

Eunjin (Anna) Kim

Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University
of Southern California, USA

ORCID: 0000-0003-4007-4461

Sidharth Muralidharan

Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University, USA

ORCID: 0000-0003-0982-5298

Heather Shoenberger

Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, Penn State University, USA

ORCID: 0000-0001-6211-1361

Testing the Extent of the ‘Immersive’ Experience: The Role of Ad Relevance, Ad Vividness, and Ad Message Explicitness in Narrative Advertising

Abstract

A study with 40 real TV commercials and 421 non-student participants confirmed that advertising persuasiveness could be enhanced when narratives are more relevant to a viewer and produce more vivid details. Specifically, greater ad relevance and ad vividness produced more goal facilitation, emotional engagement, and likelihood of decreased ad skepticism, resulting in more positive ad and brand attitudes. Furthermore, the results supported a moderated mediation process, with ad message explicitness as an important moderator. We found that the positive effects of ad relevance and ad vividness were dampened when viewers perceived the ad message to be more explicit.

Keywords: narrative advertising, ad relevance, ad vividness, ad message explicitness, ad attitude.

Testowanie zakresu doświadczenia immersyjnego. Rola relewancji, wyrazistości i bezpośredniości przekazu w reklamach narracyjnych

Streszczenie

Badania obejmujące 40 autentycznych reklam telewizyjnych i 421 uczestników niebędących studentami potwierdziły, że perswazyjny efekt reklam można zwiększyć, jeśli będą one bardziej adekwatne dla odbiorcy i zawierać będą bardziej wyraziste cechy immanentne. Przeprowadzone badania pokazują, że ulepszona relewancja reklam i ich udoskonalona wyrazistość dawały efekt większej zgodności celów, wzrostu zaangażowania emocjonalnego oraz wysokiego prawdopodobieństwa

spadku sceptycyzmu odnośnie do danej reklamy, co skutkowało poprawieniem stosunku odbiorców do reklamy i marki. Co więcej, wyniki badań potwierdzają proces moderowanej mediacji, gdzie bezpośredniość wiadomości reklamowej jest ważnym czynnikiem moderującym. Ustaliliśmy, że pozytywne skutki relewancji i bezpośredniości reklamy były niwelowane, gdy odbiorcy postrzegali wiadomość reklamową jako bardziej bezpośrednią.

Słowa kluczowe: reklama narracyjna, relewancja reklamy, wyrazistość reklamy, bezpośredniość wiadomości reklamowej, stosunek do reklam.

Introduction

Narratives are integral to the way humans understand the world¹ and in the persuasion context, have been shown to be more effective than non-narratives². For example, researchers showed that, compared to non-story ads, story ads elicited more positive emotional and cognitive responses among viewers³.

Along with demonstrating these positive outcomes, advertising researchers have offered various explanations as to why narrative ads are more effective than non-narrative ads by proposing various mechanisms: empathetic processing – drawing the viewer into an ad⁴, identification – perspective taking of the main character in a story⁵, mental simulation – imitative mental representation of the events in a story⁶, self-brand connection – assimilating an advertised brand into one's self-concept⁷, and transportation – absorption into a story⁸.

Although past research has produced important insights on the topic of narrative advertising, a clear understanding as to why some narrative ads work better than others is absent from the literature. Further, previous studies have predominantly relied

¹ See D. Padgett, D. Allen, *Communicating Experiences: A Narrative Approach to Creating Service Brand Image*, "Journal of Advertising" 1997, Vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 49–62.

² See J.E. Escalas, *Narrative Processing: Building Consumer Connections to Brands*, "Journal of Consumer Psychology" 2004, Vol. 14, No. 1/2, pp. 168–180; see also E. Kim, S. Ratneshwar, E. Thorson, *Why Narrative Ads Work: An Integrated Narrative Explanation*, "Journal of Advertising" 2017, Vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 283–296; cf. T.V. Laer, K.D. Ruyter, L.M. Visconti, M. Wetzels, *The Extended Transportation-Imagery Model: A Meta-Analysis of the Antecedents and Consequences of Consumers' Narrative Transportation*, "Journal of Consumer Research" 2014, Vol. 40, No. 5, pp. 797–817.

³ See E. Kim, S. Ratneshwar, E. Thorson, *Why Narrative Ads Work...*; see also T.V. Laer, K.D. Ruyter, L.M. Visconti, M. Wetzels, *The Extended Transportation-Imagery Model...*

⁴ J. Deighton, D. Romer, J. McQueen, *Using Drama to Persuade*, "Journal of Consumer Research" 1989, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 335–343.

⁵ A. De Graaf, H. Hoeken, J.J. Sanders, J.W.J. Beentjes, *Identification as a Mechanism of Narrative Persuasion*, "Communication Research" 2011, Vol. 20, No. 10, pp. 1–22.

⁶ S.E. Taylor, S.H.K. Schneider, *Coping and the Simulation of Events*, "Social Cognition" 1989, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 174–194.

⁷ J.E. Escalas, *Narrative Processing...*

⁸ M.C. Green, T.C. Brock, *The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology" 2000, Vol. 79, No. 5, pp. 701–721.

on stimuli created by researchers, raising questions on the ability to generalize their results to real advertisements.

