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Storytelling in the digital era:

A meta-analysis of relevant moderators of the narrative transportation effect

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Abstract

In the digital era, marketers increasingly use storytelling techniques to narratively transport and persuade their customers. This paper pursues three primary objectives: (1) to integrate three digitally relevant moderators of the narrative transportation effect into the marketing literature, (2) to empirically assess the integrated model with a quantitative meta-analysis of extant research, and (3) to provide directions for marketing managers to enhance the narrative transportation effect in an evolving technological environment. The paper contributes to the field by means of a meta-analysis of 64 articles featuring 138 narrative transportation effect sizes. The research shows that the narrative transportation effect is stronger when the story falls in a commercial (vs. non-commercial) domain, is user (vs. professional) generated, and is received by one story-receiver at a time. The study concludes with implications for research and practice and directions for future research.

Keywords: Digital marketing; Meta-analysis; Narrative transportation; Story domain; Story-receiver; User-generated content

> Technology is the campfire around which we tell our stories.
> —Laurie Anderson (performance artist)

1. Introduction

New technologies, such as innovations in virtual reality (VR) (Kim & Forsythe, 2009; Muzellec, Lynn, & Lambkin, 2012; Shih, 1998) and the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) (Cavusgil & Evirgen, 1997), provide inspiring opportunities to enhance customer engagement in an evolving technological environment in which analogue and digital communication modes vie for attention. VR holds the promise to create a truly immersive storytelling experience. For example, Etihad Airways (2016) developed an immersive VR film called *Reimagine* featuring Nicole Kidman. The film takes viewers equipped with a Google Cardboard headset from New York to Abu Dhabi and invites them to share the luxurious experience with characters ranging from a film director to a falcon traveling first class. In addition, intelligent assistants hold exciting possibilities for the future of storytelling. For example, Iñárritu's (2017) immersive work *CARNE y ARENA* allowed spectators of a recent art exhibition at Deposito at Fondazione Prada in Milan to virtually live the experience of Mexican refugees illegally crossing the U.S. border. The entire installation constantly exposed visitors to digitally mediated stories.

Both online and offline marketing research posits that a story captures 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). Marketing research also explores how stories engage and transform audiences (Harmeling, Moffett, Arnold, & Carlson, 2017). The extended transportation-imagery model demonstrates that a story engages customers through narrative transportation, defined as "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 this type of customer engagement achieves is narrative persuasion.

Narrative persuasion is notably different from the more established customer engagement outcomes that traditional advertising pursues. First, transporting stories affect people mentally and reduce their motivation for counter-arguing (Green & Brock, 2002) by carrying them into the narrative and arousing emotional responses. The narrative transportation effect manifests itself in story-receivers' affective and cognitive responses, beliefs, attitudes, and intentions as a result of being swept away by a story and transported into a narrative world that modifies their perception of their world of origin (Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2002). Second, the narrative transportation effect has the potential to last and even increase over time (Appel & Richter, 2007), allowing for higher returns on advertising investment. This potential has attracted marketers' interest in and spend on various forms of narrative content. Yet, while billions of dollars are invested in digital stories, "few brands have generated meaningful consumer interest online" (Holt, 2016, p. 42). Insufficient understanding of how commercial stories work in the digital world (Lambert, 2013) and increasing consumer creativity in producing autonomous stories (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015; Hughes, Bendoni, & Pehlivan, 2016; Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010) hinder the persuasiveness of brand stories, in turn decreasing companies' expected returns.

Following Holt's (2016) warning about the specific mechanisms and risks that characterize storytelling in digital environments, this paper investigates moderators of narrative transportation that are especially relevant for digital stories. As such, we avoid focusing on structural aspects of stories (Barthes, 1975), as they apply indiscriminately to online and offline stories (for a comprehensive review of a story's structural elements, see van Laer, Escalas, Ludwig, & van den Hende, 2018). Extant research confirms that digital stories are capable of enhancing the narrative transportation effect by, for example, exploiting

innovations such as VR (Burrows & Blanton, 2016). We identify three possible moderators of the relationship between narrative transportation and narrative persuasion in digital settings and test them using a meta-analytic procedure. Identification of the moderators emerged from three criteria: their relevance for digital environments (i.e., the hybridity of commercial and non-commercial content and greater intensity of social exchanges; (van Laer & de Ruyter, 2010); illumination from the literature on digital storytelling highlighting areas of increasing interest (Holt, 2016); and effects stemming from reliable measurement, inevitably testing relationships on the basis of extant empirical studies (Hunter & Schmidt, 2004). The moderators include (1) a story's domain (commercial vs. non-commercial), which is relevant considering the problems companies face in reaping appropriate returns from their investments in digital stories (Holt, 2016; Lambert, 2013); (2) user- versus professional-generated stories (i.e., story source), which reflect the vast social interactions that the web in general and social media in particular fuel (Bradlow, 2013; Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013), including amateur-generated narrative content (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015); and (3) the number of story-receivers who process a story at the same time, as while the web multiplies the number of amateur story producers, paradoxically customers come across stories on their own rather than in company (Pera, 2017).

Through a meta-analysis of 64 articles featuring 138 narrative transportation effect sizes, this paper tests the moderating effect of story domain, story source, and number of story-receivers in a period in human history characterized by the shift from analogue communication to communication occurring in both analogue and digital modes. Whereas most models of communication theorize only linear relationships between senders and receivers, this study investigates moderating factors that may provide additional meaningful insights. Overall, the paper pursues three primary objectives: (1) to integrate the three moderators of the narrative transportation effect into the marketing literature, (2) to

empirically assess the integrated model with a quantitative meta-analysis of extant research, and (3) to provide directions for managers to influence the narrative transportation effect in an evolving technological environment.

