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# Using Drama to Persuade

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# Using Drama to Persuade

## **Abstract**

Television ads can be classified as either arguments or dramas or hybrids of these forms. We claim that form dimension influences how ads are processed. An argument backs its claims with appeals to objectivity and is processed evaluatively. A drama appeals more to subjective criteria and is processed empathically. A study is reported in which 40 television commercials were classified on a dramatization scale. They were shown to 1,215 people, and measures of evaluative and empathic processing were taken. The measures were found to be weighted differently for arguments and dramas, supporting the contention that form influences processing.

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## **Comments**

At the time of publication, author Daniel Romer was affiliated with Leo Burnett, Inc. Currently, he is a faculty member at the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

# Using Drama to Persuade

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JOSH McQUEEN\*

Television ads can be classified as either arguments or dramas or hybrids of these forms. We claim that form dimension influences how ads are processed. An argument backs its claims with appeals to objectivity and is processed evaluatively. A drama appeals more to subjective criteria and is processed empathically. A study is reported in which 40 television commercials were classified on a dramatization scale. They were shown to 1,215 people, and measures of evaluative and empathic processing were taken. The measures were found to be weighted differently for arguments and dramas, supporting the contention that form influences processing.

Studies of persuasion in many fields distinguish between reasoned argument on the one hand and story, narrative, or drama on the other. The distinction is found in psychology (Bruner 1986), literature (Booth 1974; Chatman 1978; Scholes 1981), theology (Goldberg 1982), law (Bennett and Feldman 1981), communication (Fisher 1984), history (White 1981), and economics (McCloskey 1985). Wells (1988) is the first to apply it to advertising.

The distinction between argument and drama matters to the study of advertising because, we argue, different forms of advertising lead consumers to process claims in different ways. These distinctions need to be preserved in systematic research on persuasion and in diagnostic testing of commercials.

This article explores the topic conceptually and empirically. It defines the concept of drama in advertising, proposes a measure, and tests whether dramatization influences how advertising claims are processed. Four indicators of process are proposed: expressions of belief, counterargument, expressions of feeling, and judgments of verisimilitude or plausibility. Effective drama is hypothesized to influence beliefs by a path that evokes more expression of feeling and verisimilitude, less counterargument, and less direct elicitation of belief than occurs with effective argument.

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## ADVERTISING FORM AND FUNCTION

### Advertising Forms

Form is a popular theme in advertising texts. Ray (1982) classifies commercials by "format," e.g., warmth, testimony, refutation, repetition, and fear. Aaker and Myers (1987) use the term "message factors." Rothschild (1987) refers to classes of creative appeal (rational versus emotional, product focus versus consumer focus) and execution style (slice of life, product comparison, problem/solution, music, sex, and humor).

Following Wells (1988), we argue for a different form dimension—the extent to which the advertising is dramatized. Speculation and empirical research in a wide variety of disciplines suggest that dramas work in quite different ways than arguments. A drama draws the viewer into the action it portrays. Conversely, an argument holds the viewer at arm's length, rather as a platform speech does (Wells 1988). When a drama is successful, the audience becomes "lost" in the story and experiences the concerns and feelings of the characters. When an argument is successful, the audience weighs the evidence and then yields to it.

### The Dramatization Scale

We conceive of argument and drama as extreme points on a continuous scale constructed with plot, character, and narration as attributes that mark transitions along the scale.

At the argument extreme of the scale, there is a narrator, but the ad has no plot or character. An argument starts to become a story when plot is introduced.

Plot comprises a stable state of affairs breached to induce a crisis and finally redressed (see Bruner 1986). Although plot usually involves human intentions, that need not be so. Durgee (1988), for example, claims that advertising can impute drama to consumer products by portraying a sequence of expectancy, tension, and resolution in product use (for example, the plan, aim, shoot sequence in using a camera). It is not difficult to see plot in commercials that star products rather than humans. When a detergent fights a stain, or one diaper competes with another to retain water, the events enact a plot. We use the term "demonstration" to refer to a commercial with plot but no human character.<sup>1</sup>

The transition from demonstration to story is marked by the concept of character. Characters are protagonists who act within the context of a plot, as distinct from narrators, who address the audience. Character serves to make human values salient (Scholes 1981), so that characters placed in conjunction with products are a resource by which advertising can express claims of product value.

