

WHY POWERFUL STORIES MAKE US LISTEN:
NARRATIVE TRANSPORTATION IN MARKETING

by

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This project is an integration of psychology, marketing, and neuroscience research to study emotional branding through narrative transportation. It will explore multiple research studies that look at the consumer experience of narrative transportation in marketing, and hopefully draw new insight into the mechanisms and effects of transportation on the viewer. Narrative transportation theory proposes that when people are captivated by a story or narrative, their attitudes and beliefs change to reflect that story. Past research has shown that the tool of narrative transportation in advertisements, allows the consumer to be immersed in the story and feel an empathetic connection, which, in effect, causes the consumer to form a connection with the brand or product. The storytelling framework also creates a narrative that is moving and immersive in which the person enters a “flow” and becomes completely absorbed. This flow is achieved through a media experience that creates an emotional link between the brand and the consumer. Additionally, these types of ads cue the consumer to think of their own experiences and evokes personal memories from their past. The implications of this project can shed light on the importance of storytelling and human connection in advertising and, may provide insights into how to apply the phenomena to other domains of marketing.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Review of Literature	3
Narratives	3
Narrative Transportation	4
Analytical Processing	7
Mental Simulation	8
Narrative Self-Referencing	9
Autobiographical Memories	11
Neurobiological Effects	14
Discussion	17
Research Study	19
Methods	19
Research Questions	20
Hypotheses	20
Variables and Measures	21
Data and Results	22
Limitations	24
Implications	25
Conclusion	26
Bibliography	28

Introduction

Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world.” – Robert McKee

I have long been captivated by stories. Since childhood, I have been enamored with, and enthralled by, the narratives of favorite books and movies. I watched, and then re-watched, the same movies. I fell in love with the characters in the pages of beloved books, fantasizing about what it would be like to be part of their lives. I would catch myself losing track of time and place as I became completely immersed within the narrative. These experiences led me to wonder, What is it about stories that captivate? What makes them compelling? How does storytelling shape people’s perceptions of reality and define them as individuals? Why do we connect so much to stories, and, as a culture, why are we always telling stories?

From a social-psychology perspective, it is interesting to look at the ways in which narratives shape our beliefs and values. Upholding culture and characterizing communities, stories bring people together, allowing them to see things from a different perspective. Indeed, stories can change minds and foster new ideas. Most of our memories consist of stories and mental images from our past, which, in turn, shape our present and are part of what we draw upon to make decisions, form opinions, and think about the world. Importantly, stories add a sense of humanity to any issue or topic and help to make connections between people. In essence, storytelling can be said to be intrinsic to being human and can be witnessed in virtually every domain of life.

Such an understanding of storytelling and narratives has increasingly entered into the world of marketing. Messages and ads are constantly bombarding us in an age

in which mass media and digital communication are an ever-present part of our lives. Advertising attempts to create meaning and experience for the consumer through narratives and storytelling. What stands out in the constant stream of messaging are stories that evoke strong feeling, emotional affect, and empathy. Narrative-centered marketing sets itself apart from traditional advertising by creating unique brand awareness for the new millennial, a brand awareness in which human connection and emotionality occupy the center rather than the periphery.

This thesis consists of an extensive literature review that examines past research on the role of narrative in advertising as well as the ways these narratives are thought to affect subjects psychologically. I conducted my own original research based on a set of hypotheses inspired from this review. As a Psychology major and Business minor, I believe that what is required today is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of consumer behavior, one that seeks to understand the role played by narrative transportation in marketing.

Review of Literature

*"There's always room for a story that can transport people to another place."
—J.K. Rowling*

Narratives

Narratives are stories that capture our values, beliefs, ideas, and culture through different forms of media. They can be a sequence of events or a collection of stories that influence one's view of a brand or product. Narratives in marketing take the form of visual and mental imagery that consumers use when interacting with advertisements and often helps facilitate learning and product recall (Mcferran, et al., 2010).

In general, advertisements can be divided into two categories — informative and narrative. Whereas informative ads present the consumer with a logical argument for why they should purchase a product or use a service, narrative ads use stories as a way to model how the consumer can use the product and create meaning and engagement (G&R Research and Consulting, 2016). Additionally, narratives often feature characters and elements of plot, with a chronology, causality, and a beginning, middle, and end (Wang & Calder, 2009). Narratives in which the viewer feels drawn to the characters and sees the actions as authentic and real evoke empathetic processing and more positive cognitive responses (Escalas, & Stern, 2003). In fact, “nearly one quarter of television ads are in the form of stories” (Brechtman & Purvis, 2015). Stories have the ability to transport the viewer away from critical thoughts in order to generate positive affect and high brand attitudes — a concept called *narrative transportation* (Kim, Ratneshwar & Thorson, 2017).

