

## **Narrative Persuasion in Historical Films: Examining the Importance of Prior Knowledge, Existing Attitudes, and Culture**

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This study examines the persuasive effect of a historical movie about World War II in audiences with different attitudes toward and prior knowledge of the figures and events portrayed in the movie, based on different cultural backgrounds (U.S. and China). Empathy levels for controversial historical figures (e.g., Adolf Hitler, Josef Goebbels) and groups (e.g., Germany as a nation) were analyzed, as were related story-consistent beliefs. U.S. participants reported having more empathy toward the figures and groups after viewing, while their general opinions toward war were more negative. A different and mostly contradictory pattern was observed among Chinese participants. Results suggest that preexisting attitudes and knowledge likely play an important role in the narrative persuasion process for historical movies.

*Keywords: narrative persuasion, historical narrative, multicultural comparison, attitudes, prior knowledge*

Fictional media narratives, such as movies, soap operas, and novels, can influence the real-world beliefs and attitudes of their audiences (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013). Scholars generally position work examining this phenomenon under the broad heading of entertainment-education (e.g., Singhal, Cody, Rogers, & Sabido, 2004; Slater, 2002), with the specific process referred to as narrative persuasion (e.g., Green & Brock, 2002) or entertainment persuasion (e.g., Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

To date, the process of narrative persuasion has been examined in several specific genres (e.g., Appel & Maleckar, 2012; Dahlstrom, 2010; Green, 2006; Kennedy, O’Leary, Beck, Pollard, & Simpson, 2004; Wilkin et al., 2007). However, studies investigating the persuasive effect of historical narratives—in particular, ones dealing with socially contentious events and issues—are somewhat rare. The 2014 release of the film *Selma* highlighted the potential importance of this process, because several historians, former staffers, and family members criticized the extent of creative license taken by the filmmakers in their

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Date submitted: 2016–02–06

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portrayal of President Lyndon Johnson (e.g., Buxton, 2015; Califano, 2014). The underlying assumption in the criticism seemed to be that the film would negatively impact viewers' attitudes about the former president. Research in the area suggests that such fears may, in fact, be warranted. Butler and her colleagues found that moviegoers interviewed after viewing Oliver Stone's *JFK* tended to be more accepting of the broad conspiratorial explanations of the Kennedy assassination than those interviewed before watching the film (Butler, Koopman, & Zimbardo, 1995). Similarly, Igartua and Barrios (2012) found that viewers of the religion-themed movie *Camino* reported more negative attitudes (than viewers in a control condition) toward religion in general and toward the Catholic group Opus Dei following viewing, in line with the main positions forwarded in the film.

Despite the number of studies investigating the persuasive effect of entertainment narratives, many important questions remain unanswered, especially with media content based on historical events. Of particular interest to us is how and to what extent existing attitudes and prior knowledge impact the narrative persuasion process during the reception of such content. For historical narratives, to our knowledge, only Igartua and Barrios (2012) expressly examined the role of real-world attitudes in the persuasion process. Specifically, the researchers investigated how positioning oneself as politically right or left leaning (measured after exposure) moderated the film's effects through identification with the characters.

Existing attitudes and prior knowledge may matter tremendously in these situations. Greater knowledge about an attitude object is associated with stronger, more resilient attitudes (Wilson, Kraft, & Dunn, 1989). Therefore, attitudes that change during the viewing of entertainment programs are more likely to be attitudes associated with less knowledge and, thus, to be relatively weakly held or newly formed. Furthermore, scholars have argued that being immersed in a persuasive narrative can suppress audience members' ability or desire to counterargue with the positions presented in the story (Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Slater, 2002). We presume that any counterarguing that is suppressed (or that takes place, for that matter) would be based on the attitudes—and the knowledge supporting those attitudes—that the audience member held prior to viewing. To date, though, these issues have not been systematically examined in the narrative persuasion literature. We aim to resolve some of that uncertainty by examining how long-standing, socially shared attitudes and beliefs about an event, as well as various issues surrounding that event, might be affected by a historical narrative that forwards a contrary position.

To accomplish this task, we compare existing attitudes and prior knowledge across two cultural contexts. Many types of narratives rely greatly on cultural knowledge, with the audience's background likely influencing their understanding of those stories and the opinions expressed in those stories. In fact, it appears that the study by Igartua and Barrios (2012) was motivated by this reality. The researchers note that "because of [*Camino's*] critical message toward Opus Dei, this film triggered some controversy in Spain during its release" (p. 514); Opus Dei was founded in Spain in the late 1920s by the Catholic priest Josemaría Escrivá. In this case, it seems logical to assume that the researchers expected Spanish viewers to be more knowledgeable about the themes presented in the film, presumably leading to culturally specific effects that likely differed from the effects among viewers in countries rich in other religious traditions. Thus, one way to explore the role of attitudes and knowledge in the narrative

persuasion process in a historical film is to examine effects for the same movie with audiences from two different cultural groups.

To explore these issues, we exposed participants to an edited-for-length version of the movie *Downfall*, which depicts the final 10 days in the life of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi regime. Nominated for an Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film of 2004, *Downfall* generated public debate and controversy over (among other things) its “humanizing” and sympathetic treatment of Hitler and his followers (e.g., Eckhardt, 2004). In our study, one group of participants was from the United States, which has a long social history of interacting with and discussing these issues in various public forums, formal education, and other entertainment offerings. A second group of participants was from China, where interactions with and discussions about this particular topic are much more rare. Our goal was to examine how historical movies can influence attitudes and beliefs about historical issues and events, with particular interest in the role of prior knowledge and attitudes in the narrative persuasion process. In doing so, we also investigated how viewers from different cultural backgrounds experience narrative persuasion while watching the same movie.

