EXPLORING THE DISPROPORTIONATE PERSUASIVE IMPACT OF MELODRAMA ON HOSTILE (VS. FAVORABLE) AUDIENCES

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by

Yerheen Ha

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This dissertation of Yerheen Ha was reviewed and approved* by the following:

James P. Dillard  
Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences  
Dissertation Advisor  
Chair of Committee

Denise Solomon  
Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences

Lijiang Shen  
Associate Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences

Mary Beth Oliver  
Distinguished Professor of Communications

Kirt Wilson  
Associate Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences  
Director of Graduate Studies in Communication Arts and Sciences

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.
ABSTRACT

Hostile audiences have beliefs, attitudes, and values that are incompatible with what a persuasive message advocates. Persuading hostile audiences is sometimes necessary in such circumstances as pursuing social change (e.g., the abolition of slavery) or dealing with intergroup conflict (e.g., pro-life vs. pro-choice). However, persuading hostile audiences is challenging. Prior research suggests that hostile audiences tend to resist a message that disconfirms their view, whereas favorable audiences tend to accept a message that confirms their views. This dissertation proposes a specific type of message that can exert the intended effects on hostile audiences—melodrama. The project aims to (a) examine whether melodramas can move hostile audiences in the intended direction more so than favorable audiences and to (b) explain how melodramas can exert that influence. Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that melodramas were relatively more persuasive for hostile than for favorable audiences. Study 3 examined the significance of a mediation model that represents the process through which melodramatic sequence (i.e., suffering → fighting → ending) exerts influence on the attitude of hostile and favorable audiences. The mediation model was as follows. Character identification experienced in response to the climax mediates the effect of melodramatic sequence on hostile and favorable audiences’ attitudes. The findings from Study 3 indicated that the proposed mediation via character identification in the fighting segment was nonsignificant. Therefore, why melodramas are persuasive among hostile audiences is still unclear. However, this dissertation showed that melodramas could be an effective rhetorical device for hostile audiences.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* features Tom, a slave. Tom and his fellow slaves suffer from inhumane working conditions and punishment under a cruel owner. While Tom helps dying slaves escape, his previous owner searches for him so that he might free Tom. The slaves escape, but because Tom helped them, he is beaten. His previous owner arrives to find him dying. While reading this novel, audiences who are in favor of slavery might identify themselves with the protagonists and share the protagonists’ desire to free the dying slaves. Such pseudo-firsthand experience accompanied by identification with the protagonists might prompt hostile audiences to become less favorable toward slavery.

Other types of audiences might have been influenced by this novel. For example, the audiences who were indifferent about the controversy surrounding slavery might have become interested in the issue after reading this novel. Other readers who were undecided about the issue might have made up their mind to advocate an anti-slavery position after exposure to this story. It might have been important to increase interest in the issue and to convince the undecided audiences to bring about social changes like the abolition of slavery. In addition, it might have been equally, if not more important, to moderate or change hostile audiences’ pro-slavery views that are rooted in values such as racism (Johannsen, 1973). The question is whether this novel has the power to prompt such a movement in hostile audiences’ views.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is known for contributing to the abolitionist movement and instigating the American Civil War (Robbins, 1997). Several authors have reported that, when Abraham Lincoln met the author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, he greeted Stowe by saying that she was the one who started the war (e.g., Brock, Strange, & Green, 2002; Phelan, 2013). Of course, numerous social, political, and economic factors might have contributed to the abolition of
slavery (Stampp, 1991). However, such social change might not have been possible without support from at least some of the white citizens who had been in favor of slavery.

A message, such as that in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, can reach people who have beliefs, attitudes, and values that contradict such a message. For example, pro-lifers might be exposed to a pro-choice message. Terrorists can come across a video aimed to de-radicalize them. Persuading such hostile audiences is difficult (Shea, 1984). Prior research suggests that hostile audiences tend to resist a message that disconfirms their views, whereas favorable audiences accept a message that confirms their views (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Lord & Taylor, 2009; Munro & Ditto, 1997). However, changing or moderating hostile audiences’ views is sometimes necessary to bring about social change (e.g., the abolition of slavery) or to resolve intergroup conflicts (e.g., pro-lifers and pro-choicers; Paluck, 2009; Stewart, Smith, & Denton, 2012).

This dissertation proposes one type of message that can exert the intended effects on hostile audiences—the melodrama. This dissertation project aims to (a) examine whether melodramas can move hostile audiences’ views in the intended direction to a greater extent than they can move favorable audiences’ views, and to (b) explain why melodramas can exert such power on hostile audiences. Specifying a type of message that can be influential to hostile audiences is theoretically meaningful considering their tendency to resist persuasive messages (Lord et al., 1979; Lord & Taylor, 2009; Munro & Ditto, 1997). In addition, it has practical use because hostile audiences are often the target of socially significant campaigns, such as de-radicalizing messages targeting terrorists (Braddock & Horgan, 2016) or anti-stigma public service announcements (Hawke, Michalak, Maxwell, & Parikh, 2014).

This work presents three studies. Studies 1 and 2 compared the extent to which melodramas can move hostile audiences’ attitude with the extent to which they can move
favorable audiences’ attitude. Two experimental conditions were created: melodrama and control. In the melodrama condition, the participants were exposed to a melodrama, and they then reported their attitude regarding the narrative point (i.e., the post-test attitude). In the control condition, the participants responded to the same post-test attitude item without exposure to any message. Whether and how audience orientation (hostile vs. favorable) varies the degree of difference in the mean post-test attitude between the melodrama and control conditions were explored.

Study 3 aimed to explain why melodramas are persuasive to hostile audiences. This dissertation proposes that a melodramatic sequence (i.e., suffering$\rightarrow$fighting$\rightarrow$ending) and character identification in the fighting segment (i.e., climax) are the two factors that lead to persuasion among hostile and favorable audiences. More specifically, a melodramatic sequence can facilitate the degree to which hostile and favorable audiences identify with the protagonists during the climax, which, in turn, moves the audiences’ post-test attitude in the direction consistent with the point of the melodrama. Two experimental conditions, the melodramatic and the control sequences, were developed to test the proposed mediation. The control condition presents the three segments of the melodrama in the following order: fighting$\rightarrow$ending$\rightarrow$suffering. Tests were conducted to explore (a) whether the melodramatic (vs. the control) sequence positively influences character identification in the fighting segment among hostile and favorable audiences, (b) whether audience orientation moderates the positive effect of the melodramatic sequence on character identification in the fighting segment, and (c) whether character identification in the fighting segment influences the post-test attitude in the direction consistent with the point of the melodrama.
Audiences’ Responses to Persuasive Messages

“[A] lively debate has raged for centuries over the defining characteristics of the term persuasion” (Miller, 2013, p. 70). Some scholars (Gass & Seiter, 1999; O’Keefe, 2002) argued that, although persuasion is a contentious concept, the essence of persuasion that researchers agree upon could be distilled. The essence is shifting others’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in a direction that is consistent with the advocacy presented in a message. There is one notable point of debate regarding what outcome of persuasion researchers should focus on studying. Miller (2013) emphasized the importance of behavioral outcomes, such as the creation, reinforcement, and conversion of an action. Sharing the view that the final outcome of interest in persuasion research should be behavioral in nature, this dissertation takes the position that studying changes in attitudes and beliefs is also important. One of the main purposes of persuasion research is identifying message features that are persuasive (O’Keefe, 2002). A challenge in persuasion is that a single message rarely exerts intended effects on receivers’ behaviors, especially when the goal of persuasion is behavioral conversion. For example, a one-time exposure to an anti-smoking message seldom converts a smoker into a non-smoker. Terrorists rarely stop any actions related to terrorism in response to a single message aimed at de-radicalizing them. It is important to identify the features of a persuasive message that can be influential on attitudes and beliefs regarding the behaviors to be converted, considering that belief and attitude are the antecedents of behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In this dissertation, a message will be described as “persuasive” when either one or both of the following two conditions are met. (a) A message brings about the intended actions. (b) A message moves beliefs or attitudes in the intended direction. For example, if a terrorist who was extremely favorable toward acts of terrorism
becomes less favorable to them after exposure to a de-radicalizing message, it will be stated that
the message was persuasive.