Narrative Transportation

Narrative transportation signifies the process by which consumers become engaged with a story and mentally enter a world evoked by that story, thereby utilizing all or most mental systems and capacities. According to Wang and Calder (2009), “Transportation is the extent of absorption into the narrative flow of the story as it unfolds” (p. 551). An advertisement with a narrative persuades and compels people by connecting the ad to the self via transportation.

Narrative transportation is highly correlated with the experience of flow, which indicates the level at which a person is completely immersed in a story or activity and does not focus on anything else: “When an individual focuses on an activity so intently that they lose touch with the world around them, they are in the state of flow” (Bryne, 2016, p. 22). Flow affects one’s perception of time and is often accompanied by a loss of self-consciousness (Jackson, Martin, & Eklund, 2008).

Bryne (2016) writes about the concept of ad persuasion through the immersive process of narrative transportation, theorizing that an individual is less likely to be aware of the persuasive intent of such ads and, accordingly, that the product has higher persuasion ability. She posits that traditional advertisements may hinder the advertising ability because the intent is too clear to consumers, and, accordingly, they do not become fully immersed. Proponents of Cultivation Theory (Bryne, 2016) argue that continuous exposure to television shapes the viewer’s perception of reality, with obvious implications for understanding the effectiveness of narrative transportation.

The state of immersion is effective through the cognitive processing of information in the brain and can be split into two types of judgment — first- and

second- order cultivation effects. First-order judgements are probability judgements based on memory and reasoning, whereas second-order judgments are based on attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes, and values. Narrative transportation, part of the second-order effects, persuades consumers by facilitating a mental state of intense involvement in which they become absorbed by a story and undergo a mental process entailing imagery, affect, and focus. Bryne explains the impact of the second-order effect in advertising thus: “media exposure as a persuasive communication where repeated exposure of messages impact beliefs and attitudes” (Bryne, 2016).

A narrative serves three main functions in advertising: First, it provides consumers with a story and mental imagery for the intangible and abstract attributes of a product; second, it can increase consumer involvement by immersing consumers in a story, causing them to feel more positively toward the product in the process; third, it allows consumers to fantasize, more precisely, to feel as though they are vicariously living through the story in the ad (Bryne, 2016). Fantasy and self-referencing are often achieved by effectively placing the consumer in a fantasy scenario that includes the product so that the consumer envisions him- or herself as part of the storyline, as in, “Imagine yourself driving a Ferrari” or “Picture yourself wearing this watch.” Not surprisingly, narrative plots vary across cultures. For example, consumers in Asian countries favor romance, whereas those in Western cultures focus on the individual (Bryne, 2016).

Bryne conducted research and tested four hypotheses about narrative transportation. Overall, she hypothesizes that higher transportation and a higher need for fantasy lead to more positive attitudes towards the brand and, moreover, that there is

a negative correlation between attitudes towards brands and cognitive capacity. Her results indicate that an individual with less attentional resources available is less likely to form counter arguments and will have a higher brand evaluation. However, she found that narrative transportation was not correlated with better attitudes towards brands, but that a higher need for fantasy led to a greater likelihood of transportation. Her findings do not correspond with other research on the topic, which usually finds that narrative transportation is correlated with higher brand evaluations. Future research should look further into the exact correlation between transportation and brand evaluations to determine if they have a positive relationship.

Narrative advertisements often rely on drama in order to persuade. Common themes in dramatic ads include romance, relationships, self-esteem, courage, and hope (McFerran, et al, 2010). A compelling example of a dramatic narrative can be found in Airbnb's "Belong Anywhere" campaign. One of the campaign's most popular ads features the story of a young woman whose father is from Berlin. Narrated by the daughter, the ad consists of an animated story of the Father emigrating from Germany to America. His immigrant experience remains complete, for he misses Germany and has not fully achieved closure. Airbnb allows him to return to the places where he grew up, and allows him finally to say good-bye to them. The images of a father returning to his homeland showcases the power Airbnb has in connecting people across the world and making people feel at home through the services the company provides. The advertisement is captivating and unique; importantly, it provides new meaning to the idea of traveling and gives people a story to remember.

Another advertisement that relies on a dramatic arc is Budweiser's Chinese New Year ad. Traditionally, in China, people return home to family on the New Year's holiday. The Budweiser ad features a woman from Shanghai, who decides to run a marathon in a faraway desert instead of going home for the holiday. People are constantly telling her she can't do it and that she isn't strong enough, but she finishes the race and sees her parents at the end. The last scene in the ad features members of the family clinking glasses of Budweiser with these words written across the screen: "Remember to Thank the People in Your Life." The association of Budweiser with conquering challenges and connecting with family is embedded within the advertisement. Notably, it is a rather unconventional beer commercial, defying stereotypes by casting a female marathon runner as the main character. Such a narrative may allow young working people in China to integrate economic, cultural, and social change even as it is associated with a new consumer choice.