### **Narrative Persuasion and Historical Fiction**

Narratives are thought to persuade by presenting information in “story format” (Padgett & Allen, 1997, p. 53) such that audience members accept the attitudes and beliefs presented while engaging with the story. As noted, a growing body of literature in the field of media psychology has examined the phenomenon of narrative persuasion. For example, Green and Brock (2000) found that after reading a story about a murder by a psychiatric patient that occurred in a shopping mall, participants were more likely to hold story-consistent beliefs such as “Malls are not safe places” and “Psychiatric patients who have passes to leave their institution should not be free of supervision.”

In contrast to the fictional content examined in the narrative persuasion literature, historical movies focus on the portrayal of real events and people. Documentaries may be considered a type of historical film—one that is usually based on nonfiction, which leverages archival data and interviews to “reveal, preserve, and analyze” (LaMarre & Landreville, 2009, p. 539) a story. In contrast, historical fictional movies—the focus of our attention—are artistic and creative interpretations of real events. Such films struggle with “the problem of truth” because “meaning lies not in a chain of events themselves but in the writer’s interpretation of what occurred” (Brown, 1998, *The Problem of “True”: Historical Fiction or Fictional History*, para. 1). Ultimately, then, although historical fictional movies portray real events and figures, they portray a fictionalized history, with actual events and people possibly exaggerated, distorted, or overly simplified through the writing and production processes. This fictionalization is important for narrative persuasion with such content, because this is where prior knowledge and attitudes—based on nonfictional accounts—might be challenged.

Regardless, as noted, evidence exists that narrative persuasion can occur with historical films (e.g., Butler et al., 1995; Igartua & Barrios, 2012). However, the key dependent variables of story-consistent belief acceptance and attitude can occur on multiple levels: specific people/characters (e.g., Adolf Hitler), more generalized groups (e.g., Nazi soldiers, German citizens), specific actions (e.g.,

genocide, suicide), and broad concepts/actions/themes (e.g., [un]justified war, sacrificial love). And often the direction or valence of the attitudes that are promoted in a film may differ, may be in conflict, and may be quite complex. Given this reality, we expected narrative persuasion in the movie *Downfall* to occur on a few different levels. As noted earlier, one criticism of the movie was its empathy-appealing portrayal of Adolf Hitler and his men. Because empathy has been found to be positively related to positive attitudes and behavioral intentions (cf. Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002; Batson et al., 1997), we expect story-consistent attitude change in the same direction for participants in our study:

*H1: After exposure, participants will report more empathy toward (a) the historical figures and (b) the historical group presented in the historical film.*

Additionally, as with previous research (Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Slater, Rouner, & Long, 2006), we expected more general attitudes to change in line with their representations in the film:

*H2: After exposure, participants will report more positive attitudes toward (a) Adolf Hitler and (b) the historical group presented in the historical film.*

Also, given the cruel presentations of war throughout the film, such as the scenes depicting the murder of innocent children, we expect that:

*H3: After exposure, participants will report more negative attitudes toward war.*

### **Narrative Persuasion and Prior Knowledge**

Although the literature base provides strong rationale for these hypotheses, prior attitudes and knowledge about the people, issues, and events portrayed in a historical film can make the narrative persuasion process more complex. As alluded to earlier, one of the basic claims in the narrative persuasion literature is that existing attitudes can be suppressed when viewers are watching or reading a narrative, leading to the adoption of an attitude consistent with the narrative. Various mental mechanisms—such as transportation (e.g., Moyer-Gusé, 2008) and identification (e.g., Igartua & Barrios, 2012)—are thought to reduce a viewer's ability or willingness to counterargue with the attitudes presented in the narratives; as a result, audiences are more likely to adopt the attitudes supported by the narrative.

At the same time, when examining the potentially persuasive effects of historical narratives, we must consider how existing attitudes are entangled with prior knowledge about the people, events, and issues portrayed. For our purposes, we operationalize prior knowledge as the information individuals have regarding the historical background of the narrative. Schema theory contends that our existing knowledge helps us better understand new knowledge (Driscoll, 2005). When audiences watch a historical narrative, they rely on their existing cognitive schema to understand the story and predict its development. If a fact or event presented in the narrative is inconsistent with the viewer's preexisting schema, then she or he may be unable to become involved (or transported or identify with characters) in the story because "such inconsistencies should interfere with the smooth construction of mental models and thus motivate an evaluation of realism" (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008, p. 268). In such a situation, prior knowledge is often

extremely hard to change or replace (Fazio, Barber, Rajaram, Ornstein, & Marsh, 2013), which should affect the narrative persuasion process.

Thus, narrative persuasion studies claim that the counterarguing influence of existing attitudes can be inhibited by narrative texts, leading to possible story-consistent attitude change regardless of the genre. On the other hand, schema theory as adapted to narrative processing (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008) suggests that prior knowledge of—and presumably corresponding attitudes about—a historical person, event, or issue portrayed in a narrative might impact judgments of that narrative's external realism, which could impede the persuasive effects of the narrative.

