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Ethical Implications of Story Domain, Teller, and Receiver for the Narrative Transportation Effect

Storytelling is on the rise in the marketing domain, including the marketing of risky products such as alcohol. We argue that the ethical relevance of stories should attract more attention from managers, policymakers and scholars, as storytelling drives suspension of disbelief, has enduring persuasive effects, is unintentionally affective and may lead to actual behavior. This raises major ethical questions for marketing and consumer behavior. To fill this gap, this article offers a systematic investigation by means of a meta-analysis of how three original study characteristics: (1) story domain, (2) number of storytellers and (3) number of simultaneous story-receivers, may affect the strength of the narrative transportation effect, which manifests itself in consumers' response to having been transported into a narrative. Our contribution to prior work is twofold. First, we contribute to the field of narrative transportation and persuasion by showing the role of these three variables moderating the relationship between narrative transportation and narrative persuasion. Second, we uncover ethical implications derived from the power of storytelling.

Keywords:

Narrative transportation
Storytelling
Meta-analysis

Track: Social Responsibility and Ethics

1. Introduction

Storytelling is on the rise in the marketing domain (Cayla & Arnould, 2013; Van den Hende, Dahl, Schoormans, & Snelders, 2012). For example, CHANEL believes storytelling has the power to develop "products with soul" (Marber & Wellen, 2007, p. 198). Further, the power of storytelling combined with its recent adoption to promote numerous sensitive and even risky products and services, such as alcohol (e.g., Johnnie Walker, 2014), credit cards (e.g., ANZ, 2010), and tobacco (e.g., White Fog, 2013), indicates that storytelling poses a key consumer ethics issue. We argue that the ethical relevance of stories for consumers' decision-making and consumption experiences should attract more attention from managers, policymakers, and scholars (Shankar, Elliott, & Goulding, 2001; van Laer, 2014). Four features of the narrative transportation effect, which manifests itself in consumers' response to having been transported into a narrative, raise ethical questions for marketing and consumer behavior (Green et al., 2008). First, story-receivers do not perceive stories to be overtly persuasive, which facilitates a willing suspension of disbelief. Second, narrative transportation is a mental state that produces enduring persuasive effects, whereas analytical persuasion decays over time and positions gravitate to those held before the persuasion took place. Therefore, the use of storytelling for persuasive, commercial aims is particularly sensitive from an ethical perspective. Third, the narrative transportation effect seems to be more unintentionally affective than intentionally cognitive in nature, thus inhibiting a story-receiver's ability to process story content critically. Fourth, the narrative transportation effect may lead to actual behavior when behavioral preconditions, which Fishbein and Yzer (2003) identify, are met: (1) a person has sufficient skills to perform a particular behavior, and (2) there are no environmental constraints to inhibit said behavior. Research into the potential ethical consequences of narrative transportation is clearly needed. To fill this gap, this article offers a systematic investigation by means of a meta-analysis of how three original study characteristics: (1) story domain, (2) number of storytellers, and (3) number of simultaneous story-receivers may affect the strength of the narrative transportation effect. This study pursues three primary objectives: (1) to integrate three moderators of the narrative transportation effect into the extant literature on narrative transportation, (2) to empirically assess the integrated model with a quantitative meta-analysis of extant research, and (3) to uncover ethical issues that deserve attention and to provide directions for management and policymakers.

2. Literature Review

A story is defined as a storyteller's account of an event, or a sequence of events, leading to a transition from an initial state to a later state or outcome (Bennett & Royle, 2004). This definition implies that stories must always include a plot, characters, a climax, and an outcome (Green & Brock, 2000). Extant research in marketing (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010) and psychology (Green et al., 2008) demonstrates that a story can engross the story-receiver in a transformational experience. Arguably, the most popular concept to capture this transformational experience is narrative transportation: "the extent to which (1) a consumer empathizes with the story characters and (2) the story plot activates his or her imagination, which leads him or her to experience suspended reality during story reception" (Van Laer, de Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014, pp. 799-800). The transformation that narrative transportation achieves is persuasion of the story-receiver. In line with this transformation, the term "narrative transportation effect" in this paper refers to narrative persuasion, which is notably different from more established analytical persuasion (Slater, 2002). Analytical persuasion is the result of processing messages that are overtly persuasive, such as

