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Vicarious self-affirmation: Understanding key mechanisms

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ABSTRACT
Recent work on self-affirmation, or buffering against self-threats by affirming a separate domain of the self, has investigated the use of manipulations via narrative messages to increase self-appraisal (i.e., positive thoughts toward the self) and reduce message derogation. This study furthers this initial work by investigating the dual roles of identification with a character and value congruency in facilitating greater self-integrity (i.e., feelings of moral and adaptive adequacy) and openness to counter-attitudinal information. An experiment ($N = 286$) exposed participants to separate narrative messages to test whether identification with the main character, and strongly holding the value affirmed for the character, influence global self-integrity for audience members. Results demonstrate that such a vicarious self-affirmation experience does lead to greater self-integrity, and that this effect is strongest at high levels of identification with the main character. However, when identification is low, whether or not the value affirmed is one strongly held by the audience member determines whether self-integrity is bolstered. Finally, we show that increased self-integrity through such a vicarious experience leads to greater openness toward a subsequently presented abortion article that was attitudinally incongruent.

As the Old English proverbial saying goes, "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink" (Heywood, 1874). It seems that in today's media saturated environment, the same might be true of connecting people with information. There are a variety of causes that drive the production of mediated messages intended to inform others: health and nutrition concerns, threats to marginalized groups or the environment, and public policy initiatives are but a few. While putting this information in front of people is certainly possible, people are not merely blank slates ready to openly accept or engage with any new information they encounter. Rather, individuals have a natural tendency to defend the beliefs and attitudes they already possess, and to reject information that is dissonant (Kunda, 1990). Encountering evidence that runs contrary to one's values, beliefs, and attitudes (counter-attitudinal information) is perceived as a threat to one's self-concept (Steele & Liu, 1983). This makes the challenge of getting people to engage with messages containing important yet counter-attitudinal information to be

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quite difficult. No matter how refreshing one's message, sometimes people just won't drink.

A number of persuasive methods attempt to deal with these resistance mechanisms so as to allow mediated information to be more effectively communicated. This paper addresses two such methods: identification with narrative characters and self-affirmation theory. Recent work has shown that these processes can be brought together in a way that allows for a vicarious experience of self-affirmation (Walter, Demetriades, & Murphy, 2019; Walter, Saucier, & Murphy, 2019). These studies demonstrated that vicarious self-affirmation (VSA) can be effective in reducing message derogation and increasing both perceived risk and behavioral intention in a health context. While these are promising findings, some important questions remain unanswered. Namely, the role of identification as a mediator in this work is somewhat inconsistent, and the importance of the affirmed value to participants is not assessed. This study aims to and address these questions and further this initial work by testing the ability of VSA to increase openness to a counter-attitudinal message about a contentious social & political topic: abortion. We first discuss the theoretical need for VSA, including an overview of self-affirmation and identification. We then describe the theoretical process of VSA, as well as present the results of an experimental test of these mechanisms.

Self-affirmation theory

One mechanism that has shown promise for overcoming resistance to counter-attitudinal information is self-affirmation. The basic premise of self-affirmation theory is that individuals are motivated to maintain self-integrity, which is a view of themselves as good and appropriate (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Counter-attitudinal information calls into question the accuracy, morality, or justness of one's views, thus threatening self-integrity. Affirming self-integrity in one domain can assuage threats to self-integrity in a separate domain. This is possible because self-affirmation provides access to additional self-concept resources, allows for a broader perspective, and helps to uncouple the self from the threat (Sherman, 2013). Rather than merely preventing resistance mechanisms like counter-arguing, self-affirmation allows a counter-attitudinal message to be perceived as less threatening. That is, although the message would still be attitude inconsistent, " ... in the context of other valued self-concepts, it should pose less threat to global self-integrity and thus be more tolerable" (Steele, 1988, p. 262).

While self-affirmation theory has shown much promise in its ability to induce openness to counter-attitudinal information (Binning, Sherman, Cohen, & Heitland, 2010; Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000; Cohen et al., 2007; Kim & Niederdeppe, 2016; Memish, Schüz, Frandsen, Ferguson, &

Schüz, 2016; Sherman & Cohen, 2002), it is not without limitations. Perhaps the largest such limitation is a lack of ecological validity in how self-affirmation has normally been manipulated in research. The traditional method involves having participants rank a series of values, and then giving them an opportunity to affirm a value they ranked highly through a writing task or activity. This manipulation works to affirm the individual through making the values most central to their self-image more salient (Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000). After this, individuals are exposed to identity threatening information and then asked to evaluate it. While this manipulation may be effective, it is hard to imagine many real-world situations where such a self-affirmation would occur. It is even more difficult to imagine such a self-affirmation occurring in close proximity to exposure to counter-attitudinal information. This seems to be a substantive problem in finding ways to apply the theory of self-affirmation to communication contexts that could benefit from creating greater openness and engagement with counter-attitudinal information. While this study prioritizes an examination of the internal mechanisms that may allow a narrative to provide a VSA experience, research has shown that combining a self-affirmation and attitudinally incongruent information in the same narrative message is possible (Walter et al., 2019, 2019). Further, the specific tailoring of the affirmation to each individual, as in traditional self-affirmation manipulations, leaves questions as to how robust the mechanisms of self-affirmation are. Would an affirmation in a domain that is not one of the most strongly held by an individual still be effective?

Identification

Narratives have been utilized in a variety of contexts as a means for delivering informational messages. Overall, narratives have been consistently effective in achieving persuasive outcomes (Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013). Of course, these narrative effects work through a variety of processes. Most relevant to this investigation is the construct of identification with characters. Cohen (2001) has most fully explicated identification as, "an imaginative process through which an audience member assumes the identity, goals, and perspective of a character" (p. 261). This conceptualization of identification involves four primary components: empathic connections, cognitive connections through shared perspective, motivational connections through shared goals, and absorption that entails a loss of self-awareness (Cohen, 2001).

The idea that one experiences a loss of self-awareness and takes on (temporarily) the perspective and emotions of a character has broad implications. Importantly, this means that counterarguing with the information in a narrative is theoretically incompatible with identification, and so we would not expect such counterarguing to occur (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). This is similar

to the effect of transportation into a narrative, which overlaps with the "absorption" element of identification (Slater & Rouner, 2002). However, since identification also fosters empathic, cognitive, and motivational connections with a specific character, this may explain why it has at times been found to be more effective in reducing counterarguing than transportation alone (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010).