### **Cultural Backgrounds Influence Prior Knowledge**

One way we can begin to explore these complexities is by examining the narrative persuasion process in groups who likely have vastly different prior knowledge and existing attitudes. As noted, audiences rely on existing knowledge schemas to comprehend narratives (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008), and we know that these schemas are greatly influenced by various socialization and cultural factors (Nishida, 2004). Thus, for audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds, their values, history, and related schemas differ, likely leading to different interpretations of and attitudes resulting from a persuasive narrative, especially those related to history and culture. For example, *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1999) is a novel about a Japanese geisha written by Arthur Golden, an American. The book was incredibly popular in the United States, spending 60 weeks on *The New York Times* best sellers list; however, Japanese readers largely panned and criticized the novel for what they saw as its distortion of Japanese culture (e.g., Hanawald, 2000). A reasonable explanation for these conflicting evaluations is the differing schema related to geisha and Japanese culture held by the two groups: For American readers who did not have a great deal of knowledge about geishas, the book presented a detailed description of the culture. In contrast, Japanese readers who had prior knowledge believed the description in the book failed to reflect their culture accurately.

Analyzing the responses of participants from two different countries with different cultural backgrounds (United States and China) is a natural way to examine varying levels of knowledge and attitudes—and, as a result, the narrative persuasion process—with historical narratives. Cultures vary with regard to their participation in historic global events; the way those events are memorialized, communicated, evaluated, interpreted, and remembered across those cultures also varies, leading to different knowledge and attitude structures toward the events among people in those cultures.

With the subject matter of *Downfall*, the way that American and Chinese people think and learn about World War II is quite different.<sup>1</sup> Given the U.S. military's heavy participation and loss of life in World War II in Europe, American culture is replete with references to the war and to Nazi Germany: in holidays, school curricula, monuments, parades, and museums as well as countless documentaries, movies, books, and even video games (Meredith, 1999). Perhaps it goes without saying, but, in general, the cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Although this statement is anecdotal in nature, it reflects the personal experiences of the authors of this article, two of whom are Chinese and the third American.

references in the United States to Nazism and those responsible for its rise in Germany in the 1930s are extremely negative. On the other hand, China's participation in World War II was largely confined to the Pacific theater. As a result, their cultural resources relative to the war in Europe and Nazi Germany are comparably quite limited. For example, of the 70 World War II-related movies made in China between 1938 and 2012, only one of them was about Nazi Germany (Qu, 2012). Thus, it is reasonable to think that these cross-cultural differences might lead to variance in viewers' knowledge of and attitudes about Nazi Germany's involvement in World War II, which may be reflected in their understanding and interpretation of *Downfall*, and which in turn may impact the narrative persuasion process therein. However, without previous research in this specific area, and because of the aforementioned complexities associated with existing attitudes and prior knowledge, we explore these relationships with a general research question:

*RQ1: How do culturally informed existing attitudes and prior knowledge impact the narrative persuasion process when people from two different countries view the same historical film?*

### **Method**

To examine these issues, we used a pretest-posttest design. A total of 50 undergraduate students at a large, public university in the southern United States and 62 undergraduate students from a midsized, public university in southern China participated in the study. Instructors provided class credit or extra credit for participation in the study. Data for three participants were excluded because the participants failed to correctly answer a manipulation-check question. The final combined sample for the analyses was 109: 48 in the United States, 61 in China. The participants were predominantly women (83.5%), with an age range from 18 to 27 ( $M = 21.53$ ). Only seven participants (6.4%) across the sample reported having previously seen the film; given this low number, we elected to include their data in our analyses.

### **Procedure**

In advance of data collection, two bilingual scholars jointly translated all the materials and questionnaires used in the study; thus, participants completed the study using materials written in their native languages. One week prior to the experiment, participants at both sites completed a 10-minute, pretest questionnaire online. Next, participants at both sites came to a multimedia classroom on their respective campuses to watch an 86-minute, edited-for-length version of the stimulus material on a large screen. Afterward, they completed a 10-minute, paper-and-pencil posttest. Finally, all participants read an institutional review board-approved debriefing form before leaving.

### **Stimulus Material**

The German historical movie *Downfall* (2004) served as the study treatment. The film, adapted from the memoirs of Adolf Hitler's personal secretary, Traudl Junge, depicted the final 10 days in the life of Hitler and Nazi Germany. The movie painted a portrait that is different from most people's historical perspective, depicting Hitler, his followers, and loyal civilians in a humanizing and sympathetic way; it also portrayed Germans in general as both guilty perpetrators and victims of World War II.

The original release of the film was 179 minutes long; to keep the treatment length reasonable, we professionally edited the film to an 86-minute version. The edited version maintained the film's primary storyline, including the suicide of Hitler and his wife, Eva; the suicide of Joseph Goebbels and his wife, Magda, following the killing of their six children; the suicide of many other German officials; and the escape or surrender of other German officials. This edition also kept the storyline of a young German boy who joined the Volkssturm and attended the Battle of Berlin.

German was the language spoken in the film; therefore, participant groups viewed the film with the appropriate subtitles (i.e., Chinese or English), which had the added benefit of reducing method bias (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

### ***Variables and Measurement***

Nine items were used to measure existing attitudes about the film's subject matter. Unless otherwise noted, all items were measured using a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Participants were also given an opportunity to respond with "I don't know" to each item. For most items, only a small number ( $n < 9$ ) of participants chose the "I don't know" option. In these few cases, the responses were treated as missing data. One notable exception is mentioned.

