The Invisible Narrator: Attributes and Consumer Attitudes

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ABSTRACT
Advertising research affirms the importance of the advertising narrator, whose function is to persuade consumers by attracting attention, enhancing credibility, triggering consumer-speaker identification, and conveying product meanings. However, virtually all of this research treats the effects of visible narrators rather than invisible ones. Our research reinforces the concept of consumers as co-creators of messages by showing how consumers draw from personal experiences and persuasion knowledge to imagine characteristics of invisible narrators. The paper presents a study of invisible narrators based on a theoretical framework drawn from narratological literary theory and advertising persuasion theory to fit the advertising context. Propositions about the narrator’s attributes, valence, and relationship to the consumer are tested in a study that elicits quantitative and qualitative data. Findings indicate that consumers construct a narrator’s attributes even when s/he is unseen and develop attitudes to the ad in terms of attitudes to the narrator.

The purpose of this paper is to extend prior research on advertising narrators by focusing on the message speaker, also called by a variety of names such as “source” (O’Keefe 1990), “persona” (Elliott 1982), “voice” (Lanser 1981), and “teller” (Abrams 1990), defined as the perceived human or humanized speaker who tells a story to consumers (Riessman 1993). The assumption that a narrator is present in advertising messages derives from literary and communication theory, in which words are assumed to emanate from someone speaking (Martin 1986). The narration-persuasion association that reappears in advertising dates back to the earliest extent rhetorical and literary criticism: Aristotle’s Rhetoric (Lawson-Tancred 1991) and Poetics (Fergusson 1961). Aristotle’s concept of speakers as orators in the Rhetoric and as dramatis personae in the Poetics locates narrators as the source of persuasion whose aim is to stimulate audience effects.

Recent advertising research reaffirms the link, with narrators conceptualized of as within-ad speakers (Stern 1991, 1993, 1994) whose function is persuasion to consume (Friestad and Wright 1994; Baumgartner, Sujuan, and Bettman 1992; Sujuan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993). Narrators have been found to persuade (O’Keefe 1990) by attracting attention (McGuire 1985), enhancing credibility (Joseph 1982), triggering consumer-speaker identification (Deighton, Romer, and McQueen 1989); and conveying product meanings (McCranken 1989). Specific persuasive tactics have been examined in the literature on celebrity source effects (McCranken 1989), drama/lecture (Deighton and Hoch 1993; Deighton, Romer, and McQueen 1989; Wells 1989), marketing agency (Friestad and Wright 1994), and self-persuasion (Baumgartner, Sujuan, and Bettman 1992). In addition, research on consumer-constructed meanings also references persuasive narrators, relying on interview data to discover what consumers think about ad meanings (Mick and Buhl 1991; Mick and Politi 1989).

However, virtually all of this research treats the effects of visible narrators rather than invisible ones. Our study aims at extending the research stream by turning attention to the formal and substantive attributes of invisible narrators and their effects on consumers. We derive the theoretical formulation of invisible narrators from narratology theory—the study of literary narratives (stories, novels, tales)—which has been adapted to the study of advertisements (Stern 1991, 1993, 1994). In narratology, the presence of a speaker is taken as a common denominator of all written stories, in that they rely on “some use of personification whereby character is created out of ... the words on the page” (Miller 1990, p. 75). The assumption is that when readers are faced with speakerless words, they will infer that the message comes from a speaker, “just as the words that you and I speak are ourselves” when we speak to others (Martin 1986, p. 51). Invisible as well as visible advertising narrators have an especially important function in advertisements, where they are needed to break through audience disinterest (Kover 1995), and function as “hooks” to pull consumers into ads (Escalas, Moore, and Edell 2003). We continue the application of the narrator-persuader nexus to invisible narrators, and begin with an overview of grammatical and evaluative attributes that delineate different narrator types.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW: NARRATOLOGY AND PERSUASION
Narratology: Grammatical Person
Narratological theory grounds the grammatical dimension of narrative identity as either the self or another, for it examines the question applicable to both advertising and literary stories: “Who is doing the talking?” (Sutherland and Sylvester 2000). Narratology is a sub-field of literary criticism that gained prominence in the late 1960s, following Tvetzan Todorov’s (1968) definition and categorization of it as a research area (Cohn 1978). Todorov’s theory relies on that of the 1920s Russian Formalists, whose works were relatively unknown because they were not translated into English until the late 1950s (see Ehrlich 1981; Thompson 1971). Nonetheless, the Formalists were the first modern critics to reject Victorian subjectivism and return to an objective approach to texts based on Aristotelian principles of scientific classification. This ideological perspective appealed to the New Critics’ analytical bent, and since the 1950s, narratological criticism has burgeoned. Its premise of a story that tells itself (narratorless) as logically impossible (Genette 1983 [1988]; Todorov 1968) is axiomatic in narratology, which focuses on axes of formal and substantive differentiation to classify narrator types into parsimonious categories.