So long as an interpreter stands between events and the audience, we have narration. When the narrator is removed, the story becomes a drama; the distinction is between telling and showing (Booth 1961). Narration, or telling, draws attention to the fact that events have been selected from a larger set of past events (Scholes 1981) and are being reported to the audience for a reason. Although narration can underscore an event's meaning, explaining its relevance to a claim, there is a cost to doing so because the appeal tends to be processed evaluatively, with consciousness of persuasive intent. In a drama, by contrast, events are not so obviously selected and ordered: they seem to simply unfold (White 1981). Without a narrator, advertising has to depend on verisimilitude to establish what the depicted events are worth to its claim. If it succeeds, this type of ad builds an empathic bond between its audience and the concerns of its characters. If it fails, it is perceived as contrived or hokey, and empathy gives way to evaluativeness.

In summary, the rationale for the drama scale is the contrast between argument and drama. Argument has three attributes: it is plotless, characterless, and narrated. Its indicative mood can be quite explicit about what consumers should believe and why. At the other extreme, drama has plot and character but no narrator. Its subjunctive mood gives up the ability to make explicit claims in exchange for the power of empathy. In between are mixed forms, such as narrated drama (for example, in a slice of life with commentary) or dramatized argument (for example, when

protagonists debate the merits of a product). It is also possible, as in the California raisins commercial in the Exhibit, to have character without plot, a tableau in which very little develops. The steps on the drama scale are:

Argument	Narrated	No character	No plot
Demonstration	Narrated	No character	Plot
Story	Narrated	Character	Plot
Drama	Unnarrated	Character	Plot

## Paths to Persuasion

Persuasion is used here to refer to a change in an audience's conception of the value of an object. Brand attitude is a more usual measure of persuasion. Value, however, has the advantage over attitude in that it is potentially a multidimensional construct (see Holbrook and Corfman 1986). This study is therefore able to treat as an empirical question the possibility that the dimensions of value are affected differentially by argument and drama.

When advertising persuades, the audience can be said, almost definitionally, to have tested and accepted the truth of a claim of value. Following Bruner (1986), we propose that there are two kinds of truth test, corresponding to the two types of advertising appeal.

Appeals that the audience takes to be open to objective testing suggest that a claim depends on matters of fact, so that anyone, given enough data, would reach the same opinion on its truth. Claims of this kind are the province of argument. Arguments such as those found in comparison advertising lay out a claim's grounds and warrants for examination (Deighton 1985), risking counterargument in pursuit of reasoned agreement. Advertising for Oral B toothbrushes, for example, makes this kind of claim when it asserts that Oral B brushes are less abrasive than other brands, then backs the claim by rubbing the fender of a car with two brushes.

Appeals that the audience believes can be verified only subjectively are appeals to feeling. Here the truth test is personal and discretionary. Imagine that an ad claims that it is exhilarating to drive a Pontiac. Whether the car signifies excitement in general may be an objective issue, but whether it is true for me is not a matter on which I need to defer to the evidence of authority, logic, or anyone else's experience. Appeals of this kind are the province of drama.

When a claim rests on subjective grounds, drama's advantage over argument is that it does not have to reduce the subjective experience to words and then depend on the credibility of a narrator to communicate it. It can depict the experience directly, with the aim of evoking the feeling itself in its audience. Bruner (1986) observes that the presence of character may not convince us of a general truth—it may even

<sup>1</sup>This is not to say that demonstration advertising cannot contain human characters. We are defining demonstration by its necessary conditions.

