Seismo

Selling stories of social justice. How consumers react to and learn from social ads

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Abstract
Advertising strategies are constantly changing and today, companies often take a position regarding current social topics in their advertising messages. With two experimental studies using actual ads, we explore how people react to and learn from social ads regarding particular social issues they tackle. With the first study, we examine whether an ad that deals with modern sexism raises awareness about this issue and whether it performs more effectively than a non-narrative, informative video (TED-talk) with the same topic. Second, as corporate social responsibility (CSR) ads are discussed to be received controversial among viewers, we explore how a social ad communicating a CSR message (gay rights) compared to a "classic" product ad performs on brand-relevant outcomes. Both studies indicate that raising awareness for a social issue through social ads could potentially backfire and might only work under certain circumstances. Advertisers, therefore, should elaborate on how they integrate CSR ads into their marketing strategies.

Keywords
social advertising, entertainment education, narrative persuasion, corporate social responsibility, reactance

1 Introduction

Companies have changed their approach of reaching potential consumers and started to not only advertise the products they want to capitalize on, but they also started to include social ideas and progress into advertising messages. Brands supporting the Black Lives Matter movement are recent examples of these developments. Adding to this notion, a variety of campaigns of the last years, such as Nike's "Believe in Something," Gillette's "The Best Men Can Be," and Always' "Like a Girl" campaigns directed their audiences' attention to current societal challenges such as gender and structural (in)equality, existing privileges, and toxic masculinity. These campaigns aim to change social injustice in society with their influence. Although such ads often evoke ambivalent responses in the audience due to the strong images and / or strongly voiced positions (Vézina & Paul, 1997), political consumerism, which is the deliberate buying or not buying of brands that stand for certain political messages, has increased within the last decade (for a recent meta-analysis see Copeland & Boulianne, 2020). While some consumers agree with and endorse the companies' position, others show reactance and scrutinize the companies' aims or disagree with arguments presented, making social messages in ads potentially highly controversial (e. g., McCluskey, 2019). The current set of two case-studies aims at testing effects of actual social ads a) compared to more informative, non-commercial messages regarding their impact on issue-awareness (Study 1) and b) compared to other ads of the same brand regarding their impact on key performance indicators relevant for practitioners of the advertising industry (Study 2). Findings indicate that individual experiences of the ad (transportation) play a crucial role in overcoming reactance in individuals, raising awareness for the topic, and evaluating the ad as positive.

2   Advertising societal issues

Research discusses companies' taking position in societal issues under the term *Corporate Social Responsibility* (CSR). This is not a particularly new area of research on corporate communication but has tremendously changed during the last years. Early conceptualizations of CSR focus on companies' struggle to act according to consumers' moral values and make money for their employees' living. Following Podnar (2008, p. 75) summarizing articles of a special issue on firms taking social responsibility in his editorial, approaches understanding CSR "acknowledge that companies have responsibilities toward the society and environment that go beyond their own interests and legal obligations." Mögele and Tropp (2010, p. 163–164) add to this and state that "CSR has been understood as a concept for companies' taking responsibility voluntarily and incorporating the aspect of sustainability in corporate business activities and in interactions with stakeholders." Thus, companies at least claim to try to use their power and influence to change social injustice and make people aware of such issues. On the other hand, these early conceptualizations also consider that companies do not take a political stance due to altruistic motivations. Still, they presume that social responsibility could improve their image among stakeholders and society (Mögele & Tropp, 2010). Hence, a company's bottom line still remains profitable and not to create social justice for certain groups or raise awareness for social issues (Kraidy & Goeddertz, 2003).

CSR activities and how customers reflect them have also changed within the last years. With the increasing importance of the Internet and globalization (Dodd, 2018), CSR activities have shifted due to new affordances to address consumers' aspirations. Lightfoot (2019) offers an overview of the history of consumer activism for the US and concludes that with the rise of the Internet connecting people and allowing everyone to spread information, companies have to take a position in the socio-political discourse to avoid shitstorms in the long run. Similarly, van der Meer and Jonkman (2021, p. 1) argue that "[w]ith the heightened social visibility of corporations, as a result of processes of mediatization, firms are pressured to engage with […] social issues that are part of broader political discourses" and that they "have become inherently intertwined with their mediatized and polarized socio-political surroundings." Finally, Rank and Contreras (2021) also indicate a generational shift such as that CSR activities particularly matter to people of Generation Y and later generations compared to older generations.

Indeed, research on political consumerism found that people decide to buy or not buy products as a means of political engagement (Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005). Such research has shown that people deliberately buy brands that share one's political stand as a form of civic engagement (de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014) or show actions that concur with consumers' moral beliefs (Baskentli, Sen, Du, & Bhattacharya, 2019). On the other hand, online communication can increase boycotting behavior (Kelm & Dohle, 2018), especially if people disagree with a company's political stance (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021). Albrecht, Campbell, Heinrich and Lammel (2013) identified that brand credibility and a strong customer-brand connection could keep customers from boycotting a brand's product, emphasizing the necessity of building a clear and credible position of brands. Thus, it stands necessary to investigate how firms have to design their campaigns to promote social issues without alienating their customers.

