Reshaping Media Narratives: The Rise of Weak Narrativity in the Media Marketplace

Kees Smeets
Bayes (formerly Cass), City, University of London
Caroline Wiertz
Bayes Business School (formerly Cass), City, University of London
Daniela Cristian
Bayes Business School (formerly Cass)
Stefan Bernritter
King's Business School

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Introducing 'weak narrativity' as a narrative continuum's endpoint, our qualitative study focuses on consumers of Slow TV through a netnography and in-depth interviews. We unveil why consumers increasingly prefer alternative narrative forms, how they engage with them, and to what effect. Culturally, we highlight how the privatization of stress has prompted consumers to turn to weak narrativity for self-care amid societal and professional instability. Psychologically, our study delineates narrative idling and exploration as processes that are distinct from traditional narrative transportation, shaping psychological outcomes like headspace formation and recalibration.

Media consumption, Weak narrativity, narrative exploration, narrative idling

Track: Consumer Behaviour (Special Track for Track Chairs)

Consumer researchers have extensively explored the allure of traditional narratives in media products. These narratives – rich with intricate plotlines and dynamic character arcs – have been demonstrated to transport consumers into captivating alternate worlds that transcend the constraints of their everyday realities (Philips & McQuarrie, 2010; Wang & Calder, 2006, Molesworth, 2009). However, the existing theoretical toolkit struggles to grasp the appeal of alternative narratives that diverge from these traditional structures. This is particularly critical as we witness a growing fascination with the mundane experiences of others, showcased in videos like a 4-hour drive, an 11-hour flight, or a 3-hour forest trek. These seemingly mundane occurrences gather millions of views on platforms like YouTube, highlighting a shift in consumer preferences that defy the conventional storytelling paradigm. Indeed, these videos are free from traditionally conceptualized notions of spectacle (e.g., Ritzer, 2010), storytelling (e.g., Van Laer et al., 2014), and (connectedness with) celebrated characters (e.g., Russell, Norman, and Heckler, 2004). Yet, despite emerging research into consumer deceleration (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019), exposing consumer preferences for slower, more meditative forms of consumers, scholarly investigation has lagged in uncovering the cultural forces driving this shift in the (media) marketplace and in understanding its psychological implications. In response to this dearth, this study aims to introduce the concept of 'weak narrativity' to embrace the bourgeoning diversity within the media landscape. Next, through our exploration, we seek to unravel why, how, and to what effect consumers engage with this newly emerging type of narrativity.

1. Weak Narrativity

Our pioneering contribution first unveils a nuanced perspective on narrativity, introducing a continuum that spans from weak to strong. At one extreme, strong narrativity in media manifests as (I) a coherent chronological plot weaving a connected beginning, middle, and end, (II) pronounced character development revealing inner thoughts and emotions, and (III) spatial anchoring, with specific locales taking center stage (Escalas, 2004, 2007; Van Laer et al., 2019; Stern, 1994). On the opposite end, the absence of a structured chronological plot, evolving characters, and spatial emphasis creates a narrative mode that operates on a different paradigm. We refer to this as ‘weak narrativity’. This notion of weak narrativity challenges the conventional understanding of what constitutes a narrative. It explores storytelling approaches that do not rely on traditional narrative devices that elevate an experience, but instead, emphasize an unfiltered view. Typically, weak narrativity can be

found in various forms and degrees of often audiovisual media, including Slow TV, (originally) Korean eating broadcasts called 'Mukbangs', vlogs, and arthouse cinema. Exploring weak narrativity allows for the examination of narratives that embrace ambiguity, open-endedness, or non-linear structures, offering unique insights into why, how, and to what effect millions of consumers engage with and interpret this alternative mode of storytelling.

Our research context revolves around Slow TV, characterized as prolonged and continuous first-person recordings of relatively mundane and uneventful activities on video platforms or TV (Irving, 2017). Within our framework of narrativity, Slow TV represents an extreme form of weak narrativity, devoid of structured plot, character development and spatial anchoring. This extreme context allows for the revelation of emerging themes and categories that might otherwise remain obscure. To gather data, we have conducted 28 in-depth interviews with viewers of Slow TV (21 informants; 7 follow-ups) (McCracken, 1988) and a netnography that included an analysis of YouTube comments on 12 popular SlowTV videos, as well as an exploration of subreddit r/SlowTV (Kozinets, 2015). Additionally, we carried out 7 in-depth interviews with consumers of strong narrativity (e.g., TV series, films) to compare our emerging categories and their distinctions to traditional narrative forms. We engaged in an iterative analysis between theory and data employing descriptive coding techniques (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to identify emergent themes, as well as in theoretical coding in accordance with established literature on narrativity in consumer research.