The present research aims to fill this gap in the literature by proposing two important variables that can explain differential persuasiveness across narrative ads, namely ad relevance and ad vividness. This research also proposes three mediating variables – goal facilitation, emotional engagement, and ad skepticism, and one important moderator – ad message explicitness, in order to provide a context as to when and how one narrative ad is more likely to be effective than another narrative ad. For example, the current study argues that one narrative ad might be more persuasive than another one because it features a character and a situation that a viewer can relate to. Finally, this research tests and validates the entire framework (Figure 1) with a large sample of real TV advertisement with non-student participants, providing more ecological validity than advertisements created for research purposes.

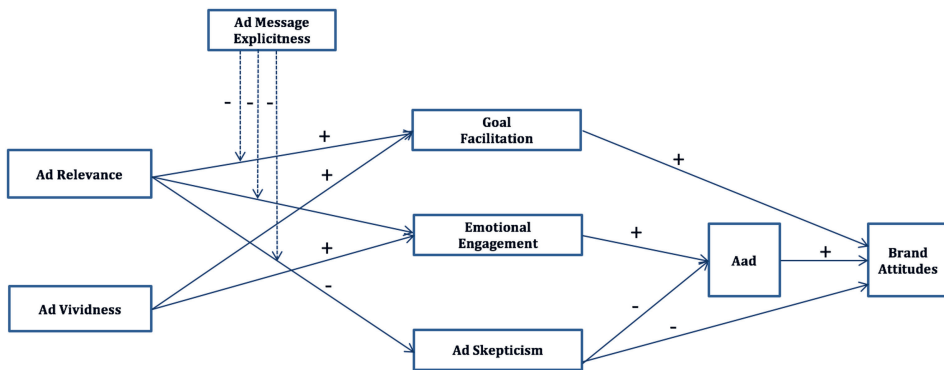


Figure 1. Hypothesized model. Developed by the Authors

Conceptual background

a. Ad relevance

Ad relevance refers to the extent to which the ad seems to be relevant to the viewer. It has been well-documented that self-relevance increases advertising effectiveness⁹. For example, studies have shown that perceived similarity between the viewer and the ad character enhances advertising effectiveness by providing a basis for self-connection¹⁰. The connection grabs a viewer's attention and thereby engages the viewer in perspective

⁹ E.g. W.E. Baker, R.J. Lutz, *An Empirical Test of an Updated Relevance-Accessibility Model of Advertising Effectiveness*, "Journal of Advertising" 2000, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 1–14.

¹⁰ E.g. C. Hoffner, M. Buchanan, *Young Adults' Wishful Identification with Television Characters: The Role of Perceived Similarity and Character Attributes*, "Media Psychology" 2005, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 325–351.

taking, which in turn, leads to vicarious experiences from the character's vantage point¹¹. Other studies have found that perceived similarity between a viewer and the main character produced more story persuasion¹².

b. Mental simulation potential

Research has shown that vividness enhances persuasion by generating more positive ad-evoked feelings and thoughts¹³ via increased attention and memory¹⁴, enhanced elaboration¹⁵, and the greater perceived likelihood of an event¹⁶. When narrative ads transport the viewers, they are able to visualize the events presented in the ad in their minds and their thoughts focus on the story¹⁷. It has also been suggested that because narrative ads typically employ vivid images and details, viewers are able to visualize and mentally rehearse the events included in the narratives¹⁸. Vicarious engagement and transportation are known to generate strong positive, affective responses among the viewers¹⁹. Further, mental simulation triggered by vivid details, helps to relate the advertised product/brand to fulfilling the viewer's consumption goals²⁰.

c. Goal facilitation

Narratives allow advertisers to strategically create characters and plots that would lead the viewer to the desired end state. Narratives follow a linear pattern, i.e., once

¹¹ See J.M. Deborah, C. Moorman, B.J. Jaworski, *Enhancing and Measuring Consumers' Motivation, Opportunity, and Ability to Process Brand Information from Ads*, "Journal of Marketing" 1991, Vol. 55, No. 4, pp. 32–53; see also E. Kim, S. Ratneshwar, E. Thorson, *Why Narrative Ads Work...*

¹² E.g. A. De Graaf, H. Hoeken, J.J. Sanders, J.W.J. Beentjes, *Identification as a Mechanism of Narrative Persuasion*, "Communication Research" 2011, Vol. 20, No. 10, pp. 1–22; see also M.D. Slater, D. Rouner, *Entertainment Education and Elaboration Likelihood: Understanding the Processing of Narrative Persuasion*, "Communication Theory" 2002, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 173–191.

¹³ E.g. R. Adval, R.S. Wyer, *The Role of Narratives in Consumer Information Processing*, "Journal of Consumer Psychology" 1998, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 207–245.

¹⁴ T.L. Childers, M.J. Houston, *Conditions for a Picture-Superiority Effect on Consumer Memory*, "Journal of Consumer Research" 1984, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 643–654.

¹⁵ J. Kisielius, B. Sternthal, *Detecting and Explaining Vividness Effects in Attitudinal Judgments*, "Journal of Marketing Research" 1984, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 54–64.

¹⁶ P. K. Petrova, R. B. Cialdini, *Fluency of Consumption Imagery and the Backfire Effects of Imagery Appeals*, "Journal of Consumer Research" 2005, Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 442–454.