As noted previously, story-related attitudes can be measured on various levels. Because of this, we measured attitudes toward three particular historical "characters" who would later be portrayed in the film: "To what extent do you feel empathy toward the leader of Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler/the Nazi leader Josef Goebbels<sup>2</sup>/other German officials during World War II?" One item measured existing attitudes toward the larger "cast of characters." It read, "To what extent do you feel empathy toward Nazi Germany?" Our decision to measure empathy in this manner is informed by work identifying it as a positive attitude (e.g., Irving & Dickson, 2004), predictive of behavioral intentions (e.g., Batson et al., 2002), and because scholars suggest that the film's director (Oliver Hirschbiegel) attempted to induce empathy toward Hitler and his followers (e.g., von Moltke, 2007).<sup>3</sup> To mask the purpose of the study, two interference items were included on the pretest about other historical figures from the same time period.

Two additional questions measured beliefs: "How much do you agree with the statement 'Hitler is not all evil'?" and "To what extent can you understand the extremely positive attitudes that many

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<sup>2</sup> A large proportion (40.4%) of the participants responded with the "I don't know" option for this item. Consequently, for practical purposes as discussed in the Results section, we converted this to another knowledge question. Those responding "I don't know" were coded as 0 (*no knowledge of Goebbels*), and those responding with some attitude as 1 (*knowledge about Goebbels*).

<sup>3</sup> Many narrative studies reference empathy as an independent (though multidimensional) construct (e.g., the oft-utilized Davis [1980] interpersonal reactivity index contains four empathy subscales: empathic concern, perspective taking, personal distress, and fantasy). We maintain that tradition, with our items primarily measuring issues related to empathic concern and perspective taking. In doing so, we imply that empathy reflects (more) positive attitudes by the viewer toward the target of the empathy.

Germans held toward Adolf Hitler at that time?"<sup>4</sup> Finally, one item measured general attitudes toward war: "How much do you agree with the statement, 'No matter what the excuse, war should be prohibited'?"

Additionally, two items assessed prior knowledge: "How familiar are you with the history of the Second World War in Europe?" and "How familiar are you with the last days of Nazi Germany during the 1940s?"

Finally, to elicit more specific opinions on Hitler and Nazi Germany, we asked one open-ended question: "Tell me about your opinions on Nazi Germany and Hitler." Participants could write their opinion in either English or Chinese.

The same seven attitude items (minus the two interference ones) posed in the pretest were used in the posttest. Furthermore, in line with narrative persuasion research (e.g., Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008), we measured transportation and identification as potential mechanisms mediating the narrative reception process. Transportation was measured with six items (Green & Brock, 2000; observed Cronbach's  $\alpha = .72$ ), and identification with the main character (Adolf Hitler) was measured with nine items (Cohen, 2001;  $\alpha = .74$ ); some wording was necessarily changed from the original scales to reflect the filmic nature of our stimulus material. However, initial analyses revealed no discernible pattern of relationships, in either cultural group, between transportation and identification and pre-post change (based on  $\Delta$  scores) on the attitude items ( $p_{\text{transportation}} > .10$ ,  $p_{\text{identification}} > .05$ ; we will discuss two identification-related observations in the U.S. sample).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the roles of transportation and identification were not examined in our final analyses.

Five items explored how participants self-evaluated their previous knowledge of the film's subject matter. Sample items include "In your country, do you think there are enough resources in mass media about Nazi Germany if you want to look into it?" (i.e., a measure of the availability of sources for prior knowledge), and "How much do you think the knowledge you learned in history class helped you understand this movie?" (i.e., a measure of the utility of prior knowledge). The scale was sufficiently reliable (observed Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ).

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<sup>4</sup> One might argue that "understanding the extreme attitudes that many Germans held" reflects perspective taking (and, thus, represents another empathy measure). However, we contend that the item does not reflect the "adopt[ion of] the psychological point of view of others" (pp. 113-114), as perspective taking was conceptualized by Davis (1980). Therefore, we treat the item as an attitudinal rather than empathy-related measure.

<sup>5</sup> Transportation (group mean centered) with Hitler (U.S.,  $r = .112$ ; China,  $r = .027$ ), officials (U.S.,  $r = .201$ ; China,  $r = .306$ ,  $p < .05$ ), Nazi Germany (U.S.,  $r = -.059$ ; China,  $r = .161$ ), evil (U.S.,  $r = .042$ ; China,  $r = .114$ ), positive attitudes (U.S.,  $r = .063$ ; China,  $r = -.040$ ), war (U.S.,  $r = .013$ ; China,  $r = .145$ ). Identification (group mean centered) with Hitler (U.S.,  $r = .621$ ,  $p < .001$ ; China,  $r = .057$ ), officials (U.S.,  $r = .335$ ,  $p < .05$ ; China,  $r = .104$ ), Nazi Germany (U.S.,  $r = .263$ ; China,  $r = -.102$ ), evil (U.S.,  $r = .132$ ; China,  $r = .006$ ), positive attitudes (U.S.,  $r = .165$ ; China,  $r = -.066$ ), war (U.S.,  $r = .080$ ; China,  $r = -.012$ ).