Analytical Processing

Narrative transportation, getting lost in a story, is contrasted with consumer decision-making based on analytical processing. This cognitive mental process involves making decisions based on logical reasoning and evaluating arguments and different alternatives to make a conscious choice about a product (Escalas, 2007). An advertisement that sends a message that is overtly persuasive possessing an obvious purpose relies on consumers to use analytical processing to decide if they want to purchase the product or service being offered. On the other hand, when marketers use narrative transportation, they rely on a person's emotions and general affect and

sometimes even their unconscious feeling about a product in order to create brand awareness (Escalas, 2007).

We can see analytical processing at work in ads that simply state the attributes of a product without creating a story or meaning behind the brand, for example, ads in which the elements and physical characteristics of a computer are described without any explanation as to why the brand matters or presenting a story around the product. Before the success of Apple, Microsoft and other computer and technology companies used rational decision-making and listing of product attributes as their brand strategy. On the other hand, Apple was able to sell a lifestyle and narrative centered on its brand instead of the actual products, which made it the front-runner in the industry.

Mental Simulation

Ads simulate events and scenarios in which consumers can cognitively place themselves and feel as if they are part of the story (Escalas, 2004). Mental simulation is the “cognitive construction of hypothetical scenarios.” The subject constructs fantasies or re-experiences past events. Mental simulation can also add to the transportation experience and persuade the consumer in the same way that a story would, thereby leading to more positive attitudes and affect as well as higher brand evaluations (Escalas, 2004).

An explanation for why mental simulation is so effective in advertising is based on the psychological theory of Availability Heuristics — the extent to which an idea or event is cognitively available in one’s mind. The theory posits that this mental shortcut helps people evaluate and make decisions (Folkes, 1998). An example that is easily available to the mind will be perceived as more likely to occur and as positive, such as a

well-known brand or a specific story associated with a product (Escalas, 2004). A powerful exemplar of this phenomenon is the Hallmark brand, whose marketing has made it synonymous with the holidays; it is easily available to the mind and is associated positively with cards and gift-giving.

Narrative Self-Referencing

Self-referencing is similar to mental simulation as it highlights a brand's personal relevance to consumers and allows consumers to relate the brand and product to themselves (Mothersbaugh, 2015). The "Self" is, in effect, a powerful memory schema, and the integration of brand information into this schema enhances learning and memory significantly. A schema, or schematic memory, can be understood here as the web of associations through which one mentally associates and categorizes various concepts with a brand (Mothersbaugh, 2015). Self-referencing is often achieved through the use of nostalgia to appeal to consumers. People can be primed to remember past events. These memories elicit positive feelings and operate as powerful drivers of consumer decision-making. Such strategies are part of a process called "product positioning" — strategic decisions by marketers to try to "achieve a defined brand image relative to competition, within a market segment of the population" (Mothersbaugh, 2015).

In consumer research, narrative self-referencing has been found to affect ad persuasion in a U-shaped relationship; that is, self-referencing increases persuasion up to a certain point and then starts to diminish in its levels of persuasion (Escalas, 2007). This is due to the fact that too much self-referencing and transportation distract people from thinking analytically about an ad's message. Escalas (2016) hypothesized that

narrative self-referencing would lead to more transportation and less critical evaluation of an ad, compared to analytical self-referencing, the process in which persuasion occurs via more traditional advertising tactics; specifically, in the latter, the ad requests the viewer to recall generic incidents and relies on the consumer to cognitively appraise the brand (Escalas, 2007). Among other findings, the researchers found that the structure of self-referencing (narrative versus analytical) is important for the persuasiveness of an ad and, moreover, that narrative self-referencing leads to a more favorable evaluation of advertised products (Escalas, 2007). Self-referencing can constitute both a strength and a limitation in the persuasiveness of an advertisement. To understand more fully the level of ad persuasion necessary for effective messaging, further research will be required.

The power of self-referencing can be evidenced again in the study of the motivational determinants of transportation in ads. Research suggests that the consumer's transportation into the storyline of an advertisement blurs the divide between the real and imaginary and, in turn, facilitates persuasion (Wang & Calder, 2009). An example of this is lottery advertisements that work to draw in the viewer with dramatic scenes of everyday people doing extraordinary things, thereby causing the viewer to think "this could happen to me" while transporting them into a fantasy world shaped by the narrative in the ad. Self-referencing through narrative transportation is a type of mental and emotional imagery that consumers use when they interact with marketing communications and often leads to a heightened sense of realism, which can facilitate better learning and recall of a brand or product (Wang & Calder, 2009).

