Fantasizing About Winning: Motivational and Cognitive Determinants of Narrative Transportation

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This paper identifies specific motivational moderators for transportation, where people become absorbed by an advertisement. Specifically, using a lottery context, the way the ad is processed, belief in luck, and size of the prize are shown to interact in determining desire to purchase, a process that is mediated by transportation. Only with a large prize do people who believe in luck engage in transportation when instructed to process the ad in a manner that facilitates transportation; with a small prize motivation to transport is attenuated, and thus processing instructions do not affect transportation.

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Recent research in psychology has identified a process, called transportation, that may be useful in explaining the behavior in reaction to advertising that encourages vivid daydreams or fantasy. Transportation is defined as “immersion into a text” (Green and Brock, 2000, p.702; Gerrig 1993).

What has been lacking in the literature, however, is a theory that explains when and how transportation is more or less likely to occur. This paper identifies specific moderators for transportation, where people become absorbed by an advertisement. As well, all prior literature on transportation views it through a cognitive lens; this paper looks at motivational mechanisms (extrinsic motivation from the attractiveness of what is being advertised and intrinsic motivation from the belief its acquisition is possible) that may affect consumer image generation and persuasion. An additional contribution of this paper is to extend transportation theory out of the context of narratives and in to the medium of television advertisements. The lottery is an ideal setting to examine consumer fantasies and transportation, as they are notorious for encouraging participants to dream or imagine, and outcomes that are salient and easy to imagine carry disproportionate influence in decision making (McGill and Anand, 1989; Keller and McGill 1994).

In a pilot study (with 3 cells: a lottery ad an ad encouraging consumers to fantasize, a control lottery ad, and a no ad condition) we show that advertisements that encourage imagination lead to more transportation, and that this increase in transportation mediates the effects of differential ad exposure on desire to purchase. Although the commercials could have differed on dimensions other than how much transportation was encouraged, the dream ad was actually liked less than the control ad. A subsequent study controls for this, and extends the results of the pilot study by directly manipulating the underlying process.

In study 1, 3 new factors were introduced to examine moderators for the effect, filling a gap in the literature (Escalas 2007; Wang and Calder 2006). The procedure used the ad encouraging consumers to fantasize from the pilot study, and this time used the guise of evaluating a new commercial for TV. The ad featured a man deciding how to spend his lottery winnings. The advertisement was altered by video editing professionals to create two new advertisements. One advertisement claimed the size of the lottery jackpot this week was $1000 (as there are many small lotteries with prizes in this range), while the other claimed it was $10 million (a relatively large prize for a lottery of this jurisdiction of the study). The same announcer was used in both conditions, the ads were the same length, and otherwise featured exactly the same visual stimuli, ensuring a high level of internal consistency. A second factor was belief in luck, as some individuals believe that luck can act as a force in their favor, while others believe that luck is simply random chance that is unreliable (Darke and Freedman 1997). The manipulation for transportation was adapted from Green and Brock (2000). Participants in the increase transportation condition were instructed before viewing the commercial to “Immerse yourself in the commercial, imagining what it might be like to be in that situation. You are now the main character”. In the neutral condition subjects were told “While watching the commercial, use your attention”. Finally, the manipulation to decrease transportation was “While watching it, try to identify any claims or words that might be confusing to people who do not speak English as their native language”. A manipulation check supported the efficacy of our manipulations. If transportation is indeed driving the effects we observe, then directly manipulating it should result in a change in the effects we observe. Thus, the study was a 2 (prize size large/ small) x 3 (transportation increase/ neutral/ decrease) x 2 (success in lottery/ failure in lottery) x measured belief in luck.

We predict and find support for a 3-way interaction: In the large prize condition, when the motivation to transport is high and subjects are encouraged to transport, we observe the largest amount of desire to purchase, and transportation mediates this effect. In the small prize condition, since belief in luck is a more stable individual-level trait, only a main effect for belief in luck influences desire to purchase. People who believe in luck are generally more willing and likely to allow themselves to be transported and play the lottery, regardless of prize size, and transportation mediates the effects of these factors on desire to purchase.

A second study examines the process underlying the effects in greater detail, with the inclusion of new measures that capture measures of what subjects thought about. The study was a simple design where the $10 million prize ad from the prior study was shown and belief...