically consisted of storylines where the man was absent (*1980s*: 4; 40%; *2000s:* 10; 38.5%; *2010s*: 19; 23.5%), a smattering of storylines in the 2000s (1; 3.8%) and 2010s (7; 8.6%) featured individuals who were implied or presumed to have impregnated the character, but the narrative was equivocal about whether this was true. The findings are similar for whether the man was alive or dead: Most often that individual was still alive (*1980s*: 9; 90%; *1990s*: 10; 100%; *2000s:* 17; 65.4%; *2010s*: 63; 77.7%), and if not his status was more often uncertain (*1980s*: 1; 10%; *2000s:* 8; 30.8%; *2010s*: 16; 19.8%) than explicitly deceased (*2000s*: 1; 3.8%; *2010s*: 2; 2.5%). Thus, there is a general trend in abortion narratives toward depicting the man responsible as an active participant in the character's story, which should ease the construction of a cognitive model of the situation and thereby heighten involvement.

Figure 3.7. *Frequencies for Man Responsible: Presence by Year*
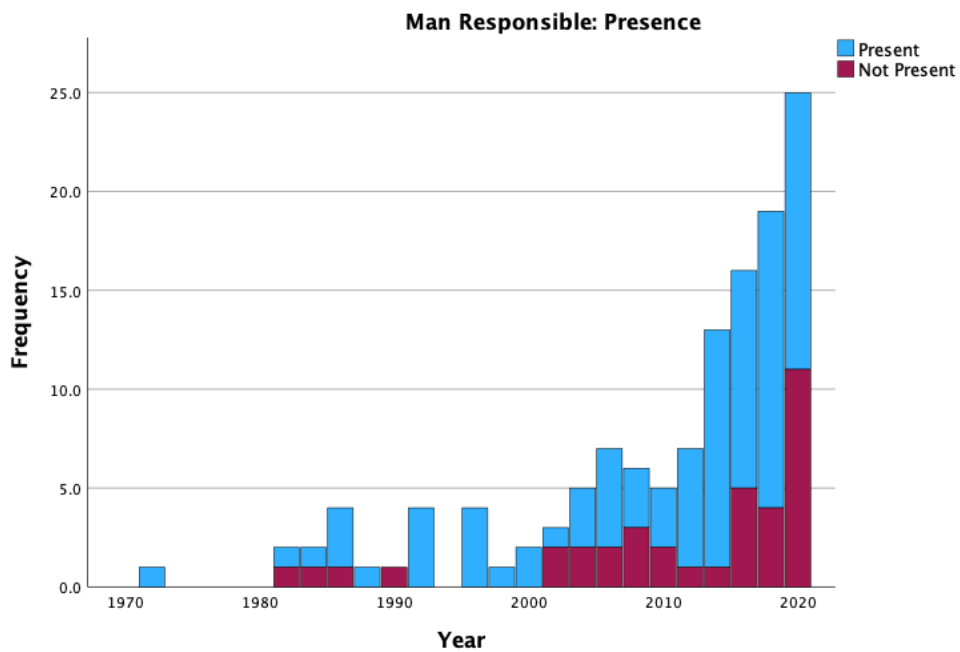
Figure 3.8. *Frequencies for Man Responsible: Living by Year*
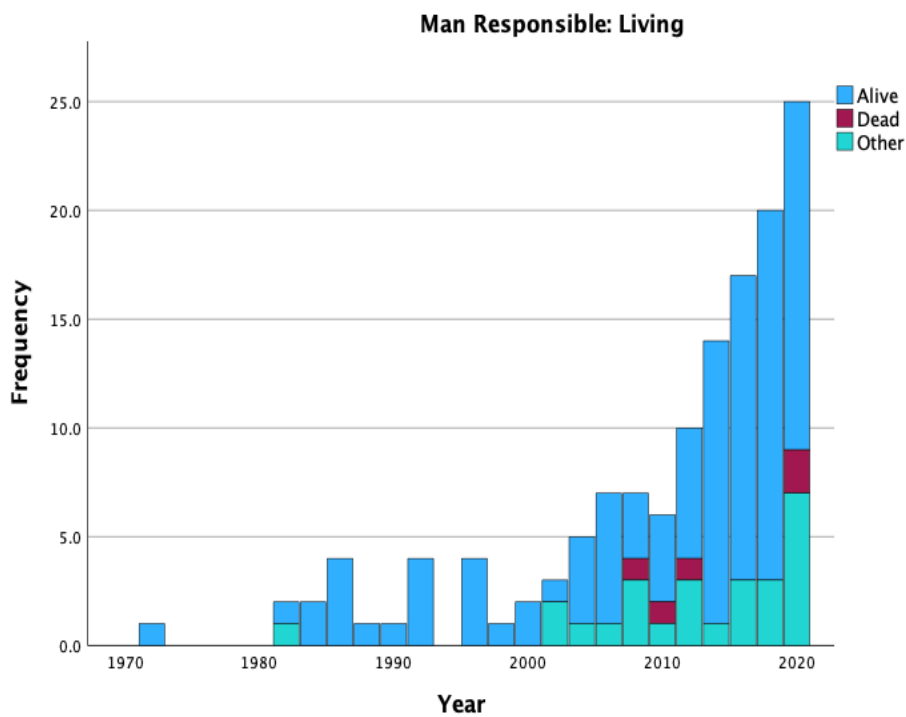
Discussion

The present content analysis surveyed the landscape of abortion representation on streaming television, guided by the postulates of social cognitive theory, the elaboration likelihood model, and the model of narrative comprehension and engagement. The coded variables captured the features of abortion storylines in terms of character, content, consequences, and more, with the intent of better understanding how mediated stories about abortion might facilitate involvement with the narrative and its characters. On the whole, the findings present a cautiously optimistic picture of abortion storytelling, where the majority of storylines embodied some combination of elements that produce favorable conditions for involvement according to the guiding theories. From these findings, I offer guidance for storytellers hoping to facilitate deeper engagement with their stories and more favorable attitudes toward reproductive rights.

Beginning with a discussion of the variables associated with social cognitive theory (SCT; RQ1 & RQ4a), the analysis indicates positive trends for facilitating involvement alongside clear areas for improvement. Character valence was one bright spot: Although positively-valenced depictions of the character were less frequent in early decades, they have recently increased their market share such that appealing character models are becoming the norm. Further, although the number of storylines that model negative consequences may contribute to distorted perceptions of risk from abortion care, the audience's outcome expectancies are more likely to be influenced by storylines that do not feature any negative consequences, which constituted more than 80% of the sample. However, future abortion storylines should give greater consideration the depiction of the procedure and the nature of the reinforcements received. In the first case, the tendency for the abortion to occur entirely off-screen may limit its

impact on efficacy beliefs, as viewers gain little insight into the experience of the procedure. In the second, the frequency of negative reinforcements (with or without additional positive reinforcement) may establish an expectation of disapproval that could temper positive outcome expectancies. Put another way, the optimal conditions for involvement under social cognitive theory are better represented with regard to the beginning (*character valence*) and end (*consequences*) of these storylines, but storytellers should devote greater attention to what occurs in between (*depiction*, *reinforcements*).

Turning to the extended elaboration likelihood model (E-ELM) and its predictions about involvement (RQ2 & RQ4b), the picture is generally quite favorable. A notable proportion of narratives featured the abortion as part of a peripheral storyline, ostensibly making the persuasive subtext less explicit by reducing the centrality of the subject matter. Similarly, instances featuring members of the main cast and where the character provided reasoning for their decision were also quite prominent, offering the viewer greater opportunity to develop favorable feelings or perceptions of similarity with the character which might deepen involvement. When these conditions are in alignment, they should enhance the predictors of involvement in the E-ELM (storyline appeal, production quality, unobtrusiveness of persuasive message, homophily) to maximize their persuasive impact (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Although there is always room for improvement, broader trends in abortion storytelling suggest that one or more of these features are represented in the vast majority of storylines. It follows that storytellers are generally upholding best practices in relation to involvement via the E-ELM, though they should strive to promote more consistent use of the main cast to match the prevalence of peripheral storylines.

Finally, examining the model of narrative comprehension and engagement (MNCE) and its propositions regarding involvement (RQ3 & RQ4c), the analysis found that most abortion

storylines prioritized the comprehensibility and applicability of storyline content through their use of realism—the overwhelming majority of storylines sought to remain grounded in both narrative and external reality. These conditions should ease the construction of viewers' situation model and help them maintain involvement and attentional focus on the story by working with (rather than against) their narrative schema and real-world knowledge (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Abortion storylines also predominantly featured the man responsible for the pregnancy, whose presence can provide considerable clarity to the situation model. The man responsible, who is most often a living agent in the world even if he is not physically present, commonly provides either positive or negative reinforcements and may contribute to the character's abortion reasoning through his presence/absence. By grounding the storyline in realism and explicitly representing this character in the story, storytellers can (and typically have) provide crucial information about the narrative circumstances and promote easier engagement and greater comprehension of its content. Going forward, storytellers could further strengthen their approach by ensuring the man is involved in the storyline and making explicit his role in the pregnancy to minimize ambiguities for the viewer.

Limitations

Despite these important findings, the content analysis bears some potential limitations that should be also be acknowledged. One such limitation is that these storylines are distributed quite unevenly throughout the decades. Out of 136 total storylines, the analysis of trends in abortion representation features a single storyline in the 1970s and 10 storylines each in the 1980s and 1990s, raising the possibility that the summaries of these decades offer poor comparisons for the ones that follow. That said, this analysis captures the population of fictional

television storylines about abortion on U.S. streaming services, and thus these characterizations are not influenced by erroneous sampling.

However, the limited population raises another possible limitation: All of the fictional storylines on streaming services constitute a mere fraction of mass media messages about abortion. Nonfiction programming like news and reality television, political communications like campaigns advertisements and debates, and many other kinds of messages might convey ideas that contribute to perceptions of abortion care and may be encountered in greater number or with greater interest, depending on viewer preference (e.g., Carmines et al., 2010; Woodruff, 2019). Nonetheless, the number of fictional storylines dealing with abortion decision-making is on the rise, and this trend is unlikely to abate given mass media's broader attention to the abortion debate following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (1973)[1] (Totenberg & McCammon, 2022).

Finally, the characterizations and recommendations offered in this study are undergirded by two significant assumptions. The first is an assumption of persuasive intent on the part of the storytellers—that they choose to engage with the topic and seek to elicit greater involvement from the audience as a way to influence beliefs about abortion, which is unlikely to be accurate in all cases. The second assumption is that the propositions of the underlying theoretical models will hold true in practice: Even storylines that utilize an "optimal" configuration of features as suggested by this interpretation may not successfully generate greater levels of involvement for the audience or influence their beliefs about reproductive care. Accordingly, an empirical investigation of character and narrative features within the context of a persuasive narrative is

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[1] The Supreme Court decision known as *Roe v. Wade* (1973) ruled that the Constitution of the United States protects a pregnant woman's liberty to choose to have an abortion without excessive government restriction, thus striking down state and federal abortion laws and laying the groundwork for legal access to abortion nationwide.

needed to enhance our understanding of whether and how storylines about contentious topics can utilize involvement to shape attitudes.

The following study seeks to satisfy that demand through an experiment in which participants are exposed to a contemporary persuasive abortion narrative excerpted from the popular television show *13 Reasons Why*. In order to elucidate how variation in key character and narrative features might influence involvement in this context, I manipulate the valence of the character as well as the circumstances surrounding the unplanned pregnancy through prefatory text without otherwise altering the storyline. As a result, this study can advance our understanding of the complexity of inducing involvement in regard to narratives about contentious topics.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE ROLE OF CHARACTER AND NARRATIVE FEATURES IN

SHAPING AUDIENCE RESPONSE TO ABORTION STORYLINES

As a growing number of primetime and streaming television shows in the United States incorporate educational content into their storylines, such narratives can promote prosocial and health-affirming attitudes and behaviors to wide-ranging audiences. Exposure to these messages can confer numerous benefits to the individual and society, such as providing information and education (Shen & Han, 2014), the adoption of supportive attitudes and social norms (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Shin et al., 2018), stigma reduction for marginalized groups (Ritterfeld & Jin, 2006; Sallar & Somda, 2011), and encouraging positive behaviors in relation to health issues such as organ donation or cancer prevention (Khalil & Rintamaki, 2014; Love & Tanjasiri, 2012). While the majority of the topics addressed in these storylines are fairly uncontroversial, like smoking cessation or scheduling preventive examinations, popular content can also engage with more contentious or politicized health matters such as abortion. Considering how emotionally and politically charged this particular subject can be (Pew Research Center, 2021), narratives seem well-positioned to address it in light of the presumed ability of storytelling to outperform expository arguments in regard to issues of morality, values, and social norms (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007; Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

However, exposure to abortion storylines might also inadvertently increase resistance to abortion and stigmatize individuals: inattention to how the focal character is portrayed in terms of reasons for seeking an abortion or sociodemographic attributes (Sisson & Kimport, 2016), as well as the tendency to dramatically distort the dangers and undermine the necessity of abortion (Sisson & Rowland, 2017), can impede audience involvement with the story and potentially contribute to unfavorable attitudes (Conti & Cahill, 2017). These concerns have grown as the

number of storylines featuring abortion has risen steeply in recent years (Herold & Sisson, 2020), which may further entrench opposition to abortion, or worse, promote the adoption of unfavorable attitudes. Given the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), which overturned *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and has effectively nullified the right to abortion in some states, it is more critical than ever to understand how the features of abortion narratives might influence support for the issue.

Accordingly, the present experiment explores the effects of such features within an episode of the popular Netflix television show *13 Reasons Why*, in which a young woman recounts how she decided to end an unplanned pregnancy. By varying two key details—specifically, whether the pregnancy was the result of consensual or non-consensual intercourse (a *narrative feature*) and how the individual is initially presented to the audience (a *character feature*)—I propose differing contexts will shape the extent to which viewers identify with the main character, thereby enhancing support for abortion. Through this, we can better understand how creative decisions might influence audience support for value-laden topics in order to inform future narrative efforts.

Abortion Storylines and Contextual Features

Despite the fact abortion access remains one of the most legislatively divisive topics in U.S. discourse and policy (Guttmacher Institute, 2021), public opinion around abortion has remained remarkably stable. Decades of debate regarding the morality of abortion have had little effect on public opinion, as roughly the same percentage of U.S. adults (38-39%) indicated that abortion should be "illegal in all/most cases" in both 1995 and in 2021 (Pew Research Center, 2021). Keeping in mind the documented ability of onscreen depictions to influence public perceptions and beliefs about reality (Bandura, 2001; Gerbner & Gross, 1976), this stagnation in

support is especially surprising in light of the undeniable increase in depictions of abortion on American television.

As reported by Sisson and Kimport (2014), the number of depictions has grown steadily in each decade since *Roe v. Wade* (1973); in the years 2015-2019, there were more than twice the number of storylines than in the preceding decade (Herold & Sisson, 2020). Although the overall quantity of television content has undoubtedly also grown over time, the outgrowth of abortion visibility is illustrated through the diversity of content in which these narratives appear, from the animated tragicomedy *Bojack Horseman* (Bob-Waksberg & Calo, 2016) to the satirical telenovela *Jane the Virgin* (Rosenthal & Sciarrotta, 2016) alongside more traditional fare for such storylines like medical dramas *Call the Midwife* (Thomas, 2019) and *Chicago Med* (Frolov & Schneider, 2019). These fictional representations may complement documentary storytelling like *After Tiller* (Shane & Wilson, 2013), which research suggests can enhance support for abortion by countering viewers' internalized social myths with factual knowledge (albeit with the caveat that this support was sometimes circumscribed by other myths about individuals seeking abortions; Sisson & Kimport, 2016).

Hence, to better understand the interplay between public opinion and televised narratives, a shift from concern over the *quantity* of representations to the *qualities* of these depictions may be warranted. Storylines featuring abortion may differ along numerous character and narrative features, such as the character's motivations or the barriers (if any) they face in accessing the procedure (Herold & Sisson, 2020; Sisson & Kimport, 2017), which can shape how viewers understand the narrative and evaluate its underlying message. However, from the perspective of narrative persuasion, two such contextual features emerge as particularly salient when evaluating the potential impact of abortion storylines.