The most fundamental formal distinction is the grammatical dichotomization of narrators expressed in the English pronoun difference between the self-referent pronoun “I” or the other-referent “he,” “she,” “it,” or “they” (Kenney 1988). Grammatical differentiation is a constant across English classification systems, no matter what terminology is used (Genette 1983 [1988]), in which the first-person narrator reports personal experiences (Stern 1991), and the third-person one reports information about others.

Persuasion Theory: First/Third Person and Positive/Negative Valence
Person: In consumer research, Friestad and Wright’s Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM 1994) posits third-person narration (“s/he,” “his/her”), which leads consumers to generate “beliefs about the traits, competencies, and goals of the persuasion agent” (Friestad and Wright 1994, p. 3). This relates to Wright’s earlier comments on consumers’ “communicator subschema,” used to determine the narrator’s identity by stimulating consumers to ask, “why is this person describing his/her characteristics?” and “why
was s/he chosen to deliver this message to me?” (1986, p. 1).
However in the self-referencing literature, autobiographical first-
person narration is posited, with consumers’ autobiographical
experiences defined as “memory for information related to the self;
more precisely... memory for events from one’s own life”
(Baumgartner, Sujan, and Bettman 1992, p. 54). Thus, the first
attribute is person, with a narrator conceived of either as a third-
person agent or a first-person self (Baumgartner, Sujan, and Bettman

Valence. The formal dimension cannot be separated from the
 substantive one, for the key to story interpretation is “understanding
how form and content are fused” (Martin 1986, p. 16). The second
dimension is substantive, discriminating between a narrator viewed
as either a positive or a negative influence on consumers. Its
theoretical basis is as old as the Western cultural dualism between
good (hero, helper) and evil (villain, harmer) inherited from Judeo-
Christian and classical traditions, now viewed as a universal rule
of narration. It is restated in Vladimir Propp’s Formalist narratological
work, Morphology of the Folktale, which appeared in 1928 but was
again not translated into English until 1958. Propp’s identification
of essential story elements became influential in the study of
folklore and then of narratives in general. The theoretical core is a
classification scheme that divides all narrators into 7 role catego-
ries, with 2 fundamental ones common to all stories: the hero
(seeker/victim) versus the villain (destroyer/denier). Virtually all
later narratologists follow Propp’s notion of a universal distinction
between heroic and villainous narrators, with Jung, for example,
claiming that first-person narrators are viewed positively as sincere
because they reveal self-truths and do not try to put something over
on readers (1968). In contrast, third-person narrators may be
viewed negatively as insincere because they pretend to convey
unbiased information, but instead express authorial opinions.

Both persuasion and self-referencing research follow prior
theory in positing consumer perceptions of narrators as positive or
negative influences on consumption. The consumer’s assignation
of valence to a third-person versus a first-person narrator depends
on different heuristics in that a third-person agent is evaluated in
terms of an appropriateness heuristic applied to others, but a first-
person one is evaluated in terms of feelings about oneself. In the
persuasion literature, appropriateness is the criterion whereby con-
sumers differentiate between an appropriate third-person market-
ing agent who delivers a “moral or normatively acceptable” mes-
gage (Friestad and Wright 1994, p. 10), and an inappropriate one
who delivers a manipulative spiel. That is, marketing agents are
viewed positively when they are perceived as helping consumers to
make wise decisions, and viewed negatively when they are perceived
as hurting consumers by persuading them to make bad
decisions and go against their best interests (Wernick 1991).