documentaries, scientific arguments, and traditional advertising. Instead, narrative persuasion manifests itself in "story receivers' affective and cognitive responses, beliefs, attitudes, and intentions from being swept away by a story and transported into a narrative world that modifies their perception of their world of origin" (Van Laer et al., 2014, p. 801). This narrative transportation effect has the potential to last and even increase over time, an effect known as "absolute sleeper effect" (Appel & Richter, 2007, p. 114). Although characters (Van den Hende et al., 2012), plot (Escalas, 2004), verisimilitude and story-receiver familiarity (Green, 2004), attention (Green & Brock, 2000), transportability (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004), education (Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela Paz, & Peterson, 2006), and sex (Argo, Zhu, & Dahl, 2008) have been shown to exert a main effect on narrative transportation and, eventually, narrative persuasion, empirical work on the moderators of the narrative transportation effect remains scant in extant literature. We aim to fill in this gap and argue that three factors ought to affect the strength of the narrative transportation effect: (1) story domain, (2) number of storytellers, and (3) number of simultaneous story-receivers.

3. Method

For the sake of comparability, we used the same list of articles as Van Laer et al. (2014). The sampling frame encompassed an inclusive linguistic range spanning Dutch, English, French, German, and Italian and was further limited to the 13 years following Green and Brock's (2000) quantitative operationalization of narrative transportation. To appear in the meta-analysis, a study needed to meet Van Laer et al.'s narrative transportation definition. Therefore, the study needed to include narrative transportation as a variable measured by the Transportation (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 704), Being Hooked (Escalas, Moore, & Britton, 2004, p. 110), or Mysticism (Hood, 1975, pp. 31-32) scales. With this criterion, the number of articles ultimately appearing in the meta-analysis was 76. Together, the 76 articles featured 132 effect sizes of narrative transportation. To ensure the independence of the effect sizes, two expert coders classified the multitude of variables reported in the articles, using the three moderator categories. The coders achieved agreement levels that were good to very good (Cohen's κs = .69–.83, p < .001) and in line with the previous meta-analysis (Cohen's κ = .73, Van Laer et al., 2014). Disagreements were resolved by discussion. The effect size statistic contrasts groups according to their mean scores on narrative persuasion. The Pearson correlation provided our effect size indicator. To test the effects of the relevant moderators on the narrative transportation effect, we calculated not only the reliability-adjusted, inverse-variance weighted ρ but also the 95% confidence interval and the conservative random effect z (Hunter & Schmidt, 2004). In addition, we determined the file drawer N, or the number of studies with a zero effect size that would be required to reduce the mean effect size to a probability level of $\alpha = .05$ (Rosenthal, 1991). To determine the presence of heterogeneity due to the moderators, we used the Q statistic.

4. Results

First, we consider the effect of story domain as a moderator of the overall narrative transportation effect (see Table 1). The Q statistic is significant, such that this effect size is heterogeneous, and thus it is beneficial to assess the levels of this moderator. Studies from marketing reveal greater effect sizes than studies from the entertainment domain, the social domain, and the health domain, in decreasing order. Second, we consider the number of storytellers. The Q statistic supports the overall prediction that the narrative transportation effect varies for different numbers of storytellers; the effect sizes indicate that the more the number of storytellers increases, the more the narrative transportation effect increases. Third,

a significant Q statistic emerges for the number of story-receivers. The effect sizes indicate that the narrative transportation effect differs depending on single or multiple story-receivers. When multiple story-receivers simultaneously experience narrative transportation, their number decreases the narrative transportation effect.

We compare the observed effect sizes with the meta-analysis that Van Laer et al. (2014) performed on narrative transportation. We establish that the effect sizes for domain and number of story-receivers are comparable ($.10 < \rho < .50$). The effect size for storytellers is smaller than any of the significant effect sizes of the other meta-analysis. Considering publication bias, the file drawer results demonstrate that the effect sizes are robust and probably not a reflection of publication bias; it would require between 267 and 43,922 null effects to reduce the statistical significance of the effect sizes to .05 at the two-tailed level.

5. Discussion

In this paper, we demonstrate the ethical implications of three factors that can moderate the narrative transportation effect. Our contribution to prior work is twofold. First, we contribute to the field of narrative transportation and persuasion by showing the role of three variables moderating the relationship between narrative transportation and narrative persuasion: (1) story domain, (2) number of storytellers, and (3) number of simultaneous story-receivers. Second, we contribute to prior work on storytelling by putting forward ethical implications for companies that rely on storytelling.

