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Do ads that tell a story always perform better? The role of character identification and character type in storytelling ads

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ABSTRACT

The growing use of storytelling as an advertising strategy for brands online poses the question of their relative effectiveness compared to more factual types of ads. In this context, this article focuses on the role of character identification and character type in the effects of narrative transportation that occur from storytelling ads. Using four experimental studies in two different contexts, two brand types, and two character types (human versus animal), the findings present a cautionary tale for the use of storytelling. By generating higher levels of narrative transportation, storytelling video ads can reduce character identification, which results in an overall decrease in positive attitude toward the brand, when using animal characters. These main findings are nuanced in the presence of joyful emotions. Implication for research and practice are discussed.

1. Introduction

Storytelling or narrative advertising is a form of advertising that communicates about a brand (Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008), a product, or a service in a story-like format (Wentzel, Tomczak, & Herrmann, 2010). In the current context of digital information overload (Sicilia & Ruiz, 2010) and ad-blocking technologies (Kelly, Kerr, & Drennan, 2010), marketers are faced with challenges to create ads that people want to see rather than consider as annoying interruptions. To this end, storytelling advertising is an innovative tool for brands to remain engaging, as suggested by its proliferation on traditional and digital media (Adweek, 2016). In contrast with more factual ads, storytelling ads don't always feature the product but rather focus on conveying the brand values through emotion-laden stories. Because people think narratively rather than argumentatively (Weick, 1995), storytelling ads can be powerful tools to engage consumers, as evidenced by research in consumer behavior (Woodside et al., 2008), brand management (Escalas, 2004; Holt, 2004), and digital marketing (Ching, Tong, Chen, & Chen, 2013). Narrative thinking represents a more natural endeavor (Escalas, 2007) and conveys heightened emotions for consumers who then ascribe positive associations to brands (Escalas, 2004).

However, insight is still needed to understand the relative efficiency of storytelling ads versus factual advertising and the processes whereby they exert an impact on consumers' brand attitude (Wentzel et al., 2010). Since stories are made up of characters with particular goals and motivations (Padgett & Allen, 1997), people are likely to empathize with them and experience the story vicariously through them (Escalas & Stern, 2003; Oatley, 1994). The presence of characters may hence represent an important condition for consumers to get immersed in the story, and thus for the emergence of narrative transportation and storytelling success (van Laer, de Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014). However, the role that narrative transportation plays in generating self-brand connections (Escalas, 2004, 2007) and, more specifically, the role of character identification in this connection, remains unclear.

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We suggest that storytelling ad framing may impede identification with the character and result in a decrease in brand attitude. More precisely, because narrative transportation enables people to escape into a virtual world, they may forget about their own reality (Hirschman, 1983), leading to a lack of identification with the character and making storytelling ads less effective than factual ads in supporting consumer-brand relationships (Escalas, 2004).

To examine this question, this research builds on narrative processing theory (Gerrig, 1994; Green & Brock, 2000) and identification theory in narrative (Oatley, 1994). In addition, this research examines the roles that character type (human versus animal) can play in the effects of storytelling ads on identification and brand attitude. Understanding the role of animal versus human characters seems required, as an increasing number of ads are using animal characters (Adage, 2016), and they appear to be vastly acclaimed by popular culture (Super Bowl Commercials, 2016).

To do so, this article takes an experimental approach with four studies and examines how branded storytelling ads broadcasted on the digital channel and social media YouTube (Pace, 2008) can affect consumers' brand attitude. Conducted in different countries and with distinct product types, these studies provide support for the notion that storytelling ads can result in a decrease in brand attitude due to the mediating roles of narrative transportation and character identification. Specifically, the results demonstrate a difference in brand attitude according to the storytelling or non-storytelling framing of the ad. Importantly, this effect is shown to be a result of the mediating effects of narrative transportation and character identification. Furthermore, studies show that the use of animal (versus human) characters in storytelling ads, decreases the effect of narrative transportation on identification. These findings are then discussed to help professionals derive actionable results on the effectiveness of story elements for brand-building purposes.

2. Storytelling advertising and narrative transportation

According to narrative theory, consumer stories and brand stories are intimately linked (Hirschman, 2010; Woodside, 2010): consumer can interpret brand stories, and build their own stories through consumption of brands (Cooper, Schembri, & Miller, 2010). A story is the storyteller's production and the account of an event or sequence of events from an initial state or outcome (Bennet & Royle, 2004; van Laer et al., 2014). Stories consist of the three key elements of causality, time evolution, and projection (Hirschman, 2010) or the four elements of plot, characters, climax, and outcome (van Laer et al., 2014). Advertisements are said to use storytelling if they depict actors with motives in a specific setting that includes physical, social, and temporal components and a sequence of events (Padgett & Allen, 1997).