Additionally, counter-attitudinal information, or evidence that conflicts with one's current attitudes and beliefs, often elicits strong resistance when it touches on positions tied to identity (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Given this, it seems that identification may be uniquely suited to deliver information viewed as a threat to identity. Cohen (2001) points out that identification can actually contribute to the development of self-identity and social attitudes, since it allows viewers to experience a different perspective. Since the process of identification involves a temporary loss of self-awareness and internalization of the motivations and goals of a character, it is possible that perspectives which would otherwise be viewed as counter-attitudinal could be transferred from character to viewer through the process of expanding self-concept (Johnson, Slater, Silver, & Ewoldsen, 2016). Indeed, there is evidence that identification with a character possessing certain traits can cause viewers to perceive themselves as higher in those same traits (Sestir & Green, 2010). We posit that the same type of transference may occur with regard to attitudinal information, even that which is counter-attitudinal. In such cases wholesale changes in attitude may still be unlikely. However, enabling individuals to "try on" a counter-attitudinal perspective in this manner may allow them to more openly engage with similar information during subsequent exposures. These mechanisms would be particularly applicable in the context of a transitional role-model where the identified-with character presents the counter-attitudinal information (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). While we believe this illustrates one of the many possible applications of the mechanisms presented here, this study focuses simply on identification as a mechanism for delivering an affirmation vicariously, not also as the context for the delivery of attitudinally incongruent information.

When it comes to counter-attitudinal information, however, one limitation of identification is that it does not directly address any actual threat to identity that may exist. As mentioned, it works to temporarily distance an individual from their initial perspective and allow them to experience a new perspective for a bit. This puts a premium of weight on the narrative's ability to induce strong identification with characters, which can be influenced by a variety of narrative factors (Cho, Shen, & Wilson, 2014; Dahlstrom, 2015; Hoeken, Kolthoff, & Sanders, 2016; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). So, while identification alone may help one to understand other perspectives in the face of a threat to self-identity, having a means of directly addressing the identity threat would be advantageous.

Vicarious self-affirmation

Vicarious self-affirmation suggests a way to bring these two paths to reducing message resistance – identification and self-affirmation theory – together in a way that combines both approaches' strengths. A VSA experience involves exposure to a narrative in which a central character experiences some source of affirmation (the "affirmed character"). The central proposition is that, to the extent that an individual identifies with that affirmed character and thus shares the cognitive and emotional perspective of the character, they should also experience a vicarious sense of self-affirmation analogous to that evoked by a traditional self-affirmation manipulation. VSA suggests that narratives have the power to mediate self-affirmations to audience members, through vicarious involvement with the affirmed character.

Two related studies have recently investigated this idea in a health context (Walter et al., 2019, 2019). Walter and colleagues demonstrate that narrative messages can achieve the tenets of self-affirmation by helping to reduce derogation of a threatening message, as well as improving self-appraisal. However, their findings regarding identification as a mediator are inconsistent; VSA models with identification as a moderator did not consistently influence persuasive outcomes, and were sometimes less effective than conditions that utilized either a control narrative or a public service announcement (Walter et al., 2019). Further, they do not assess whether the value affirmed in their narratives was one strongly held by participants or not – a fact that is implicit in traditional self-affirmation manipulations. The present study is designed to directly speak to the relative importance of identification in such a vicarious process by viewing it in a moderating role, as well as shed light on the role of value congruency in the overall process. Further, this study extends VSA into a social and political context by assessing its ability to facilitate openness to a counter-attitudinal message regarding abortion.

It should be emphasized that VSA works to address the weaknesses both identification and self-affirmation theory possess by themselves. The self-affirmation component directly addresses a potential threat to self-identity posed by counter-attitudinal information in a way identification alone cannot. Meanwhile, using narratives as a vehicle to deliver a self-affirmation seems ideal in a few ways. First, it is more ecologically valid than traditional self-affirmation manipulations. It is not hard to think of ways in which a narrative (such as a book, PSA, or a magazine article) might serve to provide an effective VSA in a natural manner. Secondly, there is evidence that self-affirmation is more effective when individuals are unaware that they are being affirmed (Sherman et al., 2009). That is, knowledge of the persuasive intent of affirmations seems to cause those affirmations to lose their effectiveness (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Identification with a narrative character provides a very unobtrusive means of delivering a self-affirmation induction.

The range of potential affirmations experienced by a character is left intentionally broad. This may involve achieving a very tangible goal like winning a race or improving a relational connection; it may also include more abstract developments like personal growth, significant learning, or deeper understanding. In any of these cases, it is possible that individuals would be vicariously affirmed through engagement with the character to which such affirmations occur. While identification is the primary mechanism through which VSA is proposed to work, it seems likely that self-integrity will benefit from such a demonstration even without high levels of identification. Seeing important values upheld by another, even if a sense of psychological distance is maintained, is still apt to be a somewhat affirming experience for the viewer. Thus, we expect that exposure to a narrative with an affirmed character is likely to result in higher overall self-integrity as compared to a narrative without an affirmed character:

H1: Exposure to a narrative with an affirmed character (VSA condition) will lead to higher self-integrity than exposure to a control narrative.

Self-affirmation has been shown to increase openness to counter-attitudinal information (Correll, Spencer, & Zanna, 2004 Sherman & Cohen, 2002), and we expect that a VSA experience will work in the same way. As we are viewing self-integrity as a measure of the extent to which individuals are affirmed, we expect the following:

H2: As individuals' level of self-integrity increases, they will display a greater openness to counter-attitudinal information.

The primary mechanism proposed by VSA is that identification with affirmed characters in a narrative should provide similar affirmations to audience members. As mentioned above, identification not only involves a loss of self-awareness, but also entails taking on the motivations of a character: their goals, plans, hopes, aspirations, and traits (Cohen, 2001) such that viewers themselves feel higher in those same traits they see in the character (Sestir & Green, 2010). Additionally, viewers are empathically "feeling with the character", and experiencing positive and negative story elements through the eyes of the character (Cohen, 2001). Therefore, as a character achieves positive developments within the narrative, we should expect individuals identifying with that character to also experience those developments as fulfilling and affirming. That is to say, VSA should be more likely in the presence of strong identification with a character that is affirmed in a narrative. With these points in mind, the following hypothesis is put forth:

H3: The relationship between narrative condition and self-integrity will be stronger for those more highly identifying with the affirmed character.

Additionally, the specific values that are affirmed have been shown to matter in the extant research on self-affirmation theory. Traditionally, self-affirmation research has been contingent upon the individual identifying a trait or value that is important to him or herself, which becomes the basis of the affirmation.

