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Research Article

Reflecting on the journey: Mechanisms in narrative persuasion

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Abstract

Recent work demonstrates that narratives persuade via mechanisms distinct from other persuasive message formats. The present work draws from the discourse processing and communication literature to introduce a construct of retrospective reflection as an additional mediator in narrative persuasion. Retrospective reflection represents self or other-relevant memories evoked by transportation into a story, which corroborates and extends story-implied beliefs into the reader's world. The reported studies indicate that retrospective reflection is distinct from transportation, mediates the relationship between transportation and various persuasion-related outcomes, and predicts these outcomes beyond transportation. The current work also examines the influence of personal relevance (Study 2) and cognitive load (Study 3) to better understand the role of retrospective reflection in narrative persuasion.

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Stories play a central role in human life. We actively seek out and pay for story-based entertainment, but we dread didactic, expository lectures of the same length. The internet's growth has facilitated the exchange of opinions between large numbers of geographically widespread consumers who often describe experiences in a story format with rich descriptions of actors and scenes. Businesses frequently present their "Brand Story" as a way to deepen connections with customers, and advertisements often feature stories displaying a product.

Narratives' presence in daily life has long been recognized, but only recently have contemporary scholars in psychology, marketing, and communication focused on understanding narratives' persuasive influence. Transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000) has been the dominant perspective to account for narrative persuasion, and describes a process entailing emotional engagement, generation of mental imagery, and attention. Research has demonstrated that the transported "traveler" can return changed

by the reading experience and is more likely to believe statements or positions illustrated in the story, in some cases despite knowledge that the story is fictional (Van Laer, De Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014).

Questions remain regarding how transportation achieves its persuasive effects. Transportation encapsulates the trip into the story world; what causes the audience member's reemergence into the real world as a changed individual? Readers bring their real-world knowledge and beliefs to help them comprehend and become transported into the story (Zwaan & Radvansky, 1998). If stories do not persuade through elaboration on the strength of arguments, as studies have demonstrated (Escalas, 2007), what mechanisms underlie the conversion of the story-world experience into one's beliefs about the real world? We posit and explore a cognitively based pathway linking transportation to persuasion-related outcomes. We describe this mechanism as a retrospective reflection process that integrates elements encountered in the story into one's understanding of the real world.

The present work contributes to the field of narrative persuasion by introducing retrospective reflection as a mechanism

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to understand *how* transportation influences persuasion-related outcomes. This research represents an effort to define and measure the retrospective reflection process, building a more comprehensive model of narrative persuasion. The paper proceeds as follows: we first review past narrative persuasion research in consumer psychology to provide background for the construct of retrospective reflection. We then define retrospective reflection and distinguish it from related constructs. Finally, we develop a model relating transportation, retrospective reflection, and persuasion-related outcomes, and evaluate this model by testing the influence of personal relevance and cognitive load on the transportation and retrospective reflection processes in narrative persuasion.

Brief overview of narrative persuasion research in consumer psychology

Social information is often shared and acquired by consumers using a narrative (Adaval & Wyer, 1998). A narrative format describes events in a chronological sequence, relating information about characters engaged in actions (Bruner, 1986). This format contrasts with messages that persuade by an appeal to arguments and are decontextualized (i.e., have no reference to actors or time; Deighton, Romer, & McQueen, 1989).

Several recent meta-analytic reviews of narrative persuasion point to a growing body of empirical evidence in the fields of consumer psychology and marketing that highlights narratives as a persuasive communication platform (Van Laer et al., 2014; Shen, Sheer, & Li, 2015). Many of these efforts have examined narrative transportation—“an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings, focused on story events” (Green, 2004, p. 247)—as the mechanism that underlies narrative persuasion, as well as the context factors (e.g., Wang & Calder, 2006) and individual differences (Argo, Zhu, & Dahl, 2008; McFerran, Dahl, Gorn, & Honea, 2010) that influence the evoked level of transportation.

Work on narrative persuasion demonstrates that consumers respond favorably to stories because of the pleasurable nature of narrative processing (Van Laer et al., 2014) and willingly expend cognitive effort to engage with them (Nielsen & Escalas, 2010). Past work has found that responses to narrative ads were unaffected by argument strength and that narratives reduced counter-arguments compared to an argument-based message (Escalas, 2007). Narratives are processed more holistically than argument-based messages, which affects information integration and response to interrupting stimuli. Adaval and Wyer (1998), for example, found negative information exerted less effect when embedded in a narrative than identical information in an argument-based format, which evokes a piece-meal form of processing. When narrative processing is interrupted, this disturbance can have a negative influence on persuasion-related outcomes. For example, Wang and Calder (2006, 2009) found ads that interrupt transportation when placed in the middle of an entertainment narrative were evaluated negatively, but ads at the end of the transportation experience benefit from the transference of positive affect associated with the transportation experience. In contrast, Nelson, Meyvis, and Galak (2009) found interrupting

ads reduced hedonic adaptation to the narrative (enjoyment declining over time), but enhanced the overall narrative experience. Collectively, this work demonstrates that persuasion via narratives is a nuanced process, distinct from persuasion via arguments or advocacy messages, and important because of narratives' prevalence and influence on consumers' lives.

Conceptual framework

Research in psychology, consumer behavior, and communication provides support for the influence of transportation on persuasion-related outcomes and has explored factors that strengthen or attenuate its influence. “What is still lacking... are answers to the question of how transportation affects persuasion” (Appel & Malečkar, 2012 p. 26). The studies reported in this paper evaluate a model that incorporates a new construct—retrospective reflection—to connect engagement with a narrative and the outcomes typically associated with narrative persuasion.

Retrospective reflection: A process to create meaning

We propose the reader recalls past episodes related to the story and connects the story-world to the reader's “real” world to better understand and corroborate the meaning of the narrative. We define this process as *retrospective reflection*, the recall of self or other-relevant memories evoked by transportation into a story, which validate and extend story-implied beliefs into the reader's world. For example, Mick and Buhl (1992) examined how personal background (memories described as “life themes”) guided the meaning derived from visual narrative ads. They found the meanings derived from these ads were affected by “the attempt to make the (story) world congruent with their own lives” (Mick & Buhl, 1992, p. 333). That is, retrospective reflections evoked by the message affected the interpretation of the message's meaning. These reflections included both experiences that happened to the person directly and stories heard from others, such as experiences shared by friends (Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008).

Past work has shown meaning is derived distinctly from arguments and narratives. Deighton et al. (1989) and Escalas (2007) each compared argument and narrative-based messages and found different facets are emphasized for persuasion (e.g., strong arguments for rhetorical messages versus story verisimilitude for narratives). Collectively, these studies provide evidence a reflective process about the self and others is used to derive meaning and differs for narrative and argument-based messages.

This process of sense-making is also consistent with Fisher's *narrative paradigm* (1989), in which people understand others and justify their own behavior by telling a plausible story rather than producing evidence or constructing rational arguments. According to this paradigm, people make decisions and accept stories based on “good reasons” that fit with their narrative explanation rather than rational tests of objective facts. For example, a student may be more likely to sign up for a study-abroad trip after reading about another student's experience than after reading statistics

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