¹⁷ C. Chang, *Being Hooked by Editorial Content: The Implications for Processing Narrative Advertising*, "Journal of Advertising" 2009, Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 21–34; see also J. E. Escalas, M.C. Moore, J.E. Britton, *Fishing for Feelings? Hooking Viewers Help!*, "Journal of Consumer Psychology" 2004, Vol. 14, No. 1 & 2, pp. 105–114.

¹⁸ P.K. Petrova, R.B. Cialdini, *Evoking the Imagination As a Strategy of Influence* [in:] *Handbook of Consumer Psychology*, eds. C.P. Haugtvedt, P.M. Herr, F.R. Kardes, Psychology Press, New York 2008, pp. 513–516.

¹⁹ J. Deighton, D. Romer, J. McQueen, *Using Drama to Persuade...*

²⁰ J.E. Escalas, *Self-Referencing and Persuasion: Narrative Transportation Versus Analytical Elaboration*, "Journal of Consumer Research" 2007, Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 421–429.

the character's goals are introduced then they are motivated to take an action, which finally leads to an outcome²¹. As the narrative ensues, vivid imagery can trigger mental simulation in the viewer, thereby, enhancing memory and relevance²². Apart from expressing the consumption benefits of the product/brand, this psychological phenomenon becomes effective when the goals of both the character and the viewer are related²³. Studies have shown that narratives can provide vicarious experiences through which the viewer perceives the consumption benefits, further motivating goal facilitation²⁴. Therefore, narrative ads providing greater self-relevance and vividness will help consumers perceive how the advertised brands can be instrumental to achieve their consumption goals.

H1: Narrative ads with high (vs. low) relevance will lead to greater goal facilitation, which in turn will lead to more positive brand attitudes.

H2: Narrative ads with high (vs. low) vividness will lead to greater goal facilitation, which in turn will lead to more positive brand attitudes.

d. Emotional engagement

Emotional engagement refers to when a viewer is emotionally involved in the ad. Research has found that ads employing narratives to engross individuals who then experience warm and upbeat feelings²⁵. Typically, advertisers portray characters in a positive light and when perceived similarity between the viewer and the character/situation is achieved then a byproduct of this relationship is experiencing emotions vicariously²⁶. Through identification, these positive emotions manifest in viewers²⁷, translating into favorable advertising attitudes.

Messages presented in a vivid manner have the ability to be emotionally interesting²⁸. Once a relevant, vivid mental image has been generated, it will lead to positive ad feelings and favorable ad attitudes. Further, vivid ads are likely to elicit more positive emotional responses than non-vivid ads²⁹. Therefore, we hypothesize that greater

²¹ J.E. Escalas, M.C. Moore, J.E. Britton, *Fishing for Feelings...*

²² J.E. Escalas, *SelfReferencing and Persuasion...*

²³ A. Bandura, *Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective*, "Annual Review of Psychology" 2001, Vol. 52, pp. 1–26.

²⁴ E.g. J.E. Escalas, M.C. Moore, J.E. Britton, *Fishing for Feelings...*; E. Kim, S. Ratneshwar, E. Thorson, *Why Narrative Ads Work...*; J. Kisielius, B. Sternthal, *Detecting and Explaining Vividness...*

²⁵ J.E. Escalas, M.C. Moore, J.E. Britton, *Fishing for Feelings...* See also: A. Hamby, D. Brinberg, J. Jaccard, *A conceptual framework of narrative persuasion*, "Journal of Media Psychology" 2016, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 113–124.

²⁶ J.M. Deborah, C. Moorman, B.J. Jaworski, *Enhancing and Measuring Consumers' Motivation, Opportunity, and Ability...*; R. Heath, *Emotional Engagement: How Television Builds Big Brands at Low Attention*, "Journal of Advertising Research" 2009, Vol. 49, No. 1, pp. 62–73.

²⁷ J. Deighton, D. Romer, J. McQueen, *Using Drama to Persuade...*

²⁸ R.E. Nisbett, L. Ross, *Human Inference Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment*. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1980.

²⁹ P.K. Petrova, R.B. Cialdini, *Evoking the Imagination As a Strategy of ...*

ad relevance and ad vividness will emotionally engage viewers and produce more favorable ad attitudes.

H3: Narrative ads with high (vs. low) relevance will lead to greater emotional engagement, which in turn will lead to more favorable ad attitudes.

H4: Narrative ads with high (vs. low) vividness will lead to greater emotional engagement, which in turn will lead to more favorable ad attitudes.

e. Ad skepticism

Research has shown that skepticism towards advertising can prevent transportation from occurring and viewers process the narrative ad in an analytical manner³⁰. On comparing narrative and expository or factual ads, studies have found that when manipulative intent is, in general, less salient in narrative ads then viewers will indulge in story processing resulting in positive emotions and favorable advertising attitudes³¹. If a narrative ad is structured with well-rounded characters and situations that viewers could easily relate to, then it can lower skepticism³². Even with a narrative, if the ad is not relevant, it will be difficult for the viewer to be immersed into the story, thereby increasing the chances of disagreeing with the message³³. Immersed viewers, on the other hand, are less likely to make a counterargument toward the ad. Furthermore, narratives enhance self-brand connections, which make it even more difficult for ad content to be criticized³⁴.