This best-evidence, model-driven meta-analysis—a model able to discern effect sizes arising solely from measurement variance while remaining sensitive to findings implying different directions across studies—argues for the relevance of stories for customers' decision making and experiences (Singhal & Rogers, 2002; van Laer, 2014). This paper increases understanding of the functioning and application of digital storytelling, thus advancing both the academic literature and managerial practice. First, investigating the moderating role of the story domain is particularly valuable to determine whether commercial stories are truly effective in enhancing the narrative transportation effect and whether managers in non-commercial domains should fully engage with storytelling or consider alternative strategies. Second, the moderating role of the source of the story is relevant because amateur users often engage in content generation in contemporary markets, such as social media platforms (Hughes et al., 2016). Therefore, comprehending whether these user voices are well-suited to the narrative transportation effect is imperative. Third, the digital world in general and technological developments such as VR in particular mean that customers are frequently exposed to stories on their own rather than with others (Pera, 2017).

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Narrative transportation and similar constructs

Narrative transportation is a form of experiential response to narratives and thus is similar to other constructs such as customer engagement (Kim, Lloyd, & Cervellon, 2016), absorption (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974), media engagement (Wang & Calder, 2009), narrative engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009), and retrospective reflection (Hamby & Brinberg, 2016; Hamby, Brinberg, & Daniloski, 2017; Hamby, Daniloski, & Brinberg, 2015).

Yet several subtle, critical differences exist. Customer engagement is a more general concept (Kim et al., 2016), whereas narrative transportation specifically entails stories, which are not necessary for all types of customer engagement. Absorption refers to a personality trait or a general tendency to be immersed in life experiences (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974), whereas narrative transportation is an engrossing temporary experience (Sestir & Green, 2010). Media engagement is the sum of the motivational experiences consumers have with a media product (Wang & Calder, 2009). Malthouse, Calder, and Tamhane (2007) demonstrate that media engagement is primarily an experiential response to aesthetic and visual elements of images whereas narrative transportation relies on a story that may not include visual content (e.g., print or Podcast stories). Narrative engagement is "the experience of engaging with a narrative" (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009, p. 322) and encompasses multiple dimensions related to narrative understanding, attentional focus on the story, emotion for and with characters, and the sensation of being there in a narrative world; by contrast, narrative transportation specifically focuses on empathy for characters and imagination of the story plot (van Laer et al., 2014), whereby story-receivers actively use their imagination to co-construct the narrative (Chronis, 2008). Finally, narrative transportation encapsulates the journey into the narrative world; retrospective reflection captures customers' changed re-emergence into the real world (Hamby et al., 2017).

As humanity has plunged into the digital era, stories have become more prevalent and ubiquitous than ever. The use of storytelling as a customer engagement strategy is on the rise in a range of domains, including branding (Cova & Pace, 2006; Holt, 2004; Hughes et al., 2016; Luedicke et al., 2010; Presi, Maehle, & Kleppe, 2016; Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004), marketing research (Cayla & Arnould, 2013; Dyer & Wilkins, 1991; Gummesson, 2002), new product development (van den Hende, Dahl, Schoormans, & Snelders, 2012), online consumer-to-consumer communication (Farace, van Laer, de Ruyter, & Wetzels, 2017;

Kedzior, Allen, & Schroeder, 2016; Simmons, 2008), retailing (Borghini, Diamond, Kozinets, McGrath, Muñiz Jr, & Sherry Jr, 2009), and tourism (Chronis, 2008; Pera, 2017).

Marketing evidence of brands pursuing predominantly narrative-type customer engagement is rich and spans many industries, including fast-moving consumer goods (e.g., Aquafresh, Coca Cola, Corona, Orangina, M&M's), luxury (e.g., Kenzo, Johnnie Walker, Mercedes, Moët & Chandon, Prada), machinery (e.g., Caterpillar, Ram Trucks), services (e.g., Air France, Eurostar, Google, HSBC), and social media (e.g., Instagram Stories). For example, Chanel has been a historical forerunner in trusting storytelling's power to develop "products with soul" (Marber & Wellen, 2007, p. 198). The 21 digital *Inside CHANEL* films (inside.chanel.com) recount the story of founder Coco Chanel, her world, and some of the brand's iconic products. These films are grounded in a life story populated by empathetic characters and filled with events that viewers can imagine having happened.

While the narrative transportation effect and its consequences have been substantively explored, these contributions are often too theoretical to be directly applicable to digital storytelling, which remains mostly grounded in a "trial-and-error" approach. For example, although consumers check their smartphones dozens of times a day, a great deal of brand content online remains unobserved because of a lack of storytelling (Vigneaux, 2015). Holt (2016) also underscores the enormous marketing budgets being wasted on digital stories, due to marketers' scant understanding of their underlining logic. In summary, marketing's storytelling practices entail a multiplicity of decisions whose role in the narrative transportation effect deserves further elucidation. Today, marketers' digital storytelling decisions include (1) the way a story is to be made (story-making stage), (2) by whom it must be delivered (storytelling stage), and (3) to which audiences it should be oriented (story-receiving stage). First, extant research largely covers the story-making stage by identifying the elements likely to exert a main effect on a story's persuasiveness. These elements include

characters (van den Hende et al., 2012), climax, plot (Escalas, 2004), a clear outcome (van

Laer et al., 2014), and verisimilitude (Bal, Butterman, & Bakker, 2011; van Laer et al., 2014).

Second, regarding the storytelling stage, Wentzel, Tomczak, and Herrmann (2010) find a

negative moderating effect of the salience of the manipulative intent of a narrative ad: the

more overt the commercial intentions of a story, the less persuasive the story is. Though

limited to the health domain, Shen, Sheer, and Li (2015) highlight the role of story channels

by showing that narratives delivered via audio and video are more likely to have a strong

effect on persuasion than print narratives. Third, previous research indicates that some

qualities of a story's audience (story-receiving stage) also affect the narrative transportation

effect. Story-receivers' attention (Green & Brock, 2000), education (Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela

Paz, & Peterson, 2006), familiarity (Green, 2004), sex (Argo, Zhu, & Dahl, 2008), and

transportability (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004) all exert an eventual main effect.