**EXHIBIT**  
**EXAMPLES OF COMMERCIAL CLASSIFICATION**

Product	Ad action sequence	Coding
Vision saucepan	An aluminum saucepan is placed inside a transparent, glass Vision saucepan, which is heated on a hot plate. The aluminum saucepan becomes red hot and melts. During this demonstration, a narrator describes the several merits of the glass saucepan.	Coders scored the commercial 0 for character, 4 for plot (referring to the contest between the glass and aluminum saucepans, which occupied two-thirds of the commercial's duration), and 0 for narration (reverse-scaled, continuous narration) for a mean aggregated rating of 1.33 on the 0 to 6 scale.
California raisins	Clay models of raisins with human characteristics are shown dancing and singing on a television set watched by a couple snacking on raisins. The raisins' song refers to attractive attributes of raisins.	The commercial scored a mean of 5.66 across the three judges for character, 0 for plot, and 5 for narration because the coders interpreted the singing of the raisins as character communication rather than narration. The mean of the three components of the rating was 3.56.
Diet Pepsi	A young woman calls on a man in the apartment next to hers to borrow a Diet Pepsi. The man, finding he has none, leaves by a back window in search of the product. He endures several adventures before returning with the can, to be told that her roommate wants one too.	The commercial scored 6 for both plot and character and a mean of 5.33 for narration because it was entirely unnarrated except for a closing frame with the slogan "Pepsi—Choice of a new generation." The mean summary rating was 5.78.

impede it—but it does vividly instantiate a particular proposition. Drawing on Iser (1978), he states that plot and character recruit the reader's imagination to "perform" the meaning of the drama. Narration interferes with this process. In telling, a narrator does some of the audience's thinking, explaining the events and warranting their meaning. Without a narrator, the verisimilitude of the events alone, through their ability to build empathy, determines how well they back the claim. When verisimilitude is high, the audience may not, in fact, even notice that a claim is being made. On the positive side, nothing intrudes between the audience and the immediacy of the experience shown in the drama. On the negative side, there is no interpreter to underscore the point.

To summarize, we contend that there are two paths by which advertising can persuade. In one, the advertising suggests that a claim is objective, by invoking the rhetorical form of an argument. In the other, the claim is framed as subjective, appeals to personal experience, and is not open to objective testing. Drama is a reliable way to invoke this mode of processing.<sup>2</sup>

**Indicators of Persuasion Paths**

Evidence exists for a variety of mental processes mediating acceptance of advertising: argument

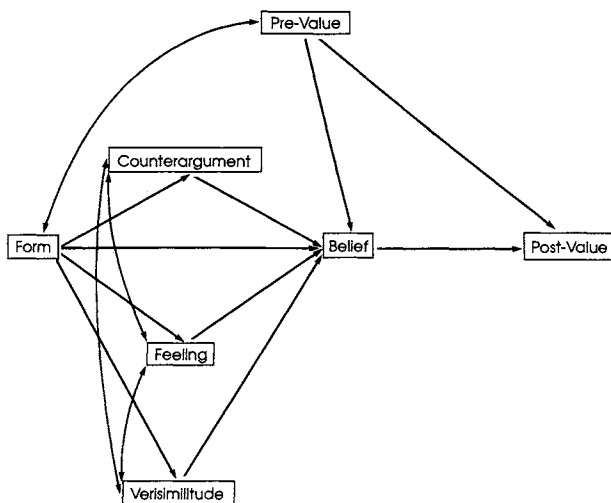
<sup>2</sup>We are not being prescriptive here. We do not want to claim that there is a "best" path for a particular communication task. The same claim can be made by drama or argument, and many factors influence whether one is better than the other, including the form of competing claims, the effectiveness of competing claims, and the effectiveness of the executions. In any event, it is probably not possible to hold content constant while manipulating form, so propositions about the effect of different forms of expression on identical content are somewhat conjectural.

for and against the advocated position, curiosity thoughts, and source derogation (Wright 1973, 1980); connections (Krugman 1967); attitude toward the ad (McKenzie, Lutz, and Belch 1986); and various affective responses (Batra and Ray 1986; Burke and Edell 1989; Holbrook and Batra 1987). Our review of the dramatization literature suggests that the mediators may themselves be conditioned by the form of the communication. Differences in mediating responses may mark differences in persuasion paths.