First, in relation to *narrative features*, abortion storylines differ with respect to whether the pregnancy was the result of consensual or non-consensual intercourse (*consent status*). In the television show *Shrill* (Bryant et al., 2019), for example, the protagonist Annie discovers that she is pregnant after the "morning-after pill" (an emergency contraceptive also known as Plan B) fails, and chooses to terminate the pregnancy after weighing the circumstances of her current relationship and her personal priorities. In contrast, a storyline from *Scandal* (Canales & Brownell, 2015) relates to the sexual assault and unintended pregnancy of Ensign Amy Martin, a naval communications officer, by an admiral, and the steps taken by the protagonist Olivia Pope (and her team of "fixers") to support her and help her access abortion care. Although these are just two examples of how *consent status* may factor into presentations of abortion on screen, the question of consent is likely to emerge as an important variable in how audiences understand abortion stories. The issue is significant due to the fact that, for many people who are broadly opposed to abortion, pregnancies resulting from sexual assault are a notable exception to this belief (Pew Research Center, 2020). Moreover, portraying the main character as a victim of sexual assault may enhance the audience's connection with the character: a recent study that assessed the impact of a narrative film featuring hearing-impaired sexual assault victims on intent to support a new human rights law for disabled individuals found that exposure to the story influenced behavioral intent via increased engagement with the plot and its characters (Bae et al., 2014).

Accordingly, an abortion storyline that depicts the pregnancy as the product of non-consensual intercourse could promote greater support for abortion, and so I advance the following hypotheses:

H1: An abortion storyline that depicts a non-consensual act increases support for abortion, compared with an equivalent storyline that depicts a consensual act.

H2: The relationship between exposure to an abortion storyline that varies consent status (non-consensual/consensual) and support for abortion is mediated through identification with the protagonist.

Second, regarding *character features*, abortion storylines on television have historically vilified women who sought to end pregnancies, depicting them as immature and over-concerned with future opportunities while minimizing the role played by financial hardship and pregnancy mistiming (Sisson & Kimport, 2014). For instance, researchers found that although 40% of U.S. women who terminated a pregnancy reported that they did so because they could not financially support a child, only 10.5% of their on-screen counterparts offered similar reasoning. Similarly, nearly 30% of characters on television sought an abortion because they were not mature or responsible enough for a child, compared to only 7% of respondents (Sisson & Kimport, 2016). Given these misrepresentations, which can reinforce negative attitudes toward abortion (Kumar et al., 2009), contextualizing the character as engaging in either "good" (responsible) or "bad" (irresponsible) behaviors prior to exposure should inform how the audience processes the storyline and evaluates the character's actions.

This dichotomy can be illustrated by comparing shows such as *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and *UnREAL*. On *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (Ehrlich, 2016), a storyline involving Paula, the protagonist's best friend and a married woman with two adolescent boys, spotlights her decision to terminate an unplanned pregnancy by her husband. As a 40-something paralegal who is planning to finally attend law school—a dream deferred due to an earlier unplanned pregnancy—her decision is made with the full support of her husband and sons. Paula is portrayed as a hard-working and

empathetic individual who has spent much of her adult life attending to the needs of others: thus, any "selfishness" implied by the decision may be offset by the character's legacy of "good" behaviors.

In contrast, the television show *UnREAL* (Shapiro & Rukeyes, 2018) also featured a storyline involving a 40-something woman ending an unplanned pregnancy; however, the circumstances surrounding this pregnancy differ dramatically. Quinn, a main character who is a producer on a *The Bachelor*-style reality show, unexpectedly becomes pregnant following an affair with a contestant. Although her long-term partner accepts paternal responsibility, an uncertain prognosis for the fetus leads her to terminate the pregnancy. When asked whether there was a reason for ending the pregnancy, she replies that it does not matter because she "wasn't meant to be a mother" (Ehrlich, 2016). After several seasons of Quinn's machinations, both in the context of the reality show and her personal life, her legacy of misbehavior does little to garner support for her decision to end the pregnancy.

Importantly, according to Norris et al. (2011), when an individual terminates a pregnancy there are number of factors that others use heuristically to assess whether it was a "good" or "bad" abortion, one of which is the individual's past behavior. Thus, a character who has previously engaged in negative behaviors (e.g., lying, being unkind to others) may be perceived as less justified in seeking an abortion than those who demonstrate positive behaviors (Hanschmidt et al., 2016). This dichotomy is especially relevant to the ways in which audience members form emotional connections with characters. According to affective disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1972), dispositions toward characters are formed along a continuum ranging from extremely negative through indifference to extremely positive. According to Raney (2020), we form positive affective dispositions toward characters of whom we morally approve

and negative affective dispositions toward characters of whose actions we disapprove. Accordingly, characters that cultivate positive feelings are perceived as "friends," whereas characters that do not share our moral values are viewed as "foes" that ignite our disdain (Zillmann, 2000). As a result, viewers should express greater support for the actions of characters that demonstrate principled qualities as opposed to characters whose morals are at odds with the viewer's.

Unsurprisingly, there is a wealth of evidence from the narrative persuasion literature suggesting that people are more likely to identify with, and subsequently be persuaded by, virtuous characters (e.g., Cohen, 2001, 2006; Igartua & Vega Casanova, 2016). Identification refers to a process wherein the boundary between viewer and character is eroded by the viewer's cognitive and emotional involvement such that the viewer feels as if they have "become" the character (Cohen, 2001). In the context of narrative persuasion, promoting identification with a character has been linked to deeper processing of narrative messages (Slater & Rouner, 2002) and reduced resistance to attitude-discrepant messages (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Additionally, research has demonstrated a consistent link between identification and successful persuasive outcomes (e.g., Igartua & Vega Casanova, 2016; Walter et al., 2019). In this way, storylines that promote identification are more likely to improve audience support for controversial issues.

Although there is considerable ambiguity in what an individual might consider good or bad, depicting a character as generally virtuous is more likely to promote identification than context that presents the character in an unflattering light (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010; Walter et al., 2017). Considering the clear divergences in how these examples present their focal characters, it seems probable that the audience will be more accepting of the decision to end a pregnancy when they believe the character to be a virtuous person. Based on this, I predict that:

H3: An abortion storyline that provides a positive disposition of the protagonist increases support for abortion, compared with an equivalent storyline with a negative disposition of the character.

H4: The relationship between exposure to an abortion storyline that varies the protagonist's affective disposition (positive/negative) and support for abortion is mediated through identification with the protagonist.

Furthermore, considering that both narrative features and character features could plausibly influence the audience's reception of the storyline, an interaction between the two could impact the resulting attitudes toward abortion. If one is led to believe that the character is a good person *and* that they did not consent to the intercourse that led to the pregnancy, the confluence of these ostensibly mitigating factors could produce greater support than either detail alone. By the same token, it is possible that presenting a character who engages in bad behaviors *and* consented to the intercourse could produce significantly less favorable attitudes. Because there is no clear evidence to suggest which conditions are most likely to improve support for abortion, I propose the following research question:

RQ1: Is there an interaction effect between narrative (consensual vs. non-consensual intercourse) and character (positive vs. negative disposition) features on (a) attitudes toward abortion and (b) identification with the character?

Method

Design and Participants

The research hypotheses were tested with an online experiment utilizing a 3 (*character disposition*: positive disposition, negative disposition, or no disposition) x 2 (*consent status*: consensual or non-consensual) design, wherein participants were asked to complete a

questionnaire relating to "how individuals learn from television dramas." Based on an *a priori*

power analysis (G*Power 3; Faul et al., 2007) using an expected weak-medium effect size ($f =$

.18, $\alpha = .05$, $1\text{-}\beta = .80$) for the tests of simple main effects and interactions, the target sample was

420 (70 participants per condition). Following approval by the Northwestern University

institutional review board (IRB #STU00210939), participants were recruited via Qualtrics ($N =$

438) and subjected to several screening questions to ensure that all identified as female, were

fluent in English, and also had not previously viewed *13 Reasons Why*. The study was limited to

only female participants, as they are the primary stakeholders in discussions and policies

surrounding abortion. While the majority of both men and women express support for legal

abortion, public opinion polls indicate that women are more likely than men to hold this view

(Pew Research Center, 2021)—there is also evidence to suggest that perceived similarity can

facilitate identification between audience members and characters, and given the role of

identification in the analysis I sought to control for this possibility (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; but see

also Cohen et al., 2018). Participants, on average, were 50.49 years old ($SD = 17.85$) and had

14.83 years of education ($SD = 2.68$). A plurality of participants identified as Democrats (199;

45.4%), with Independents (133; 30.4%) and Republicans (106; 24.2%) comprising roughly

equal shares of the remainder. The vast majority of participants were White (330; 75.3%), with

Black (55; 12.6%), Pacific Islander (28; 6.4%), and Mixed (18; 4.1%) as the other sizable racial

groupings—of these, 47 (10.7%) also identified as Hispanic or Latinx.

Procedure

Following the electronic informed consent process, participants were asked to indicate

their age, gender, and whether they had ever seen *13 Reasons Why*. Next, participants answered a

number of demographic questions, such as political affiliation/ideology, race/ethnicity, and

employment status. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of six viewing conditions that differed with respect to *character disposition* (positive, negative, or no disposition) and *consent status* (consensual or non-consensual). After viewing the assigned stimulus, participants completed three attention check items before answering measures related to abortion as well as their experience of the storyline.

Material

The experimental stimulus was excerpted from Season 3, Episode 2 of *13 Reasons Why* (14:41). The storyline centers on Chloe, a teenage girl and focal character in Seasons 1 and 2 of the show. In the narrative, Chloe recounts via flashback how she unexpectedly became pregnant by her now-ex-boyfriend, Bryce, and the events leading up to the termination of that pregnancy (for a detailed synopsis, see the Supplemental Material.) Prior to viewing the video, participants were exposed to a brief prefatory statement that varied by condition. Participants in all conditions saw "On the next page you'll be asked to watch a video from the television show *13 Reasons Why*. The video focuses on Chloe, a high school girl, who has recently broken up with her long-term boyfriend Bryce. In a recent episode of the show:" followed by up to two additional details about Chloe that varied by experimental condition. In order to manipulate *consent status*, participants saw either "Bryce and Chloe went to a party where she had too much to drink—Chloe passed out on the ride home, but Bryce got her home safely and the next morning they had unprotected sex" (*Consensual*) or "Bryce and Chloe went to a party where she had too much to drink—Chloe passed out on the ride home, and Bryce had unprotected sex with her while she was unconscious" (*Non-Consensual*). In line with previous studies that manipulated the character's moral disposition (e.g., Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012), participants learned that Chloe either "stood up for a former friend who was wrongfully accused of cheating

on an exam" (*positive disposition*) or "spread a false rumor that one of her former friends had cheated on an exam" (*negative disposition*). Participants in the "no disposition" conditions were only provided a *consent status* statement.

Measures

Attitudes toward abortion. Adapted from Hill (2004), participants were presented with six phrases to complete the prompt "I believe abortion should be legal…" Examples include "When the pregnant person decides they want or need one" and "When the pregnant person is a teenager." Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement from (1) – "Completely Disagree" to (7) – "Completely Agree" ($M = 4.52$; $SD = 1.93$; $\alpha = .93$).

Identification. The questionnaire utilized the abbreviated (5-item) identification index from Tal-Or and Cohen (2010). Responses were measured on a Likert-type scale spanning from "1 – Completely Disagree" to "7 – Completely Agree" for items like "While watching, I felt like Chloe felt" and "While watching, I could really 'get inside' Chloe's head" ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.52$, $\alpha = .88$).

Results

In order to assess how contextual features might influence participants' attitudes toward abortion, I conducted a two-way between-subjects ANCOVA (for a complete outline of results by condition, please see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1. *Means (+SDs) for Attitudes toward Abortion and Identification with Protagonist by*

Experimental Condition

	Experimental Condition (*Consent Status* x *Character Disposition*)					
	Consensual x Positive (*n* = 73)	Consensual x Negative (*n* = 67)	Consensual x No Disposition (*n* = 74)	Non-Consensual x Positive (*n* = 77)	Non-Consensual x Negative (*n* = 73)	Non-Consensual x No Disposition (*n* = 74)
Attitude	4.75 (1.87)[a]	4.58 (1.88)[a]	4.89 (1.76)[a]	4.28 (2.17)[a]	4.13 (2.01)[a]	4.79 (1.73)[a]
Identification	4.56 (1.53)[abc]	4.49 (1.40)[abc]	4.88 (1.38)[abc]	4.77 (1.56)[abc]	4.20 (1.50)[ab]	5.02 (1.27)[ac]

Note. Means with differing scripts are significantly different at *p* = .05 based on Tukey's post-hoc test.

In regard to the influence of *consent status* (H1) on attitudes toward abortion, the results of the ANCOVA indicated a marginal effect, $F(1, 432) = 3.50$, $p = .062$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Contrary to our prediction, however, participants in the consensual condition ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.83$) reported *more favorable* attitudes toward abortion than those in the non-consensual condition ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.99$). Consequently, H1 was not supported. For *character disposition* (H3), the ANCOVA model retrieved a nonsignificant effect on attitudes toward abortion, $F(2, 432) = 2.40$, $p = .092$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Although these differences were not significant, it is worth noting that participants in the negative impression condition reported the least support for abortion ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.99$), followed by their counterparts in the positive impression condition ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 2.04$) and those who were not exposed to any information about the character ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.74$). With regard to RQ1, which asked whether there was an interaction between consent status and character disposition, our model found no interaction for attitudes, $F(2, 432) = 0.42$, $p = .656$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$. I found no direct influence of contextual features on attitudes toward abortion, but this could imply that the influence of entertainment is better explained by more nuanced, indirect effects.

To test the indirect effects of *consent status* (H2) and *character disposition* (H4), I used

PROCESS (Model 4, set to 20,000 boostrapped models with 95% CI; Hayes, 2017). In line with

the results of the ANCOVA, *consent status* did not have a significant effect on identification

with the character ($b = $ -.02, $SE = $ .14, $p = $ .885, 95% CI [-.30, .25]) and there was no indirect

effect of *consent status* on attitudes through identification ($b = $ -.01, $SE = $ .09, 95% CI [-.20,

.17]). Hence, there was no support for H2. The mediation model was able to explain 26.3% of

the variance in attitudes toward abortion, $F(2, 435) = 77.75$, $p < .001$.

Shifting focus to H4, *character disposition* was entered as a multicategorical predictor

(with no disposition as the reference category) and identification as the mediator. In line with our

prediction, exposure to the negatively-valenced character reduced identification with the

character ($b = $ -.61, $SE = $ .17, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.94, -.27]) and, in turn, identification was

positively related to abortion attitudes ($b = $ .66, $SE = $ .06, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.55, .77]).

Importantly, the analysis also recorded an indirect effect for negative disposition on attitudes via

identification ($b = $ -.40, $SE = $ .12, 95% CI [-.64, -.18]). Positive disposition, however, did not

significantly increase identification ($b = $ -.28, $SE = $ .17, $p = $ .094, 95% CI [-.61, .05]) nor did it

indirectly influence attitudes ($b = $ -.18, $SE = $ .11, 95% CI [-.41, .03]). Therefore, I find partial

support for H4; the mediation model was able to explain 25.6% of the variance in attitudes

toward abortion, $F(3, 434) = 49.64$, $p < .001$ (for a complete outline of the direct effects for H4,

see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. *Unstandardized Coefficients for the Direct Effects of Character Disposition and*

Identification with Protagonist on Support for Abortion
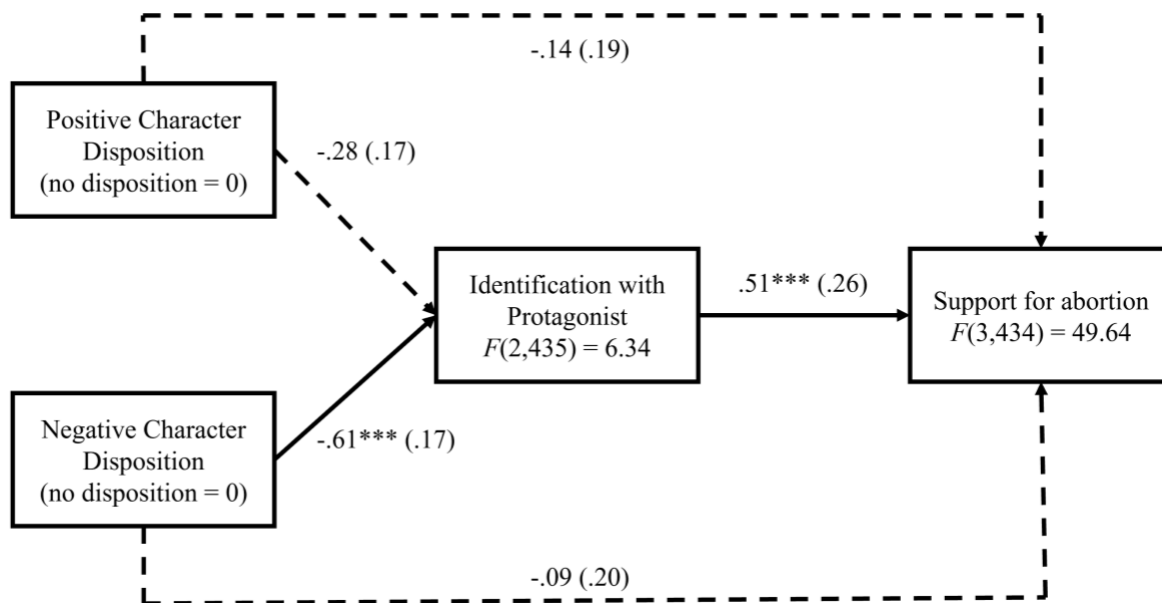
Note. ***p < .001. Dashed arrows represent nonsignificant relationships at the .05 alpha level.

