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The Presence of the Protagonist: Explaining Narrative Perspective Effects Through Social Presence

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ABSTRACT

Based on two experiments, this paper advances the concept of social presence as a novel mechanism through which narrative perspective (first- versus third-person) exerts persuasive effects on attitudes toward outgroup policies and behavioral intentions to help outgroup members. Study 1 ($N = 503$) shows that the first-person perspective, compared to the third-person perspective, increases social presence of the protagonist, but not identification with the protagonist, when the story depicted an outgroup character. This increase in social presence mediates the effect of narrative perspective on support for outgroup policies. Study 2 ($N = 410$) further suggests that social presence mediates the effect of narrative perspective regardless of the protagonist's group membership (in-group versus out-group). Furthermore, this project evaluates the role of social presence in light of other, often-studied processes such as identification and transportation. These findings advance the theorizing and research in narrative research and in media psychology more broadly.

Narratives are powerful tools that can change attitudes and influence behavior about controversial social issues or marginalized groups (e.g., Chung & Slater, 2013; Green & Brock, 2000; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016). These narratives can range from television drama or film (e.g., Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Slater, Rouner, & Long, 2006) to short anecdotes or exemplars in the news (e.g., Kim, Bigman, Leader, Lerman, & Cappella, 2012; Strange & Leung, 1999). The diversity of narrative forms studied in the literature is impressive, but it also raises an important question about the root of these effects, namely what are the specific underlying causes that give particular narratives their persuasive advantage. Different styles of narratives (e.g., testimonials, news exemplars, television

dramas), communicated through vastly different channels (e.g., audio-visual, textual), naturally embody very different narrative characteristics (see de Graaf, Sanders, & Hoeken, 2016 for a review). Only by isolating the effects of specific narrative features can we better understand the power of narratives to shape attitudes and change minds.

Toward that end, this paper focuses on a simple yet powerful textual feature that influences the reading experience – narrative perspective. Narrative perspective (or point of view or narrative voice) refers to the physical and psychological point of perception presented in a story (Bal, 1997). Narrative perspective is a ubiquitous and inescapable textual property that colors the narrative world it depicts and is often correlated with different styles or genres. We argue that the interpretive shift that results from different perspectives, specifically between the first- and third-person perspective, has direct and indirect effects on narrative persuasiveness. By systematically testing these effects, we aim to explain the contradictory evidence from extant work on narrative perspective (e.g., Banerjee & Greene, 2012; Chen, McGlone, & Bell, 2015; de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012; Hoeken, Kolthoff, & Sanders, 2016; Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Nan, Dahlstrom, Richards, & Rangarajan, 2015).

In particular, we advance social presence of the narrative character as the key theoretical mechanism underlying narrative perspective effects. We argue that narrative perspective influences narrative persuasiveness because it augments the readers' experience of the narrative character (i.e., social presence). Social presence refers to the salience of the other in an interaction (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and can be understood as the "sense of being together with another" (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003). Despite the fact that this concept is considered central for understanding interactions in virtual or mediated situations (Lee, 2004; Lombard & Ditton, 1997), its relevance to simple textual narratives has never been examined. Yet narratives also simulate human characters and their social interactions in minds of the readers (Mar & Oatley, 2008), and in this sense, create a virtual environment where we "meet" characters, and thus the social presence of narrative characters can be an important factor in processing narratives. We posit that first-person narration (vs. third-person) promotes feelings of coexisting with the other (i.e., social presence), which in turn facilitate persuasion. We further argue – and empirically show – that social presence is a concept distinct from the often-studied identification (Cohen, 2001; Igartua & Barrios, 2012) and transportation (Green & Brock, 2000). This proposed mechanism is tested across two different studies to examine the persuasive power of first-person narratives compared to other mechanisms. Based on these results, we argue that social presence is an important mediating mechanism for narrative perspective effects leading to story-consistent attitudes.

In contrast to the existing work on narrative perspective focused on the health communication research (see de Graaf et al., 2016), we apply this work

to the domain of intergroup relations. Using a national sample of Singaporeans, Study 1 examines the direct and mediating effects exerted by a first-person versus third-person narrative featuring a migrant foreign worker in Singapore (i.e., an outgroup member) on individual support for policies to protect foreign workers. Study 1 focused on an outgroup protagonist to provide an initial evidence on our major proposition on social presence and identification. Study 2 additionally introduces a narrative of a Singaporean student from a low-income family (i.e., an ingroup member), in order to (a) extend Study 1 results across narratives featuring ingroup versus outgroup protagonists, (b) compare the effects of three different mediators – social presence, identification (tested in both Studies 1 and 2), and transportation (tested only in Study 2), and (c) assess whether the proposed effects extend to behavioral intentions as the outcome variable.

Narrative persuasion through first-person narratives

All narratives are told from a perspective – the physical and psychological point of perception presented in a story (Bal, 1997). Perspective is linguistically constructed along two dimensions: the narrator's relation to action and the extent to which the narrator observes the character's thoughts and behaviors (Black, Turner, & Bower, 1979). The former dimension, often referred to as a point of view, is based on the use of different pronouns by the narrator (e.g., "I" versus "he/she"). For example, the first-person narrative would cast the narrator as the main communicator ("I came to Singapore three years ago"), while the third-person narrative tells the story of an individual from the onlooker's perspective ("Sumon came to Singapore three years ago"). The second dimension, referred to as internal or external focalization, can be inferred by whether the inner thoughts and emotions of the character are described (van Peer & Pander Maat, 2001). The combination of these two factors results in a unique viewing position for each story.

Past work often examines narrative perspective effects by shifting from one first-person internal perspective (e.g., the lawyer's perspective) to another (e.g., the victim's widow's perspective). This work finds strong effects of perspective on various persuasive outcomes (de Graaf et al., 2012; Hoeken et al., 2016). However, these effects may emerge because message recipients are exposed to different kinds of thoughts and information. The internal perspective of a lawyer (e.g., "I defend the defendant, not the act"), for example, would be vastly different from that of a murder victim's widow (e.g., "Such nonsense!"), and as such, this work cannot pinpoint which factor actually generates the effects: the perspective or the distinct thoughts and information.

