



How consumer reviews persuade through narratives



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ABSTRACT

Consumers often read online consumer reviews before making a purchase decision. The format of these reviews (i.e., more information-based vs. more story-based) varies. The current research examines how story-based online consumer reviews influence attitudes toward the reviewed product through a framework of narrative persuasion. The current work features an additional proposed process beyond what is captured by current conceptualizations of narrative engagement. Two studies demonstrate that reviews with a more story-like format lead to higher levels of transportation into the review, which lead to higher levels of reflection on the message, and ultimately influence behavioral intent. The present work also examines how product type and review valence influence transportation and reflection in distinct ways, providing additional evidence for the role of both mechanisms as distinct processes in narrative persuasion.

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“Eight PM. Dimly lit candles and a waft of jasmine greeted us as we stepped past the velvet curtain just inside the entrance of Morimo. My boyfriend and I had been anticipating this evening to celebrate our anniversary. The hostess led us through the chic, intimate dining room, filled with other diners and their hushed murmurs, and seated us at the one empty table. ‘Tonight’s Chef Surprise is especially memorable,’ she advised before walking away. I love surprises (28 years old, and I still can’t sleep on Christmas Eve!), and my boyfriend and I pride ourselves on being adventurous eaters, so we both ordered the Chef’s Surprise without so much as glancing at the menu. After a pleasant 20 minute wait over glasses of a moderately priced (\$9 per glass) house red wine, the waiter approached with the highly anticipated plates. As he sat them down before us I noted, to my complete surprise—”

What could it be? And, why do you care?

Reviews of consumers’ experiences, like the one above, have risen in prevalence and accessibility. Consumers seek and share information regarding consumption experiences, which has a significant impact on consumer choice (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). Consumer reviews are perceived as more relevant and informative than marketer-driven

communication (Schlosser, 2011) and impact business’ sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006).

Research on reviews has not examined how differences in review format or structure affect persuasion. Consumers do not follow a standard format when sharing their evaluations (Park & Kim, 2009) and, as a consequence, reviews range in structure and content. Reviews can be written in a manner describing a detailed, sequential experience, which is consistent with humans’ preference for communicating in stories (Schank & Berman, 2002).

The following research evaluates a series of models that examine how the distinct mode of processing evoked by consumer review narratives can help researchers understand their persuasive impact. The transportation–imagery model (Green & Brock, 2000) posits that narrative processing affects outcomes such as beliefs, attitudes, and intentions directly. It is silent on *how* the transportation experience leads to changes in expected outcome measures; as Appel and Malečkar (2012, p. 26) observe, “what is still lacking ... are answers to the question of how transportation affects persuasion.”

The current work seeks to address this gap in understanding and proposes that a process of reflection operates as a mediator between transportation and intention. During this process, an individual integrates narrative elements into perceptions of her real world — what the story means, personally. The current work proposes that, if transportation encapsulates the trip into the story world, reflection captures the trip out of it. This term is not meant to imply the effortful elaboration considered in dual-route processing models (although this can occur). Rather, it implies that narrative persuasion is more than an inherently pleasant experience that biases judgment.

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1. Conceptual framework

1.1. Narrative persuasion

Scholars in psychology (Green & Brock, 2000), communication (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007), and marketing (Escalas, 2007) recognize the powerful influence of narratives, which persuade through depiction of characters in a setting, and through inferences about cause-and-effect relationships that exist. Narratives evoke a type of processing different from argument-based messages; “a distinct mental process, an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings” (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 701). The cognitive component relates to mental involvement in the narrative and entails a lack of self-awareness or awareness of events happening around them. The emotional component involves feelings evoked through the events depicted or sympathy with characters, and the mental imagery component refers to visualization of the described images.

The way narratives are processed differs from that of arguments, in part, because of message structure. Narrative passages entail a temporal dimension; events unfold over time. Narratives also consist of relationships among elements that enable causal inferences, which allow an audience to mentally construct the storyline (Graesser, Singer, & Trabasso, 1994). Thus, elements that comprise narrative structure both distinguish them from other types of messages (i.e., rhetoric) and determine how an audience constructs meaning out of such passages.