Discussion

In this study, I sought to explore how two theoretically-driven contextual features (*consent status* and *character disposition*) common to abortion narratives might influence audience response to the depiction of contentious issues on screen. Although the findings do not indicate these features act directly upon viewer's attitudes, their influence on the process of identification (and its resultant effect on attitudes) contributes to our understanding of how characteristics of mass media story-telling might contour audience response in this and other controversial contexts. In particular, the results reinforce the importance of the narrative context in which behavioral models are situated, while highlighting how well-intentioned creative decisions may have unexpected or counterproductive outcomes (Bandura, 2001).

In regard to H1, I found that specifying the *consent status* of the sexual encounter that preceded the abortion had a marginal effect on participants' reported attitudes, although the direction of the effect ran counter to the hypothesis' prediction. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 60% of US citizens who identify as pro-life believe that abortion should be legal in the case of rape or incest cases (2020). Assuming that those who are generally supportive of abortion are less likely to be sensitive to the context surrounding consent, I anticipated that exposure to the non-consensual condition might elicit some combination of sympathy, support, and understanding from participants who are otherwise opposed to abortion. Despite this reasoning, I found instead that participants in the consensual condition reported more favorable attitudes toward abortion after viewing the storyline.

Considering how public discourse around abortion often emphasizes "in the case of rape or incest" as two exceptional circumstances in which terminating a pregnancy is warranted, this finding is somewhat surprising. Following the loose dichotomy advocated by Norris et al. (2011), Chloe's experience meets many of the criteria for a "good abortion": (1) she is a young woman (2) having her first abortion, and, for those in the non-consensual conditions, (3) her abortion occurred in the context of a rape. In spite of these mitigating factors, this may be a situation where the unpleasant context of rape invoked feelings of fear or disgust, dampening participants' engagement with the story and making them less receptive to the message (Nabi, 2002).[2] Alternatively, perhaps viewers were simply more averse to identifying with a character that had previously been victimized, due to the negative implications about oneself that identification with the character might suggest (Cohen, 2001).

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[2] It bears noting that, despite a significant difference in scores for the attitudes item pertaining to rape/incest, a combination of unequal variance and high (approximately 6 on a 7-point scale) mean scores in both the consensual & non-consensual conditions suggest that this finding may be due to the choice of instrument.

Failure to find support for H3 demonstrates that exposure to a positive impression of a character prior to viewing the narrative does not necessarily enhance participants' attitudes toward abortion. However, the findings for H4 offer greater insight regarding the impact of character disposition: the relationship between exposure to the negative disposition condition, identification, and attitudes toward abortion suggests that the negatively-valenced character was a significant impediment to identification. It is worth noting that Chloe, who is rather reserved and does not demonstrate much warmth in this particular storyline, may have fallen victim to negativity bias (Ito et al., 1998; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020). When characters are not intrinsically appealing or behave in ways that are morally ambiguous, the audience may be more likely to weight negative information more heavily than positive details (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). Simply put, people were less inclined to adopt Chloe's perspective when their initial impression was unfavorable, illustrating a significant challenge of representing contentious matters on screen.

As previously demonstrated by Tal-Or and Cohen (2010), people are more inclined to identify with characters that they believe are virtuous rather than immoral. Our results indicate a variation on this finding, in that the negative disposition discouraged identification but the positive disposition did not *encourage* it. This suggests a baseline expectation that behavioral models demonstrate only "good" behaviors—a considerable limitation for narrative representations. Moreover, failure to generate empathetic feelings toward the protagonist, which can vary dramatically depending on how a character's traits and behaviors are presented, was identified by Niederdeppe et al. as a significant detriment to persuasion (2015). Thus, it seems of paramount importance that the model(s) within a given intervention embody enticing personal

qualities, particularly when their words or deeds might alienate viewers who hold contrary opinions.

As a whole, the results suggest a worrying asymmetry: whether the viewer is initially exposed to positive or negative context regarding a character seems like minor variation, and yet the negative impression exerted a distinctly counterproductive influence. Considering the diversity of abortion storylines on television in recent years (Herold & Sisson, 2020), this has concerning implications: despite the best of intentions, narratives featuring a less-than-perfect protagonist could inadvertently instill or promote anti-abortion sentiments. From this perspective, an increase in abortion representation does not necessarily lead to greater support— however, with attention to the nuances of contextual features, practitioners might utilize the power of storytelling to increase support for reproductive rights.

Limitations

For the current study, there were some notable limitations, the first of which was the degree of homogeneity within the sample. Non-Hispanic white women composed nearly three-quarters of participants (i.e. most participants shared at least two significant demographics identities with Chloe), potentially facilitating the identification process in ways that are not typical of the general population. Further, the mean age (50.49 years) and education (14.83 years) of our sample does not reflect the expected audience for a teen drama—the effects of exposure might be more pronounced among adolescent women.

In terms of design, my findings are limited by the fact that the current study utilized a single exposure to an excerpted storyline, viewed by participants who had not seen the show previously. In reality, the experience of a television show is likely to be defined by ongoing and complex involvement with the narrative and its characters; these long-term connections can

make viewers particularly receptive to the ideas expressed in the show. Thus, one might anticipate the persuasive influence of the story would be magnified for long-term viewers, and future research will complement current insights into the ways extended exposure may enrich one's experience of narrative messages (Oschatz & Marker, 2020). Additionally, in order to ensure as much parity between experimental conditions as possible, the character and storyline manipulations were provided through the viewing instructions, rather than arising organically as part of the narrative. While this helped promote equivalence between viewing conditions, this is not reflective of how this information in acquired in natural viewing contexts.

Finally, it bears stating that the relations between contextual features are inherently more complex than can be established in a single study: the influence of both consent status and character disposition could potentially be shaped by numerous variables that were not manipulated (social support, reasoning, etc.) This is further complicated by the pursuit of narrative reality in our manipulation (what scenario might occur in this teen drama that could plausibly result in either a consensual or non-consensual outcome?) in relation to broader cultural norms that tend to disfavor victims of sexual assault in the context of alcohol consumption and/or romantic relationships (World Health Organization, 2009). I acknowledge this as a potential weakness in the design, but posit that the findings further emphasize the need to explore these effects in varied contexts (e.g., an older protagonist, less economically advantaged, a partnered individual, etc.), genres (i.e. comedy) and formats (e.g., documentary film).

From these findings, it is evident that the contexts in which a narrative and its characters are situated can shape how viewers interpret and process the content of value-laden narratives. Even small details that have seemingly little bearing on the larger message can contour the

audience's perceptions—and not always in ways that one might expect. In practical terms, this work has the potential to mitigate unintended consequences of abortion representation while simultaneously enhancing the audience's experience of the narrative—benefits to the viewing public that should not be overlooked. This line of inquiry will hopefully enhance the design of future interventions, but most importantly it should improve the ways in which stories are shared. When it comes to presenting contentious issues on screen, the old maxim seems to apply: "Context is king."

The insights into the process of involvement with contentious topics from this study illustrate how some narrative features might shape audience perceptions, but these findings also invite further questions. The first concerns the nature of the experimental stimulus: Although the use of a real-world abortion narrative contributes to the external validity of the results, the lack of control over the alignment of character and narrative features in the story complicates the study's conclusions. Given that the narrative does not fully adhere to the "optimal" conditions for involvement as proposed in Study 1 (e.g., the stimulus features a guest actor in the central storyline, the character's portrayal may be perceived as more mixed than positively valenced), findings regarding persuasion and involvement could differ in a more strongly controlled context. Additionally, the emphasis on the effects of narrative messages in isolation leaves unaddressed one of the central concerns of narrative persuasion: when and whether narrative messages outperform non-narrative messages.

Due to an array of conflicting findings regarding the efficacy of narrative and non-narrative messages in terms of a variety of outcomes and contexts, the following study juxtaposes not only these two message formats, but also a "blended narrative" approach which interweaves the content and style of the other two messages. In this case, the blended narrative

synthesizes a story featuring a conversation between friends about reproductive decision-making (narrative) with a report that provides factual information about the experience (non-narrative). Further, because the three stimuli were explicitly developed to meet the goals of the study, they allow greater control over the stimuli while also facilitating a suitable comparison between messages.

CHAPTER FIVE: BEARING THE WEIGHT OF EVIDENCE: COMPARING THE

EFFECTS OF MESSAGE FORMAT ON CONTENTIOUS TOPICS

When it comes to engaging with value-laden or emotionally-fraught topics, the dominant theoretical perspectives underlying narrative persuasion are in alignment: engagement with the narrative and its characters should commit individuals' cognitive and emotional faculties to the experience of the story such that their real-world knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes are less accessible, clearing a path for persuasion that should exceed the influence of equivalent non-narrative messages (e.g., Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Green & Brock, 2002; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). However, support for this contention is far less consistent in the empirical findings: Despite the findings of meta-analyses on the effects of narrative vs. non-narrative messages that indicate narratives should reliably outperform non-narratives, particularly in terms of delayed effects (Oschatz & Marker, 2020), and should provoke less resistance (Ratcliff & Sun, 2020), evidence from individual reports seem to vary between no differences to significant advantages to contingent effects that depend on individual differences more than involvement mechanisms.

In light of how the narrative versus non-narrative paradigm encapsulates such disparate empirical findings, perhaps it is not simply a matter of the message format but the distinctive ways in which they might provide evidence to support the claims of their underlying message. From the results of earlier research, it seems likely that individuals may differentially process non-narrative/statistical evidence and narrative/anecdotal evidence in regard to message-consistent outcomes (e.g., Zebregs et al., 2015a). Given the different ways in which these two evidence types influence persuasion, one might assume that a combination of both types could be most effective. Accordingly, Allen et al. (2000) and Maki and Feeley (2021) provide some indication that a message which combines statistical and narrative evidence is more effective

than a message that utilizes either type individually. However, Krause and Rucker (2019) find that a narrative style can actually be detrimental to persuasion when it includes strong (as opposed to weak) factual evidence, suggesting that combining both forms of evidence to influence a wider array of persuasive outcomes will not necessarily produce optimal results.

Thus, the present experiment seeks to advance our understanding of the influence of message format (and the attendant forms of evidence) by comparing narrative and non-narrative persuasive messages about abortion, as well as a blended narrative message that synthesizes their style and content. Utilizing the context of abortion due to its salience as an emotional and controversial topic (e.g., Montanaro, 2023), the experiment hopes to discern whether the fusion of narrative and non-narrative yields advantages in terms of message-consistent outcomes, involvement, and even cognitive/emotional evaluations of messages on contentious topics. Further, this study proposes that variables of individual difference will moderate the relationship between message format and message-consistent outcomes due to both their structure (i.e., need for cognition [Cacioppo & Petty, 1982], need for affect [Appel et al., 2012]), and content (prior attitudes toward abortion [e.g., Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019]). By illustrating differences between message formats in terms of a wider array of outcomes (knowledge, persuasion, involvement, cognitive/emotional evaluations), this study hopes to offer guidance on the use of anecdotal and statistical evidence to message designers who seek to engage with controversial issues through narrative.

The Narrative/Anecdotal vs. Non-Narrative/Statistical Paradigm and Contentious Topics

The comparison of non-narrative and narrative message formats has become a common theme in persuasion as scholars have sought to articulate when and how stories might exert greater influence. Studies on a variety of topics, from relaxation rooms in offices (Hoeken &

Hustinx, 2009) to skin cancer (Greene & Brinn, 2003) to organ donation (Feeley et al., 2006) have sought to distinguish the efficacy of narrative and non-narrative messages, but the configuration of findings in these studies present a rather complicated picture of the conditions under which narratives are successful. Prior scholarship comparing narratives and non-narratives has found that (a) narratives are more effective than non-narratives due to mechanisms of involvement (Murphy et al., 2013); (b) non-narratives are more effective when communicating information (Bekalu et al., 2018); (c) both formats are effective, but narratives produce stronger effects (Borrayo et al., 2017); and (d) narratives and non-narrative information are equally effective in the short-term, but effects on relevant outcomes do not persist (Zebregs et al., 2015b).

Beginning with examples where narrative was determined to be more effective than non-narrative, Murphy et al. (2013) found that a narrative about cervical cancer promoted greater knowledge and more positive attitudes compared to an equivalent non-narrative, and that involvement with the narrative and characters contributed to changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intention. In a similar fashion, Kreuter et al. (2010) suggest that a narrative on mammography reduced counterarguing and enhanced recall, resulting in fewer perceived barriers to the behavior compared to the non-narrative message. These studies are contrasted by findings from Bekalu et al. (2018), which indicate that participants exposed to a non-narrative video on pandemic influenza reported greater knowledge and perceived response efficacy compared to those who viewed an equivalent narrative. That said, a number of studies have also reported limited difference between message formats in terms of outcomes: A study comparing conversational and testimonial narrative formats with a didactic non-narrative on nutrition information by Slater et al. (2003) found that reception of all three messages was generally

favorable, and that there were no significant differences in terms of their impact on participants. Similarly, a study by Borrayo et al. (2017) reported that a narrative video, non-narrative video, and brochure each improved knowledge, self-efficacy, and behavioral intent regarding mammography from pretest to posttest, but the magnitude of change for self-efficacy was significantly greater following exposure to the narrative.

Although the literature on message format yields a slight advantage to narrative over non-narrative in terms of message-consistent outcomes, scholarship on the differences between anecdotal (narrative) and statistical (non-narrative) *evidence* contributes additional nuance to this conversation. Across a host of studies, anecdotal and statistical evidence differ in terms of the outcomes they are most likely to influence: the provision of anecdotal evidence is associated with greater message acceptance and empathy (Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016), improved behavioral intent (Greene & Brinn, 2003; Zebregs et al., 2015a), and perceived risk (de Wit et al., 2008), while statistical evidence is associated with greater perceived attitude change (Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016), behavior change and perceived susceptibility (Greene & Brinn, 2003), and improved beliefs and attitudes (Zebregs et al., 2015a). These findings are further complicated by the fact that systematic reviews of the efficacy of anecdotal and statistical evidence types have presented varying results over time. Two early meta-analyses comparing anecdotal and statistical evidence suggest that, overall, statistical evidence is more influential than anecdotal evidence (Baesler & Burgoon, 1994; Allen & Preiss,1997), while subsequent reviews have suggested that there may be no difference in effectiveness (Xu, 2023) or that anecdotal evidence may hold an advantage in key circumstances—notably, when emotional engagement with the issue is high (Freling et al., 2020; Winterbottom et al., 2008) or when the message features exemplars (Bigsby et al., 2019).

In sum, the findings regarding the advantages of narrative/non-narrative format and anecdotal/statistical evidence are fraught with terms and conditions that challenge generalization. However, this complexity may also offer a path forward in the present context. First, the utility of anecdotal evidence in contexts where emotional engagement is strong seems particularly relevant to messages about reproductive rights: the contentious nature of the abortion debate in the United States is fueled by emotional appeals and engagement (Ntontis & Hopkins, 2018) such that few people are likely to have emotionally-neutral responses to messages about the topic. Second, narratives about abortion are likely to feature exemplars in the form of a character seeking or obtaining an abortion, who can serve as a vehicle for persuasion through their words and actions, thereby strengthening the influence of the story. Finally, when individuals are confronted with a value-discrepant message, there is some indication that anecdotal evidence will be more effective than statistical evidence (Slater & Rouner, 1996). Since the intent of the persuasive messages in the present study is to promote more favorable outcomes related to abortion, they are naturally attitude-discrepant for those who are opposed to reproductive rights. From this, we might presume that a narrative message, with its abundance of anecdotal evidence, might outperform a non-narrative message.