In contrast, studies that compare first- and third-person stories typically use internal focalization in both by shifting only the pronouns that describe the storyteller but equally presenting the inner thoughts of the focal character

in both conditions (e.g., Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Kim & Shapiro, 2016; Nan et al., 2015; Segal et al., 1997). These studies typically find small or conditional effects of narrative perspective because the actual textual difference between first- and third-person perspectives is small (i.e., only the pronouns differ). Following this line of work, we also examine the differential effects of first- versus third-person perspective while preserving information equivalence between the two, offering a more precise and conservative test of perspective that controls for any unwanted influence of additional pieces of information.

First-person narratives are generally considered more persuasive than third-person narratives because the use of first-person pronouns creates a sense of closeness to the narrator and improves readability and comprehension (Pourgiv, Sodighi, & Kaloorazi, 2003; see also Brunyé, Ditman, Mahoney, Augustyn, & Taylor, 2009). Moreover, they allow readers to better listen to the protagonist compared to third-person narratives that feature an unspecified, general narrator (Segal et al., 1997). Indeed, a recent review of health communication messages finds that "all print narratives that produced effects on story-consistent beliefs and attitudes used a first-person perspective" (de Graaf et al., 2016, p. 101). Extending these arguments to a sociopolitical context that features outgroup protagonists, we argue that first-person perspective in a narrative about an outgroup member will have a persuasive advantage over the third-person perspective. We hypothesize that first-person narratives, compared to third-person narratives, will lead to greater support for policies intended to protect the outgroup members depicted in the narrative (*H1*).

Social presence as a mediator of narrative perspective effects

This project advances social presence as a novel theoretical mediator of narrative perspective effects. Social presence is conceptualized as the psychological state of feeling a sense of togetherness with another human or a humanlike intelligence (Biocca et al., 2003; Lee, 2004). The construct is applicable to contexts that mediate social interaction (e.g., in computer-mediated communication where the focal subject is a human being), and to contexts that simulate social interaction (e.g., where the focal subject is an artificial agent designed to emulate a human). Taken together, social presence is a sense that is induced when we perceive the mediated or simulated other (e.g., the narrative character) to be a "real, actual human being" (Biocca, 2002; Lee, 2004) with whom we are interacting "without any mediation" (Lombard & Ditton, 1997).

Narrative texts simulate human characters and their social interactions in the minds of readers (Mar & Oatley, 2008), making social presence of narrative characters an important factor in processing narratives. We propose that social presence can be triggered by the use of first-person

pronouns. The first-person pronoun creates a sense that the narrative character is directly talking to readers as a real person. In contrast, the third-person narrative describes the focal character from an outsider's point of view, and because the thoughts and feelings of the character are conveyed to us by an unidentified third-person intermediary, the character is more distant and potentially abstract. Indeed, the social presence literature suggests that the existence of an intermediary (i.e., the storyteller in our case) reduces feelings of direct engagement with the character (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). For instance, messages posted on Twitter induce greater social presence of a politician or a celebrity than identical messages conveyed through a news article (Lee & Jang, 2013; Lee & Shin, 2014), suggesting that the direct self-expression, the first-person perspective embedded in the text, makes a character more present in the minds of the readers.

Higher levels of experienced social presence should lead to attitudes that support the story protagonist. Because social presence entails a sense that the character is real and occupying the same space as us (see Biocca, 2002; Biocca et al., 2003), the readers listen more earnestly to the thoughts, feelings, and goals of a more socially present character. In the current project, where narratives describe hardships and personal suffering, the feeling of social presence should bring about empathy and a sense of urgency to help those who are brought closer to us (see Chouliaraki, 2006). In short, the recognition of intimate, coexistence with character – feeling that the character is truly here, together with me – can ultimately help promote the protagonist's message, and lead to attitudes that support the character and her social group. Indeed, some empirical studies find a positive relationship between social presence and attitudes toward the target (e.g., Lee & Jang, 2013; Lim & Lee-Won, 2017). For example, heightened social presence of a previously unknown politician led to positive evaluations of the candidate and greater intentions to vote for him (Lee & Jang, 2013).

Social presence and identification

While related, the conceptual underpinning of identification is slightly different. Identification refers to a cognitive-affective process in which the audience temporarily loses self-awareness and adopts the character's goals, perspectives, and emotions (Cohen, 2001; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Although identification is often used to explain narrative perspective effects, it only works when perspective is conceived as a shift between different first-person perspectives (e.g., applicant versus interviewer; de Graaf et al., 2012; Hoeken et al., 2016). In a more conservative test that compares first- and third-person stories that focalize on the same character, identification is only conditionally affected; first-person narratives increase identification only for an ingroup protagonist, and not for a protagonist who is an outgroup member (e.g., Kaufman & Libby, 2012). This suggests that the

mechanisms underlying a first-person persuasive advantage over the third-person are not fully understood.

Although feeling the presence of a narrative character and identifying with the character are both directed at the character of the story and can facilitate persuasion (e.g., de Graaf et al., 2012; Lee & Jang, 2013; Lee & Shin, 2014), they should be differentially affected by narrative perspective. In contrast to identification that posits a merge between one's own and the character's identity (e.g., Cohen, 2001), social presence demarcates the self and the other, such that we feel a heightened sense of togetherness but with an independent entity. As a result, whereas the first-person narrative should not induce any greater identification compared to the third-person narrative when the protagonist is negatively perceived (e.g., Chung & Slater, 2013; Tanski et al., 2009), their presence can still be felt more intensely. As such, we hypothesize that the first-person perspective will invite greater social presence of the outgroup protagonist compared to third-person narratives (*H2*). On the other hand, we expect no effect of narrative perspective on identification from narratives about an outgroup protagonist (*H3*). Finally, we test whether the effect of narrative perspective on policy support is mediated by social presence (*H4*).