In self-referencing research, on the other hand, the first-person
self narrator is endowed with valence by means of an affective
heuristic, whereby an emotional response is triggered by retrieval
of an “intact” memory (Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993).
Similar to persuasion theory, the “affect associated with personal
memories can be either positive or negative,” with individuals
exposed to the same stimulus able to recall either positive or
negative life episodes (Baumgartner, Sujan, and Bettman 1992, p.
58). However, most self-referencing research focuses on elicitation
of positive emotions, “because there is a bias toward remembering
positive episodes from one’s life and because ads often encourage
the retrieval of pleasant rather than unpleasant memories” (Sujan,
Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993, p. 424). Nonetheless, in follow-
ning this research, we claim that both positive and negative self-
narrators exist, with autobiographical memories of a product or
usage situation likely to stimulate ad evaluations by means of
empathetic or sympathetic (Boller and Olson 1991; Deighton,
Romer, and McQueen 1989; Wells 1989) emotional responses to
the storyteller and the story. Empathy is elicited when consumers
vicariously experience an advertising story, and use their more
affective state (feeling into the emotion itself) “as a heuristic for
judgments” (Baumgartner, Sujan, and Bettman 1992, p. 78). Sym-
pathy is elicited when consumers understand the advertising
narrator’s emotions and use their more cognitive state (recognizing
the depicted emotion) as a parallel heuristic. To sum up so far,
literary theory and consumer research converge on two common
attributes, and the following section presents the propositions about
the perception of narrators, their attributes, persuasive intent, and
influence on attitudes to ads.

PROPOSITIONS

Perception of Narrators and Diverse Perceptions

The central theoretical assumption in multidisciplinary re-
search is that even when no narrator is visible, perceivers are likely
to imagine one to make sense out of a story (Howard and Allen
1989). They are said to construct a speaker based on the “strands of
action, information, and personal traits [that] are woven together
to form the thread of character” (Martin 1986, p.116), who tells a
comprehensible story. However, the assumption that consumers do
construct an advertising narrator has not yet been studied, even
though it is crucial to determine whether or not it occurs. To do so,
the first proposition posits construction of a narrator in the invisibil-
ity situation. The second proposition posits the construction of
different narrators, for individuals are free to assign meaning to ads.

P1: Consumers will tell stories about an invisible narrator.
P2: Consumers will tell different stories about the narrator.

Perception of Persuasive Intent

Even though consumer stories about narrators are predicted to
differ, persuasion theory assumes that consumers understand ad-
vertisements as texts designed to persuade and invoke persuasion
schemas (Greenwald and Banaji 1989) to facilitate processing. Pre-
existing persuasion knowledge is developed in the course of expo-
sure to ads, and people develop criteria over time for evaluating the
validity of message claims by observing its surface features. Heu-
ristic processing enables quick assessments of a persuasion attempt’s
effectiveness (Friestad and Wright 1994), and the proposition states
that consumers recognize ads as persuasive.

P3: Consumers will perceive narrators’ persuasive goals.

Evaluation of Narrators as Positive/Negative

Proposition 4 follows from P2 (individual stories will differ) and
P3 (persuasive goals will be perceived), stating that individual
assessments of persuasive tactics will also differ. It treats the
evaluation of narrators as positive when they speak in the consumer’s
best interests, or negative when they speak only for the marketer. In
this regard, positive evaluations of narrators are likely to lead to the
formation of favorable attitudes to an advertisement and acquies-
cence in the persuasion attempt, whereas negative evaluations are
likely to lead to skeptical Aad and resistance to its persuasive
message. Some consumers may accept the “just like me” self-
narrator as true to life, whereas others may discount such narrators
as sponsorial creations who fake similarity to manipulate them
(Friestad and Wright 1994). Further, some consumers may perceive
other-narrators as appropriate sponsorial agents, whereas others
may perceive them as “mind-screwers” involved in “marketplace gamesplaying” (Wright 1986, p. 1). Notwithstanding the perception of a narrator as self or other, consumers who perceive themselves to be objects of manipulative influence tactics are assumed to react negatively by invoking a “schemer’s schema” to evaluate the message (Wright 1986). We propose that consumer judgments of ad narrators will be positive/negative.

P4: Consumers will evaluate narrators as positive or negative.