Thus, when self-affirmation is induced by having an individual write about a particular experience they've had, the individual is affirmed on a value that is especially meaningful to them. The extent to which an affirmed value must be personally important in order for it to have the desired effect is, at this point, unclear. In the case of VSA, the value that is affirmed is simply germane to the narrative, not tailored to the specific audience members. Individuals may thus vary in terms of how meaningful the affirmed value is to them and it is unclear whether the degree of VSA will be affected by whether the viewer previously possesses that value more strongly. Some research does suggest that self-affirmation could occur in a vicarious context regardless of whether the individual perceived the value as central to their self-identity prior to exposure. As noted above, the transmission of traits and values from characters to viewers' real world sense of self suggests that vicariously watching the character be affirmed on that value may be enough to make the value important to the viewer as well (Sestir & Green, 2010; Slater, Johnson, Cohen, Comello, Ewoldsen, 2014). However, this has never been tested in the context of self-affirmation research, which has exclusively worked by having participants identify an important value through which to be affirmed (McQueen & Klein, 2006). Thus, whether value congruence is an important boundary condition of the self-affirmation process, or if it is unnecessary in a vicarious application, remains an open question. Given the ambiguity regarding this topic, especially in a narrative context, we set out to examine the role of value congruence in the VSA process. Specifically, we wondered if changes in self-integrity as a result of narrative exposure would be contingent upon individuals' prior rating of the value affirmed. Thus, the following research question is posed:

> RQ: Will value congruency moderate the relationship between narrative condition and self-integrity?

Method

Participants and procedure

The study was advertised to a pool of undergraduate communication students at a large midwestern university as a "two-part online experiment about how people process different types of written materials." Students in the research pool complete studies in exchange for a limited amount of credit in courses in which they are enrolled. Students are able to choose which studies to participate in from a list of available studies or to complete an alternative assignment for an equal amount of course credit. Since this was a 2-part study, it was made available to students for the duration of a summer and fall term to allow for attrition between the pretest and the main study. In total, 533 undergraduate students completed an online pretest. After an imposed delay of at least 4 days,

348 of these participants (65%) also completed an online experiment in exchange for additional course credit. We removed 35 participants who had excessively long completion times for the experiment of over 46.28 minutes (1.5 interquartile ranges above the upper quartile).[1] Participant attention was measured with two simple multiple-choice questions. One question was in regard to the story and applicable to both story conditions: What was Carl Herrick's profession? (correct answer: teacher). The second question was in regard to the research article on abortion: What social issue was the article about? (correct answer: abortion). These questions were not meant to assess learning, but were designed to be basic enough that simply reading the story would enable one to answer them correctly. Thus, participants who could not answer such basic questions were assumed to not have paid adequate attention to the story, and were thus removed from analysis (N = 27). This decision was made prior to any data analyses. As a result, 286[2] participants (*M* = 21.02 years old, *SD* = 3.65; 60% female) comprised the final sample.

Both the pretest and experiment were presented through a link to on online survey site, and participants completed the questionnaires in a location of their choosing. The pretest survey asked participants to rank a list of 13 values in order from most important to least important, as well as assessed attitude toward abortion and demographic information. They were then informed that they would be contacted when they were eligible to complete part two of the study and were emailed a link to complete the experimental portion once four days had passed since they completed the pretest.

In order to reduce suspicion about the study's purpose during the experiment, participants were told that they would be asked to read a random selection of two out of a possible eight types of written materials, and then asked to give specific feedback regarding each. They were then randomly assigned to read one of two narrative excerpts (narrative with affirmed character, control narrative). After reading the narrative, participants filled out a questionnaire assessing self-integrity and their engagement with the narrative. They were then asked to read a brief summary of research providing evidence either that abortion laws are effective or that they are ineffective. This summary of research was presented as counter-attitudinal for each participant based on their responses to a measure of attitudes toward abortion included in the pretest. For example, if a participant registered a negative attitude toward abortion (below the scale midpoint), then they were viewed as pro-life and assigned a research summary that supported legal abortion. Abortion was chosen as the topic of counter-attitudinal information because it is a particularly polarizing topic ("U.S. public continues to favor legal abortion, oppose overturning Roe v. Wade", 2019). This increases the likelihood that our summaries of research will be interpreted as a threat to those holding the opposing view, and thus provides a suitable context for testing the ability of a vicarious self-affirmation to buffer against such threats. After reading the

summary of research, participants filled out the final questionnaire assessing their response to the article and attitude toward abortion.

Stimulus materials

The current study focused on whether identifying with an affirmed character in a narrative provided a mechanism for VSA. Participants read one of two excerpts from a movie script for the popular film *Mr. Holland's Opus*. The character is named Carl Herrick, rather than Glenn Holland, in the script version utilized.[3] The film concerns an aspiring musician taking a job as a high school music teacher, and his career in that role. In the condition with an affirmed character, the excerpt focused on Mr. Herrick retiring from his teaching position and being recognized at a surprise celebration for his influential role in the life of his students. "achievement and personal success", one of the common values considered in values inventories (e.g., Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004), was believed to be the value most strongly affirmed in this condition.

Meanwhile, the control condition focused on a few more lighthearted scenes of Mr. Herrick interacting with students in positive ways, and of him coming home from work at the end of a busy day. Both conditions were of equivalent length (1,058 words) and focused on Mr. Herrick's interactions, thoughts, and feelings. It should be noted that one potential threat to the mechanisms proposed by self-affirmation research, regardless of context, is that it simply increases positive affect and makes individuals more agreeable and better able to deal with threats to the self (Tesser, 2000). While research has generally shown self-affirmation to operate separate from affect (see Sherman & Cohen, 2006), and we chose our stimuli narratives to be similar in level of affect evoked, we also wanted to ensure positive affect wasn't inadvertently manipulated. An independent samples t-test revealed that there was no significant difference in positive affect between the narrative with the affirmed character ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.23$) and the control condition ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.33$), $t(283) = .002$, $p = 1.00$.

Measures

During the pretest, participants ranked a list of 13 values in order of personal importance (1 = *most important*, 13 = *least important*). These values were adapted from the value inventory by Schwartz and Boehnke (2004), with a few additional items added from the "values in action" inventory (Peterson, 2006). The values included, "Social status and prestige", "Achievement and personal success", "Pleasure and enjoyment of life", "Excitement and challenge in life", "Independence and creativity", "Equality and justice", "Generosity and help-fulness", "Respect for tradition & religion", "Consideration of others and

politeness", "Safety and security", "Appreciation and gratitude", "Forgiveness and Mercy", and "Love and Intimacy". Responses were reverse-coded so that higher values indicate greater personal importance. Rankings of the key value of interest, "achievement and personal success", were used to examine the moderating role of value congruency in RQ1 ($M = 7.71$, $SD = 3.69$).

At pretest, participants were also assessed on their attitude toward abortion, in addition to a number of other distractor political issues to conceal the study purpose (e.g. gun rights, same-sex marriage, and legalizing marijuana). These attitudes were assessed via 6-item semantic differential scales asking participants to indicate how they would rate the topic on a scale between a pairs of words (i.e. good/bad, desirable/undesirable, beneficial/harmful). Composite scores for attitude toward abortion were used exclusively to determine which version of the research article would be counter-attitudinal for each participant.

