

THE EFFECT OF NARRATIVE TRANSPORTATION IN MINI-FILM ADVERTISING ON REDUCING COUNTERARGUING

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ABSTRACT

Narrative transportation and the reduction of counterarguing have been conceptualized as pivotal factors that enable a story to exert its persuasive influences. Applying narrative persuasion theories, this study empirically investigated the effects of mini-film advertising, a recent online marketing innovation of branded entertainment, on brand attitude and purchase intention to gain a deeper insight into the effects of mini-film in particular and narrative advertising in general. Two quasi-experiments with real mini-films were conducted. The results demonstrated that narrative transportation is positively related to the outcome variables. The insignificant moderating effects of product involvement, preexisting brand attitude, and attitude toward advertising provide evidence that the reduction of counterarguing contributes to the effectiveness of the narrative persuasion.

Keywords: Mini-film Advertising, Narrative Persuasion, Transportation, Counterarguing, Branded Entertainment

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1. INTRODUCTION

The persuasive effectiveness of narratives has increasingly drawn attention from advertising research in recent years. Compared to expository or argumentative ads, narrative ads elicit more favorable product evaluations¹, stronger self-brand connection², and a more positive attitude toward the brand as well³. Many scholars have conceptualized and theorized persuasive mechanism of narratives as a ‘transportation’ process^{2, 4, 5, 6, 7}, referring to the integrative melding of the attention, imagery, and feelings of the viewers who are ‘transported’ into the fictional worlds of the stories, just like being moved from one place to another, and cognitively and affectively experience the constructed worlds in the story^{8, 9}. Transported viewers who are absorbed in the storyline would be less motivated and less able to argue the story points as well as less inclined to perceive them as persuasive in nature. Counterarguing, a form of cognitive resistance¹⁰ against persuasive content in the narratives, is therefore reduced, leading to changes in beliefs, attitudes, and even behaviors^{9, 11, 12}.

This persuasive process of narrative transportation may complement the possible persuasion ‘routes’, as theorized in the landmark study of Petty and Cacioppo¹³. The persuasive effect of transportation is derived from neither central nor peripheral processing of the viewers^{7, 9, 11}. Since viewers who have been transported are absorbed or immersed in the story, the influence of persuasive messages imbedded in the narrative will be a function of the extent of transportation with the narrative rather than the form, format, or the quality of the argument of the messages¹¹. Deighton, Romer, and McQueen¹⁴ have long argued that drama (narrative) ads function in a very different way compared to argumentative ones. Relying on plots and characters, a drama ad draws the viewer into the events it portrays. The audience becomes ‘lost’ in the story and adopts the feelings of the characters. The viewers will accept the benefits of the promoted brand because they are less disposed to argue the ad’s messages.

Since the cognitive resistance of the manipulative intent adversely affects the advertising persuasiveness^{3, 15}, the ability of narrative transportation to suppress or distract from the counterarguing may be one of the most important persuasive strengths of narrative transportation^{7, 9}. To measure counterarguing, communication and advertising researchers usually employ the ‘thought listing’ technique, where subjects report their favorable and unfavorable thoughts concerning the narrative with imbedded persuasive messages¹⁶. However, the concept of reduced counterarguing is difficult to measure because it occurs outside of an individual’s awareness¹⁰. Another possible way to investigate the cognitive processing involved in a reduction of counterarguing is to consider the origin of these arguments and

examine whether they play a significant moderating role in the transportation effect. Greater involvement with an issue is presumably related to greater resistance to persuasion, and stronger attitude can withstand stronger force of opposing persuasive appeals¹⁷. Along this line of thinking, three possible factors in marketing research, involvement with the product category, a preexisting attitude toward a specific brand, and the attitude toward advertising in general, may influence the degree of counterarguing against ads messages. The reduced or diminished influence of these factors on brand attitudes and purchase intentions promoted by narrative ads provide additional evidence that the persuasion mechanism of narratives is distinct from expository one.