Study 1

Study context

We test our theoretical predictions in Singapore in the context of migrant worker issues. Singapore has one of the world's highest proportions of foreigners in its population and the workforce, with a majority working in manufacturing, construction, or maritime industries (Yap, 2014). Foreign workers in this category face many challenges. Most of them enter the country after paying exorbitant recruitment fees to intermediary agencies, fees that they pay off from their salaries over months or even years. They endure poor living conditions in overcrowded dormitories (Goh & Lin, 2016). Injuries sustained at work can sometimes go untreated, as loopholes are abused by some employers to avoid paying for treatment (Transient Workers Count Too [TWC2], 2014). In sum, the lack of laws or oversight can, in some cases, lead to abuse and exploitation in the workplace. Foreign workers are seen as the outgroup for Singaporeans because they do not share a common identity or life experiences. Despite grassroots efforts to raise awareness, this issue is not highly visible on the public agenda. As such, examining the impact of narratives on public support for policies protecting migrant workers is socially consequential.

Procedure and participants

A total of 503 Singaporean adults were recruited from an online panel in Singapore to participate in a Web-based experiment.[1] Respondents' age ranged from 21 to 66 (M = 39.6, SD = 11.7) and slightly more than half (52.7%) were females. Eighty-four percent were ethnic Chinese (Malay 6.8%, Indian 5.6%, and "other" 3.4%), largely consistent with the national statistics (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2016).

Participants were randomly assigned to either a first-person or third-person narrative about a Bangladeshi construction worker in Singapore (single-factor, between-subjects design).[2] After reading the story, a posttest questionnaire measured social presence, identification, policy attitudes, and demographic information.

Stimulus materials

For the purpose of this study, we developed two versions (first-person or third-person) of a fictitious story that depicted the plight of Sumon, a Bangladeshi construction worker. Sumon moved to Singapore to earn money to support his family; however, his salary was far below the amount promised when he interviewed and his employer refused to cover the medical costs incurred from a work-related injury. The story was fictional but written based on true stories (e.g., Korycinska, 2015). Narrative perspective was manipulated solely by altering the voice through which the story was told, either referring to the focal character in first ("I", n = 248) or third-person ("Sumon", n = 255). In the first-person narrative, Sumon narrates with his own voice (e.g., "I feel like the rules are against immigrants like myself"); in the third-person narrative, an external observer narrates Sumon's story (e.g., "Sumon feels like the rules are against immigrants like himself"). The two versions were identical in all other regards (first, 587 words; third, 590 words).[3] Also, no significant demographic (age, gender, ethnicity) differences were found between the conditions, showing successful randomization.

Measures

Policy support

Support for policies to protect foreign workers was assessed with four questions derived from a white paper (TWC2, 2014). Participants reported their agreement (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), with policy proposals related to foreign workers' workplace issues (e.g., "The government should make it mandatory for employers to issue pay slips"; "claims related to workplace injuries should be assessed by safety officers independent of the employer"; see Online Appendix for full list of items). The four items were averaged (Cronbach's α = .86, M = 5.58, SD = 1.01).

Social presence

The core mediator in this project was assessed with four items (Lee & Shin, 2014): "I felt as if I were engaging in an actual conversation with Sumon"; "I could imagine Sumon vividly"; "I felt as if Sumon was speaking directly to me"; and "I felt like I was in the same room with Sumon" (1 "strongly disagree," to 7 "strongly agree"). The items were averaged (Cronbach's α = .89, M = 4.76, SD = 1.07).

Identification

Six items from Cohen's identification scale (2001) were used to measure identification (e.g., "I was able to understand the events that happened to Sumon in a manner similar to which Sumon understood them"; "I felt I could really get inside Sumon's mind"; see Online Appendix for full list of items; 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). These were averaged (Cronbach's α = .94, M = 5.19, SD = .92).

Analytic approach

A pair of t-tests assessed the effect of experimental factor on the dependent variable, policy support (*H1*) and social presence (*H2*). For the null-hypothesis on identification (*H3*), we performed an equivalence test to confirm that the observed effect is significantly smaller than predetermined effects based on prior research on perspective effects (see Weber & Popova, 2012). The indirect effect (*H4*) was calculated using the PROCESS macro for SPSS, Model 4 (Hayes, 2018), which uses bootstrapping methods to estimate the confidence intervals for the indirect effect.

Results

As expected, the first-person narrative significantly increased support for policies that protect the migrant workers as compared to third-person narratives (M_{1st} = 5.69, SD = .97; M_{3rd} = 5.48, SD = 1.04; t (501) = 2.32, $p<$ .05, Cohen's d = .21; *H1* supported). In addition, those who read the first-person narrative reported feeling greater social presence of the protagonist than those who read an identical story in the third-person (M_{1st} = 4.86, SD = 1.01; M_{3rd} = 4.66, SD = 1.13; t (501) = 2.09, $p<$ .05, Cohen's d = .19; *H2* supported). In contrast, the first-person narrative did *not* affect identification with the outgroup protagonist compared to the third-person narrative (M_{1st} = 5.22, SD = .93; M_{3rd} = 5.15, SD = .92; t (501) = .87, $p=$ .385, Cohen's d = .08). The result of an equivalence test was statistically significant, Δ = .16, p_{eq} = .02 (*H3* supported). Finally, consistent with our theoretical predictions, social presence mediated the effect of the first-person narrative on policy support as compared to the third-person narrative ($b_{indirect\ effect}$ = .06, Boot SE = .03, 95% Boot CI = [.01, .13]; *H4* supported). We did not examine the

mediation of identification because perspective difference was not expected on identification (*H3*).

Study 1 discussion

Study 1 found that first-person narrative about a marginalized outgroup member had stronger effects on policy support than third-person narratives. These effects occurred because respondents felt a greater level of social presence of the focal character in the first-person condition. In contrast, first-person narratives did not increase identification, presumably because people find it hard to identify with a marginalized outgroup member. In short, we found differential effects of narrative perspective on social presence and identification, a finding that highlights the limitation of identification as a mechanism of narrative perspective effects when message recipients are faced with outgroup protagonists, and, in contrast, the usefulness of social presence as the explanatory factor.