2.2 Storytelling in an evolving technological environment

Several technological developments hold the promise to further enhance the narrative

transportation effect in different domains. Stories told through social media are particularly

influential because they utilize social networks, are available in real time, and are digital,

dynamic, ubiquitous, and visible (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Additional technological

developments, which have received scant attention in the academic literature on storytelling,

also have the potential to further heighten the narrative transportation effect. In particular,

mobile devices are highly individualized personal communication tools (Bacile, Ye, &

Swilley, 2014) and, as such, can be leveraged for targeted storytelling, as long as privacy

concerns are taken into consideration (Aguirre, Mahr, Grewal, de Ruyter, & Wetzels,

2015). Location-based apps enable a user to receive pertinent information while away from

home, such as movie times at the local theater, price comparisons across local stores, or

directions to a local outlet. Danaher, Smith, Ranasinghe, and Danaher (2015) examine the

effectiveness of location-based mobile coupons delivered to customers' devices as they walk around a shopping mall, and Fong, Fang, and Luo (2015) consider location-based targeting of offers sent to mobile devices according to proximities to competitors' physical locations. Location-based technologies combined with big data management can support the provision of specific narrative content adapted to a customer's profile and situation. In other words, programmatic advertising can be adapted to storytelling (Noller & Magalon, 2016). For example, Yves Saint Laurent recently tailored its storytelling for the fragrance Black Opium to suit five different customer profiles, which were segmented according to their specific narrative needs (e.g., adventure, romance, social connectedness).

While the literature on mobile storytelling remains limited, exciting possibilities include sending customers personalized information about the backstory of a cultural institution or a work of art, no matter whether they are located within or outside the walls of a museum. For example, on Google's Arts & Culture app, the public can access high-resolution and VR images of artworks housed in the initiative's partner museums from anywhere in the world. In addition, VR, defined as a computer-generated interactive, immersive experience (Ryan, 2001), has received limited attention in scholarly research on storytelling. However, it holds strong promises for the field, as storytelling itself can be likened to a VR because stories transport story-receivers into the VR of the narrative world. Considering its immersive and multi-sensory nature, VR holds the potential to strengthen the engaging power of both commercial and non-commercial stories. Moreover, AI holds exciting possibilities for commercial storytelling. For example, van Laer et al. (2018) use AI to map the emotional shape of online customer reviews, revealing five core trajectories that affect reviews' ranking and visibility and readers' purchase decisions. Overall, these technological developments have the potential to enable storytellers to tell even more compelling stories, which is likely to

further enhance the engaging power of storytelling and, thus, the narrative transportation effect. However, several factors may moderate this effect.

2.3. Hypotheses development

Stories can come from commercial or non-commercial domains. Commercial stories are specific types of advertising whose content and form are narrative and whose aim is to persuade customers. Conversely, non-commercial stories are all other stories that are merely meant to educate, entertain, or thrill an audience rather than fulfill marketing objectives. Extant research shows that narrative ads (i.e., commercial stories) may reduce story-receivers' critical scrutiny by triggering narrative transportation into a brand's world (Barnhardt, Manzano, Brito, Myrick, & Smith, 2016; Wentzel et al., 2010). Nonetheless, a commercial story can be conveyed via typical commercial media (e.g., television commercials, a company's dedicated Internet pages) or non-commercial media (e.g., when a customer receives a commercial story while browsing a friend's Facebook page). However, in this research the term "domain" refers not to the media but to the nature of a story: its commercial or non-commercial aims. In other words, we do not compare the persuasiveness of commercial communication by contrasting its alternative formats (i.e., narrative vs. non-narrative); rather, we focus solely on the narrative format and contrast commercial and non-commercial stories (i.e., stories differing in terms of domain of provenance) to determine which most enhances the narrative transportation effect.

Social media creates a greater demand for narrative content. Yet this demand is relatively recent when compared with advertising history. Facebook (>2 billion users) and Instagram (>1 billion users)—the two largest social media networks to date—and YouTube (1.5 billion users)—the main online video platform—were founded in 2004, 2010, and 2005, respectively. In addition, their social success (measured in terms of number of members worldwide) has not been immediately accompanied by corresponding economic success

(measured in terms of profit/loss). For example, Facebook was said to have turned profitable five years after inception (Thompson, 2009), while Twitter, though large, has remained unprofitable since its creation in 2006. We can thus reasonably conclude that massive diffusion of commercial narrative content online is only a recent phenomenon. Before turning to stories, marketers have long relied on push advertising. However, push advertising has become rapidly obsolete in the digital world, which instead favors pull advertising (Unni & Harmon, 2007). Pull advertising, which postulates customers' active interest in looking for and consuming commercial content, has mostly been pursued through marketers' adoption of narrative content, which is more apt to engage an audience (Brown & Patterson, 2010).

However, research demonstrates that narrative content only works when customers are unaware of the ads' manipulative intent or are not skeptical (Escalas, 2007). When aware or skeptical, customers "may also engage in a more analytical processing style in response to a narrative ad when they think that it is warranted to do so" (Wentzel et al., 2010, p. 513). Marketers' use of (1) excessive rhetorical questions (Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004), (2) biased endorsers (Kirmani & Zhu, 2007), and (3) negative comparisons with competing brands (Jain & Posavac, 2004) augment the likelihood of an audience to detect a story's commercial intent. Recent research has become less consensual about the positive effects of commercial narrative content. Dessart (2018) concludes that under specific circumstances (e.g., when an animal rather than a human portrays the story's character), commercial narrative content may increase narrative transportation but decrease customers' positive attitudes toward the advertised brand, because they may find it difficult to identify with the character. These exceptional circumstances aside, we follow the scholarly consensus and hypothesize that customers, distracted by the novelty of narrative content, which hides stories' commercial aims, are being swept away and persuaded by commercial stories through narrative transportation.

H1.   If the story domain is commercial, the effect of narrative transportation on narrative

persuasion increases.

The evolving technological environment makes it essential to comprehend the

moderating role of the source of a story because amateur users and professionals are often

engaged in story production in contemporary markets not only via traditional platforms but

also via apps, mobile phones, and websites. Two literature streams are useful when examining

whether a story's source (i.e., amateur users or professionals) enhances or reduces the

narrative transportation effect: (1) cultural branding and (2) social media communication.