H5: Narrative ads with high (vs. low) relevance will lead to greater likelihood of decreased ad skepticism, which in turn will lead to more favorable ad and brand attitudes.

f. Relationship between ad attitudes and brand attitudes

Previous research has demonstrated that ad attitude mediates the effect of ad content and brand attitudes. Therefore, we expect that the effects of emotional engagement and decreased ad skepticism on brand attitudes will be mediated by ad attitude³⁵.

H6: Ad attitudes will mediate the effects of emotional engagement and decreased ad skepticism on brand attitudes.

³⁰ J.E. Escalas, *Self-Referencing and Persuasion...*

³¹ E.g. D. Wentzel, T. Tomczak, A. Herrman, *The Moderating Effect of Manipulative Intent and Cognitive Resources on the Evaluation of Narrative Ads*, "Psychology and Marketing" 2010, Vol. 27, No. 5, pp. 510–530.

³² J.E. Escalas, M.C. Moore, J.E. Britton, *Fishing for Feelings...*

³³ M.C. Green, T.C. Brock, *The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives...*

³⁴ J.E. Escalas, *Narrative Processing...*

³⁵ S.B. Mackenzie, R.J. Lutz, *An Empirical Examination of the Structural Antecedents of Attitude Toward the Ad in an Advertising Pretesting Context*, "Journal of Marketing" 1989, Vol. 53, No. 2, pp. 48–65.

g. The moderating role of ad message explicitness

Ad message explicitness refers to the extent to which a viewer perceives the ad message as obvious in its attempt to sell the advertised product/brand. An explicit ad message is likely to alert consumers to the marketer's persuasive intent because it may interrupt the transportation perceived by the consumer as they follow the story³⁶. Transportation or "immersion" into the story or a perception of feeling "lost" in the story is considered an essential element to the persuasive effects of narrative advertising. It is linked to an increase in affective responses and decrease in skeptical thoughts resulting in higher brand/ad attitudes³⁷.

Explicit ad messages significantly decrease ad evaluations not only because overt persuasive attempts may be considered manipulative³⁸ but in the narrative context, by interrupting the immersion, consumers' critical cognition will dominate and ad skepticism will concurrently increase³⁹. Once a consumer's immersion into the narrative ad is interrupted and the person becomes conscious of a persuasive attempt, his or her focus vacates the narrative and turns to evaluating the ad claims⁴⁰. The result of an explicit ad message is that analytical cognitive processing, triggered by the explicit persuasive attempt, will decrease positive emotions and increase critical thoughts. Thus, the explicit message is likely to drive down positive affect and elicit ad skepticism. However, less explicit ad messages will be less likely to interrupt the consumers' enjoyment or transportation into the narrative ad and thus lead to increased positive emotions and less ad skepticism⁴¹. Taken together, we expect ad message explicitness to attenuate the effect of ad relevancy on goal facilitation, emotional engagement, and ad skepticism.

H7a: The positive effect of high ad relevance on goal facilitation will be enhanced when the ad message is less explicit.

H7b: The positive effect of high ad relevance on emotional engagement will be enhanced when the ad message is less explicit.

H7c: The positive effect of high ad relevance on ad skepticism will be enhanced when the ad message is less explicit.

³⁶ M.C. Green, T.C. Brock, *The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives...*; J.E. Escalas, *Narrative Processing...*

³⁷ J.E. Escalas, *Narrative Processing...*; M.C. Green, T.C. Brock, *The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives...*

³⁸ M. Friedstad, P. Wright, *The Persuasion Knowledge Model: How People Cope with Persuasion Attempts*, "Journal of Consumer Research" 1994, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 1–31.

³⁹ J.E. Escalas, *Narrative Processing...* See also: T. Gebbers, J. De Wit, M. Appel, *Transportation into narrative worlds and the motivation to change health-related behavior*, "International Journal of Communication" 2017, Vol. 11, pp. 4886–4906.

⁴⁰ J.E. Escalas, *Narrative Processing...*

⁴¹ *Ibidem.*

Method

a. Overview

The hypotheses were tested in a study involving 40 narrative TV commercials that aired in the United States between 2013 and 2015. We intentionally chose somewhat old commercials to avoid the effect of ad familiarity on people's responses to the study variables. The study was administered via Qualtrics, and 300 participants were recruited through an online panel in exchange for monetary compensation. Each participant was exposed to one randomly selected commercial and then asked to answer various dependent measures using a pre-tested survey questionnaire.

Participants

Participants who satisfied the following criteria were recruited: 18+ years old, US residents, and native speakers of English. Participants completed the survey in 12 minutes on average and they were widely distributed in age, with 63% between 25 and 44 years; 58% were female, and 75% had completed college. A post-stratification method was used to address sampling issues such as a non-response bias and under-/over-sampling.