Despite important theoretical implications of these findings, which we outline in the general discussion, this study has some limitations. First, the differential effects of social presence and identification were *assumed* to be due to the identity of the protagonist, not directly tested. Also, Study 1 examined policy support as the single dependent variable, leaving open the question as to whether other outcomes consequential to outgroup relations, such as behavioral intentions, are also influenced by narrative perspective. Furthermore, Study 1 did not use the full scale to measure identification, and instead relied on a subset of items that were used in past work (e.g., Chung & Slater, 2013). Lastly, Study 1 did not examine another potential mediator, transportation, which is often suggested as the mechanism of narrative perspective effects. To address these issues, we conducted Study 2. To compare the effects of narrative perspective on social presence and identification more conclusively, Study 2 directly manipulates the character's group membership, uses the full scale of identification, includes behavioral intentions as another persuasive outcome, and tests transportation to more conclusively establish the role of social presence in narrative perspective effects.

Study 2

Study 2 was designed to offer additional evidence for the tested effects and to add theoretical and methodological refinements to Study 1. Notably, we introduce a new dimension by considering the group membership of the narrative protagonist as either an ingroup or an outgroup member. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) suggests that group- or category-based memberships are central to one's self-concept and these distinctions help us to better understand our place in the social world and maintain a positive image of ourselves.

In the context of narratives, the protagonist's ingroup versus outgroup membership is relevant, as it can influence the processing of the story, especially when coupled with the perspective from which the story is told. We expect that a first-person narrative that depicts an ingroup protagonist should make it easier to *identify* with the protagonist than a parallel narrative depicting an outgroup protagonist, but that the protagonist's group membership should not influence the feelings of *social presence* of the character. This is because identification relies on a process of merging between the self and the character (Cohen, 2001), and social presence does not. As outgroup members are generally perceived as possessing fewer desirable traits compared to ingroup members (Hogg, 2000) and because people want to differentiate themselves and their ingroup from the outgroup (Tajfel, 1978), narrative perspective should be less effective in inducing identification when the protagonist is an outgroup member. Studies show that audience members have a hard time imagining themselves "as" the character when the character displays discordant attitudes (Cohen, Tal-Or, & Mazor-Tregerman, 2015) or is highly stigmatized (Chung & Slater, 2013; Igartua & Frutos, 2017). Moreover, some past work finds greater identification with an ingroup versus an outgroup protagonist (Hoeken et al., 2016), suggesting that the effect of narrative perspective on identification will be moderated by in- and outgroup status of the protagonist (see also Kaufman & Libby, 2012).

Social presence, on the other hand, should not depend on the character's group membership because it does not require a merge between the self and the character. A first-person narrative can evoke a sense of togetherness with the protagonist regardless of whether the protagonist is an ingroup or an outgroup member. Study 1 found support for this claim, observing the effect of narrative perspective on social presence of an outgroup protagonist. Study 2 aims to replicate this finding and also strengthen our theoretical claim by adding the ingroup protagonist condition to the outgroup protagonist condition and formally testing their different effects on social presence and identification.

Study 2 additionally considers transportation, another central concept in the narrative persuasion literature. When one is transported to the narrative world, one's cognitive and affective processes converge on the events happening in the story and one's emotional responses become consistent with the character's (Green & Brock, 2000). However, in contrast to identification and social presence, transportation is not directed at any character as it refers to an immersion in the narrative world itself (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Tukachinsky, 2014). Because transportation is not a person-directed concept, evidence suggests that the first-person perspective does not induce any greater transportation compared to the third-person perspective (e.g., Banerjee & Greene, 2012; Chen et al., 2015). Moreover, transportation should not be contingent on character attributes, such as group membership (Slater

& Rouner, 2002), but rather on the ability to relate to the themes evoked by the characters and events of the story and the quality of a narrative (Green & Brock, 2000). Studies examining narratives about personal struggles, health issues, or diseases (e.g., Banerjee & Greene, 2012; Chen et al., 2015) show that changing character type does not induce transportation differentially.

Thus, we expect that first-person narratives will invite greater social presence compared to third-person narratives, regardless of the protagonists' group membership (i.e., ingroup or outgroup member) (*H1*). Conversely, while we expect that first-person narratives will increase identification with the protagonist more than third-person narratives, we only expect this effect when the protagonist is an ingroup member, as opposed to an outgroup member (*H2*). Lastly, no effects of narrative perspective are expected on transportation (*H3*). We then examine whether there are indirect effects through social presence and identification. Specifically, we posit that social presence will mediate the effect of narrative perspective on policy support (*H4a*) and behavioral intentions (*H4b*). Lastly, identification should mediate the effect of narrative perspective on policy support (*H5a*) and behavioral intentions (*H5b*), but this mediation effect should be moderated by protagonist's group membership, such that it should be present only when the protagonist is an ingroup member.

Procedure and participants

A total of 410 Singaporean adults were recruited from a different online panel from Study 1 to participate in the experiment.[4] Participants were distributed roughly equally across age groups (20% 18–24 years old; 21% 25–34 years old; 21% 35–44 years old; 21% 45–54 years old; 19% above 55 years old) and gender (49% males, 51% females), and were predominantly ethnically Chinese (84%, Malay 6%, Indian 7%, others 3%). We recruited only Singaporeans for this study. Given a clear duality of locals versus foreigners in Singapore (Ho, 2006), stemming from differences in occupation, lifestyle, culture, and immigration policies, defining group membership based on nationality was justified. Using a 2×2 between-subject design, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions that varied in story perspective (first-person, third-person) and protagonist's group membership (ingroup, outgroup). Participants assigned to the ingroup condition read a story about another Singaporean, whereas those assigned to the outgroup condition read a story of a foreign protagonist (see Appendix A for experimental stimuli). After reading the story, participants completed a posttest questionnaire.

Stimulus materials

The two versions (first-person, third-person) of the Bangladeshi construction worker story used in Study 1 were again used in Study 2, representing narratives that feature an outgroup protagonist (foreign worker Sumon). Two versions of an additional story were developed for the ingroup condition. This featured Jiaming, a Singaporean student from a low-income household, who struggles to make ends meet while falling behind in school.[5] The story was written based on true stories (Ng & Li, 2014; Toh, 2016). All stimulus materials were written with a sympathetic tone and the characters were depicted neutrally. Like Study 1, narrative perspective (first- vs. third-person) was manipulated by changing the voice (first-person $n = 205$; third-person $n = 205$). The two versions of the stories were identical on all other aspects (word count of the first-person version is 541; third, 550). A pretest ($n = 177$) found that the ingroup and outgroup stories were rated equally in terms of various story characteristics and protagonist perceptions.[6]

Measures

All answers were recorded on a scale of 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree") unless noted otherwise. See Appendix B for complete wording of all items.