A strong example of a brand using narrative self-referencing as a tool for ad persuasion is the Old Spice advertising campaign. The company's first commercial, "The Man Your Man Could Smell Like," became an instant success as well as a cultural phenomenon, relying on humor and originality as well as narrative self-referencing to captivate viewers. In a series of ads on behalf of the cologne, former NFL player Isiah Mustafa addresses the viewer in a monologue about the benefits of using Old Spice, using the framework: "If you use Old Spice, you could be like me." This strategy places consumers in a hypothetical scenario in which they cognitively see themselves and feel as though they could be as sleek, fit, and successful as Mustafa if only they would use Old Spice (DA&D., 2010). Despite the fact that the ads are humorous and clearly unrealistic, they are able to humanize and personalize the Old Spice brand through the use of story and self-referencing.

Autobiographical Memories

Self-referencing is often achieved through cuing autobiographical memories and nostalgia tactics in advertisements. When autobiographical memories (i.e. personal memories of one's past) are evoked, they enhance an ad's positive affect and generate stronger feelings of empathy for the characters in the ad (Baumgartner, et al., 1992). Because memories of past events are often connected to possessions that hold deep meaning for their owners, advertisements can recreate these feelings by presenting products and scenarios that trigger such memories in the consumer. Recreation can be achieved through goal-derived ad categories, such as weekend activities or birthday gifts, which are closely associated with memories of specific events. Furthermore, autobiographical memories are part of our semantic memory (they also share features

with episodic and procedural memory), and research has shown that the brain organizes things, including products, according to categories rather than by attributes. It is therefore more likely to remember brands through schemas and themes rather than specific product features (Price, Axsom, & Coupey, 1997).

The researchers in the study make two hypotheses: “First, that evoking results in higher levels of positive affect, and higher levels of felt negative affect, compared to a focus on the product alone; second, evoking autobiographical memories in a product judgment context results in fewer thoughts about the product’s features, and reduced recall of the product features compared to focus on the product alone” (Baumgartner, et al., 1992).

The first experiment consisted of three groups of participants each of whom was given the task of describing the product information in front of a video camera. The first group was asked to form an impression of the product while thinking about a specific personal experience that involved usage of the product; the second group was told to think about a general situation in which the product could be used; and the third (control) group was told to describe the camera while thinking about the description of the product. They were then given questionnaires and surveys evaluating their attitudes toward the brand, their cognitive feelings and affect toward the product, and questions about the product’s features. The data showed that when autobiographical memories are evoked, there is reduced analysis of product information and fewer cognitive responses and lower recall related to product features (Baumgartner, et al., 1992).

In the second experiment, the product description was embedded in an ad, which created a richer advertising context. The results of this experiment showed that more

empathetic characters in the ad and stronger identification with the characters in the situation resulted in more favorable brand evaluations. The study concluded that cuing autobiographical memories in ads influences feelings towards the brand and that creating empathy for characters offers a way to cue these past memories. These researchers also found that while past memories and empathetic connection did create higher affect and emotionality in the consumer, it did not always lead to better brand evaluation. They speculated that the weaker connection is due to the fact that memory retrieval may serve as a distractor and prevent the consumer from paying close attention to the product details (Baumgartner, et al., 1992). This consumer-behavior research experiment was important in creating my own research study, influencing my decision to use varying levels of transportation in order to determine the effect in response to the brand. Again, future research will need to investigate which specific factors cue the retrieval of autobiographical memories and if such retrieval is actually favorable for brand evaluation.

The persuasive impact of autobiographical memories can be seen in the advertisements of numerous iconic and classic brands that use childhood memories to provide relevance and engagement. Examples of brands that use nostalgia tactics in the hopes of cuing autobiographical memories, include Coca Cola, McDonald's, and Calvin Klein, among many others. Coca Cola, one of the most iconic brands of all time, is known for its "Taste the Feeling" campaign, which relies on early childhood exposure to the brand in order to create emotional attachment in the adult consumer. The brand's re-introduction of the glass bottle in its advertisements very purposively evokes nostalgia, bringing back memories of the past. In addition, the company's "The

Holidays are Coming” campaign produced advertisements around the time of Christmas — scenes of a young boy trying to bring back the holiday spirit and glimpses into the living rooms of families during the Holidays. By connecting the narratives of Christmas with the Coke brand, people instantly think of past happiness and connect such memories with the product of Coca Cola.

Neurobiological Effects

D’Annucci (2011) discusses the ways in which emotional storytelling better enhances the listener’s memory and engages the entire brain, including the amygdala, hippocampus, and other memory centers. This type of storytelling creates a rush of the neurotransmitter, dopamine, which is linked to the motivation and reward circuits of the brain and to better memory recall. She reasons that marketers use storytelling to make an emotional and psychological impact on the consumer, which keeps them remembering the story and, therefore, creates a better memory of the brand (D’Annucci, 2011).