Previous vicarious self-affirmation work by Walter et al. (2019) measured self-appraisal by asking participants the extent to which the stories made them think about several items such as, "things that are important/unimportant to me." While this measure is an improvement over many self-affirmation studies that use a simple one-item measure of whether participants' global sense of self has been bolstered, it is somewhat unclear as to whether thinking about important things is the same as being affirmed in regard to those things. For example, one can think about things that are important/valued in the context of mourning the loss of such things, or feeling inadequate or incompetent at embodying such traits. We chose to use the 8-item scale of self-integrity suggested by Sherman et al. (2009), which is directly designed to "capture feelings of moral and adaptive adequacy" (p. 747), which is the central goal of affirmation. Example items include, "I have the ability and skills to deal with whatever comes my way," "On the whole, I am a capable person," and "Even though there is always room for self-improvement, I feel a sense of completeness about who I fundamentally am" (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*, $M = 5.75$, $SD = 0.85$, $\alpha = .90$).

Identification was measured using the 10-item scale suggested by Cohen (2001). Example items include, "I think I understand Carl Herrick well," "I tend to understand why Carl Herrick did what he did," and "At key moments in the story, I felt I knew exactly what Carl Herrick was going through" (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*, $M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.05$, $\alpha = .91$).

Previous literature on self-affirmation has used the close-mindedness subscale of the Need for Closure Scale (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) to assess how open individuals are to opposing viewpoints (Binning et al., 2010). That subscale assesses openness in a more trait-like and general manner. Given that self-affirmation effects depend on how participants respond to threatening stimuli encountered in temporal proximity to the affirmation, we were interested in a more time-sensitive and topic-relevant way of assessing

participants' responses to the presented counter-attitudinal message. Thus, we constructed a similar, yet more state-like and stimulus-specific openness to counter-attitudinal information measure composed of five items on a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*). Example items include, "The author's points were clear and reasonable," "I found the arguments in this article convincing," and "The information in this article will affect how I view the issue of abortion" ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.23$, $\alpha = .81$).

Results

Of the 286 participants in the study sample, 15 had previously seen the movie *Mr. Holland's Opus*. It is possible that prior exposure could attenuate the effects of engagement with the narrative although the stimuli were different from the original film in format (written as opposed to audio visual) and the main character's name. We decided to statistically control for whether or not individuals had seen the movie in all analyses. We also successfully matched the narrative conditions in terms of positive affect to ensure that any outcomes weren't affect-driven (reported above). To further safeguard against this possibility, we also statistically controlled for positive affect (happy) in all reported analyses.

Effects of narrative exposure on self-integrity

H1 predicted that exposure to the VSA condition – the narrative depicting an affirmed character – would lead to greater self-integrity. Since all hypotheses are part of a coherent model, we constructed a moderated mediation model (model 7) using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018) to test all hypotheses. That model included narrative condition as the independent variable, self-integrity as the mediator, openness to counter-attitudinal information as the dependent variable, and identification as the moderator for the path from narrative condition to self-integrity. This analysis also included whether participants had seen the movie or not and positive affect as control variables. The first half of this overall model, with self-integrity as the outcome, was significant: $F(5,278) = 14.11$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .20$. Thus, approximately 20% of the variance in self-integrity was explained by our variables of interest, interaction term, and covariates. In regard to H1, the coefficient for narrative condition was significant, but in the opposite direction to that which was hypothesized ($\beta = -.98$, $t(278) = -2.15$, $p = .03$). This indicates that participants exposed to the control narrative reported self-integrity scores almost a point higher, on average, than those exposed to the narrative with the affirmed character, when controlling for the other variables in the model. In order to ensure that this effect was not overly impacted by the inclusion of identification as the moderator and the interaction term, we also ran a simple

linear regression model assessing the effect of narrative condition on self-integrity. This model showed no significant difference between conditions in level of self-integrity, with approximately 12% of the variance in self-integrity explained specifically by narrative condition and our covariates ($\beta = -.04$, $t(280) = -.45$, $p = .65$, model $R^2 = .12$). These results indicate that H1 was not supported.

The effect of self-affirmation on openness to counter-attitudinal information

H2 predicted that participants who were vicariously self-affirmed would show greater openness to counter-attitudinal information. To test H2 we assessed the impact of self-integrity on openness to counter-attitudinal information in the full moderated mediation model mentioned above. The second half of this overall model, with openness to counter-attitudinal information as the outcome, was significant: $F(4,279) = 4.60$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .06$. Thus, approximately 6% of the variance in openness to counter-attitudinal information was explained by self-integrity scores, narrative condition, and our covariates. Additionally, the coefficient for self-integrity indicated it was a significant predictor of openness to counter-attitudinal information ($\beta = .20$, $t(279) = 2.27$, $p = .02$). These results indicate that, as individuals reported higher levels of self-integrity, they also displayed more openness to the subsequently presented counter-attitudinal article concerning abortion laws. Thus, H2 was supported.

The moderating role of identification

H3 predicted that the VSA condition would more positively affect self-integrity for those who identified more highly with the affirmed character than for those who reported less identification. In order to test H3, we assessed the moderating effect of identification on the path from narrative condition to self-integrity in the context of the full moderated mediation model mentioned above. Although identification positively affected self-integrity more in the VSA condition, the bootstrapped confidence interval for the index of moderated mediation contained zero, indicating a non-significant effect (index of moderated mediation = .03, BootSE = .03, 95% BootCI [−.0213, .0987]). Further, when evaluating the first half of the model with self-integrity as the outcome, the specific coefficient for the interaction between identification and narrative condition indicated a non-significant effect, showing only a 1% increase in explained variance due to the inclusion of the interaction term ($b = .17$, $F(1, 278) = 3.54$, $p = .06$, $R^2\Delta = .01$). These results indicate that the relationship between narrative condition and self-integrity was not significantly impacted by participants' level of reported identification with the

affirmed character. Thus, H3 was not supported. The full model with results for all hypotheses is shown in Figure 1.