It is reasonable to expect expression of belief to mediate both persuasion paths. A partisan communication must logically be believable to be persuasive. But our review suggests two different ways to be believable. The first, the appeal to objectivity through argument, invites counterargument and overt expressions of belief. Wells (1988, p. 15) claims that lectures are "ideas that other people are trying to impose on me" and that defenses are erected against them. Although an argument may generate counterargument, it must also evoke positive beliefs if it is to be persuasive. In the appeal to subjective truth through drama, counterargument is less likely to occur. However, drama must evoke expressions of feeling and meet the test of verisimilitude or plausibility of the depicted events. Belief is the product rather than an indicator of the process of persuasion here.

The Figure illustrates these divergent paths to persuasion. Form, an indicator of the degree of advertising dramatization, determines whether belief is built (1) by a process involving expression of feeling and verisimilitude or (2) by a path through counterargument on a direct route to belief. Belief in turn affects judgments of value. Subjects' prior opinions of value also influence belief and posterior value. Our hypotheses refer to these paths in the Figure.

**FIGURE**  
PATHS TO PERSUASION



- H1:** The more dramatized a commercial, the less it will (directly) elicit counterargument and expression of belief, and the more it will elicit expression of feeling and verisimilitude.
- H2:** Counterargument impedes the expression of belief and the communication of value.
- H3:** Expression of feeling facilitates the expression of belief and communication of value.
- H4:** Verisimilitude facilitates the expression of belief and communication of value, but more for drama than for argument.

## THE STUDY

To test the hypotheses, we measured value, advertising form, counterargument, expression of belief, expression of feeling, and verisimilitude. The value of a product or service was measured through ratings of 10 descriptive qualities on a six-point scale ranging from “does not describe (the product or service in the ad) at all” to “describes extremely well.” The 10 adjectives or descriptive phrases used were: important, relevant, useful, helps get things done, necessary, enjoyable, reflects my personality, gives me pleasure, exciting, and desirable. These items were chosen to span a range of value dimensions, including functional, symbolic, and experiential (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986), and a factor analysis of responses to the scale suggested that subjects discriminated between two kinds of value, one having to do with usefulness and the other with enjoyment. Path coefficients in the model to be presented later did not,

however, differ materially when estimated separately for each dimension. In the interest of simplicity, therefore, we present value as the sum of these items in this article, while recognizing that it is a multidimensional construct.

Advertising form was rated by three trained coders who viewed each member of a set of television commercials several times. The commercials were divided into units of five seconds duration, and the following questions were answered yes (coded 1) or no (coded 0) for each five-second unit:

**Narration:** Was the unit unnarrated? Narration refers to speech or writing (including pack shot) directed to the audience.

**Character:** In the unit, were one or more protagonists shown or heard acting as if they were unaware of the existence of the camera?

**Plot:** In the unit, did you see or hear the working out of a story? A story is a fictional or true account of how the expectations or wishes (of a person) or the inclinations or tendencies (of a person or product) are first opposed, frustrated, or are otherwise in doubt, then in some way prevail, succeed, or are redressed.

The three judges' binary judgments for a commercial were summed and divided by the duration of the commercial in seconds. A linear transformation placed this score on a five-point scale ranging from pure argument to pure drama.

The four indicators of persuasion path were measured in the tradition of the reaction profile (Wells, Leavitt, and McConville 1971) and viewer response profile (Schlinger 1979) as consumer judgments of the experience of viewing a commercial. They are not intended as measures of attitude toward the ad, but as self-reports of responses that occurred during the processing of the commercial. They were rated on six-point scales as follows:

**Counterargument:** A two-item scale asked subjects to rate their inclination to argue back to the commercial and asked if they thought of reasons not to use the product while viewing the commercial.

**Expression of belief:** A five-item scale measured whether the ad was believable, was personally important, had shown the product had advantages and what a really good product of this type should do. Subjects were also asked whether the ad convinced them that the product was one they needed or could use.