First, recent marketing research on stories and cultural branding suggests a positive

impact of customers acting as storytellers on the narrative transportation effect: having

amateur brand storytellers can improve a campaign's persuasiveness through the brand's

complex system, or "gestalt." Brand gestalt implies that the narratives a brand conveys

become more powerful when more storytellers are involved, because these provide a richer

system of narrative content and meaning that boosts an audience's active engagement

(Diamond, Sherry, Muñiz, McGrath, Kozinets, & Borghini, 2009). This tenet contests that the

success of a brand relies only on perfectly consistent and brand-controlled narrative content

over time. Extending Booker's (2004) original observation that more powerful stories contain

more master plots, research documents how amateur storytellers provide a narrative system

whose component parts are in constant interaction and together make up a whole greater than

their sum (Diamond et al., 2009; Visconti & Di Giuli, 2014). Specifically, Brown and

Patterson (2010, p. 541) unveil the narrative complexity of Harry Potter, which they identify

as a "sea of stories," including the stories the audience itself creates. These user-generated

stories often maintain story-receivers' engagement longer (Brown & Patterson, 2010). In their

case study of the Prada brand strategy, Visconti and Di Giuli (2014) report that bringing in storytellers from non-professional worlds accounts for one of the main drivers of the brand's success. In addition, Diamond et al. (2009) argue that powerful brands are the products of a range of amateur storytellers conveying their own stories, which help a brand continuously transform and evolve. Their study of the American Girl store's history and texts stands as a powerful addition to Berthon, Holbrook, Hulbert, and Pitt's (2007) work, which also establishes that complex brands have multiple meanings and stories. As such, Diamond et al. argue that brand advocates should participate in what they refer to as a "multilogue," a conversation between customers-as-storytellers (i.e., gestalt storytelling). On that basis, it is reasonable to expect that if stories are sourced from users, the narrative transportation effect should be enhanced.

The second useful stream of research to make sense of the moderating role of the story source is the literature on social media communication. Social media includes blogs, discussion fora, and news-, photo-, and video-sharing sites. Particularly relevant to this research is the transformation of the traditional division between storyteller and story-receiver that social media platforms bring about. While the brand traditionally controlled story content, production, and distribution (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003), social media facilitates user-generated brand content. Research even argues that brand managers have lost their pivotal role as authors of their brands' stories (Kuksov, Shachar, & Wang, 2013). As a result, brands do not have complete control over the stories they tell (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010), and the multi-vocal nature of brand stories leads to "open-source" branding (Fournier & Avery, 2011). This also means that customers are more likely to be exposed to stories told by other users when experiencing them on social media platforms. Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) liken storytelling on social media platforms to an improvised theater performance, due to its uncontrolled and unpredictable nature. Specifically, the roles of the storyteller and story-

receiver are unclear because both the brand owner and customers can play either part. This results in an interactive co-creation process. Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, and Wiertz (2013) propose a conceptual framework to visualize the co-creational process of brand stories in social media. With this framework, they explain that while firm-generated brand stories are mainly consistent over time, user-generated brand stories are more likely to change and may give new meanings to the brand.

Campbell, Cohen, and Ma (2014) note that additional voices can join the co-creation process, such as news media. The pinball metaphor (Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, & Bloching, 2013) illustrates the disorderly aspect of the co-creation process that characterizes storytelling on social media platforms. While the brand manages the ball (i.e., the story), the ball may not necessarily go in the direction the brand manager intended as empowered customers affectively, cognitively, and behaviorally participate in creating information and content (Solem & Pedersen, 2016). Despite these challenges, brand stories told through social media are uniquely powerful (Gensler et al., 2013; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). This finding is also in line with prior work on the persuasiveness of user-generated brand stories for word of mouth (Verleye, Gemmel, & Rangarajan, 2014). For example, research on user-generated content (Hautz, Füller, Hutter, & Thürridl, 2014) shows that multiple amateur participants in the generation of a video positively affect an audience's perception of the source's expertise and trustworthiness. This provides further evidence for the hypothesis that stories told by user voices have heightened engaging power. Therefore, story source moderates the relationship between narrative transportation and narrative persuasion:

H2. If the story is user-generated, the effect of narrative transportation on narrative persuasion increases.

The third moderating variable this paper puts forth is the number of story-receivers—that is, whether story-receivers are alone when they consume the story or whether others are present. Living in a digital world means that story-receivers often interpret stories on their own (Greengard, 2011). Furthermore, technological developments such as VR completely remove customers from the presence of others by transporting them into a virtual world. Therefore, examining the moderating role of the number of story-receivers for the narrative transportation effect is a timely endeavor.

The "social desirability bias," a well-established concept in social sciences, argues that customer behavior is socially sensitive. Thus, individuals tend to behave in a manner that they believe others will view favorably and also tend to describe themselves in favorable terms (Beretvas, Meyers, & Leite, 2002; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Extending this concept to the narrative transportation context, the presence of others may hinder the narrative transportation effect because individuals may worry that others around them will judge them as too emotional. This may prevent story-receivers from being completely persuaded by the narrative.

In addition, work on emotional displays shows that the presence of others generally inhibits expressions (Buck, 1984; Izard, 1971), though other studies show that the presence of others can facilitate some positive emotions (Chapman & Wright, 1976; Kraut & Johnston, 1979). Similar to other potentially harmful propensities (Orazi, Lei, & Bove, 2015), inhibition of emotional expressions should generally depend on the social consequences associated with these emotional expressions. The expression of one's feelings may be controlled and modified by presenting to others an expression that minimizes, exaggerates, or hides these feelings to suit the social situation (Ekman, 1992). Friedman and Miller-Herringer (1991) find that the presence of others inhibits expressions of emotions when individuals are told that they have won a competition. Specifically, spontaneous expressions of happiness in response to

individual success are more noticeable when individuals are alone than when others are present.

