

Narrative Advertising and Implicit Persuasion: The Loss of Persuasive Potential

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Cite as:

Glaser Matthias , Reisinger Heribert (2019), Narrative Advertising and Implicit Persuasion: The Loss of Persuasive Potential. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 48th, (8600)

Paper presented at the 48th Annual EMAC Conference, Hamburg, May 24-27, 2019.



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Abstract

Building on transportation theory, consumer persuasion knowledge, and para-social interaction, this study explores a potentially limiting aspect of the persuasive potential of narrative advertisements. Given the indirect transfer of meaning of narrative advertisements, consumers might perceive this form of advertising as a form of implicit persuasion attempt. This activates consumer persuasion knowledge, and consumers feel that their personal freedom is threatened and counterarguing against the message is elicited. Interestingly, the results of the study suggest that narrative advertisements can be transporting but at the same time elicit counterarguing originating in a threat to freedom. This highlights the potential downside of narrative ads, and more importantly, it suggests that a reduction in counterarguing might *not* be a primary mechanism by which narrative ads persuade consumers. In spotlight of the results of this study, the persuasive potential and the associated negative aspects of implicit persuasion appeals in narrative ads should be subjected to further research.

Keywords: Narrative Advertising, Consumer Persuasion Knowledge, Implicit Persuasion, Para-social Interaction

Track: Advertising & Marketing Communications

1 Introduction

The persuasive appeal of narratives is well-known, research even indicates that narrative advertising is more effective than classic rhetorical advertising (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Brechman & Purvis, 2015; Kim, E., Ratneshwar, & Thorson, 2017). Although narrative advertising research has focused extensively on the upside in persuasive potential, studies have not shed light on the potential negative effects of narrative advertising messages. Narrative advertising messages unfold their persuasive potential through narrative transportation and reduced counterarguing (Escalas, 2004a; Green & Brock, 2000; van Laer, Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014). Narrative advertisements hook the viewer by transportation and push the message implicitly (Escalas, Moore, & Britton, 2004). Yet, singular studies have shown an increase in counterarguing when transportation increases or at least an ambivalent relationship (Mazzocco, Green, Sasota, & Jones, 2010; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010), which is surprising considering the well-founded empirical literature illustrating a negative relationship between transportation and counterarguing. This is interesting, considering narrative ads' persuasive potential and its persuasive mechanism via reducing critical thought.

We propose a complementing perspective to the mainly positive discussion of the persuasive potential of narrative advertisements. A line of reasoning we introduce here is that a narrative ad can, because of its indirect persuasive appeal, be categorized by the consumer as an implicit persuasion attempt. Thus, if such a narrative marketing message is considered as being manipulative, it activates consumer persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994). The recognition of such an implicit persuasion attempt is manifested as a threat to freedom. This elicits a corresponding coping strategy by the consumer, either avoidance or contesting which are relevant in this context (Fransen, Smit, & Verlegh, 2015; Fransen, Verlegh, Kirmani, & Smit, 2015). Contesting is akin to what has been discussed in literature as counterarguing or more generally, as critical thought. This means that even narrative ads with high levels of narrative transportation might have a dark side, namely that given their implicit nature, they provoke critical thoughts reducing the ad's actual persuasive potential.

The objective of this research is to assess the persuasive potential of narrative advertising in the light of consumer persuasion knowledge, specifically that transportation induces counterarguing because the message is perceived as an implicit persuasion attempt. Results show that the threat to freedom of the implicit persuasion attempt of a narrative ad is not

linked to transportation levels but rather depends on the activation of consumer persuasion knowledge.

2 Theoretical Background

Narrative ads definition. Slightly different definitions for the term have been proposed but basically all follow the characterization introduced by Bruner (1990) focusing on chronology and causality. In spotlight of the referenced definitions and their consistent overlap, this paper follows the practice and standard of the field in defining a narrative ad (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Escalas, 2004a, 2004b; Stern, 1994). This means that a narrative advertisement is defined as having a plot that is linked by temporal sequence, causal inference, and includes characters.

Transportation theory. Transportation theory conceptualizes the phenomenological process and the mental state which is elicited by the consumption of narratives, captured by the construct of narrative transportation (Green & Brock, 2002). The construct of narrative transportation is a key link between story and persuasion of the consumer (van Laer et al., 2014). Transportation involves imagery, cognitions and emotions (McFerran, Dahl, Gorn, & Honea, 2010). Transportation into narratives is defined as “[...] a convergent process, where all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative.” and the recipient becomes immersed in the story, subsequently being influenced by it (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 701).

3 Hypotheses Development

Transportation theory, consumer persuasion knowledge, and para-social interaction are the main concepts used to develop the hypotheses.