Assessing the role of value congruency

We posed a research question asking whether prior possession of the value affirmed in the narrative would moderate the effect of the VSA narrative on self-integrity and subsequently openness. Because "achievement and personal success" was the value most emphasized by the narrative with the affirmed character, we considered participants' ranking of this particular value as measured at the pretest. To test this model, we constructed a moderated mediation model in PROCESS (model 7), with ranking of "achievement and personal success" as the moderator. The model indicates that rating of "achievement and personal success" as an important personal value does in fact significantly moderate the path from narrative condition to openness through self-integrity, yet in a negative manner (index of moderated mediation = −.01, BootSE = .01, 95% BootCI [−0.0307, −0.0006], see *Figure 2* for full
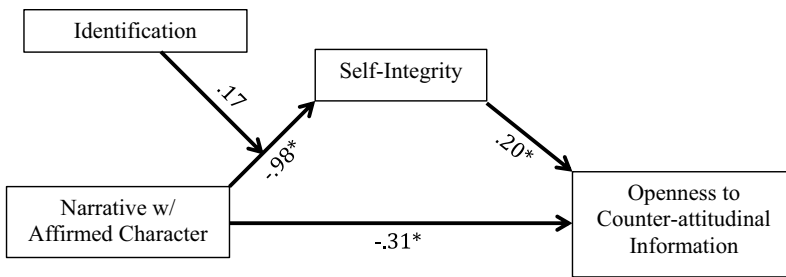

Figure 1. Full moderated mediation model with all path coefficients. Index of moderated mediation = .03, BootSE = .03, 95% BootCI [−0.0213, 0.0987].
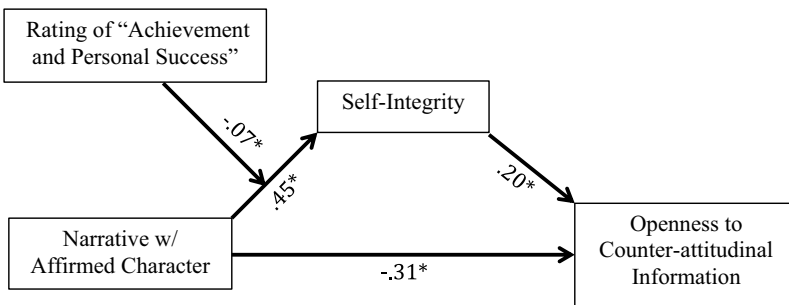*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Figure 2. Adjusted moderated mediation model (rating of "achievement and personal success" replacing identification as moderator) with all path coefficients. Index of moderated mediation = −.01, BootSE = .01, 95% BootCI [−0.0307, −0.0006].
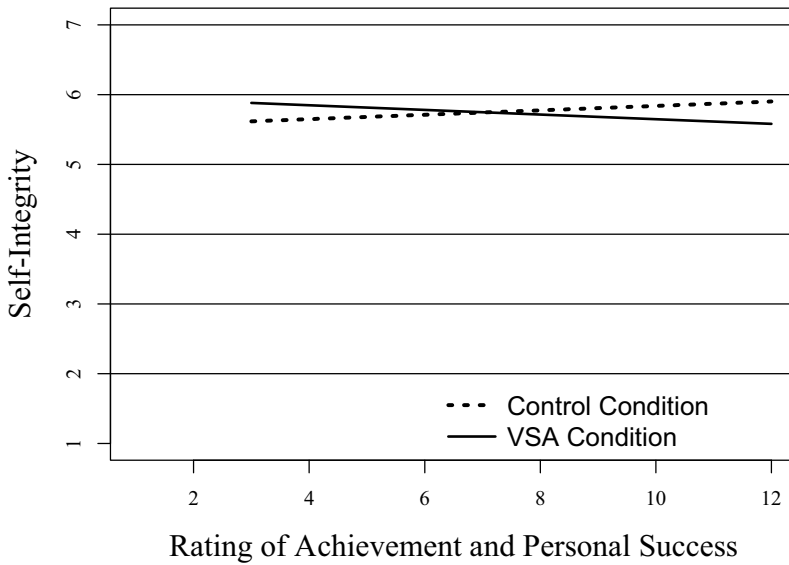*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Figure 3. Effect of "achievement and personal success" rating on self-integrity by narrative condition.

model and path coefficients). A graph of the interaction (*Figure 3*) shows that individuals who rated "achievement and personal success" highly were actually *less* affirmed by our narrative manipulation, in which a character was affirmed on this value (conditional effect of strongly holding the value: $b = -.03$, $t(141) = -1.74$, $p = .08$, $R^2\Delta = .02$). Meanwhile, those in our control condition were more highly affirmed to the extent that they strongly held this value (conditional effect of strongly holding the value: $b = .03$, $t(135) = 1.85$, $p = .07$, $R^2\Delta = .02$). Using the Johnson-Neyman technique (as provided by PROCESS) to probe this interaction indicates that the conditions significantly differ in their level of self-integrity for individuals whose rating of "achievement and personal success" as an important value was either above 10.79 (control group higher) or below 1.29 (VSA group higher). Thus, these results support the conclusion that value congruency is an important factor in vicarious self-affirmation, albeit in an unexpected manner.

Post Hoc analyses

Following the analysis of RQ1, and given that mean self-integrity scores for our VSA condition ($M = 5.72$, SD $= 0.89$) were not significantly different from those for our control condition ($M = 5.77$, SD $= 0.81$; $t(283) = .53$, $p = .60$), we were curious as to whether self-integrity may have been positively influenced by a different value in our VSA condition. Since the value intended to be affirmed in our VSA condition actually had the opposite effect for those who

strongly held the value in that condition, we wondered if this same pattern would play out in our control condition. Our observation was that the story-line in the control message could be seen as affirming the value "forgiveness and mercy". The last scene in our control narrative involved a student pleading for Mr. Herrick to grant him a final academic chance after failing multiple courses, and Mr. Herrick extending him an unmerited opportunity. Thus, it seems reasonable that our control condition may have served to affirm the character in regard to his traits of "forgiveness and mercy", and that individuals who ranked this value highly might feel affirmed after reading the control narrative.

In order to assess the role of "forgiveness and mercy" in the full hypothe-sized model, we constructed a moderated mediation model in PROCESS (model 7), replacing the original value ("achievement and personal success") with "forgiveness and mercy" as the moderator. The model revealed that ranking of "forgiveness and mercy" does in fact significantly moderate the path from narrative condition to openness through self-integrity (index of moderated mediation = .02, BootSE = .01, 95% BootCI [0.0014, 0.0365], see *Figure 4* for full model and path coefficients). It is important to note that this effect is positive. Thus, this model replicates the pattern we found for the value affirmed in our VSA condition in that rating "forgiveness and mercy" highly led to lower self-integrity in the control condition only, as demonstrated by *Figure 5* below.