In contrast to factual ads, storytelling ads do not systematically represent the use or consumption of products (Padgett & Allen, 1997) because beyond product use they aim to create stronger emotional connections with the consumers (Woodside et al., 2008). Storytelling ads are thus contrasted to factual or expository ads, which communicate information about the features of a product or service in a direct, fact-based, logical, or list-like way (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Wentzel et al., 2010). These differences in format lead to different types of processing. Factual ads tend to be processed in an analytical, or cognitive, way (Deighton, Romer, & McQueen, 1989). They are overtly persuasive, requiring consumers to actively engage in cognitive assessments (Escalas, 2007). On the contrary, because storytelling ads are not overtly persuasive but rather affective in nature, such ads are processed in a narrative way and are more likely to enable the consumer to be unconsciously carried away (Escalas, 2004).

Storytelling ads are particularly potent in eliciting long-term attitude and intentions because their narrative processing elicits a phenomenon called *narrative transportation* (Escalas, 2004; van Laer et al., 2014). This phenomenon refers to an experiential response during which the story plot activates consumers' imagination (van Laer et al., 2014), and thus occurs when a consumer is immersed in a story, eventually "gets lost in it" (Wentzel et al., 2010), and reaches a state of detachment from reality (Green & Brock, 2000). Narrative transportation can be seen as a matching process because, when transported, consumers interpret the world around them to make sense of it (Escalas, 2004, 2007). Using this logic, consumers relate incoming stories to those they have stored in their memories (Schank & Abelson, 1995) and, following a comparison, form associations with brands and attitudes toward them (Escalas, 2004).

In online environments, narrative transportation can be compared to some extent with the flow experienced when navigating the network. Similar to the flow experience, narrative transportation involves a seamless and enjoyable moment accompanied by a loss of self-consciousness (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). Flow is however distinct from narrative transportation because it is not triggered by the viewing of a story but rather by the active act of interacting with a computer-mediated environment. Further, flow involves being focused on a specific activity that is part of consumers' immediate reality, whereas in transportation the focus is on an alternative reality (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009).

3. Characters in stories: the role of identification and character types

Although narrative transportation involves consumers deeply and activates emotional processing with positive outcomes for brands (van Laer et al., 2014), it is not the only phenomenon at play when it comes to involving consumers in advertising content: character identification also plays a role (Oatley, 1994). Following Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), character identification refers to a cognitive state of connection, proximity, or similarity between the consumer and the character, which, to some extent, implies a perception of overlap between the two identities. Identification focuses on how the consumer relates to the character and is distinct from narrative transportation, which refers more to one's absorption with the whole plot (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). Character identification and narrative transportation are thus distinct phenomena, but both may play a role in audience involvement with a story.

The link between transportation and identification in extant literature remains unclear (de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012). On the one hand, narrative transportation might increase levels of character identification (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004;

Green, Tesser, Wood, & Stapel, 2005; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). With narrative transportation, consumers are immersed into the story and develop a consciousness of what happens in the story, including elements such as the characters (Escalas, 2004). What these characters do, want, feel, and experience is core to the narrative structure (Bruner, 1991), and the consumer is faced with this information, which can lead to increased identification (Green et al., 2005).

On the other hand, this assumption has not to our knowledge been subjected to empirical validation. What we argue is that not only is the link between narrative transportation and identification unclear but also it might be negative. Being immersed, transported, or "hooked" into the story is not sufficient for identification with the character to occur, and transportation might even be counterproductive to identification. Although consumers might vicariously experience the story conditions through the character (Escalas, 2007), this is no indication that they identify their self-concept with that of the character. Being able to project oneself into the imagined reality of the fictional character does not mean that the consumer construes his or her own identity, set of motivations, and values to be the same as that of the character. Put differently, transportation does not imply an overlap of the consumer's self-image with the character's image (Bagozzi, Dholakia, & Mookerjee, 2006) or process of congruity (Sirgy, 1985).

The first reason for our rationale builds on theories of consumer identification in marketing (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000) and social psychology (Sirgy, 1985) positing that identification requires an overlap between the self-image of the consumer and the image of the character (Bagozzi et al., 2006) and that the consumer is conscious of this overlap. Despite the frequent conceptual leap arguing that transportation leads to identification (Green & Brock, 2000; Woodside et al., 2008), there is no empirical evidence of this relationship to our knowledge.

Further, because being immersed or hooked into a fictional story implies that the consumer experiences a form of escapism and removal from his or her own self and experiences (Addis & Holbrook, 2010), a negative correlation between narrative transportation and identification might be expected. As explained by Hirschman (1983), escaping into a virtual world may make consumers forget about their own reality, because escapism is a way to get away from a reality that they find hard to deal with and enables them to reach a more desirable state of being.

Hence, processes of character identification can even be opposed to that of escapism in consumption settings (Hirschman, 1983), because transportation could create a loss of self-awareness (Green et al., 2005). Thus, it may be harder, rather than easier, for consumers to consciously reflect on their own identity and see an overlap with that of story characters if they are highly engrossed in a story. Therefore it is posited:

Hypothesis 1. Storytelling ad framing has a positive effect on narrative transportation (H1a), which has a negative effect on identification with the character (H1b). Narrative transportation thus mediates the negative effect of framing as a storytelling ad on identification with the character (H1c).

