Effects of Narrative Transportation on Persuasion: a Meta-Analysis

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This meta-analytic review covered a decade of research on the transportation–persuasion relationship. Transportation occurs when consumers mentally enter a world evoked by a narrative. Story topic familiarity and transportability were the greatest moderators. These findings put a spotlight on the importance of the consumer in the narrative persuasion process.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The impact of narrative transportation on persuasion continues to attract research attention (e.g., Escalas 2004; Escalas 2007; Green and Brock 2000, 2002; Slater and Rouner 2002). When consumers lose themselves in a story, their attitudes and intentions change to reflect that story (Green 2008). Since Green and Brock (2000) initiated quantitative transportation research, many studies have investigated narratives, how they transport consumers, and how they change consumers’ views. Furthermore, recent developments have enhanced the significance of transportation effects, including interactive video games (Baranowski et al. 2008), narrative advertising (Chang 2009), and reality TV (Hall 2009). Thus, transportation demands theoretical and applied research attention (Singhal and Rogers 2002).

Despite notable strides, extant transportation literature remains fragmented, in terms of both its conceptual breadth and its empirical findings (e.g., Green, Brock, and Kaufman 2004; Moyer-Gusé 2008; Nabi and Krcmar 2004). A comprehensive synthesis that can unify and advance the field after a decade of transportation research is thus needed. Therefore, this research pursues three objectives: (1) develop a conceptual framework integrating the antecedents and consequences of the transportation effect; (2) empirically assess a model derived through a quantitative meta-analysis; and (3) uncover issues that deserve further attention.

We seek meaningful relationships of transportation with affective and cognitive responses, attitudes, and intentions. In line with the postulates of transportation theory (Green 2008; Green and Brock 2002), our meta-analytic model comprises the story, medium, and consumer attributes as the antecedents of the transportation effect. Finally, our model considers methodological factors in prior studies.

METHOD
To appear in our meta-analysis, a study must include transportation as a key variable. A vast array of experimental designs is acceptable. We limited our search to literature published after Green and Brock’s (2000) empirical operationalization. Our search produced 12 unpublished and 187 published articles (including book sections) related to transportation.

We analyzed 287 effect sizes. To ensure the independence of the effect sizes, we applied Johnson and Eagly’s (1989) technique. Two expert researchers classified the multitude of dependent variables reported in the identified studies, using four categories: affective response, cognitive response, attitude, and intention. These expert coders achieved acceptable agreement levels (Cohen’s $\kappa = .74$, $p < .001$) but disagreed on 54 variables (18.8%).

For these 54 variables, 189 undergraduate students served as the coders. Each variable was summarized in several sentences and included on a questionnaire. The questionnaire instructed respondents to read each variable description carefully and decide which of the outcome categories it represented, as described at the top of the questionnaire. Respondents coded the variables and we entered the mode into the analysis.

The effect size statistic contrasts groups on their mean transportation and outcome scores. The Pearson correlation provides the effect size indicator. We calculated not only the sample-weighted, reliability-adjusted $r$ but also the conservative random effect $z$ (Hunter and Schmidt 2004). To determine the presence of heterogeneity, we used the QWithin statistic (Huedo-Medina et al. 2006). In addition, we determined the file drawer $N$, or the number of studies with a zero effect size required to reduce the mean effect size to a probability level of $\alpha = .05$ (Rosenthal 1991). The QBetween statistic tests whether the size of the effect differs across factor levels (Borenstein et al. 2009; Hedges and Olkin 1985).

RESULTS
Transportation had significant, positive on affective responses (file drawer $N = 2,955$), cognitive responses (file drawer $N = 330$), attitudes (file drawer $N = 8,001$), and intentions (file drawer $N = 3,304$). Because we determined positive main effects for all outcomes, we could merge the correlations of transportation with the four outcome variables into an overall persuasive transportation effect.

The transportation effect varied for chronology and intrusiveness. However, character similarity did not have an effect. The transportation effect was also greater with greater media readability. However, richness did not enhance the transportation effect. The transportation effect further differed depending on consumers’ familiarity and transportability. However, no significant effect emerged for attention.

Finally, transportation occurs when a study uses participant distraction, simple observation, or in-story perspective manipulation; assigns participants randomly; focuses on a communication or marketing domain; provides incentives; and includes highly educated, young, male participants.

DISCUSSION
This research underscores the robustness of the effect of narrative transportation and builds on previous research to refine extant understanding. Transportation has a significant impact on each stage of narrative processing, from mental processing invested to empathize with story characters to changes in consumers’ beliefs. Moreover, transportation’s effect appears influenced by key variables, such as the consumer’s familiarity with the story topic and chronic propensity to be transported. These findings have implications for not only persuasion research but communication practices overall— as demonstrated by the growing popularity of public narratives. As consumers increasingly experience transportation in their dealings with persuasive narratives, it becomes increasingly important to understand the processes underlying narrative communication. We have identified some research paths and thus hope to have enabled scholars and practitioners alike to see the way forward as well.

REFERENCES


