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Are Dark and Frightening Story Worlds Inspirational? An Analysis of the Narrative Persuasion Process

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Applying the widely accepted use of fear-appeals, we uncover the direct and indirect workflows of threatening narratives arousing story-related pros-social and health-conscious consumer reflections. Thus, we verify the debated importance of fear in terms of persuasion and contribute to the understanding of narrative persuasion mechanisms, whilst respecting main personality traits.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The rising tide of media broadcasts, misinformation, public persuasion knowledge and the extreme polarization of opinions, as challenges of the information age, heighten the need for an effective social marketing. Against the background of the striving for entertainment (Singhal & Rogers, 2002), narratives become increasingly important to open human eyes and minds across various areas of social and health problems (Slater, 2002; Hinyard & Kreuter, 2012). Narratives are "(…) a way of organizing spatial and temporal data into a cause-effect chain of events with a beginning, middle, and end that embodies a judgement about the nature of the events as well as demonstrates how it is possible to know, and hence to narrate, the events" (Branigan, 1992) and meet higher audience acceptance than overtly persuasive argument-based messages (Dal Cin et al., 2004). Scholars increasingly try to explain the mysterious background of narrative persuasion by using the phenomenon of perceptual illusion that a mediated experience is not mediated (nonmediation, Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Transportation, as a central element of nonmediation, is defined by Green and Brock as "a convergent process, where all of the person's mental systems and capacities become focused on the events occurring in the narrative" (Green et al., 2003). It seems to be particularly crucial, since this mental process regulates the subsequent phase of the narrative persuasion procedure, capturing the readers' discovery of the deeper story message and its projection into their individual future (e.g., Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). The most important subsequent intermediary, in this context, can be summarized as reflection, which involves cognitions and emotions evoked by the narrative, as well as reflections about the reader and the world external to the reader (Hamby, 2014). Nevertheless, there are only a limited number of studies available analyzing the driving forces that increase transportation, reflection and set the narrative persuasion procedure in motion (Appel & Malečkar, 2012; Hamby, 2014).

In this respect, research suggests the power of threatening and creepy content in narratives. Findings in the field of fear appeals, traditional persuasion (e.g., Dillard & Anderson, 2004; Cauberghe et al., 2009) and narratives (e.g., McQueen et al., 2011; Nabi, 2015; Bartsch et al., 2014) particularly provide evidence for the power of dark stimulating emotions, which may lead to the journey into a narrative world, representing the secret key to the inspiration mechanism of narratives, which has never been analyzed before. Therefore, we attempt to uncover the capability and the workflow of fear-inducing stories to arouse story-related reflections. Thereby, we contribute to the existing findings by addressing four important issues. First, we reassess the debate towards the relevance of fear in relation to a) fear appeals (Tannenbaum et al., 2015) and in relation to b) reflective cognitions (Bartsch et al., 2014). Second, the paper furthers the effort of Green and Brock (Green et al., 2003) to understand the emergence of transportation. Third, we broaden the knowledge regarding the steps in the narrative persuasion process (Appel & Malečkar, 2012) and recover transportation as an intermediate process between story reception and reflection (Hamby et al., 2014). Finally, we add to the discussion regarding the role of personality traits in the persuasion process (Weibel et al., 2010; Bartsch et al., 2010; Zwarun & Hall, 2012; Green et al., 2008).

Narrative Persuasion Process

In comparison to argument and data-based evidence, narratives are completely different communication vehicles. This implies distinct ways of mental processing, including distinct moderators and mediators (Slater & Rouner, 2002).

While dual-process models, normally applied in the context of traditional argument-based messages, deal with the elaboration likelihood, narratives concentrate on image sequences. Moreover, there is no need to separate between a central and a peripheral route of mental processing, since the cognitive and affective stimuli of narratives are simultaneously processed (Slater & Rouner, 2002). If a compelling story succeeds to completely absorb the individual's cognitive resources, the audience immerses into the story and feels present in the imagined world. Thus, no capacity for counterarguments is available (Hofer, 2013). In this matter, considerable attention has been paid to the concept of transportation, which is very similar to *presence* (Lombard & Ditton, 1997) but includes also the engaging "journey" into the story world (Kim & Biocca, 1997). Green and Brock (Green et al., 2003) argue in the Transportation-Imagery-Model that distance to the real world increases by being mentally drawn into a narrative world such that story claims are no longer called into question. Thus, after the immersion into the story world, the audience is more prone to support the story-consistent beliefs due to the emotional experience and the missing cognitive resources. In this respect, far-reaching effects on emotions, self or other-centered cognitions (Dunlop et al., 2010; Escalas, 2007; Banerjee & Greene, 2012, Green & Brock, 2000) and behavior (van Laer et al., 2012) were identified.