That said, the scholarship on the narrative/non-narrative and anecdotal/statistical dichotomies broadly suggest that each hold advantages that could be mutually beneficial. For example, if statistical and anecdotal evidence are more effective in relation to different outcomes—as exemplified in the meta-analysis by Zebregs et al. (2015a), which found that statistical evidence had a greater influence on beliefs and attitudes and anecdotal evidence was more effective with regard to behavioral intent—then it follows that a message seeking to impact a variety of outcomes (e.g., attitudes, knowledge, and behavioral intention) should utilize both

forms of evidence in tandem. Although this synthesis of narrative and non-narrative has not been

the focus of significant scholarly attention, there are a few noteworthy studies that gesture

toward their promise. First, Allen et al. (2000) extend the findings of an earlier meta-analysis,

which reported that statistical evidence was more effective than anecdotal (Allen & Preiss,

1997), with an experimental study which found that a combination of both forms of evidence

was more effective than messages that used statistical, anecdotal, or no evidence to support its

claims. In a similar vein, Maki and Feeley (2021) indicate that, in comparison to either a

narrative or non-narrative message, a combined message can yield greater change. However, a

study by Okuhara et al. (2023) highlights that findings regarding the combination of anecdotal

and statistical evidence are scarce in the literature, and what findings exist are typically mixed.

Thus, a blended narrative that synthesizes narrative and non-narrative formats may be able to

outperform a message that uses only one form of evidence—but the necessary conditions for this

outcome are unclear.

Given this review of the efficacy of narrative, non-narrative, and blended message

formats, I propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Message format will influence message-consistent outcomes such that the blended

narrative will outperform other message formats in regard to (a) factual knowledge about

abortion, (b) attitudes toward abortion, and (c) social support for abortion.

The Moderating Roles of Individual Difference in Message Processing

If anecdotal and statistical evidence are indeed evaluated in distinct fashions, then it

seems probable that the processing of narrative and non-narrative messages might vary from one

individual to another due to differences in motivation. More specifically, research has suggested

that the evaluation of non-narrative/statistical evidence and narrative/anecdotal evidence may be

guided by individuals' *need for cognitio*n (NFC; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) and *need for affect* (NFA; Maio & Esses, 2001), respectively. The former is typically conceptualized as an individual's enjoyment of and preference for effortful cognitive activity like thinking and reasoning, while the latter is commonly defined as one's desire to experience strong emotions and understand the emotions of others. Earlier research has indicated that these two constructs are relatively independent (e.g., Maio et al., 2004; Huskinson & Haddock, 2004), and thus individuals are likely to possess differing levels of NFC and NFA. Accordingly, the combination of these two attributes (e.g., high NFC/low NFA, low NFC/high NFA, etc.) should differentially shape the impact of a narrative, non-narrative, or blended narrative message on an individual.

Scholarship examining the effects of NFC and NFA on differing message formats have generally supported this contention. In a series of experiments, Haddock et al. (2008) found that an affective persuasive message elicited more favorable attitudes among individuals who were high in NFA and low in NFC, and that a cognitive persuasive message yielded more positive response among those who were high in NFC and low in NFA. These relationships extended to recognition of information from the messages, such that higher levels of NFC improved recall of the cognitive message and higher levels of NFA enhanced the recollection of details from the affective message. Similarly, research by Appel & Malečkar (2012) suggests that the persuasiveness of a story increases with greater NFA, and that NFC shapes the persuasiveness of non-fictional content. Studies probing the effects of NFC and NFA in isolation report results that are consistent with these differences in processing: Cao (2015) found that lower levels of NFC were consistent with reduced counterarguing when viewing a fictional video, and Appel and Richter (2012) found that greater levels of NFA were predictive of greater involvement with a narrative.

From this, it seems probable that individuals who are high in NFA will be most influenced by a narrative message, as greater NFA is conducive to involvement and reduced counterarguing in this context, while those who are high in NFC will be most affected by a non-narrative due to how NFC facilitates the processing of information and message arguments. However, scholarship on the processing of different message formats has typically juxtaposed cognitive/non-narrative and affective/narrative messages, rather than a blended narrative as proposed in this study. As the findings suggest that greater levels of NFC and NFA may be detrimental in narrative and non-narrative message processing, respectively, it is not yet known whether a message that combines both formats will represent "the best of both worlds" by providing content to appeal to individuals regardless of their preferences for cognition/emotion. Nonetheless, it is certainly possible given previous findings on the combination of narrative and statistical evidence that the benefits of NFC and NFA could work together to enhance the efficacy of the blended narrative.

In light of the roles played by need for cognition and need for affect in the processing of different message formats, I propose the following hypotheses:

H2: The relationship between message format and message-consistent outcomes is moderated by need for cognition (NFC) such that higher levels of NFC will result in more favorable outcomes in the non-narrative and blended narrative conditions.

H3: The relationship between message format and message-consistent outcomes is moderated by need for affect (NFA) such that higher levels of NFA will result in more favorable outcomes in the narrative and blended narrative conditions.

Despite findings from Allen et al. (2000) and Maki and Feeley (2021) that suggest a blended narrative may be more effective than either a narrative or non-narrative alone, their

emphasis on relatively uncontroversial topics (e.g., HIV testing, use of cosmetics) may make for a less suitable comparison to the present context. Recent findings regarding contentious topics from the narrative persuasion literature indicate that prior attitudes toward an issue play a considerable role in how audiences process a message. In a study on marijuana legalization, Oschatz et al. (2022) found that post-exposure attitudes were more strongly predicted by prior beliefs than involvement, suggesting the extent to which participants became involved with the narrative and its characters depended on their initial agreement with the message's position. Looking at the issue of gun control, Tukachinsky Forster et al. (2022) found that exposure to counter-attitudinal characters actually bolstered reader's prior attitudes through greater counterarguing, diminishing potential persuasion. Thus, it seems reasonable prior attitudes may be of particular import when engaging with a contentious topic.

Given this possibility, I advance the following hypothesis:

H4: The relationship between message format and message-consistent outcomes is moderated by prior attitudes toward abortion such that more positive prior attitudes will result in more favorable outcomes.

Variations in Involvement and Evaluation by Message Format

Given the relative novelty of the blended narrative message format, there is particular interest in how it compares to traditional narratives with regard to measures of involvement. As involvement processes are presumed to be key to the efficacy of narrative persuasion (e.g., Dal Cin et al., 2004), if the value a blended narrative offers in terms of its provision of both statistical and anecdotal evidence is offset by lower levels of identification/transportation as well as greater counterarguing, it is unlikely to prove an effective vehicle for persuasion. This concern is especially salient given findings that suggest the presence of strong factual evidence within a

narrative can be detrimental to persuasion by increasing counterarguing (Krause & Rucker, 2019).

Thus, I posit the following research question:

RQ1: Are there significant differences in involvement between the narrative and blended narrative messages in terms of (a) identification, (b) transportation, and (c) counterarguing?

Similarly, the blended narrative format may differ in terms of individuals' cognitive and emotional evaluations compared to other message formats. Considering that the extent to which individuals feel that a message was interesting and informative may reflect its actual utility in these domains—especially in light of evidence that the perceived effectiveness of a message tends to suggest its actual effectiveness (Dillard et al., 2007)—participants' cognitive assessments of each message format could be instructive. Further, enjoyment is proposed to be an outcome of narrative exposure that can strengthen its persuasive impact (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2022; Moyer-Gusé, 2008), and so it should be considered as well. In much the same way, the extent to which each message elicits emotional response should prove relevant for the present study. Given the ways in which emotions interact with cognitive processes to inform attitudes (e.g., Petty & Briñol, 2015), particularly in regard to value-laden topics like abortion, understanding whether message format contours the audience's emotional evaluations is of considerable interest.

Accordingly, I offer the following research questions:

RQ2: Are there significant differences in cognitive evaluation of the messages in terms of (a) interest, (b) informativeness, and (c) enjoyment between message conditions?

RQ3: Are there significant differences in emotional evaluation of the messages in terms

of (a) sadness, (b) happiness, (c) anger, (d) fear, (e), disgust, and (f) surprise?

Method

Design & Participants

The hypotheses and research questions were tested with an online experiment that

utilized a 2 (*anecdotal evidence*: present or absent) x 2 (*statistical evidence*: present or absent)

design that resulted in three message conditions (narrative, blended narrative, and non-narrative)

and a no message control. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire relating to "the

effects of format on message processing." Based on an *a priori* power analysis (G*Power 3; Faul

et al., 2007) using an anticipated weak-medium effect size ($f = .20$, $\alpha = .05$, 1-$\beta = .80$) for the

tests of simple main effects and interactions, the target sample was 400 participants (≥ 277, ~100

per condition). Following approval by the Northwestern University institutional review board

(IRB #STU00219356), participants were recruited via Qualtrics ($N = 403$) and subjected to

several screening questions to ensure that all sample criteria were met. That is, all participants

identified as Female (AFAB), were aged 18 to 40, fluent in English, and resided in the United

States. The study was limited to female participants in that age range to ensure that the

experimental stimuli held roughly equivalent narrative (e.g., similar characters, familiar

relationships) and medical (e.g., directly burdened by restrictions on reproductive rights, may

require abortion care) relevance for all participants. Additionally, all participants spent at least 7

minutes completing the questionnaire to minimize inattentive responses.

Participants, on average, were 27.62 years old ($SD = 5.89$) and had 13.58 years of

education ($SD = 2.99$). In terms of political affiliation, the sample featured roughly equal

portions of Democrats (154; 38.2%) and Independents (156; 38.7%), and nearly a quarter of

participants were Republicans (93; 23.1%). Political ideology was similarly diverse: on a scale

from 1 ("Very liberal") to 7 ("Very Conservative"), the mean ideology was 3.75 (*SD* = 1.88),

with the largest proportions rating themselves as 4 (115; 28.5%), 1 (75; 18.6%) 5 (62; 15.4%),

and 7 (47; 11.7%). Most participants (287; 71.2%) were registered to vote, although 99 (24.6%)

indicated they were not and 17 (4.2%) were uncertain of their registration status. Nearly three-

quarters of participants were White (300; 74.4%), with Black (52; 12.9%), Other (24; 6.0%) and

Asian (15, 3.7%) making up the majority of the remainder—of these, about 1 in 6 (70; 17.4%)

also identified as Hispanic or Latinx. Finally, participants in the sample had limited personal

experience with abortion: the vast majority (351; 87.1%) indicated they had not previously had

one, while a modest contingent (43; 10.7%) indicated they had and a smaller number (9; 2.2%)

preferred not to answer.

Procedure

After completing the informed consent process, participants answered four screening

questions to ensure that the recruitment criteria were enforced. Following this, they were asked

to a series of single-item attitude measures related to an assortment of contentious topics (e.g.,

gun violence, climate policy, immigration) in order to minimize priming while acquiring a

preliminary measure of their attitudes toward abortion, and then complete the need for cognition

and need for affect indices. Next, participants were assigned to one of the four conditions, with

those in the non-narrative, narrative, and blended narrative conditions being exposed to their

corresponding persuasive abortion message and then completing three attention check items.

After completing these items, participants were asked to rate their emotional and cognitive

responses to the message. Then, participants in the narrative and blended narrative conditions

rated their experience in regard to the involvement-related mediators. Following these condition-

exclusive items, all participants completed a series of true/false questions related to factual knowledge about abortion, and then the attitudes toward abortion and social support for abortion scales. Once these were completed, participants were asked to answer some additional demographic questions, including political affiliation, race, and voter registration status. Before concluding the questionnaire, participants were exposed to a "knowledge confirmation" page, where the correct answers to the true/false items were provided alongside a brief explanation/correction and a message thanking them for their time and efforts.

Material

The three experimental stimuli utilized in this study were developed by the author (see Appendix B for the complete text of these messages.) Prior to study launch, these stimuli were shared with a series of experts in narrative persuasion and message design to refine the storytelling (e.g., revising dialogue, characterization) and promote parity between conditions (e.g., length, factual content). In addition to covering the same abortion-related topics in general, each message included details corresponding to a series of 10 abortion facts which were used to test participants' knowledge (see Appendix C for a table of these facts and how they were presented in each message.) Additionally, to minimize participant fatigue, the messages were written so as to take no more than 5 to 10 minutes to read, depending on participant ability.

The non-narrative message (1050 words) took the form of a report on abortion in the United States (1050 words) which drew upon numerous credible sources (e.g., scholarly papers, reports from federal agencies, reproductive health organizations) to provide a factual account of abortion care in the United States, including details about the experience, its safety and frequency, and demographics of abortion seekers. In contrast, the narrative message (1604 words) told the story of Lila, a woman who is currently pregnant and considering a medication

abortion, and a conversation with her good friend Sara, who has previous experience with the process. Finally, the blended narrative (1707 words) utilized the plot and characters from the narrative condition, but rather than answering Lila's questions solely from personal experience, Sara guides her on an information-seeking activity that yields answers extracted from the non-narrative report.

Measures

Message-Consistent Outcomes

Abortion-related factual knowledge. To ascertain whether the messages were able to improve factual knowledge about abortion, participants answered a series of 10 true/false items derived from the message content. These items included statements such as "The vast majority of abortions take place in the first trimester of pregnancy," "Abortion has a lower rate of serious complications than childbirth," "Plan B and medication abortion are two names for the same thing," and "Most people who obtain abortions do not have any children." Participants' answers were summed such that a correct answer yielded 1 point toward their total knowledge score ($M = 7.01$, $SD = 2.08$).

Attitudes toward abortion. Adapted from Hill (2004), participants were presented with six phrases to complete the prompt "I believe medication abortion should be legal…" and asked to rate their level of agreement from 1 ("Completely disagree" to 10 ("Completely agree") to gauge attitudes toward abortion. Examples include "When the pregnant person decides they want or need one," "When a pregnant person tried to prevent the pregnancy (e.g., by using birth control, but the birth control method failed)," and "When the pregnant person is a teenager." ($M = 7.06$, $SD = 2.87$, $\alpha = .92$).

Social support for abortion. Based on previous measures of health-related social support (Major et al., 1990) participants indicated their level of agreement regarding actions they would take upon learning a close friend were intending to end their pregnancy through a medication abortion. The list of seven actions included "encourage her," "care for her during the process," and "accompany her to an appointment" alongside reverse items like "talk to her about options other than abortion," and "scold her." Participants indicated how they felt about each response from 1 "completely disagree" to 7 "completely agree." ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.32$, $\alpha = .80$).

Attention checks. To approximate the extent to which participants attended to their respective messages, participants in each message condition answered three multiple-choice questions about their content. For example, participants in the non-narrative condition answered "What percentage of abortion seekers are under the age of 18?" and "How many states enacted new restrictions on medication abortion in 2022?" while those in the narrative and blended narrative conditions answered "What were the names of the two characters in the story?" and "Where did the characters meet to talk?" To promote parity between conditions, the answers to these items were provided near either the beginning or the end of each message. Most participants (208; 65%) answered two or more correctly ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 1.01$).

Moderators

Need for cognition. To capture participants' enjoyment of cognitive stimulation, they completed the 18-item need for cognition scale from Cacioppo et al. (1984). The index requested for participants to rate their level of agreement from 1 ("Completely disagree) to 7 ("Completely agree") with items such as "I would prefer complex to simple problems" and "I prefer my life to be filled with puzzles I must solve" as well as reverse items like "I only think as hard as I have

to" and "I like tasks that require little thought once I've learned them." ($M = 4.22$, $SD = .84$, $\alpha = .79$).

Need for affect. To similarly obtain participants' enjoyment of emotional stimulation, they completed the 10-item need for affect scale from Appel et al. (2012). The index asked participants to rate their level of agreement on a scale from 1 ("Completely disagree") to 7 ("Completely agree") with items like "Emotions help people to get along in life" and "I think it is important to be in touch with my feelings" as well as reverse items like "I would prefer not to experience either the lows or highs of emotion" and "I find strong emotions overwhelming and therefore try to avoid them." ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.02$, $\alpha = .77$).