Turning to the performance of storytelling ads, previous research indicates that such ads create greater levels of positive affect, stronger self-brand connections, and more positive attitudes than factual ads (Escalas, 2004; Polyorat, Alden, & Kim, 2007). The increased affective reactions to narrative styles of ads (versus factual ads) have been attributed to the structural similarity to information acquired through daily life experience (Adaval & Wyer, 1998), suggesting that identifying with the content, and with the characters in particular, plays an important role in the success of storytelling ads. Because the content of storytelling ads relies on a large part on the character and its actions, identification might represent a mechanism through which narratives can affect attitude (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Such a prediction finds support in research suggesting that persona-focused storytelling that articulates the brand's character and personality is the cornerstone of a successful storytelling strategy (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). However, because storytelling ads drive narrative transportation, which is posited to lead to lower identification, a mediating role of identification between narrative transportation and brand attitude is expected to be negative. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2. Identification with the character mediates the negative effect of narrative transportation on brand attitude.

To further understand the role of the character storytelling advertising, we also pay attention to the character type, specifically if the character is a human or an animal. Traditionally, advertising uses human characters on the basis that their human features help consumers relate to the brand thanks to its characters. In storytelling marketing, using archetypal human characters helps consumers make sense of a story (Woodside, 2010) and make the story seem real (Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011). Human characters thus help audiences identify with the story characters and feel close to them as well as generate a positive affect for the brand (Delbaere et al., 2011).

However, animal characters are increasingly used in storytelling marketing (Connell, 2013; Lancendorfer, Atkin, & Reece, 2008; Miles & Ibrahim, 2013). This reliance on animal characters, as opposed to humans, poses the question of their effectiveness in storytelling ads. Although some might argue that animals can be considered to be human-like characters, others consider that animals cannot lead to the personification of brands like human characters do (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Fournier, 1998). Animals may thus negatively affect how people identify with the characters (Guido & Peluso, 2015). Considering that animal characters are harder to identify to than human characters, the use of animal characters may thus explain why narrative transportation can have a negative effect on identification, whereas this negative effect should not be observed for human characters. Thus, the following two hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 3. Human (versus animal) character type positively moderates the effects of narrative transportation on identification with the character. Precisely, no negative effect of narrative transportation on identification is expected when the character is a human, whereas a negative effect is expected when the character is an animal.

Hypothesis 4. Human (versus animal) character type positively moderates the mediating effect of identification with the character such that the indirect effect of narrative transportation on brand attitude through identification is not negative for human characters, whereas this indirect effect is expected to be negative for animal characters.

4. Study 1

4.1. Procedure and sample

Study 1 tested H1 and H2 by using a between-subjects design and randomly assigning respondents to a commercial that was either a storytelling or a factual ad. In this study, as well as those that follow, the focus was on video advertisements because rich ad formats such as videos have been underresearched (van Laer & de Ruyter, 2010). Further, given the attention paid by consumers to messages on social media (Kannan & Li, 2017; Zhang, Moe, & Schweidel, 2017), the choice was made to select ads from YouTube. This digital and social media appears a particularly relevant ground for the exploration of brand stories and identification because processes of identification and identity seeking through brands on such social media are common consumer practices (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2015).

A researcher from a large French business school contacted students by e-mail and randomly sent willing participants a link they had to click on to access the ad from YouTube and the questionnaire. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and were not compensated for their participation. The researcher explained that the respondents' efforts would aid marketing research. One hundred and twenty-seven responses were collected (48.8% women, ages ranging from 17 to 26).

To control for brand familiarity as a potential confound, the two ads used in the study were from the same brand. To select a brand that communicates through factual and storytelling commercials that both have a high number of online ad views, Adweek (2016) rankings was used and Budweiser selected. Ads from this brand can be considered either as telling a story or as more factual, based on narrative ad structure elements (Escalas, 2004). Also, the videos from Budweiser are highly popular, with >2880,000 views for the selected storytelling ad and >168,000 views for the factual ad. While popularity of the video is a potential confound in natural YouTube settings, the respondents could not see the number of views when answering the survey instrument, and video popularity was not included as a control variable. Full details of the videos' content, characters, and type, as well as their Uniform Resource Locator (URL), are provided in Appendix 1.

4.2. Measures

Respondents completed a questionnaire that asked their opinions about the ad and the brand. To avoid order effects (McFarland, 1981), the dependent variables of the model were measured first. Hence, respondents started by rating their brand attitude using a three-item Likert scale (positive, good, favorable; $\alpha = 0.87$; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). They then completed a four-item scale of consumer identification from Curras-Pérez, Bigné-Alcaniz, and Alvarado-Herrera (2009). The items adapted for the study were "The way I am fits in with what I perceive of that character," "I am similar to what I think that character represents," "I am similar to how I perceive that character," and "The image I have of that character overlaps with my self-image" ($\alpha = 0.93$). Narrative transportation was then measured using a three-item scale ("I was mentally involved in the ad," "While thinking about the ad, I could easily picture the events in it taking place," and "I could picture myself in the scene shown in the ad," $\alpha = 0.79$; Escalas, 2007; Green & Brock, 2000).