Social presence
Social presence was assessed with identical four items used in Study 1 (Lee & Shin, 2014; Cronbach's α = .86, $M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.03$).

Identification
Identification was measured with 10 items adapted from Cohen (2001), such as: "I felt I could really get inside Sumon's/Jiaming's mind"; "I could feel the emotions Sumon/Jiaming portrayed" or "While reading the story, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed" (Cronbach's α = .94, $M = 5.29$, $SD = .92$).

Transportation
Transportation was assessed with five items (Appel, Gnambs, Richter, & Green, 2015), 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" (Cronbach's α = .91, $M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.01$).

Policy support
Support for policies protecting foreign workers was measured using the items from Study 1 (Cronbach's α = .84, $M = 5.98$, $SD = .91$). Support for policies targeting low-income Singaporeans was measured with four statements (e.g., "Revise the rental housing renewal scheme to be more flexible about the

income cap"; "Streamline the various financial support application processes"; Cronbach's α = .87, M = 6.04, SD = .87).

Behavioral intentions

Participants indicated how likely they were to engage in different actions related to the groups represented by the protagonist: "Sign an online petition to raise awareness of foreign workers'/low-income Singaporeans' situations"; "Donate money to a civil society group advocating for better support for foreign workers/low-income Singaporeans"; "Link this story on your social media page"; "Volunteer to raise awareness" (Cronbach's α = .85, M = 5.07, SD = 1.09).

Analytic approach

A series of ANOVA models estimated the effect of narrative perspective on social presence and identification and potential moderation by protagonist's group membership (*H1, H2*). Consistent with Study 1, we performed the equivalence test to examine the null hypothesis on transportation (*H3*). The indirect effects (*H4a-b, H5a-b*) were assessed in two ways. Given concerns regarding the high correlation among the mediators (see Online Appendix C), we first modeled the indirect effect of social presence (Model 4; *H4a-b*) and identification (Model 7; *H5a-b*), separately using PROCESS (Hayes, 2018)[7]. Secondly, to make an accurate conclusion regarding the relative efficacy of mediators, the indirect pathways were assessed in a comprehensive framework using structural equation modeling (SEM). Hayes (2018, p.183–184) discusses the problems associated with highly correlated mediators in testing indirect effects and suggests that, in such cases, the indirect effects could be examined both separately and concurrently. Thus, though unconventional, we considered both the separate and comprehensive model to cautiously interpret the role of social presence in Study 2.

Results

Replicating Study 1, those who read the first-person narrative reported greater social presence than those who read the third-person narrative (M_{1st} = 5.07, SE = .07; M_{3rd} = 4.85, SE = .07, $F(1, 406)$ = 4.70, p < .05, Cohen's d = .21; *H1* supported). This effect was not moderated by the protagonist's background as either an ingroup or outgroup member ($F(1, 406)$ = 1.60, p = .206), indicating a robust effect of narrative perspective across different protagonists.

On the other hand, narrative perspective showed no main effect on identification (M_{1st} = 5.31, SE = .06; M_{3rd} = 5.26, SE = .06, $F(1, 406)$ = 0.33, p = .564). Instead – as predicted – there was a significant interaction effect between perspective and protagonist's group membership ($F(1, 406)$ = 4.00, p < .05, Cohen's d = .20;

H2 supported), such that the first-person narrative marginally significantly induced identification only when the protagonist was an ingroup member (M_{1st} = 5.39, *SE* = .09; M_{3rd} = 5.15, *SE* = .09; *F*(1, 406) = 3.32, *p* = .069, Cohen's *d* = .20) but not when he was an outgroup member (M_{1st} = 5.24, *SE* = .09; M_{3rd} = 5.37, *SE* = .09; *F*(1, 406) = 1.01, *p* = .315).

As hypothesized, narrative perspective showed no main effect on transportation (M_{1st} = 5.24, *SE* = .07; M_{3rd} = 5.21, *SE* = .07, *F*(1, 406) = 0.08, *p* = .777). The equivalence test was significant, Δ = .16, p_{eq} = .01 (*H3* supported). There was no significant interaction effect between narrative perspective and protagonist's group membership on transportation (*F*(1, 406) = 3.06, *p* = .081). These main and interaction effects of the experimental factors are summarized in Figure 1. It is worthwhile to additionally note that protagonist's group membership did not have any main effect on the mediators (social presence, *F*(1, 406) = 0.35, *p* = .555; identification, *F*(1, 406) = 0.17, *p* = .681; transportation, *F*(1, 406) = 0.00, *p* = .984).

Separately estimated mediation models show that heightened social presence of the protagonist resulting from reading first-person, as compared to third-person narratives, increased support for policies aimed at helping the groups depicted in the narratives ($b_{indirect\ effect}$ = .08, Boot *SE* = .04, 95% *CI* = [.01, .16]). Extending Study 1, parallel effects emerged for behavioral intentions, such that social presence enhanced by exposure to first-person narratives increased intention to participate in actions that can help the groups depicted ($b_{indirect\ effect}$ = .11, Boot *SE* = .05, 95% *CI* = [.01, .23], see Figure 2a). On the other hand, the protagonist's group membership moderated the strength of mediation via identification (see Figure 2b). Identification was a positive mediator of narrative perspective effects on policy support when the protagonist was an ingroup member ($b_{indirect\ effect}$ = .13, Boot *SE* = .07, 95% *CI* = [.00, .28]) but not when he was an outgroup member ($b_{indirect\ effect}$ = − .07, Boot *SE* = .07, 95% *CI* = [−.21, .07]). This difference was statistically significant (*Index* = .21, Boot *SE* = .10, 95% *CI* = [.01, .42]). Further enhancing the robustness of these effects, identification
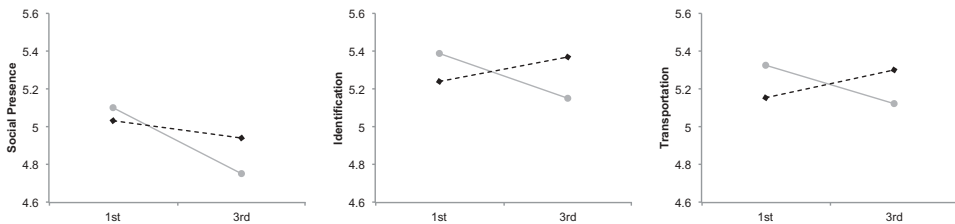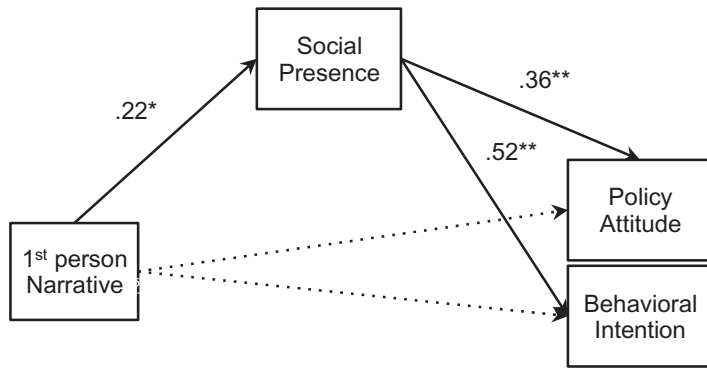