These findings suggest that story-receivers will go to great lengths to mask their emotional responses to stories when other story-receivers are present. The presence of other story-receivers may drive story-receivers to focus on their non-verbal expressions rather than let themselves be fully engaged. In summary, we propose that the number of simultaneous story-receivers moderates the relationship between narrative transportation and narrative persuasion:

H3.   If the story is received alone, the effect of narrative transportation on narrative persuasion increases.

3. Method

3.1. Sampling frame

For the sake of comparability, we use the same sampling technique as van Laer et al. (2014) but expand and update the sample to include studies conducted since then. The frame encompassed an inclusive linguistic range spanning Dutch, English, French, German, and Italian and was limited by Green and Brock's (2000) quantitative operationalization of narrative transportation with the Transportation scale. Noting the potential upward bias of published studies (Bozarth & Roberts, 1972), we deemed all relevant articles eligible, regardless of their publication form. We employed four methods in the literature search:

1. Searched for the term "transportation" in Business Source Premier, CINAHL, EconLit, ERIC, Google Scholar, GreenFILE, LISTA, MEDLINE, PiCarta, PsyARTICLES, PsycBooks, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycINFO, and SocINDEX databases.

2. Searched the Social Sciences Citation Index using Green and Brock (2000) and van Laer et al. (2014).

(1) Conducted manual shelf searches of journals that frequently publish articles on narrative transportation (e.g., *Journal of Business Research, Journal of Consumer Research,* and *Media Psychology*).

3. Engaged in personal communications with authors of articles on narrative transportation, asking for their published and un-published work as well as their impressions of whether any relevant articles were missing.

Our search produced nine unpublished and 327 published articles (including book sections) related to narrative transportation. To appear in the meta-analysis, a study needed to include a dependent variable as well as narrative transportation as a variable measured by the Transportation (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 704), Being Hooked (Escalas, Moore, & Britton, 2004, p. 110), Mysticism (Hood, 1975, pp. 31-32), or Narrative Engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009, p. 337) scales. These scales provide data on participants' degree of empathy, mental imagery, and suspended reality. No other quantitative operationalization meets these definitional criteria. With these inclusion criteria, the number of articles ultimately appearing in this meta-analysis was 64.

3.2. Variable coding

Together, the 64 articles featured 138 narrative transportation effect sizes. To ensure the independence of the effect sizes, two expert coders blind to the hypotheses classified the multitude of variables reported in the articles, using the three moderator categories. Each moderator level was described in a codebook. For example, the commercial domain was described as "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large." A user-generated story was defined as a story "made publicly available over

the Internet, which reflects a certain amount of creative effort, and which is created outside of professional routines and practices" (Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery, 2006, p. 4) in contrast with a professionally generated story. Not all studies report the exact number of story-receivers. Because of the limited number of exact reports, we used a variable of a dichotomous ordinal measurement level (single vs. multiple) to measure the number of story-receivers. The coders achieved agreement levels that were good to very good (Cohen's κ = .70–.85, p < .001) and in line with van Laer et al.'s (2014) meta-analysis (Cohen's κ = .75). Disagreements were resolved through discussion.[1]

3.3 Effect size computation

The effect size statistic contrasts groups based on their mean scores on the narrative transportation effect. The Pearson correlation provided the effect size indicator. We used Hullett and Levine's (2003) method to calculate a simple average correlation by converting F values from the analyses of variance into effect size estimates. We weighted these estimates using the inverse of the variance (Marín-Martínez & Sánchez-Meca, 2010) and then corrected the weighted correlations for differences in the reliability of the variables involved (Hunter & Schmidt, 2004).

To test the influence of the relevant moderators on the narrative transportation effect, we calculated the reliability-adjusted, inverse-variance-weighted ρ; 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 required to reduce the mean effect size to a probability level of α = .05 (Rosenthal, 1991). To detect the presence of heterogeneity due to the moderators, we used the Q_{Within} statistic (Huedo-Medina, Sánchez-Meca, Marín-Martínez, & Botella, 2006). The $Q_{Between}$ statistic tested whether the size of the effect differed between moderator levels (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, &

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[1] Both the complete list of articles and the codebook are available on request.

Rothstein, 2009; Hedges & Olkin, 1985). Finally, we conducted mixed-effects analysis with the Comprehensive Meta-Analysis software program (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2005).

4. Results

First, with regard to the effect of story domain as a moderator of the overall narrative transportation effect (see Table 1), the Q_{Within} statistic is significant ($Q_{Within(136)} = 1352.30$, $p < .001$); that is, this effect size is heterogeneous, and thus assessing the levels of this moderator is beneficial. The $Q_{Between}$ statistic indicates that stories from commercial domains ($\rho = .45$, $z = 10.11$, $p < .001$) have greater effect sizes than stories from non-commercial domains ($\rho = .29$, $z = 11.52$, $p < .001$; $Q_{Between(1)} = 6.25$, $p < .05$), in support of H1.

Second, regarding the source of the story, the Q_{Within} statistic supports the overall prediction that the narrative transportation effect varies for different story generators ($Q_{Within(136)} = 1341.68$, $p < .001$); the $Q_{Between}$ statistic indicates that the narrative transportation effect is greater for user-generated ($\rho = .40$, $z = 11.36$, $p < .001$) than for professional-generated ($\rho = .29$, $z = 10.56$, $p < .001$; $Q_{Between(1)} = 5.55$, $p < .05$) content, in support of H2.