A particular way to communicate a stance to a mass audience in a lighthearted, approachable manner is the use of CSR advertisements. In this paper, we take the perspective of literature on entertainment education, arguing that people tend to internalize the information presented in an accessible, entertaining format (Singhal & Rogers, 2002), such as a commercial ad. With this, we focus on two current societal issues in two case-studies: modern sexism (Study 1) and gay rights (Study 2). We chose to aim at high external validity for

both studies using commercials that were originally promoted and available on the advertisers' YouTube channels.

3   Why use narrative social ads for societal advertising?

A growing number of studies have shown that persuasive messages are particularly convincing when presented within narration because narratives have multiple advantages over argument-driven messages (Escalas, 2004). Following Escalas (1998, p. 273), a minimal definition of narratives is based on a series of actions that underlie chronology (timely sequence of actions) and causality (events are caused by another). Discussing the extended elaboration likelihood model, Slater and Rouner (2002, p. 182) put that "[t]he ability of skilled advertisers […] to generate reasonably meaningful narratives, with character and situation, in 30 seconds also illustrates people's inherent inclination to readily process narrative." Indeed, research on product advertising shows that narrative ads seem to outperform informative ones in many regards. A recent study by Kim, Ratneshwar, and Thorson (2017) found that narrative versus non-narrative ads evoked more emotional responses, entertainment experiences, credibility, and perceived goal facilitation leading to better ad and brand attitudes. Narrative content that evokes emotions through affective arguments was also shown to be more effective than content based on informative arguments when promoting healthy products to children (Naderer, Binder, Matthes, & Mayrhofer, 2020). Yet, we lack research on the effectiveness of narratives for ads that thematize social issues. However, communicating their stance via commercial ads might be one of the most promising ways to inform a mass audience of customers of their social and political stance.

Research in the field of (entertainment) communication has shown that movies, series, or even books can increase awareness of social issues and empower people to change their behaviors accordingly (e.g., Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne, 2007; Slater & Rouner, 2002; Vaughan, Rogers, Singhal, & Swalehe, 2000). This research is also referred to as *entertainment education* (e.g., Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Singhal & Rogers, 2002), and it identifies various aspects of narrations that can help persuade and convince people. Narratives allow people to identify with protagonists (Cohen, 2001), facilitate transportation into the story (Green & Brock, 2000), and overcome psychological resistances such as reactance and counterarguing in individuals (Dillard & Shen, 2005).

3.1 Transportation

Originally developed by the work of Gerrig (1993), transportation into a narrative describes the process of getting involved with a story, immersing into the narrative, and being "transported" into the story. Green and Brock (2000, p. 701) define transportation "as a distinct mental process, an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings." People transported into a story experience vivid mental images (Green, 2004), which commonly makes being transported an enjoyable experience (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008). Narrative messages are particularly successful in eliciting feelings of being transported than informative messages that rather activate analytical elaboration that focuses on cognitive processing and thus hamper getting immersed into the message (Escalas, 2007). Green (2004) found individual knowledge and realism of a story relevant for transportation. Other studies found need for affect (Appel & Richter, 2010), one's attitude for the particular topic (Sukalla, 2018), and (positive) expectations regarding the story (Appel, Schreiner, Haffmans, & Richter, 2019) meaningful predictors for successful transportation.

Transportation is thought to be meaningful for persuasive effects because people accept the conditions of a story, report more story-consistent beliefs, and become less skeptical against story content. Bilandzic and Busselle (2008) also speak of the cultivation of story-consistent beliefs that individuals learn from multiple transportation experiences into narrative worlds. Transportation may also lead indi-

viduals to include traits of story protagonists into their self-concept (Isberner et al., 2019; Sestir & Green, 2010). Nonetheless, stronger arguments presented in a story still appear more convincing than weak arguments, especially among skeptical individuals (Appel et al., 2019). Summarizing these implications for transportation and persuasion, research argues that transportation can help overcome cognitive and emotional resistances in individuals, such as reactance and counterarguing set against advertising by people's persuasion knowledge.

3.2 Reactance and counterarguing

Being told what to do or what to think and thus becoming somewhat limited in freedom, people may just reject the instruction. This affective motivation is called reactance and is triggered when people become aware that their freedom of opinion is being threatened, for example, by a persuasive attempt (Brehm, 1966; Fransen, Verlegh, Kirmani, & Smit, 2015). The further experience of reactance might best be described as a combination of affective anger and negative cognitions (Dillard & Shen, 2005; Quick, 2012). Most importantly, the more reactance people experience, the less they are willing to accept persuasive messages (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010).