One further observation from these analyses is that the values affirmed by each of our conditions seemed to actually increase self-integrity for partici-pants in the opposite condition. That is, the self-integrity of individuals in the control condition was positively impacted by the degree to which they strongly held the value affirmed in the VSA condition, "achievement and personal success." This same pattern is true for participants in the VSA condition, who showed a general increase in self-integrity as they rated the value affirmed
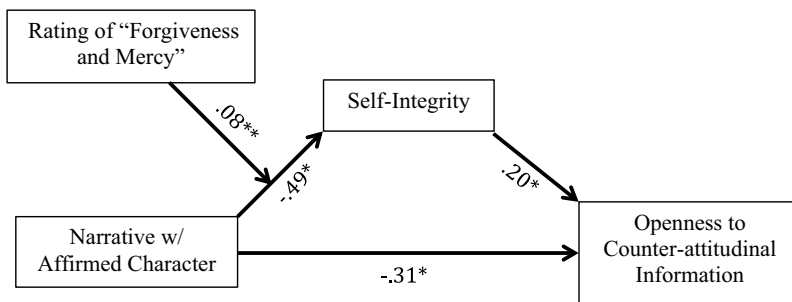

Figure 4. Adjusted moderated mediation model (rating of "forgiveness and mercy" replacing identification as moderator) with all path coefficients. Index of moderated mediation = .02, BootSE =.01, 95% BootCI [0.0014, 0.0365].
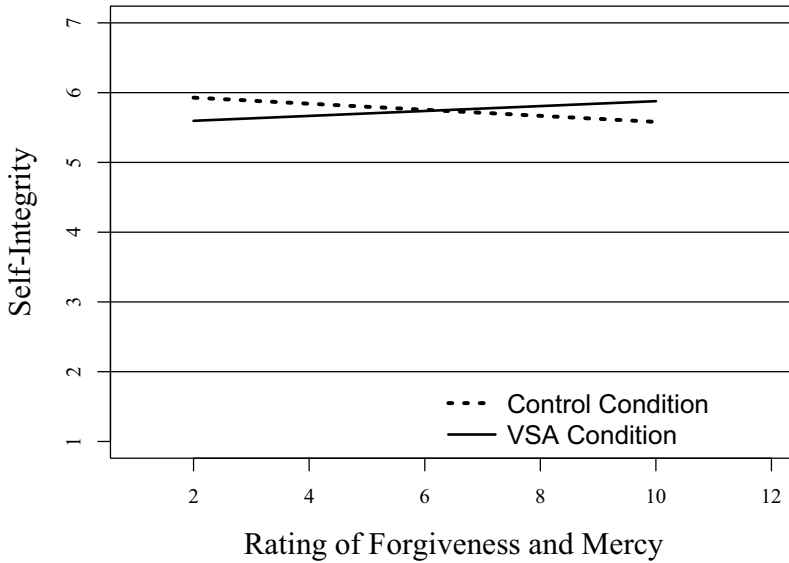*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Figure 5. Effect of "forgiveness and mercy" rating on self-integrity by narrative condition.

in the control condition, "forgiveness and mercy," as more strongly held (see *Figures 3* and *5*). Additionally, these analyses replace identification in the model with the affirmed values. Since identification is so theoretically central to the process of VSA, we wanted to understand how it might be affecting these relationships. In order to further investigate how our narrative conditions impacted self-integrity and openness to counter-attitudinal information with regard to these factors, we constructed a moderated moderated mediation model in PROCESS (model 11) in which we entered narrative condition as the independent variable, openness to counter-attitudinal information as the dependent variable, self-integrity as the mediator, "achievement and personal success" (the value affirmed by our VSA condition) as a moderator on the path between narrative condition and self-integrity, and identification as the secondary moderator (moderating the moderation path) along with our covariates.

The index of moderated moderation for this model was significant(.02, BootSE = .01, 95% BootCI [0.0011, 0.0361]), indicating that the combined effect of both moderators does significantly influence the indirect effect of narrative condition on openness to counter-attitudinal information through self-integrity (see *Figure 6* for full model with all coefficients). In terms of understanding the relationship between the moderators, we need to focus on the first half of this overall model ("A" path with self-integrity as the outcome), which was significant ($F(9, 274) = 10.22$, $p < .001$) and explained approximately a quarter of the variance in self-integrity scores ($R^2 = .25$). More specifically to our interests, the three-way interaction between narrative
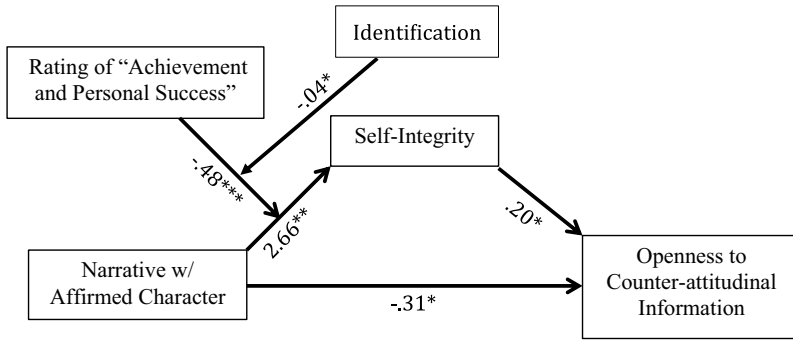
Figure 6. Moderated moderated mediation model with all path coefficients. Index of moderated moderated mediation = .02, BootSE = .01, 95% BootCI [0.0011, 0.0361].
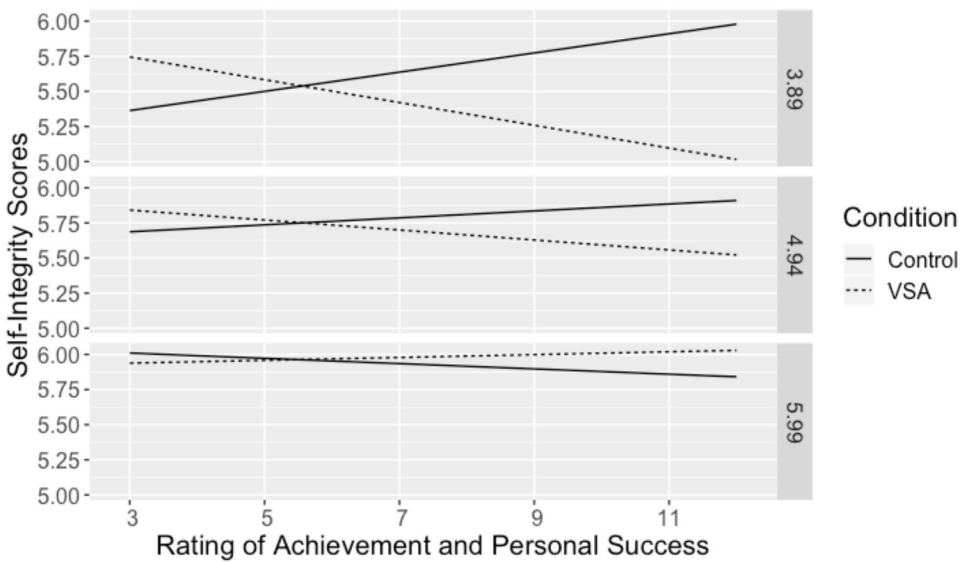*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Figure 7. Graphs of interaction between narrative condition and "achievement and personal success" rating at the following levels of identification: 1 SD below the mean (3.89 – top panel), the mean (4.94 – middle panel), and 1 SD above the mean (5.99 – bottom panel). Higher Scores on the x-axis indicate a rating of "achievement and personal success" as more personally important.