Zak (2015) discusses the behavioral and chemical effects of narratives in the brain. His research team hypothesized that narratives in which there is a dramatic arc, causes an increase in the brain’s release of the neurotransmitters, oxytocin and cortisol. The production of the neurotransmitter, oxytocin is associated with higher levels of trust, reciprocation, and empathy, and the neurotransmitter, cortisol helps to focus our emotions and de-stress the body in high stress or anxious situations (Zak, 2015). Participants received intranasal infusions of synthetic oxytocin or a placebo infusion and then were shown different public service announcements related to either smoking, drinking in excess, speeding, or global warming.

The study results confirmed the causal role of oxytocin on post-narrative prosocial behavior — i.e. people who received oxytocin were more likely to donate money to the cause after watching the video. These results illustrate the fact that stories can influence the viewer and cause them to take direct action, such as donating money or purchasing a product (Zak, 2015). The results also point to the idea of message involvement; when a consumer is motivated to learn about the product, processing can be increased by causing the person to become involved with the message itself (Mothersbaugh, 2015).

Additionally, the study found that when participants were shown emotional videos, the brain regions with high levels of oxytocin receptors and areas involved in emotion-regulation were the most active. They also found that the story must first sustain attention by creating tension in the narrative, which directly relates to the release of cortisol and acetylcholine in the brain (Zak, 2015). The connection between neurotransmitter release in the brain and the impact of narratives can be applied to marketing strategies and storytelling in advertisements. When ads have a dramatic arc or relatable characters, specific chemical releases in the brain may play a role in the ad's effectiveness and impact the consumer in an important way.

Another neurobiological implication of storytelling and its effects on memory and attention are mirror neurons in the premotor cortex area of the brain (Oberoi, 2017). Mirror neurons are brain cells that are activated when one watches another person perform an action or listens to someone speak. Visuals and written language that target the senses or motor functions will fire off neurons in the corresponding cortices in another person's brain, so even if one is not personally performing an action, he or she

can picture the action in his or her mind and better encode it in memory. This can be applied to watching narrative advertisements because we are better able to form a connection with the story and feel as if we are part of it, partially through the function of mirror neurons. There has also been a causal link between the mirror neuron system and evoked empathy through feeling others' pains and emotions (Winerman, 2005). This feeling of evoked empathy and connection to others can be used to the marketer's advantage. Dramatic or people-focused advertisements are meant to create an emotional reaction in the viewer, partially through the function of mirror neurons. UCLA brain researcher Ian Cook notes the difference:

Advertising images that may seek to influence behavior without a rational evaluation tend to activate the brain differently than ads that appeal to rational decision-making. The idea that irrational behavior may be present every day for many people, even among those who ordinarily seem sensible and logical, is getting more and more attention (Thompson, 2011, p. 136).

There is much controversy, however surrounding the research that mirror neurons are the basis for actions and action understanding. Some researchers have found that the research on mirror neurons in monkeys has been oversimplified and cannot be used to explain the whole learning process of motor representation and imitation (Hickok, 2009).

In addition to specific chemical releases and effects of brain cells, memory plays a biological role in story retention. In fact, information and memory are stored, indexed, and retrieved in the form of stories (Oberoi, 2017). Memory is critical to learning and information processing in our brains, and can be described as any change in the content or organization of our memory. Short-term memory is encoded to long-term memory

through this form of information processing (Mothersbaugh, 2015). Long-term memory is organized into semantic memory — memory of information, knowledge, and facts, as in the statement: “Lexus is a luxury car.” Long-term memory also takes the form of episodic memory, personal memories of sequences of events in which a person participated, often eliciting imagery of, and feelings about, a birthday or an anniversary (Mothersbaugh, 2015).

Within memory, there is explicit conscious memory and implicit, often-unconscious memory. The implicit form of memory can evoke a sense of familiarity, feeling, or belief about something. This relates closely to strategic brand placement and reinforces the role affect plays in brand recognition, and the level of involvement one has with a brand or product. People often think and recall information in the form of narratives, which is one reason why stories are such powerful tools for marketers. “A substantial amount of information stored in and retrieved from memory,” writes Woodside (2008), “is episodic — stories that include inciting incidents, experiences, outcomes/evaluations, and summaries/nuances of person to-person and person-and-brand relationships within specific contexts” (p. 99). This correlation between memory, retention, and narratives is important in understanding why advertising uses storylines and plot to create brand awareness and engagement.