Using an online innovative advertising format termed as mini-film (or Net film)^{18, 19} as an experimental treatment, this study empirically tested the transportation and reduced counterarguing effects of narrative ads in order to clarify the persuasive mechanism of narrative ads in general and mini-films in particular. Mini-film advertising (MFA) is a short feature film, like an online commercial, which is posted on designated websites, portals, or video-sharing websites to attract viewing and sharing²⁰. Though referred to as a type of 'advertising,' MFA is conceptually and practically more than traditional paid commercials, and it can be categorized as a special form of online branded entertainment²¹. This marketing innovation was first introduced by the German car maker BMW in 2001 when it produced a series of films titled 'The Hire' to showcase their various models of luxury cars^{18, 22}. Marketers and advertisers in Chinese-speaking areas (mainly in China and Taiwan) have widely praised and adopted the format as an innovative promotional tool when introduced in 2010 by the American car maker Cadillac into Chinese markets²³.

Both online and offline quasi-experiments were conducted using the existing MFAs to test the possible effects of narrative persuasion on brand attitudes and purchase intentions as well as the (in)significant moderating effects of product involvement, preexisting brand attitude, and attitude toward advertising in general on narrative transportation. The results of the research are reported, and their theoretical and practical implications are discussed, followed by sections that examine the limitations of the research and provide future research suggestions.

2.THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Narrative Transportation

Narratives or stories can be a powerful persuasion tool. The narrative format is structured by its chronological and causal elements²⁴. Events in a narrative are organized by time sequences and arranged according to the

causal and intentional relations among them. A narrative involves a plot with characters, portraying the actions caused by their goals and the resulting outcomes^{24, 25}. Recipients who are absorbed or immersed in the narrative may be mentally transported into the story-constructed land. In the transportation process, part of the real world is inaccessible because the recipients are cognitively and affectively invested in the fictional world, which they perceive as 'real'; therefore, the values and beliefs it conveys would also be accepted without much elaboration^{8, 9}. The consumer or viewer who experiences the narrative world may evoke empathy for the story's characters and imagination of the plot. The resulting responses will alter one's beliefs, attitudes, and intentions, if they are not consistent with the narrative¹².

Narrative transportation has been adopted as an important theoretical foundation in many persuasion research disciplines, such as entertainment-education^{10, 11, 26}, health communication^{27, 28, 29}, as well as print advertising^{2, 7, 30}. The persuasive mechanism of narrative transportation is distinct from that of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)¹³, which is one of the most widely adopted research paradigms in advertising research³¹. ELM proposed that the motivation, opportunity, and ability of consumers determine the central or peripheral process of the messages while subsequent judgment formulation and text properties of the ads, i.e., the formation and presentation of the persuasive messages, seem largely ignored⁷. Transportation is a state or experience that allows the person to immerse him/herself in the story itself and not in any consequences extrinsic to the narrative. Therefore, the cognitive process of narrative transportation cannot be categorized into central or peripheral, systematic or heuristic processing; instead, it is another 'route' of persuasion process^{7, 9, 11}.

Contrary to expository or argumentative ads focused on argument qualities, narrative ads invoke consumers' narrative transportation, when the possible benefits of the consumption of the brand is experienced vicariously, and meaningful brand-self connection can be easily formed through linking the story with one's own memories or imaginations, which leads to a positive evaluation of and attitude toward the advertised brand^{1, 2, 3}. Furthermore, the narratives are often presented as entertainment rather than persuasion³², therefore the persuasive effectiveness of narrative transportation in a sense resides in its implicit or less perceivable persuasive intent²⁶, a principle followed by many branded entertainment practitioners^{18, 21}. With short feature film qualities posted online to attract voluntary viewing and sharing, successful mini-film advertisements must be sufficiently entertaining and transport the consumers into the ad's world to achieve the brand attitude and purchase intention changes²⁰. Therefore, an association between transportation effect and ad outcomes can be expected.

H1: Narrative transportation of mini-film advertising is positively related to attitude toward the brand and purchase intention.

2.2 Counterarguing Reduction

When an external force threatens one's freedom of choice or actions, he/she would resist or counteract against that limiting force³³. Resistance, as a response to such pressure, is therefore an opposing yet integral part of the persuasive interaction¹⁵. Since traditional communication research emphasizes the strength of the message or the merits of the argument to break the barrier of attitudinal changes, Knowles and Linn¹⁵ proposed that resistance reduction, a different side of the persuasion equation, should be considered as an alternative persuasion strategy. This avoidance approach suggests the way to lower or eliminate resistance when one is confronted by persuasive messages, which conceptually can be viewed as forces that limit choices and pressure for change.