Persuaders design and/or distribute a message that implicitly or explicitly advocates a
certain view with the intention to persuade the message recipients. The message recipients,
however, are not mere receptacles. Audiences’ views regarding the topic discussed in a
persuasive message potentially influence their responses to the message (Atkins, Deaux, & Bieri,
1967; Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Lord et al., 1979; Lord & Taylor, 2009; Munro & Ditto, 1997;
Peterson & Koulack, 1969).

Research on the latitude of acceptance and rejection (Atkins et al., 1967; Peterson &
Koulack, 1969) shows that when an issue stance presented in a persuasive message falls within
the latitude of acceptance, which refers to the range of issue stances that audiences judge to be
acceptable, audiences’ view is likely to be changed in a message-consistent way. Conversely, if a
persuasive message advocates a stance that falls within the latitude of rejection, which is defined
as the range of issue stances that are objectionable, audiences’ view might not be altered or
might be altered in a direction that is opposite from the view advocated in the message.

Other streams of research hint about the impact of audiences’ prior views on message
effects. Research on biased assimilation (Lord et al., 1979; Lord & Taylor, 2009; Munro & Ditto,
1997) proposes that message recipients tend to discount or counter-argue the messages that
disconfirm their views, whereas they value the messages that confirm their prior views. In
addition, research on motivated reasoning suggests that, when audiences are exposed to counter-
attitudinal messages, they are motivated to defend their own positions (Hart & Nisbet, 2012).

On the basis of research on the latitude of acceptance and rejection, biased assimilation,
and motivated reasoning, audiences’ responses to a message can be argued to vary, depending on
these audiences’ prior view. *Favorable audiences* are likely to accept it. *Hostile audiences* tend to resist the message. Therefore, a persuasive message is more likely to exert the intended effect on favorable audiences than on hostile audiences. That is, audience orientation might moderate the effects of a persuasive message.

**Narrative Effect and Audience Orientation**

A *narrative* is a message form consisting of causally related events, bounded in space and time, involving characters capable of voluntary actions, thinking, and feeling, and with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end (Brooks & Warren, 1950). Unlike an argument, which explicitly states an advocacy, a narrative implicitly presents an advocacy (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004). For example, the story of *The Tortoise and the Hare* implies that slow and steady wins the race. The turtle’s persistence illustrates slow and steady. The plot, in which a turtle that has been losing a race wins at the end, highlights the importance of slow and steady. As shown in this example, the characters and the plot illustrate an advocacy in the narrative, which is called the point (Graesser, Pomeroy, & Craig, 2002).

Narrative has the potential to prevent audiences’ beliefs, values, and perspectives against the narrative point from causing resistance. A narrative implies its point that advocates certain views and actions (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Graesser et al., 2002; Prince, 1992). Unlike an argument, a narrative does not have specific claims to refute (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Instead, the characters and the plot illustrate the point of a narrative (Prince, 1992). Until narrative audiences infer the point of the narrative, they do not know if the point is incompatible with their pre-existing beliefs, values, and perspectives. Therefore, even if these audiences have cognitions that are incompatible with the point, they are unlikely to be motivated to defend their views (Dal Cin et al., 2004). Moreover, a narrative prompts narrative audiences to be mentally
Engrossed in narrative events and characters (Green & Brock, 2000; Cohen, 2001). While they pay attention to narrative events, imagine the situations featured in the narrative, and feel the characters’ feelings, the audiences’ beliefs, values, and perspectives against the narrative point are under the radar (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Thus, the motivation to defend their views is unlikely to activate.

Therefore, not only favorable audiences but also hostile audiences are unlikely to resist narrative effects. It has been claimed that the implied point and mental involvement in the story world prevent narrative audiences’ cognitions that are incompatible with the narrative point from causing resistance (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Slater & Rouner, 2002). In other words, the audiences’ prior views against the advocacy might not block narrative effects. Therefore, a narrative might influence hostile audiences, whose prior view is incompatible with the point of the narrative, to a similar extent as it does on favorable audiences.

Because a narrative has the potential to influence hostile audiences, who tend to resist a persuasive message, in an intended way, creating a narrative would be effective when developing a persuasive message that targets hostile audiences. However, how to create a narrative would be unclear. Identifying the specific types of narratives, such as melodrama, thriller, and comedy, which can influence hostile audiences in an intended way to a similar extent that they influence favorable audiences, would be practically meaningful. As a start, this dissertation explores whether melodrama can be influential to both hostile and favorable audiences.

**Melodrama Effect and Audience Orientation**

Narratives contain a sequence of events (Chatman, 1980). First, the characters’ personalities and living circumstances are introduced in the opening segment. Second, the main characters encounter and deal with an obstacle. Finally, the outcome appears in the ending
segment. A *melodrama* follows this three-part format, but it is distinct with regard to how each segment is operationalized (Osborn & Bakke, 1998; Williams, 2001). The first part of a melodrama, *suffering*, emphasizes the innocent victim’s distress brought about by the antagonist. Second, the *fighting* segment presents the protagonist’s confrontation with the antagonist. Third, the *ending* segment shows the resolution of the fight.

Melodrama can be contrasted with a drama in terms of the conflicts and characters involved. Brooks (1976) stated that, whereas dramas and melodramas both present conflicts, the origin of these conflicts differs. In a melodrama, the conflict originates from an external factor that is antagonistic; the protagonist fights against the antagonist whose views and behaviors are portrayed as evil. On the other hand, a drama often presents internal conflicts that the protagonist experiences. For example, a homosexual protagonist, raised as a Christian, may struggle with the morality of homosexuality. In addition, characters are featured differently. Melodramatic characters are either extremely moral or extremely immoral; dramas feature characters who possess both positive and negative attributes (Anker, 2005; Brooks, 1976; Schwarze, 2006). Such characters are sometimes called *round* to contrast them with the *flat*, unidimensional characters found in a melodrama (Forster, 2005).

Melodrama can prevent audiences’ cognitions that are incompatible with the narrative point from causing resistance. A melodrama is a subtype of narrative. Similar to a narrative, a melodrama implies its point (Prince, 1992). As stated in the preceding section, the implied point prevents the activation of resistance because the audiences find it difficult to gauge how compatible or incompatible the point is with their own views (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Moreover, a melodrama has unique features that can prompt narrative audiences to identify themselves with the characters. Character identification is the process through which
narrative audiences share the characters’ goals, adopt their perspectives, feel their feelings, and have the illusion of becoming the characters (Cohen, 2001; Oatley, 1995).

The victims’ pain portrayed in the suffering segment can generate character identification. According to the literature on empathy for pain, people have a tendency to share the pain of others (Jackson, Meltzoff, & Decety, 2005; Lamm, Decety, & Singer, 2011; Singer et al., 2004). Scholars argue that when people observe others in pain, the neural networks in charge of experiencing pain fire up (Lamm et al., 2011). In short, they feel other people’s pain. Considering that people often react to characters in media as if they have a direct contact with them (Giles, 2002), melodrama audiences might share the victim’s pain. Thus, they can identify themselves with the victim. In addition, they can also identify themselves with the protagonist because both the audiences and protagonists are empathic toward the victim.

The portrayal of the victim’s suffering prompts narrative audiences to identify with the protagonist who later fights against the antagonist harming the victim (Anker, 2005; Schwarze, 2006). For example, thanks to the suffering of slaves featured in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, readers might identify with Tom, who shares the pain of and later help the suffering slaves run away. Even if the readers previously supported slavery, their pro-slavery views might not be salient to them while they share Tom’s goal of freeing the suffering slaves. While being identified with characters, narrative audiences are unlikely to recognize their beliefs, values, and perspectives that disapprove the point of a melodrama (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Because narrative audiences’ views that are incompatible with the point are under the radar, they are unlikely to be motivated to defend their view (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Therefore, neither favorable nor hostile audiences are likely to resist the influence of a
melodrama. As noted in the preceding section, (a) an implied point and (b) the activation of involvement in the characters and narrative events are the reasons why narrative audiences’ prior views against the point cannot block narrative effects (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Slater & Rouner, 2002). A melodrama implies its point. In addition, it has a unique feature that is effective in prompting character identification—victims’ suffering. Therefore, a melodrama may be one specific type of narrative that can prevent the operation of the latent resistance barrier and impose a similar degree of influence on hostile and favorable audiences. In other words, in terms of the magnitude of influence, a melodrama may impose an equivalent influence on both hostile and favorable audiences.