In order to ensure that respondents in the storytelling ad condition perceived the ad as such and not as a factual ad, a measure of narrative ad structure from Escalas (2004) was used ("The ad told a story"; "The ad had a beginning, middle, and end"; "The ad showed the personal evolution of one or more characters"; Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; $\alpha = 0.84$). Another item measured the extent to which respondents were familiar with the brand ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 2.10$). Finally, because the ads were in English and the respondents were French, a three-item scale rated respondents' skills in English to ensure that they did not differ across conditions ("I am fluent in English," "I speak English as well as I speak French," "I can easily switch to English if I have to"; $\alpha = 0.91$). All items used seven-point scales. Table 1 describes the measures.

To test the discriminant validity between multi-item measures, the procedure suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981) was followed. The average variance extracted for each construct was higher than the squared correlation between this construct and any other construct, bringing support to the discriminant validity of the measures. Convergent validity was also supported as the average variance extracted clearly exceeded 0.50 for all variables (Table 2).

4.3. Results

4.3.1. Manipulation check

Participants exposed to the storytelling ad (versus the factual ad) reported a significantly stronger narrative ad structure and thus a stronger perception of the ad as telling a story ($M_{Storytelling} = 5.25$, $SD = 1.31$; $M_{Factual} = 4.02$, $SD = 1.57$; $t = -4.79$, $p < 0.001$). Brand familiarity did not differ across the experimental conditions ($M_{Storytelling} = 2.38$, $SD = 2.13$; $M_{Factual} = 3.06$, $SD = 2.08$; $t = 1.83$, $p > 0.05$). Also, the English skills of respondents in the storytelling condition ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.69$) did not differ from those of respondents in the factual ad condition ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.44$; $t = 1.35$, $p > 0.10$). Therefore, the manipulations were successful.

Table 1
Description and psychometric properties of the multi-item measures.

Measures	Study 1		Study 2		Study 3		Study 4	
	Loadings	α	Loadings	α	Loadings	α	Loadings	α
Narrative transportation								
Mentally involved in the ad	0.79	0.79	0.83	0.81	0.89	0.86	0.79	0.70
Easily picture the events in it taking place	0.86		0.89		0.88		0.81	
Picture myself in the scene shown in the ad	0.85		0.84		0.87		0.77	
Identification with the character								
Fits in with what I perceive of that character	0.89	0.93	0.91	0.94	0.89	0.94	0.90	0.92
Similar to what I think that character represents	0.94		0.94		0.92		0.93	
Similar to how I perceive that character	0.92		0.93		0.90		0.88	
Overlaps my self-image	0.91		0.92		0.88		0.90	
Attitude toward the brand (& Aad in Study 4)								
Positive	0.86	0.87	0.95	0.93	0.96	0.94	0.95; 0.95	0.95; 0.94
Good	0.90		0.93		0.94		0.96; 94	
Favorable	0.93		0.94		0.95		0.94; 95	
Narrative ad structure								
The ad told a story	0.81	0.84	0.84	0.77	0.85	0.82	0.87	0.74
Personal evolution of one or more characters	0.87		0.87		0.86		0.74	
The ad had a beginning, middle, and end	0.86		0.75		0.83		0.81	
Joy								
Joyful							0.92	0.92
Pleased							0.90	
Happy							0.92	
Delighted							0.87	
Perceived similarity								
Lifestyle							0.91	0.91
Personality							0.91	
Values							0.93	
Brand congruence								
Compatible							0.92	0.93
Good fit							0.92	
Congruent							0.93	

