Transportation Back: Reflecting on the Journey
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Narrative transportation leads to changes in story-related beliefs, but it is less clear how this change occurs. This work suggests an additional process in the context of narrative persuasion. The current work defines this process and role in narrative persuasion, developing a measure of it: reflection on story content, relating the story to oneself/surrounding world, and reflection on emotion.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Scholars across fields related to consumer psychology now recognize the powerful influence of narratives, which persuade through the depiction of events. Narratives evoke a distinct form of processing often called transportation, a composite of cognitive attention, mental imagery, and emotional involvement (Green and Brock 2000). A stream of work has shown that transportation into a story can alter beliefs about the narrative topic (Van Laer et al. 2014).

Current theory suggests narrative processing affects persuasion-related outcomes directly, and is silent on how the transportation experience leads to changes in expected outcomes. As Appel and Maleckar (2012) observe, “what is still lacking… are answers to the question of how transportation affects persuasion.” Despite the lack of formal conceptualization, several studies suggest an additional process between transportation and persuasion-related outcomes, which can be viewed as a reflective process that integrates elements encountered in the story world into one’s understanding of the real world (Risk perception; Dunlop, Wakefield, and Kashima 2010; Cognitive responses; Niederdeppe, Shapiro and Porticella 2011; Self referencing; Strange and Leung 1999). In the current work, I define and explore the process of reflection in the context of health-related narratives.

In three preliminary studies, undergraduate participants (study 1a, N=93; study 1b, N=169; study 1c, N=57) read one several different narratives (across studies 1a-1c) and responded to the open ended questions: “Please describe your thoughts while reading the passage,” and “Describe what emotions you felt while reading the passage,” and completed Green and Brock’s Transportation scale (2000).

As a necessary condition for reflection, participants must first be transported. Average scores on Green and Brock’s transportation scale were significantly higher than the scale midpoint of 3.5 in all studies. I applied procedures outlined by Kassarjian (1977) and reviewed the elicited text to gain an understanding of the underlying themes. I developed codes for responses to the question “what are the cognitive and emotional responses to a transportation experience?” and organized the elicited responses using a complete thought as the basic unit. I used descriptive coding to capture the themes and ideas expressed in the elicited responses, which yielded 15 unique categories.

Two undergraduate research assistants coded the elicited responses, assigning the responses to the pre-determined categories and using as many category labels as relevant. The author resolved any discrepancies when there were overlapping or conflicting codes. The Cohen’s Kappa score indicates that the coding scheme was clear and appropriate (study 1a: Kappa = 0.72, SE = .05, p <.005; study 1b: Kappa = 0.80, SE = .03, p <.005; study 1c: Kappa = 0.76, SE = .04, p <.005). Each predetermined category label was used at least once, and the “other” code was not assigned frequently, suggesting the coding system comprehensively captured the process of reflection.

The results of studies 1a-c increase confidence that the 15 proposed categories are robust across variations in narrative features. I assessed the robustness of the categories used to represent reflection through using different stories. In each study, all 15 codes were applied at least once, and the “other” codes were not meaningfully related to the conceptualization of reflection.

Based on the content analysis of the open-ended elicitation responses in studies 1a-c, four general categories emerged: Statements that reflected thoughts about the narrative (e.g., “I thought about the takeaway message of the story”), about the reader and the world external to the reader (“I thought about how the story relates to me while reading the story”), emotion evoked by the narrative (“I thought about how the story made me feel after reading”), and disbelief in the narrative (“I found myself questioning some of the statements in the story”). In study 2, undergraduate participants (N=172) read a published story describing an individual’s health-related reactions to home pesticide use and were presented with 30 Likert scale items generated from four general categories. Participants completed Green and Brock’s Transportation scale and 7 story-related belief items.

Scale validation techniques yielded a 3 factor model (corresponding to the first three categories; the fourth factor, skepticism, added stress to the model and likely moderates the relationships in the narrative persuasion process rather than as a component of reflection). See Figure 1 for the final set of items. As conceptualized, reflection on the narrative occurs after transportation into the story, which suggests a relationship between transportation and reflection. The composite measures of transportation and reflection were significantly correlated, and reflection mediated the influence of transportation on story-consistent beliefs. This suggests that both constructs are components of the narrative persuasion process.

Study 3 compares how individuals respond to rhetorical (argument-based) versus narrative messages. Previous work indicates that, though these types of messages may be equally persuasive, individuals are less likely to be transported into messages consisting of arguments. The process of reflection, then, may differ or be less relevant in this context. Undergraduates participants (N=154) were assigned to a “narrative” or “argument” condition. The narrative condition consisted of a published story about an individual’s development of allergies in response to GMO food. The information-based message was derived from this narrative with content displayed in a bulleted list (Adaval and Wyer 1998). Participants read the message and were asked to complete Green and Brock’s Transportation scale, followed by the reflection scale items identified in study 2, the skepticism measures (12 items total), and measures of message perceptions. Participants then completed measures related to story-consistent beliefs.

We assessed the discriminant validity of the reflection scale by examining whether responses to this scale differed for a narrative or argument-based message. The 3-factor structure for reflection characterized responses to narrative but not argument-based messages.

The analyses suggest the reflection composite mediates the relationship between transportation and an overall belief composite in response to a narrative message, but not in response to an argument-based message. Although both forms of messages lead to changes in some beliefs and attitudes, transportation and reflection are relevant mechanisms for narrative messages, but do not operate for argument-based messages. This difference provides additional evidence the mechanisms that underlie narrative and argument-based processing are distinct.

REFERENCES