However, the degree of shift in the narrative audiences’ views in the intended direction could possibly be greater among hostile audiences than among favorable audiences because hostile audiences have more room for change than favorable audiences have. Hostile audiences can be transformed from unfavorable to favorable, whereas favorable audiences can be shifted from somewhat favorable to extremely favorable. Because of the ceiling on change among favorable audiences, the degree to which the narrative audiences shift in the intended direction can be greater among hostile audiences than favorable audiences.

However, this prediction is inconsistent with the accumulated knowledge indicating that, a persuasive message is more likely to exert its intended effects on favorable audiences than on hostile audiences who tend to resist a persuasive message (Atkins et al., 1967; Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Lord et al., 1979; Lord & Taylor, 2009; Munro & Ditto, 1997; Peterson & Koulack, 1969). Therefore, empirically exploring whether and how audience orientation moderates the degree to which a melodrama moves narrative audiences’ views in the intended direction is worthwhile.
RQ1: Does audience orientation (hostile vs. favorable) moderate the effect of message condition (melodrama vs. no-message) on attitude?

Two studies were conducted to examine the research question. Study 1 used a melodrama about abortion (hereafter, abortion study), whereas Study 2 used a melodrama about death penalty (hereafter, death penalty study). The abortion and death penalty studies excluded neutral audiences, and these studies treated audience orientation as a dichotomous variable with two levels—hostile and favorable. The reason is that hostile and favorable audiences have opposing views that can influence the audiences’ responses to a message in the opposite direction, as discussed in the preceding sections (Lord et al., 1979; Lord & Taylor, 2009). On the other hand, neutral audiences can be indifferent (i.e., neither good nor bad) or ambivalent (i.e., both good and bad) about an issue (Kaplan, 1972; Yoo, 2010). Predicting how the neutral group consisting of the two types of audience would react to a message is difficult. Whether the two types respond to a message in a similar or different manner, which is beyond the scope of this dissertation, is worth examining. However, the focus of this study is to compare the responses of hostile versus favorable audiences. Therefore, the abortion and death penalty studies reported in this dissertation used the dichotomous measure of audience orientation (hostile vs. favorable) excluding the neutral group. This dichotomous measure of audience orientation was used in prior studies that demonstrated the moderating role of audience orientation on message effects (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Lord et al., 1979; Munro & Ditto, 1997).

The methodological aspects of the abortion and death penalty studies were nearly identical. The common methods and a few methodological differences between the two studies will be presented in the next section.

Method
Participants and design. Participants were recruited from undergraduate courses at the Pennsylvania State University and offered course credit for participation. These participants (abortion study: \( N = 175 \), death penalty study: \( N = 110 \)) were randomly assigned to one of two message conditions: melodrama or control. Those who did not completely view the melodrama, those who did not complete the item measuring audience orientation, or those who were categorized as neutral audience were eliminated from the analyses. This left 78 participants (Age: \( M = 19.32 \); Female = 44%) in the abortion study and 62 participants (Age: \( M = 20.11 \); Female = 52%) in the death penalty study.

**Melodrama.** In the abortion study, a partial episode (about 15 minutes) of a television drama series, *Chicago Hope*, was used; it favored abortion rights and had the following three-part melodramatic plot: (a) Dr. Hancock performs an abortion to save a patient’s life, but the patient sues him because a lawyer persuades her to do this to gain publicity, and anti-abortion activists bomb the hospital where Dr. Hancock works (suffering segment) \( \rightarrow \) (b) Dr. Hancock argues with hospital administrators that he had to perform the abortion to save the patient’s life (fighting segment) \( \rightarrow \) (c) scared by the bombing incident, the lawyer drops the case, and Dr. Hancock convinces the patient that the abortion was necessary to save her life (ending segment).

The death penalty study presented a partial episode of *Law and Order* (about 20 minutes). The story favored the death penalty and consisted of the following three parts: (a) the children in a school are killed by a man who has escaped from prison, and after the mass killing, the murderer is apprehended by a police officer (suffering segment) \( \rightarrow \) (b) a prosecutor pursues death penalty as a punishment for the murderer, but the attempt fails because death penalty is banned in the state (fighting segment) \( \rightarrow \) (c) the father of the victim killed by the murderer
shoots and kills the murderer, and in his trial, he testifies that he killed the murderer because he was dangerous (ending segment).

Measures.

**Audience orientation.** In the abortion study, the participants chose one of the following options: (a) abortion should be illegal in all circumstances, (b) abortion should be legal only under certain circumstances, and (c) abortion should be legal under any circumstances. In the death penalty study, the participants were asked to report their attitudes toward death penalty for a person convicted of murder by selecting one of the following response options: (a) oppose, (b) neither oppose nor favor, and (c) favor. Those who selected options (a) and (c) were categorized, respectively, as hostile (abortion study: 46%; death penalty study: 55%) and favorable (abortion study: 54%; death penalty study: 45%)

**Post-test attitude.** The participants in both the abortion and death penalty studies were asked to report their attitudes toward abortion and death penalty, respectively, on the following seven-point semantic differential items: unjustifiable–justifiable, indefensible–defensible, and unnecessary–necessary. Their responses to the three items were averaged to form the measure of post-test attitude (abortion study: $M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.99$, $\alpha = .91$; death penalty study: $M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.68$, $\alpha = .91$).

**Procedure.** First, the participants responded to the audience orientation item. The procedure for measuring audience orientation differed between the two studies. In the death penalty study, the participants reported their orientation online two weeks prior to coming to the lab to complete the study. Those in the abortion study provided their orientation offline in the lab immediately before completing the study. Second, in the lab, the participants assigned to the melodrama condition viewed a melodrama and then responded to the item measuring post-test
attitude. Conversely, the participants assigned to the control condition responded to the post-test attitude item without exposure to any message.

Data

For simplicity of reporting and to increase statistical power, data from the two studies were combined ($N = 140$; Age: $M = 19.67$, $SD = 1.38$; Female = 47%; White = 83%).

Results

Preliminary analysis. In order to check whether study (abortion vs. death-penalty) moderates the effect of the interaction between message condition and audience orientation on post-test attitude, a three-way analysis of variance with message condition, audience orientation, and study as the factors was conducted. The effect of the three-way interaction (message condition*audience orientation*study) on post-test attitude was non-significant [$F(1, 132) = 0.11$, $p = .74$]. The results revealed that study did not significantly condition the effect of the interaction between message condition and audience orientation on post-test attitude.

RQ1. To explore whether audience orientation moderates the effect of message condition on post-test attitude, an analysis of covariance was run with message condition (melodrama vs. control) and audience orientation (hostile vs. favorable) as the factors and study as the covariate. As indicated in Table 1, the effect of the interaction between message condition and audience orientation on post-test attitude was significant [$F(1, 135) = 4.53$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$]. Audience orientation significantly moderated the effect of message condition on post-test attitude (RQ1).

The significant interaction pattern is shown in Figure 1. The degree to which the mean post-test attitude is higher in the melodrama condition than in the control condition was greater among the hostile audiences (melodrama: $M = 3.77$, $SE = 0.26$; control: $M = 2.67$, $SE = 0.23$)
than among the favorable audiences (melodrama: $M = 5.70, SE = 0.18$; control: $M = 5.58, SE = 0.20$). As a higher rating in terms of the post-test attitude indicates that the attitudes are more consistent with the narrative point, the findings suggest that a greater degree of attitude movement in the intended direction is possible among hostile versus favorable audiences.