Consumer-narrator Relationships and Attitudes to Ads

Theoretical support for the concept of a narrator-narratee is found in narratology (Lanser 1981; Wallace 1986), in which a reader’s perception of a narrator’s relationship to him/her is considered the basic element of a narrative transaction. The concept is reaffirmed in advertising/consumer behavior research, where the process of making sense out of a story is based on consumer decisions about the nature of the relationship (Stern 1991). Perceptions of the consumer-marketer relationship are said to influence evaluations of both the other-narrator’s behavior (Friestad and Wright 1994) and that of the self-narrator. When consumers project themselves into a story or recognize like-me narrators, they may participate emotionally in the scenario, but when they remain outside observers of a fake self or a manipulative agent, they may disengage emotionally and become more judgmental. Persuasion by self-identification is said to motivate copywriters’ creation of a like-me narrator (Kover 1995), and persuasion by other-identification to evoke vicarious participation in another’s experience (Boller and Olson 1991). Burke described successful consumer-narrator identification in itself as persuasive, stating that “you can persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language... identifying your ways with his” ([1950] 1969, p.55). We propose that consumers perceive the self/other relationship.

P5: Consumers will view the invisible narrator as self/other, in relation to themselves.

Even though Aad studies do not focus on the narrator in general, we follow the suggestion that the target as interpreter is an aspect of consumer interpretations of persuasion attempts (Folkes 1988). We draw from evidence found in the self-persuasion literature to develop the connection between the narrator’s message and ad attitudes. Previous research supports the finding that messages become more persuasive when they activate consumer memories that trigger emotional responses that transfer to ad evaluations (Boller and Olson 1991; Deighton, Romer and McQueen 1989; Stern 1994). The questions were adapted from those used in prior research: “What story does the ad tell?” (Mick and Politi 1989; Deighton, Romer and McQueen 1989; Stern 1994); “How does the ad make you feel?” (King, Pehrson and Reid 1993; Walker and Dubitsky 1994); “How does the ad relate to your life?” (Mick 1992; Mick and Buhl 1992); and “Please tell us why you like or dislike the ad” (Mitchell and Olson, 1981; Walker and Dubitsky 1991).

P6: Consumers who recognize a greater (lesser) degree of self-relevance in the narrator’s message will produce more (less) favorable ad evaluations.

THE STUDY

Data Collection

The propositions were tested in a study of consumer responses to ads lacking a visible narrator via a computerized questionnaire that used open-ended questions to elicit verbal and/or visual descriptions and traditional scale measures. The rationale for combining open-ended with scales is that the verbal/visual data captures consumers’ thoughts about ads (Walker and Dubitsky 1994), and the measures capture attitudinal effects.

Sample

Seventy-five undergraduate business students in an introductory marketing class at a large northeastern public university participated in the one-hour study for 2.5% of their grade. The sample consisted of 42 female and 33 male participants (75), with an average age of 21 years. The justification for use of a student sample is that students were the target of the stimulus ads, which appeared in the college newspaper as part of a Visa campaign to attract student users. The respondents were pre-screened to determine credit card ownership, and 93% of the respondents said that they owned one, with 87% stating that they owned two or more.

Ad Stimulus

Figure 1 shows two print ads from the Visa campaign ran in student newspapers, with two different headlines:

8 wds Ad 1: “Because all-nighters aren’t always spent in the library.”
6 wds Ad 2: “Because today is mystery meat day.”

Aside from the words in a handwritten font, there is no concrete evidence of a persona, which forces readers to invent someone responsible for the words. The first word, “because,” poses an implicit question—because why?—that calls for an answer (Stern 1991). The text is a teaser, for it is up to the readers to provide closure by inferring the problem and the solution (“use Visa”), based on the product benefit in the tagline, “It’s everywhere you want to be.” The headline catch phrases “all-nighter” and “mystery meat,” familiar to college students, are not spoken by anyone visible, forcing readers to construct a speaker, his/her motivation, actions, and outcomes.