condition, ranking of the "achievement and personal success" value, and identification was also significant, showing a 4% increase in explained variance due to the inclusion of the three-way interaction term (β = .08, $F(1, 274)$ = 12.92, p < .001, $R^2\Delta$ = .04). As can be seen from the graph of this interaction (*Figure 7*), when identification was low, strongly holding the value affirmed in the VSA narrative had differential effects between the two conditions. However, when identification was high, the effect of the affirmed value

becomes rather negligible, and self-integrity remains high across both conditions. These effects were also present and significant, but in the opposite direction for each condition, when the overall model[4] was run with the value "forgiveness and mercy" in the first moderator position instead, indicating a 2% increase in explained variance due to the inclusion of the three-way interaction term ("A" path of the model with self-integrity as the outcome: $F(9, 274) = 9.90$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .25$; interaction: $\beta = -.08$, $F(1, 274) = 8.58$, $p = .004$, $R^2\Delta = .02$).

This interaction also helps to clarify the important role of identification in the VSA process. As can be seen in the bottom panel of *Figure 7*, when identification with the affirmed character was high, the effect of strongly held values virtually disappears. That is to say, participants displayed relatively high self-integrity scores after exposure to either narrative, regardless of value ratings, when they strongly identified with the main character. This seems to add credence to the idea that identifying with an affirmed character is of central importance to the process of vicarious self-affirmation, and makes such an experience possible regardless of other mitigating factors.

Discussion

This study sought to investigate the mechanisms by which narratives might foster vicarious self-affirmation, as well as the subsequent effect on engagement with counter-attitudinal information. While recent research has demonstrated application of the general tenets of self-affirmation in a narrative context (Walter et al., 2019), the precise mechanisms that underlie such vicarious affirmations have remained an open question. To this end there are three primary takeaways from the current study. First, these results provide further evidence that self-affirmation can be experienced vicariously through a narrative, confirming the importance of identification in this process. Second, this study suggests that values may also play a central role in this process. Finally, the experience of vicarious self-affirmation is shown to make individuals more open to a subsequent presentation of counter-attitudinal information, thus replicating the findings from traditional self-affirmation research.

Our results demonstrate that affirmation can be achieved through narrative messages as one identifies with an affirmed character. As we saw, participants who strongly identified with an affirmed character in our narratives reported higher self-integrity scores, regardless of their prior possession of the value affirmed. This demonstrates support for the basic theoretical mechanism proposed to allow self-affirmations to occur vicariously: being cognitively and empathically immersed into the perspective of an affirmed character.

We attempted to manipulate the narrative presented in this study such that participants either read a narrative where the central character was affirmed, or one in which the character was not affirmed. In so doing, we apparently

underestimated how sensitive individuals are to the presence of values in a narrative context. Participants were affected in our control condition by the subtle affirmation of a value in the final scene. Thus, both our narrative conditions affirmed separate values. In answering the research question we posed, we provide evidence that values are important to the process of VSA, but only when identification is low. In such cases, participants actually reported lower self-integrity scores when they more strongly held the value affirmed in each condition. Our speculation is that this may be the result of an upward social comparison, which can have negative effects on self-concept if the gap between themselves and the comparison is large (Collins, 1996). In the absence of identification – which would involve a narrowing of the perceived gap between the self and the character – it is understandable how this comparison would take place and lead to a boomerang effect. This may have been particularly likely in the case of the narratives presented here, which featured a rather exemplary individual who, at least in our VSA condition, was celebrated for a lifetime of significance and achievement. Even in our control condition, the grace and mercy extended by a benevolent teacher might be expected to induce a significant upward social comparison for college students who have not yet begun their career journeys. An important avenue of future research should be to examine whether additional relationships between audience members, values, and narrative characters lead to qualitatively different processes, or if the differences are more a matter of degree.

Additionally, it appears that our two narrative conditions actually presented values that lie on opposite sides of a circular values continuum, and are generally antagonistic (Schwartz, 2012). The value of "achievement and personal success" fits under the broad motivational goal of *self-enhancement*, and emphasizes "pursuit of one's own interests and relative success and dominance over others"; meanwhile "forgiveness and mercy" fits under the motivational goal of *self-transcendence*, emphasizing "concern for the welfare and interests of others" (Schwartz, 2012, p. 8). Among participant rankings, these values actually show the strongest negative correlation of any two values, further highlighting this fact ($r = -.39$, $p < .001$). This fact might lead one to think a narrative affirming such an opposing value would have negligible or possibly detrimental effects on global self-integrity. Yet, our findings suggest that exposure to an opposing value in a vicarious manner can still be an affirming experience. It may be that individuals are simply less likely to engage in upward social comparisons for any value that is not strongly held, even ones that are generally opposing in nature. This could result in freedom from the negative self-concept consequences of such an upward comparison, thus allowing the affirmation to be effective. This further speaks to the flexibility of vicarious self-affirmations, which allows for the exploration of a much wider range of combinations between values and audience members than traditional affirmation manipulations. Another possibility is that, while such values may be viewed antagonistically when put in competition with one another, in

isolation individuals are likely to see most values as positive. Since our narratives did not pit these narratives against one another, and participants' ranking of values was done at a delayed pretest and not readily accessible, such conflict between values may not have been salient.

Again, though, it is important to emphasize that these value-based effects virtually disappeared under conditions of strong identification with the affirmed character, regardless of condition. Identifying more strongly with the affirmed character may have buffered against self-reflective social comparisons, as an individual becomes more wholly immersed into the perspective of the character. While the role of values provides quite interesting contingent effects, identification is more central to a VSA experience both theoretically and empirically. The lack of significant moderation effects of identification as originally hypothesized (H3) is likely due to the lack of a true control condition in this study. Future work should aim to identify and implement an appropriate comparison condition, in order to more thoroughly assess the impact of identification. Nonetheless, these results still suggest it plays a crucial role in the process of narrative-based affirmation.