Overall, there is evidence that transportation is a promising precondition of narrative persuasion. However, little is known on how the transition between reception and persuasion proceeds and which key determinants beside transportation join in the process (Appel & Malečkar, 2012). Cognitive and emotional post-story-message evaluations, which can be described as upstream processes of change in attitude and behavior (Dunlop et al., 2010; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010) are important intermediaries. They can also be summarized as the phenomenon of reflection, resembling Oatley's (1999) idea of the reader's and storyteller's meeting of minds. Hamby (2014) similarly defines reflection as "…a process related to integrating elements encountered in the story world into one's understanding of the real world". Whereas transportation corresponds to the immersion into and the presence in the story world, the secondary process of reflection covers the "return trip to the real world". As Hamby (2014) suggests, reflection involves three types of successive opinion-forming evaluations, including cognitive, emotional responding and reflections about the reader's self and the reader's social surrounding.

Overall, reflection was found to be a very central mechanism in the persuasion process, subsequent to the experience of transportation (Hamby, 2014). It is, however, still an open issue regarding how the causal chain of transportation and reflection is activated. Recent research in this context explored the power of emotionally charged media experiences to stimulate reflective thoughts directly (Bartsch et al., 2014). But research also reflects signs of an indirect pathway, since scary story contents were uncovered to be incredibly absorbing (Hoffner & Levine, 2005), fascinate the audience through the sensation of fear (Sparks & Sparks, 2000) paired with inspiration

(Merchant et al., 2010). As the following discoveries of fear appeals and associated works demonstrate, fear is a very effective device in provoking deep message processing and message acceptance - potentially in terms of narrative persuasion.

Fear Appeal Research

Initial research on fear appeals primarily shed light on the role of fear for persuasion (Janis, 1967; Mc Guire, 1968). In contrast to anxiety, fear represents a short-term reaction towards an identifiable stimulus (Sutton, 1982) and is explained as "(…) a negatively valenced emotion, accompanied by a high level of arousal" (Witte & Allen, 2000).

In contrast to the previous models (Janis, 1967; McGuire, 1968), the central role of fear dwindled in successive models and was gradually replaced by danger and fear control appraisals (Witte, 1992). But the decisiveness of fear in terms of the effectivity of fear appeals on persuasion outcomes is still an ongoing debate (Dillard et al., 2016). Inspired by drive theories, recent research highlights the major importance of fear in the persuasion process (Dillard et al., 2016) and supports the direct and linear link between fear and persuasion-related outcomes (Dillard & Anderson, 2004; Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2004). Besides the direct impact channel, there is also evidence for an indirect mechanism (Cauberghe et al., 2009), running through elements mirroring the phenomenon of transportation recovered in narrative persuasion research (e.g. Keller & Block, 1996; LaTour & Rotfeld, 1997, Tanner et al., 1991; LaTour & Rotfeld, 1997; Panić et al., 2011).

Packaged in an entertaining tale, fear-inducing storytelling seems to be a suitable stage to transfer compelling visions in terms of educational work and social marketing. Therefore, we suggest that the identified indirect and direct power of fear identified by persuasion research might be recovered and applied in the field of narrative communication, especially in the area of transportation and subsequent evaluations like reflection.

Direct and Indirect Pathways to Reflection

For two reasons stories are very favorable to set the receivers into an absorbing reflection mode. Stories firstly provide a high entertainment value for the receiver (Green et al., 2004). Secondly, narratives are unconsciously educationally valuable (Hoffner & Levine, 2005; Kniveton, 1978). Both characteristics of narratives, which demonstrate important preconditions of narrative persuasion in terms of transportation and reflection, are especially valid for fear-inducing stories. Since frightening stories include unforeseeable, new, surprising, sensational and destructive contents (Allen & Greenberger, 1978), which address life beyond social rules (McCauley, 1998) they are very arousing and suspenseful for us, as long as we feel safe (Nell, 2002). Thereby, these contents are very entertaining. Alongside their role regarding entertainment, emotional arousal and pleasurable suspense represent core components of transportation, as research has disclosed, and increase the receiver's emotional engagement to follow the storyline (McQueen et al., 2011). These insights reveal more strongly the direct impact of fear-inducing content on transportation as well as reflection.