Third, we find a significant Q_{Within} statistic for the number of story-receivers ($Q_{Within(113)} = 1165.55$, $p < .001$). The $Q_{Between}$ statistic indicates that the narrative transportation effect is greater for single ($\rho = .37$, $z = 11.33$, $p < .001$) than for multiple ($\rho = .27$, $z = 7.56$, $p < .001$; $Q_{Between(1)} = 5.55$, $p < .05$) story-receivers, in support of H3. When multiple story-receivers simultaneously experience narrative transportation, the effect decreases.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Fig. 1 provides a graphic representation of the effect sizes. In comparing the observed effect sizes with those in van Laer et al.'s (2014) meta-analysis on narrative transportation, we find that all three effect sizes are comparable ($.10 < \rho < .50$). Considering publication bias, the

file drawer results indicate that the effect sizes are robust and most likely not a reflection of publication bias; such bias would require between 5,865 and 81,478 null effects to reduce the statistical significance of the effect sizes to .05 at the two-tailed level.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

5. Discussion

This study demonstrates that the narrative transportation effect is greater when (1) the story pertains to a commercial domain; (2) amateur users are engaged in the story production, which has become the case in contemporary markets in which social media (van Laer & de Ruyter, 2010) and multiple customer touchpoints (Phillips, 2012; Viña & Mattelmäki, 2010) dominate; and (3) the story-receiver interprets the story alone, which living in a digital world (Greengard, 2011) and one-to-one marketing tools (Rogers & Peppers, 1997) foster. Thus, the paper answers Wentzel et al.'s (2010, p. 524) call for research "to investigate which additional factors moderate the relationship between narrative ads and narrative processing." More specifically, this paper extends understanding of the narrative transportation effect in an evolving technological environment, which has generated specific social interactions (e.g., user-generated content) and technologically mediated experiences (e.g., virtual isolation) that are still under-researched in the field of storytelling.

As such, this paper makes two contributions. First, the paper contributes to the field of customer engagement by integrating into the literature three variables that moderate the effect of narrative transportation, a type of customer engagement, on narrative persuasion. Story domain, story source, and number of simultaneous story-receivers are particularly appropriate moderating variables to support scholars' understanding and marketers' use of storytelling in the digital world. Second, the paper contributes to prior work on the power of storytelling by providing marketing implications derived from each of the three factors moderating the narrative transportation effect. The first two variables shed light on marketers' decisions at the

storytelling stage, while the third variable sharpens their expectations in terms of story-reception.

5.1. Research implications of the story domain

The domain in which storytelling takes place is essential for the prediction of the narrative transportation effect. In the commercial domain, specific marketing spheres (e.g., branding, marketing research and strategy, new product development, retailing) and industries (e.g., cultural industry, luxury, tourism) can particularly benefit from telling stories to customers. This paper shows that when the story domain is commercial, story-receivers' sensitivity to narrative transportation increases, positively moderating narrative transportation's effect on narrative persuasion. The superiority of the narrative transportation effect in the commercial domain may be linked to its specificities. First, commercial stories are oriented toward having a persuasive effect, whereas stories in non-commercial domains may aim to stimulate escapism, fun, or surprise without an ulterior motive. Second, in comparison with stories in non-commercial domains (e.g., health-related stories, stories accompanying non-governmental organizations' fundraising campaigns), stories in the commercial domain are more likely to appeal to positive emotions, thus lowering resistance. Third, professional storytellers may be aware of the risks of making commercial intentions overt (Wentzel et al., 2010) and thus could avoid wrongdoings more consciously. We posit that after decades of receiving push advertising typically grounded in rational arguments and analytical persuasion, customers might not expect commercial intent to be embedded within narrative content. However, as Dessart (2018) shows, there are exceptions to this "rule." Future research should monitor the evolution of the moderating effect of the story domain, as repeated use of a narrative format with a commercial aim over time could trigger customers' awareness of marketers' intentions and thus ignite their skepticism toward commercial storytellers.

5.2. Research implications of the story source

This research shows that the source of a story moderates the narrative transportation effect: the impact increases when users generate a story instead of professionals. At the market level, the multiplication of customer touchpoints (Viña & Mattelmäki, 2010) facilitates an increase in user-generated content. For example, the 2016 launch of Chanel N° 5 L'Eau demonstrates how touchpoints as diverse as print advertising, television commercials, and social media can create a "Niagara of narratives" (Fulford, 1999, p. 149). Each of these touchpoints becomes a source of storytelling in a customer's journey (Tax, McCutcheon, & Wilkinson, 2013). The multiplication and increasing complexity of company–customer interactions and exchanges all along the journey demand more advanced marketing paradigms, such as 'transmedia' communication (Phillips, 2012), which overcomes the limitations of more traditional integrated communication. In summary, recent developments in marketing practice have facilitated the rise of user-generated content, indicating that this moderation of the narrative transportation effect constitutes a key issue that demands marketers' attention.

5.3. Research implications of the number of simultaneous story-receivers

This paper finds that when multiple story-receivers simultaneously experience narrative transportation, the narrative transportation effect decreases. This is consistent with prior research showing that, due to the "social desirability bias," individuals tend to act in a manner that they think others will view positively (Beretvas et al., 2002; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). This finding is also in line with extant work that shows that the presence of others generally hinders unconstrained emotional expressions (Buck, 1984; Izard, 1971). This is an important finding because living in a digital world means that customers are more likely to receive stories alone. Particularly adolescents increasingly consume media alone in their bedrooms (Livingstone, 2007). Our findings indicate that story consumption should be

experienced individually to enhance the narrative transportation effect, which technological innovations that immerse customers into another world (e.g., VR) facilitate. Paradoxically, because adolescents are vulnerable consumers (Pechmann, Levine, Loughlin, & Leslie, 2005), the finding that the narrative transportation effect strengthens when story-receivers consume the story on their own is an area of concern, especially from a public policy standpoint.

5.4. Practical implications of the story domain

Extant studies in marketing show that narrative ads are more effective than factual ads (i.e., ads that present a product's features and benefits in a direct and logical fashion, Adaval & Wyer, 1998) in determining ad message involvement and thus lead to enhanced brand and product evaluations (Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 1997). Research also shows that when customers narratively process content, the positive effect of narrative ads is particularly strong if customers are not aware of the ads' manipulative intent (Wentzel et al., 2010). In his systematic synthesis of storytelling, Woodside (2010, p. 534) finds five main positive effects of stories: (1) they improve memorization, (2) they aid information retrieval, (3) they may give story-receivers cathartic pleasure, (4) they can help people identify the source of their happiness, and (5) they can help customers "achieve deep satisfying levels of sense making."