Method

Respondents were randomly assigned a questionnaire about one ad and were seated at computers. They were given a copy of the ad in a page of the daily newspaper to heighten task realism by allowing them to view the ad in context, and were asked to respond to a 4-part questionnaire. Part 1 followed established procedures in requesting responses to four specific questions rather than a single general one (“what do you think about this ad?”) to minimize irrelevant responses (Wansink, Ray and Batra 1994). The questions were adapted from those used in prior research: “What story does the ad tell?” (Mick and Politi 1989; Deighton, Romer and McQueen 1989; Stern 1994); “How does the ad make you feel?” (King, Pehrson and Reid 1993; Walker and Dubitsky 1994); “How does the ad relate to your life?” (Mick 1992; Mick and Buhl 1992); and “Please tell us why you like or dislike the ad” (Mitchell and Olson, 1981; Walker and Dubitsky 1991).

P2 part used a projective prompt to determine perceptions of the ad narrator, instructing respondents to “draw and/or describe the speaker. Please be as detailed as possible.”

Part 3 presented respondents with three scales that measured Aad, personal relevance, and normative evaluation of the ad situation. Attitude toward the ad (McKenzie, Lutz, and Belch 1986; Mitchell and Olson 1981) was measured by four seven-point semantic differential items (unpleasant/pleasant, bad/good, unlikely/likable, and boring/interesting). Cronbach’s alpha for the four items was 0.93. The four measures were averaged to form an overall measure of attitude toward the ad.
Respondents’ evaluations of the situation depicted in the ad were measured by Rook and Fisher’s (1995) 5-point scale of 10 bipolar adjective pairs (good-bad, rational-crazy, productive-wasteful, appealing-unappealing, smart-stupid, acceptable-unacceptable, generous-selfish, sober-silly, mature-childish, and right-wrong). A factor analysis confirmed scale unidimensionality, and the 10 items were averaged to form an overall evaluation (alpha=.88).

The authors developed a self-report measure using a 6-item, 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree) to assess personal/other-relevance of the message. Personal relevance was measured in statements about the ad’s consistency with the respondent’s experiences: “This ad is a slice of my life”; “I can relate to using a credit card in this situation”; and “It was as if I wrote the ad.” Other-relevance was measured by statements about the ad’s representation of other people’s behavior: “I have seen others come up with excuses like this before”; “Many students behave in this manner”; and “I know people who rationalize their behavior in this manner.” Factor analysis using a varimax rotation yielded a two-factor structure validating the measure, with self-relevance as one factor and other-relevance as the second. The scales were averaged to provide overall measures of self-relevance (alpha=.85) and other-relevance (alpha=.71). Thus, the scale items were able to distinguish between two kinds of message relevance.

Part 4 requested demographic information (age, sex) and credit card usage patterns (card ownership, payment history and responsibility, purchase patterns).

Data Analysis

Verbal responses were coded independently by the authors, who classified responses on the attribute axes of self/other and positive/negative. Coding the narrator’s grammatical person in a marketing context was straightforward, for the pronouns determine whether narrators are conceived of as peer/self or persuasion agent/other. Coding the narrator’s positive/negative valence produced some discrepant readings, requiring discussion to negotiate meanings.

FINDINGS

Proposition 1 stating that consumers will tell stories about an invisible narrator was confirmed, with all 75 respondents producing descriptions of the narrator, and 21 producing drawings (see Figure 2 for sample illustrations). The descriptions uniformly refer to someone “who is speaking,” indicating that respondents create a speaker and a story about the antecedents and consequences of credit use by making inferences that enable them to “follow” the ad’s meaning. Proposition 2 stating that consumers will tell different stories about the narrator was also confirmed, and Table 1 shows the divergent responses.

Proposition 3, stating that consumers will perceive the narrators’ persuasive goals, is confirmed, supporting the claim that readers are aware of ads as attempts to persuade. The majority of students recognized that they were targets, making comments such as “Visa is targeting students,” and “the ad is aimed at college students.” Even those who focused on the ad’s persuasive message imagined a variety of types of corporate persons, mostly negative, conceived of as a manipulative corporate spokesperson who pretends to relate to students but really just wants their money. Some critiqued the ad itself by questioning the sponsor’s motives for using the headline language, offering suggestions about improving the layout, and criticizing the ad’s openness to multiple interpretations. Thus, support for the first three propositions indicates that different narrators are perceived and recognized as persuasive.

