Moved By Fear: Exploring Affect As a Driver of Narrative Transportation

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Fear arousal’s role in narrative transportation—a mechanism through which narratives persuade people—has not been well studied. Across three studies, we provide strong evidence that fear arousal actually leads to more transportation and, therefore, more persuasion, a possibility not predicted by existing transportation models.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Prior research has shown that narrative transportation (i.e., immersion into a story) can be an important factor in persuasion by reducing the connection to one’s own beliefs and attitudes toward the focal content of the story (Green 2004). Common to many models of transportation-driven persuasion is the idea that narrative transportation generates greater affective response that in turn influences persuasion (Escalas 2004; Green and Brock 2000). While most persuasive narratives attempt to generate positive affect through transportation, one domain that relies on narratives to help facilitate persuasion is that of fear appeals, where the negative consequences of certain behaviors are portrayed through narratives that can elicit very strong negative emotions, such as fear.

In this research we propose that, whereas current transportation models show affective response as an outcome of narrative transportation and a driver of persuasion, narratives that rely on fear may follow a different route to persuasion. Specifically, we propose that the experience of fear arousal results in an alternative relationship between transportation and affect such that the affect can help drive narrative transportation. We predict that this happens because fear arousal will lead to a general state of increased vigilance (Nielsen, Shapiro, and Mason 2010; Pratto and John 1991) that in turn drives increased processing of the narrative, leading to higher transportation (Nielsen and Escalas 2010). We further propose that the fear-induced narrative transportation will facilitate non-affective drivers of persuasion, such as reduced counterarguing. We explore this proposal across three studies.

**Overview of studies.** In all studies, participants saw narrative ads in the form of storyboards (Escalas 2004, Nielsen and Escalas 2010) aimed at curbing distracted driving. Depending on the condition, these narratives were either neutral or fear evoking and were always followed by a measure of narrative transportation (Green and Brock 2000).

In study 1, participants were randomly assigned to either a fearful writing task or a neutral writing task. A pretest confirmed that the fear writing task significantly increased ratings on a fear arousal scale (Keller and Block 1996) compared to a control. Following the writing prime, all participants saw the storyboard for a neutral Public Service Announcement (PSA) titled “It Can Wait”. Following completion of the storyboard review, participants completed the narrative transportation scale (Green and Brock 2000) and a few demographic items. Participants’ facial expressions were recorded during the writing task and analyzed using the Noldas FaceReader 6 to generate scores on several different emotions. Panel data analysis controlling for fixed effects confirmed an overall effect of fear on “scared” facial expressions as well as an interaction between time and the fear condition. Comparing narrative transportation ($\alpha = .83$) scores for the two conditions confirmed that participants who were primed with fear prior to reviewing the PSAs experienced higher transportation than those in the no prime condition ($M_{\text{neutral prime}} = 5.70$, $M_{\text{fear prime}} = 6.21$, $F(1, 194) = 7.84, p < .01$).

In study 2, participants were randomly assigned to either the neutral storyboard used above or to a more fearful version of the same storyboard. After viewing the PSA, participants completed a modified version of the narrative transportation scale ($\alpha = .73$) and a fear arousal scale adapted from the PANAS scale. Results confirmed the predicted effect of the fearful PSA on fear arousal ($M_{\text{neutral}} = 2.43$, $M_{\text{fearful}} = 2.91$, $F(1, 163) = 11.44, p < .001$) and transportation ($M_{\text{neutral}} = 4.92$, $M_{\text{fearful}} = 5.63$, $F(1, 163) = 7.96, p < .01$). We then tested whether fear arousal mediated the direct effect of fear condition on transportation ($\beta = .238, t = 3.12, p < .01$). Our test of fear arousal as a mediator of this relationship (PROCESS model 4, Hayes 2009) showed a direct effect of fear condition on fear arousal ($\beta = .474, t = 3.38, p < .001$, 95% CI = [.20, .75]). The direct effect of fear condition on transportation was no longer significant when fear arousal was included as a mediator ($\beta = .270, t = 1.41, p = .16$, 95% CI = [-.11, .65]).

Study 3 directly tested the full model predicting fear’s effect on persuasion through narrative transportation and counterarguing. After viewing one of the two storyboards presented in study 2, participants then filled out the same narrative transportation scale used in previous studies, a version of the fear arousal scale used in the pretest for study 1 (Keller and Block 1996), a scale to measure counterarguing (Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, and Byrne 2007), and a persuasion measure. Results confirmed that participants who viewed the fearful version of the PSA indicated increased fear arousal ($M_{\text{neutral}} = 2.28$, $M_{\text{fearful}} = 2.38$, $F(1, 233) = 3.92, p < .05$), transportation ($M_{\text{neutral}} = 5.63$, $M_{\text{fearful}} = 6.25$, $F(1, 233) = 13.48, p < .001$), and persuasion ($M_{\text{neutral}} = 5.41$, $M_{\text{fearful}} = 6.59$, $F(1, 233) = 32.60, p < .001$). We then tested whether the direct effect of fear arousal on counterarguing ($\beta = .232, t = -3.64, p < .001$) was mediated by transportation (PROCESS model 4, Hayes 2009). We found a direct effect of fear arousal on transportation ($\beta = 1.59$, $t = 4.70, p < .001$, 95% CI = [1.19, 1.99]), while the direct effect of fear arousal on counterarguing was no longer significant when transportation was included as a mediator ($\beta = -.249, t = -1.05, p = .29$, 95% CI = [-.72, .22]).

In the present research, we seek to better understand fear arousal’s effects on narrative persuasion. We accomplished this by presenting an unrelated fear manipulation prior to exposure to a neutral narrative and showing a causal effect of incidental fear arousal on transportation (study 1). We replicate this effect through manipulation of fear within the PSA itself (studies 2 and 3). Finally, we showed that fear arousal affects persuasion through narrative transportation by reducing overall counterarguing against the communication’s message. Current transportation models would not predict that transportation is driven by affect generated by the narrative. Researchers should take the potential for this two-way relationship into account when developing their models moving forward.

**REFERENCES**