In her entertainment overcoming resistance model, Moyer-Gusé (2008, p. 414) argues that messages that are entertaining and use "a more subtle form of persuasion may overcome this type of reactance." Particularly, she builds upon the extended elaboration likelihood model (E-ELM; Slater & Rouner, 2002) and argues that narrative messages induce less resistance because they do, at first glance, not look like persuasion messages. Slater and Rouner (2002) argue that when watching an informative ad, people decide in the early stages whether the product could be relevant for them or not. This might be explained by the persuasion knowledge model that assumes that people are aware that companies compete for consumers' attention (Friestad & Wright, 1994). In a narrative, the storyline can help to let "such awareness […] fade into the background"

(Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 176). Moreover, narratives offer the audience a set of protagonists to identify with. Combined with the story plot, these factors make the persuasion intend less obtrusive and help absorb the audience into a story. Slater and Rouner (2002) also state that variables such as issue involvement (which is a key moderator in the original ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) "are replaced by engagement or absorption in the narrative and identification with characters" (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 177).

Regarding characters in narrative ads, in particular, Moyer-Gusé argues that messages appear less persuasive when peers deliver them, and the more people relate to or identify with fictional characters, the more these characters appear familiar (e. g., Burgoon et al., 2002). Altogether, research on narrative persuasion suggests that the more people are transported into a fictional world, the more messages can overcome their natural resistances and succeed in persuasion. With the present studies, we want to replicate presumed effects for ads that raise awareness for social issues. Such narrative ads, presenting light, accessible arguments, should outperform rather sober, informative and non-narrative messages because they potentially overcome reactance reactions and counterarguing evoked by a non-narrative, informational message (Escalas, 2007; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). We thus formulated the following two hypotheses:

H1: Narrative social ads evoke a) more transportation and b) less reactance toward the presented message than non-narrative, informative videos.
H2: The positive effect of narrative social ads on issue awareness of the promoted social issue is mediated by a) higher transportation and b) less reactance reactions toward the message.

However, advertisers might be scared to alienate customers by taking a position in current social debates. Indeed, reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) also suggests that people tend to act consistently and avoid behaviors that are not congruent

with their worldviews. If companies talk about social issues, people might take this as provocative. And while provocation is a good tool to raise awareness, it can potentially be problematic for brand evaluations and intentions (Vézina & Paul, 1997). Furthermore, if brands raise social issues, consumers might think that they are doing this to gain profit and do not care about the social issue at hand (Kraidy & Goeddertz, 2003). Thus, customers might psychologically devalue advertisers who disagree with customers' opinions and attitudes and their products. To address this possibility, we formulated the following research question:

> RQ1: Compared to a clip that does not address any social issue, how do narrative social ads and non-narrative, informative videos concerned with societal issues affect a) counterarguing, b) transportation and c) awareness of the promoted social issue?

4 Study 1

We conducted a case study comparing existing stimuli. Thus, our design was focused on high external validity.

4.1 Method
We recruited a convenience sample of 109 participants (57.8 % female; age, $M = 26.95$, $SD = 10.76$). This research was part of a research seminar at a large German University. Students of the seminar posted the link to the survey in Facebook groups interested in research and shared the link via their Facebook and Instagram profiles in December 2019.

4.1.1 Procedure
After providing informed consent, we randomly assigned participants to watch one of three videos: Participants in the narrative social ad condition watched the Always ad "Like a Girl." In this ad, people are asked about their associations when doing certain activities (e.g., throwing a ball) "like a girl" to reveal gender biases (01:00 minute length). As a non-narrative,

informative video tackling the same social issue, we showed participants in the informative condition a clip from a TED talk about "Why gender-inclusive language matters" in which a graduate student explained that there exists a gender bias in language so that words like "mankind," "manpower," and "chairman" are associated with power and strength while female words are connected to insult and weakness (01:13 minutes length). The chosen stimuli thus vary in their narrative format as well as the persuasive setting. Yet, our search did not render viable examples that would lead to internal valid designs, as we would have needed spots in which the same advertiser argues the same social issue in a narrative and a non-narrative way. Thus, we have selected a social ad and a TED-talk that addressed the same issue using similar arguments. In the control condition, we showed participants a video that was both non-narrative and not tackling a societal issue. In this condition, participants saw an excerpt of a documentary about eagles with no speaker (01:08 minutes in length). We chose modern sexism because this is one of the most discussed social issues in Western societies that exist in various layers: While women earn less money for the same work as done by their male colleagues (e.g., European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021; Gaucher, Friesen, & Kay, 2011), sexism was an important part of the 2016 US presidential election (e.g., Godbole, Malyar, & Valian, 2019), and is deep-seated in everyday language discriminating women, for example, by using sexist stereotypes (Bruckmüller, Hegarty, & Abele, 2012; Heilman & Eagly, 2008). After watching the respective video of each condition, participants answered questions about transportation, reactance, and sexism. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

4.1.2 Measures
For an overview of original items used in Study 1, see Table S1 in the supplementary material.

Transportation. We measured transportation as our mediator with ten items

(e.g., "While watching the video, I felt drawn into what was happening."; Appel et al., 2015) on a 7-point scale (1 = I don't agree at all; 7 = I agree completely; M = 4.12, SD = 1.61, = .93).