4.3.2. Hypotheses tests

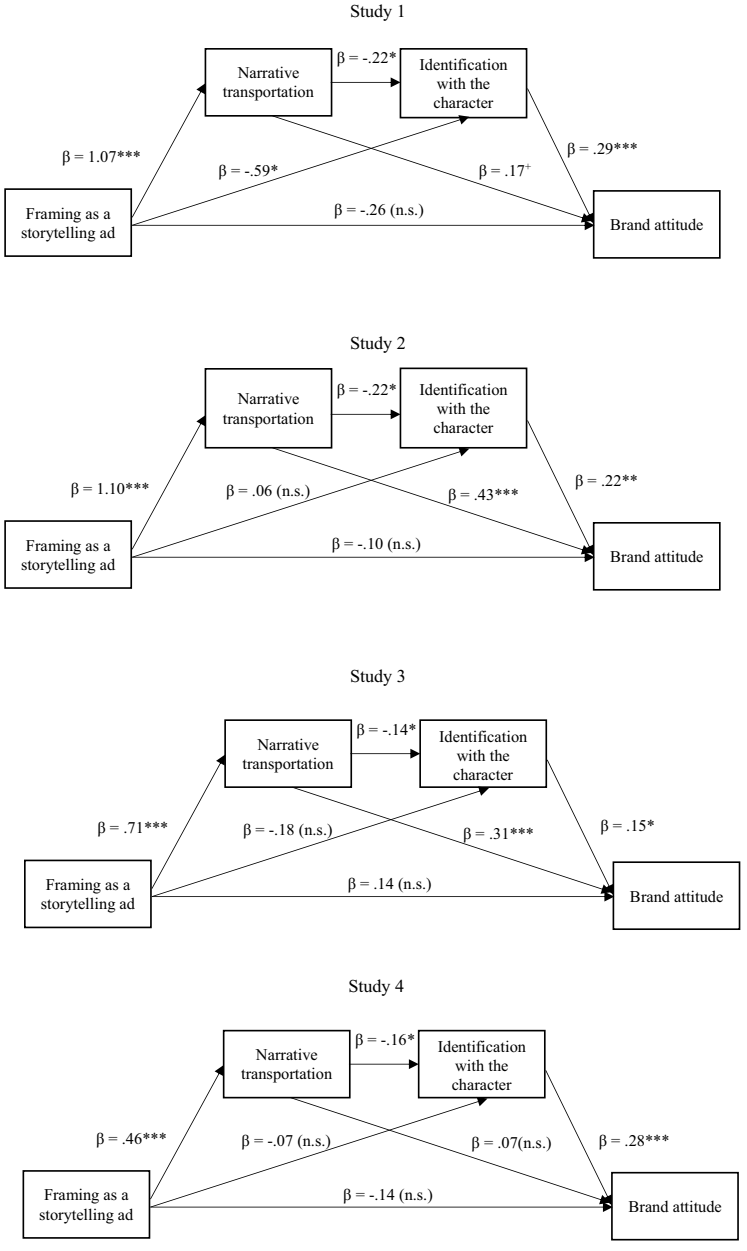
In order to test both H1 and H2, a serial mediation analysis was performed using PROCESS (Model 6 with 5000 iterations; Hayes, 2013). The ad-framing manipulation was the independent variable (coded 0 for the factual ad and 1 for the storytelling ad), narrative transportation and identification with the character were the mediators, and brand attitude was the dependent variable. Gender, age, language skill, and brand familiarity were included as covariates. Results revealed a significant serial mediation (95% CI = −0.208; −0.011), indicating that narrative transportation and identification intervene as mediators in the indirect

Table 2
Descriptive statistics, discriminant and convergent validity of the multi-item measures.

	Study 1				Study 2				Study 3				Study 4				Joy	Simil.	Cong.	Aad
	NT	ID	Ab	NAS	NT	ID	Ab	NAS	NT	ID	Ab	NAS	NT	ID	Ab	NAS				
1. Means	4.61	3.52	4.46	4.69	4.70	3.91	4.87	4.47	4.39	3.69	4.72	4.39	4.53	4.93	4.98	4.66	4.06	3.91	5.42	4.95
2. S.D	1.37	1.42	1.35	1.55	1.22	1.37	1.25	1.27	1.52	1.26	1.44	1.24	1.06	1.22	1.31	1.12	1.22	1.32	1.33	1.17
3. NT	0.70	−0.29	0.06	0.41	0.73	−0.18	0.36	0.55	0.78	−0.17	0.36	0.49	0.63	−0.04	0.20	0.24	0.10	0.39	0.36	0.23
4. ID	0.09	0.84	0.26	0.05	0.03	0.87	0.18	0.12	0.03	0.81	0.06	0.04	0.00	0.81	0.36	0.01	−0.14	0.41	0.09	0.21
5. Ab	0.01	0.07	0.80	0.26	0.13	0.03	0.89	0.31	0.13	0.01	0.90	0.45	0.04	0.13	0.92	0.13	0.06	0.42	0.28	0.76
6. NAS	0.17	0.01	0.07	0.72	0.30	0.01	0.10	0.68	0.24	0.01	0.20	0.73	0.06	0.00	0.02	0.66	−0.02	0.14	0.19	0.10
7. Joy													0.01	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.82	−0.10	−0.12	0.09
8. Simil.													0.16	0.17	0.18	0.02	0.01	0.85	0.38	0.33
9. Cong.													0.13	0.01	0.08	0.04	0.01	0.015	0.88	0.27
10. Aad													0.06	0.05	0.59	0.01	0.01	0.11	0.08	0.91

Note: S.D. = Standard Deviation.
NT: Narrative Transportation; ID: Identification with the Character; Ab: Attitude toward the brand; NAS: Narrative Ad Structure; Simil.: Perceived Similarity; Cong. Brand congruence.
From line 3, the average variance extracted appears in diagonal. Squared correlations appear below the diagonal. Correlations appear above the diagonal.

effect of the framing of the ad on brand attitude. Precisely, the use of the storytelling ad increased narrative transportation ($\beta = 1.07$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn decreased identification with the character ($\beta = -0.22$, $p < 0.05$; see Fig. 1). Identification then increased brand attitude ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$). These results support H1 and H2 and the hypothesized mediating roles of narrative transportation and identification. Of note, a similar pattern of results was obtained when using the measured value of narrative ad structure as the independent variable instead of the manipulation variable (95% CI = −0.096; −0.014). Fig. 1 describes the other effects that exist between the variables included in the model, among which the non-significant direct effect of ad framing ($\beta = -0.26$, $p > 0.05$) and the marginal positive effect of narrative transportation ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.10$) on brand attitude. Among the covariates, language skills ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.10$) had a marginal positive effect of narrative transportation, suggesting that being fluent in the language of the ad favors narrative transportation. Age ($\beta = -0.11$, $p < 0.05$) and familiarity ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$) had, respectively, a negative and a positive effect on brand attitude. No other direct effects of covariates were observed.