To examine whether the participants paid adequate attention while viewing the movie, we used one manipulation-check question: "In the movie *Downfall*, do you still remember who Hitler died with?" The data from participants who provided incorrect answers to this question were excluded from the analyses.

## Results

All data were analyzed with SPSS 20. Furthermore, the data from the two sites were analyzed separately because we suspected participants' cultural background would influence their prior knowledge and the change in their attitude after viewing the movie. Combining the samples would decrease the chance of detecting the differences of pre-exposure and postexposure attitude change. Table 1 reports pre-exposure knowledge and attitudes for both samples.

**Table 1. Pre-exposure Knowledge Regarding and Attitudes Toward World War II Figures and Events.**

	United States <i>M</i> (SD)	China <i>M</i> (SD)	Significance test
Familiar with:			
History of World War II	4.40 (1.38)	3.66 (1.06)	$t(107) = -3.16^*$
Last days of Nazi Germany	4.06 (1.26)	3.48 (1.71)	$t(106.6) = -2.06^{†*}$
Attitudes toward:			
Hitler	1.55 (0.88)	3.53 (1.51)	$t(88.85) = 8.19^{***}$
Officials	2.81 (1.52)	4.40 (1.91)	$t(98.50) = 4.64^{***}$
Nazi Germany	2.22 (1.17)	3.88 (1.39)	$t(101) = 6.43^{**}$
Hitler not all evil	2.46 (1.60)	3.05 (1.36)	$t(106) = 2.08^*$
Germans' positive attitudes toward Hitler	4.00 (1.68)	4.23 (1.55)	$t(107) = 0.74$
War should be prohibited	3.72 (1.46)	4.57 (1.83)	$t(104) = 2.59^*$

<sup>†</sup> Equal variance not assumed.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

H1a predicted that viewers would report more empathy toward the historic figures after viewing the movie. We had originally planned to measure three historic figures—Hitler, Goebbels, and the other German officials—but only two remained in the current analysis (H1a). The item on Josef Goebbels was removed because many participants were unable to respond to the item. Because our study is largely exploratory and because attitude shifts may occur on various levels, we decided to analyze each item individually. Thus, pre-post empathy scores were compared using a series of paired-sample *t*-tests. In the U.S. sample, as expected, participants reported more empathy toward Hitler after exposure,  $t(46) = -2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $M_{pre} = 1.55$ ,  $M_{post} = 2.11$ , and toward the German officials,  $t(42) = -2.82$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $M_{pre} = 2.81$ ,  $M_{post} = 3.56$ .

As mentioned, identification was not correlated with any of the attitudinal measures, with two exceptions. Among U.S. participants, identification was significantly correlated with the change scores for the target items in H1a: empathy toward Hitler ( $r = .621$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and toward the German officials ( $r =$

.335,  $p < .02$ ). Because of this and because of the observed role of identification in previous studies of narrative persuasion, we conducted repeated-measures analyses of covariance as a follow-up to the main effects analysis within the U.S. sample. Identification was a significant covariate with the empathy-toward-Hitler items ( $F = 11.57$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As expected, the time  $\times$  identification interaction was significant ( $F = 28.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that the more a viewer identified with Hitler, the greater the empathy reported in the posttest. Despite the observed correlation, identification was not a significant covariate with the empathy-toward-German officials item. Nevertheless, given the results of the initial analyses, H1a was supported in the U.S. sample.

Somewhat surprisingly, a different pattern emerged among the Chinese participants. They reported less empathy toward Hitler after exposure,  $t(54) = 2.902$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $M_{pre} = 3.53$ ,  $M_{post} = 2.95$ , with no change in postexposure empathy scores reported toward the other German officials,  $t(57) = .375$ ,  $p > .10$ ;  $M_{pre} = 4.40$ ,  $M_{post} = 4.29$ . Therefore, H1a was not supported in the Chinese sample.

H1b predicted that after watching the historical movie *Downfall*, viewers would report more empathy toward the historical group presented in the film (i.e., Nazi Germany). The paired-sample  $t$ -tests confirmed that both the U.S. group,  $t(44) = -4.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{pre} = 2.22$ ,  $M_{post} = 3.24$ , and the Chinese group,  $t(57) = -2.56$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $M_{pre} = 3.88$ ,  $M_{post} = 4.41$ , reported significantly more empathy toward Nazi Germany after viewing the movie. Therefore, H1b was supported.

In addition to the empathic attitudes toward the historical figures and groups, we predicted that viewers would also form more general attitudes in line with those presented in the film. Specifically, we predicted more positive attitudes toward Hitler (H2a) and toward the German people (H2b).

With respect to general attitudes about Hitler, we again conducted paired-sample  $t$ -tests separately for the two groups. In the U.S. sample, participants tended to report more agreement with the positive attitudes expressed in the movie ( $M_{pre} = 2.46$ ,  $M_{post} = 2.83$ ); however, the pre-post difference was not statistically significant,  $t(47) = -1.51$ ,  $p = .14$ . The pre-post difference observed in the Chinese sample was marginally significant; and, similar to the Hitler item tested in H1a, the direction of the attitudinal shift was opposite of what was expected. After viewing, the Chinese participants held *less* positive general attitudes about Hitler:  $t(59) = 1.89$ ,  $p = .06$ ;  $M_{pre} = 3.05$ ,  $M_{post} = 2.73$ . As a result, H2a was not supported.