**Expression of feeling:** Five items were constructed to tap the extent to which the commercial aroused appreciation of its quality and cleverness, as well as feelings of positive affect, comfort, enjoyment, entertainment, and excitement.

**Verisimilitude:** A six-item scale measured whether the subject felt drawn into the commercial, whether the actions depicted seemed authentic, whether the commer-

cial had portrayed feelings the subject could relate to and had made the subject want to join in the action.

Forty television commercials were selected for the study. The selectors were not apprised of the argument/drama distinction or of the hypotheses of this study, but were attempting to construct a broad cross-section of prime time television advertising by national advertisers. Twenty-five different brands of consumer products and services, including food, beverages, clothing, household supplies, a magazine, transportation services, and financial services, were represented. Fifteen of the brands were represented by two commercials each. Three commercials were 60 seconds long, and the remainder were 30 seconds long.

Subjects were recruited in malls in 10 cities throughout the United States and were qualified as users of one of the 25 products in the study. On a computer-administered questionnaire, each subject rated his or her opinion of and experience with five brands in that product category and rated the target brand on the 10 items of the value scale. The subject then saw a television commercial for that brand. The subject rated the commercial on each of the items on the profile of responses, rerated the brand on the 10 items of the value scale, and supplied demographic information. The interview lasted about 25 minutes and involved only one commercial. Subjects were paid for their time, and each commercial was rated by between 29 and 31 subjects. In all, 1,215 people were interviewed.

## RESULTS

The Exhibit gives examples of how the commercials were coded. Agreement among the three coders was high, with the lowest pairwise correlation at 0.97. The median on the form scale was 3.22, with a range from 1 to 4.85; thus, some commercials were rated as pure argument, but none as pure drama. (This is to be expected, as it is common to find some device, such as a final frame with a pack shot or a tag line, that breaks the drama mode.)

Reliability of the 10-item value scale was assessed separately for the 1,215 responses collected before (pre-value) and after (post-value) subjects saw a commercial. The results indicated high reliability and unidimensionality, and each of the four path indicators achieved adequate reliability.

<i>Measures</i>	<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>
Pre-value	.91
Post-value	.93
Counterargument	.53
Communication of feeling	.88

Communication of belief	.85
Verisimilitude	.84

The counterargument scale is low, but satisfactory for a two-item scale. Neither pre-value nor post-value was correlated with form, i.e., drama versus argument. We shall first report mean scores, mainly for the sake of exposition, and then a path analytic test of the hypotheses.

## Descriptive Results

Our discussion predicted that a persuasive drama follows a particular path to persuasion. It does not arouse counterargument but generates expressions of feeling and convinces the audience of its verisimilitude. By implication, an unpersuasive drama fails to follow this path in some or all of its particulars. A persuasive argument, on the other hand, may produce more counterargument than a drama, but less than an unpersuasive argument. It does not depend on feeling or verisimilitude to persuade, but does evoke expressions of belief.

Table 1 summarizes what our data have to say about these predictions. The respondents are partitioned into persuaded ( $n = 616$ ) and unpersuaded ( $n = 599$ ), defining persuasion as an increase in the value score for the advertised product after exposure to the ad. Respondents are then split according to whether the ad they saw fell into the lower (argument) or upper (drama) half of the form scale. For each of these four cells, means for the four path indicators are reported.

The median splits reveal that the profile of a persuasive argument commercial differs significantly from the profile of a persuasive drama commercial, supporting the prediction that good drama induces more feeling, more verisimilitude, and less counterargument (the latter at  $\alpha = 0.07$ ) than good argument. The implication that good drama is persuasive because it elicits less counterargument and more feeling and verisimilitude than poor drama is also supported. Although the difference between good and poor argument with respect to counterargument is not significant, good argument elicits more belief than unsuccessful argument, and none of the predictions is contradicted. It is worth noting that there was no difference in the mean beliefs of good arguments and good dramas, consistent with the idea that one form is not consistently more persuasive than the other.