Prior attitudes toward contentious topics. In order to more discreetly measure participants' prior attitudes toward reproductive rights (defined as "the right to choose when and whether to have a child" in the questionnaire), participants were asked to rate their level of support for six contentious or polarized policy issues (e.g., gun rights, gender-affirming care for transgender individuals, stricter immigration policy) on a scale from 1 ("Completely oppose") to 10 ("Completely support"), including reproductive rights ($M = 7.89$, $SD = 2.88$).

Narrative Involvement

Identification with Lila. To indicate their depth of involvement with the character seeking information about abortion care, participants answered the abbreviated 5-item index from Tal-Or and Cohen (2010). These items included "I think I understand Lila well" and "While reading, I felt like Lila felt." ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.55$, $\alpha = .90$).

Identification with Sara. Participants also completed the same 5-item identification index in relation to Sara, the friend in whom Lila confides. Sample items included "While

reading, I could really "get inside" Sara's head" and "I tend to understand why Sara did what she did" (M = 4.53, SD = 1.62, α = .91).

Transportation. To measure the extent to which participants were involved with the narrative, they completed the short-form transportation scale from Appel et al. (2015). The 5-item index included questions such as "I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the narrative," "I was mentally involved in the narrative while reading it," and "While reading the narrative, I had a vivid image of Lila." (M = 4.44, SD = 1.66, α = .92).

Counterarguing. To determine the extent to which participants mustered cognitive resistance to the message, they answered the 4-item counterarguing scale from Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010). These items included "I sometimes felt like I wanted to 'argue back' against what I was reading" and "I couldn't help thinking about ways that the content was inaccurate or misleading." (M = 3.33, SD = 1.80, α = .90).

Cognitive and Emotional Evaluations

Cognitive message judgments. To capture participants' cognitive evaluation of the message (e.g., Holbrook, 1978), they were given the prompt "To what extent did you find the text you read to be…" and asked to rate the following adjectives from 1 ("Not at all") to 10 ("Very much"): "interesting" (M = 7.54, SD = 1.92), "informative" (M = 7.88, SD = 1.88), and "enjoyable" (M = 6.92, SD = 1.93).

Emotional message judgments. To capture participants' emotional evaluation of the message, they were given the prompt "To what extent did the text you just read make you feel the following emotions?" and asked to rate their emotional response in terms of Ekman's (1999) basic emotions on a scale from 1 ("Not at all") to 7 ("Very much"): "sad" (M = 3.98, SD = 1.83),

"happy" (M = 3.40, SD = 1.84), "angry" (M = 3.49, SD = 2.04), "frightened" (M = 3.12, SD =

1.97), "disgusted" (M = 3.18, SD = 2.09), and "surprised" (M = 3.72, SD = 1.97).

Results

H1: Main effects of message format on message-consistent outcomes

To test H1, I first performed a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with

message format as the fixed factor and attitudes toward abortion, social support for abortion, and

knowledge as outcomes. The MANOVA indicated a non-significant omnibus effect for message

format (Wilk's λ = .99, F(9, 966.34) = 0.323, p = .968, ηp^2 = .002). Examining its univariate

effects, the model reported non-significant effects on attitudes toward abortion, F (3, 402) =

.056, p = .983, ηp^2 = .000; social support for abortion, F (3, 402) = .180 , p = .910, ηp^2 = .001;

and factual knowledge about abortion, F(3, 402) = .538, p = .657, ηp^2 = .004. Further

examination using Tukey's HSD post-hoc test indicated that contrasts between experimental

conditions were non-significant with respect to all three outcomes (all p values were greater than

.7). Thus, I did not find any evidence to support H1 (for a complete outline of research outcomes

by experimental condition, see Table 5.1 for means and SDs).

Table 5.1: *Means (+SDs) for Message Outcomes by Experimental Condition*

	Experimental Condition			
	Narrative (*n* = 105)	**Blended Narrative** (*n* = 107)	**Non-Narrative** (*n* = 108)	**Control** (*n* = 83)
Attitudes	7.09 (2.98)[a]	6.99 (2.79)[a]	7.13 (2.86)[a]	7.01 (2.90)[a]
Social Support	5.01 (1.38)[a]	5.04 (1.10)[a]	5.05 (1.34)[a]	4.92 (1.48)[a]
Knowledge	6.92 (2.15)[a]	6.95 (2.19)[a]	7.23 (1.99)[a]	6.93 (1.96)[a]
Identification (Lila)	4.54 (1.65)[a]	4.55 (1.45)[a]	—	—
Identification (Sara)	4.58 (1.69)[a]	4.49 (1.58)[a]	—	—
Transportation	4.45 (1.77)[a]	4.44 (1.55)[a]	—	—
Counterarguing	3.20 (1.90)[a]	3.47 (1.70)[a]	—	—
Interesting	7.14 (2.04)[a]	7.54 (1.84)[ab]	7.94 (1.94)[b]	—
Informative	7.40 (2.04)[a]	7.74 (1.74)[a]	8.47 (1.72)[b]	—
Enjoyable	6.84 (1.99)[a]	7.15 (1.81)[a]	6.77 (1.97)[a]	—
Sadness	3.51 (1.85)[a]	3.72 (1.63)[a]	4.69 (1.80)[b]	—
Happiness	3.63 (1.79)[a]	3.88 (1.64)[a]	2.69 (1.88)[b]	—
Anger	2.95 (1.87)[a]	2.99 (1.82)[a]	4.50 (2.04)[b]	—
Fear	2.56 (1.74)[a]	2.73 (1.74)[a]	4.50 (2.04)[b]	—
Disgust	2.41 (1.83)[a]	2.66 (1.81)[a]	4.44 (2.00)[b]	—
Surprise	3.40 (1.98)[a]	3.70 (1.87)[a]	4.05 (2.01)[a]	—

Note. Means with differing scripts are significantly different at *p* = .05 based on Tukey's post-hoc test.

H2-H4: Moderation analyses

To test H2-H4 and examine the potential moderation of need for cognition (NFC), need for affect (NFA), and prior attitudes on message-consistent outcomes (attitudes toward abortion, social support for abortion, and factual knowledge about abortion), I utilized PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2018), entering message format as a multicategorical predictor (with the no-message

control as a reference category), message-consistent outcomes as the dependent variables, and NFC, NFA, and prior attitudes as continuous moderators. Each model included a single moderator with the other two moderators included as covariates, allowing me to control for their variance. As predicted by H2a, there was a significant interaction between message format and need for cognition on factual knowledge. Specifically, these significant interactions were between exposure to the non-narrative and NFC (b = .74, SE = .34, p = .028, 95% CI [.08, 1.40]) as well as between exposure to the blended narrative and NFC (b = .65, SE = .37, p = .046, 95% CI [.012, 1.30]). As expected, the moderation was not significant for exposure to the narrative (b = .61, SE = .38, p = .107, 95% CI [-.13, 1.35]). Figure 5.1 illustrates the moderation of NFC on knowledge by condition.

Figure 5.1. *Moderation of Need for Cognition on Knowledge by Condition*
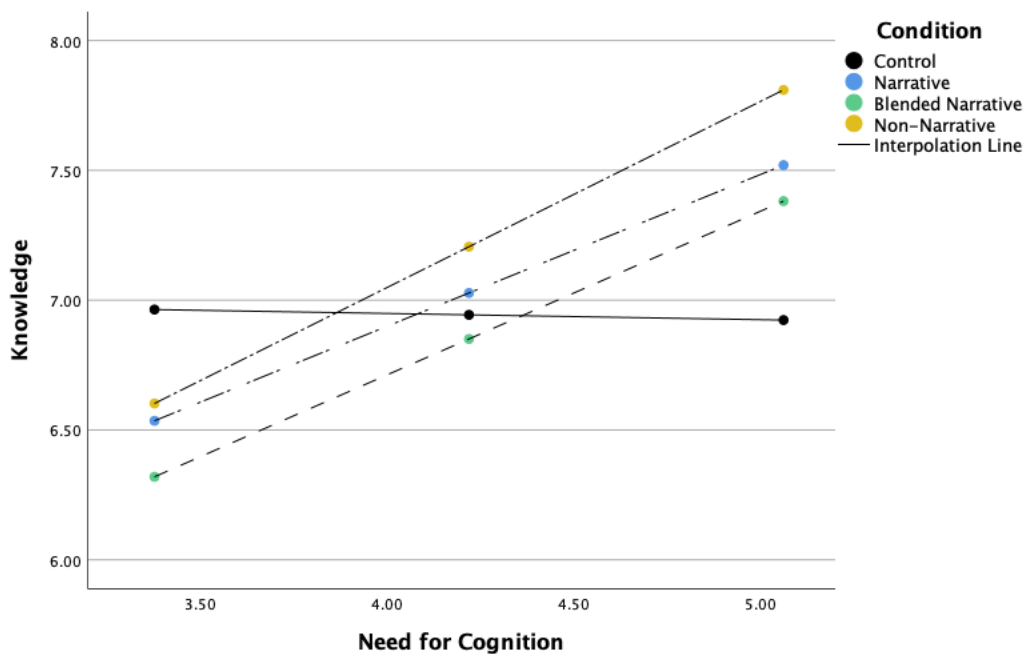
For H2b and H2c, which pertained to the potential moderation of NFC in relation to attitudes toward abortion and social support for abortion respectively, the model did not suggest any significant interactions (*attitudes*: $F(3, 393) = 1.39$, $p = .246$, $\Delta R^2 = .007$; *social support*: $F(3, 393) = 1.14$, $p = .334$, $SE = .37$, $\Delta R^2 = .006$). Because participants with higher levels of NFC were better able to answer the knowledge items in conditions that utilized "non-narrative" content, but this influence did not extend to attitudes toward abortion or social support for abortion, I find only partial support for H2.

In regard to H3a, the model reported a significant moderation of need for affect on the relationship between message format and factual knowledge about abortion. Interestingly, this moderation was significant in the narrative ($b = -.79$, $SE = .29$, $p = .006$, 95% CI [-1.36, -.23]), blended narrative ($b = -.78$, $SE = .29$, $p = .008$, 95% CI [-1.35, -.20]), and non-narrative

conditions ($b = -.56$, $SE = .27$, $p = .042$, 95% CI [-1.10, -.02]) such that greater levels of NFA

were actually associated with *lower* performance in terms of factual knowledge (see Figure 5.2

below). Similar to the findings for H2b and H2c, the analysis did not suggest a significant

moderation of NFA on either attitudes toward abortion, $F(3, 393) = .660$, $p = .578$, $\Delta R^2 = .003$; or

social support for abortion, $F(3, 393) = .376$, $p = .771$, $\Delta R^2 = .002$. Thus, I find no support for H3

due to findings regarding NFA that run counter to my prediction.

Figure 5.2. *Moderation of Need for Affect on Factual Knowledge about Abortion by Condition*
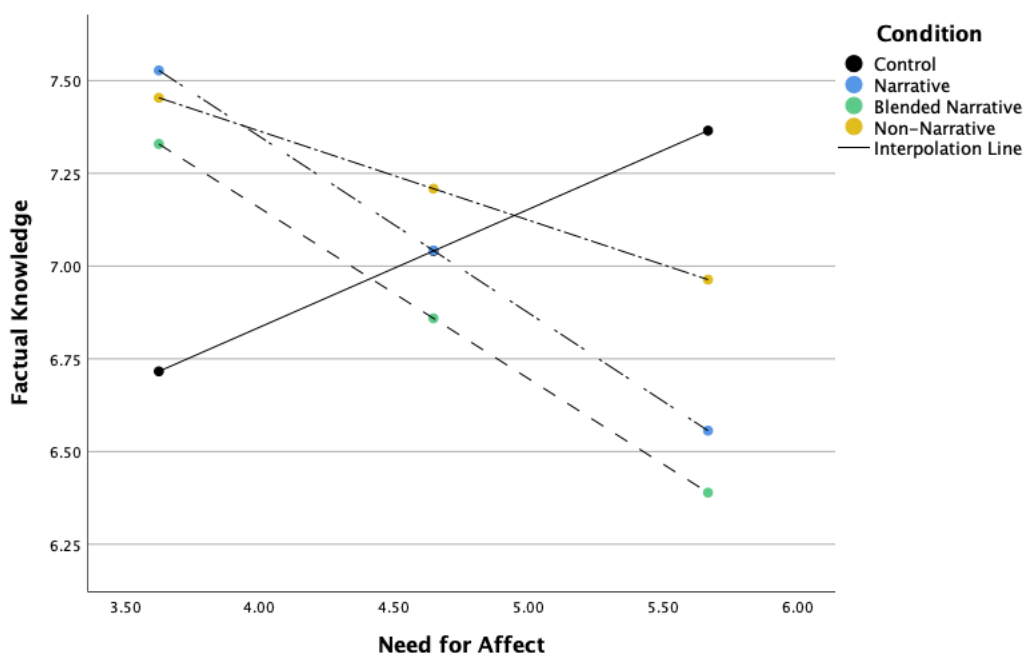
Finally, in regard to H4a & H4b, the PROCESS model did not report a significant

moderation for prior attitudes on the relationship between message format and factual

knowledge, $F(3, 393) = .944$, $p = .419$, $\Delta R^2 = .006$; or attitudes toward abortion, $F(3, 393) =$

$.782$, $p = .505$, $\Delta R^2 = .004$. However, in relation to H4c, the findings indicated a significant

moderation of prior attitudes on social support for abortion among those in the blended narrative

condition (b = -.14, SE = .05, p = .012, 95% CI [-.24, -.03]), but not the narrative (b = .01, SE = .05, p = .973, 95% CI [-.11, .11]) or non-narrative (b = -.01, SE = .06, p = .965, 95%CI [-.11, -.11]), For the blended narrative condition, more favorable prior attitudes were associated with somewhat *lower* ratings for social support compared to the other conditions—a curious finding, particularly since participants in the blended condition also reported somewhat greater levels of social support among participants with less favorable attitudes. Nonetheless, I do not find support for H4 given the findings do not match my predictions.

Figure 5.3. *Moderation of Prior Attitudes toward Abortion on Social Support by Condition*
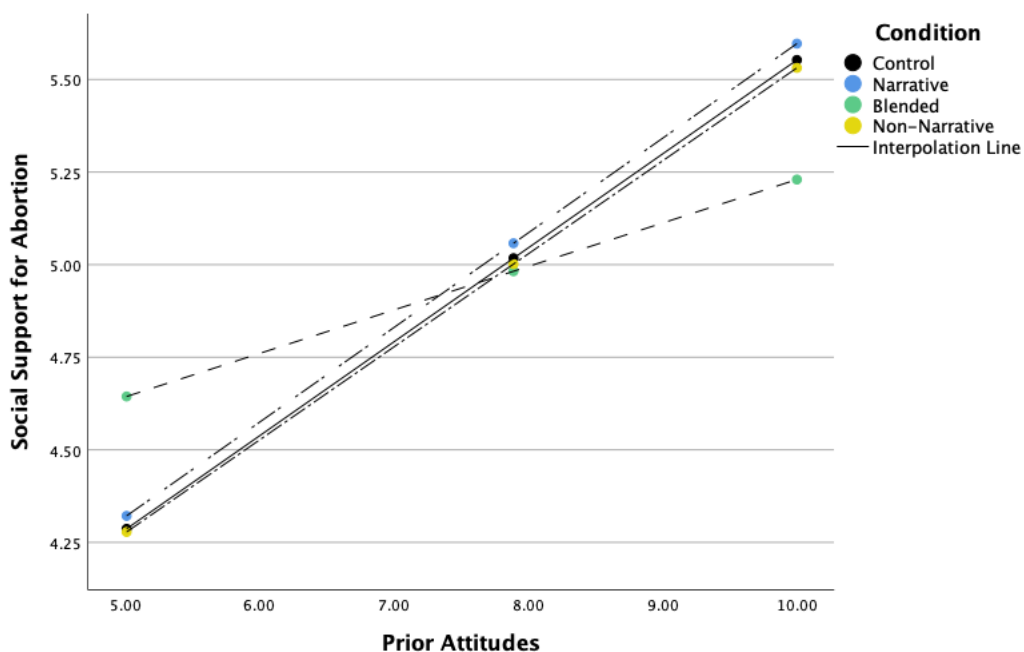
RQ1-RQ3: Differences in cognitive/emotional evaluations and involvement

Turning to the research questions, independent samples *t*-tests were used to assess whether there were significant differences between the narrative and blended narrative conditions in relation to the involvement-related mediators (identification with Lila, identification with Sara, transportation, and counterarguing; RQ1). Participants in the narrative

did not experience significantly greater levels of identification with Lila ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.65$) than those in the blended narrative ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.45$) ($t(210) = -.05$; $p = .961$), nor did they experience significantly greater levels of identification with Sara (*narrative*: $M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.69$ vs. *blended narrative*: $M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.58$) ($t(210) = .39$; $p = .696$). Further, those in the narrative condition were not significantly more transported into the narrative ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.77$) than those in the blended narrative ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.55$) ($t(210) = .06$; $p = .949$). Finally, there were no significant differences in terms of counterarguing between the two conditions (*narrative*: $M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.90$; *blended narrative*: $M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.70$) ($t(206.70) = -1.11$; $p = .270$). The negligible differences between the narrative and blended narrative in terms of involvement suggest that the inclusion of statistical evidence in a story does not significantly impede involvement.