**Discussion**

Audience orientation (hostile vs. favorable) moderated the effect of message condition (melodrama vs. control) on post-test attitude. This finding was consistent with the claim that favorable audiences have less room for change, and so a smaller degree of attitude movement can take place among the favorable audiences. The mean post-test attitude of the favorable audiences assigned to the control (i.e., no-message) condition was 5.58; this value was closer to the upper limit of the scale, which was 7. The range within which a melodrama can move favorable audiences’ attitude in the intended direction was limited. Because favorable audiences already support the point of a melodrama, the melodrama might have negligible effects on attitude extremity even if it might have exerted an equivalent magnitude of influence on both types of audiences.

An implication of the findings from Studies 1 and 2 is that a melodrama is an effective means of persuading hostile audiences. The findings suggesting the possibility that the degree of attitude shift in the intended direction may be observed to a greater extent among hostile audiences than among favorable audiences is consistent with the claim that a melodrama has the potential to exert the intended effects on hostile audiences who tend to resist a persuasive message. Thus, when a message producer creates a narrative targeting hostile audiences, making a melodrama would be wise.
Studies 1 and 2 are not without limitations. First, the two studies did not test the mental processes mediating melodrama effects. Second, the studies did not identify the specific components of a melodrama, which can be the antecedent of the mental processes leading to persuasion. These two limitations will be addressed in Study 3.
Chapter 3: Melodramatic Sequence, Character Identification, and Audience Orientation

Studies 1 and 2 showed that a melodrama has the potential to exert the intended effects on hostile audiences. The next question worth exploring is, “Why are melodramas persuasive among hostile audiences?”

Overcoming the Dissimilarity Barrier: Melodramatic Sequence and Character Identification

Character identification is a psychological process in which people adopt the protagonists’ goals and perspectives, share emotions, and feel as though they are becoming the characters (Cohen, 2001; Oatley, 1995). One of the antecedents of character identification is the similarity between characters and narrative audiences (Cohen, 2006).

Hostile audiences might perceive protagonists as dissimilar to themselves. Hostile audiences have a prior view against the point of the melodrama, which is illustrated by the protagonists. For example, Uncle Tom’s Cabin implies anti-slavery ideas. The ideas are illustrated by the protagonists attempting to free some slaves. This action is against the pro-slavery views held by hostile audiences. From the perspective of such audiences, the protagonists are dissimilar to the audience members themselves.

It might be challenging for hostile audiences to identify with characters that they perceive as dissimilar to themselves. Audiences tend to react to characters featured in media in the same way they react to people encountered in reality (Giles, 2002). In reality, people are less likely to identify with dissimilar others than with similar ones (Harrison, 2011). As Harold (2003) stated, “it is much easier to imagine being someone who shares your background and experience than to imagine being someone who does not” (p. 249). In a study conducted by Krebs (1975), people were found to be less likely to identify with another person when they believe that this person is
more dissimilar to themselves in personality and values. Other studies have also demonstrated that dissimilarity inhibits identification with others (Barnett, 1984; Barnett, Tetreault, & Masbad, 1987). These claims and evidence suggest that dissimilarity functions as a barrier that one must overcome to identify with others. This barrier might be called the dissimilarity barrier. Such a barrier might also exist when people react to characters, as suggested by Cohen (2006).

Hostile audiences might overcome the dissimilarity barrier because of melodramatic sequence. *Melodramatic sequence* is a component of melodrama; it refers to the order in which the suffering, fighting, and ending segments are presented in a melodrama. Rhetoricians and film scholars have noted the rhetorical power of the causal sequence, in which unjust suffering motivates protagonists’ journey of fighting against the harm-doers (Anker, 2005; Osborn & Bakke, 1998; Schwarze, 2006; Williams, 1998). They claimed that the suffering segment effectively involves audiences into the melodrama and mobilizes their support for what the protagonists pursue in their journey. However, rhetoricians and film scholars did not stress the importance of presenting the three segments of melodrama in an order that corresponds to its causal sequence. That is, the audiences should first see the suffering segment before the fighting and ending segments. In this dissertation, this presentation order is called a melodramatic sequence. The following paragraphs explain why a melodramatic sequence is effective in overcoming the dissimilarity barrier.

In the melodramatic sequence, the climax that is the fighting segment follows the suffering segment. The suffering segment might help hostile audiences identify with the dissimilar protagonists featured in the climax for the following reason. In the suffering segment, victims experience unjust pain caused by the antagonists, which morally justifies the protagonists’ fight against the antagonists (Anker, 2005; Osborn & Bakke, 1998; Schwarze, 2006). For
example, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the suffering of innocent slaves justifies Tom’s endeavor to help the slaves run away from the owner. Because protagonists’ action against harm-doers are morally justified by the portrayal of unjust suffering, hostile audiences might think that the protagonists are good characters who want to save the victims, although the protagonists’ action taken to accomplish that goal is not in line with the hostile audiences’ beliefs or values. Good characters are easy to identify with (De Graaf, 2014; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). Thus, hostile audiences are likely to identify with the protagonists during the climax when the climax follows the suffering segment in the melodramatic sequence.

In contrast, favorable audiences’ pre-existing values and beliefs are in line with the protagonists’ actions in the climax, so identifying with these protagonists might not be difficult for such audiences (Cohen, 2006; De Graaf, 2014; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). In other words, favorable audiences do not experience the dissimilarity barrier while identifying with the protagonists. For example, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Tom’s attempt to free slaves is in line with anti-slavery sentiments, which favorable audiences already have, so they might readily identify with Tom.

Although they do not experience the dissimilarity barrier, favorable audiences are likely to be under the influence of the suffering segment while identifying with the protagonists during the climax because of the same reason applied to hostile audiences. That is, the suffering segment frames the protagonists as good characters who are easy to identify with (De Graaf, 2014; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). Osborn and Bakke (1998) provided anecdotal evidence indicating the power of the portrayal of suffering on favorable audiences. They analyzed melodramas portraying the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike in 1968. The melodramas depicted black sanitation employees who work under dangerous, inhuman conditions. They also showed two
black workers who were crushed to death in a garbage compactor. Osborn and Bakke (1998) claimed that such portrayals of suffering prompted black residents in Memphis to identify with the black workers who went on strike to improve their working conditions.

The portrayal of the victims’ unjust suffering has been claimed so far to frame the protagonists presented in the climax as moral heroes, thus prompting identification during the climax among the favorable and hostile audiences. In other words, the suffering segment facilitates character identification during the climax within the two audience groups. Therefore, compared with showing the climax without any preceding segment, presenting the climax after the suffering segment can increase character identification during the climax regardless of the type of audience. A melodramatic sequence presents the suffering segment before the climax so that the sequence can be effective for both hostile and favorable audiences in prompting character identification during the climax.

**Effect of Character Identification**

Character identification experienced in response to the climax of a melodrama might influence the audiences’ views and behaviors. Character identification has been proposed as a psychological process that leads to persuasion (Cohen, 2001; De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). The mechanism through which character identification leads to persuasion simulates experiential learning (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 1995, 1999). While identifying with a character, audiences vicariously experience the character’s goals, perspective, emotions, and tendency toward certain actions (Cohen, 2001). This pseudo-firsthand experience creates or reinforces cognitions and behavioral tendencies (Epstein, 1994). For example, while identifying with a character who tries to run away from a pit bull that has just bitten him or her, audiences can vicariously experience the character’s pain and tendency to
avoid the pit bull. Basing on the experience, the audiences might formulate or strengthen a negative attitude toward pit bulls, in general. This process simulates the experiential learning process through which we have learned how to react to the world since we were young (Epstein, 1994; Zillmann, 1999).

Previous studies found evidence supporting the claim that character identification is a psychological process that leads to persuasion. Participants who more closely identified with characters exhibited attitudes that were more consistent with the point of the narrative (De Graaf et al., 2012; Igartua, 2010; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Murphy, Frank, Chatterjee, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2013). For example, Igartua (2010) found that a greater identification with characters in a film favoring Mexican immigrants was associated with a more positive attitude toward immigration.