Given this work, the story's domain has two implications for practitioners. First, the results show that stories in the commercial domain (i.e., narrative ads) are more likely to engage an audience than stories from other domains. As such, we argue that the use of storytelling in commercial domains is potentially more effective than in other domains if the persuasive intentions of the advertiser are not made overtly salient (Wentzel et al., 2010). In doing so, we contend that research on storytelling and narrative transportation is particularly relevant for the former domains, though we warn that massive and systematic use of stories for commercial intent may reduce these positive effects over time. Conversely, non-commercial choices should be encouraged using strategies other than storytelling. For

example, educators could benefit from the use of analogies. Analogies are uniquely suited to the education domain, which has non-commercial aims, because they help individuals learn about new concepts by encouraging them to use information from a familiar domain (the base) to understand a novel domain (the target).

Second, elaborating from the former conclusion, this paper further develops Wentzel et al.'s (2010) argument about the salience of manipulative intent in narrative ads by distinguishing between two types of narrative ads: (1) overtly commercial and (2) covertly commercial. The first type provides a rational message, typical of analytical involvement, which is however presented through a story format, typical of narrative transportation. Two examples from both traditional and innovative immersive media platforms help clarify how to formulate plot in commercial stories. In *L'Odyssée de Cartier*, Cartier (2012) provides the incarnation of the brand by showing a panther (the symbol of the *maison*) traveling the world, where it encounters countless iconic Louis Cartier products. This story leverages the brand's French heritage and iconicity to give evidence of its long tradition, prestige, and uniqueness as valuable reasons to buy. Google is another company that has overcome the idea of simply being an information provider to become a storyteller in a digital world. In *Parisian Love*, Google (2009) suggests that the brand can support people throughout their life stages by always finding pertinent and timely information to fulfill their dreams (and stories). The film is about a man who moves to Paris, falls in love with a Parisian woman, looks for a job to settle down in Paris, and eventually marries the women and has a child. More recently, Patrón Spirits International (2015) developed a VR film using a mix of animated elements and real-life footage shot with a three-dimensional drone. In the film, prospective customers are invited to discover how the company cultivates the next generation of agave and to explore the secrets behind tequila production. All these commercial stories actively try to persuade prospective and actual customers to prefer a given brand to its competitors.

The second type of commercial stories (covert) does not provide a rational argument but aims to deliver a purely enjoyable story in which the brand or product may not even be visible. In this case, both the message and its format are consistent with a purely narrative approach. Prada (2013) often follows this path by commissioning short films to international directors, such as Ridley Scott, Roman Polanski, and Wes Anderson, in which the tie to products is always limited, if not entirely absent. M&M's follows a similar trajectory by populating its brand universe with a plethora of brand characters whose key role is to tell funny stories. Brands can also use covertly commercial stories to call attention to an issue. For example, Häagen-Dazs (2017) used its platform to raise awareness of waning honey bee populations. The brand's initiative includes a VR experience that lets viewers fly with bees to learn about their impact on the world, their plight, and how customers can make a change to save them. The brand name is not mentioned during the video and only briefly appears on screen at the beginning and the end. Companies expect to benefit more from associating their brands with the emotions that customers derive from the narrative than from rationally re-assuring customers of their brands' superiority. While additional research is necessary to further develop this field, we argue that covertly commercial stories may diminish customers' rational processing of the story content even further because they evoke pure pleasure.

Finally, technological developments such as AI hold the potential to further strengthen the persuasive power of storytelling in a marketing context. As Brian Dames (Macy, 2017) puts it: "Good brand storytelling has long been a somewhat ethereal concept largely owned by Madison Avenue agencies in exchange for millions of dollars. Leveraging AI, the presence of storytelling elements can be quantified and linked to types of engagement. So now, all marketers can tell their compelling brand story in a way that is measurable, actionable and affordable."

5.5. Practical implications of the story source

From a story source perspective, we offer two levels of implications: the generation of stories may derive from a company's intentional use of various professional sources (e.g., advertising firms) or from multiple storytellers within a customer group. The moderating effect of user-generated content suggests that a company that employs user voices to communicate a story is more persuasive (Brown & Patterson, 2010; Diamond et al., 2009). This effect should occur when brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015), families and friends (Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997), or other groups of significant others share stories on or off social media. For example, Intel and Toshiba (2012) developed *The Beauty Inside* series, a film about a man who wakes up every day with a new body and a new face. Its distribution through social media gave audience members the opportunity to film themselves and play the main character, which resulted in many amateur users generating the narrative. Of note, Intel and Toshiba did not relinquish control of the story, as the brands created the Internet series. However, other brands wholly embrace user-generated content and keep their interference to a minimum. For example, GoPro relies almost entirely on consumer-generated advertising to tell an engaging story within its content marketing strategy (Watt, 2014). Amateur GoPro users shoot high-quality videos of themselves and their peers engaging in activities such as hiking, kayaking, skiing, or even skydiving and load these onto YouTube and social networks using the dedicated GoPro hashtag. Our findings suggest that such narratives are particularly potent when it comes to engaging customers. Therefore, managers aiming to increase the implications of storytelling and engage customers digitally should consider user-generated storytelling. The findings are particularly relevant when considering that marketers customarily use a limited number of narrative sources (usually narrative ads) and insist on maintaining full control over their brand stories.