Next, I conducted a MANOVA with message format as the fixed factor and the three cognitive message judgments (interesting, informative, and enjoyable) as outcomes to determine whether there were significant differences in participants' cognitive evaluations of the messages (RQ1). Interestingly, the MANOVA indicated a significant omnibus effect for message format (Wilk's $\lambda = .90$, $F (6, 630) = 5.708$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .052$. Probing its univariate effects, the analysis reported a significant effect in terms of both interest, $F (2, 317) = 4.599$, $p = .011$, $\eta p^2 = .028$; and informativeness, $F (2, 317) = 9.540$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .028$; but not enjoyment, $F (2, 317) = 1.190$, $p = .306$, $\eta p^2 = .007$. More specifically, Tukey's HSD post-hoc test indicated that participants found the non-narrative more interesting ($M = 7.94$, $SE = .183$, 95% CI [7.57, 8.30]) than the narrative ($M = 7.14$, $SE = .186$, 95% CI [6.78, 7.51]), and also that the non-narrative was more informative ($M = 8.47$, $SE = .177$, 95% CI [8.13, 8.82]) than both the narrative ($M = 7.40$, $SE = .177$, 95% CI [7.05, 7.75]) and the blended narrative ($M = 7.74$, $SE = .177$, 95% CI [7.40,

8.09]). Thus the blended narrative, which was a synthesis of content from both the narrative and non-narrative conditions did not exceed the sum of its parts in terms of cognitive evaluations.

Finally, I conducted a second MANOVA to assess differences in emotional evaluation, using message format as the fixed factor with the six basic emotions as outcomes (RQ2). As with RQ1, the MANOVA reported a significant omnibus effect for message format (Wilk's $\lambda = .74$, F (6, 624) = 8.491, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .140$). In terms of univariate effects, message format significantly influenced participants' ratings of sadness, F (2, 317) = 13.500, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 =$ .078); happiness, F (2, 317) = 13.316, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .077$; anger, F (2, 317) = 22.831, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .126$; fear, F (2, 317) = 20.791, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .116$; and disgust, F (2, 317) = 37.165, $p <$ .001, $\eta p^2 = .0190$; with a borderline significant effect on surprise, F (2, 317) = 2.909, $p = .056$, $\eta p^2 = .018$.

Further examination of these relationships indicated that the non-narrative elicited significantly greater sadness ($M = 4.69$, $SE = .169$, 95% CI [4.35, 5.02]) than the narrative ($M = 3.51$, $SE = .172$, 95% CI [3.18, 3.85]) or blended narrative ($M = 3.72$, $SE = .170$, 95% CI [3.39, 4.06])), and also significantly less happiness ($M = 2.69$, $SE = .171$, 95% CI [2.36, 3.32]) than either the narrative ($M = 3.63$, $SE = .173$, 95% CI [3.29, 3.97]) or blended narrative conditions ($M = 3.89$, $SE = .171$, 95% CI [3.54, 4.22]). Similarly, the non-narrative induced greater anger ($M = 4.50$, $SE = .184$, 95% CI [4.14, 4.86]) and fear ($M = 4.06$, $SE = .179$, 95% CI [3.70, 4.41]) than the narrative (*anger*: $M = 2.95$, $SE = .187$, 95% CI [2.36, 3.03]; *fear*: $M = 2.56$, $SE = .181$, 95% CI [2.21, 2.92]) or blended narrative (*anger*: $M = 2.99$, $SE = .185$, 95% CI [2.63, 3.36]; *fear*: $M = 2.73$, $SE = .180$, 95% CI [2.38, 3.08]). Finally, the non-narrative elicited more disgust ($M = 4.44$, $SE = .181$, 95% CI [4.09, 4.80]) than the other two conditions (*narrative*: $M = 2.41$ $SE = .184$, 95% CI [2.05, 2.77]; *blended narrative: M = 2.66, SE = .182*, 95% CI [2.31, 3.02]). In

short, the non-narrative condition provoked more negative affect and less positive affect than the narrative or blended narrative messages.

Discussion

The present study sought to compare the effects of different persuasive message formats in relation to their influences on abortion-related attitudes, social support, and knowledge, as well as differences in mechanisms of involvement and cognitive/emotional evaluations. The findings provide insight into the nuances of format which suggest that there may be both advantages and disadvantages to the blending of narrative and non-narrative content, offering considerable opportunity for future research regarding this approach. Further, this experiment contributes to our understanding of the roles played by moderators of individual difference such as need for cognition and need for affect with regard to how they influence the processing of statistical and anecdotal evidence.

Regarding the contention that a blended narrative could combine anecdotal and statistical evidence to exert a greater impact on message-consistent outcomes than a narrative or non-narrative message (HI), the findings of the current study do not support that hypothesis. However, mean scores for the message-consistent outcomes (abortion-related attitudes, social support, and knowledge) were quite high across all conditions, which may suggest a ceiling effect driven by the target population. Notably, women aged 18-40 in the United States are more likely than their older counterparts to support legal abortion under any circumstance and more likely to identify as pro-choice (Gallup, n.d.b), and although the mean political ideology was near the mid-point of the scale this diversity of viewpoint was not present in relation to reproductive rights. This underscores the need for subsequent research to allocate sufficient

resources toward ensuring a more even distribution of abortion attitudes in the sample to strengthen its conclusions regarding message format.

Turning to the hypotheses regarding moderators of individual difference (H2-H4), I find a mixture of results that warrant deeper investigation. With regard to need for cognition (NFC; H2), the only significant moderation was found in relation to participants' factual knowledge about abortion. As this moderation was significant only for the non-narrative and blended narrative conditions, I found further support for the association between greater need for cognition and the use of statistical evidence to promote message-consistent outcomes (Haddock et al., 2008). Contrastingly, the moderation of need for affect (NFA, H3) was significant with regard to factual knowledge in all three message conditions, rather than the narrative and blended narrative as predicted. Interestingly, higher levels of NFA were associated with poorer performance—this may reflect a failure of the stimuli to elicit sufficient emotional response, thereby limiting engagement with the content of the message for these participants (Appel & Richter, 2012). Regarding prior attitudes toward abortion (H4), that the moderation was significant only for the blended narrative and only in relation to social support defies a straightforward explanation. While it is possible that minute story differences between the narrative and blended narrative may have contributed to this distinction, this finding is in need of additional scrutiny before stronger conclusions can be drawn. Nonetheless, these results contribute to a deeper understanding of how NFC and NFA can influence the processing of different message formats, particularly in relation to contentious issues.

In regard to the research question that asked whether there were differences in involvement between message formats (RQ1), the findings are a cause for measured optimism regarding the blended narrative format. As the mean scores in both conditions were above the

midpoint for narrative/character involvement and below the midpoint for counterarguing, these findings suggest that the blended narrative format does not impede identification or transportation and does not intensify counterarguing, and thus maintains the ostensible advantages of narrative despite the incorporation of non-narrative elements. Although this finding is somewhat tempered by the limited difference between conditions in terms of message-consistent outcomes, it still gestures toward the promise of blended narrative as a way to incorporate differing evidence types into a story.

Regarding differences in cognitive evaluations of the messages (RQ2), the results indicate that the non-narrative was significantly more interesting than the narrative and more informative than both the narrative and blended narrative—but not significantly more enjoyable. Because the non-narrative format differs markedly in its presentation of information (e.g., more explicitly informative, no character/setting information), it is not entirely surprising that participants would perceive it to be more informative and potentially more interesting (e.g., Greene & Brinn, 2003). However, the lack of difference in enjoyment between conditions suggests there is yet potential for a more effective integration of anecdotal and statistical evidence to garner even more positive evaluations from the audience: Future iterations of this comparison should strive to enhance these qualities in the story-based formats. In terms of emotional evaluations (RQ3), the finding that the narrative and blended narrative both elicited more positive affect and less negative affect than the non-narrative may be a particular boon in this present context. Although emotions like fear and anger undoubtedly play a significant role in persuasion in many contexts (e.g., Tannenbaum et al., 2015; Walter et al., 2018), one might argue that they play an outsized role in the abortion debate, and thus a narrative that elicits

happiness through the friendship between two women in relation to abortion may be a step in the

right direction.

On the whole, the findings of the present study provide groundwork for further

investigation of differences in message format by teasing apart some of the complexities of this

comparison. In particular, the results regarding need for cognition and need for affect suggest

that the attributes of the message audience may impose particular demands for the design of

blended narrative messages. More specifically, that maximal effect may be found by ensuring

that the incorporation of statistical evidence does not come at the expense of the emotional

content of the story. Further, the potential for stories to elicit positive affect in relation to content

about controversial issues should prove to be a great advantage in striving to promote message-

consistent outcomes. Thus, it is my hope that future research will determine that blended

narratives can successfully bear the weight of anecdotal and statistical evidence to promote

message-consistent outcomes.

Limitations

The present study also bears some notable limitations that should be acknowledged. First,

given the formative nature of the research and limited resources for the project, the experimental

stimuli did not undergo extensive pretesting prior to data collection. Although participants'

cognitive and emotional evaluations of the stimuli were generally favorable across the board,

pretesting of the stimuli could ensure that any differences between conditions (or lack thereof)

were not due to issues of quality (e.g., in theory, a good narrative should be more interesting and

enjoyable than a non-narrative). This also gestures toward the challenges of comparing narrative

and non-narrative more broadly: a good story generally requires more content to make its impact

(dialogue, events, characterization, emotion) than a non-narrative, and the relative brevity of the

story stimuli suggest a "minimum dose" opportunity for involvement (e.g., Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016) that may inhibit its potential for influence. An iterative feedback and evaluation process may be employed in future research to allay potential concerns about message quality, and future research may need to compare longer-term exposures to non-narrative and narrative messages.

Further, the present study utilized third-person narration in the narrative and blended narrative conditions to promote greater parity with the non-narrative condition. Although some studies suggest that a first-person point of view may hold advantages in persuasion (e.g., Chen & Bell, 2023; Ma et al., 2022), this is not always the case (e.g., Chen, 2016). Accordingly, future research should consider whether a particular point of view is more effective in relation to more controversial topics (e.g., Christy, 2018) as well as within the blended narrative format. Finally, the potential ceiling effect noted in relation to the message-consistent outcomes may have obscured possible findings regarding the efficacy of different message formats. As most participants indicated largely favorable attitudes toward abortion prior to exposure to the messages, it seems likely that this may have influenced the largely non-significant results. While future research will undoubtedly allocate greater resources to ensuring a larger portion of "persuadable" participants in the sample, the nuances of message processing evidenced within the present study nonetheless contribute to our understanding of different formats and forms of evidence.

CHAPTER SIX: GENERAL DISCUSSION

Implications

This series of studies contributes to our understanding of how to engage contentious topics through narrative persuasion by illuminating the influence of the depictions and processes that characterize abortion storytelling. Through a theoretically-guided survey of the landscape of narrative abortion representation, the first study highlights how these stories are contoured by character and narrative features that are predicted to shape involvement, and offers recommendations for storytellers to better utilize these theories to enhance the impact of their narratives. In turn, the second study manipulates two such features to demonstrate their effect on involvement and illustrate the complications that arise when striving to induce involvement in relation to a controversial issue. Extending the line of thought from the first two studies, the third proposes a "blended narrative" approach to abortion persuasion that considers the interaction between audience (through individual differences) and evidence (anecdotal vs. statistical) to demonstrate its potential as well as possible pitfalls. Taken together, their findings suggest that stories do not necessarily provide a shortcut to persuasion that bypasses cognitive and emotional resistance (e.g., Moyer-Gusé, 2008)—much as one might expect for an issue as socially and politically divisive as abortion. However, they also provide valuable insights that might enhance the quality and impact of future persuasive narratives on controversial issues.

First, in terms of general representation, these narratives are situated in a media landscape that has seemingly become increasingly receptive to storylines that engage with polarized issues. Although it is possible that the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* may lead to a pruning of the new outgrowth in abortion representation, contemporary storylines largely reflect positive trends in terms of the promotion of involvement with characters seeking reproductive care. The analysis

indicates that, with regard to variables associated with the extended elaboration likelihood model and the model of narrative comprehension and engagement, storytellers have generally conformed to the guidance of theory through depictions that emphasize the deeper engagement with the story and greater comprehensibility of the narrative situation. The findings relating to social cognitive theory are more mixed: These stories often feature appealing models who experience few negative consequences, and yet they might also establish an expectation that one will receive at least some negative reinforcement—and offer little insight into the experience of abortion care. Nonetheless, with continued attention to the contextualizing features that contribute toward a sympathetic, comprehensible, and realistic presentation of the topic, storytellers should feel emboldened to tell these stories to attenuate the stigma and negative affect that drives the contentious nature of abortion (Zhuang & Guidry, 2022).

This need for care with sensitive subjects is starkly illustrated through the second study's findings regarding character disposition: If all it takes to prejudice the viewer against a character is an initial report of misbehavior, which impedes involvement and attenuates support for the topic, then even well-intentioned persuasive narratives could inadvertently promote negative sentiment toward the focal issue. The demand for characters seeking abortions to be on their "best behavior" in order to elicit deeper involvement from the audience may impose some limitations in terms of persuasive storytelling, but given the importance of identification to narrative influence it is a guideline worth observing. Additionally, the null effect of consent status suggests that not every contextual feature contributes to the viewer's perception of a contentious issue, regardless of their relevance to discourse surrounding the topic. Beyond the nuances of these contextual features, the study further underscores the significance of involvement (or a lack thereof) in determining whether narratives can successfully persuade.

In terms of how this involvement is shaped by message format, the blended narrative format proposed in the third study demonstrates a glimmer of potential for narrative persuasion that blends statistical and anecdotal evidence. Because there were no significant differences in terms of identification with characters, transportation, or counterarguing between the narrative and blended narrative, the introduction of "strong arguments" into a narrative is not detrimental to audience engagement. Additionally, although the blended narrative did not outperform the other message formats in terms of message-consistent outcomes, it did not foster greater reactance or resistance to the message that could fuel a backfire effect. Thus, there is promise in further study of the blended narrative approach, particularly with more extensive stimuli that might better facilitate meaningful involvement with the narrative and characters (e.g., a storyline on a popular television show rather than a standalone stimulus.). Further, the findings regarding need for cognition and need for affect suggest that one's preferences for differing levels of cognitive and emotional engagement can have either a beneficial or detrimental effect in message processing. While the findings suggest that greater need for cognition enhanced the processing of statistical evidence and greater need for affect was associated with poorer processing of both kinds of evidence, it is possible that the findings may have differed given narrative stimuli that elicited stronger emotional responses from participants—an additional reason to compare more extensive stimuli.

Taken together, the relatively bleak findings of these three studies examining narrative persuasion on contentious topics illustrate why narratives are useful in persuasion while also highlighting a potential boundary condition for narrative influence. Although narratives may be effective in overcoming (some forms of) resistance, it seems probable that the nature of

resistance to persuasion related to health screenings is quite different from resistance to persuasion in regard to an emotionally- and politically-charged issue like abortion. Accordingly, the theoretical foundations underlying narrative persuasion may need to be expanded to accommodate or account for controversial content in persuasion. Through greater consideration of the specificities of representation (through contextualizing character and narrative features) and message format (in terms of the provision of statistical and anecdotal evidence), alongside moderators of individual difference that should guide the processing of narrative messages, it is probable that new theoretical paradigms might emerge to cater to the particularities of contentious contexts. In turn, these theories may help us to understand whether touching tales can change hearts and minds in relation to touchy topics.

