Lost in the Story: Factors That Affect Narrative Transportation and Advertising

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Lost in the Story: Factors that Affect Narrative Transportation and Advertising

Effectiveness

Jing Wang and Bobby J. Calder, Northwestern University

Advertising is commonly presented in the context of media articles or programs that are intended to engage the consumer. An important aspect of this engagement can be conceptualized theoretically as transportation. Transportation is a type of information processing in which a person not only attends to information but also is absorbed into the narrative flow of a story in a pleasurable and active way. This research examines the effects of the degree of consumer transportation produced by the media context on the impact of ads that appear in that context. Narrative Self-Referencing

Jennifer Edson Escalas, Vanderbilt University

This paper contrasts narrative self-referencing with non-narrative (analytical) self-referencing. We propose that narrative self-referencing persuades through transportation, where people become absorbed in their story-like thoughts (Green and Brock 2000). When ad viewers are transported, persuasion is not negatively affected by weak ad arguments. On the other hand, analytical self-referencing persuades via more traditional processing models, wherein cognitive elaboration is enhanced by relating incoming information to one’s self, resulting in a differential persuasive effect for strong versus weak arguments. We also propose that ad skepticism moderates the effect of narrative transportation. These assertions are tested in three experiments.

The Impact of Prior Thinking on the Enjoyment of Experiences

Daniel Lieb and Joel Huber, Duke University

Many consumption experiences take place after one has thought about an event. The purpose of our research is to determine contexts in which thinking in advance about an event increases its value and to develop a theory parallel to both transportation theory and mental simulation that accounts for this increase in preference. We report two experiments in which participants watch films of both short and feature length. We find significant increases in preference measures for participants who were encouraged to write about a film’s abstract prior to viewing the film.

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY
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EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Narrative Transportation and Advertising Effectiveness”
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Narrative transportation has recently been defined as “a convergent process, where all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative” (Green and Brock 2000, p. 701). The authors show that high transportation leads to more change in story-related beliefs and evaluations than low transportation. Hence people’s attitudes toward whether individuals with violent mental disorders should be released without supervision change more if they are more transported by a story involving a murder by a disturbed individual.

From a more cognitive perspective, the work of Gerrig (1993; Polichak and Gerrig 2002) emphasizes that transportation should not be thought of as a passive process. This research indicates that transportation is characterized by “participatory responses” which are thoughts actively generated by the person in response to the narrative. Beyond merely paying attention to the story, a person produces her or his own cognitive responses, and this process is instrumental to the experience of transportation.

Based on previous research, we define transportation as a process of narrative information processing in which a person not only attends to information but he or she is absorbed into the flow of a story in a pleasurable and active way. Previous research has focused on how people react differently to a story if it involves high transportation versus low transportation. The present research focuses on how differences in transportation affect an ad that is presented in the context of the story (that is, where the story is the media context for the ad). We propose that these effects depend not only on the extent to which the audience is transported by the context, but also on the relationship between the ad exposure and the transportation experience. Specifically, high transportation should enhance advertising effectiveness if the ad exposure does not interrupt the transportation experience. With high transportation, people are absorbed in the media context and experience it as a pleasurable activity. If an ad does not interfere with this process, say by occurring after the story is completed, the positive experience of transportation will be associated with the ad. This should lead to greater advertising effectiveness. However, if the ad does interrupt the transportation experience, this in itself creates a negative experience that is associated with the ad. This should lead to lower advertising effectiveness. Thus, we predict that the effect of media context transportation on advertising is moderated by the intrusiveness of the advertising. If an ad does not interrupt the transportation experience it benefits from association with the positive experience. If it does interrupt it, it suffers from the association with a negative experience. We conduct three studies to test these predictions.

The first study is designed to test the hypotheses that the effect of context transportation on product attitude is moderated by the intrusion of the ad. Participants are instructed to evaluate a new product after reading a sample story. We measure participants’ narrative transportation with Green and Brock’s (2000) transportation scale, and manipulate ad intrusion by inserting the ad either in the middle or at the end of the story. Consistent with our hypotheses, we find that highly transported participants have more favorable attitudes toward the advertised product than less transported participants when the ad is inserted at the end of the story. However, when the ad is inserted in the middle of the story, highly transported participants have less favorable attitudes toward the product than less transported participants. Also consistent with our hypotheses, we find that highly transported participants perceive the ad inserted in the middle of the story to be more intrusive than less transported participants, and that the perceived intrusiveness of the ad mediates the effect of transportation on product attitude.