2. The Privatization of Stress

Our findings indicate that the cultural shifts that have prompted the widespread adoption of weak narrativity find roots in the societal implications of what has been termed 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000). As sociologist Bauman (2000) describes, the traditional structures of government have liquefied: institutions that once provided a sense of stability and security, such as long-term employment, robust social structures, and clear life paths, are transforming into more ambivalent forms. Consequently, individuals find themselves navigating a precarious, uncertain world where traditional support systems such as labor unions are eroding. This creates a scenario where the burden of managing stressors and uncertainties falls increasingly on the individual's shoulders (Cederstrom & Spicer, 2015; Becker, 2013; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Indeed, the privatization of stress (Purser, 2019) compels individuals to take charge of their well-being, both physically and psychologically. With fewer collective safety nets, individuals now seek personal strategies to navigate stress

that is often rooted in their work environments. Within this context, consumption of weak narrativity surfaces as a self-care strategy for maintaining an illusion of control amid an inherently unpredictable environment. This type of narrativity, as such, offers a mediated environment that contrasts the overwhelming demands of post-modern existence. It provides access to a space where individuals can momentarily detach from the complexities of their own lives and find solace in the simplicity or unstructured nature of these narratives. As such, consumption of weak narrativity offers a sense of relief from the pressures of navigating an increasingly stressful world, allowing for a temporary respite from the privatized burdens of stress management, as Taylor (52, M) represents the sentiment of many other informants:

> "These days, now that I've graduated, my job is unlike anything I've ever dealt with before, and learning how to handle the problems that I've never dealt with before. In my position, there are peers I can reach out to, but they're not very reliable in communication. I often need answers quicker than they check their emails because most of them are pretty bad at that. I talk to my wife, and she's very helpful in that grounding process. But she works too, so there's that. When I was a student, there were multiple assignments due, and the deadlines seemed to sneak up on me. It's just that organizational process, knowing that the deadlines are closer than I thought, and I need to focus and get things done. So those are the two hectic parts. When I have a non-hectic day at work, life is good, but when I do, I need that grounding distraction. Watching walk videos is one of the ways I do that."

3. Narrative Exploration and Narrative Idling

We find that weak narrativity challenges viewers' expectations of storytelling and invites them to engage with a narrative in different ways than traditionally theorized (e.g., Van Laer et al., 2014. Specifically, we distinguish two types of psychological processes that consumers engage in through weak narrativity: narrative exploration and narrative idling. *Narrative exploration* involves an active form of engagement wherein consumers project themselves into the narrative setting, exercising freedom to traverse within its confines. Indeed, narrative exploration allows for agency, facilitating the consumer's deliberate choice

to immerse themselves in the narrative world while exercising the freedom to navigate without the constraints of a predefined plot, as Veronica (30, F) reports:

> "...you get to tell the story in your head. And I think it's that role of yourself that maybe makes it seem... Then you make it whatever you wanted to fill that void in your life at that time, as opposed to someone talking at you telling you what to do, telling you where to go. This leaves room for imagination, so whatever I may be missing, I will try somehow to find a way to derive from that feeling. So that's probably what makes it the most powerful."

Indeed, weak narrativity encourages projection, enabling consumers to insert themselves into the narrative space. As such, this concept embraces the idea of transportation within narratives despite the lack of a structured or forceful storyline – as theory on narrative transportation usually prescribes (e.g., Escalas, 2004, 2007; Van Laer et al., 2014). Instead, narrative exploration encompasses autonomous story production: individuals may actively contribute to the narrative's development, shaping its direction through their interpretations, imaginings, and interactions with the storyline. This interactive form of engagement fosters a sense of co-authorship, allowing individuals to influence the narrative's trajectory based on their perspectives and desires, as illustrated by Soufiane (30, M):

> "It's that soft spot between "nothing is happening" and there are no things happening that require you to think. There are no peculiarities in these videos. It's just people walking on the street. Living. Laughing. Waiting. You see those things occasionally, but for the most part, it's just a street. Often empty as well. It actually provides space for your own projections. That's what it is. The video doesn't tell you what it is or what's happening with the people. The people themselves don't say anything. It doesn't explain why you're seeing a particular street. It's all open for your own interpretation. You can imagine how that street is during the day, or what those people are doing there, or why that person is standing there, or running. It's just... it keeps your brain stimulated just enough... a kind of space for observation."