## Tests of the Hypotheses

The path model illustrated by the Figure allows the pre-value score to be correlated with the other exogenous variable, the form of the ad. The linear system of equations implied by the model was estimated with EQS (Bentler 1985). EQS is an approach to linear

TABLE 1  
MEAN SCORES FOR PATH INDICATORS

Ad form and effectiveness	Counterargument	Expression of belief	Expression of feeling	Verisimilitude	
Persuasive argument	2.51 <sup>ab</sup>	4.16 <sup>a</sup>	4.18 <sup>a</sup>	3.68 <sup>a</sup>	314
Persuasive drama	2.35 <sup>a</sup>	4.08 <sup>a</sup>	4.38 <sup>b</sup>	3.94 <sup>b</sup>	302
Unpersuasive argument	2.68 <sup>b</sup>	3.70 <sup>b</sup>	3.66 <sup>c</sup>	3.34 <sup>c</sup>	291
Unpersuasive drama	2.58 <sup>b</sup>	3.51 <sup>c</sup>	3.95 <sup>d</sup>	3.43 <sup>c</sup>	308

<sup>abcd</sup> Two means in the same column are different (at alpha = 0.05) only when they do not share a common superscript.

NOTE: Argument and drama are defined by a median split on the form variable. Persuasive cases are those for which a respondent's rating of value increased after exposure to the commercial; unpersuasive cases are those for which it declined.

structural equations modeling, similar to LISREL (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1983) but more suitable for models that do not contain latent variables. Maximum likelihood estimation, based on multivariate normal distribution theory, was used.

The model fits the data well. The standardized residual covariance matrix values are small (average off-diagonal absolute value = 0.10) and evenly distributed among the variables (maximum value = 0.45). The fit can be compared to the fit of a model that assumes complete independence among the variables, by the Bentler-Bonett normed fit index. The index is given by  $1 - Q/Q_0$ , defining

$$Q = (S - \sigma(\Theta))'W(S - \sigma(\Theta)),$$

where  $S$  is the vector of observed variances and covariances,  $\sigma$  is a model for the data, a function of more basic parameters  $\Theta$ , which are estimated so as to minimize  $Q$ , and  $W$  is a weight matrix to accommodate the data distribution assumptions.  $Q_0$  is the same function as  $Q$ , evaluated under the independence model. The Bentler-Bonett normed index is 0.93.

Table 2 gives the unstandardized values of the path coefficients. The coefficients on the paths involved in the hypotheses all pass a univariate large-sample normal  $z$  test of difference from zero at the 0.05 level of confidence.

*Effects of Form on Path Indicators.* Hypothesis 1 refers to these effects and is supported. As the range of the form variable is from 1 (pure argument) to 5 (drama), a positive coefficient indicates that the response is more likely to be generated by an ad in the drama form. Thus, argument advertising was associated more with counterargument and belief (by the direct path) than drama advertising, which was associated more with feeling and verisimilitude.

*Effects of Path Indicators on Belief and Value.* Hypotheses 2–4 refer to these effects. As hypothesized, counterargument is negatively associated with belief, while feeling and verisimilitude are positively

associated. Belief is associated with value. To test the second part of Hypothesis 4, that verisimilitude influences the communication of value more by dramas than by arguments, we reestimated the model on the two subsets of the data (dramas and arguments) created by a median split on the form variable. The results are in Table 2.<sup>3</sup> For the hypothesis to hold, the verisimilitude-belief path coefficient in the argument model (0.33) must be significantly less than in the drama model (0.45). To test if that was so, the drama model was reestimated with the coefficient constrained to 0.33. The model chi-square statistic increased by 10.3 for one degree of freedom gain, so the hypothesis of no difference was rejected at the 0.01 significance level.

Although no other contingent effect of dramatization on path coefficients had been hypothesized, we used the same test to see whether the other three paths entering belief were significantly different in the two submodels. The direct form-belief path was significantly larger in the argument model. The paths from counterargument and feeling to belief were not significantly different between the submodels.