Second, threatening stories offer the opportunity to address controversial issues that are avoided in everyday life (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Sparks & Sparks, 2000). This explains the educational value of that kind of story influencing the audience to become transported, resulting in reflection (Hamby, 2014; Hamby et al., 2014). Therefore, we suspect that fear, which can be enjoyable in terms of the experience of a frightening narrative, while feeling safe (Nell, 2002), might be a vitalizing avenue to enhance entertainment-educational effects

(Nabi, 2015; Bartsch et al., 2014) by increasing transportation and reflection. Thus, we predict that:

Hypothesis 1:   *Higher levels of fear evoked by a narrative will result in a higher level of transportation.*

Hypothesis 2:   *Higher levels of transportation will result in a higher level of reflection.*

Literature reviews alert that negative emotions like fear may affect information processing negatively, which occur particularly at higher levels of arousal (Lang, 2000; Sanbonmatsu, 1988). But this observation also suggests that arousing stories provoke the receiver to become "lost in the story", weakening the processing of real world information but strengthening the focus on the narrative. Due to the equivalence to transportation, we conclude that this subsequent process makes the aroused receiver enter the phase of reflection (Hamby et al., 2014). Hence, we assume:

Hypothesis 3:   *Transportation mediates the impact of fear on reflection.*

According to the aforementioned findings of persuasion research, we additionally suppose that activating fear might be an important immediate driver of reflection and narrative persuasion. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4:   *Higher levels of fear evoked by the narrative will result in a higher level of reflection.*

Previous research has shown the link between specific personality traits and transportation, as well as persuasive outcomes (Weibel et al., 2010; Bartsch et al., 2010; Zwarun & Hall, 2012; Green et al., 2008). Hence, we also controlled for extroversion, neuroticism, openness for experiences, conscientiousness, agreeableness and need for cognition.

Study 1

Particularly in the field of the meat industry and the heightened consumption of food produced by factory farming, consumer education in adulthood regarding the dangerous consequences for human health and animal welfare is needed (Chemnitz & Becheva, 2014; Stehfest et al., 2009; Hughner et al. 2007). Thus, our study concentrates on the capability and the procedure of fear-inducing narratives to make consumers reflect on those issues to promote better consumption decisions.

180 respondents (132 females; mean age: 30.44 years, SD: 10.574) participated in the online and paper-based quasi-experimental survey voluntarily, anonymously and individually. After the participants were shortly briefed about the topic of factory farming, the participants were invited to carefully read a narrative and to answer some questions regarding their feelings (fear) and their mental processes during and after story reception (transportation and reflection). In our survey, we utilized an adapted translation of the experimental text material *Murder at the Mall* (provided by Appel & Richter, 2010, originally used in Green & Brock, 2000). Modelled after selected episodes of a well-known German TV crime series (*Tatort, 2014*), we inserted the issue of the consumption of meat produced by factory farming in the initial version of the scary narrative (due to the German speaking sample, this method seems to be reasonable). In conjunction with this issue, we embedded argumentation lines towards the environmental and personal threats of factory farming (animal welfare and personal health status), as well as educational

handling recommendations. An online-performed Delphi-interview (12 experts) served to correct misleading and disturbing story passages (c.f. narrative description in the appendix).

Multi-item measures extracted from peer-reviewed studies were used for the operationalization of the variables (cf. appendix).

Results

This study aims to analyze whether transportation fully or partially mediates the relationship between fear and reflection. To validate the effects, we include the covariates of *need for cognition*, *extroversion*, *agreeableness*, *conscientiousness*, *emotional stability* and *openness to experience* (Hayes, 2013). The results of the analysis of linear regression revealed that fear significantly provokes transportation ($\beta = 0.351$, SE = 0.039, p < 0.01), providing support for H 1. Additionally, we find a significant impact of the covariate *extroversion* on transportation ($\beta = 0.094$, SE = 0.037, p < 0.05). In line with our expectations, we observe that a higher level of transportation results in significantly higher levels of reflection ($\beta = 0.589$, SE = 0.097, p < 0.01) (H 2). Moreover, we find significant positive effects of the covariates *emotional stability* ($\beta = 0.099$, SE = 0.047, p < 0.05) and *openness to experience* ($\beta = 0.116$, SE = 0.068, p < 0.1), as well as negative effects of *agreeableness* ($\beta = -0.169$, SE = 0.079, p < 0.05) and *conscientiousness* ($\beta = -0.104$, SE = 0.059, p < 0.01). We applied the bootstrapping method proposed by Preacher & Hayes (2004) using Hayes's PROCESS macro (2012) in order to analyze the mediation effect. The computation of the bias corrected 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effects was based on 10,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2013). The results disclosed that the impact of narratively induced fear on reflection is mediated by transportation ($\beta = 0.207$ SE = 0.048, 95% CI = .122 to 0.310) (H3). Beyond the indirect effect, we observe fear as a significant direct predictor of reflection ($\beta = 0.220$, SE = 0.061, p < 0.01) (H4), providing evidence for a partial mediation. The results of the total effect model revealed a total impact of fear on reflection ($\beta = 0.428$, SE = 0.055, p < 0.01) (c.f. appendix).