Stimuli

The TV commercials used in the study were a convenience sample drawn from commercials that had aired on various channels in the United States between 2013 and 2015. We chose old ads to minimize the effect of ad fatigue and familiarity. The 40 commercials included various consumer products and services, such as *Kia* automobiles, *Taco Bell* fast food, *Samsonite* luggage, *Tide* detergent, *Budweiser* beer, *Sears Optical* retail store, and *GEICO* insurance. We excluded highly targeted products such as gender-specific products and prescription drugs. To control for the effect of ad length, only 30-second-long commercials (the most common length of TV commercials in the U.S.) were retained. Two independent judges (marketing scholars with 10+ years of research experience) who were not aware of research hypotheses verified whether the commercials were narrative ads by using the six necessary criteria discussed in Kim *et al.*⁴² (i.e., this commercial tells a story with the necessary elements of who, what, when/where, why, how, and chronology – sequence of events). Commercials that did not have all six necessary elements were excluded. The two judges agreed 100% on the classification of the final set of 40 narrative commercials

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the 40 commercials. Participants were informed that they were participating in an “Ad Study,” and that the purpose of the study was to better understand how people feel about certain ads. Participants were advised

⁴² E. Kim, S. Ratneshwar, E. Thorson, *Why Narrative Ads Work...*

to complete the study only using a laptop or desktop computer without taking a break. Participants were directed to watch the commercial as they would watch any other ad and to watch it on full screen.

After watching the commercial, participants answered various questions in the following order: Ad attitude (Aad), brand attitudes, goal facilitation, emotional engagement, ad skepticism, ad relevance, ad vividness, and message explicitness. To minimize demand effects⁴³, dependent variables were measured prior to the other variables. All the items for each measure were randomized. An attention-check question was included to make sure that participants were carefully reading the items for the measures. Due to incorrect responses to the attention-check question, 19 participants were removed, leaving a final sample of 421 participants. At the end of the survey, participants were subjected to a suspicion probe question, and scrutiny of the data for the suspicion probe confirmed that none of the participants were able to guess any of the hypotheses.

b. Measures

The items for various measures in the study are shown in Table 1, along with their psychometric properties. Ad relevance, ad vividness, goal facilitation, emotional engagement, ad skepticism, and message explicitness were measured with nine-point Likert scales. Aad and brand attitudes were assessed with nine-point, semantic differential scales.

Aad ($\alpha = .97$) and brand attitudes ($\alpha = .97$), taken from Mackenzie and Lutz⁴⁴, were measured with five items each (e.g., negative/positive, unfavorable/favorable). The six items ($\alpha = .96$) for goal facilitation (e.g., "I would be able to express who I wish to be") were taken from Park *et al.*⁴⁵. The three items ($\alpha = .92$) for emotional engagement (e.g., "I felt emotionally involved in the ad") were adopted from Escalas and Stern⁴⁶. The three items ($\alpha = .93$) for ad skepticism (e.g., "this ad is believable") were taken from Obermiller and Spangenberg⁴⁷. The six items (e.g., "I found this ad is really relevant to me") for ad relevance ($\alpha = .90$) were adopted from Escalas⁴⁸ and Campbell and Babrow⁴⁹. The three items ($\alpha = .94$) for ad vividness (e.g., "While watching the ad, I had a vivid image of the ad character") were adopted from Green and Brock⁵⁰. Finally,

⁴³ M.T. Orne, *On the Social Psychology of the Psychological Experiment: With Particular Reference to Demand Characteristics and Their Implications*, "American Psychologist" 1962, Vol. 17, No. 11, pp. 776–783.

⁴⁴ S.B. Mackenzie, R.J. Lutz, *An Empirical Examination of the Structural Antecedents...*

⁴⁵ C.W. Park, A.B. Eisingerich, J.W. Park, *Attachment-Aversion (AA) Model...*

⁴⁶ J.E. Escalas, B.B. Stern, *Sympathy and Empathy: Emotional Responses to Advertising Dramas*, "Journal of Consumer Research" 2003, Vol. 29, No. 4, pp. 566–578.

⁴⁷ C. Obermiller, E. Spangenberg, *Development of a Scale to Measure Skepticism toward Advertising*, "Journal of Consumer Psychology" 1998, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 159–186.

⁴⁸ J.E. Escalas, *Narrative Processing...*; J.E. Escalas, *Self-Referencing and Persuasion...*

⁴⁹ R.G. Campbell, A.S. Babrow, *The Role of Empathy in Responses to Persuasive Risk Communication: Overcoming Resistance to HIV Prevention Messages*, "Health Communication" 2004, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 159–182.

⁵⁰ M.C. Green, T.C. Brock, *The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness...*

the three items ($\alpha = .97$) of message explicitness (“The advertising message in this ad is very obvious”) were created by the authors.

Table 1. Measures and psychometric properties. Developed by the Authors

Construct/item	CFA			Fornell and Larcker
	Factor loading	AVE	CR	
<i>Goal facilitation</i>		.88	.94	Yes
I would be able to communicate who I am to other people.	.93			
I would be able to express who I wish to be.	.93			
I would be able to express my values in life.	.94			
I would be able to accomplish some of my personal projects.	.94			
I would be able to get things done.	.95			
I would be more efficient.	.94			
<i>Emotional engagement</i>		.92	.85	Yes
I felt emotionally involved in the ad.	.97			
I found the ad moving.	.97			
The ad affected me emotionally.	.94			
<i>Ad skepticism</i>		.90	.85	Yes
This ad is generally truthful.	.97			
This ad is deceptive. (R)	.94			
This ad is believable.	.93			
<i>Ad relevance</i>		.93	.96	Yes
I think this ad really speaks to me.	.96			
I could relate to the main character.	.98			
I could see how the events in the ad could happen to me.	.98			
I found this ad is relevant to me.	.98			
I could put myself in the position of the main character.	.97			
I thought there are a lot of similarities between the situation in the ad and situations in my life.	.91			
<i>Ad vividness</i>		.90	.88	Yes
While watching the ad, I had a vivid image of the ad character.	.90			
While watching the ad, I had a vivid image of the scene.	.97			
While watching the ad, I had a vivid image of the events in it taking place.	.98			
<i>Aad</i>		.90	.94	Yes
Very unfavorable – favorable	.97			
Bad – good	.96			
Unappealing – appealing	.95			
Dislike – like	.94			
Negative – positive	.93			
<i>Brand attitudes</i>		.93	.94	Yes
Very unfavorable – favorable	.97			
Bad – good	.96			
Unappealing – appealing	.96			
Dislike – like	.96			
Negative – positive	.96			