However, previous studies neglected one aspect of character identification. That is, character identification experienced in response to a particular part of the narrative may be especially influential to the audiences’ views and behaviors. One candidate as an influential part is the climax. In the climax of a narrative, an internal or external conflict peaks (Abbott, 2008). The peak might reveal opposing positions and uncover protagonists’ stances, feelings, and thoughts regarding the issue, which illustrate the point of the narrative (Richardson, 2002). For example, the climax of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* portrays Tom’s goals and actions of helping some slaves run away, which illustrate his view against the slave owner and his anti-slavery sentiments. As illustrated in this example, the climax clearly demonstrates the protagonist’s main actions and views. Compared with the climax, the opening and ending segments portray more peripheral actions and views. That is, the opening segment shows protagonists’ thoughts and behaviors, which reveal their personality and circumstances; the ending segment focuses on presenting the
protagonists’ circumstances that may or may not correspond to what they desired (Abbott, 2008; Chatman, 1980; Richardson, 2002).

Because the climax of a narrative portrays the protagonists’ actions and views that illustrate the point of the narrative, character identification experienced in response to the climax might significantly influence the audiences’ views in a direction consistent with the point of the narrative after controlling for character identification in the opening and ending segments. This claim leads to the prediction about the effects of character identification experienced in response to a melodrama. Character identification in the fighting segment (i.e., climax) may influence the audiences’ views in the direction consistent with the point of the melodrama above and beyond the effect of character identification experienced in the suffering (i.e., opening) and ending segments.

In summary, this dissertation proposes that a melodramatic sequence is effective in facilitating character identification in the climax among hostile and favorable audiences. In addition, character identification in the climax influences the audiences’ views and behaviors in a way consistent with the point of the melodrama after controlling for character identification in the remaining two parts. That is, character identification in the climax mediates the effect of melodramatic sequence on hostile and favorable audiences.

**Rationale and Hypotheses**

To test the effect of presenting the suffering segment before the climax in melodramatic sequence, the following two experimental conditions were created: melodramatic sequence and control. The control condition presented the three segments of melodrama in the following order: fighting → ending → suffering. There are three reasons for devising this control condition. First, in the control sequence, the suffering segment does not precede the climax that is the fighting
segment. Therefore, it is possible to test if the degree of character identification during the climax varies depending on whether or not the suffering segment is presented before the climax. Second, this control condition enables the participants to see all three segments of the melodrama. Instead of eliminating the suffering segment, the control condition presents the suffering segment at the end. Third, placing the suffering segment at the end does not disrupt the chronological order of the fighting and ending segments.

Character identification was measured three times: in response to the suffering segment, in response to the fighting segment, and in response to the ending segment. The three character identification measures were obtained for two reasons. First, measuring character identification in the fighting segment was necessary because melodramatic sequence has been claimed to be effective to facilitate character identification in the fighting segment. Second, measuring character identification in the suffering and ending segments was necessary because the two measures would serve as covariates when testing the unique persuasive effect of character identification in the fighting segment.

Presenting the climax after the suffering segment as opposed to showing it without any preceding segment has been claimed to increase character identification in the climax among both hostile and favorable audiences. A melodramatic sequence presents the suffering segment before the climax, whereas the control sequence does not present any segment before it. Therefore, melodramatic sequence (vs. control) may positively influence character identification in the fighting segment. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Melodramatic sequence (vs. control) positively influences character identification in the fighting segment.
Moreover, whether the magnitude of the positive effect of melodramatic sequence on character identification in the fighting segment is moderated by audience orientation is worth questioning. As claimed in the previous section of this dissertation, favorable audiences might readily identify with the protagonists during the climax because these protagonists perform actions compatible with the views of the favorable audiences. However, hostile audiences hesitate to identify with dissimilar protagonists in the climax. Hostile (vs. favorable) audiences therefore have relatively more room to increase their degree of identification. Because of this room for change, hostile (vs. favorable) audiences can experience a greater increase in the level of character identification in response to the climax when it is presented with the preceding suffering segment (vs. without a preceding segment). Melodramatic sequence presents the climax after the suffering segment whereas the control order shows the climax in the absence of any preceding segment. Therefore, the positive effect of melodramatic sequence (vs. control) on character identification in the fighting segment may be greater among hostile audiences than among favorable audiences.

H2: Audience orientation and melodramatic sequence interact such that the positive effect of melodramatic sequence (vs. control) on character identification in the fighting segment is more pronounced among hostile audiences than among favorable audiences.

Furthermore, it is proposed that character identification in the fighting segment influences the audiences’ views in a way consistent with the melodrama’s point. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H3: Character identification in the fighting segment is related to post-test attitude in a direction that is consistent with the melodrama’s point above and beyond the effect of identification in the suffering segment and identification in the ending segment.
Method

**Design and Participants.** The participants were randomly assigned to the following two conditions: melodramatic sequence versus control. Four hundred and thirty-five undergraduate students at the Pennsylvania State University (PSU) participated in this study in exchange for course credit. Those who did not completely view the melodrama, did not complete the item measuring audience orientation, or were categorized as neutral were excluded from the analyses. This left 178 participants (female = 40%; age: $M = 20.05$).

**Procedure.** First, the participants completed an online survey that contained items measuring audience orientation, in addition to other items used in studies that were being conducted by other researchers. The survey items were collected by the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at PSU. The department created the survey using the collected items and distributed it to undergraduates taking certain introductory communication courses from which the participants of Study 3 were recruited.

One month after completing the survey, the participants came to a lab, where they viewed a melodrama consisting of three parts presented in either melodramatic or control sequence. Immediately after watching each segment, the participants responded to the items measuring character identification for that segment. After the entire melodrama was shown, they responded to the items intended to measure post-test attitude.

**Manipulation: Melodramatic sequence versus control.** A melodrama in favor of the death penalty (about 15 minutes in length) was used. This melodrama was a short version of the melodrama used in Study 2; scenes that were nonessential to the development of the main plot or the characterization of the protagonists were deleted to reduce viewing time. For example, the scenes depicting a long chase between the police officer and the murderer were shortened.
The order of presenting the three segments—(a) suffering, (b) fighting, and (c) ending—was varied to manipulate the melodramatic sequence versus the control. The melodramatic sequence was suffering → fighting → ending. The control sequence was fighting → ending → suffering.

**Measures.** Variables were measured in the order presented below.

**Audience orientation.** The participants were asked to report their attitude toward death penalty on two nine-point semantic differential-type items, namely, unjustifiable–justifiable and indefensible–defensible. Only two items were used for a practical reason: the online survey that included audience orientation items had limited space for questions because it also contained other items to be used in different studies. The participants’ responses to the two audience orientation items were averaged (α = .95) to retain the original 1 (negative adjectives) to 9 (positive adjectives) scale. The average score was used to categorize the participants into the following three audience groups: hostile, neutral, and favorable. Values of 3 or smaller were classified into the hostile category (36%), whereas values of 6 or higher were classified into the favorable (64%) category.

**Character identification.** The participants reported the extent to which they identified themselves with the protagonist featured in each of the three segments. The protagonists of the suffering, fighting, and ending segments were a police officer, a prosecutor, and the father of a victim (Robert), respectively.

Cohen’s (2001) 10 item measure of character identification was used. Example items were, “I think I have a good understanding of the protagonist,” and “While viewing the video clip, I wanted the protagonist to succeed in achieving his goal.” The participants provided their responses to each item on a seven-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.
Their responses were averaged to form the measure of character identification within each segment: identification in the suffering segment ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.02$, $\alpha = .89$), fighting segment ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.14$, $\alpha = .91$), and ending segment ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.09$, $\alpha = .90$).

**Post-test attitude.** Participants reported their attitude toward the death penalty on three nine-point semantic differential-type items ranging from 1 to 9: unjustifiable–justifiable, indefensible–defensible, and unnecessary–necessary. Their responses to the three items were averaged to form the measure of post-test attitude ($M = 6.49$, $SD = 2.33$, $\alpha = .92$).