Figure 1. Effects of narrative perspective on social presence, identification, and transportation by protagonist type. (Study 2). Note. The black-dotted lines represent narratives with an outgroup protagonist, while the gray, solid lines represent narratives with an ingroup protagonist. The two lines were equivalent in slope for social presence (i.e., no interaction effects), only the ingroup narrative showed a marginally significant effect for identification, and neither of the two lines represents a significant effect in the case of transportation.

(a) Simple mediation via social presence (PROCESS, Model 4)

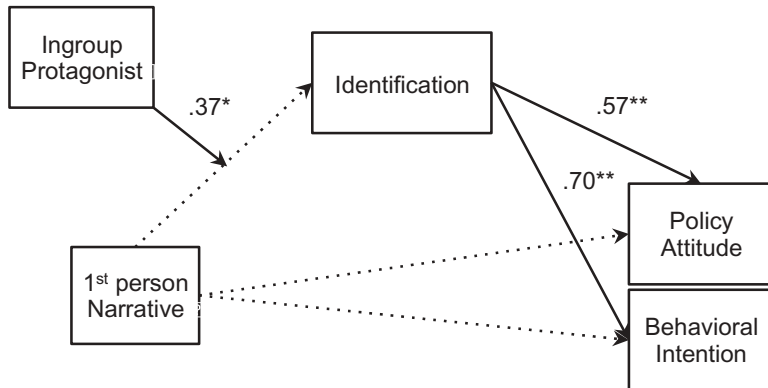(b) Moderated mediation via identification (PROCESS, Model 7)

Figure 2. Simple and moderated mediation of narrative perspective effects by social presence and identification. Dotted lines indicate non-significant pathways. (Study 2).

mediated narrative perspective effects on behavioral intentions only when the protagonist was an ingroup member ($b_{indirect\ effect}$ = .16, Boot SE = .09, 95% CI = [.00, .35]) but not when he was an outgroup member ($b_{indirect\ effect}$ = − .09, Boot SE = .09, 95% CI = [−.26, .09]), a difference that was also statistically significant (*Index* = .25, Boot SE = .13, 95% CI = [.02, .51]). We did not examine the mediation of transportation because no perspective difference was expected on transportation.

In addition, we performed a parallel analysis using SEM with all relevant variables. This comprehensive model allows us to query about the magnitude of social presence effects controlling for another mediator, identification. First, we confirmed the latent structure of the three mediators to ensure that these were indeed distinct[8] (χ^2(32) = 80.21, p < .001, CFI = .988, TLI =
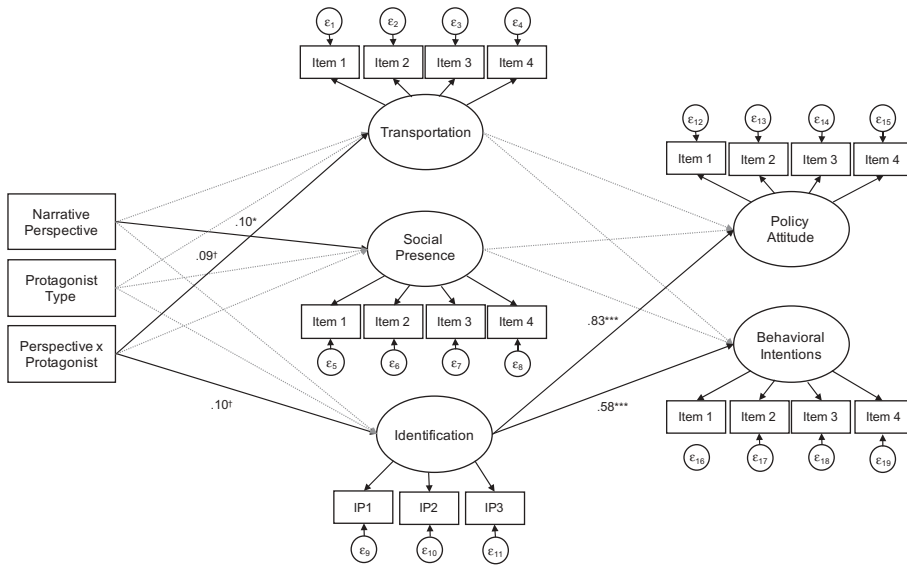
Figure 3. Standardized coefficients from the structural model (Study 2). Dotted lines represent non-significant pathways. Model fit was acceptable, $\chi^2(75) = 392.253$, $p < .001$, CFI = .964, TLI = .954, RMSEA = .054, 90% CI [.047, .061]; SRMR = .044. Error terms and their covariances were specified for all endogenous variables but are omitted here for readability. Full list of path coefficients can be found in Appendix D. †$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, ***$p < .001$.