Story Domain as a Moderator. Our findings show that stories from marketing, entertainment, social causes, and health transport and persuade consumers in decreasing order. The superiority of storytelling in the marketing domain may be linked to the specificities of commercial storytelling: (1) commercial storytellers are professionally trained to be persuasive, (2) commercial stories are by definition oriented towards persuasion whereas stories in entertainment are not necessarily aiming at persuasion (instead they may aim at stimulating fun, surprise, fear, escapism, etc.), and (3) in comparison to health-related stories, commercial stories are more likely to appeal to positive emotions. We contribute to prior work in transformative consumer research (Mick, 2006) by arguing that the power of commercial stories should be monitored especially for potentially addictive products, and for vulnerable consumer groups who are less able to resist the power of commercial stories.

Number of Storytellers as a Moderator. The storyteller is the agent who produces the story. We find that overall the number of storytellers is positively related to the narrative transportation effect. This suggests that an organization that uses several voices to communicate a story (e.g., advertisements, salespeople, packaging, websites, etc.) would become more persuasive and potentially more dangerous for consumers. Storytelling can also occur in consumer groups when families, circles of friends, professional networks, brand and consumption communities, and other groups of significant others share stories. For instance, Intel and Toshiba (2012) developed "The Beauty Inside", a social film about a man who wakes up every day with a new body and a new face. This gave audience members the opportunity to film themselves and play the main character throughout the narrative, which resulted in many storytellers producing the narrative. Our findings suggest that such narratives are particularly potent when it comes to persuading consumers.

Number of Story-Receivers as a Moderator. We find that when multiple story-receivers simultaneously experience narrative transportation, their number decreases the narrative transportation effect. This effect may be due to the social desirability bias (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960): The presence of others may limit the narrative persuasion of transported individuals, because it stimulates rational behaviors induced by the intention of not being judged as too emotional. This suggests that story consumption should be shared with others in

order to attenuate persuasion when persuasion is not desirable, whereas story consumption should be experienced individually to enhance persuasion. Prior work in media studies has shown that young people increasingly consume media alone in their bedroom, rather than in the presence of the rest of their family (Livingstone, 2007). Such behaviors enhance the narrative transportation effect, and therefore make it unlikely that these vulnerable consumers will resist the power of stories in general and commercial mediated stories in particular. This reinforces the need to restrict adolescents' exposure to advertising and promotion of high-risk products such as tobacco, especially in situations where young consumers are likely to be on their own when exposed to the stories.

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Table 1
Moderators of the effect of narrative transportation

	ES	N	r_u	CI_{ru}	r	CI_r	ρ	CI	z	FD	Q	df_Q	κ
Domain	101	16,137	.31	.15–.45	.32	.28–.35	.35	.31–.39	15.57 ***	43,922	13.92**	3	.69***
Marketing	28	3,711	.43	.27–.56	.45	.37–.52	.47	.39–.54	10.05 ***	6,095			
Entertainment	42	6,556	.31	.14–.45	.32	.26–.37	.35	.29–.41	10.58 ***	8,002			
Social	9	1,366	.25	.10–.39	.26	.18–.34	.29	.20–.38	5.95 ***	267			
Health	22	4,504	.18	.02–.34	.19	.06–.32	.21	.06–.34	2.81 **	618			
Number of storytellers (1-6)	101	16,137	.00	-.06–.06	.03	.01–.05	.03	.01–.05	3.22 **	43,922	10.36**	1	.83***
Number of story-receivers	86	14,401	.29	.13–.44	.32	.27–.36	.35	.30–.40	12.78 ***	29,287	5.20*	1	.70***
Single	37	6,046	.34	.19–.47	.35	.29–.41	.40	.33–.46	11.16 ***	9,093			
Multiple	49	8,355	.26	.09–.41	.27	.19–.34	.28	.20–.36	6.63 ***	5,703			

Mixed effects analysis.

ES = number of effect sizes; N = number of participants in the original studies; r_u = unadjusted mean correlation; CI_{ru} = lower and upper limit of the 95% confidence interval around the unadjusted mean correlation; r = inverse variance-weighted mean correlation; CI_r = lower and upper limit of the 95% confidence interval around the inverse variance-weighted mean correlation; ρ = reliability-adjusted, inverse variance-weighted mean correlation; CI = lower and upper limit of the 95% confidence interval around the reliability-adjusted, inverse variance-weighted mean correlation; z = test of null (two-tailed); FD = file drawer N, giving an indication of publication bias; Q = test of difference between moderator levels; df_Q = degrees of freedom of the test of difference between moderator levels; and κ = level of inter-rater reliability.

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001