The concept of resistance to persuasion can be applied to consumer behavior research because consumers are accustomed to having the freedom to choose from various market choices. Since advertising, among other forms of marketing communication, seems to be one of the forces that limit the perceived pressure for certain purchase decisions, resistance may ensue. Counterarguing is a form of cognitive resistance¹⁰. When one cognitively invests in the persuasive messages, stronger previous attitude or involvement, be it concerning product or brand, becomes less persuadable because more counterarguments would be generated to dissuade him or her from the ad's attempts to persuade. Therefore, Slater and Rouner¹¹ emphasized that for narrative to have an effect, involvement with the issue is less important than involvement with the narrative itself. Overall, narratives can be a useful strategy in challenging strong attitudes^{34, 35}.

In marketing research, one of the greatest determinants of elaboration motivation and enduring persuasion is product involvement, which has an important moderating effect on the cognitive routes of ad messages^{13, 36}. It is assumed that involved consumers invest more cognitive efforts and counter-argue the persuasive messages if the arguments made by the ads are not strong enough, whereas uninvolved consumers who do not intend to engage in the brand messages are persuaded by the peripheral cues of the ads rather than those of the arguments. However, if the consumers are immersed or absorbed into the story world, the elaboration on the placed product or advocated ideas should be lessened because the cognition of the viewers, along with their felt emotion, has been 'directed' to the narrative plots and characters; therefore, the transportation effect may be a strong and

significant predictor of brand attitude and purchase intention irrespective of the previous product involvement of targeted consumers.

H2: The persuasion effectiveness of MFA resides mainly on involvement with the storyline, i.e., narrative transportation, irrespective of product involvement.

Another possible determinant that motivates consumers to elaborate on the persuasive messages is the existing brand attitude. Brand attitude, defined as an individual's internal evaluation of a branded product³⁷, is considered an immediate antecedent of consumer behavioral responses, such as brand choice and product or service consumption^{38, 39}. Attitude is derived from salient beliefs, which are activated from memory and elaborated by a person in a given situation⁴⁰. Consumers holding a strong brand attitude are likely to centrally elaborate and counter-argue the new branded messages by considering the competing brands. From the narrative persuasion viewpoint, the existing brand attitudes, strong or weak, will exert much smaller influences on the newly-formed attitude and behavior compared to those resulting from narrative involvements. Empirical evidence supports the idea that narrative transportation can reduce counterarguing and increase acceptance of the messages even after controlling for initial attitudes several weeks earlier^{9, 14}.

H3: The persuasion effectiveness of MFA resides mainly on narrative transportation, irrespective of the strength or weakness of the existing brand attitude.

In addition to product and brand attitudes, the attitude toward advertising may have an effect on the level of elaboration of individual ad campaigns. Attitude toward advertising is defined as a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner toward advertising in general⁴¹. A consumer's negative affective reaction to advertising can lead to an avoidance of advertising in all media, thus rendering an ad campaign ineffective⁴². Consumers who are skeptical about the persuasive intention of the advertising are more likely to be critical of an ad and evaluate it in a more analytical fashion³. Contrary to a specific advertisement attitude, espousing a negative attitude toward advertising in general motivates consumers to be suspicious and elaborate the messages contained in the marketing vehicles, while positive attitude motivates consumers to rely more on the peripheral cues of the ad messages. Counterarguing that the attitude toward advertising evoked should be reduced drastically when the persuasive route of narrative transportation is a decisive influencing path.

H4: The persuasion effectiveness of MFA resides mainly on narrative

transportation, irrespective of whether the attitude toward advertising is positive or negative.

3. STUDY ONE

An online quasi-experiment was conducted with four real MFA videos, two product and two service advertisements, each high-involved (tablet PC and tourist attraction) as well as low-involved (laundry detergent and convenience store service). Caution has been taken to select films with a similar duration (6-9 minutes), similar movie or television stars casting, and similar quality of production to avoid possible confounding induced by film characteristics¹¹.