Although these finding regarding the impact of concordant and opposing values was unexpected, we see it as rather informative for the study of self-affirmation. This study's use of a more nuanced values list than traditional self-affirmation studies allowed us to get a more fine-grained sense of the role of values. Specifically, we were able to identify the importance of values that participants rated as both more and less strongly held for potential affirmation effects. Given other research regarding how priming specific values can affect other values in unique ways depending on the values' relationship to each other (Maio, Pakizeh, Cheung, & Rees, 2009), it would be interesting to investigate how narratives that highlight other sets of values function in relation to each other. Further, a meta-analysis pointed to the fact that most self-affirmation studies did not actually employ a manipulation check for their affirmation inductions (McQueen & Klein, 2006). When present, such manipulation checks simply assessed the relative difference between groups where individuals engaged with either a personally important or unimportant value. Such methodology can't elucidate whether raising the self-integrity of the manipulation group or lowering the self-integrity of the control group caused such differences. Our results suggest that engaging with an "unimportant" value may still affect global self-integrity in interesting or unexpected ways, and provides a fruitful avenue for future research.

Finally, this study presented evidence that when narratives vicariously increased self-integrity scores, this led to greater openness to subsequent counter-attitudinal information. This aligns with traditional self-affirmation research and demonstrates that narratives have the ability to foster similar outcomes (Correll et al., 2004; Sherman & Cohen, 2002). Given that we utilized the highly contentious social & political issue of abortion as the

counter-attitudinal information in this study, we consider this a strong initial test of this outcome. Thus vicarious self-affirmation provides another mechanism through which to explore the persuasive power of narrative communication messages.

It should also be noted that the prospect of narrative-based affirmations opens the door to a potentially wide range of related yet unique processes. This study has specifically focused on the vicarious process of being affirmed through identification with an affirmed character. As our results demonstrate, however, there are possible benefits to self-integrity that occur in a non-vicarious manner. In the absence of strong identification, our findings suggest that values play a central role in potential effects, and there may well be other important contextual factors to consider (e.g. narrative circumstances, in-group vs. out-group representations, etc.).

Additionally, this study focused primarily on a VSA experience in which the threat to identity was wholly unrelated to the narrative or the affirmed character. However, there exist a wide range of possibilities for how persuasive counter-attitudinal information may be placed in relation to the story and character. For example, as mentioned earlier, vicarious self-affirmation may be an ideal mechanism to aid the effectiveness of a transitional role model in encouraging belief, attitude, or behavior change. In such a case, the counter-attitudinal information would actually be delivered through the affirmed and identified-with character. However, we may expect to see differences if it is an adversary or companion of this affirmed character who presents the counter-attitudinal message. Further, the extent to which the attitudinally incongruent information is delivered in relation to the domain of self-affirmation may yield further permutations on how effects play out. In short, we believe that value affirmation through a narrative provides a quite flexible framework for encouraging more open, even-handed engagement with information that would otherwise be resisted or rejected outright. The specific mechanisms of VSA as outlined here represent but one path in this potentially expansive landscape, which we believe is ripe for further research.

The absence of a true control condition without any VSA does provide a limitation to this research in that we were not able to demonstrate the effect of VSA in comparison to a control narrative. Future research should consider more carefully what a true-non-affirming narrative condition might look like, in order to better understand potential boundary conditions. However, this limitation also provided an unexpected strength in that we were able to demonstrate the occurrence of VSA across multiple narratives where different values were presented, in addition to the value mismatch findings already mentioned.

Another limitation is that we do not have a direct manipulation check to confirm that the value affirmed in each condition was in fact the one that participants perceived to be affirmed. Research has shown that a prerequisite

for a successful affirmation manipulation is that the individual is unaware of the stimuli's purpose of affirmation (Sherman et al., 2009). Thus, assessing the perceived value affirmed by each condition would likely need to occur after the presentation of counter-attitudinal information, raising the prospect of contamination by intervening measures and stimuli. Nonetheless, while the values affirmed in each of our conditions show good face validity when evaluating the narratives, having a true manipulation check would help to lend further confidence that participants perceived those values specifically as the ones being affirmed. Further, it would be interesting to know how much flexibility in perceived values still allow for a successful VSA experience. Being able to assess the perceived value affirmed by audience members would allow for such an evaluation, as well as helping to further understand the role of opposing and complementary values.

It should also be noted that our counter-attitudinal topic, abortion, focused specifically on laws regarding abortion and how they affected various related health and well-being outcomes. While it seems likely that pro-choice individuals would support legal abortion while pro-life individuals would oppose such laws, there may be exceptions. For example, it is possible that someone may exhibit a negative attitude toward abortion on moral grounds, but yet still support legalization on practical or political grounds. One solution would be to have a way of assessing the degree to which participants perceived the message to be threatening. Another option would be to choose a population for which a threat can be evoked more objectively. Walter et al. (2019) provide an example of this by using a population of e-cigarette users, and then providing a counter-attitudinal message that detailed the risks of e-cigarette use.

Finally, this study utilized a college student sample. While there is no obvious reason to believe that the mechanisms proposed by VSA would function differently in a non-college student sample, future research into VSA should seek to replicate these results with more diverse samples that better represent the general population.

There is a diversity of communication contexts in which engagement with important yet counter-attitudinal information may be beneficial; health and wellness, public policy, and science & technology are but a few. Being able to present such messages in a way that is perceived as less threatening, and thus allows for greater openness to and engagement with the information, has great potential benefit. The ability to accomplish affirmations vicariously through a narrative represents an expansion in opportunities for such benefits to be realized. Specifically, understanding of the role of identification and value congruency may allow for message designers to more appropriately design content to provide an effective VSA experience. For example, recognizing that the affirmation of strongly held values can actually lower self-integrity when identification is not high may lead to more care in the selection of specific

values affirmed, considering how exemplary the character should be, or taking steps to increase the likelihood of identification. We hope that research will continue to explore the topic of vicarious self-affirmation, so that such applications and mechanisms may be better understood.

Notes

1. Self-affirmation relies on an induced state of global self-integrity, which in turn allows subsequent counter-attitudinal information to be seen as less threatening (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Because engagement with the counter-attitudinal information was dependent upon this induced state, any intervening activity that could change this induced state would be problematic. With the online nature of this study, it was impossible to determine at what point in the course of participation an individual may have taken a break or engaged in other activities. Thus, given the strong potential for affecting the hypothesized mechanism, all participants that took an excessively long time to complete the experimental portion were removed from analysis.
2. This sample size is slightly larger than those reported in one of the previous studies on vicarious self-affirmation (Walter et al., 2019) and slightly lower in terms of participants per condition than the other recent study in this domain (Walter et al., 2019). Given the effects detected in those studies, we feel the reported sample in this study should provide ample power to similarly detect effects.
3. This name change was due to the fact that it was an earlier version of the film script. We viewed this as an asset, as it may help to lessen the chances that participants recognized the story excerpts.
4. This model (PROCESS, model 11) also showed a significant index of moderated moderated mediation (−.02, BootSE = .01, 95% BootCI [−0.0344, −0.0004]), again indicating that the indirect effect of narrative condition on openness through self-integrity is significantly influenced by the combined influence of both moderators.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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