In the context of privatized stress, narrative exploration serves as a haven for consumers seeking to engage with stories in a way that liberates them, offering a platform for imaginative freedom and creative projection. Ultimately, narrative exploration becomes a tool for not just consuming narratives but actively participating in their creation, providing a sense of control and agency in an otherwise uncertain and stressful world. *Narrative idling*, on the other hand, encompasses a state of being engaged with a narrative in a passive or inactive manner, marked by low cognitive involvement. Exposed to narratives that lack strong structural elements or immersive storytelling devices, consumers can mentally detach and "zone out", as aptly put by Christine (45, F):

> "Like I said, nothing bad happens in these videos. I don't have to follow a plot and use that much of my brain to enjoy these videos, so it's kind of a bomb to my to my brain, you know, it's… I don't have to put that much mental energy into watching it, I can enjoy it and just… I kind of, I guess… kind of zone out. But I'm still aware of what's going on. But I don't have to like… think about all the bad stuff that's happening in the world."

This mode of engagement allows for a low level of cognitive investment in the narrative content, providing a mental break from the constant demands of navigating an uncertain and stress-laden environment. As a result, narrative idling fosters a space for consumers to experience a form of passive leisurely engagement. This state of low engagement serves as a form of mental relaxation, as they consume but do not get fully get absorbed in the narrative. In contrast, strong narrativity often comes with expectations of complete immersion and attentiveness, for example, due to societal hype or cultural significance, as illustrated by Garreth (28, M). This contrast highlights the liberating nature of narrative idling, devoid of the judgment often associated with forms of strong narrativity.

> "So, I think part of it is… when you're watching a show… Like I'm watching Ted Lasso right now, I'm on the last episode. There's always a sense, especially with the show that is this hyped... Like everyone loves this shows… "Okay, I gotta pay attention, I have to fully experience the show, because everyone loves the show". And if I

don't watch it right, I'm gonna miss something. I'm not… I'm gonna miss out on this cultural moment. I'm not going to view it rightly. And there's all this like judgment of just like consuming a show, which should be no judgment."

4. Formation of headspace and recalibration

Despite their distinct processes, both narrative exploration and narrative idling yield significant psychological outcomes that play a pivotal role in managing stress. Specifically, two distinct psychological effects can be distinguished: the formation of headspace and recalibration. *The formation of headspace* represents the creation and nurturing of a mental environment that provides room for introspection and emotional processing. An 'empty mind' could also serve as an endpoint, rather than a means for thought organization. Whether viewed by the consumer as an end or a means to an end, the formation of headspace empowers consumers to facilitate better decision-making, emotional regulation, and overall well-being. The formation of headspace is contrasted with the constant activity of the brain that is endemic to navigating a stress-laden environment. *Recalibration* refers to the intentional process of restoring mental balance amidst the pressures and uncertainties of post-modern life. Recalibration involves recognizing when the mental and emotional equilibrium is disrupted by burdens of managing personal stressors and uncertainties. Particularly, it involves a reassessment of personal values, goals, and priorities. To most informants, who aim to cultivate a capability to redirect their focus back to professional aspirations amidst stress, this recalibration process through weak narrativity offers a healthy aid in achieving personal objectives.

Together, the conceptualization of weak narrativity, the processes of narrative engagement, and their psychological outcomes, contribute substantially to extant literature on narrativity. They expand our understanding of how consumers engage with and derive meaning from narratives, as our findings challenge the traditional emphasis on strong narratives and narrative transportation. Instead, we offer novel insights into the multifaceted relationship between consumers and the narratives they encounter in various forms of media.

Secondly, our research extends the emerging discourse on consumer deceleration. While Husemann and Eckhardt's (2018, p. 1158) seminal work on deceleration highlighted three processes of (embodied, technological, and episodic) deceleration that all "must be

present for consumer deceleration to succesfully occur", we demonstrate that deceleration is not solely tied to physical discomfort during slow transportation modes. Moreover, we find that limiting technology is not critical in achieving deceleration; rather, we reveal how technological interfaces like media that display weak narratives can actively facilitate this process of deceleration.

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