3.1 Participants and Procedures

E-mail messages with a link to one of the four real MFA videos and an online questionnaire were sent to some 80 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in marketing courses at a Taiwanese university. The students were asked to complete the survey and then forward the e-mail to their friends and relatives. A total of 391 responses were received. Students who completed the task received extra credit from the course instructor, and all respondents were automatically entered in a lottery.

3.2 Measures

The online questionnaire started with the measures of the product involvement and general attitude toward advertising. All four products and services involvements were measured to avoid the testing effect. All of the constructs were measured on a seven-point Likert scale unless otherwise indicated. Each involvement was assessed using four semantic differential scales anchored as interested/uninterested, important/unimportant, relevant/irrelevant, and useful/useless, which were adapted from Zaichkowsky⁴³. The 4-item attitude toward the advertising measure (e.g., the ads help me learn about product) was adopted from Prendergast, Cheung, and West⁴². After viewing one of the videos, the respondents were further asked about narrative transportation and the outcome effects of two ads. Transportation measures were adapted from Green and Brock's scale⁹. We assessed five items, such as 'I was mentally involved in the MFA video while watching it.' The attitude towards the brand was assessed using three semantic differential scales anchored as very good/very bad, very favorable/very unfavorable, and very pleasant/very unpleasant. Three Likert-scale items were used to measure the respondents' purchase intention (e.g., after watching this MFA, I believe this product would be worth considering). Both brand attitude and purchase intention scale items were

derived from Lafferty and Goldsmith⁴⁴ (see APPENDIX). A manipulation check of the product or service shown in the film was conducted to ensure that the respondents have actually watched the hyperlinked MFA. Lastly, the demographic data on gender and age was collected.

3.3 Results

Overall, 391 responses were received, but 44 responses were discarded because the values of the questionnaire items entered were too similar or failed to pass the manipulation check. Of all of the 347 usable responses, 69, 107, 91, and 80 subjects were for laundry detergent, tablet PC, convenience store, and tourist attraction, respectively. The respondents were 139 males and 208 females, mostly from age groups of 18-23 ($N = 223$, 64%) and 24-29 ($N = 64$, 18%). An analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that narrative transportation was not significantly different by age ($F_{5,341} = 1.535$, $p = 0.192$) and gender ($F_{1,345} = 0.598$, $p = 0.440$); therefore, these two sample characteristic variables were dropped from further analysis.

Cronbach's α values of involvement of four promoted products/services were 0.927 (laundry detergent), 0.824 (tablet PC), 0.889 (convenience store), and 0.851 (tourist attraction). Cronbach's α for general attitude toward advertising was 0.820, narrative transportation 0.873, attitude toward the brand 0.950, and purchase intention 0.930. The value of all of the constructs exceeded the level of 0.7, indicating acceptable reliability⁴⁵.

Pairwise t-tests of the two products involvements confirmed that involvements between detergent ($M = 2.739$, $S.D. = 1.044$) and tablet PC ($M = 3.806$, $S.D. = 1.370$) were significantly different ($t_{692} = 12.186$, $p = .000$). Regarding the two services selected, involvement with the tourist attraction ($M = 2.744$, $S.D. = 1.161$) was significantly higher compared to that of the convenience store ($M = 2.210$, $S.D. = 0.950$) ($t_{692} = 7.739$, $p = .000$).

It is worth noting that the main purpose of this study was to test the aggregate effect of transportation and the possible moderating effects of each product/service involvement level (with two high and two low products/ services promoted by the four videos) as well as the moderating effects of the general advertising attitudes rather than to compare the transportation effects among these four groups. Therefore, regression analyses of narrative transportation effects with brand attitudes and purchase intentions were first conducted with all of the samples combined. The results demonstrated that transportation significantly influences brand attitude ($F_{1,345} = 160.664$, $p = .000$) as well as purchase intention ($F_{1,345} = 288.817$, $p = .000$), explaining 31.6% and 45.4% of the variances,

respectively; thus, H1 is supported.

Multiple regression analysis of the relationship of narrative transportation and product involvement with brand attitude was further conducted for each MFA, with the involvement included as a moderator of transportation-attitude relationship. The same model has been run with purchase intention as a dependent variable as well. As Table 1 demonstrates, transportations were all significant at .001 level. Most of the involvement and all of the interactions were not significantly influenced by dependent variables. H2 was therefore supported.