**Analyses**

To test H1, a bivariate correlational analysis was conducted. H2 and H3 were examined using the structural equation modeling (SEM) technique. The SEM analyses were performed with the use of AMOS 22. Two dummy coded variables, melodramatic sequence (vs. control) and audience orientation (hostile vs. favorable), and the variable representing the interaction between the two dummy variables (melodramatic sequence*audience orientation) were specified to influence identification in the fighting segment, which, in turn, influenced post-test attitude.

In order to test whether the effect of identification in the fighting segment on post-test attitude is significant after controlling for character identification in the suffering segment and character identification in the ending segment, those two identification variables (i.e., identification@suffering and identification@ending) were specified to influence post-test attitude. In addition, because character identification is a psychological process that is influenced by the features of a narrative (Cohen, 2006; De Graaf et al., 2012; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010), the two identification variables were specified as the mediators that are directly predicted by melodramatic sequence.
The relationships between melodramatic sequence and the two identification variables were not hypothesized because those relationships were not the focus of the theoretical arguments presented in this chapter. However, it was reasonable to specify those associations for the following reason. Narrative producers attempt to create plausible characters illustrating actions and thoughts that are in line with some dimensions of the characters’ personality and values or with the characters’ circumstances (Riedl & Young, 2010). The producers provide information about the characters’ traits and background throughout the narrative, which are useful to explain the characters’ actions and thoughts (Riedl & Young, 2010). Information about characters’ traits and background might be helpful for the audiences to understand and share the characters’ thoughts, feelings, and action tendencies (i.e., character identification). Participants might know more about protagonists’ internal characteristics and social background that bring about the protagonists’ actions and thoughts presented in the suffering segment when that segment is presented at the end (i.e., control order) than when it is shown at the very beginning (i.e., melodramatic sequence). Thus, it might be easier for the participants to identify with the protagonists during the suffering segment in the control (vs. melodramatic) sequence. For the same reason, participants might more readily identify with the protagonists shown in the ending segment when it is presented as the last segment in the melodramatic sequence than when it is shown as the second segment in the control order.

All exogenous variables were allowed to co-vary with each other. Moreover, the model included the following additional linkages. First, the disturbance associated with the three identification variables (i.e., mediators) was allowed to co-vary. These additional linkages, which represent the relationships among the identification variables, were necessary given the exploratory nature of this study because there might have been an unspecified factor that would
account for the relationships among the identification variables. Thus, if these linkages had not been present, the estimates for the paths specified to test the hypothesized relationships might have been biased. Second, the direct paths from the melodramatic sequence, audience orientation, and the variable representing the interaction between melodramatic sequence and audience orientation (melodramatic sequence*audience orientation) to post-test attitude were specified.

Melodramatic sequence, audience orientation, and melodramatic sequence* audience orientation were the manifest variables. Post-test attitude, identification in the suffering segment, identification in the fighting segment, and identification in the ending segment were treated as latent variables, with one multi-item composite indicator corrected for measurement error; the variance of the error terms associated with the composite indicators was set to be \((1 - \alpha)\) multiplied by the variance of the indicators. The variance of the error term for identification in the suffering segment was \(0.12 = 1.05*(1 - .89)\), that for identification in the fighting segment was \(0.12 = 1.31*(1 - .91)\), that for identification in the ending segment was \(0.12 = 1.18*(1 - .90)\), and that for the post-test attitude was \(0.44 = 5.44*(1 - .92)\). Table 2 provides the summary of the descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among the input variables used in the SEM analyses.

The proposed model did not fit the data well \(\chi^2 (4, N = 178) = 28.67, p = .00, CFI = .95, TLI = .74, RMSEA = .19\). Modification indices suggested adding the path from audience orientation to character identification in the ending segment. This suggestion was justifiable.

There is a possibility that hostile audiences’ perception that the protagonists are dissimilar to themselves, prompted by the climax of the melodrama, inhibits character identification in the ending segment. In other words, the dissimilarity barrier might operate in the ending segment as well as in the climax among the hostile audiences. Thus, the hostile (vs. favorable) audiences are
less likely to identify with the protagonists in the ending segment. Based on this rationale, the suggested path was added. The global fit of the modified model was as follows: $\chi^2 (3, N = 178) = 5.85, p = .12, \text{GFI} = .99, \text{CFI} = .99, \text{TLI} = .96, \text{RMSEA} = .07$. The value of RMSEA was slightly above the cut-off point (.05) that is conventionally used. However, the other fit statistics indicate good fit. Some scholars argue that the RMSEA values ranging from .05 to .08 indicate adequate fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Taken together, the global fit of the modified model was judged to be acceptable. The modified model was obtained as the final model. It is presented in Figure 2.

**Results**

**H1.** The bivariate correlational analysis revealed that melodramatic sequence (vs. control) was positively and significantly related to character identification in the fighting segment ($r = .26, p = .00$). This finding supports the hypothesis (H1) that melodramatic sequence positively influences character identification in the fighting segment.

**H2.** SEM analyses revealed that the path from melodramatic sequence*audience orientation to identification in the fighting segment was non-significant (standardized regression weights = .14, $p = .15$), as shown in Figure 2. This finding did not support the hypothesis (H2) that the positive effect of melodramatic sequence on character identification in fighting segment is greater among hostile audiences than favorable audiences.

**H3.** In addition, it was examined whether character identification in the fighting segment was related to post-test attitude after controlling for character identification in the suffering segment and character identification in the ending segment. The path from character identification in the suffering segment and character identification in the ending segment to post-test attitude were non-significant (identification@suffering: standardized regression weight = -
The hypothesized path from identification in the fighting segment to post-test attitude was non-significant (standardized regression weight = .05, \( p = .52 \)). The result did not support the hypothesis (H3) that identification in the fighting segment and post-test attitude are positively related above and beyond the effects of identification in the suffering segment and identification in the ending segment.

**Discussion**

Study 3 found a significant positive relationship between melodramatic sequence (vs. control) and character identification in the fighting segment, as expected. Unexpectedly, the magnitude of the relationship was not significantly moderated by audience orientation. In addition, character identification in the fighting segment was not significantly related to post-test attitude after controlling for identification in the suffering segment and that in the ending segment. Therefore, character identification in the fighting segment was not a significant mediator of the effect of melodramatic sequence on post-test attitude.

However, the results of Study 3 support the claim that compared with the climax without a preceding segment (i.e., control), the climax following the suffering segment (i.e., melodramatic condition) relatively increases character identification. This finding suggests that the suffering segment shown before the climax in a melodrama can function as an amplifier of character identification during the climax. In addition, audience orientation did not moderate the effect of melodramatic sequence perhaps because a ceiling effect was not present among favorable audiences. In the favorable audience sample, the mean identification in the fighting segment for the control condition that shows the fighting segment without a preceding segment was 4.44 on a scale ranging from 1 to 7. The score is close to the midpoint of the scale.
Therefore, arguing that the favorable audiences had very limited room to increase character identification during the fighting segment presented with the preceding suffering segment (vs. without a preceding segment) is difficult. This might be the reason why melodramatic (vs. control) sequence increased the degree to which favorable audiences identified with protagonists in the climax to a similar extent to which hostile audiences did.

Study 3 also showed that identification in the fighting segment did not uniquely contribute to post-test attitude after controlling for identification in the suffering segment and that in the ending segment. Perhaps there was no uniqueness in the experience of character identification in the fighting segment because the protagonists consistently desire to fight against the antagonists in all three segments. In the suffering segment, they form the goal of fighting for the victims and pursue this confrontational goal in the fighting segment. At the end, they recall the past suffering so that their fighting goal relives. Thus, character identification in the fighting segment might not have a unique effect on post-test attitude after controlling for character identification in the remaining two parts.