Future Directions

Considering that the topic of abortion is a single case in the study of contentious topics, future research will need to determine if these findings hold true in relation to other controversial issues. Undoubtedly, further study of persuasive messages to influence feelings regarding topics like gender-affirming care for transgender individuals, gun control, and climate change—with particular attention to the roles played by contextual features and message format in eliciting involvement—will help us better understand whether there might be a coherent strategy for engaging these and similarly polarized subjects. Given that the majority of findings regarding narrative persuasion in general are drawn from uncontroversial contexts, there is considerable uncertainty regarding the ideal approach for value-laden or emotionally-fraught topics.

Additionally, the combination of statistical and anecdotal evidence within a single message (i.e., a blended narrative) is still a relatively untested message format. Given the relative lack of evidence in support or in opposition to this approach, our understanding of narrative

persuasion could be greatly expanded by deploying this format in relation to more traditional narrative topics alongside more contentious ones. In light of the limited findings that suggest this combination can be particularly effective in regard to more anodyne subjects (e.g., testing behavior, cosmetics), continued study of how these forms of evidence (as well as moderators of individual difference) influence the processing of persuasive narratives will be essential for deepening our understanding of when and how the stories we tell can shift perspectives on contentious topics.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Detailed Synopsis of Experimental Stimulus for Study 2

The excerpt is composed of scenes from Season 3, Episode 2: "If You're Breathing, You're A Liar." At the outset, the protagonist Chloe is seated in a coffee shop with two acquaintances from school, Clay and Ani. "Did you tell Bryce?" are the first words out of Clay's mouth, though the audience does not know to what he is referring until later. As Chloe explains that she did not tell him, the show flashes back to an earlier encounter between Chloe and Bryce, who is revealed to be her boyfriend. In this interaction, he explains how he feels that all isn't right in their relationship, and apologize for his past behavior while begging for her not to give up on him, though the expression on Chloe's face suggests she is uncertain how she feels. The storyline then cuts to a later scene of Chloe crying in a school hallway, as her friend Zach enters and tries to comfort her. She confides that she has just learned she's pregnant, but has not told Bryce and does not plan to do so. Zach asks what she's going to do about the pregnancy, and Chloe says she "has no idea."

We next see Chloe sitting in an office—a woman enters with a folder, and says that the "ultrasound looks good" and that the exam went well. She shows the ultrasound to a visibly uncomfortable Chloe, then asks her why she is here today. Chloe explains that she wants to get an abortion, but that she can't afford it and needs help accessing programs to obtain one. The woman explains that there are many programs available to expectant mothers, and passes some literature to Chloe as she begins to explain how "California makes it easier than most states to end a baby's life," and that her role is to help "mothers understand the choice they're facing." Chloe then expresses confusion as she attempts to confirm whether the clinic offers abortion care, to which the woman clarifies that this is a "counseling and resource service" that is "here to

help [her] make the right choice." At that moment, Chloe looks crestfallen and the woman's voice fades as the storyline transitions to a new scene.

"I'm so sorry that happened to you, Chloe," Zach says, sitting across a park table from Chloe. She asks Zach if he thinks she'd be a good mother, and he provides his full support for whatever course of action she chooses, even offering to claim the child as his own or help her raise it. Chloe pushes back against that idea, as both would have to give up on their dreams, and she determines that she doesn't want to be a mother—at least not yet. She questions whether Zach thinks that's bad, to which he quickly affirms that he would support Chloe whatever her choice.

We then see the two of them in an exam room, as a nurse inquires about the circumstances around Chloe's pregnancy. She explains that she is 8 weeks pregnant, and that she became pregnant following sex with her boyfriend because she had missed a few days of birth control pills. After this, the nurse explains the abortion procedure to Chloe and instructs her to return on Saturday before cutting to a scene where Chloe is having a tense dinner with Bryce's mother, who apologizes for her son's past behavior. She goes on to explain, in the context of her father, her ex-husband, and now her son, that the men in her life share a streak of cruelty that suggests they are unfit to be parents—even though she does not know Chloe's situation. Chloe is stunned at this admission, and the camera fixes on her expression for a moment before cutting to Zach and Chloe arriving at the abortion clinic.

As they approach the clinic entrance, a crowd of protesters have gathered out front and have begun to yell at Chloe to "think of her baby." Then, a woman in an orange "Clinic Escort" vest approaches and offers to "walk [them] past the crazies." As they are walking, Zach expresses disgust for the protesters' behavior because "this is hard enough," to which the escort

suddenly retorts "Well, it should be hard—killing is a sin, but it's not too late! This is the moment where you decide the fate of two souls. Choose wisely, or you'll regret this day until you die!" as she thrust a replica of a bloody fetus into Chloe's hands. "What is wrong with you?!" Chloe calls out, as Zach ushers her into the clinic.

We next see Chloe lying back in the operating room just before the procedure. The nurse from before is present to offer Chloe support, and the camera focuses on Chloe's face while we hear the sounds of the procedure. Afterward, the storyline shows Chloe thinking about her experience as the show cuts between several locations (the recovery room, Chloe's bedroom, and finally a classroom) before we see Chloe and Zach walking toward the same park table where they were seated. He expresses surprise that she's back at school already, and asks how she's feeling. She just says "Better" before explaining that she will pay him back for the cost of the procedure. She then confesses that she won't be coming back to their high school in the fall, and that she is breaking things off with Bryce for good. Zach tentatively asks if he can see her this summer, to which Chloe clarifies "just to hang out"—Zach nods, and Chloe smiles before saying "Okay."

Then, the show cuts back to the present, where we see Zach and Chloe seated on an outdoor staircase at night. He asks if she "ever thinks of it, now." "Every day," she responds, before explaining that she varies between feeling fine and being ashamed of the abortion. Zach urges her not to feel that way—he offers that "Shame is what other people put on you, and they make it like you have to own it or something, but you don't. Let it go." In the silence that follows, Chloe and Zach look off into the distance as the screen cuts to black.

Main Cast

Chloe Rice	**Zach Dempsey**	**Bryce Walker**

Appendix B. Experimental Stimuli for Study 3

Non-Narrative Messsage

In the United States, abortion is a commonplace form of reproductive health care for many different kinds of people. Although many assume that abortion care is primarily sought by teenagers or individuals without children, this is not the case: According to a report from the Guttmacher Institute, the majority of abortion patients are in their 20s, while women in their 30s make up the next largest age-group—women younger than 18 account for only 4% of patients, and a significant proportion (59%) of patients already have at least one child. Although no single racial or ethnic group represents a majority of abortion seekers, most patients identify as heterosexual, have at least a high school education, and report a religious affiliation. In short, there is considerable diversity in the patient population for reproductive healthcare.

The vast majority of abortions (92%) occur in the first trimester of pregnancy (Weeks 0-12), when they can often be managed through a medication abortion. This term is typically used to describe a series of two self-administered pills a woman can take in the privacy of her own home to end a pregnancy. This stands in contrast to a surgical abortion, which is performed in a clinic by a medical professional. As of 2022, medication abortions account for the majority of abortion procedures. According to research from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), medication abortion risks are comparable to commonly prescribed medications like antibiotics. Rates of serious complications are very low, with far less than 1 in 100,000 women experiencing life-threatening outcomes. Compared to childbirth, where the risk of death is nearly 24 per 100,000 women, medication abortion is exceedingly safe. Importantly, abortion care may be necessary even when an individual had planned to carry the child to term: some medical issues that arise during pregnancy, like infection, high blood

pressure, or internal bleeding, may require the termination of the pregnancy in order to save the life of the mother. In other words, abortion can be a life-saving and medically necessary procedure for people who are pregnant, whether they had intended to end the pregnancy or not.

Medication abortion is different from emergency contraception, also known as Plan B, which prevents pregnancy by delaying ovulation. Instead, a medication abortion is used after the egg has been fertilized. The typical process of obtaining a medication abortion begins through contact with a healthcare provider: after discussing the available options and determining that a medication abortion is the right choice, the individual will receive guidance from the provider about how to self-manage their medication abortion. In most cases, they will first take a pill (mifepristone) which stops the pregnancy from growing, and then take a second pill (misoprostol) within the next 48 hours to induce cramping and bleeding that empties the uterus. The process of a medication abortion tends to take 4-5 hours and can feel similar to a heavy, crampy period, but that discomfort can be eased with pain medications like ibuprofen. After passing the pregnancy tissue, the cramping and bleeding will slow, though some individuals report periodic cramping over the next 1 or 2 days. Thus, from start to finish, the process of obtaining and recovering from a medication abortion is often quite brief, usually just a few days.

Medication abortion can offer a more comfortable and accessible experience than a surgical abortion for many individuals. Although it is not uncommon to feel anxiety or uncertainty about the process of self-managing an abortion, women who have chosen a medication abortion have reported that the counseling they received from their provider on how to navigate the process helped them feel more confident and typically resulted in an uncomplicated termination. Medication abortion also allowed them to feel greater control over their experience, including the timing of their symptoms, planning around work and caring

duties, maximizing their personal comfort, and making plans for a friend or loved one to keep them company. In terms of accessibility, medication abortion can help overcome key barriers to receiving care through a combination of telemedicine and mail delivery as an equivalently safe alternative to clinic visits. In addition to the logistical burdens mail delivery can ease, such as taking time off work, arranging child care, and coordinating transportation, it can reach even those residing in areas that are remote and/or underserved by healthcare providers, potentially saving many miles of travel in addition to time.

However, access to medication abortion is currently under threat from both legal and legislative action by parties opposed to reproductive rights. Last year, state lawmakers in 22 states introduced a total of 118 restrictions on medication abortions, and anti-abortion activists have recently targeted mifepristone's approval by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) with a lawsuit to restrict its availability nationwide. This is despite the fact its safety has been demonstrated through over two decades of study since its approval: the FDA recently reported that mifepristone's "efficacy and safety have become well-established by both research and experience." This lawsuit also does not reflect popular opinion: according to a recent poll from Pew Research, only 22% of adults believe medication abortion should be illegal in their state. This reflects a public consensus toward preserving access to reproductive healthcare, despite a vocal minority that want to take away the right to choose when and whether to have a child.

Although mifepristone remains available for the moment, pending the resolution of multiple legal cases, access to this medication is in jeopardy. Nearly 1 in 4 women will have an abortion in their lifetime, so it is important to do what we can to protect their right to safe and legal reproductive healthcare. Beyond supporting candidates for political office who have pledged to protect reproductive rights, there are many actions that you can take to support the

important people in your life who might experience an unplanned pregnancy. By helping them find more information about their options or schedule an appointment; by offering assistance before, during, or after the process; and by standing up for their right to reproductive decision-making, you can offer crucial support during a time when they might be feeling anxious, overwhelmed, or uncertain. As long as the right to choose is being targeted by political and legal forces, women everywhere need the support of their friends and family.

Narrative Message

On a crisp and sunny spring day, a woman in her late twenties is seated on the outdoor patio of a café—she fidgets in her seat, sipping anxiously from a coffee cup, as her eyes scan the streets in search of someone. When that someone fails to appear, she sighs and pulls her phone from the pocket of her blazer, scrolling through a feed full of headlines for articles that she couldn't bring herself to actually read—at least not right now. This continues for a minute or two until a shadow casts itself across her screen. Looking up from her phone, her mouth breaks into a smile as she stands to enthusiastically embrace a tall woman in an oversized sweater. "Sara, I'm so glad you're here!" she exclaims, her face buried in her friend's shoulder such that her voice was muffled by the sweater's plush knit. "*I'm happy to see you too, Lila,*" Sara wheezes, the vigor of the hug expelling the breath from her lungs. When Lila finally releases her, Sara takes a deep breath before smoothing her hair back into place and taking a seat opposite her friend. They exchange pleasantries as Sara scans the menu, ordering a latte from the bubbly waitress patrolling nearby—but when she turns back to Lila her mouth is tense with worry.

"Everything okay, Lila?" Sara asks, her brow furrowing at her friend's apparent distress. "I'm sorry for asking to meet on such short notice and with so little context, Sara, but something's been weighing on me and I wasn't getting anywhere by myself," she responds

softly, glancing away from Sara. She takes Lila's hand warmly, her face softening as she does so: "No apology necessary—what else are friends for?" Reassured by this, Lila relaxes a bit, leaning forward to sip from her coffee before continuing. "So, Michael and I are expecting again…" she confides with a tremor of uncertainty in her voice. There is a note of concern in Sara's response: "Is everything okay? You don't seem as excited as you were the last time…or the time before." Lila shakes her head. "We were planning on having another child—eventually. But the timing isn't great." She takes a deep breath, "Honestly, it's all pretty overwhelming. Money has been tight lately, between inflation and surprise expenses for the kids, and I've only been back to work for a few months now. Michael is doing his best to make ends meet, but it's an ongoing struggle with two kids at home. Now my mother has to go back to work, so I have to add childcare costs to the pile…" Her lip quivers, and Sara gives her hand a supportive squeeze. "I had no idea things were so tough right now. You know I'm always here for you, right? Whatever you need," Sara says with deep sincerity. "I really appreciate you saying that, Sara, because I actually do need something from you: advice."

Sara raises an eyebrow quizzically as Lila continues: "Remember a few years ago, right after you broke up with Nico? You were worried you were pregnant and…" Lila's voice trails off as Sara's face lights up with recognition. "There's no reason to feel uncomfortable, Lila—abortion is a common form of reproductive healthcare," Sara replies matter-of-factly, "About 1 in 4 women will have an abortion during their lifetime, and I'm not ashamed to count myself among them." Lila looks relieved to have not needed to say it aloud. "I never thought I'd be in this position, but that's why it's important to hear about your experience before I make a decision," Lila explains, looking at Sara expectantly. "To start, do you mind if I ask how far along you are?" Sara asks. "I'd guess a little over 6 weeks, probably? I thought my period was

just late…until the nausea set in," she utters wryly, groaning dramatically for emphasis. Sara lets out a low chuckle at this. "Well, since it's so early, you should be able to get a medication abortion—they're more common than surgical abortions these days. It's usually an option if you're in the first trimester, which is when most abortions occur anyway."

Lila looks at her with a puzzled expression. "Is that the same as Plan B?" she asks. "Plan B is different," Sara explains, "Emergency contraception like Plan B can keep you from getting pregnant by delaying ovulation, but a medication abortion is used when you're already pregnant. It's actually two different pills you can take in the privacy of your own home to end a pregnancy: the first you take to stop your pregnancy from growing, and the second you take in the next two days to induce cramping and bleeding to empty the uterus." Lila winces involuntarily at this, prompting Sara to quickly add, "While it isn't the most pleasant experience in the world, the doctor told me I could take pain medication like ibuprofen, and it really helped with the discomfort. Honestly, it felt like a heavy period."

Lila gazes pensively into her coffee for a moment before speaking up. "I feel silly even asking, but…how safe is it? I feel like I've heard a lot of conflicting information and it's hard to know what's accurate." Sara gives her a reassuring smile: "It's not at all silly to ask, but would you believe me if I told you that it's much, much safer than giving birth? Like, not even comparable levels of risk. While you should definitely check in with a healthcare professional if you are worried, the risk of complications from a medication abortion is extremely low. Besides cramping and bleeding, the worst part is probably some numbness from sitting on the toilet for a few hours." Lila nods gently, taking this in, as Sara continues, "My doctor gave me the complete rundown on what to expect, so it was easy to get over my nerves about the whole experience."

Lila's face is awash with relief as she hears this: "I appreciate you clearing that up for me, Sara—the idea of ending a pregnancy had always seemed scarier." After a moment of reflection, she asks, "Would you be comfortable sharing why you chose to have a medication abortion?" "Besides not wanting to have a kid with that manchild?" Sara replies jokingly, before responding in earnest, "In all seriousness, it helped me feel like I was in control of the experience: I invited my sister over after work to calm my nerves and keep me company, got a hot water bottle for the cramps, and settled in for the evening. I couldn't really take time off work for a clinic appointment, so a surgical abortion didn't seem like the right choice for me— still, I'm grateful I had options."