Reactance. To assess viewers' reactance as our mediator, we employed five items (e.g., "I didn't like the fact that the video message tried to tell me what's right."; Dillard & Shen, 2005) on a 7-point scale (1 = I don't agree at all; 7 = I agree completely; M = 2.19, SD = 1.29, = .85).

Modern sexism. As our dependent variable, we examined our participants' levels of modern sexism to see whether the videos were able to create awareness (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995; measured with eight items on a 7-point scale; 1 = I don't agree at all; 7 = I agree completely; M = 2.99, SD = 0.99, = .82). The scale measures the perception of prevalent sexism in societies with higher scores indicating higher levels of sexism and thus lower awareness for this societal problem (e.g., "Discrimination against women is no longer a social problem in Germany.").

4.2 Results

We conducted a MANOVA to identify differences in all outcome variables between all conditions. Results indicated a significant multivariate effect of condition, F(3, 105) = 78.255, p < .001, Pillai's V = .69, η_p^2 = .48. Table 1 shows an overview of single comparisons for all outcome variables between conditions. While the videos did not affect participants' sexism, participants' reactance and transportation levels differed between conditions. These findings support H1a and H1b.

To further investigate the relationship between counterarguing and sexism, we conducted a mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro model 6 in SPSS. We entered the conditions as the independent variable, treating the control condition as our reference group, transportation and reactance as mediators, and sexism as our outcome variable. As the topic may be more relevant to participants who identify as female, we inserted gender (dummy-coded with 1 = female; 0 = male and others) as a control variable (Figure 1).

4.2.1 Transportation

We found that transportation was higher for both the narrative social ad condition and the non-narrative video condition than the control group. In addition, female participants experienced higher transportation levels than male participants (Table 2). When inserting the social ad condition as a reference group, we found that the non-narrative video had lower transportation levels than the social ad condition (Table 3). This indicates our manipulation was successful, as the non-narrative video condition was indeed perceived as less transporting than the narrative social ad condition.

4.2.2 Reactance

Reactance levels were higher for both experimental conditions compared to the control group (Table 2). Reactance was also higher in the non-narrative video condition than the narrative social ad condition (Table 3). Transportation minimized the felt reactance of participants.

4.2.3 Sexism

For sexism, we found a direct effect of participants' gender. Female participants showed lower levels of sexism than male participants. We also found that the narrative social ad positively affected participants' sexism compared to the control group, which was not the case for the non-narrative video condition (Table 2). In addition, the social ad condition also increased participants' sexism compared to the non-narrative video condition (Table 3). Transportation minimized participants' sexism, which indicates an indirect effect of the conditions via transportation on sexism.

4.2.4 Indirect effect

The paths that compared the non-narrative video condition to the control group (b = −0.64; LLCI = −1.04; ULCI = −0.23) and to the narrative social ad condition (b = 0.43; LLCI = 0.17; ULCI = 0.74) on sexism via transportation were significant. Also, the path of the narrative social ad condition compared to the control group via transportation on sexism (b = −1.07;

Table 1:   Effects of condition on all outcomes in Study 1 and Study 2

	Study 1 conditions				
	Narrative social ad video M (SE)	Non-narrative video M (SE)	Control video M (SE)	F-test F (df)	η_p^2
Transportation	5.54a (1.14)	4.17b (0.80)	2.45c (0.85)	100.03*** (2.106)	.65
Reactance	1.92a (1.92)	3.24b (1.04)	1.58a (1.01)	21.62*** (2.106)	.29
Sexism	2.88a (0.88)	3.07a (0.98)	3.05a (1.14)	0.41 (2.106)	.08
	Study 2 conditions				
	Social ad M (SE)	Product ad M (SE)	Control video M (SE)	F-test F (df)	η_p^2
Ad attitude	4.15a (.17)	3.46b (.18)	3.56b (.17)	4.66* (2.109)	.08
Brand attitude	2.76a (.14)	2.77a (.15)	2.56a (.16)	.62 (2.109)	.01
Transportation	2.96a, b (.14)	2.45a (.15)	3.15b (.16)	5.62** (2.109)	.09
Narrativity	5.00a (.15)	4.61a (.14)	2.54b (.14)	87.86*** (2.109)	.62
Negative attitudes toward homosexuals	1.62a (.13)	1.43a (.14)	1.27a (.13)	1.76 (2.109)	.03

Note. *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001. Within rows, means with no subscripts in common differ at p<.05. Sidak corrections were used to adjust for multiple comparisons.