3.1 Replication of key relationships

As a basis for our analysis, hypotheses 1 to 3 replicate the following findings from the literature (i.e. Escalas, 2004a; van Laer et al., 2014): narrative transportation is positively associated with ad attitude and negatively associated with counterarguing, whereas counterarguing stands in a negative relationship with ad attitude.

H1: Higher levels of narrative transportation increase ad attitude.

H2: Higher levels of narrative transportation reduce counterarguing.

H3: Higher levels of counterarguing reduce ad attitude.

Interestingly, a literature review revealed the sole disadvantage of narrative ads seems to be the requirement of more cognitive resources to process narrative ads (Chang, 2009). Considering narrative ads as implicit persuasion attempts, we develop three original hypotheses by utilizing the consumer persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), the typology of consumer resistance to advertising (Fransen, Smit et al., 2015; Fransen, Verlegh et al., 2015), and the concept of para-social interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

3.2 Consumer persuasion knowledge and coping strategies

Narrative ads are by design supposed to be entertaining and transporting, masking the primary purpose of the message to some extent. Consumers accept this but are still aware of the persuasive intent behind the narrative advertising message which activates the consumer's persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994). A narrative ad's message might be perceived as transporting and at the same time threaten the sovereignty of the consumer. Consumers interpret the persuasive intent of the message as a threat to their freedom (TTF) concerning thinking, and related to that constructing attitudes. The activation of persuasion knowledge also entails coping strategies as a response to such a message. As a consequence, the consumer immediately implements a coping strategy to resist the persuasion attempt. Coping strategies might differ according to the underlying motive, in this case contesting (Fransen, Smit et al., 2015; Fransen, Verlegh et al., 2015). The result is a disruption of the transportation experience and an increase in counterarguing (contesting).

H4: Higher levels of threat to freedom reduce narrative transportation.

H5: Higher levels of threat to freedom in a narrative advertising message increase counterarguing.

3.3 Para-social interaction

Para-social interaction is a potential confound because it influences narrative transportation but might at the same time have a connection with threat to freedom. Para-social interaction (PSI) refers to the simulacrum of social interaction, which can be elicited during the observation of media figures (personae), for example in television (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Specifically, para-social interaction is likely to affect the narrative transportation experience because PSI engages the recipient by affective involvement (Rubin & Perse, 1987). PSI is also an indicator of source credibility and lowers perceived social distance. This means that it has a positive influence on transportation.

H6: Higher levels of para-social interaction increase narrative transportation.

4 Research Method

Stimulus Material. Twenty six commercials targeted at the DACH region (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) that confined to the definition of narrative advertisements served as stimulus material. The advertised brands are well known in these markets. The different narrative advertisements were used as between-subject stimuli. The sample size per advertisement varied between 10 and 30 respondents. Respondents saw the stimulus material and then filled out a pen and paper questionnaire.

Sample. A convenience sample was collected by master students for course credit. Screening procedures that ensured data integrity were conducted with due diligence. The final sample (N = 576) had the following characteristics: the mean age was 28 years and 53.5% of the sample were female.

Scales. Transportation (adapted from Green & Brock, 2000) was represented by three items ($\alpha = 0.78$). Ad Attitude (adapted from Lee & Mason, 1999) was measured with five items ($\alpha = 0.94$). Counterarguing (adapted from Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne, 2007) consisted of three items ($\alpha = 0.79$). Threat to freedom (adopted from Kim, Y., Baek, Yoon, Oh, & Choi, 2017) had four items ($\alpha = 0.81$). Para-social interaction (adapted from Rubin & Perse, 1987) was constituted by four items ($\alpha = 0.76$).

5 Results

A structural equation model was used (AMOS 25) to simultaneously analyze the hypothesized paths of the outlined model (see Figure 1 for model and standardized pathways).

5.1 Model estimation

The model was overidentified ($df = 145$) and goodness-of-fit indices indicated overall a good fit, RMSEA = 0.069, Standardized RMR = 0.048, GFI = 0.905, CFI = 0.935. ECVI of the model also indicates good fit (ECVI default model = 1.109, ECVI saturated model = 0.661, ECVI independence model = 11.220). The chi-square statistic is significant but this is due to the large sample size, $\chi^2(145) = 547.65$, $p < 0.001$.