Table 1. Regression analysis of transportation and involvement effects for each MFA

MFA	Brand Attitude			Purchase intention			
		<i>F</i>	β	R ²	<i>F</i>	β	R ²
Detergent	NT		0.623***			0.677***	
	IN		0.249**			-0.075	
	NT*IN		0.081			0.097	
		17.523***		0.422	14.642***		0.376
Tablet PC	NT		0.505***			0.687***	
	IN		0.107			0.173*	
	NT*IN		0.019			0.022	
		14.034***		0.268	41.897***		0.534
Convenience store	NT		0.422***			0.693***	
	IN		0.184			0.089	
	NT*IN		-0.017			-0.011	
		7.299***		0.172	26.922		0.461
Tourist attraction	NT		0.639***			0.747***	
	IN		0.170			0.031	
	NT*IN		0.001			-0.053	
		21.908***		0.439	36.176***		0.569

Note: NT = narrative transportation; IN = product involvement; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Multiple regression analyses of the relationship of narrative transportation and the general advertising attitude with brand attitudes were then conducted across four sub-samples, with the general attitude as a moderator of transportation-brand attitude relationships. In addition, the same model was performed with purchase intention as a dependent variable. The transportations were still all significant at .001 level, except for one (convenience store MFA, $p = .01$) (see Table 2). The general advertising attitude had a significant influence on purchase intentions in some cases, but all interactions were not significant, supporting H4.

Table 2. Regression analysis of transportation and attitude toward advertising for each MFA

MFA	Brand Attitude			Purchase intention		
	F	β	R^2	F	β	R^2
Detergent		NT	0.516***		0.565***	
		ATA	0.272**		0.153	
		NT*ATA	-0.102		-0.125	
	18.146***		0.431	16.230***		0.402
Tablet PC		NT	0.505***		0.660***	
		ATA	0.066		0.169*	
		NT*ATA	-0.074		0.038	
	13.702***		0.263	41.597***		0.532
Convenience store		NT	0.330**		0.583***	
		ATA	0.201		0.270**	
		NT*ATA	0.080		0.077	
	7.814***		0.183	35.049***		0.529
Tourist attraction		NT	0.608***		0.677***	
		ATA	0.130		0.293***	
		NT*ATA	-0.058		-0.020	
	20.969***		0.428	49.756***		0.646

Note: NT = narrative transportation; ATA = attitude toward advertising; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

4. STUDY TWO

Study two was held in a classroom setting. Two real MFAs were selected based on the same criteria as study one. One MFA was selected to promote a certain tea drink brand and another to promote one for the convenience store chain, the same brand as in study one, but with a different video.

4.1 Participants, procedures, and measures

Overall, 150 undergraduate students enrolled in advertising courses from another Taiwanese university completed a pre-test four weeks before attending the experimental session. The attitude toward the two MFA-promoted brands with thirteen filler brands (a total of fifteen brands comprising three brands for each of the five products/service categories including tea drink and convenience store chain) and the general advertising attitude were measured (the scales were the same as in study one). Demographic data on gender and age and student ID numbers was also

collected.

During the experimental session, participants viewed both mini-films. The sequence of videos was randomized to avoid order effect. Participants viewed their films in groups ($n = 20-40$) and completed a post-test questionnaire after each viewing condition comprising measures of narrative transportation, brand attitude, and purchase intention of designated video and product, along with their student ID numbers. They were also asked to write down what they were thinking about while they were watching the MFA. Each session was completed in about 35 minutes. Students who completed the task received extra credit from the course instructor.

4.2 Results

A total of 123 participants completed fully both the pre- and post-test questionnaires. The sample comprised 40 males and 83 females with an average age of 19.24 ($S.D. = 1.15$). ANOVA demonstrated that narrative transportations of tea drink and convenience store MFAs were not significantly different in terms of age ($F_{4,118} = 1.205$, $p = .306$ and $F_{4,118} = 1.799$, $p = .094$), but females were more transported compared to males ($F_{1,121} = 8.994$, $p = .003$; $F_{1,121} = 11.916$, $p = .001$).