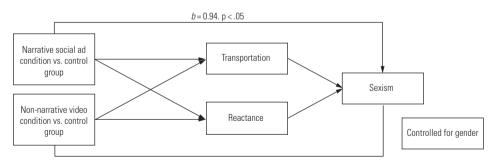Figure 1:   Mediation model in Study 1; 5000 bootstrapping samples

Indirect effect informative condition via Transportation on Sexism, b = −0.64, 95 % CI [−1.04, −0.23]
Indirect effect social ad condition via Transportation on Sexism, b = −1.07, 95 % CI [−1.67,−0.41]
Indirect effect informative condition via Reactance on Sexism, b = 0.10, 95 % CI [−0.26,0.60]
Indirect effect social ad condition via Reactance on Sexism, b = 006, 95 % CI [−0.12, 0.46]
Indirect effect informative condition via Transportation & Reactance on Sexism, b = −0.02, 95 % CI [0.19, 0.06]
Indirect effect social ad condition via Transportation & Reactance on Sexism, b = −0.04, 95 % CI [−0.04, 0.10]

Table 2:   Mediation model Study 1; control group inserted as a reference group

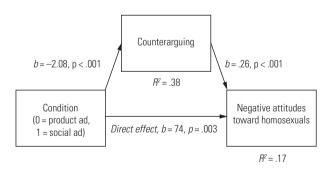|	Transportation		Reactance		Sexism	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Narrative social ad condition (versus reference group)	3.05***	0.19	1.18**	0.42	0.94*	0.36
Non-narrative video condition (versus reference group)	1.82***	0.23	2.07***	0.33	0.43	0.32
Gender, Female	0.51**	0.19	−0.26	0.22	−0.56**	0.18
Transportation			−0.26*	0.11	−0.35***	0.09
Reactance					0.05	0.08
Explained Variance R²	.68		.35		.26	

Total Effect. Narrative social ad condition b = −0.11; LLCI = −.54; ULCI = .31. Non-narrative video condition b = −0.13; LLCI = −.59; ULCI = .32
Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001; 5000 bootstrapping samples.

Table 3:   Mediation model Study 1; narrative social ad condition inserted as a reference group

	Transportation		Reactance		Sexism	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Control group (versus reference group)	−3.05***	0.19	−1.18**	0.42	−0.94*	0.36
Non-narrative video condition (versus reference group)	−1.22***	0.23	0.89**	0.29	−0.51*	0.25
Gender, Female	0.51**	0.19	−0.26	0.22	−0.56**	0.18
Transportation			−0.26*	0.11	−0.35***	0.09
Reactance					0.05	0.08
Explained Variance R²	.68		.68		.68	

Total Effect. Control group b = 0.11; LLCI = −.31; ULC = .54. Non-narrative video condition b = −0.02; LLCI = −.47; ULCI = .43.
Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001; 5000 bootstrapping samples.

Figure 2:   Mediation model in Study 2; 5000 bootstrapping samples

Indirect effect, *b* = −0.55 %, CI [−1.01, −0.13]
Total effect, *b* = .19, *p* = .37

LLCI = −1.68; ULCI = −0.40) indicated an indirect effect. These findings support H2a. However, neither the indirect path via reactance nor the indirect path via transportation and reactance reached significance. Thus, H2b was rejected.

4.3 Study 1 discussion

For Study 1, we found that a narrative social ad indeed increases transportation and decreases reactance compared to a non-narrative, informative video tackling the same social issue and a control video that neither transports a social message nor a narrative. We also found counter-intuitive results regarding our main outcome variable, sexism. While the social ad evoked more sexism directly, it also had the highest levels of transportation. Transportation, in turn, led to a decrease in participants' sexism. For this reason, the total effect model was not significant. Hence, the results indicate that narrative social ads can impact awareness for a social topic and lead to a decrease in sexism, but *only* if consumers feel transported by the message. If viewers are not transported by the ad, then their level of sexism is even increased. Advertisers should therefore make sure to create CSR ads that have high identification and transportation potential to viewers. Our study also shows that ads potentially can be more effective in achieving awareness for the portrayed topic compared to an informative video tackling the same social issue due to said transportation levels. This is somewhat surprising as companies could be confronted with having an ulterior motive for raising the issue in the first place (Kraidy & Goeddertz, 2003). Therefore, companies should be careful regarding the stories they tell and consider to include people in the creative process who suffer from the concrete issues addressed. At the same time, other than with a non-narrative informative video, the narrative communication of an informative issue is more unexpected, raising the potential for entertainment education effects (e. g., Kim et al., 2017)

Nonetheless, advertisers might ask how such ads perform compared to narrative product ads. In particular, ads taking a position on social issues may polarize viewers and evoke counterarguing in specific viewer groups leading to lower brand acceptance. To empirically test this assumption, we conducted a second study to compare the effects of two narrative ads (social ad vs. product ad) of the same brand on how they perform in terms of counterarguing and brand attitude.