Note: n.s.: $p > .10$; + < p < .10; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Fig. 1. The mediating roles of narrative transportation and identification with the character in the effect storytelling ads on Ab.

4.4. Discussion

In line with previous research (Ching et al., 2013; de Graaf et al., 2012; van Laer et al., 2014), this study provides evidence that ads that tell a story exert a positive impact on narrative transportation compared to ads that do not tell a story. However, even though the net effect of narrative transformation is positive ($0.17 + (0.22) * (0.29) = 0.23$), what the results also indicate is that when an ad tells a story, narrative transportation and identification serve as mechanisms that make a storytelling ad exert a less positive effect on brand attitude. Specifically, the results show that when an ad is framed as telling a story, narrative transportation is increased and leads to lower identification with the character, ultimately having a less positive effect on brand attitude. These results add insight to the role of narrative transportation and character identification in the effects of storytelling ads.

In Study 2, we seek to replicate these findings in order to generalize beyond the specific context used here. Importantly, because the difference in the characters across the ads may have confounded the results (see Appendix 1), Study 2 employs ads featuring only one particular type of character, animals.

5. Study 2: replication

In Study 2, we first seek to demonstrate that the effects revealed in Study 1 are not specific to the brand that was used—Budweiser—but apply to other types of brands. Study 2 also seeks to show that these effects replicate in a different sample than the French sample that was used in Study 1.

5.1. Procedure and sample

This study randomly assigned respondents to either a storytelling ad or a factual ad. As in Study 1, to avoid potential confounds, the two ads were from the same brand. The brand that was chosen for the study was Three, a telecommunications and Internet service provider from the United Kingdom. This decision was made for four reasons. First, the brand Three operates in the United Kingdom, which allowed us to show that our effects found in Study 1 could be replicated in a country other than France. Second, Three operates in a sector that is widely different from that of the brand Budweiser, enabling the investigation of whether the results of Study 1 can be generalized for brands operating in different sectors. Third, Three designed ads that clearly could be classified either as storytelling or factual. Fourth, one might also argue that the results in Study 1 do not represent generalizations because respondents were exposed to a brand—Budweiser—whose products are highly hedonic, which might have biased the effects. Because being exposed to an ad for hedonic products might induce a positive mood, and because such a positive mood may be associated with greater message processing activity (Wegener, Petty, & Smith, 1995), narrative transportation may have been affected by the product category. Study 2 thus involves another product category that is utilitarian rather than hedonic.

For this study, the researcher independently selected a pool of ads from Three on YouTube and classified them as either storytelling or more factual. She then selected the two ads that were the most representative of these two categories of ads. The classifying criteria included the existence of a causal sequence of events, evolution through time, and characters (Hirschman, 2010; van Laer et al., 2014). Importantly, in order to avoid biases because of the nature of the ad, the researchers chose ads that depicted only the same kind of character, here animals (Lancendorfer et al., 2008). The storytelling ad depicted a pony dancing by the sea, and the factual ad showed a little dog in a cart. For full details on the ads, see Appendix 1.

An online panelist contacted respondents from the United Kingdom by e-mail and asked them to participate in the study. Because the study aimed to investigate how consumers react to online storytelling ads, only respondents that stated watching videos on YouTube at least once a week were selected for the study. In total, 140 English individuals (71 women, mean age of 35.4, ages ranging from 18 to 64) participated in the study.

5.2. Measures

After having been exposed to the ad, respondents completed a questionnaire about their opinion of the ad and the brand Three. Measures were the same as in Study 1, except that language skills were not measured due to the UK origin of both the ad and the respondents. All the measures were reliable ($\alpha_{\text{Narrative ad structure}} = 0.77$; $\alpha_{\text{Narrative transportation}} = 0.81$; $\alpha_{\text{Identification}} = 0.94$; $\alpha_{\text{Brand att.}} = 0.93$). All items used seven-point scales.

5.3. Results

5.3.1. Manipulation check

Participants exposed to the storytelling ad (versus the factual ad) reported a significantly stronger perception of the ad as telling a story ($M_{\text{Storytelling}} = 4.80$, $SD = 1.11$; $M_{\text{Factual}} = 4.00$, $SD = 1.34$; $t = -3.82$, $p < 0.001$). Brand familiarity did not differ across the experimental conditions ($M_{\text{Storytelling}} = 5.30$, $SD = 1.56$; $M_{\text{Factual}} = 5.34$, $SD = 1.63$; $t = 0.12$, $p > 0.05$). Overall, the manipulations were successful.