Propositions 4 and 5 are also confirmed, supporting the attribute dimensions out of which narrators are constructed. Proposition 4, stating that consumers will evaluate narrators as positive or negative, was confirmed. Table 2 shows the frequency of positive/negative and self/other narrators. In both ads, 17% (12) of the respondents described a positive free spirited student as the narrator. However, the mystery meat ad elicited significantly more negative descriptions (Chi-square=16.5, p<.001), especially those referring to a cafeteria worker who serves disgusting food. Proposition 5, stating that consumers will describe the invisible narrator in relation to themselves as self/other, was also confirmed. Respondents provided diverse descriptions of narrators in relation to themselves (participants or targets) or others who influence their actions. Confirmation of the attribute propositions thus underlies the classification of four distinct types of narrators.

**Self/Positive:** As self/positive figures, respondents provide autobiographical interpretations that are self-referential (Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1992). No matter whether the self is actual or ideal, s/he is always a cash-starved student who uses the Visa card to turn a situation from threat to opportunity. One
common pattern is that of a student who uses credit to play now and pay later. Interestingly, “all-nighter” rarely refers to studying for an exam. Rather, one variant is about a night out partying with friends, and another is about a sexual conquest by a male “big spender” who impresses a date and is thanked in a “personal way.” Other positive self narrators rely on the card to overcome threatening situations, which differ for men and women. When the narrator is male, he is faced with an emergency such as a late-night car breakdown, but overcomes the threat by charging rescue and repair bills. When the narrator is female, her lack of cash prevents her from going to a restaurant with friends, but the card comes to the rescue.  

Self/Negative: Most of these responses are only mildly negative, for even though the narrators are described in negative terms, their story ends happily. For example, the male narrator in the “mystery meat” ad is often someone who hates cafeteria food because of dietary restrictions or health concerns, but who manages to avoid it by using the card to pay for a restaurant meal. In contrast, the female narrator is often someone who wants to become part of a social group going out to eat, but feels guilty or lacking in self-esteem because she has to pretend that she is more affluent than she really is by relying on the card in the absence of ready cash. The point of these stories is that the narrator’s attempt to impress her
TABLE 1
Characterizations of the Ad Narrator

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Goals (Traits)</th>
<th>Ad A “Library”</th>
<th>Ad B “Meat”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self – Positive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Free Spirit</td>
<td>Pleasure-seeking, spur-of-the-moment type acts with confidence and follows his/her impulses without regret.</td>
<td>To experience life in the moment (Spontaneous, individualistic)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Party Animal</td>
<td>Extroverted hedonist slurrs the words, beer in hand. Not the scholarly-type, he maintains a low GPA.</td>
<td>To have fun (Hedonistic, rebellious)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Leader</td>
<td>Socialite inspires peers to escape mundane routine by partaking in activities in the pursuit of happiness.</td>
<td>To create memorable experiences (Charismatic, kind)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other – Positive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wise Advisor</td>
<td>An empathetic voice of experience (possibly a graduate) entices students to loosen up and enjoy their college years.</td>
<td>To educate and guide (Wise, confident)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Caring Provider</td>
<td>Concerned parent-type offers credit card to ensure students’ safety should an unforeseen emergency arise.</td>
<td>To protect (Caring, compassionate)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Restaurateur</td>
<td>Friendly food services professionals (restaurant host, waiters, or butcher) offer a solution to students’ food dilemma.</td>
<td>To serve (Proactive, supportive)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Temptress</td>
<td>Warm, seductive, sultry voice exhorts students to alter their credit card spending behavior.</td>
<td>To tempt (Flirtatious, affectionate)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self – Negative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Spenderthrift</td>
<td>Free spender willing to incur charges to get what they want; may rely on others to defer his/her frivolous expenses.</td>
<td>To indulge desires (Impulsive, irresponsible)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Victim</td>
<td>Dejected student complains about inedible cafeteria food. Strapped for cash, he feels obliged to eat the prepaid meal.</td>
<td>To avoid problems (Moody, in denial)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Finicky Foodie</td>
<td>Picky woman refuses to eat the disgusting cafeteria food. She cites health concerns to justify going elsewhere to eat.</td>
<td>To never compromise (Demanding, stubborn)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dork</td>
<td>Dorky loser tries to impress others and appear cool. Clearly, this annoying person does not get out much.</td>
<td>To belong, friendship (Desperate, pathetic)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other – Negative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Clueless Exec</td>
<td>Out-of-touch middle-aged man dressed in a business suit tries (in vain) to relate to college students.</td>
<td>To connect, to convince (Alienated, yearning)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lunch Lady</td>
<td>An unpleasant, hairnet-donning cafeteria worker slops disgusting food onto a plate, inspiring students to leave.</td>
<td>To spread misery (Unpleasant, unhappy)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Profiteer</td>
<td>Wealthy executive collects interest payments from poor college students.</td>
<td>To capitalize (Greedy, manipulative)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gourmand</td>
<td>Overweight middle-aged man salivates in anticipation of mystery-meat meal.</td>
<td>To indulge appetite (Gluttonous, short-sighted)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Shopper</td>
<td>Middle-aged woman uses credit card to finance a spending binge at the local mall.</td>
<td>To indulge desires (Impulsive, careless)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
peers fails either because they mock her pretensions or she herself feels fraudulent. Despite this, she regains peer respect and affirms her real identity if she learns from her mistake and avoids overuse of credit in the future.