5　Study 2

In Study 2, we focused more specifically on how a brand is affected by using social issues in their advertising campaigns compared to commercials that refrain from tackling social issues. Brands' involvement in social issues can be potentially beneficial because positioning the brand as prosocial might provide a so-called halo effect (Jin & Lee, 2019). The halo effect describes a systematic cognitive bias where evaluations are results of raters' tendency to rely on global emotional states or affect rather than carefully examining and differentiating between the distinct and potentially independent brand attributes (Leuthesser, Kohli, & Harich, 1995). In other words, perceiving one specific company's action as positive and worthy could affect our general assessment of the whole company as positive and impact both ad and brand evaluation.

At the same, raising social issues might be controversial, which can also potentially change brand evaluations and intentions negatively (Vézina & Paul, 1997). And if brands raise social issues, consumers might show reactance, as they perceive these actions as a plot to gain profit (Kraidy & Goeddertz, 2003). While referring to a social issue might be perceived as provocative, potentially prosocial, and can grab people's attention, it could also negatively affect brand outcomes like brand evaluation due to reactance against the messages (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020; Vézina & Paul, 1997). As the current literature suggests both positive and negative outcomes, we do not formulate a hypothesis, but instead, we ask:

RQ2: How does a narrative social ad compared to a narrative product ad perform in terms of key performance indicators, a) counterarguing, b) transportation and c) brand outcomes?

5.1 Method

We recruited a convenience sample of 116 participants via posts in online forums and social media in December 2019. Like Study 1, this research was part of a research seminar. Students of the seminar posted the link to the survey in Facebook groups interested in research and shared the link via their Facebook and Instagram profiles. We excluded two participants who indicated problems playing the ads, leaving a final sample of $N = 114$ participants (55 % female; age, $M = 33.63$, $SD = 12.79$).

5.1.1 Procedure

After providing informed consent, we randomly assigned participants to watch one of three videos: Participants in the social ad condition watched a Burger King ad telling a story about gay marriage and gay rights (01:38 minutes length). Participants in the product ad condition watched a Burger King ad telling a story about a burger patty that was delivered from a volcano giving it a special taste (01:53 minutes length). In a third control condition, participants watched a drone flight over a big city (01:24 minutes in length). We chose the issue of gay rights inequality because it is a societal issue that is often discussed but still quite understudied in communication (Chan, 2017). Moreover, compared to modern sexism, gay rights is a topic that targets a minority in society (rather than half of the society). After watching, participants answered questionnaires for ad attitude, narrativity, transportation, counterarguing, brand attitude, attitudes toward homosexuals, and sociodemographic information. Finally, participants were probed for suspicion, thanked for their participation, and debriefed.

5.1.2 Measures

For an overview of original items used in Study 2, see TableS2 in the supplementary material.

Ad attitude. We measured ad attitude with six items from Lastovicka's (1983) television commercial rating scale. The scale focusses three aspects of ad evaluation: relevance (e. g., "The commercial was meaningful to me."), confusion (e. g., "I was not sure what was going on in the commercial."), and entertainment (e. g., "The ad was not just selling – it was entertaining me."). We recoded confusion items to make high scores represent positive evaluations. The scale showed good internal consistency across these three dimensions ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.09$, $\alpha = .77$).

Narrativity and transportation. To account for possible differences in narrativity between both ads, we assessed narrativity using the items from Kim et al. (2017) asking for characteristics of narration, for instance, "the commercial shows how a series of events unfolded in a story format" ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.39$, $\alpha = .89$). Similar to Study 1, we measured transportation with five items of the transportation short scale (Appel et al., 2015). The scale showed a good internal consistency ($M = 2.86$, $SD = .95$, $\alpha = .73$).

Counterarguing. In both ad conditions, we measured counterarguing with three items from Nabi et al. (2007). As there was no persuasive message in the control condition, these questions were skipped in that condition. We recoded these items in a way that high values indicate high counterarguing. The measure showed high internal consistency ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 2.24$, $\alpha = .97$).

Brand attitude. We measured attitude toward the brand with six items of Cho's (2011) brand respect scale. This subdimension reflects on how people perceive the authenticity of a brand (e. g., "This brand is honest to me.") and how they overall appreciate a brand's public image ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 2.67$, $\alpha = .84$).

Attitudes toward homosexuals. We assessed (negative) attitude toward homosexuals with five statements, for instance "Homosexuality is a psychological disorder" ($M = 1.44$, $SD = .82$, $\alpha = .86$). Thus, high scores on this measure represent negative prejudice against homosexuals.

5.2 Results

We conducted a MANOVA to identify differences in all outcome variables (but counterarguing because it was not measured in the control group) between all conditions. Results indicated a significant multivariate effect of condition, $F(10, 212) = 14.62$, $p < .001$, Pillai's $V = .82$, $\eta_p^2 = .41$. Table 1 shows an overview of single comparisons for all outcome variables between conditions. While ads did not differ in narrativity or transportation, participants rated the social ad more positively than the product ad. There was, however, no difference in attitudes toward the brand or homosexuals. An additional independent t-test was used to compare both ad conditions for counterarguing. On average, counterarguing was significantly lower for the social ad ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.56$) than the product ad ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 2.56$). This difference, 1.69, BCa 95% CI [.73, 2.65] was significant $t(73) = 3.51$, $p = .001$ and represented a large-sized effect, $d = 0.80$.