5.6. Practical implications of the number of simultaneous story-receivers

Living in a digital world (Greengard, 2011) means that customers are more likely to find stories on their own, away from the presence of other story-receivers. As noted previously, Livingstone (2007) shows that young people increasingly consume media alone in their bedrooms rather than in the presence of their families. Such behavior enhances the narrative transportation effect and, in doing so, makes it unlikely that this already-vulnerable audience (Pechmann et al., 2005) will resist the power of stories in general and commercial-mediated stories in particular. Furthermore, the possibility of developing brand stories through individual games or VR can boost a company's persuasive impact. This is because VR provides customers with a simulated experience of being in another world, which they undergo on their own, as the headset cuts them off from the presence of others in the real world. For example, as part of its VR initiative, the *New York Times* (2017) sent more than one million Google headsets to its print subscribers. The project, in collaboration with Google, was called *The Displaced* and focused on three children across South Sudan, Syria, and Eastern Ukraine whose lives war had uprooted. Following the success of this VR initiative, the newspaper released additional VR videos, including *Seeking Pluto's Frigid Heart*. TOMS (2015) also uses VR in its flagship store in California to relay the message that for every pair of shoes sold, a new pair of shoes is given to an impoverished child. Customers sit in a "VR chair" and are transported to a remote village in Peru where they experience a giving trip. In line with the finding that the narrative transportation effect is enhanced when customers receive a narrative on their own, such immersive individual experiences should act as a uniquely compelling component of the narrative transportation process.

6. Research limitations and directions for future research

As with any type of research, meta-analytic research suffers from certain limitations. We call for additional research that goes beyond the limitations of this meta-analysis, which we briefly discuss next.

First, limitations in the method used should not be ignored. The validity of the conclusions from a meta-analysis always depends on the quality of the procedures adopted in the original studies. Most studies clearly report how the original authors measured the variables. Still, the meta-analytic methodology requires researchers to assume that the authors of the original studies conducted their research in an acceptable manner by using appropriate sampling methods, conducting their experiments ethically, and reporting their findings correctly.

Second, this paper explains the moderation of story domain on the narrative transportation effect using commercial and non-commercial story domains, but the case can always be made that sub-domains account for variance. Specifically, storytelling may be uniquely suited to the tourism sub-domain (Pera, 2017). In effect, destinations may be construed as storyscapes—environments in which narratives about the physical surroundings are negotiated, shaped, and transformed (Chronis, 2008). Furthermore, stories are central to travel experiences because tourists create stories during their trips and then share these with others as memories of their travels: memorable travel experiences are all about stories (Moscardo, 2010). Thus, the effect of narrative transportation on narrative persuasion might be strengthened if the commercial sub-domain is tourism (vs. other commercial sub-domains, such as fast-moving consumer goods). Aware of this power of storytelling, tourism brands are increasingly trying to leverage new technologies, such as VR, to tell immersive stories. For example, Marriott Hotels launched "VRoom Service," the first in-room VR travel experience in which guests can borrow a VR device and experience "VR Postcards," described as

"intimate and immersive travel stories that users experience in 360-degree 3D, via a virtual reality headset" (Kramer, 2015). The following statement by Matthew Carroll, vice president of Marriott Hotels, evidences the relevance of both narrative transportation and VR in tourism: "VRoom combines storytelling with technology, two things that are important to next generation travellers" (Kramer, 2015). Future research should endeavor to examine the moderating role of sub-story domains, such as tourism, in the narrative transportation effect.

Third, although we find that receiving a digitally mediated story in the presence of others inhibits the narrative transportation effect, the original studies did not provide enough information to examine the exact number of story-receivers at which the narrative transportation effect is diminished. Moreover, Buck, Losow, Murphy, and Costanzo (1992) show that strangers cause emotional inhibition in more contexts than close others. An increase in the number of story-receivers may thus weaken the narrative transportation effect only if the other story-receivers present during the reception of a digital story are strangers rather than close others. Over time, additional studies tackling these issues may be able to determine such influence.

Fourth, an intriguing direction for future research would be to investigate when stories might backfire. For example, future work could explore the unintended consequences of providing story-receivers with too much narrative information. According to Chronis (2008), story-receivers benefit from actively co-constructing their narrative experiences by using prior knowledge, filling in narrative gaps, re-contextualizing new experiences, and using imagination to immerse themselves in the story. Providing too much narrative information might make it difficult for story-receivers to fully engage with the story, as they would not need to be as actively involved in the co-construction of their narrative experiences (e.g., they would not need to fill in narrative gaps or use their imagination as much). More concretely, a widespread opinion is that books are more enjoyable than movies because they leave more to

the imagination: "Books allow you to be more creative and imagine the characters, places, scenes and so on, the way you want to.... In movies, all of the work is done for you" (Ginther, 2016). Thus, a fruitful direction for research would be to explore whether providing too much narrative information hinders story-receivers' engagement with the story, which would ultimately lose some of its power and persuasiveness. Furthermore, additional reasons could explain why stories might backfire. Dessart (2018) shows that, under certain circumstances, storytelling online videos prevent identification with the character in the story and result in a decrease in brand attitude. This counterintuitive finding arises because narrative transportation enables story-receivers to escape into the virtual world of the story and forget about their world of origin. This makes storytelling ads less effective than factual ads in enhancing brand attitudes. Dessart warns about the risks of carrying story-receivers away from their own reality excessively, to a point at which they lose their self-awareness and do not identify with story characters (animals vs. humans). Future research should delve deeper into the circumstances under which narrative transportation might lead to negative effects.

Fifth, while this meta-analysis identified three moderators of the narrative transportation effect, one limitation associated with the meta-analytic method is that it cannot directly examine the mechanism underlying these moderating influences. One question is whether individuals are aware that they are less engaged with a digital story when consuming it in the presence of others. Future work could use phenomenological methods (e.g., in-depth interviews or introspections) to shed light on whether individuals (1) experience distinct types of tensions to varying degrees, depending on whether the digital story consumption experience is collective or individual, but also which device they use to access the story, the timing of consumption, and so on, and (2) engage in strategies to minimize tensions. Such a study could generate additional, fine-grained implications and recommendations for marketers with regard to enhancing the engaging power of digitally mediated stories. Research into

these and other potential engaging effects of narratives is clearly required. This paper identifies new paths for research that will help practitioners understand why customers in today's fast-paced digital world may not yet be engaged.

Acknowledged as art within the precincts of literature and philosophy, storytelling is not required to stand as art within the precincts of the digital world. Yet it demands much more than the current chaotic creations. This paper is meant to improve digital marketing managers' and scholars' understanding of how stories work and how they should be conceived in an evolving technological environment.

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