One alternative explanation of the results in the first study is that the effects could come from the position of the ad rather than the intrusion, because the time between ad exposure and evaluation is different across the conditions. The second study is designed to rule out this alternative hypothesis and to support our theorizing with a different operationalization of the construct. The ad is inserted in the middle of the story for all participants, but its intrusion to the transportation experience was manipulated by varying participants’ involvement with the advertised product. When participants are highly involved with the product, they are more likely to pay attention to it and process it deeply. As a result, the ad is more intrusive to the transportation experience and participants should have a less favorable attitude toward the advertised product because of the interrupted transportation experience. On the other hand, an uninvolved product should be less likely to interrupt the context transportation experience. Consequently, the product attitude should be less influenced by how transporting the context is. The results confirmed our hypotheses.

In the third study, we approach the theoretical link between the transportation experience and the processing of the ad from the flip side. Rather than manipulating the ad processing, we manipulate the degree of transportation itself by giving half participants a cognitive load. All participants read one of the two versions of the same story, one more transporting than the other. The ad is inserted in the middle of the story for all participants. We show that the effects of interrupted transportation are eliminated when the transportation experience is diminished by a resource-demanding task.

In summary, we show across three studies that transportation leads to a more favorable product attitude when the ad is not intrusive to the transportation experience, whereas transportation leads to a less favorable product attitude when it is interrupted by the ad. We also show the robustness of our results by operationalizing both transportation and ad intrusion in different ways.

“Narrative Self-Referencing”
Jennifer Edson Escalas, Vanderbilt University

Self-referencing occurs when one processes information by relating it to one’s self or personal experiences (Burnkrant and Unnava 1995). Some consumer research has found that self-referencing serves to increase product feature and ad message elaboration, leading to enhanced persuasion when message arguments or product features are strong, but not when they are weak (e.g., Burnkrant and Unnava 1989). The predominant explanation for these findings is that self-referencing facilitates elaboration of incoming information because the self is a highly organized, complex memory structure (Greenwald and Banaji 1989; Klein, Loftus, and Schell 1994). Other research has found that self-referencing can also serve to distract attention away from and thus eliminate the differential effects of strong versus weak arguments.
This paper proposes that there are two distinct types of self-referent processing: analytical and narrative, that is, in the form of a story. Narrative processing has been shown to affect persuasion through a mechanism called transportation, which is defined as "immersion into a text" (Green and Brock 2000, p. 702; Gerrig 1994). Narrative transportation leads to persuasion through reduced negative cognitive responding, realism of experience, and strong affective responses (Green and Brock 2000), mechanisms that differ from the traditional elaboration-based explanations for self-referencing effects (e.g., ELM, Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983). Elaboration based models still apply to self-referent processing that is not in the form of a story, that is, analytical self-referencing. Here, cognitive elaboration is enhanced by relating incoming information to one’s self, resulting in a differential persuasive effect for strong versus weak arguments. These assertions are tested in three experiments.

Our first experiment examines the effects of narrative and analytical self-referencing on persuasion and examines whether transportation is at work in the case of narrative self-referencing. This experiment is designed to examine the differential effect of analytical versus narrative self-referencing across varying argument strength levels in a print advertising setting. Our results demonstrate that different types of self-referencing persuade via different mechanisms. We are able to manipulate self-referencing to encourage either narrative or analytical processing with our stimulus print ad for a fictitious running shoe. Under conditions of narrative processing, self-referencing serves as a distraction from message strength evaluation, resulting in enhanced ad attitudes and brand evaluations even when ad arguments are weak. Under conditions of analytical processing, self-referencing serves as to enhance elaboration such that only strong ad arguments are persuasive. The experiment finds support for the idea that narrative self-referencing persuades as a result of narrative transportation, with more compelling or “transporting” stories leading to lower consideration of weak arguments (and by extension, less consideration of other analytical factors, such as source credibility). In this case, we find that persuasion is mediated by narrative transportation, which leads to fewer negative cognitive responses and more positive affective responses.

The second and third experiments identify a moderator of narrative transportation, skepticism towards advertising, and test whether people who have a tendency to respond to advertising with skepticism (experiment 2) or are instructed to behave as an ad critic (experiment 3) are less likely to be transported by an advertisement that encourages narrative self-referencing. These experiments test the premise that consumers who are distrustful of marketers’ intentions will be less likely to engage in narrative processing and more likely to process the ad analytically (Friestad and Wright 1994). In both studies, participants are exposed to a print ad for a fictitious shampoo product that has text encouraging narrative self-referencing via instructions to imagine using the shampoo. Results for experiment 2 show that individuals who are highly skeptical of advertising are less likely to be persuaded by weak arguments because they are not transported by the ad’s instructions to imagine themselves using the product. These skeptical individuals are not distracted from paying attention to and analytically evaluating the ad’s arguments. Less skeptical individuals, on the other hand, follow the pattern of results found in experiment 1: under conditions of narrative processing, self-referencing serves as a distraction from message strength evaluation. Here, persuasion occurs as a result of narrative transportation, with more compelling or “transporting” stories leading to less elaboration on weak arguments; narrative transportation mediates the effect of type of processing (here, operationalized as more likely to be analytical for consumers who are highly skeptical of advertising) by argument strength interaction on ad attitudes and brand evaluations.