Notes: CFA results: $\chi^2(434) = 1426.10$, CFI = .96, NFI = .96, RMSEA = .074 (90% CI of .069 to .078)

Results

All data analyses were done after aggregating participants' responses across 40 commercials. Descriptive statistics and correlations for the study measures are shown in Table 2. To assess psychometric properties, scale items for all measures were subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), using EQS 6.3 software. Next, the hypothesized relationships were tested with bootstrapping procedures⁵¹.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations between measures. Developed by the Authors

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Goal facilitation	4.00	2.54						
2. Emotional engagement	4.29	2.39	.28					
3. Ad skepticism	5.23	2.15	-.27	-.31				
4. Ad relevance	4.51	2.41	.33	.47	-.54			
5. Ad vividness	5.19	2.25	.14	.34	-.36	.36		
6. Aad	6.61	2.13	.25	.37	-.46	.53	.47	
7. Brand attitudes	6.63	1.89	.32	.31	-.49	.48	.36	.61

Notes:

- (1) The theoretical scale range is 1–9 for all variables.
- (2) Correlation is significant, $p < .01$ level (2-tailed).

a. Measurement model

CFA was conducted for testing convergent and discriminant validity of the variables. The CFA model was estimated by the elliptical reweighted least square (ERLS) procedure of the EQS program⁵². The results suggest a strong fit of the model to the data: $\chi^2(434) = 1426.10$, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .96, Normed Fit Index (NFI) = .96, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .074 (90% confidence interval of .07 to .08). All factor loadings were significant (p 's < .01) and the standardized factor loadings for all items exceeded the minimum level of .50 (see Table 1). Construct reliabilities (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct were found to exceed the minimum criteria of 0.70 and 0.50 respectively, providing evidence of adequate convergent validity. Discriminant validity was tested using Fornell and Larcker's⁵³ criterion of ensuring that the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeds the square of the pairwise-correlation between constructs. All AVE estimates were greater than the squared inter-construct correlations, thus demonstrating discriminant validity.

⁵¹ A.F. Hayes, *An Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis*, The Guilford Press, New York 2013.

⁵² P.M. Bentler, *EQS Structural Equations Program Manual*, Multivariate Software Inc., Los Angeles 1995, pp. 132–140.

⁵³ C. Fornell, D.F. Larcker, *Evaluating Structural Equation Models with Unobservable Variables and Measurement Error*, "Journal of Marketing Research" 1981, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 39–50.

b. Test of mediation effects using bootstrapping procedures

Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested using the bootstrapping procedure (5,000 samples) of the “PROCESS” macro⁵⁴. The results confirmed that narrative ads that elicit high self-relevance would produce greater goal facilitation ($B = .39, p < .001$) after controlling for the effect of ad vividness on goal facilitation. The results also confirmed that narrative ads with high vividness would lead to greater goal facilitation ($B = .15, p < .05$) while controlling for the effect of ad relevance on goal facilitation. Further, the bootstrap results showed that goal facilitation mediated the effects of ad relevance ($B = .07, 95\%$ bias-corrected CI = .04 to .10) and ad vividness ($B = .02, 95\%$ bias-corrected CI = .00 to .05) on brand attitudes. Thus, H1 and H2 were supported.

For hypotheses 3 through 6, a serial multiple-mediator model was estimated using “Process” macro⁵⁵. As hypothesized, narrative ads that elicit high self-relevance produced greater emotional engagement ($B = .40, p < .001$) while controlling for the effect of ad vividness on emotional engagement. Similarly, narrative ads with high vividness increased emotional engagement among viewers ($B = .12, p < .05$) after controlling for the effect of ad relevance. The bootstrap results revealed that emotional engagement successfully mediated the positive effects of ad relevance and ad vividness on Aad, which in turn produced more favorable brand attitudes, *Bad* relevance-emotional engagement –Aad-brand attitudes = .02, 95% bias-corrected CI = .00 to .04 and *Bad* vividness-emotional engagement –Aad-brand attitudes = .01, 95% bias-corrected CI = .001 to .016. Hypothesis 5 suggested that narrative ads that elicit high self-relevance would lead to greater likelihood of decreased ad skepticism, which in turn generating more favorable Aad and brand attitudes. The results confirmed that high self-relevance inducing narrative ads yielded greater likelihood of decreased ad skepticism ($B = -.52, p < .001$) and decreased ad skepticism led to more favorable Aad ($B = -.22, p < .001$) and brand attitudes ($B = -.18, p < .001$). Finally, the serial multiple-mediator bootstrap results supported the mediating role of decreased ad skepticism and Aad, *Bad* relevance–decreased ad skepticism–brand attitudes = $-.09, 95\%$ bias-corrected CI = $-.16$ to $-.05$ and *Bad* relevance–decreased ad skepticism–Aad–brand attitudes = $-.04, 95\%$ bias-corrected CI = $-.07$ to $-.02$. Therefore, H3 – H6 were supported.