The same pattern was found with the item measuring participants' understanding toward the German people's choice to support the Nazis. Participants in the U.S. sample reported attitudes toward the German people's choice after viewing similar to those they had reported before,  $t(47) = -.313$ ,  $p > .10$ ;  $M_{pre} = 4.00$ ,  $M_{post} = 4.08$ . However, the Chinese participants reported *less* understanding toward German people in the posttest:  $t(60) = 5.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{pre} = 4.23$ ,  $M_{post} = 3.20$ . As a result, H2b was not supported.

Because the film presented the devastating consequences of war, we expected attitudes about war to be more negative following viewing (H3). This was indeed the case in both the U.S. sample,  $t(45) =$

$-2.45, p < .05$ ;  $M_{pre} = 3.72, M_{post} = 4.10$ , and the Chinese sample,  $t(59) = -2.82, p < .01$ ;  $M_{pre} = 4.57, M_{post} = 5.10$ . Therefore, H3 was supported in both groups.

To answer RQ1, we first examined participants' self-evaluation of their previous knowledge. In the pretest, the Chinese participants reported less familiarity than their U.S. counterparts with the history of World War II in Europe and the final days of Nazi Germany (see Table 1). Moreover, in the posttest, prior knowledge of Nazi history was significantly less helpful for the Chinese participants to understand the movie than it was for the U.S. participants:  $t(107) = -8.903, p < .01$ ;  $M_{U.S.} = 5.18, M_{China} = 3.60$ .

Furthermore, we wanted to broadly examine how the two samples varied across the narrative persuasion process with the same historical film (see Table 2). Much of this analysis has already been reported. To summarize, it appears that the more knowledgeable U.S. sample generally reflected the basic tenets of narrative persuasion. That is, the film portrayed Hitler and his German followers in a positive light, and war in a negative light. U.S. participants reflected postviewing attitude change in line with the film in four of six cases. This may be somewhat surprising given the strong—and overwhelmingly negative—social attitudes about these topics in the United States; the U.S. participants rated as significantly more negative than their Chinese counterparts all the Nazi-related attitudes in the pretest (except for the general attitude item about the German people). Nevertheless, perhaps these findings speak quite loudly to the power of narrative to impact long-standing attitudes (though the resilience of that impact on attitudes is still unknown).

**Table 2. Postexposure Attitudes Toward World War II Figures and Events.**

	United States <i>M (SD)</i>	China <i>M (SD)</i>	Significance test
Hitler	2.11 (1.67)	2.95 (1.42)	$t(100) = 2.74^*$
Officials	3.56 (1.61)	4.29 (1.51)	$t(99) = 2.35^*$
Nazi Germany	3.24 (1.71)	4.41 (1.58)	$t(101) = 3.60^{**}$
Hitler not all evil	2.83 (1.78)	2.73 (1.21)	$t(79.36) = -.33^\dagger$
Germans' positive attitudes toward Hitler	4.08 (1.66)	3.20 (1.72)	$t(107) = -2.71^*$
War should be prohibited	4.10 (1.56)	5.10 (1.89)	$t(104) = 2.74^*$

<sup>†</sup> Equal variance not assumed.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

In contrast, the typical narrative persuasion formula was not reflected among the Chinese participants. The only exceptions were more empathy toward Nazi Germany and more negative views on war. Attitudes measured on other Nazi-related items did not change in line with those presented in the narrative. In fact, on average, the Chinese viewers left the film with *less* positive attitudes about Hitler and the German people. This is curious given how relatively positive those attitudes were before they viewed the film (see Table 2) and also given the content of the film.

Finally, the study offered an unexpected opportunity to investigate the general role of prior knowledge in the narrative persuasion process without regard to cultural differences. Remember that a large number of participants were unable to respond to the pretest item on Josef Goebbels, whom the film

portrayed as loyal to Hitler and as a (somewhat) sympathetic character in the film. As noted, we converted the item into a prior-knowledge question, dummy-coding the 44 participants who did not know Goebbels in the pretest as 0, and the 65 persons holding an existing attitude about Goebbels in the pretest as 1 ( $n = 65$ ).<sup>6</sup> We then conducted a one-way analysis of variance with the dependent variable being the posttest attitude toward Goebbels. Our aim was to see how prior knowledge may lead to differences in the persuasive effects of the film. Results indicated a significant postviewing difference between the two groups:  $F_{1,107} = 10.34, p < .01$ . Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants with no prior knowledge of Goebbels reported more postexposure empathy toward him ( $M = 3.48, SD = 1.59$ ) than did participants with prior knowledge ( $M = 2.51, SD = 1.51$ ). The results seem to support the earlier discussions based on schema theory, suggesting that audience members with prior knowledge of a historical figure may be less likely than those with no prior knowledge to adopt the attitudes/opinions expressed about this figure in a film.

### Discussion

The goal of the current study is to examine the narrative persuasion process with a historical film, with particular interest in the role of prior attitudes and knowledge. To do so, we exposed viewers who might have different prior knowledge (U.S. and China) to the critically acclaimed German-language film *Downfall*, which offers a somewhat sympathetic and humanizing account of Adolf Hitler and others. For the U.S. sample—that is, the group we presumed to have the most knowledge about and strongest attitudes toward the film’s content—we observed results that were generally in line with previous narrative persuasion studies. Specifically, the U.S. participants reported more postexposure empathy toward the historical figures and groups portrayed in the film, and their general attitudes toward war became more negative. Thus, historical narratives appear to be capable of influencing (some) attitudes toward real people and events in line with the positions forwarded in the story, even when those positions may be counter to long-standing and widely accepted social ones. However, despite the observed changes in empathy levels, other general attitudes toward Hitler and the German people did not change.