Experiment 3 is also designed to examine whether ad skepticism moderates the effect of narrative transportation, but in this case, we manipulate whether or not participants act as ad critics while viewing the same shampoo ad used in experiment 2. In this study, we are again able to replicate the finding from experiments 1 and 2: under conditions of narrative processing, self-referencing serves as a distraction from message strength evaluation, while under analytical processing (evoked by our critique manipulation), self-referencing serves to enhance elaboration. Here, our critique manipulation evokes ad skepticism, which leads to analytical self-referencing, even in response to ad text encourages narrative self-referencing for less skeptical respondents. We again find that when self-referencing does not evoke narrative processing, persuasion occurs when product arguments are strong, consistent with a high degree of analytical elaboration. Finally, persuasion effects under conditions of narrative processing are again mediated by narrative transportation. Immersion into one’s storied thoughts leads to persuasion through reduced negative cognitive responding, realism of experience, and strong affective responses (Green and Brock 2000).

**“The Impact of Prior Thinking on the Enjoyment of Experiences”**

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Many consumption experiences take place after one has both planned for and then thought about an event. The purpose of our research is to determine contexts in which thinking in advance about an event increases its value and to develop a theory parallel to both transportation theory and mental simulation that accounts for this increase in preference. We demonstrate our findings with two laboratory experiments in which participants watched films of both short and feature length. We find significant increases in preference measures between participants who were encouraged to think and write about a film’s abstract prior to viewing the film and control conditions in which participants were not given such opportunities to expand on their thoughts about the upcoming film.

There are several mechanisms through which such prior thinking increases the pleasure attached to an event. We investigate these mechanisms by relating two theoretical frameworks. First, transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000) has been typically applied to narratives and suggests that highly transported readers become more immersed into a story. Such immersion incorporates the self and often increases positive affect related to the story and its protagonists. In our experiments references to the self in the prior elaboration stage may have increased the degree to which those in the experimental conditions were transported by the films. Second, mental simulation (c.f. Taylor, et al., 1998) describes a mechanism in which people simulate (mentally rehearse) the process of experiencing an event. Mental simulation has been previously applied to goal setting and coping (Taylor, et al., 1998) as well as in reducing judgment errors associated with cognitive heuristics (Sanna, et al., 2004). Both of these mechanisms share the property that advance
thinking limits the cognitive interruptions that can interfere with acceptance and enjoyment of the narrative process. We extend these theories by examining how mental simulation and allowing oneself to be transported through preparation can lead to greater pleasure of experiences.

We report two studies demonstrating the effect of future thinking on preferences and enjoyment for experiences. In one study, participants viewed ten-minute instructional films from the 1950’s. After reading an abstract, participants in treatment conditions spend either five minutes discussing what they think they will like about the story and how the film might be self relevant. In control conditions, participants read the abstract and then were given a five minute distraction task where they were asked to discuss their most recent movie going experience. We find that participants in the treatment conditions enjoyed the film more as exhibited by both ratings and choice measures. In addition, participants who thought ahead about a film performed better on a memory task in which they had to recall the order of scenes from the movie. These memory results are highly suggestive that participants who mentally simulated watching the film became highly transported during while watching the film.

In study second study, we formed a movie-club where participants watched four feature length documentary films over the course of one month. In two different treatment conditions, participants were emailed the movie’s abstract ahead of time and were asked to write about aspects of the movie they would enjoy. In a control condition, participants were only able to read the movie’s abstract upon entering the auditorium just prior to viewing the film. We find that participants who were emailed the movie’s abstract ahead of time enjoyed the movie more than participants who only read the abstract just prior to watching the movie. We also analyzed all participants’ open-ended responses to measures following the movie and found that participants who read and thought about the abstract ahead of time were less likely to use negative affective words and critical thoughts. We also administered follow-up surveys several days after each movie night had taken place and found both of these results to be stable over time.

The results from both studies suggest a process parallel to transportation theory and mental simulation may account for the increase in pleasure and preference ratings. This process is also akin to a fluidity account whereby viewers who are highly transported are less likely to suffer from a cognitive interruption from watching the film.

REFERENCES