Cronbach's α values of preexisting attitudes of designated tea drink and convenience store were 0.969 and 0.967, narrative transportations were 0.869 and 0.900, attitudes toward the brands were 0.955 and 0.960, and purchase intentions were 0.922 and 0.964, respectively. Cronbach's α for general attitude toward advertising was 0.703.

Statistical analysis was the same as in study one by employing simple linear regression and multiple regression. Transportations of both videos correlated significantly with brand attitudes ($F_{1,121} = 8.155$, $p = .000$, $R^2 = 0.349$ and $F_{1,121} = 7.685$, $p = .000$, $R^2 = 0.322$) as well as purchase intentions ($F_{1,121} = 9.531$, $p = .000$, $R^2 = 0.424$ and $F_{1,121} = 9.113$, $p = .000$, $R^2 = 0.402$). H1 is again supported.

Multiple regression analyses of the relationships of narrative transportation and preexisting brand attitude with a new-formed brand attitude for both products were conducted, with the pre-existing attitude as a moderator of the transportation-attitude relationship. Moreover, the same model was run with purchase intention as a dependent variable. As table three shows, transportations were all significant at .001 level. Both pre-existing attitudes correlated with new brand attitudes significantly at .05 level but not with purchase intentions. Not all of the interactions exerted significant influence on the dependent variables. H3 was therefore supported.

Table 3. Regression analysis of transportation and preexisting brand attitude for each MFA

MFA	Brand Attitude			Purchase intention		
	F	β	R ²	F	β	R ²
Tea drink		0.577***			0.643***	
		0.150*			0.097	
		-0.022			-0.010	
	24.058***		0.362	30.992***		0.424
Convenience store		0.568***			0.637***	
		0.148*			0.059	
		-0.075			0.006	
	21.909***		0.340	27.627***		0.396

Note: NT = narrative transportation; PBA = preexisting brand attitude; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The same analysis of the relationships among transportations, attitudes toward advertising, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions of both MFAs revealed that transportations were still all significant at .001 level. Advertising attitudes had no influence on purchase intentions. Regarding the moderating effect, the attitude toward advertising had a negative effect on the transportation-brand attitude of the tea drink MFA, other interactions were all insignificant (Table 4). The results again supported H4.

Table 4. Regression analysis of transportation and attitude toward advertising for each MFA

MFA	Brand Attitude			Purchase intention		
	F	β	R ²	F	β	R ²
Tea drink		0.559***			0.645***	
		0.145			0.039	
		-0.159*			-0.027	
	28.446***		0.403	30.138***		0.417
Convenience store		0.532***			0.615***	
		-0.212			-0.084	
		0.386			0.175	
	22.794***		0.349	28.289***		0.402

Note: NT = narrative transportation; ATA = attitude toward advertising; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Two graduate students blind to the experimental purposes coded the thought listings written down by the participants. Any single negative thought (counterargument) concerning storyline, character, product, brand, or the film in general was coded as -1, and any positive thought (support argument) was coded as +1. Typical responses, such as “*I would like to try this brand,*” “*This MFA is interesting,*” were coded +1, and negative

responses, such as *"It's manipulative,"* *"No one would believe this kind of story,"* were coded as -1. The scores of each subject were summed up to determine whether he or she was generating much counterarguing while watching the film. Since the number of total responses was relatively small, the discrepancies in coding by the two coders (five responses) would be resolved through discussion with one of the authors. The inter-coder reliability therefore reached 1.0. The final coding showed that fewer participants have counterargument(s), i.e., negative thoughts, compared to those with positive thoughts for both MFAs (28 negative vs. 79 positive thoughts written down by 84 participants for tea drink and 29 negative vs. 83 positive thoughts by 72 participants for convenience store). The average scores were a positive 0.61 and 0.75, respectively, if only participants who have written down any argument are considered. The thought listings results provided another piece of evidence that counterarguing is diminished in narrative persuasion.

5. DISCUSSION

The power of the narratives cannot be underestimated. Consistent with the findings of various studies in communication^{46, 47} and advertising research⁷, both studies demonstrated that transportation is the best predictor of changes in the attitude and behavior of narrative persuasion. With a longer duration compared to traditional 30-second drama commercials¹⁴ and a more vivid portrayal compared to 'grotesque' print advertisements⁷, consumers may be more likely to be immersed or absorbed into the fictional worlds constructed by the mini-films and receive the brand messages conveyed. The relatively large effect sizes of transportation on outcome variables, explaining 30% to 45% of variances, make the MFA an invaluable online advertising vehicle. The persuasive mechanism, however, remains the same, as conceptualized by previous researchers on traditional commercials²⁵.