Discussion

Narrative transportation is an effective and impactful tool of persuasion and creates emotional connections and affect within the consumer. Transportation creates a flow in which a person becomes completely immersed within a story, and in turn, reflects that story in their lives and decision processes. Transportation is also often

achieved through cuing autobiographical memories from the past and connecting the brand to the self through narrative self-referencing. In addition, there are neurobiological implications for storytelling. Emotional storytelling causes the release of specific chemical messengers in the brain, called neurotransmitters, that effect emotions and behavior. Storytelling is able to impact the entire brain – it enhances learning centers and leads to stronger memory retention. Narrative transportation is a term that describes the way we become transported with a story and why we connect so much to narratives in which we can place ourselves and become immersed.

Advertisements must perform two critical tasks — capture the attention of consumers and convey the meaning of what they are trying to sell; however, sometimes one of the two tasks may dominate the other (Mothersbaugh, 2015). Narratives and storytelling are one way to capture the attention of the consumer, but this does not always mean the consumer will have better product evaluation or recall. To understand more fully the effects of this marketing strategy, further research into the ways in which consumers respond to narrative transportation in advertisements and the ways in which they cognitively process them is necessary. For my research project, I investigate the relationship between narrative transportation and affect, brand evaluation, and product recall, using a series of advertisements. I hypothesize that ads with higher levels of narrative transportation will lead to higher positive affect and brand evaluations, and, conversely, lower product recall. I hypothesize further that brand involvement will mediate this correlational relationship.

Research Study

"Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it."

– Hannah Arendt

Methods

Based on my literature review, I have conducted a pilot study and research proposal. It is meant to explore the ways transportation affects the viewer and to see if certain advertisements lead to more narrative transportation and experiences empathy. It is important to note that these are only preliminary findings and more in-depth analysis needs to be conducted in order to see the correlation of these variables.

Data were collected at the University of Oregon using 250 student participants from the Department of Marketing subject pool. The experiment was administered using a Qualtrics survey with students randomly allocated to conditions with a different print or video stimuli.

The Qualtrics survey for my experiment is designed around advertisements from The North Face brand. The questionnaire starts with a quick consent form, an overview of the study, and some basic demographic questions, followed by questions about brand favorability and degree of involvement with the brand. The questionnaire is then randomized to show participants one of four different advertisements — a print ad with no narrative, a print ad with a narrative, a non-narrative video advertisement, and a narrative-video advertisement. After seeing one of the four ads, participants are asked questions related to affect and empathy as well as their brand evaluations and, finally, they are presented with questions about their recall of the brand and what they

remember about the products shown in the ad. The survey ends by asking participants more in-depth demographics questions. I use questions from pre-existing surveys included in past research studies that test the same variables to ensure the validity and accuracy of my study.

Research Questions

1. How, specifically, does narrative transportation create empathy and feelings of connection in the consumer?
2. Does narrative transportation lead to higher brand evaluations and higher affect and emotionality in the consumer?
3. Does narrative transportation have higher advertisement persuasion ability, or does it work to distract the consumer from brand evaluation and the likelihood of purchasing the product?

Hypotheses

H1. The greater the immersion in the ad with narrative transportation:

- a) the higher the reported empathy
- b) the higher the brand evaluation and affect
- c) the lower the product recall (cognitive capacity)

H2. Consumer involvement with the brand mediates the effect of narrative transportation on

- a) affect
- b) brand evaluation
- c) product recall

Variables and Measures

In the experiment, the independent variable is narrative transportation and the dependent variables include affect and empathy, brand evaluation, and product recall. In order to examine the interaction and correlations of these variables, one must first understand and define the constructs. Emotional affect in the context of consumer research is used to describe the experience of feeling or the expression of emotion. Additionally, brand evaluation is used to assess a person's overall attitude and feeling towards the brand featured in the ad. The combined affect/brand evaluation scale consists of an 8-item scale, with questions including: "I found the ad interesting" and "I would recommend this brand to someone."

Empathy response can be defined as "an involuntary and unself-conscious merging with another's feelings" (Escalas, & Stern, 2003). It is a response that stems from another's emotional state and embodies a person's capacity to feel for others. In the survey, the empathy measures consist of how much someone felt for the characters and experienced their feelings as if they were his or her own. Empathy should, notably, be distinguished from sympathy, which is a person's heightened *awareness* of the feelings of others. I do not test for sympathy in this study. The section of the survey that measures brand evaluation is a 6-item, 5-point Likert scale.

The variable of narrative transportation is measured through a 3-item, 5-point Likert scale, which ranges from "strongly agree = 1" to "strongly disagree = 5." A sample question item from the survey is "The advertisement totally engrossed my attention." Finally, product recall — how well the participant remembers the brand and the product's attributes — is measured by asking participants to name and describe the

brand or products in the ad they had viewed. By including this variable at the end, participants are tested to see if they can retrieve recent memories about the physical characteristics and attributes of the products the brand is selling.

