

Narrating immigrants' pain and tragedy can reduce perceived threat to Muslim immigrants in the US

In contrast to nostalgic narratives, narrating the painful experiences immigrants have faced can foster a stronger sense of connection and integration.

SHARJAH, SHARJAH, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, November 26, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- US media and politicians often celebrate beautiful stories of immigrants arriving in America, finding a new home, and thriving in the land of opportunity.

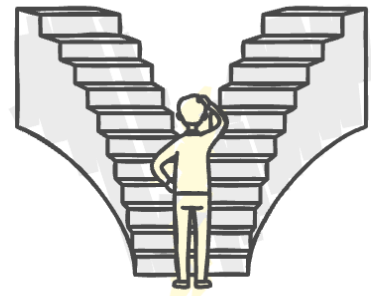
However, a new study published in the Journal of Intercultural Communication Research challenges these prevailing assumptions, particularly regarding Muslim immigrants. Contrary to widely held views, the research urges US media and educators to draw from the painful and tragic stories that the immigrants themselves share.

The researchers highlight that nostalgia—a sentimental longing for “the good old days”—is a powerful tool frequently leveraged by media, politicians, and advertisers to evoke emotional connection. Yet, they caution that nostalgia, when misapplied, can reinforce exclusion and deepen divides between in-groups and out-groups.

“We wanted to flip nostalgia on its head—use it not to divide, but to unite,” says Dr. Syed Ali Hussain, a media communication scholar at Sharjah University’s College of Communication. “To find out, we designed an experiment. We produced short videos about a Muslim refugee family: one told through nostalgia—happy memories of home before war; another through tragedy—the family’s painful displacement and loss. We asked participants to watch (the videos) and then share their responses about the family.”

Which narrative type should be used to increase empathy and perspective taking toward immigrants?

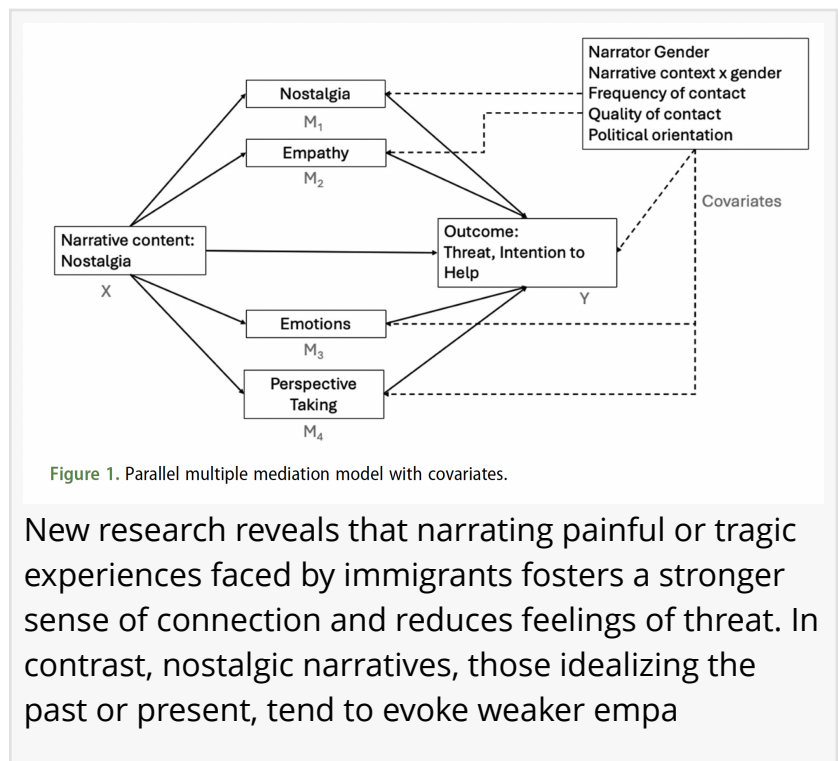
Nostalgia Narratives	Tragedy Narratives
Elicit greater nostalgia but may not effectively reduce threat perceptions.	Indirectly influence threat perceptions and increase helping intentions through empathy.