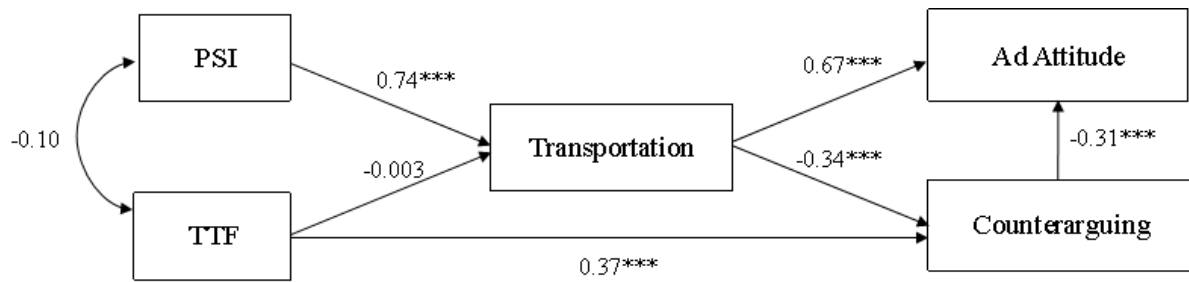


Figure 1. Structural model standardized solution

Note: *** $p < 0.001$

The measurement model assessment confirms that the constructs are reliable but average variance extracted (AVE) of PSI is lower than would be desirable (see Table 1 below).

	Composite Reliability	AVE
PSI	0.77	0.45
TTF	0.82	0.53
Transportation	0.78	0.54
Ad Attitude	0.95	0.80
Counterarguing	0.79	0.56

Table 1. Measurement model assessment

Note: AVE = Average Variance Extracted

5.2 Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses 1 to 3 were supported, given the significant ($p < 0.001$) pathways from transportation to ad attitude and counterarguing, and from counterarguing to ad attitude (see Table 2 for unstandardized regression weights). The pathway from threat to freedom to transportation was not significant (standardized weight = -0.003, $p = 0.94$), thus hypothesis 4 is rejected. In contrast, the path from threat to freedom to counterarguing is significant (standardized weight = 0.37, $p < 0.001$), supporting hypothesis 5. The significant pathway from PSI to transportation (standardized weight = 0.74, $p < 0.001$) lends support to hypothesis 6. Also, it should be noted that the correlation between PSI and TTF is negative and borders significance ($p = 0.050$).

	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	p
PSI → Transportation	0.897	0.072	12.52	***
TTF → Transportation	-0.005	0.067	-0.07	0.941
TTF → Counterarguing	0.559	0.080	6.99	***
Transportation → Counterarguing	-0.326	0.047	-6.94	***
Transportation → Ad Attitude	0.797	0.050	15.79	***
Counterarguing → Ad Attitude	-0.381	0.046	-8.19	***

Table 2. Unstandardized regression weights structural model

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, S.E. = Standard Error, C.R. = Critical Ratio

6 Theoretical Contribution and Managerial Implications

The replication of results from the literature (hypotheses 1 to 3) provides further empirical support for these relationships. More interestingly, support for hypothesis 5 indicates that narrative advertisements do elicit counterarguing via a pathway independent of transportation. Moreover, at the same time, this pathway, originating from threat to freedom, does not disrupt the transportation experience (rejection hypothesis 4 and support hypothesis 5). When looking at the standardized pathways to counterarguing, the values are comparable in size, meaning that the advantageous effect of narrative ads to reduce counterarguing via transportation is flattened by threat to freedom. Notably, one crucial advantage of narrative ads should lie in reduced counterarguing but this does not have to be the case, given the empirical findings. Still, transportation has a strong effect on ad attitude but the aforementioned results open up a discussion whether narrative ads really persuade via reduced counterarguing. Most interestingly, threat to freedom does not disrupt the transportation experience itself.

Also, PSI increased transportation levels (hypothesis 6 supported) most likely because both constructs appeal to consumers on an emotional level. The above findings indicate that narrative ads might not be a panacea to reduce counterarguing.

The results of this study illustrate that narrative advertisements are an effective instrument for the marketer to influence ad attitude but the nature of narrative ads might be perceived as implicit persuasion attempt, eliciting also a critical response that is not contingent on transportation. This constitutes a negative aspect of narrative ads that might influence related measures beside ad attitude, like company image or purchase intentions which are highly relevant to assess the effectiveness of a narrative ad. Practitioners should be aware of the potential negative effects even a narrative ad might have, although it is deemed transporting.

7 Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this study is that it is based on a convenience sample and the narrative advertisements which served as stimulus material were not selected probabilistically from a total pool of narrative ads. Further, some influences like the involvement with the advertised product category or service might moderate results. Also, the actual activation of consumer persuasion knowledge was not measured constituting another limitation.

The results indicate that the potential risk and negative side of narrative ads need further assessment. Other negative effects for the brand that might be related to threat to freedom were not treated in this model. Also, the emotional level of PSI in narrative ads might constitute an interesting new research venue. In spotlight of the above, the implications are first results pointing tentatively to a fresh perspective.

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