.979, RMSEA = .061, 90% CI [.044, .077], SRMR = .019).[9] We then estimated a full structural model with our experimental factors, mediators, and dependent variables in a single model (see Figure 3). The structural model showed acceptable fit ($\chi^2(178) = 392.25$, $p < .001$, CFI = .964, TLI = .954, RMSEA = .054, 90% CI [.047, .061], SRMR = .044; path coefficients in Online Appendix D). The experimental results mirrored our findings (*H1-H3*) based on ANOVA. However, only identification was significantly associated with policy attitude ($\beta = .83$, $p < .001$) and behavioral intention ($\beta = .58$, $p < .001$), while social presence was not. Thus, in the comprehensive model, none of the indirect effects were significant.

In sum, the expected indirect effects emerged, but *only* when the mediators were modeled separately (*H4a-b, H5a-b* conditionally supported). When all mediators were considered together – estimating the partial indirect effects of each mediator – there was no clear pattern of effects. The insignificant indirect effects in SEM are likely due to the large intercorrelation between mediators, which inflates the standard error of the estimates in testing of the partial effects (Hayes, 2018). Thus, based on two different tests of indirect effects, we were unable to confirm conclusively whether social presence is a better mediator than identification given the inconsistent effects; nonetheless, in light of the results of ANOVA and equivalence tests, the role of

social presence lies in its stronger association with narrative perspective effect compared to identification or transportation.

Study 2 discussion

Study 2 makes three important contributions. First, we replicated the effects of narrative perspective on social presence across two narratives featuring different types of protagonists. Regardless of the protagonist's group membership (ingroup versus outgroup), the first-person perspective induced greater social presence than the third-person perspective. Second, Study 2 further established that social presence consistently mediates narrative perspective effects on both attitudinal as well as behavioral outcomes when modeled separately. Social presence explained *why* the first-person narrative, more so than the third-person narrative, leads to greater support for story-consistent policies and even behaviors aimed at helping the groups depicted in the story. Third, Study 2 showed some indication that the pattern of mediation for social presence might be different from that of the often-studied processes of identification or transportation. When modeled separately, social presence explained the persuasiveness of first-person narratives over third-person narratives regardless of the protagonist's group membership, but identification only did so when the protagonist was an ingroup member. Transportation, as expected, was not affected by narrative perspective at all (see also Banerjee & Greene, 2012). These findings show that social presence explains the persuasive power of first-person narratives (vs. third-person) for both ingroup and outgroup protagonists and that other processes do not seem to play such a mediating role. When modeled collectively, however, due to the high correlation among the mediators, none of the indirect effects were significant, cautioning the interpretation of these effects. The different conclusions suggested by different analytical methods should not be seen as contradictory; rather, as Hayes (2018, p.183–184) notes, they give us answers to different questions. While it may be impossible to identify the unique indirect effect of narrative perspective through social presence holding all other processes constant, social presence – in its entirety – does seem to show a different pattern of effect as compared to identification or transportation processes.

General discussion

All narratives are told from a perspective. Focusing on this simple yet prevalent feature of narratives, this project investigated whether and how narrative perspective (first-person versus third-person) exerts persuasive influence on attitudes and behavioral intentions related to the story. In doing so, we advanced the concept of social presence as a central theoretical mechanism that explains the effects of first-person narratives and established its applicability to two distinct social groups across two original experimental

studies. The very same story enhanced the social presence of the protagonist when it was told from the first-person perspective but not when the exact same information was presented in the third-person. Put differently, the existence of a third-person intermediary in the narratives interfered with the experience of presence. Bridging past work on social presence with the scholarship on narrative effects, this robust effect shows that even small changes in textual messages, such as simply varying the pronoun in the story, can influence the level of social presence, thereby exerting persuasive effects on attitudes and behavioral intentions in the context of socio-political narratives about marginalized groups.

Furthermore, this project established that social presence is a psychological mechanism that is consistently affected by narrative perspective compared to other related processes such as identification (Chen, Bell, & Taylor, 2016; de Graaf et al., 2012; Hoeken et al., 2016) and transportation (Banerjee & Greene, 2012). A first-person story increased social presence consistently, regardless of the protagonist's group membership. In contrast, identification was affected by narrative perspective only when the protagonist was an ingroup member, in line with some prior findings (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). Moreover still, narrative perspective did not at all influence transportation into the narrative, and this uniform null effect did not depend on the protagonist's group membership. As theorized above, these differential patterns are likely due to the fact that social presence, while still being a character-directed in its nature, does not entail a merge of identities and the narrative reader remains separate from the character. Thus, although feeling the presence of a character, identifying with him/her, and being absorbed in the story world may appear to describe similar phenomena, we establish that these are distinct mechanisms differentially affected by narrative perspective, especially in the context of messages about potentially disliked or marginalized outgroups.

Our findings point to a possible convergence between social presence theory (Short et al., 1976) and intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), such that heightened feelings of social presence of an outgroup protagonist can create an experience comparable to intergroup contact. Although reading or viewing a narrative at first offers a mediated (e.g., through a book, television) experience with the simulated narrative characters, heightened social presence of the protagonist may make the situation feel similar to an intergroup encounter. Indeed, media psychologists have theorized about illusionary social experience of media consumers, who can feel like they are interacting with media characters (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956) and the work on mediated contact has shown that such experiences can improve outgroup attitudes (e.g., Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). Our study shows that the first-person perspective may be a key factor that brings about this feeling of direct interaction with a narrative character, a feeling that may have important implications for intergroup outcomes.

Despite these novel findings, this project has some limitations. First, we portrayed the outgroup protagonists in our stimuli materials in a positive and sympathetic way. However, the sympathetic portrayal of the outgroup character could have induced liking, which could have had persuasive effects through reducing reactance against the persuasive message (Moyer-Gusé, 2008) and increasing learning from the character (Robinson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2017). Because the two studies did not measure liking toward the character, we were unable to separate the effects of liking. Moreover, this project examined the effects of narrative perspective on attitudes toward social issues in a specific context in Singapore. It is unclear whether our findings apply to other issues and other socio-political contexts. Also, the groups featured in the narratives (i.e., foreign workers and low-income Singaporeans) were disadvantaged but not necessarily stigmatized, and it is unclear whether parallel results would emerge for more stigmatized groups (e.g., drug addicts) for whom greater presence may induce greater anxiety. Thus, our study findings should be replicated with multiple message conditions and in cultural contexts beyond Singapore to confirm whether perspective effects hold regardless of the cultural background of the audience.