To conclude, Study 3 failed to find evidence supporting the claim that character identification in the fighting segment can mediate the effect of melodramatic sequence on post-test attitude among hostile as well as favorable audiences. Therefore, it is still unclear why melodrama can be persuasive to hostile audiences.
Chapter 4: General Discussion

Melodrama and Audience Orientation

**Moderated effects.** This dissertation showed that a melodrama was more persuasive among hostile than favorable audiences. The term “persuasive” does not mean to imply that hostile audiences are more supportive of the point of a melodrama than favorable audiences are. Studies 1 and 2 showed the pattern that favorable audiences were likely to report a more positive attitude toward the point of a melodrama than hostile audiences were after they viewed the melodrama. Specifically, hostile audiences in the melodrama condition exhibited a neutral attitude toward the point of the melodrama; the mean was 3.77 on a scale ranging from 1 (negative) to 7 (positive). On the other hand, favorable audiences tended to be positive toward the point of the melodrama in the absolute sense; the mean attitude of favorable audiences in the melodrama condition was 5.70 on the same scale. Favorable audiences were more supportive of the point of the melodrama than hostile audiences.

However, hostile (vs. favorable) audiences showed a greater relative change. The term “persuasive” refers to the degree of attitude movement in the intended direction. A melodrama can be inferred to be persuasive if the mean attitude of the participants in the melodrama condition is more positive toward the point of the melodrama than the average attitude of those in the control (i.e., no-message) condition. Studies 1 and 2 showed the expected mean difference in attitude toward the point of the melodrama between the conditions within the two audience samples, but the magnitude of the mean difference was greater in the hostile audience group (mean difference = 1.10) than in the favorable audience group (mean difference = 0.12). On the other hand, the design of Study 3 did not allow checking the possibility of replication of the findings from Studies 1 and 2, indicating the greater difference caused by melodrama (vs. no-
message) among hostile audiences than among favorable audiences. The reason is that the focus of Study 3 was a comparison of the effect of melodramatic (suffering→fighting→ending) versus control (fighting→ending→suffering) sequences, and not a test of the effect of the whole melodrama versus no-message. Only Studies 1 and 2 were able to provide evidence supporting the claim that the entire melodrama is more persuasive among hostile audiences than among favorable audiences.

This evidence is consistent with the findings from a study conducted by Igartua and Barrios (2012). The authors’ theoretical interest was to examine the effect of narratives, in general, so they did not attempt to conceptualize melodrama. However, the authors noted that the stimulus used in their study was a melodrama. The gist of the melodrama is as follows. An innocent teenage girl lives religiously while sacrificing a normal life that teenagers enjoy. She later suffers from a terminal disease. She acts against her religious mother, so she can live a freer, normal life. However, the mother does not allow it. The poor girl dies in the end. In addition, Igartua and Barrios (2012) measured participants’ political view to classify two audience types—politically right/neutral versus politically left. The authors mentioned that politically right/neutral people tend to have more positive prior views toward religion than politically left people have. As the melodrama used in their study negatively portrays a religion, politically right/neutral participants can be argued to correspond to hostile/neutral audiences, whereas politically left participants can be considered as favorable audiences.

Igartua and Barrios (2012) found that the effect of the melodrama on attitude toward religion was significantly moderated by audience orientation. The following interaction pattern was observed. Compared with the politically right/neutral participants (i.e., hostile/neutral audience) who did not view the melodrama, the same type of audiences with melodrama
exposure reported a more negative attitude toward religion. On the other hand, unexpectedly, the politically left participants (i.e., favorable audience) with melodrama exposure showed a more positive attitude toward religion than the same type of audiences without exposure. Why the unexpected pattern was found among politically left participants is unclear. However, the overall findings indicate that as audiences’ prior views are less favorable toward the point of the melodrama, a higher chance that a melodrama is persuasive exists. The findings are consistent with the pattern found in Studies 1 and 2 of this dissertation that a melodrama is more persuasive among hostile audiences than among favorable audiences.

Of note is that Studies 1 and 2 of this dissertation, as well as Igartua and Barrio’s study, used melodramas about controversial social issues. Within other topical contexts, such as health and science, more studies that use other melodramas should be conducted to test the generalizability of the findings that melodramas are more persuasive among hostile audiences than among favorable audiences.

Explanation. This dissertation also attempted to explain why a melodrama is persuasive among hostile audiences. The suffering segment was proposed to amplify the degree to which hostile and favorable audiences identify with the protagonists during the climax, which, in turn, influences the post-test attitude in the message-consistent direction. Consistent with this claim, Study 3 demonstrated that the suffering segment facilitated character identification during the climax, and such effect was not moderated by audience orientation.

This finding is consistent with the claim made by rhetoricians and film scholars that the portrayal of unjust suffering facilitates character identification (Anker, 2005; Osborn & Bakke, 1998; Schwarze, 2006; Williams, 1998). Moreover, this dissertation made two novel contributions. (a) First, it showed the significance of presentation order. That is, presenting the
suffering segment before the climax is effective facilitating character identification in the climax. (b) Second, this dissertation found that the positive effect of the suffering segment presented before the climax in the melodramatic sequence on character identification in the climax may be present regardless of audience orientation. As Study 3 is the first empirical research testing the effect of melodramatic sequence, more empirical evidence is needed to evaluate the durability of these two results.

Study 3 showed that character identification in the fighting segment had a negligible unique effect on post-test attitude after controlling for character identification in the remaining two parts. This finding is inconsistent with the accumulated evidence. Previous studies demonstrated that character identification does influence audiences’ views and behaviors in ways consistent with the narrative point (De Graaf et al., 2012; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Moyer-Gusé, Chung, & Jain, 2011).

There is one notable difference between the previous studies and Study 3 in this dissertation. The previous studies measured character identification once, after the narrative had completely finished, and used the overall identification measure as a predictor of persuasive outcomes. However, in Study 3, character identification was measured three times, after exposure to each of the three segments, and all three identification measures were included in the predictive model for post-test attitude.

The unique effect of character identification in the fighting segment on the post-test attitude after controlling for character identification in the remaining two parts was not significant perhaps because the nature of character identification experienced in response to each segment has no uniqueness. Protagonists consistently experience the same desire in all three melodrama segments and so, too, do narrative audiences while identifying with the protagonists.
Specifically, both protagonists and audiences would form, pursue, and relive the confrontational goal in the suffering, fighting, and ending segments, respectively. For example, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Tom forms the desire to free suffering slaves in the suffering segment, helps the slaves run away in the fighting segment, and relives his desire to free slaves while being beaten to death at the end. While being identified with Tom, the readers might experience the anti-slavery goals in all three segments. As illustrated in this example, the experiences of character identification prompted by the three segments of melodrama may not vary much. This could be why Study 3 found only a negligible unique effect of character identification in the fighting segment on the post-test attitude after controlling for character identification in the other two segments.

Alternatively, the character identification experienced in response to the whole melodrama instead of a particular segment may predict the post-test attitude. Over the course of processing a melodrama, the audiences can repeatedly experience the protagonists’ confrontational goal against the antagonists. This repeated experience in response to the whole melodrama might become the basis for the overall level of character identification, which can be measured after the melodrama finishes. The overall measure might have significantly predicted the post-test attitude.

No matter the reason, Study 3 failed to find evidence of an effect for character identification. Thus, the data did not support the claim that character identification in the fighting segment mediates the effect of melodramatic sequence on hostile audiences as well as favorable audiences.

**Implications**

There are at least two implications of this dissertation. First, melodrama can bring about the interaction pattern of persuasion on hostile versus favorable audiences, which does not
confirm to the well-known tendency that hostile audiences resist a persuasive message whereas favorable audiences accept it (Atkins et al., 1967; Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Lord et al., 1979; Lord & Taylor, 2009; Munro & Ditto, 1997; Peterson & Koulack, 1969). A certain aspect of persuasion was unacknowledged by prior research that demonstrated the known tendency. That is, a persuasive message can be presented in various forms, such as melodrama or fear-arousing argument. The message form possibly functions as a moderator that varies the direction and degree of shift in the views of hostile versus favorable audiences in response to a persuasive message. Melodrama may be a specific form that can generate the following understudied pattern: a persuasive message can move hostile audiences’ views in the intended direction to a greater extent than it can move favorable audiences’ views.