Value, as we measure it, is potentially multidimensional. A factor analysis of our data suggests that subjects discriminated usefulness from enjoyment in rating value. When we estimated submodels for these two components of value separately, however, we found no material differences in the pattern of coefficients, whether for arguments or dramas or for all commercials together. We do not rule out the possibility that argument might be more effective in establishing usefulness and drama in establishing enjoyment value, but the question could not be resolved by our data because the measures of each value component were correlated.

<sup>3</sup>For the form effects (the first four kinds of effects listed in Table 3), we attach no significance to differences between coefficients estimated on the argument and drama subsets of the data. The median split on the form variable attenuates its range and makes comparison of these path coefficients unwise.



**TABLE 2**  
COEFFICIENTS ON CONSTRUCT EQUATIONS  
FOR MODEL IN FIGURE

Effects From → To	Path coefficients		
	Aggregate model ( <i>n</i> = 1,215)	Model fit to arguments only ( <i>n</i> = 605)	Model fit to dramas only ( <i>n</i> = 615)
Form → counterargument	-0.158*	-0.160	-0.273*
Form → belief (direct)	-0.743*	-0.710*	-0.203
Form → feeling	0.653*	0.988*	0.475
Form → verisimilitude	0.599*	1.445*	0.070
Counterargument → belief	-0.173*	-0.212*	-0.134*
Feeling → belief	0.247*	0.281*	0.221*
Verisimilitude → belief	0.399*	0.345*	0.450*
Pre-value → belief	0.402*	0.435*	0.386*
Belief → post-value	0.288*	0.213*	0.208*
Pre-value → post-value	0.520*	0.482*	0.564*
Bentler Bonett normed fit	0.929	0.917	0.930

NOTE: \* indicates that coefficients are significant at alpha = 0.05.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study suggests that the degree of dramatization in television commercials influences how this advertising will be processed. An argument's appeal is processed evaluatively, with opponent processes of counterargument and expression of belief determining the degree of persuasion. A drama's appeal is processed empathically. Viewers are less disposed to argue and believe the appeal to the extent that they accept the commercial's verisimilitude and respond to it emotionally.

### Conceptual Discussion

There are many ways to think about persuasion, but the main body of advertising research uses few of them. One largely unmined tradition deals with the rhetoric of fiction (Booth 1961). Despite the absence of propositional claims, reasons, evidence, and other trappings of argument, fictional literature is persuasive. One product of literary criticism is a catalog of the tactics of organization and structure that storytellers use to impose their invented worlds on audiences. These insights bear on persuasion by dramatized advertising.

The most provocative difference between the methods of inquiry in literature and advertising is that literary criticism tends to ignore the psychology of readers almost entirely in favor of attributes of the text, while advertising research does the opposite. The potential for synthesis of the two traditions is considerable. In this article, we have borrowed an assumption of some literary analysts, that an audience's response

to a presentation is shaped by its form,<sup>4</sup> and tested it by looking for indicators of cognitive process.

Other disciplines besides literature have had to deal with whether, why, and how stories persuade. The historian Hexter (1971, p. 47) attempts to account for the necessity of storytelling in historical explanation with an example from baseball. The New York Yankees won the American League in 1939 for reasons that can be summarized in statistical tables. The New York Giants won the National League in 1951 for reasons that are not easily understandable except through stories. The argument of the first method of explaining is not superior to the narrative of the second: both may convey "good" reasons. In fact, Goldberg (1982), noting the popularity of narrative over argument in theological writing, claims narrative is logically prior to argument in human understanding. Propositions, he contends, gain their sense and meaning from narrative and are, in fact, abstractions from it. In his analysis of the rhetorical character of economic inquiry, McCloskey (1985, p. 78) makes a similar claim: "The word 'story' has in fact come to have a technical meaning in mathematical economics, though usually spoken in seminars rather than written in papers. It means an extended example of the economic reasoning underlying the mathematics, often a simplified version of the situation in the real world that the mathematics is meant to characterize." One reason stories are persuasive may be that much knowledge is contained and transmitted in stories.