Despite these results, we are hesitant to state that the film had long-term attitudinal impacts on the viewers with greater historical knowledge, primarily because we did not measure the resilience of attitude change over time. We note that the observed changes seemed to occur on a (more) emotional attitudinal level (i.e., with responses to the three empathy items) rather than on a (more) cognitive one (i.e., the two more general attitude items). To a certain degree, this finding mirrors that reported by Baumert, Hofmann, and Blum (2008), who found that after watching the movie *My Fuehrer*, a comedy about Hitler, German participants reported more positive emotional attitudes toward Hitler, although their cognitive attitudes remained unchanged. If these observations are accurate, then we might reasonably expect that the empathic attitude changes we observed will dissipate over time—in particular, the extent to which such changes were elicited by positively valenced activation of the sympathetic nervous system. That is, it is possible that the empathy-related effects observed are bound—at least to some degree—to

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<sup>6</sup> For this analysis, we collapsed the two cultural groups to increase the power of our analysis. For this particular analysis, the lack of knowledge about Goebbels was the more important distinguishing characteristic.

increased arousal experienced during viewing, the effects of which should diminish as excitatory homeostasis is once again achieved in the viewer. Furthermore, research on expectancy-value theory (e.g., Fishbein, 1963) and information integration theory (e.g., Anderson, 1971) suggests that, in the case of a long-standing, well-informed attitude, the introduction of a single new piece of information will likely be incapable of effecting a sustained attitude change. At the same time, Batson and his colleagues (1997, 2002) note that experiencing empathy toward a member of a group can lead to increased positive attitudes for the whole group, even a highly stigmatized one. More work is strongly encouraged to examine these complex issues within the narrative persuasion context.

A different picture emerged with the participants who had less historical knowledge. In contrast to the U.S. sample, the Chinese participants reported less empathy toward Hitler as well as less positive general attitudes toward Hitler and the German people after viewing the film. As noted, the film presented a more sympathetic and humanizing picture of Nazi Germany. It was initially quite difficult for us to understand why most attitudes reported by the Chinese participants became less positive after viewing the movie. But then we began to consider the question of "more sympathetic and humanizing" than what? Undoubtedly, the perception by viewers and critics alike that the film's alternative view of a sympathetic and humanized Nazi Germany is based on some shared understanding or knowledge of a "mainstream" view on that topic. As noted (and is likely well understood by the reader), the mainstream view on Nazi Germany is overwhelmingly negative and represents the widely held and accepted social perspective in the United States and throughout Europe. However, this perspective was seemingly not shared by the Chinese participants. As Table 1 indicates, on five measures from the pretest, the Chinese participants reported significantly more positive attitudes related to Nazi Germany. However, those attitudes were supported by significantly *less* historical knowledge, as attested to by responses to the two prior knowledge items from the pretest (see Table 1). Ultimately, while seemingly more sympathetic and humanizing to a more knowledgeable U.S. audience, the film offered a relatively more negative (or corrective) perspective for the Chinese participants. As a result, their attitudes became less positive, because the film offered more knowledge in support of those attitudes. We think these results clearly demonstrate the ultimate import of prior knowledge on narrative persuasion effects.

An informal textual analysis of responses to the open-ended item further supports our conclusion. During the pretest, both Chinese and U.S. participants mentioned that Hitler was "evil," and many of them talked about Hitler's genocide policy toward Jews. However, except for "killing innocent people" and "killing Jews," Chinese participants did not provide more historical details about the criminal actions of Hitler and Nazi Germany, and many of them admitted they were not familiar with Nazi history. Several Chinese participants mentioned a Chinese saying, "A person's poor situation can always be attributed to his own fault," suggesting that they believed Hitler was an unfortunate and sympathetic person, but he needed to take responsibility for his unfortunate life. Several Chinese participants stated that Hitler played an important role in the recovery of economic depression of the 1930s and that people around the world should not deny his contribution during that period.

Although several U.S. participants also indicated Hitler's contributions during the Great Depression, they mentioned much more information about Hitler's cruel actions, such as his methods of "brainwashing," "propaganda," and "genocide." Several students also stated that their personal experiences, such as reading

*The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank or traveling abroad in Germany, influenced their opinions on Hitler. For example, one participant wrote, "After visiting Germany this summer and going to Dachau Concentration Camp, it's hard to imagine turning your head away from something that was so evil." Thus, an examination of open-ended responses lends further support to our contention that U.S. participants had more salient knowledge about the cruel side of Hitler before they watched the movie, which we argue contributed to their overall negative opinions of Hitler and Nazi Germany.

Although these interpretations are highly plausible, we acknowledge that other explanations of the findings may exist. For instance, more knowledgeable viewers (e.g., those in the U.S. sample) may have selectively attended to parts of the narrative that complemented or selectively avoided parts that seemed counter to their existing knowledge, leading to differential persuasion effects. Or perhaps the mainstream-challenging nature of the content led those with prior knowledge to experience reactance to a presentation that differed from their existing attitudes, thus minimizing the film's persuasive impact. Alternatively, perhaps what was presented in the film was processed as "new" information by the more knowledgeable viewers, with (most) U.S. viewers specifically adding "emotional knowledge" (manifest in the empathy-related results). Follow-up studies with other fictionalized historical content should consider testing these different explanations.