The current work examines narrative processing in the context of consumer reviews, which contain limited content and less contextually rich passages than narrative stimuli typically used in consumer research. One unaddressed question for consumer researchers is whether shorter narratives posted as consumer reviews evoke the persuasion process prompted by narratives. We predict that reviews structured like stories (i.e., about a consumer's experience, rather than a list of product attributes) lead to higher levels of transportation. Formally,

H1. A review structured as a narrative will result in a higher level of transportation than a review structured as a list of information.

1.2. Reflection

The present work proposes that reflection operates as a mediator between transportation and intention, and is a process in which an individual links the story world with the real world. Reflection on the narrative experience is affected by the context and content of the narrative. For example, in a health-related context, perceived susceptibility and personal risk are relevant narrative components. After an individual is transported into a health-related narrative, reflection involves evaluation of an individual's level of susceptibility or personal risk — that is, interpreting the relevance of the narrative content to the person's real world. For example, Dunlop, Wakefield, and Kashima (2008) found that individuals who were more transported into a skin cancer narrative experienced higher levels of perceived personal risk, which led to more positive attitudes about skin protection. McQueen, Kreuter, Kalesan, and Alcaraz (2011) contrasted effects of narrative and argument-based messages about breast cancer, and found that narratives (through increased narrative engagement) reduced defensive counter-arguing and increased cognitive rehearsal of the information, which influenced beliefs about mammography barriers, cancer fatalism, and message recall. This prior research, collectively, provides evidence for a process beyond transportation and prior to persuasion-related outcomes.

1.2.1. Reflection in consumer reviews

The nature and process of reflection are likely to differ based on the context. Whereas reflection in a health-oriented context may include an

assessment of risk, reflection in a consumer review context involves assessing the quality of the information gathered from that review. The literature on how consumers determine the value of consumer reviews highlights two specific and one holistic feature consumers consider when reading an online opinion: informativeness, credibility, and persuasiveness.

Search for online opinions results in data to inform a consumer purchase decision (Hennig-Thurau, Walsh, & Walsh, 2003). Consumers evaluate (or reflect on) the quality of the data collected (i.e., the online opinions reviewed) to assess whether the information is sufficiently compelling (or persuasive) to inform a subsequent decision (Park, Lee, & Han, 2007).

Informativeness influences the extent to which data in the consumer review are considered prior to forming an attitude or intention to purchase the product or service. Previous work suggests that when people evaluate reviews of others as containing opinions that are informative or useful, they are more likely to incorporate these data into their decision (Park et al., 2007). On consumer review sites, readers rate the informativeness of a review to allow other users of the site to search for reviews rated as higher in information value. Based on this past work, informativeness is a criterion used by consumers to assess the recommendation of a particular review.

Consumers also make inferences regarding review credibility to assess the value of a review (Park et al., 2007). In an online environment, where consumers rarely touch the product or recognize the message sender, credibility is a critical element of message acceptance (Awad & Ragowsky, 2008). Previous work in the context of consumer reviews suggests that higher levels of message source's credibility positively influence the reader's adoption of the recommendation contained within the review (Lee & Koo, 2012). When details about source credibility are not explicit (e.g., information about the credentials of a source), source credibility is inferred from message content and perceived quality (Slater & Rouner, 1996). Regardless of how it is determined, credibility has an effect on the inclusion of information to inform a decision.

Finally, persuasiveness of the review text influences a consumer's likelihood of accepting information contained in the review to inform the subsequent decision. Previous work has identified a range of textually-based inferences that affect perceived persuasiveness. Specific textual content elements that make a particular review persuasive can also differ by context.

The influence of granular textual elements can be captured by the holistic judgment of a review's perceived influence or persuasiveness (Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1995) and prior work indicates that consumers make such overall assessments about a message and its value (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). Several authors have used a holistic measure of review persuasiveness as a context-independent way to capture a review's overall usefulness (Schlosser, 2011).

1.2.2. Reflection and transportation

Transportation provides the reader with an opportunity to vicariously experience the product from the writer's perspective, serving as a source of surrogate first-hand information (Slater & Rouner, 2002). The process of transportation requires readers to suspend disbelief (Green & Brock, 2000). As a result, the message is more likely to ring true while transported, which will influence the reflection process. In the context of consumer reviews, ringing true is related to reflections on informativeness, credibility, and persuasiveness. Consumer reviews that lead to higher levels of transportation are likely to enhance reflection. We predict that:

H2a. Higher levels of transportation into a review will result in higher levels of reflection on that review.

H2b. Transportation mediates the relationship between narrative format and reflection on the review.

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