### Technical Discussion

The findings of this study can be discussed in terms of (1) dramatization's effect on indicators of persuasion process and (2) the effect of the indicators on persuasion. The first set of findings shows that advertising form can be a significant determinant of intermediate responses to advertising. This is the more interesting result because it establishes that there are material implications to the argument-drama distinction. Studies that deal with cognitive and affective responses generated by a number of different ads would do well to anticipate this source of variance and the problem it poses for aggregation across commercials.

The second set of findings, that the path indicators influence persuasion, are largely consistent with earlier work, although the role of verisimilitude has not previously been measured in advertising research. Our conclusion that counterargument inhibits persuasion, while expressions of belief facilitate it, adds little to earlier studies. Similarly, the finding that feelings contribute uniquely to persuasion is not surpris-

<sup>4</sup>Or, in the pithy terms of Kenneth Burke (1950, p. 58), "A yielding to the form prepares for assent to the matter identified with it."

ing (Edell and Burke 1987; Holbrook and Batra 1987) and might even be open to the criticism that a composite feeling measure can mask countervailing influences of separate feelings (Burke and Edell 1988). The fact that our measures of advertising response behave in a manner consistent with different measures of the same concepts in other studies does, however, offer some evidence of their validity.

This second set of findings contains some interesting contingencies. Verisimilitude affects belief more when advertising is dramatized, and advertising elicits belief directly only when it is in argument form. But neither counterargument nor expression of feeling seems to be contingent on advertising form. That is to say, counterargument, once elicited, is no less an obstacle to persuasion by drama than by argument, even though drama is less likely to elicit it. Were it not for argument's direct path to belief, therefore, this study might seem to say that drama was always more persuasive than argument. As it happens, we can say that no one form of advertising consistently beat the other in our sample. And we cannot say from this study if there are contingencies under which one form would always dominate the other. In fact, given the inventiveness of advertising writers, we see little point in looking for such contingencies. Once a form has been selected, however, the study does suggest that different diagnostic criteria apply. The search for indicators of the quality of the argument (Areni and Lutz 1987) and the quality of the drama (perhaps indicated by verisimilitude) appear to be separable areas of inquiry.

This research is open to the criticism that it attempts to reach causal conclusions from a correlational design. Our response is that in the study of advertising form effects, experimentation is not the way to go. It is probably impossible to disentangle advertising form and content experimentally. Even if it were possible, it would be impractical to try to replicate the production values of real advertising with laboratory stimuli that vary according to an experimental design. For example, it takes considerable skill to tell a story with verisimilitude. Any attempt to manipulate this factor with stimuli of lower quality than television advertising would be of very dubious internal validity. We therefore approached the issue with a large sample correlational study of real advertising, contending that the benefits of that approach outweigh the costs.

Our stimuli were all good advertising, by the criteria that firms were willing to invest to air them. We lost some power to test the theory by using a sample with less variance than we might have had with inclusion of some bad advertising. We are, however, able to say something about the existence of form effects on persuasion and can report findings about the size of these effects among real consumers.

The use of a pre-post design raises questions of external validity. Measuring the change in judgment of value following forced exposure to a commercial does not capture longer term in-market effects. Nevertheless, it is consistent with our limited aim of showing that the immediate persuasive impact of the pool of 40 commercials was mediated by indicators of processing mode and dramatization. The between-subjects pattern of responses is too complex to be attributed to demand or to a tendency to anchor on the pre-measure of value.

Although this study is suggestive, research is needed to investigate more directly the cognitive processing that is hypothesized to operate in response to arguments and dramas. In particular, alternative measures of persuasion path might be explored. Behavioral measures of persuasion might be found to supplement the self-reports. Further research might also consider whether forced exposure, as in our study, gives drama an advantage that it would not receive in more natural exposure settings. It may be that some television viewers do not give a commercial the serial attention needed to follow a drama that unfolds over the duration of the ad. They may sample fragments of the execution long enough to encode a claim or a sentiment, but not long enough to encode the plot of a story. Our forced exposure design encouraged subjects to get involved in the plot of drama ads, perhaps more than they would naturally do. This conjecture is worth testing.

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