To further investigate the relationship between counterarguing and attitudes toward homosexuals, we conducted a mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro model 6 in SPSS, only comparing the product ad and the social ad. We did this because we did not measure counterarguing in the control group. We entered the condition as the independent variable, counterarguing as a mediator, and negative attitude toward homosexuals as outcome variable. There was a direct association between condition and negative attitudes toward homosexuals. The direct effect indicates that participants watching the social ad compared to the product ad had more negative attitudes about homosexuals. Nonetheless, the social ad compared to the product ad showed less counterarguing. Counterarguing, in turn, showed positive associations with negative attitudes toward homosexuals. This indirect effect of condition on attitudes toward homosexuals via counterarguing was significant. Altogether, the total effect of condition on attitudes was not significant as both associations negated each other (Figure 2). Together, these findings indicate that while the social ad increased negative attitudes toward homosexuals directly, it also reduced negative attitudes toward homosexuals indirectly mediated by (comparably less) counterarguing.

5.3 Study 2 discussion

There are two main findings in Study 2. First, the social ad compared to the product ad, which was similarly narrative and transporting, did not differ regarding brand evaluation, but we found a difference in ad attitude. Thus, while being similarly entertaining, the ad containing a social message was evaluated better and triggered less counterarguing than the product ad.

Second, we found counter-intuitive results regarding attitudes toward homosexuals. While the social ad evoked more negative attitudes directly, it also reduced counterarguing compared to the product ad. Counterarguing, in turn, also led to negative attitudes toward homosexuals. For this reason, the total effect model was not significant. This finding is particularly interesting in light of Study 1, where transportation was the key indicator for issue awareness. When comparing two narrative ads, and transportation levels are similar, counterarguing in response to specific messages might take the bigger part in attitude change. A limitation here is that we chose a different measure to assess counterarguing in Study 2 (instead of reactance in Study 1). While these constructs appear similar and partly overlapping (Moyer-Gusé, 2008), the items for counterarguing are framed positively (e.g., "It was easy for me to agree with the statements mentioned."). Another reason for this pattern could be that while the ad discussed a social topic, the characters depicted may have rather confirmed than reduced prejudice and stereotypes against male homosexuality. Also, the product ad did not include any homosexual characters or discuss the topic explicitly. Compared to the social ad, it may have activated overall thoughts (positive and negative) about homosexuality. Future studies should look at ads that implicitly rather than obviously discuss homosexuality to not foster existing stereotypes.

6 General discussion

The current set of studies aims to investigate how efficient commercial ads can promote societal issues and how such a promotion impacts central advertising constructs. In Study 1, participants watched a social ad talking about female empowerment, a non-narrative, informative video tackling the same social issue or a control video that was both non-narrative and not tackling a societal issue. Results show that narrative social ads are most effective in creating viewers' transportation. Yet, concerning the social issues we were examining, we found that social ads increased participants' sexism. Only if viewers felt transported by the ad, we observe an indirect, negative effect on sexism. In Study 2, participants watched one of two ads of the same company. Participants watching an ad promoting gay marriage (compared to a product ad) reported less counterarguing and evaluated the spot better. However, attitudes toward homosexuals did not differ between conditions, so the social ad failed in promoting the social issue addressed. These findings have several implications for societal advertising regarding the consequences for the advertiser and social issues.

Regarding advertisers, the findings of Study 2 imply that a narrative social ad (here from Burger King) was evaluated better than a common narrative product ad. The social ad also evoked less counterarguing than the product ad. This can be particularly meaningful because counterarguing is one of the most important obstacles advertising has to overcome for successful persuasion (Moyer-Gusé 2008). These findings support the implementation of CSR messages into advertising and may come with implications for two major challenges that connect to CSR measures in ads. First, potential customers who share a different opinion on particular topics could boycott a brand or company that does not take their socio-political stand. A CSR campaign could backfire for this particular group (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021). Narrative ads might overcome this reactance if they are well-designed and respect ideas of the opposite opinion (Schmitt, Caspari, Wulf, Bloch, & Rieger, 2021). Second, narratives might overcome counterarguing connected to customers calling out companies for hypocritical support for social issues. Even if customers generally agree to CSR messages, they might accuse companies of only hypocritically taking a stand and engaging in behaviors such as fem-washing (Takedomi Karlsson & Ramasar, 2020), pinkwashing (Li, 2022), or greenwashing (Schmuck, Matthes, & Naderer, 2018). Greenwashing, for instance, relates to promoting environmentally friendly behavior while the production conditions still contribute to ecological destruction. For these reasons, companies should elaborate deeply whether and how they take a stance in social issues and whether their company appears believable and authentic concerning that specific issue (e.g., an airline might prefer to speak up for diverse recruiting rather than for sustainability as air travel is known for its negative carbon footprint). Concerning "washing" practices, learning about deceiving practices of a brand or industry may deteriorate trust in social claims as a whole, and drawing on schema-theory (Blanchard, DeSarbo, Atalay, & Harmancioglu, 2012; Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020) could debunk the trust in a whole product-market (also Albrecht et al., 2013). Thus, companies that engage in particular CSR marketing messages have to think about how they communicate their stand to avoid unnecessary headwinds and have a responsibility to support respective issues and prepare to defend against the accusation of hypocrisy.