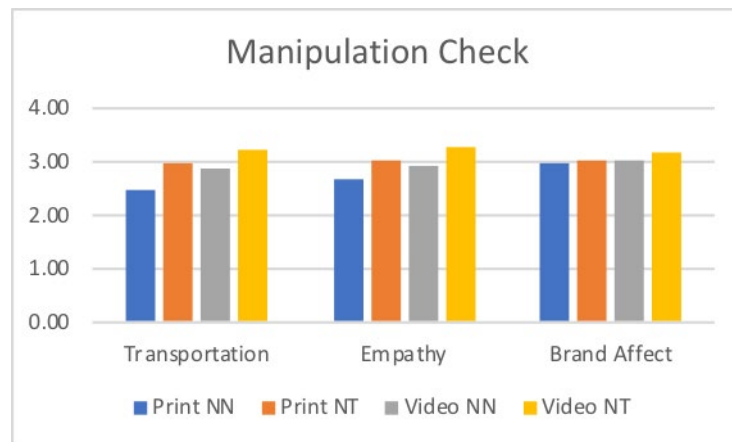
In the second part of my hypothesis, consumer involvement with the brand is believed to mediate the effects of narrative transportation in the ad. Involvement is a motivational state used to understand consumer attitudes and the degree to which a person is invested in a certain product or brand. This psychological theory of cognitive loyalty is a “preference for a brand consisting of positive beliefs and thoughts about purchasing a brand on the next purchase occasion” (Worthington, Bennett & Hartel, 2009). This means that the extent to which the consumer is involved with the brand has a mediating effect on the power of narrative transportation (Dahlgren, 2011). For example, a consumer with high involvement would be the most affected by narrative transportation and would be more motivated to remember the brand. Brand loyalty and involvement in this research study were measured using a 8-item, 5-point Likert scale, with questions such as these: “I say positive things about the brand to other people” and “I don’t bother looking at alternative brands.”

Data and Results

The analysis platform, SPSS, was used to analyze the data from the study. The analysis was conducted to see the strengths of correlations between the different variables in my experiment and to see if the ad conditions were statistically differences. I also looked to see if brand involvement had a mediating effect on the results.

The data illustrates partial support of H1 that the level of immersion in the ad is positively correlated with the variables of transportation and empathy. In fact, the ads

with stronger narratives led to higher levels of transportation and greater empathy responses. The video advertisement with the narrative had the highest empathy response and levels of transportation, out of the four ad options. This demonstrates that transportation has statistically significant effects. However, the different ad conditions did not have a strong effect on brand affect and evaluations. This partial support of the hypothesis could be due to how the variables were constructed or confounding variables.



Correlations		Transportation	Empathy	Brand Affect
Transportation	Pearson Correlation	1.00	.66	.60
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	182	182	182
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	.66	1.00	.60
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	182	182	182
Brand Affect	Pearson Correlation	.60	.60	1.00
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	182	182	182

Figure 1: Statistical significance of the experimental variables

The variables successfully generated statistically different levels of transportation, $F(3, 178) = 5.10$, $p < .05$, and empathy, $F(3, 178) = 3.87$, $p < .05$. However, there was not a statistically significant effect on brand evaluation/affect across the different advertisement conditions, $F(3, 178) = 1.38$, n.s.

Consumer involvement with the brand mediates the effects of narrative transportation in H2, was partially supported by the data. A regression analysis has shown that involvement partially mediates the relationship between transportation and affect.

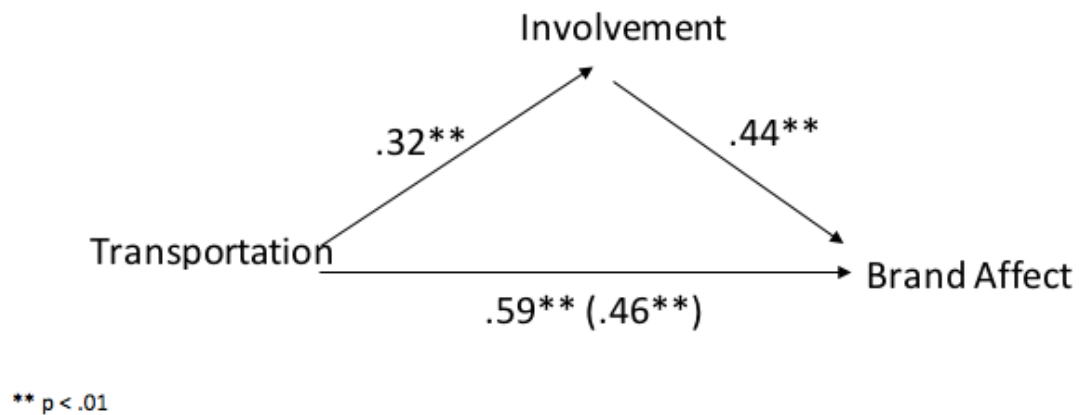


Figure 2: Mediation effect of brand involvement

A significant Sobel test ($z=2.48$, $p < .05$) demonstrated that there is an indirect effect of narrative transportation on brand evaluation and affect through involvement with that brand, which suggests that the effect can partially be explained by mediation. It is not full mediation because the effect of transportation on affect is still significant when involvement is part of the regression model. However, there is still a strong relationship between these three variables.

