

Media engagement and advertising: Transportation, matching, transference and intrusion

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Abstract

Three studies show that consumer response to advertising depends on engagement with the media content, in this case a television program, in which the advertising appears. The specific form of engagement studied is the experience of narrative transportation, of being absorbed into the narrative world of the program. If an ad is not intrusive, by virtue of where it occurs in a narrative, high transportation is shown to positively impact an ad. This impact is obtained if the ad matches the narrative (thematically compatible), supporting the hypothesis that transportation can act as a message frame that increases processing. If a compatible ad is intrusive, however, it is shown that high transportation is disrupted and this negatively impacts an ad. A third study proposes and finds an additional mechanism, called transportation transference, in which high narrative transportation increases the transportation with an ad that is not intrusive and this increase in ad transportation in turn increases advertising effectiveness.

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Advertising to consumers typically appears in conjunction with narratives. These narratives take the form of journalistic or artistic stories in a particular medium, for instance, a television drama. The experience of such narratives is an important emerging area of study (Hogan, 2003; Oatley, 2002), as is the relationship between the experience of the narrative and the advertising. Recent research has found that ads can positively affect narrative experience, despite consumer expectations to the contrary (Nelson, Meyvis, & Galak, 2009). This is attributed to the disruption by the ad of the process of hedonic adaptation—enjoyment of the narrative declining over time. When an ad intrudes on the narrative this process is disrupted and pleasure with the narrative is restored (though this effect is eliminated with programs that do not lead to adaptation). And, just as an ad can affect the

experience of a narrative, the narrative can affect reactions to an ad. The latter effect, of the narrative on the ad, has been traditionally approached, however, as a “context effect” rather than in terms of the experience of the narrative.

Many past studies document the existence of media context effects on advertising (e.g., Goldberg & Gorn, 1987; Murry, Lastovicka, & Singh, 1992; Norris & Colman, 1992; Soldow & Principe, 1981). This work generally finds positive effects demonstrating that media content can make responses to an ad more positive. Such a positive effect would, of course, be expected on a number of theoretical grounds, not the least being a simple halo effect. At this point, however, it is becoming clear that media context effects are not always positive and that there is a need to consider the relationship between media content and advertising in more depth. Specifically, we need a better understanding of how the experience of the narrative that constitutes the content itself affects reactions to ads.

A promising way of approaching the experience of narratives, transportation theory, focuses on one important

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way that stories engage people (Green & Brock, 2000).¹ Transportation is the experience of being caught up in the “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997, 2000) of the story. Television lends itself to transportation in that it is a particularly passive medium tied to relaxation and lower personal potency (Csikszentmihalyi & Kubey, 1981).

While people experience narratives in many ways (Maltouse & Calder, 2007), transportation stands out for two reasons. One has to do with the very power of narratives in the first place. Stories provide us with vicarious and empathetic experiences and transportation theory is about this subjective experience. The other is that transportation theory suggests an important way that stories can affect advertising, both positively and negatively. Transportation can have a general impact on the depth of processing of an advertising message (a message framing effect) and a specific effect on the level of transportation experienced with the ad itself (a transportation transference process). Both of these effects have implications for current media practices that seek increasingly to link narratives and advertising ever more closely.

Wang and Calder (2006), working with print ads, show that the transportation experience does affect advertising. When an ad is after the end of a story, transportation increases advertising effectiveness, but if the ad appears in the middle of the story it decreases it. They interpret this result as indicating that an ad at the end of the story benefits from the positive transportation experience but that an ad in the middle interrupts the transportation experience and the ad is evaluated more negatively because of this. An intrusive ad interferes with a highly transporting experience and consequently responses to the ad are more negative. This is consistent with the results of Nelson et al. (2009) in that a high transportation experience should be associated with low adaptation and thus, as they show, not be subject to a positive disruption effect. As they point out, ads can disrupt transportation, as well as high adaptation, and this can lead to lower advertising effectiveness.

So far we have reviewed transportation theory and evidence that the level of transportation with a story can affect responses to advertising. The goal of this research is to examine more

closely *how* the transportation experience affects a subsequent ad.

Narrative as a message frame

One way to look at the effects of the narrative transportation experience on an ad is to view the narrative as a message frame. There is evidence that a message frame can lead to greater processing of a message. The arguments in the message receive greater scrutiny and elaboration and this yields more persuasion, assuming the arguments are strong. This is also consistent with other work showing that visual and verbal information in a story affects people’s reasoning outside of the story per se (Bagozzi, 2008; Wyer & Adaval, 2004; Wyer, Hung, & Jiang 2008; Wyer, Jiang, & Hung 2008). And engagement with fictional stories may even increase people’s receptivity to persuasion (Green, Garst, & Brock, 2004). Two interrelated hypotheses arise from this view.

The impact of framing on subsequent message processing depends on the extent to which the framing narrative is perceived as connected to the message. We hypothesize that if an ad does not disrupt (disrupts) narrative transportation the ad will not (will) stand out as disconnected from the narrative and hence receive greater (less) processing. This is consistent with the results of Wang and Calder (2006). Using the message framing approach, however, it is possible to make a further prediction.

It has been shown that when the message frame and the message content match or are compatible, the processing of the message and hence persuasion is further enhanced (Agrawal, Menon, & Aaker, 2007; DeSteno, Petty, Rucker, Wegener, & Braverman, 2004; Petty & Wegener, 1998; Wang & Lee, 2006). Thus a second, related and twofold prediction concerns matching between the media narrative and the ad. In the studies that follow matching will be operationalized in terms of whether the narrative (program) and the ad share compatible thematic content.

If an ad is intrusive, we predict that compatibility will make the ad even more disruptive in that the salience of the ad will call even more attention to it, making it more intrusive. The highly transporting experience will be disrupted and the ad will fare worse than if transportation were low. This prediction that high media transportation will negatively impact an ad that is compatible with but intrusive to a program is tested in Study 1. Compatibility between the framing narrative and the ad is in this study a way of posing a stronger test of the intrusion hypothesis than in Wang and Calder (2006).

Of course, not all ads are intrusive. When the ad is not intrusive, we predict that the narrative message frame will lead to greater processing of and persuasion by the ad. It is further predicted that in this case compatibility should facilitate even greater processing of the ad and thus greater persuasion. The prediction that high media transportation will positively impact a non-intrusive ad that is compatible with a program is tested in Study 2. Note that intrusion is used to test predictions about the transportation effects, rather than being the focus of this research.

¹ Transportation can be compared with another construct widely used in studies of media context effects, involvement. In some studies context involvement enhances ad effectiveness, in others context involvement decreases it (Anand & Sternthal, 1992; Feltham & Arnold, 1994; Furnham et al., 1998; Lord & Burnkrant, 1993; Norris & Colman, 1992; Soldow & Principe, 1981). It is difficult to interpret these studies in terms of transportation, however. At the very least involvement has typically been used broadly to refer generally to a higher state of motivation. In addition there is also support for the view that involvement and transportation are separate constructs. Some researchers have approached involvement more specifically as a motivational state in which a person’s self concept is activated in terms of her or his ability to obtain desired outcomes (Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Sherif & Cantril, 1947; Zaichkowsky, 1985). In our view transportation contrasts with this approach to involvement in that transportation is an experience “where all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative. (Green & Brock 2000, 701).” Direct evidence that the two are different can be found in Wang and Calder (2006). They manipulate transportation and involvement independently and show that each of the two constructs has a unique effect on consumers’ responses to products advertised in the media context.

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