c. Test of moderated mediation using bootstrapping procedures

Hypothesis 7a through 7c were tested using the PROCESS macro⁵⁶. As hypothesized, the mediating effect of goal facilitation between high self-relevance and brand attitudes was greater when the ad message was less explicit ($B = .07, 95\%$ bias-corrected CI = 0.04 to .11) compared to when the ad message was more explicit ($B = .033, 95\%$ bias-corrected CI = 0.01 to .06). Similarly, the mediating effect of emotional engagement

⁵⁴ Model 4, A.F. Hayes, *An Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis...*

⁵⁵ Model 6, *ibidem*, p. 446.

⁵⁶ Model 7, *ibidem*, p. 447.

between high self-relevance and Aad was enhanced when the ad message was less explicit ($B = .09$, 95% bias-corrected CI = 0.05 to .140) compared to when the ad message was more explicit ($B = .067$, 95% bias-corrected CI = 0.04 to .11). However, the mediating effect of decreased ad skepticism between high self-relevance and Aad was not moderated by ad message explicitness ($B = .004$, 95% bias-corrected CI = $-.00$ to .01). Thus, H7a and H7b were supported but H7c was not supported. Detailed results are summarized in Table 3 and the supported hypothesized model is shown in Figure 2.

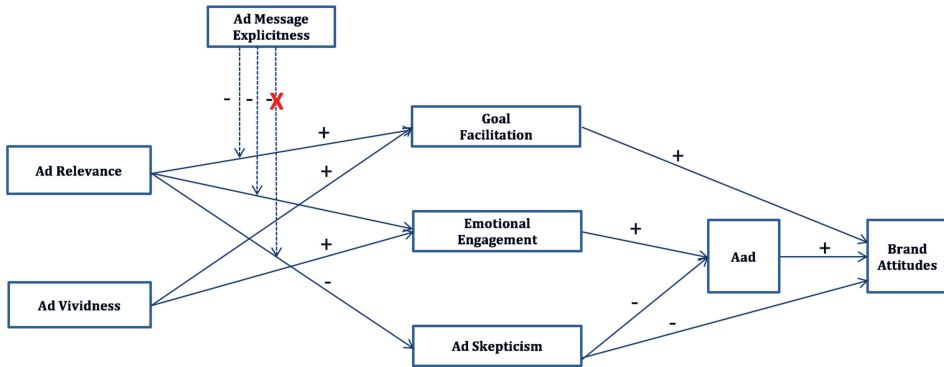


Figure 2. Supported hypothesized model. Developed by the Authors

Table 3. Tests of moderated mediation hypotheses. Developed by the Authors

A. Mediator: goal facilitation (H7a)

Mediator variable model (DV = Goal facilitation)				
Predictors	B	SE	t-Value	p-Value
Ad relevance	0.29	0.05	6.02	0.00
Ad message explicitness	-0.11	0.4	-2.48	0.01
Ad relevance X Ad message explicitness	-0.04	0.2	-2.22	0.03
$R^2_{adj} = .14, F(3, 417) = 24.67, p < .001$				
Dependent variable model (DV = Brand attitudes)				
Predictors	B	SE	t-Value	p-Value
Goal facilitation	0.17	0.04	5.08	0.00
Ad relevance	0.37	0.03	11.01	0.00
$R^2_{adj} = .32, F(2, 418) = 105.32, p < .001$				
Conditional indirect effects at ad message explicitness				
Mediator	Condition	B	Boot SE	Boot 95% CI
Goal facilitation	Less explicit	0.07	0.02	.04 to .11
Goal facilitation	More explicit	0.03	0.01	.01 to .06
Notes. B refers to unstandardized regression coefficient.				
Bootstrap resamples = 5000.				

B. Mediator: emotional engagement (H7b)

Mediator variable model (DV = Emotional engagement)				
Predictors	B	SE	t-Value	p-Value
Ad relevance	0.42	0.04	10.00	0.00
Ad message explicitness	-0.04	0.05	-0.89	0.37
Ad relevance X Ad message explicitness	-0.04	0.02	-2.30	0.03
R ² = .19, F(3, 417) = 34.64, p < .001				
Dependent variable model (DV = A _{ad})				
Predictors	B	SE	t-Value	p-Value
Emotional engagement	0.19	0.04	5.12	0.00
Ad relevance	0.47	0.04	12.92	0.00
R ² _{adj} = .41, F(2, 418) = 152.40, p < .001				
Conditional indirect effects at Ad message explicitness				
Mediator	Condition	B	Boot SE	Boot 95% CI
Emotional engagement	Less explicit	0.09	0.02	.05 to .14
Emotional engagement	More explicit	0.07	0.02	.04 to .11
Notes. B refers to unstandardized regression coefficient.				
Bootstrap resamples = 5000.				

Discussion

A key contribution of the present research is to account for why some narrative ads are more effective than others. Results of this study suggest that narrative ads with greater self-relevance and vividness increase advertising effectiveness via goal facilitation, emotional engagement, and decreased ad skepticism.