Despite these limitations, this project offers several theoretical contributions to the field of narrative persuasion. First, we introduce and establish social presence as a novel mechanism that explains how first-person (vs. third-person) narratives lead to persuasive outcomes, a mechanism that shows more consistent effects than other processes studied to date. Although the literature on narrative persuasion, to our knowledge, has never considered the role of *social* presence of narrative characters (cf. see Tukachinsky, 2014 on "spatial" presence), this feeling of presence is highly relevant insofar as reading or viewing a narrative entails a virtual experience with characters. And since certain factors (e.g., perspective) can make protagonists seem more real and close, their stories become more impactful.

Second, this project establishes group membership of a narrative protagonist as an important boundary condition for narrative perspective effects. While social presence worked as a mechanism regardless of whether the protagonist is an ingroup or an outgroup member, the outgroup status of the protagonist inhibits identification process, consistent with the growing evidence that it is challenging to induce identification with characters who are stigmatized (Chung & Slater, 2013; Igartua & Frutos, 2017), display discordant attitudes (Cohen et al., 2015), or are considered as members of an outgroup (Hoeken et al., 2016). Future work should further investigate other traits of narrative protagonists and of the narrative messages more broadly, which can influence the tested processes.

Third, this project helps us better understand the inconsistent findings in the narrative perspective literature. Whereas extant research uses different conceptualizations of narrative perspective and/or confounds perspective

with other factors (e.g., thoughts and information presented in the text), we kept all the information constant and only altered the pronouns in the texts. By doing so, our project rules out other possible confounds and is apt to demonstrating that the detected results are due to the shifts in perspective only. Also, extant research examines different narrative processing variables (e.g., identification, transportation), which – as we argued and showed above – are not as theoretically central to narrative perspective effects as is the feeling of social presence, which is not only consistently affected by perspective but also strongly shapes attitudes and behavioral intentions. Thus, our project specifies the conditions in which and the processes through which narrative perspective has persuasive effects.

In sum, although the shift in narrative perspective, from the first-person to the third-person, seems rather trivial (i.e., the difference between an "I" and a "he"), it creates a sense of togetherness with a character presented in a message. This feeling of social presence explains why first-person narratives may powerfully shape story-consistent attitudes toward and behaviors directed at ingroups as well as outgroups. By proposing this novel mechanism of social presence, this project opens up a promising avenue for future studies on the mechanisms of narrative persuasion.

Notes

1. Sampling and recruitment were done by Qualtrics, which maintains a large online panel of adults recruited through affiliates, advertisements, and partner samples. Panel members received reward points for completing the survey – points which could later be exchanged for various rewards such as PayPal currency and e-vouchers. Survey was advertised via email to panel members. Only Singaporean adults could participate in the study.
2. The study was originally designed as a 2 (narrative perspective: first vs. third) x 2 (target salience: photo vs. no photo) between-subject design with participants randomly assigned to one of four conditions. However, the manipulation of target salience had no effects on any of the variables and also the covariance between study variables did not change by target salience. We thus exclude this factor from the current analyses. Post-hoc power calculations show .61 power for Study 1.
3. Both were rated equally in terms of story believability (M_{1st} = 5.12, M_{3rd} = 5.09, p = .838), accuracy (M_{1st} = 4.86, M_{3rd} = 4.82, p = .671), completeness (M_{1st} = 4.67, M_{3rd} = 4.58, p = .480) and bias (M_{1st} = 2.41, M_{3rd} = 2.53, p = .339).
4. We commissioned Survey Sampling International (SSI) to recruit participants from their online panel. SSI also recruits and maintains panel members through online advertisements and referrals. The survey was posted on their main board and reward points were given as an incentive. Post-hoc power calculations show .52 power for Study 2.
5. Depicting the ingroup protagonist as one from a low-income family may possibly contaminate the manipulation since it may inhibit identification for higher income participants. However, controlling for income did not influence the magnitude, direction, or significance of the presented results. Moreover, regardless of the condition, income was not significantly correlated with the level of identification with the character (ingroup condition r = .09, p = .197; outgroup condition r = .09, p = .203).

6. The ingroup/outgroup narratives not only differ in the protagonist's group status, but also in content as they reflect unique life experiences of a local student vs a migrant worker. This was inevitable as an ingroup member's experiences are clearly distinct from those of the outgroup's, at least in the current study's context. Fortunately, our pretest confirms that the two stories were rated equally on story accuracy ($M_{ingroup}$ = 4.83, $M_{outgroup}$ = 4.98, p = .422), completeness ($M_{ingroup}$ = 4.51, $M_{outgroup}$ = 4.43, p = .713) and bias ($M_{ingroup}$ = 4.26, $M_{outgroup}$ = 4.10, p = .455). The two stories were also rated equally in terms of character evaluation (honest, $M_{ingroup}$ = 5.30, $M_{outgroup}$ = 5.56, p = .141; trustworthy, $M_{ingroup}$ = 5.29, $M_{outgroup}$ = 5.42, p = .432; honorable, $M_{ingroup}$ = 5.53, $M_{outgroup}$ = 5.31, p = .214; genuine $M_{ingroup}$ = 5.52, $M_{outgroup}$ = 5.72, p = .244).

7. High correlations among mediators not only lead to unstable regression estimates and inflated standard errors, it also introduces complexities in interpretation (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003, p. 98–99, 420; Hayes, 2018).

8. We rely on the joint criteria proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999) to assess model fit: CFI≥0.96 and SRMR≤0.09 or SRMR≤0.09 and RMSEA = <0.06.

9. We used item parcels instead of the raw items to represent the identification construct as the original model with 10 raw items showed less than satisfactory model fit ($\chi^2(51)$ = 282.30, p < .001, CFI = .946, TLI = .931, RMSEA = .105, 90% CI [.093, .117]; SRMR = .051). Item parceling has been used successfully in a number of studies that utilized SEM (e.g., Peter & Valkenburg, 2008) to help reduce idiosyncratic feature of items in favor of more parsimonious models. We also dropped one item from the transportation scale due to redundancy issues as discovered in the residual analysis.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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