The results demonstrated that product involvement, pre-existing brand attitude, and attitude toward advertising in some cases influence brand attitudes or purchase intentions. However, only eight out of 24 statistical analyses reached significant levels, and the direct effects were much smaller compared to those of transportation. One might argue that an ad might decrease the influences of existing attitudes and general motivators of consumers. Since most one-shot advertisement studies did not investigate the effects over time, as the persuasive effect of any individual advertisement is short-lived, the dominant influence of narrative transportation on brand attitudinal and intentional changes confirmed the proposition made by Slater and Rouner¹¹ in the advertising context that narrative involvement, rather than issue involvement, is pivotal to

persuasive effectiveness and that the effect of persuasive subtexts imbedded in the narrative will be a function of the extent of the absorption or engagement with the narrative.

Cognitive resistance or counterarguing against persuasive content in the narratives is reduced. In most cases, none of the preexisting attitudes and involvement had a moderating effect on the transportation and outcome variables, while the thoughts written by the participants were predominantly positive as well. This further strengthens the reduced-counter-argument proposition, which is one of the most important theoretical foundations of narrative persuasion. The persuasion mechanism of the narrative depends on the power of the story rather than elaboration, which results from the consumers' previous stance. From the branded entertainment viewpoint, the entertaining values of individual marketing techniques are emphasized^{18, 21}. To the extent that a narrative entertainment is perceived as intending to entertain rather than persuade, counterarguing should be avoided²⁶.

Narrative transportation has been heavily researched in areas such as entertainment-education^{10, 11, 26}, health communication^{27, 28, 29}, and even online story-like consumer reviews⁴⁸. A few studies that empirically verified counterarguing reduction effects have mostly applied the techniques of thought listings and scale measures²⁶ in recent years. The merits of this study are that it not only introduced the construct of narrative transportation into the online advertising and branded entertainment domain, but also empirically tested counterarguing reduction resulting from narrative appeals with a novel research method. By doing so, the study provides a more comprehensive view and wider application to this research tradition as well as a deeper insight into one of the most important persuasive mechanisms of narrative.

An unexpected finding of the study is that narrative transportations had a stronger influence on the participants' purchase intentions rather than on brand attitudes. It may be that a good story stimulates consumers' impulsive buying tendency before a more positive brand attitude is formed, similar to the effect of an attractive fashion design that raised positive emotion and hedonic consumption tendency⁴⁹. Though purchase intention is not purchase behavior *per se*, and the actual purchase is subjected to the influence of numerous other factors, impulse-buying of low-price consumer goods is plausible, especially for unknown brands. One of the authors of the study has informally asked some students who have enjoyed a foreign mini-film advertisement if they would try the advertised brand of ice cream once it entered the local market. 'Of course, why not?' was the typical response.

6. IMPLICATIONS

Persuasion is one of the central concepts in an advertising study. Based on the approach-avoidance model, Knowles and Linn¹⁵ proposed two fundamentally different ways to create change, namely, Alpha strategies and Omega strategies. Alpha strategies attempt to persuade individuals by increasing the approach forces, such as adding more incentives, finding more credible sources, and the like, whereas Omega strategies, assuming an avoidance approach, attempt to persuade individuals by decreasing avoidance forces or by removing or disengaging reluctance to change. In economically developed countries, consumers are bombarded daily by hundreds of promises from various forms of advertising. Marketing messages with huge claims can be easily discredited or counter-argued as consumers grow more sophisticated; therefore, the effectiveness of advertising with an Alpha approach may lessen. Narrative transportation, as an Omega tactic of persuasion, has been understudied in marketing research; therefore, it is recommended that academics and practitioners alike further explore the potential of this particular form of persuasive tactics in advertising research.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model tends to assume that any target of a persuasion attempt is persuadable. In a world over-saturated with marketing messages in a crowded media environment, persuasion is highly unlikely or even impossible, because the audience will refuse to engage before persuasion could properly begin⁷. Inattention to ads in the media consumption poses a severe threat to the ads' effectiveness, especially when the general public increasingly favors online interactive media where ads are not 'forced' to viewing. The mini-film with its entertainment value is designed to attract voluntarily viewing and sharing, like viral videos⁵⁰. More subtle placement is therefore a better practice in mini-film production¹⁸. Successful films attract audiences not because of their persuasive content, but because they have a higher entertaining value espoused by narratives^{11,32}. It should be one of the primary considerations of future advertising campaigns, both online and traditional.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The sample of this study comprised predominantly student subjects, which is one of the research limitations that can compromise the external validity. A meta-analysis conducted by Van Laer and colleagues¹² demonstrated that education and gender exert a small effect on narrative transportation. However, there is no reason to think that the small effect sizes of these two demographic factors will interact with the theoretical variables under the investigation and meaningfully change the experiment