Hearing this, the corner of Lila's mouth turns down. "Part of the reason I was so nervous was how people talk about it these days—the conversation just seems…extreme. I can't read the news without being reminded of some new abortion restriction being passed," she says, her voice heavy with fatigue, "and even though I never expected I'd need one, I also didn't think I'd have to worry my right to choose might actually be taken away." "Seriously—they actually tried to stop medication abortion by targeting the FDA approval of one of the pills, mifepristone!" Sara said indignantly. "They've been studying it for over twenty years; I think the FDA would know if it was unsafe." Sara massages her temple as if soothing a headache, "I wonder if the people who want to stop all abortions realize that most people who need abortions already have children, and there can be life-threatening medical reasons why someone may need to end a pregnancy." Lila pipes up, "I don't think most people actually want it to be illegal, even if some don't personally agree with it." Sara hums in agreement, letting that same fatigue slip into her expression as she takes a long sip from her latte.

After a moment of silence, Lila speaks with a newfound resolve, "I really am grateful that you were willing to share your experience with me, Sara. I think you've helped me make up my mind." Sara takes her hand again in response: "I meant what I said earlier, about being here for whatever you need." "I know you did—I'm going to talk to my doctor, and after that's taken care of I'll give you a call. Maybe I can get my mom to watch the kids one evening so we can have a sleepover?" Lila suggests warmly. "It's a date! I'll pick out some movies to stream and bring the snacks," Sara responds, genuinely happy to accept the offer. Then, Lila offers another suggestion with a wide smile: "Well, it's a lovely day—why don't we take our coffee to-go and stroll around the park?" "I could certainly do with stretching my legs," Sara says as she stands, adjusting the hem of her sweater. Lila echoes her movements, buttoning her blazer. As the two friends step away from the patio, Lila turns to Sara with a meaningful look in her eyes. She bites her lip for a brief moment before saying, "Thank you for being a friend, Sara." "You're quoting the theme song from *The Golden Girls* at me?" "I *mean it*," Lila retorts, good-naturedly swatting at Sara's shoulder. "I know, I know—I'm glad we're friends too, Lila, and I'm proud you came to me for support," Sara says in return. With that, the two women turn toward the park and set out to enjoy the sunshine.

Blended Narrative Message

On a crisp and sunny spring day, a woman in her late twenties is seated on the outdoor patio of a café—she fidgets in her seat, sipping anxiously from a coffee cup, as her eyes scan the streets in search of someone. When that someone fails to appear, she sighs and pulls her phone from the pocket of her blazer, scrolling through a feed full of headlines for articles that she couldn't bring herself to actually read—at least not right now. This continues for a minute or two until a shadow casts itself across her screen. Looking up from her phone, her mouth breaks into a

smile as she stands to enthusiastically embrace a tall woman in an oversized sweater. "Sara, I'm so glad you're here!" she exclaims, her face buried in her friend's shoulder such that her voice was muffled by the sweater's plush knit. "*I'm happy to see you too, Lila*," Sara wheezes, the vigor of the hug expelling the breath from her lungs. When Lila finally releases her, Sara takes a deep breath before smoothing her hair back into place and taking a seat opposite her friend. They exchange pleasantries as Sara scans the menu, ordering a latte from the bubbly waitress patrolling nearby—but when she turns back to Lila her mouth is tense with worry.

"Everything okay, Lila?" Sara asks, her brow furrowing at her friend's apparent distress. "I'm sorry for asking to meet on such short notice and with so little context, Sara, but something's been weighing on me and I wasn't getting anywhere by myself," she responds softly, glancing away from Sara. She takes Lila's hand warmly, her face softening as she does so: "No apology necessary—what else are friends for?" Reassured by this, Lila relaxes a bit, leaning forward to sip from her coffee before continuing. "So, Michael and I are expecting again…" she confides with a tremor of uncertainty in her voice. There is a note of concern in Sara's response: "Is everything okay? You don't seem as excited as you were the last time…or the time before." Lila shakes her head. "We were planning on having another child—eventually. But the timing isn't great." She takes a deep breath, "Honestly, it's all pretty overwhelming. Money has been tight lately, between inflation and surprise expenses for the kids, and I've only been back to work for a few months now. Michael is doing his best to make ends meet, but it's an ongoing struggle with two kids at home. Now my mother has to go back to work, so I have to add childcare costs to the pile…" Her lip quivers, and Sara gives her hand a supportive squeeze. "I had no idea things were so tough right now. You know I'm always here for you, right?

Whatever you need," Sara says with deep sincerity. "I really appreciate you saying that, Sara, because I actually do need something from you: advice."

Sara raises an eyebrow quizzically as Lila continues: "Remember a few years ago, right after you broke up with Nico? You were worried you were pregnant and…" Lila's voice trails off as Sara's face lights up with recognition. "There's no reason to feel uncomfortable, Lila—abortion is a common form of reproductive healthcare," Sara replies matter-of-factly, "1 in 4 women will have an abortion during their lifetime, and I'm not ashamed to count myself among them," Lila looks relieved to have not needed to say it aloud. "I never thought I'd be in this position, but that's why it's important to hear about your experience before I make a decision," Lila explains, looking at Sara expectantly. "I am happy to share my experience with you, but what I found most helpful was consulting with more authoritative sources. I saved the link to the resource I used, if you'd like to look at it together?" Lila nods enthusiastically as Sara pulls out her phone, scooting her seat around the table. "To start, do you mind if I ask how far along you are?" Sara asks. "I'd guess a little over 6 weeks, probably? I thought my period was just late…until the nausea set in," she utters wryly, groaning dramatically for emphasis. Sara lets out a low chuckle at this as she skims the text on her screen. "Well, the vast majority of abortions (92%) occur in the first trimester of pregnancy (Weeks 0-12), when they can often be managed through a medication abortion—as of 2022, medication abortions account for the majority of abortion procedures."

Lila looks at her with a puzzled expression. "Is that the same as Plan B?" she asks. "Plan B is different," Sara explains, scanning for a better explanation on her screen, "Emergency contraception, also known as Plan B, prevents pregnancy by delaying ovulation, but a medication abortion is used after the egg has been fertilized. It is a series of two self-administered pills a

woman can take in the privacy of her own home to end a pregnancy." She continues, "After

discussing the available options with a healthcare provider and determining that a medication

abortion is the right choice, the individual will receive guidance about how to self-manage their

abortion. In most cases, they will first take a pill (mifepristone) that stops the pregnancy from

growing, and then take a second pill (misoprostol) within the next 48 hours to induce cramping

and bleeding that empties the uterus." Lila winces involuntarily at the mention of cramping,

prompting Sara to quickly add, "It can feel similar to a heavy, crampy period, but that discomfort

can be eased with pain medications like ibuprofen."

Lila gazes pensively into her coffee for a moment before speaking up. "I feel silly even

asking, but…how safe is it? I feel like I've heard a lot of conflicting information and it's hard to

know what's accurate." Sara gives her a reassuring smile: "It's not at all silly to ask—you aren't

the first person to wonder!" After a moment, she begins reading again, "According to research

from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), medication

abortion risks are comparable to those from commonly prescribed medications like antibiotics.

Rates of serious complications are very low, with far less than 1 in 100,000 women experiencing

life-threatening outcomes. Compared to childbirth, where the risk of death is nearly 24 per

100,000 women, medication abortion is exceedingly safe."

Lila's face is awash with relief as she hears this: "I appreciate you clearing that up for

me, Sara—the idea of ending a pregnancy had always seemed scarier." After a moment of

reflection, she asks, "Would you be comfortable sharing why you chose to have a medication

abortion?" "Besides not wanting to have a kid with that manchild?" Sara replies jokingly, before

responding in earnest, "In all seriousness, it helped me feel like I was in control of the

experience: I invited my sister over after work to calm my nerves and keep me company, got a

hot water bottle for the cramps, and settled in for the evening. I couldn't really take time off work for a clinic appointment, so a surgical abortion didn't seem like the right choice for me—still, I'm grateful I had options."

Hearing this, the corner of Lila's mouth turns down. "Part of the reason I was so nervous was how people talk about it these days—the conversation just seems…extreme. I can't read the news without being reminded of some new abortion restriction being passed," she says, her voice heavy with fatigue, "and even though I never expected I'd need one, I also didn't think I'd have to worry my right to choose might actually be taken away." "Seriously—the page had this update at the bottom," Sara replies, dryly, before reading. "Anti-abortion activists have recently targeted mifepristone's approval by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) with a lawsuit to restrict its availability nationwide." She continues, her voice heavy with fatigue, "This is despite the fact its safety has been demonstrated through over two decades of study since its approval: the FDA recently reported that mifepristone's 'efficacy and safety have become well-established by both research and experience. This lawsuit also does not reflect popular opinion: according to a recent poll from Pew Research, only 22% of adults believe medication abortion should be illegal in their state." Sara massages her temple as if soothing a headache, "I wonder if the people who want to stop all abortions realize that most women—nearly 60 percent—who need abortions already have children, and there can be life-threatening medical reasons why someone may need to end a pregnancy."

After a moment of silence, Lila speaks with a newfound resolve, "I really am grateful that you were willing to share your experience with me, Sara. I think you've helped me make up my mind." Sara takes her hand again in response: "I meant what I said earlier, about being here for whatever you need." "I know you did—I'm going to talk to my doctor, and after that's taken care

of I'll give you a call. Maybe I can get my mom to watch the kids one evening so we can have a sleepover?" Lila suggests warmly. "It's a date! I'll pick out some movies to stream and bring the snacks," Sara responds, genuinely happy to accept the offer. Then, Lila offers another suggestion with a wide smile: "Well, it's a lovely day—why don't we take our coffee to-go and stroll around the park?" "I could certainly do with stretching my legs," Sara says as she stands, adjusting the hem of her sweater. Lila echoes her movements, buttoning her blazer. As the two friends step away from the patio, Lila turns to Sara with a meaningful look in her eyes. She bites her lip for a brief moment before saying, "Thank you for being a friend, Sara." "You're quoting the theme song from *The Golden Girls* at me?" "I *mean it*," Lila retorts, good-naturedly swatting at Sara's shoulder. "I know, I know—I'm glad we're friends too, Lila, and I'm proud you came to me for support," Sara says in return. With that, the two women turn toward the park and set out to enjoy the sunshine.

Appendix C. Knowledge Table for Study 3

	Abortion Fact	Non-Narrative (1,050 words)	Narrative (1604 words)	Blended (1707 words)
1	**Nearly 1 in 4 women will have an abortion in their lifetime.**	Nearly 1 in 4 women will have an abortion in their lifetime, so it is important to do what we can to protect their right to safe and legal reproductive healthcare.	"There's no reason to feel uncomfortable, Lila—abortion is a common form of reproductive healthcare," Sara replies matter-of-factly, "About 1 in 4 women will have an abortion during their lifetime, and I'm not ashamed to count myself among them."	"There's no reason to feel uncomfortable, Lila—abortion is a common form of reproductive healthcare," Sara replies matter-of-factly, "1 in 4 women will have an abortion during their lifetime, and I'm not ashamed to count myself among them."
2	**The vast majority of abortions occur in the first trimester of pregnancy**	The vast majority of abortions (92%) occur in the first trimester of pregnancy (Weeks 0-12), when they can often be managed through a medication abortion.	"Well, since it's so early, you should be able to get a medication abortion…It's usually an option if you're in the first trimester, which is when most abortions occur anyway."	"Well, the vast majority of abortions (92%) occur in the first trimester of pregnancy (Weeks 0-12), when they can often be managed through a medication abortion…"
3	**Medication abortions make up the majority of abortion procedures**	As of 2022, medication abortions account for the majority of abortion procedures.	"Well, since it's so early, you should be able to get a medication abortion—they're more common than surgical abortions these days."	"…as of 2022, medication abortions account for the majority of abortion procedures."
4	**Medication abortions are typically induced using two self-administered pills.**	This term is typically used to describe a series of two self-administered pills a woman can take in the privacy of her own home to end a	"It's actually two different pills you can take in the privacy of your own home to end a pregnancy: the first you take to stop	"…a medication abortion is used after the egg has been fertilized. It is a series of two self-administered pills a woman can take in

		pregnancy. This stands in contrast to a surgical abortion, which is performed in a clinic by a medical professional.	your pregnancy from growing, and the second you take in the next two days to induce cramping and bleeding to empty the uterus."	the privacy of her own home to end a pregnancy."
5	**Medication abortion is not the same as Plan B**	Medication abortion is different from emergency contraception, also known as Plan B, which prevents pregnancy by delaying ovulation. Instead, a medication abortion is used after the egg has been fertilized.	Lila looks at her with a puzzled expression. "Is that the same as Plan B?" she asks. "Plan B is different," Sara explains, "Emergency contraception like Plan B can keep you from getting pregnant by delaying ovulation, but a medication abortion is used when you're already pregnant."	Lila looks at her with a puzzled expression. "Is that the same as Plan B?" she asks. "Plan B is different," Sara explains, scanning for a better explanation on her screen, "Emergency contraception, also known as Plan B, prevents pregnancy by delaying ovulation, but a medication abortion is used after the egg has been fertilized. It is a series of two self-administered pills a woman can take in the privacy of her own home to end a pregnancy."
6	**Can take pain medication to ease discomfort from medication abortion**	The process of a medication abortion tends to take 4-5 hours and can feel similar to a heavy, crampy period, but that discomfort can be eased with pain medications like ibuprofen.	"While it isn't the most pleasant experience in the world, the doctor told me I could take pain medication like ibuprofen, and it really helped with the discomfort. Honestly, it felt like a heavy period."	Lila winces involuntarily at the mention of cramping, prompting Sara to quickly add, "It can feel similar to a heavy, crampy period, but that discomfort can be eased with pain medications like ibuprofen."

7	**Abortion has a lower rate of serious complications than childbirth**	According to research from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), medication abortion risks are comparable to commonly prescribed medications like antibiotics. Rates of serious complications are very low, with far less than 1 in 100,000 women experiencing life-threatening outcomes. Compared to childbirth, where the risk of death is nearly 24 per 100,000 women, medication abortion is exceedingly safe.	"It's not at all silly to ask, but would you believe me if I told you that it's much, much safer than giving birth? Like, not even comparable levels of risk. While you should definitely check in with a healthcare professional if you are worried, the risk of complications from a medication abortion is extremely low."	"It's not at all silly to ask—you aren't the first person to wonder!" After a moment, she begins reading again, "According to research from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), medication abortion risks are comparable to those from commonly prescribed medications like antibiotics. Rates of serious complications are very low, with less than 1 individual in 100,000 experiencing life-threatening outcomes; by comparison, the risk of death from childbirth is nearly 24 per 100,000. In other words, medication abortion is exceedingly safe and effective."
8	**The safety of mifepristone, the pill used in medication abortion, has been demonstrated through over**	This is despite the fact its safety has been demonstrated through over two decades of study since its approval: the FDA recently reported that mifepristone's "efficacy and safety	"Seriously—they actually tried to stop medication abortion by targeting the FDA approval of one of the pills, mifepristone!" Sara said indignantly. "They've been	"This is despite the fact its safety and efficacy have been demonstrated through over two decades of study since its approval. In 2016, the FDA reported that

		have become well-established by both research and experience."	studying it for over twenty years; I think the FDA would know if it was unsafe."	mifepristone's 'efficacy and safety have become well-established by both research and experience.'"
	two decades of research.			
9	**Most people do not believe medication abortion should be illegal**	This lawsuit also does not reflect popular opinion: according to a recent poll from Pew Research, only 22% of adults believe medication abortion should be illegal in their state. This reflects a public consensus toward preserving access to reproductive healthcare, despite a vocal minority that want to take away the right to choose when and whether to have a child.	Lila pipes up, "I don't think most people actually want it to be illegal, even if some don't personally agree with it." Sara hums in agreement, letting that same fatigue slip into her expression as she takes a long sip from her latte.	"This lawsuit also does not reflect popular opinion: according to a recent poll from Pew Research, only 22% of adults believe medication abortion should be illegal in their state."
10	**Most people who seek abortion care have at least one child**	According to a report from the Guttmacher Institute, the majority of abortion patients are in their 20s, while women in their 30s make up the next largest age-group—women younger than 18 account for only 4% of patients, and a significant proportion (59%) of patients already have at least one child.	Sara massages her temple as if soothing a headache, "I wonder if the people who want to stop all abortions realize that most people who need abortions already have children, and there can be life-threatening medical reasons why someone may need to end a pregnancy."	Sara massages her temple as if soothing a headache, "I wonder if the people who want to stop all abortions realize that most women—nearly 60%—who need abortions already have children, and there can be life-threatening medical reasons why someone may need to end a pregnancy they wanted to keep."