5.3.2. Hypotheses tests

The same serial mediation analysis (5000 iterations) as in Study 1 was used, with the same variables included (except English skills). Results revealed that using a storytelling ad decreases brand attitude through the mediating effects of narrative

transportation and identification (95% CI = −0.188; −0.003). Specifically, as in Study 1, using a storytelling ad increases narrative transportation (β = 1.10, $p < 0.001$), which then decreases identification with the character (β = −0.22, $p < 0.05$). Identification then positively affects brand attitude (β = 0.22, $p < 0.01$; see Fig. 1 for details). Of note, a similar serial mediation was found when using the measured value of the narrative ad structure as the independent variable (95% CI = −0.120; −0.008). As in study 1, the ad framing had no effect on brand attitude (β = −0.10, $p > 0.05$), while narrative transportation had a positive one (β = 0.43, $p < 0.001$). Overall, these results replicate those of Study 1 and provide further support for H1 and H2. The direct effect of the ad framing on identification however did not replicate (B = 0.06, >0.05). Narrative transportation fully mediated the impact of framing on identification, which might be explained by the fact that the ad featuring the pony in study 2 was more abstract than the ad in study 1, making the role of transportation more prominent.

Regarding covariates, the only one that had an effect was familiarity, with a positive effect on narrative transportation (β = 0.19, $p < 0.001$).

5.4. Discussion

The results observed in Study 2 replicate in another country using a different brand the results found in Study 1, whereby storytelling ads lead to a stronger narrative transportation and consequently to a lower identification with the character and brand attitude. However, one may argue that the types of character differ across studies 1 and 2; study 1 featured animal characters in the story ad but human characters in the factual ad, whereas Study 2 featured animal characters in both the story ad and factual ad. Therefore, the role played by identification in Studies 1 and 2 raises the question as to whether storytelling ads that involve human characters instead of animals induce stronger identification and consequently stronger brand attitude. We explore this in Study 3.

6. Study 3: the effect of character type in storytelling ADS

Study 3 was designed to go deeper into the understanding of the role played by identification and more specifically to examine the effect of character type on identification and attitude in storytelling ads. The notion tested here is that when the character of a storytelling ad is human, as opposed to an animal or an object, identification with the character is increased and leads to a more positive brand attitude. Such an examination seems worthy of investigation because Studies 1 and 2 mostly used animal characters (see Appendix 1), which could be the cause of the negative impact of narrative transportation on identification.

6.1. Procedure and sample

Because Study 3 aims to replicate the results found in Studies 1 and 2 and also to investigate the effect of character type in storytelling ads, the study employed a 2 (ad framing: storytelling versus factual) × 2 (character: human versus animal) between-subjects design that manipulated the ad framing and the character type. As in Study 2, respondents were contacted by the same panelist Toluna and exposed to the same brand, Three. Again, the sample was composed of English respondents ($N = 256$, 52.9% male, mean age of 35.6, ages ranging from 18 to 65) who declared watching videos on YouTube at least once a week. After having been randomly exposed to an ad, respondents answered a questionnaire.

6.2. Pretest and stimuli selection

A pretest ($n = 29$, 17 women) was conducted online before launching the experiment to ensure that the stimuli in the final study differed in the way expected by the researchers. The pretest was designed as a 2 (ad framing: storytelling versus factual) × 2 (character type: human versus animal) mixed design, with the second factor being the within-subjects factor. For this pretest, respondents were exposed to two ads that differed in the type of the main character but were similar in their framing, both either being in a storytelling or factual format. Because the brand Three used in Study 2 was highly active in terms of ads on social media, it was decided to keep this brand and the two ads that were used in Study 2. The details of each video ad can be found in Appendix 1. After having seen each ad, participants completed the narrative ad structure scale used in the previous studies (α = 0.88). They also completed a three-item measure of anthropomorphism derived from Kim and McGill (2011), which measures how much an entity seems like a person ("The character looks like a person," "The character seems almost as if it has free will," and "The character seems almost as it if has intentions"; α = 0.70). Each participant's average score on the narrative ad structure scale was computed. These computed average scores were then used in a one-way ANOVA. Also, their average ratings of character type were computed, and these scores were then used in a 2 (ad framing: storytelling versus factual) × 2 (character type: human versus animal) design using repeated ANOVA measures. Finally, to ensure that the storytelling ads did not differ from the factual ads in their ability to induce positive emotions, an item measuring the extent to which people perceived the ad as funny ("To what extent do you agree with the following statement?—'This ad is funny'") was included. Fun was deemed a relevant positive emotion to account for, since some of the ads were clearly using a humor appeal (see Appendix 1 for detail of story plot).