Study 2

In order to validate the findings of Study 1, Study 2 aims to analyze the proposed effects in the context of a narrative dealing with a more serious fear (e.g. the consequences of a life-threatening disease) solely on human-based reflections. More precisely, in Study 2, we explore the effects on reflections associated with blood cancer prevention and social motivations to donate to leukemia patients. 186 respondents (131 females; mean age: 27.90 years, SD: 9.066) attended the online and paper-based survey. Except for the contextual changes into a health-related narrative addressing the issue of leukemia prevention and support (similar to an episode of *Tatort, 2013)*, we applied the same procedure as in Study 1 (c.f. appendix).

Results

The linear regression analysis reveals our first hypothesis that fear affects transportation ($\beta = 0.321$, SE = 0.038, p < 0.01). A positive effect of extroversion ($\beta = 0.099$, SE = 0.0359, p < 0.01) and a negative effect of emotional stability ($\beta = -0.064$, SE = 0.037, p < 0.1) on transportation is also found. Moreover, transportation is a significant predictor for reflection ($\beta = 0.403$ SE = 0.091, p < .01) (H 2). Negative effects of emotional stability are also again obtained ($\beta = -0.078$, SE = 0.045, p < 0.1). Mediation analysis again suggests a significant indirect effect of fear on reflection, providing support for the mediating role of transportation ($\beta = 0.123$ SE = 0.031, 95% CI = .077 to 0.199) (H 3). Beside the indirect effect, we also find the direct effect of fear on reflection, suggesting a partial mediation as proposed in H4 ($\beta = 0.251$, SE = 0.055, p<0.01). In summary, we

find a significant total effect of fear on reflection ($\beta = 0.380$, SE = 0.048, p<0.01).

General Discussion

As in Study 1, the supposed steps in the narrative persuasion process reemerge: half of the fear effect operates through transportation, which is again identified to be an important upstream process of reflection. Besides these factors, a minor part of the narrative effect might be attributed to specific personality characteristics (Weibel et al., 2010; Bartsch et al., 2010; Zwarun & Hall, 2012; Green et al. 2008), as both studies reflect. These findings, implying the power of fear-provoking narratives to vitalize the persuasion process, show that insights of fear appeal research (Dillard et al. 2016; Dillard & Anderson, 2004; Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2004) and related study fields assuming an indirect relationship (Cauberghe et al., 2009; Keller & Block, 1996; LaTour & Rotfeld, 1997) might also be valid in the field of narrative persuasion. Furthermore, we find that fear-inducing stories provoke transportation, which contributes to the understanding of the emergence of transportation. Consistent with the literature, we again demonstrate the significance of transportation toward evoking persuasion-related outcomes (e.g., Green et al., 2003; Murphy et al., 2011).

Furthermore, our study could respond to the recent call to research (Appel & Malečkar, 2012; Hamby, 2014). Both studies provide evidence for the supposed and partially uncovered sequence of elements in the persuasion process. As previously supposed (Nabi, 2015; Bartsch et al., 2014; McQueen et al., 2011; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Sparks & Sparks, 2000), fear is identified to be a crucial emotional arousal, which directly initiates transportation and successively evokes reflection. We therefore strongly recommend practitioners to predominately use fear as a stimuli in narratives, which directly or subsequent to the compelling process of transportation promises that readers transform the narratively simulated experience into cognitions and emotions, which may have suggestive impact on their own lives.

Overall, the outcomes also demonstrate that further work needs to be done in order to identify relevant emotional factors introducing transportation, as well as reflection, and in particular the causal-chain of transportation and reflection as well as other valuable upstream mechanisms of narrative persuasion outcomes (e.g., reception of stories transmitted by other media channels, purely experimental setting, and measurement of covariates).

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