Second, this dissertation suggests a way to facilitate identification with dissimilar characters. Characters may have external or internal characteristics that are dissimilar to those of narrative audiences. For example, a protagonist may have a different racial background. Heterosexual audiences may encounter homosexual characters. Characters might have values that are incompatible with those of narrative audiences. Scholars have shown evidence that identification with dissimilar characters can broaden narrative audiences’ perspectives and help them become more supportive of the people or views that the dissimilar characters represent (Chung & Slater, 2013; Johnson, Jasper, Griffin, & Huffman, 2013; Kaufman & Libby, 2012). That is, if narrative audiences identify with dissimilar characters, it can exert persuasive power. The question is: How can narrative audiences identify with dissimilar characters? It has been noted that it is difficult to identify with dissimilar characters (Cohen, 2006). This dissertation suggests a sequence that can facilitate identification with dissimilar characters. In the sequence, the portrayal of unjust suffering of victims precedes the illustration of protagonists’ actions
against the harm-doers. This sequence may be effective to facilitate audiences’ identification with the heroic protagonists, even if the protagonists are dissimilar to themselves.

Limitations and Future Research

**Melodrama effect or narrative effect?** It is questionable whether a melodrama is the only kind of narrative that is effective for hostile audiences. It is possible that any kind of narrative, such as comedies or dramas, can be persuasive to hostile audiences. Previous studies that demonstrated hostile audiences’ resistance to persuasive messages seldom used narratives as stimuli; instead they used argumentative messages (Atkins et al., 1967; Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Lord et al., 1979; Lord & Taylor, 2009; Munro & Ditto, 1997; Peterson & Koulack, 1969).

Argument is likely to cause resistance among hostile audiences for several reasons. First, arguments explicitly state an advocacy that disconfirms hostile audiences’ views. Therefore, they are likely to be motivated to defend their views. Moreover, argument logically presents claims and evidence. According to Epstein (1994), logical presentation prompts analytical evaluations of the message. This does not mean, however, that the message receivers always deliberately evaluate the contents of argumentative messages. Receivers sometimes rely on heuristic cues, such as source credibility, to evaluate the message’s quality (Chaiken, 1987). In other words, although some receivers heuristically process argument, the logical structure of argument requires its receivers to engage in analytical thinking. When engaged in analytical, rational processing of the message, hostile audiences might evaluate the messages in a biased manner because they are motivated to defend their position. They might devalue information that disconfirms their views, but value the information that confirms their views (Lord et al., 1979). Thus, their views are unlikely to alter as intended by a persuasive message.
However, narrative including melodrama has characteristics that contradict the characteristics of argument. First, narrative implies its point, which potentially disconfirms hostile audiences’ views. Second, it prompts involvement with characters and situations featured in the narrative. While involved in the story world, hostile audiences tend to have story-consistent cognitions and emotions, disregarding their predispositions against the narrative point (Slater, Rouner, & Long, 2006). Therefore, there is a possibility that any kind of narrative would be persuasive to hostile audiences.

Studies 1 and 2 are limited by having only two experimental conditions: melodrama and no message. They did not test whether melodrama is the only kind of narrative or one instance of many narrative types that can exert intended effects on hostile audiences. Future studies should include additional conditions that present other kinds of narratives, such as drama, comedy, and action-thriller, to test whether all kinds of narrative are more persuasive to hostile audiences than to favorable audiences. If so, melodrama is not a special kind. It is merely one instance of narrative.

There is a similar limitation in Study 3. It is impossible to tell whether the suffering segment is the only kind of segment that can facilitate character identification among both hostile and favorable audiences during the climax. In any kind of narrative, the opening segment introduces the protagonists and provides background information that is helpful in understanding why the protagonists perform certain actions. Thanks to this background information, it might be easy for narrative audiences to share the protagonists’ goals, perspectives, thoughts, and feelings shown in the climax. The suffering segment might be just one of many kinds of opening segments that have the power to facilitate character identification during the climax among both hostile and favorable audiences. Future studies should use different kinds of narrative to test
whether the presentation of the opening segment before the climax facilitates character identification during the climax among both hostile and favorable audiences. If the future studies using various narrative types replicate the findings from Study 3, it should be concluded that the portrayal of unjust suffering is not special. It is just one of many kinds of opening segment that help both hostile and favorable audiences to identify with protagonists.

**Outcome measure.** There is also a limitation in the outcome measure used in the three studies. At the conceptual level, the outcome of interest was attitude movement that occurred after exposure to a melodrama. In Studies 1 and 2, the magnitude of attitude movement was inferred by comparing the attitude measured after exposure to a melodrama (i.e., melodrama condition) with the attitude measured without exposure to any message (i.e., control). If the mean attitude in the melodrama condition was more consistent with the melodrama’s point when compared to that of the control condition, it was inferred that the melodrama had moved the attitude in the intended direction.

Another way of measuring attitude movement is to measure attitude change by subtracting the attitude rating obtained before exposure to a melodrama from that gathered after exposure (i.e., post-test attitude minus pre-test attitude). Even though the three studies gauged pre-test attitude, they did not create such a change measure. Instead, the pre-test attitude ratings were used to classify participants as either hostile or favorable audience members. The classification was important because the focus of this dissertation was to test whether melodrama effects varied between hostile and favorable audiences. Future studies should use different variables, such as political orientation and religion, to classify participants into one of the two audience groups, as well as utilize pre-test attitude ratings to create an attitude change measure that operationalizes attitude movement.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

A challenge that persuaders potentially face is finding a way to exert the intended effects on hostile audiences (Shea, 1984). Hostile audiences are demanding. However, they are a significant target audience for persuaders who want to bring about social change (e.g., abolition of slavery) or resolve social conflicts (e.g., pro-life vs. pro-choice; Paluck, 2009; Stewart et al., 2012). This dissertation suggests a type of narrative that is persuasive among hostile audiences—the melodrama. A melodrama portrays the unjust suffering of victims harmed by antagonists, and then features the protagonists’ journey as they fight against the antagonists. Why the melodrama is effective among hostile audiences is unclear. As an exploratory research, this dissertation generates more questions than answers. For example, is a melodrama a special type or one of the many types of narratives that are persuasive among hostile audiences? The journey to identify which rhetorical devices are effective for hostile audiences continues.


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Table 1

**ANCOVA Summary Table for Impacts of the Interaction Between Message Condition and Audience Orientation on Post-test Attitude**

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<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
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<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.05</td>
<td>8.36 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message condition (melodrama vs. control)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.24</td>
<td>8.47 *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audience orientation (hostile vs. favorable)</td>
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<td>208.81</td>
<td>124.20 *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Message condition * audience orientation</td>
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<tr>
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*p < .05.*
Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations Among Variables in Study 3*

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<tr>
<td>1. Identification@suffering</td>
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<td>2. Identification@ending</td>
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<td>3. Melodramatic sequence</td>
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<td>.20*</td>
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<tr>
<td>(vs. control = 0)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Audience orientation</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.33*</td>
<td>-.05*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(favorable audience = 0)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Identification@fighting</td>
<td>.41*</td>
<td>.56*</td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>-.27*</td>
<td>.90</td>
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<td>6. Post-test attitude</td>
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<td>.36*</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.71*</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>.92</td>
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</table>

<table>
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<td></td>
<td>5.28</td>
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*Note. N = 178. Diagonal elements are reliability coefficients.*

*p < .05.*
Figure 1. The estimated means of post-test attitudes across the four factorial groups: message condition (melodrama vs. control) and audience orientation (hostile vs. favorable).
Figure 2. Final model in Study 3. Numbers indicate standardized regression weights; * denotes the paths significant at $p < .05$. 
CURRICULUM VITAE

Yerheen Ha

Home Address
550 Toftrees Ave. #247
State College, PA 16803
(530) 574-4181

Office Address
316 Sparks Building
University Park, PA 16803
yzh115@psu.edu

Education

PhD. The Pennsylvania State University
Department of Communication Arts and Sciences
Advisor: James P. Dillard
Dissertation Title: Exploring the Disproportionate Persuasive Impact of Melodrama on Hostile (vs. Favorable) Audiences

M.A. University of California, Davis
Department of Communication

M.A. Seoul National University
Department of Communication

B.A. Korea University
Department of Mass Communication & Journalism

Experience

Graduate Teaching Assistant
The Pennsylvania State University

Graduate Teaching Assistant
University of California, Davis