The present study proposed three process variables – goal facilitation and emotional engagement increase positive effects, while decreased ad skepticism was linked to reduced negative cognitive responses. Compared to previous studies focusing on a single process mechanism such as transportation⁵⁷, self-brand connection⁵⁸, and identification⁵⁹, the proposed three parallel process variables clarify the persuasive power of narrative advertising by accounting for both enhanced positivity and reduced negativity. The results also supported the hypothesis that Aad would mediate the effects of emotional engagement and decreased ad skepticism on brand attitudes. Further, narrative ads that produced more goal facilitation also resulted in more positive brand attitudes.

Another contribution is the examination of how the roles of the three process variables vary depending on the perception of ad message explicitness. The results confirmed that under high ad message explicitness, the positive effect of ad relevance

⁵⁷ N.H. Lien, Y.L. Chen, *Narrative Ads: The Effect of Argument Strength and Story Format*, “Journal of Business Research” 2013, Vol. 66, No. 4, pp. 516–522.

⁵⁸ J.E. Escalas, *Self-Referencing and Persuasion...*

⁵⁹ M.D. Slater, D. Rouner, *Entertainment Education and Elaboration Likelihood...*

on goal facilitation and emotional engagement would be attenuated. Explicit messages tend to generate negative cognitive and affective responses in the viewer because they are likely to be perceived as persuasion attempts rather than stories, a notion suggested by previous research⁶⁰. Another reason would be explicit messages may interfere with a viewer's ad story enjoyment, thereby generating negative feelings, disbelief, and counterarguments.

The interaction effect of ad relevance and ad message explicitness on decreased ad skepticism was significant, but the moderated mediation effect was not significant ($B = .004$, 95% bias-corrected CI = $-.002$ to $.010$). One reason for the failed role of decreased ad skepticism as a mediator may be due to a confounding effect. In other words, when viewers are disrupted by an explicit advertising message, they may stop watching the ad and the resulting negative reactions maybe because they were interrupted in the midst of enjoying a story and not due to disruption-caused counterarguments and disbelief.

a. Managerial implications

This study offers important but straightforward managerial implications for advertisers.

First, our findings suggest that advertisers should craft a story with characters and plots embedded in rich imagery that viewers would find personally relevant. The combination of relevancy and vividness can emotionally engage viewers and make them more attentive to the brand's message. Second, ad messages that are less explicit increase goal and emotional engagement. Though the character and plot are central to the narrative, advertisers shouldn't use narratives as a top-down approach where the entire story is explained to the viewers, instead the audience should be left to fill in the final pieces to gain complete comprehension. Advertisers should make sure they engage the viewers to be a part of the narrative and offer enough guidance so as to understand the message on their own such as in a postmodern ad⁶¹. Third, narratives should not be viewed as a means to an end. Brands who decide to use the narrative ad approach to market a product should be cognizant of the ad's personal relevance to the consumer or risk losing favorable ad and brand attitudes because of increased ad skepticism. If the ad is not relevant to the consumer it may be perceived as manipulative, thereby, increasing existing levels of skepticism. Fourth, in the world of social media, a good narrative ad, if found compelling, can be buzzworthy. Chen and Lee⁶² found that an interesting storyline can elicit strong affective responses. A strong plot can facilitate transportation of the viewers into the narrative, thereby, enhancing their enjoyment of the ad, which essentially has a positive impact on the viewers' advertising

⁶⁰ E.g. M. Friedstad, P. Wright, *The Persuasion Knowledge Model...*

⁶¹ S. Proctor, T. Proctor, I. Pappasolomou-Doukakis, *A Postmodern Perspective on Advertisements and Their Analysis*, "Journal of Marketing Communications" 2002, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 31–44.

⁶² T. Chen, H.M. Lee, *Why Do We Share? The Impact of Viral Videos Dramatized to Sell. How Microfilm Advertising Works*, "Journal of Advertising Research" 2014, Vol. 54, No. 3, pp. 292–303.

attitudes and intentions to forward the ad to their social circle. To add to the literature, our findings suggest that if advertisers can specifically focus on enhancing relevance and vividness, but lower message explicitness then it may elevate the ad's ability to go viral. Another advantage, of course, is the large viewership coverage gained at low costs.

b. Limitations and future research

While this research offers exciting insight into narrative advertising, one of the limitations of this study was the use of correlational data to test a comprehensive set of casual relationships. Future research could validate the present findings with controlled experiments. Second, this study relied on a measured variable of ad skepticism. Future research could seek additional insight and validate the present findings by using thought protocols such as number of counterarguments and number of positive thoughts. Third, this study only tested two explanatory variables (ad relevance and ad vividness), but there could be other interesting variables. For example, the fidelity of story, which refers to whether one invests in a story could play an important role in narrative advertising effectiveness. If a story is not believable, a viewer will stop processing the ad and generate negative emotive and cognitive responses, thereby diminishing the equity of the advertised brand. Finally, this study considered only one moderator, message explicitness. Future research could extend this study by testing more moderators, for example, brand integration could be an important variable. No matter how brilliant a story your ad tells, if the brand is not well integrated (e.g., an awkward name drop in the middle or not central to the storyline) then positive viewer responses generated by the ad may not transfer to brand attitude.

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