Nevertheless, our study suggests that prior knowledge does in fact play an important role in the processing of fictionalized historical narratives, with the level of that knowledge leading to differential persuasive effects. One additional analysis further supported this claim, while perhaps illuminating another layer of complexity in the phenomenon that must be considered in future studies. Participants who indicated in the pretest that they knew nothing about Josef Goebbels reported more empathy toward him—in line with the portrayal in the film—than those who had some preexisting attitude toward (and knowledge of) him. Recall that these analyses were conducted without taking culture into consideration; that is, the greater persuasive effects were similar for U.S. and Chinese participants who reported no prior knowledge of Goebbels. What makes this analysis different from others in the study is the observed level of knowledge. Throughout, we found differences between participants at lower (Chinese sample) and at higher (U.S. sample) levels of prior knowledge. But in this particular case, we observed an effect on those with no prior knowledge/attitude. We think that this finding likely points to differences in narrative persuasion in attitude (or belief) formation and attitude (or belief) change. By and large, this distinction has not been explicitly made within the narrative persuasion literature. Admittedly, this is a single finding within a single study. But as scholars continue to explore these complex processes, we suggest that this distinction may offer an additional avenue of inquiry.

Despite the insight gained in this study, we acknowledge that it has some limitations. To begin, the nature (i.e., college students) and size of the sample limits the generalizability of our findings; the same can be said of our single-message design. But as an exploratory study, our study clearly highlights a set of factors that warrant further investigation with more diverse and larger samples and with multiple stimulus materials. We also recognize that the knowledge measures we utilized could be interpreted as *self-evaluations* of knowledge (i.e., "how much I think I know") rather than actual knowledge. However, given that this approach was consistent across the pre- and posttest, as well as all conditions, we think the measures offered important—though perhaps not perfect—data.

Furthermore, our study diverged somewhat from the traditional narrative persuasion model in that transportation and identification into the narrative appeared to have no relationship to our findings.<sup>7</sup> One possible explanation for this is that we examined these variables in relation to attitude/belief *change* (operationalized with pre–post change scores). This approach is somewhat outside the norm for narrative persuasion studies, but we argue that it is the manner appropriate for truly examining narrative-dependent effects. A follow-up analysis revealed that transportation was indeed significantly correlated with two posttest (only) attitudinal items, with identification significantly correlated with five (of seven) items.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, we argue that the real effect of both reception variables should be observed in their effect on (or relationship to) attitude change.

Another possible explanation is that transportation and identification may operate somewhat differently during the reception of fictional narrative based on specific historical events, in that perceptions of fictionality and realism may be particularly dynamic (especially with regard to the formation of mental and situational models; see Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). For instance, in historical movies, the protagonist is not merely a character who the writers create, but an actual figure in history. Because of this, preexisting attitudes or knowledge of the real person may moderate identification with the fictionalized version of the real person, especially when the historical figure has been negatively evaluated in history. Thus, because participants of our study held negative impressions of the real Hitler before they watched the movie, their ability (or willingness) to identify with the more sympathetic, fictionalized Hitler was challenged (see Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). Future studies should further examine issues related to transportation and identification with historical narratives, in particular by examining how fictionalizing the mainstream or widely accepted accounts of history may challenge (or promote) narrative processing. At the same time, it is possible that the nature of the belief and attitude change we observed—which is arguably somewhat different from other narrative persuasion studies—is less related to or influenced by transportation and identification. Finally, we acknowledge that our interpretation of the findings from the Chinese participants, while based on what we think is solid logic, is somewhat speculative. Future studies should seek to verify our claims, perhaps by leveraging more open-ended questions and other methods to investigate the possible reasons for observed differences in the narrative persuasion process between cultural groups.

In conclusion, this study offers a great deal of fodder for reflective discussion and further research. First, it adds to the small number of studies that indicate that narrative persuasion can occur not only in fictional contexts but also with attitudes and beliefs toward historical events and figures. We also illuminate the important role that prior knowledge might play in the process of narrative persuasion with fictionalized historical narratives. Finally, our study demonstrates that cultural contexts are important factors influencing

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<sup>7</sup> One exception to this statement was observed with the follow-up analysis for H1a, in which a significant identification-related interaction effect was observed with the pre–post empathy-toward-Hitler items.

<sup>8</sup> Transportation was correlated with one item on the posttest: German citizens positive toward Hitler:  $r = .235$ ,  $p = .014$ . Identification was correlated with five items on the posttest: empathy toward Hitler:  $r = .430$ ,  $p < .001$ ; empathy toward German officials:  $r = .266$ ,  $p = .005$ ; empathy toward Germany:  $r = .195$ ,  $p = .042$ ; Hitler is not all evil:  $r = .380$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and German citizens positive toward Hitler:  $r = .393$ ,  $p < .001$ .

the persuasive effect of narratives. Specifically, we show how the same narrative might have different persuasive effects in people from different cultural groups. Our hope is that the ideas shared in this article will serve as a basis for others to investigate these interesting and socially important issues.

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