Regarding the effectiveness in raising awareness of social issues, our studies indicate that it may not be the ad itself but how people experience and perceive it that plays a more crucial role than employed stylistic characteristics of the ad. In Study 1, participants watching the narrative social ad compared to those watching the informative clip showed higher levels of sexism. However, the social ad also increased feelings of transportation which, in turn, were negatively associated with sexism. Hence, only if they felt transported

by the social ad, sexism decreased. Likewise, in Study 2, the social ad had a negative direct effect, increasing homophobia compared to the control ad. Here, counterarguing had the mediating role similar to transportation in Study 1. Indeed, this finding could be explained by the control spot not containing any content related to homosexuality and therefore being perceived lighter overall.

In this context, two major shortcomings of the current case studies should be discussed. First, we compared a narrative social ad to a non-narrative, informative video (Study 1) and a narrative social ad to a narrative product ad (Study 2). While we found meaningful effects regarding the processing of narrative social ads compared to informative clips and narrative product ads in increasing awareness for a topic and encountering reactance and counterarguing, it appears questionable whether practitioners, in reality, need to decide *between* these options and campaigns. Second, the current studies only took the micro perspective, asking singular participants for their very own perceptions and attitudes. However, in reality, especially controversial campaigns such as the "Like a Girl" campaign are discussed publicly on social networking sites (e. g., Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016), offering a more nuanced discourse. Especially for debates on gender and feminism, patterns such as communication styles impact how people evaluate campaigns (Hayat, Lesser, & Samuel-Azran, 2017). Such social impact factors have not been included in the presented studies and should be accounted for in future research designs. Thus, our studies only look at how individuals react to such campaigns without effects from the overall echoes, discourse, and debate such campaigns may initiate.

Our findings have important implications for existing theoretical approaches in entertainment education. Here, Study 1 shows that narrative stories or printed products and social ads can increase awareness for a social issue. As in the context of story narratives in a book (e. g., Green, 2004; Green & Brock, 2000), transportation and counterarguing in a social ad play an important role in communicating social issues. Indeed, as people have learned that ads are trying to sell them something (Friestad & Wright, 1994), ads may have a harder time overcoming this persuasion knowledge. This knowledge might still keep them from buying the argument even though they enjoy watching the spot. Future research will be necessary to further unveil how persuasion knowledge triggered when watching an ad may impede advertising and the social message of an ad.

These are also the core limitations of the current set of studies. Both studies are cross-sectional experimental case studies. To increase ecological and external validity, we used existing ads of well-known brands (Always and Burger King), not manipulated for the studies' purpose. While this has the advantage that our findings are easily transferable to the "real world" and mirror the exact communication that marketeers intended when they released this material online, this procedure comes with confounds. First, participants likely had pre-existing brand images, which may have impacted their evaluations of the spots, independent of the presented content. We also examined two different social issues. Gender equality and speaking out for the LGBTQIA* community might be experienced very differently in controversy and reactance. In addition, participants might have overall opinions on sexism and heteronormativity that are not easily changed while watching one short clip of an advertiser. We employed an experimental design with a control group per study to account for this possibility in both studies. However, to account for attitude changes over time and the role of CSR and social advertising within this process, longitudinal studies would be necessary. Lastly, as mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the stimulus material we employed in both studies differed more than just regarding the aspect we were examining. Hence, there are differences in, e. g., music, actors, and what kind of depth of information was transported. This diminished the internal validity of the experiment. At the same time, because we used existing material,

the external validity of our experiment can be considered as high, as we can make conclusions about how actual available and produced content impacts viewers regarding their attitudes.

7   Conclusion

Together, both studies show that the companies' decision to change their promotional strategies by including social issues in corporate messages might be a double-edged sword. While confronting a social issue in a promotional message can potentially raise transportation or narration for viewers and positively affect ad attitudes, it highly depends on how people experience the ad in terms of transportation and counterarguing in whether they will support the social message behind that. If ads cannot overcome obstacles such as counterarguing and reactance reactions, it is possible that they even backfire and decrease viewers' awareness for the societal topic. Hence, companies should consider testing such social ads for their transportability in independent pretests and ponder if using a social issue in their promotional messages just furthers their profit but potentially harms the social plan, which should be worth more than gaining some sympathy points.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited). https://https://www.hope.uzh.ch/scoms/article/view/j.scoms.2022.01.3054

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