Limitations

The sample size of my experiment is relatively small and given that it involves only marketing students at the University of Oregon, the results cannot as easily be generalized to the public. The study looks solely at one brand, which also limits the generalizability of the results to all domains of advertising. In addition, there are many variations and subtle differences between advertisements, and grouping them into either a narrative or non-narrative category oversimplifies the effects of ads and does not take

into account the different levels of transportation that an ad can induce. It is also important to note that the data has shown correlations and not causation. Accordingly, we cannot know if one variable caused the other, or if there are potential third or confounding variables affecting the results. This thesis is a pilot study and more extensive research and analysis of the data must be performed to reach any strong conclusions about the findings. However, there is a statistically significant difference between the varying levels of ad and their impact on transportation and empathy as well as a partial mediating effect of brand involvement.

Implications

Research on consumer response to narratives has far-reaching implications for the use of storytelling in advertising and can also be applied to product placement in television, movies, and games. If advertisements are able to use narrative transportation to influence consumers' brand evaluations, then the same products that are placed within a movie should have the same effects on the brain. Movies and television have high levels of transportation and, are therefore, good mediums in which to insert advertisements of brands and products. While watching a movie, the viewer has already entered into the flow of the narrative and developed a connection with the story and, accordingly, can form a connection with the product or brand placed within it. In fact, products placed within television and movies can be a lot more successful than traditional advertisements and can maximize memory of the brand for viewers (Russell, 2002).

Along with movies and television, narrative transportation and flow can be used in video games; in fact, advertisements are already beginning to be embedded in their

virtual worlds. Research has shown that individuals immersed in the world of a video game will focus their energy on the game, and the brand and logo advertisements will be registered secondly (Rodgers & Thorson, 2012, p. 392). By interacting and intervening within the virtual world of the gaming, consumers become engaged with the process and may form a connection with a brand. Because the viewer is registering the advertisement secondly, they may not realize the persuasive intent and view the brand as more positive. However, more research must be conducted into the difference between actively participating in a narrative versus passively viewing it in relation to advertisement persuasion.

In addition to the application of these theories to advertising, storytelling is a powerful tool of influence and persuasion in all domains. Stories are pervasive throughout life, and it is important to understand their effects on the human psyche and mind as well as in our decision processes.

Conclusion

Ultimately, stories in advertising enhance the concept of *verisimilitude* — the appearance of being true and real — and help to blur the lines between fantasy and reality. Stories create feelings of empathy and human connection, which, in turn, facilitate persuasion. Narratives capture authentic human experiences better than any other form of communication and transcend people, place, and time. They engage people through creative and empathetic processes that allow us to place ourselves in someone else's shoes and experience things from a different perspective.

The North Face narrative-video ad featured in the Qualtrics survey consists of a series of shots of women taking on challenges and doing remarkable physical feats.

The video clips, along with the uplifting musical score, elicit feelings of female empowerment, strength, and sense of community. This video effectively connects the consumer with the brand through its use of emotional appeal and storyline. The response to this video has reinforced the claim that narrative transportation is, in fact, correlated with higher affect and better brand evaluations. The story framework within the narrative ad impacts the audience in a unique way and forms a connection between the viewer and the brand.

It is important for marketers to understand how people react to empathetic and dramatic stories in advertising at a neurobiological and psychological level in order to create the highest level of brand awareness. This paper has shown that traditional use of analytical processing and giving consumers rational and concrete reasons to purchase a product or service are not enough to create strong brand connections. People remember, and are persuaded by, ads that feature powerful stories and narratives that capture attention and engage the consumer in a meaningful way.

Our world is constantly changing in a technology-driven, digital age in which mass communication has become central to the functioning of society. Marketers who rely on rational decision-making to promote brands fail to understand the ways in which people form connections. Today's consumer is constantly being exposed to advertising across numerous media channels — from social media to television to the billboard on the public bus. The ads that stand out are the ones that tell a story and give the brand a purpose beyond the product it is immediately trying to sell. In the future, one can expect that the advertising industry will continue to change and evolve, taking on new approaches and methods for reaching and impacting audiences.

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