outcomes⁵¹ with no significant age effect in either study. Moreover, many online marketing innovations target younger and higher-educated consumers because they are the main users of the Internet in daily life. The use of student subjects is adequate.

The limited choices of real MFAs for experimental treatments posed another research limitation. A convenience store is not a typical service consumers have in mind, and it may not be able to represent other services requiring only low-involvement, for instance. Many production considerations of MFA might also confound the transportation process, such as production qualities and film genres¹¹, which render the direct comparison of narrative effects of different MFAs questionable. However, much effort has been devoted to selecting comparable videos in the experiments. The relatively large effect sizes of narrative transportation on outcome variables as well as similar results across all experimental conditions demonstrated that transportation and its related concept of reduced counter-arguing are central to narrative persuasion in general and mini-film advertising in particular.

Narrative transportation is an umbrella term for both story absorption and character identification⁹. In entertainment-education research, Slater and Rouner¹¹ have distinguished these two concepts of narrative involvement and character involvement as well as their relationship for dual avenues toward the effects of pro-social issue advocacy, which has been verified by an empirical study⁵². Identification with story character has already been heavily researched for its effect on drama consumption⁵³. It is highly likely that identification with character in a mini-film, or narrative advertising in general, can also contribute to the diminishing counter-argument phenomenon. Another line of thinking concerning mini-film character(s) is the celebrity endorsement theory of traditional advertising. Mini-film is not a drama for pure entertainment purposes, and since the main characters of the selected MFA are all played by movie or television stars, celebrity attraction can be a potential factor in MFA effectiveness.

It has long been recognized that positive cognitive and affective responses from individual consumers are both indispensable processes for effective advertising³⁹. Narrative transportation as a distinct persuasive mechanism has been proposed to have an effect on beliefs and attitudes by reducing the number of negative cognitive responses to the messages imbedded and increasing emotional response⁹. The emphasis on both cognitive and emotional immersions indicates that transportation can exert its effectiveness through dual pathways, cognitive and affective⁵⁴. It is worth to further investigate whether the reduction in cognitive resistance in interaction with an increase in positively emotional response maximizes the

persuasive effect of the MFA or traditional advertisement.

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9. APPENDIX

Construct	Measurement items	Source
Product involvement	Interested/uninterested Important/unimportant Relevant/irrelevant Useful/useless	Zaichkowsky ⁴³
Attitude toward the advertising	The ads help me learn about product. I often try a new product because of an ad. I find ads entertaining. I often switch brands because of an ad.	Prendergast, Cheung, and West ⁴²
Narrative transportation	While I was watching the MF video, I could easily picture myself in the scene of the events described in the video. I was mentally involved in the MFA video while watching it. The MF video affected me emotionally. The events in the MFA video are relevant to my everyday life. After finishing the MFA video, I found it easy to put out of my mind. (R)	Green and Brock ⁹
Attitude toward the brand	Good/bad Favorable/unfavorable Pleasant/unpleasant	Lafferty and Goldsmith ⁴⁴
Purchase intention	After watching this MFA, I would love spending a little more time to understand the brand of product. After watching this MFA, I believe this product would be worth considering. After watching this MFA, I am willing to buy this product.	Lafferty and Goldsmith ⁴⁴

Note: R = reverse-scored.