**Other/Positive:** Respondents also described other/positive narrators whose goal was to influence him/her to use credit to achieve a positive outcome. These narrators are described in terms of the respondents’ personal and social values functioning as a just-like-me friend, a protective family member, or a student who triumphs over adversity. For example, the narrator may be a college graduate who represents the voice of experience, advising students to enjoy the best years of their lives or a parent who protects a child by making sure that s/he has a credit card in case of an emergency. In some cases, even if narrators are perceived as the sponsor-generated solution to a problem, they are still considered positive marketing agents.

**Other/Negative:** However, negative marketing agents comprise the majority of negative other-narrators, likely to be cast as sponsorial manipulators such as debt collectors who lacks empathy with students or obviously fake “students.” Thus, the classification of narrators into 4 types based on 2 attributes validated the predicted four-box typology.

Proposition 6 was supported. Consumers who perceived higher levels of self relevance in the narrator’s message produced more favorable ad evaluations (R²=.42, F(1,72)=51.34, p<.001). The addition of normative evaluations, card ownership, and sex to the model only yielded a small increase in R²=.024, for message self-relevance was the strongest predictor of affective responses to the ads. A post-hoc test found that character valence (positive / negative) did not affect ad attitudes directly (F(1,72)=.85, NS). However, consumers with positive (negative) views of the narrator perceived slightly greater (lower) levels of self relevance in the narrator’s message (R²=.11, F(1,72)=8.7, p<.01).

Despite the fact that the normative evaluations of both ads were virtually identical, attitudes to each differed. The all-nighter ad stimulated significantly more positive attitudes (4.8 vs. 4.0, F(1,72)=6.09, p<.05) than did the mystery meat ad. In the all-nighter ad, the narrator was most often conceived of as positive, and respondents found it easier to relate to this ad (3.2 vs. 2.5, F(1,74)=7.33, p<.01) than to the mystery meat ad, no matter whether the narrator was self or other (see Table 1). One possible explanation is that all-nighters are more often part of student life than compulsory food plans.

**Limitations.** The limitations of this study concern generalizability and verisimilitude. Insofar as the stimulus was a print ad, responses cannot be generalized to electronic ads in which cues such as voice, sound effects, and motion on TV may influence interpretations. Further, even though the ad was appropriate for the student sample, forced viewing may have influenced responses by focusing attention to the research situation and not the advertising (Kover 1995). Participation in a study for class credit may require more involvement from respondents than everyday advertising encounters would.

Notwithstanding the limitations, the study indicates that even when ad narrators are invisible, consumers draw from personal experiences and/or cultural conventions to attach meaning to the visible words by constructing formal and substantive attributes for the narrator. Multiple interpretations of the same words reveal that even though different narrators are constructed, each reflects the consumer’s tacit understanding of ads as persuasive message. In addition, consumers perceive the narrators in terms of two major attributes, with positive self/others influencing positive attitudes to the ad. Taken as a whole, the findings reinforce the concept of consumers as co-creators of messages powerful enough to engage them in a positive relationship with a narrator.

### TABLE 2
Classification of Narrators by Attributes and Ad Version

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plot Pattern</th>
<th>Narrator Type</th>
<th>Ad “A” – Library</th>
<th>Narrator Type</th>
<th>Ad “B” – Mystery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive / Guide</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative / Warning</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**REFERENCES**