Made with Napkin

The findings are striking: tragic narratives elicited significantly more empathy and compassion than nostalgic ones. In simple terms, participants exposed to stories of real suffering felt more connected to and less threatened by Muslim immigrants. Credit

Scientists affiliated with universities in the US, China, and the UAE participated in the research. Their findings are striking: tragic narratives elicited significantly more empathy and compassion than nostalgic ones. In simple terms, participants exposed to stories of real suffering felt more connected to and less threatened by Muslim immigrants. Conversely, nostalgic stories—those recalling a beautiful past—often triggered weaker empathy and, in some cases, reinforced subtle forms of social distance.



The authors argue that in a polarized society like the US, narratives about immigrants—often framed as “the other”—can either build empathy or evoke fear. Their research revolves around a key question through which they examine the potential of stories grounded in nostalgia and tragedy in reshaping Americans’ perceptions of Muslim immigrants.

The experiences of Muslim immigrants in the US, home to nearly 4.5 million Muslims, remain a frequent subject of debate and discussion. Polling organizations and think tanks have documented a sharp rise in anti-Muslim discrimination and hate incidents. According to a 2025 report by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the organization received more than 8,650 complaints of discrimination and Islamophobic attacks—the highest number since it began publishing civil rights reports in 1966.

To understand the drivers and possible remedies for this surge in anti-Muslim bias, the authors review a wide range of studies conducted in the US. Some attribute the problem to news and social media, which amplify narratives that reinforce negative stereotypes. Other research highlights a correlation between fear of terrorism, prejudice against immigrants, and negative attitudes toward Muslims.

To examine whether nostalgia- or tragedy-based narratives can increase empathy and perspective-taking toward Muslim immigrants, the authors created four narrative videos as research stimuli. These included a tragedy narrative depicting the devastating effects of war on a Muslim refugee family and a nostalgia narrative portraying happier times in the same family’s life before they became refugees.

The study involved 239 adult participants (121 women, 116 men, and 2 transgender individuals)

recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a platform increasingly recognized for providing access to diverse, non-student US populations in psychological and communication research.

“The main experiment showed that tragedy narratives, more than nostalgia, indirectly influenced threat perceptions and helping intentions through empathy,” the authors write. “Compared to tragedy narratives, nostalgia narratives elicited less empathy. There was no significant direct effect of narrative content on threat perceptions and intention to help the Muslim family.”

They report that tragedy narratives elicited more empathy, while nostalgic narratives resulted in less empathy. “There was no direct effect on the outcomes; significant indirect effects were observed through empathy on threat perceptions and intention to help, indicating that empathy served as a mediator.

“Tragedy narratives, compared to nostalgia narratives, were able to evoke more empathy for the narrator, which further led to reduced realistic and symbolic threat perceptions as well as increased intention to help the Muslim family.”

Summarizing the outcome of the study, co-author Dr. Mary Bresnahan of the Department of Communication at Michigan State University stated, “Empathy is not about longing for yesterday. It’s about caring for someone today. The bottom line is that peacebuilding begins person to person and family to family.”

Reflecting on the broader significance, Dr. Hussain explained, “Our findings matter because they challenge how we design public campaigns, news features, or even films about migration. When we sanitize or sentimentalize the immigrant experience, we risk diluting empathy. But when we acknowledge struggle—when we humanize pain rather than romanticize the past—we create space for understanding.”

The authors emphasize that the implications of their research extend beyond academia, offering insights for nonprofit organizations working with refugees, journalists covering immigration stories, media professionals producing documentaries, educators teaching intercultural communication, and state-run immigration agencies.

Original Source URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2025.2557893>

LEON BARKHO
University Of Sharjah
501654376
[email us here](#)

This press release can be viewed online at: <https://www.einpresswire.com/article/870297248>

EIN Presswire's priority is source transparency. We do not allow opaque clients, and our editors try to be careful about weeding out false and misleading content. As a user, if you see something

we have missed, please do bring it to our attention. Your help is welcome. EIN Presswire, Everyone's Internet News Presswire™, tries to define some of the boundaries that are reasonable in today's world. Please see our Editorial Guidelines for more information.

© 1995-2025 Newsmatics Inc. All Right Reserved.