The results showed that respondents in the storytelling ad condition exhibited higher narrative ad structure scores (M = 3.61, SD = 1.31) than those in the factual ad condition (M = 2.58, SD = 0.72; $F(1, 28) = 5.96$, $p < 0.05$). Also, the ads with a human character scored higher on character type (M = 5.58, SD = 1.02) than the ads with an animal (M = 3.43, SD = 1.87; Wilks' Lambda = 0.31, $F(1, 27) = 61.69$, $p < 0.001$). No significant interaction of ad framing and character type was observed

($M_{Storytelling,\ Human} = 5.59$, $SD = 1.14$; $M_{Storytelling,\ Animal} = 3.84$, $SD = 1.51$; $M_{Factual,\ Human} = 5.58$, $SD = 0.88$; $M_{Factual,Animal} = 2.86$, $SD = 1.03$; Wilks' Lambda = 0.90, $F(1, 27) = 2.94$, $p = 0.098$). Finally, the results showed that the ads across the conditions of storytelling versus factual framing did not differ in terms of how funny they were ($p > 0.10$). Hence, the manipulations of framing (storytelling versus factual) and character type (human versus animal) were considered successful, and the four ads that were pretested were used in the experiment.

6.3. Measure

Measures were the same as in the preceding studies. All scales were reliable ($\alpha_{Narrative\ ad\ structure} = 0.82$; $\alpha_{Narrative\ transportation} = 0.86$; $\alpha_{Identification} = 0.94$; $\alpha_{Brand\ att.} = 0.94$) and measured on seven-point Likert scales.

6.4. Results

6.4.1. Manipulation checks

Participants exposed to the storytelling ad reported a significantly stronger perception of the ad as telling a story ($M_{Storytelling} = 4.78$, $SD = 1.18$; $M_{Factual} = 3.95$, $SD = 1.17$; $t = -5.64$, $p < 0.001$). Further, a two-way ANOVA revealed no main effect of character type ($F(1, 256) = 1.14$, $p > 0.10$) or any interaction between the conditions of ad framing (storytelling versus factual) and character type (human versus animal) on perception of the ad as a story ($F(1, 256) = 0.001$, $p > 0.10$). Also, brand familiarity did not differ across the experimental conditions of ad framing ($M_{Storytelling} = 5.38$, $SD = 1.63$; $M_{Factual} = 5.18$, $SD = 1.76$; $t = -0.92$, $p > 0.10$). Hence, the manipulations were successful.

6.4.2. Hypotheses tests

The same serial mediation (5000 iterations) with the same covariates as in the previous studies revealed again a significant indirect effect of using a storytelling ad on brand attitude through narrative transportation and identification with the character (95% CI = −0.053; −0.002). Supporting H1 and H2, using a storytelling ad increases narrative transportation ($\beta = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$), which decreases identification with the character ($\beta = -0.14$, $p < 0.01$), this variable then having a positive effect on brand attitude ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$; Fig. 1). Again, the ad framing had no effect on brand attitude ($\beta = 0.14$, $p > 0.10$) but narrative transportation had a positive one ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$). Of note, narrative transportation increased with age ($\beta = 0.02$, $p < 0.05$) and brand familiarity ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$), and consistent with previous research, brand attitude increased with brand familiarity ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.001$).

Hypotheses 3 and 4 related to the notion that character type moderates the effect of narrative transportation on, respectively, identification with the character and brand attitude through the mediating effect of identification. Hence, their tests were performed using PROCESS (Model 8 with 5000 bootstraps), with narrative transportation being included as the independent variable, identification with the character as the mediator, brand attitude as the dependent variable, and character type (human versus animal) as the moderator of the mediation. Gender, age, and brand familiarity served as covariates. Results revealed main effects of narrative transportation ($\beta = -0.33$, $p < 0.001$) and character type ($\beta = -1.36$, $p < 0.01$) on identification with the character, and, supporting H3, their significant interaction ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$; Fig. 2).

Results then revealed a significant index of moderated mediation (95% CI = 0.007; 0.163). Specifically, when the character is an animal, identification exerts a negative mediating role between narrative transportation and brand attitude (95% CI = −0.134; −0.009), whereas no effect is observed when the character is human (95% CI = −0.027; 0.052; Fig. 3). Overall, these results support H4 by showing that character type moderates the mediating effect of identification with the character.

6.5. Discussion

Results of Study 3 provide further support that when exposed to a storytelling ad, narrative transportation impedes identification with the character, which results in a decrease in brand attitude. Importantly, Study 3 shows that human characters exert a positive moderating effect on the link between narrative transportation and identification so that it removes the negative effect of animal characters. In other words, unless the ad includes a human character, narrative transportation may result in negative consequences. Study 4 is designed to examine if the effects of character type replicate in another context.

7. Study 4

The first goal of Study 4 was hence to examine if the moderating effect of character type found in Study 3 would replicate in another context. Additionally, because these results of Study 3 bring nuance to the impact of storytelling ads, either directly or through narrative transportation, Study 4 aims to provide additional explanation for the ways in which storytelling ads are processed by consumers. Specifically, because narrative transportation involves an emotional experience that can lead to media enjoyment (Green, Brock, et al., 2004; Green & Brock, 2000), Study 4 aims to investigate if, in addition to having a negative effect on identification, narrative transportation also has a positive effect on the emotion of joy and subsequently on brand attitude. Also, it investigates if the attitude toward the ad (Aad) is another outcome affected by the framing of the ad and its subsequent effects on narrative transportation and identification.

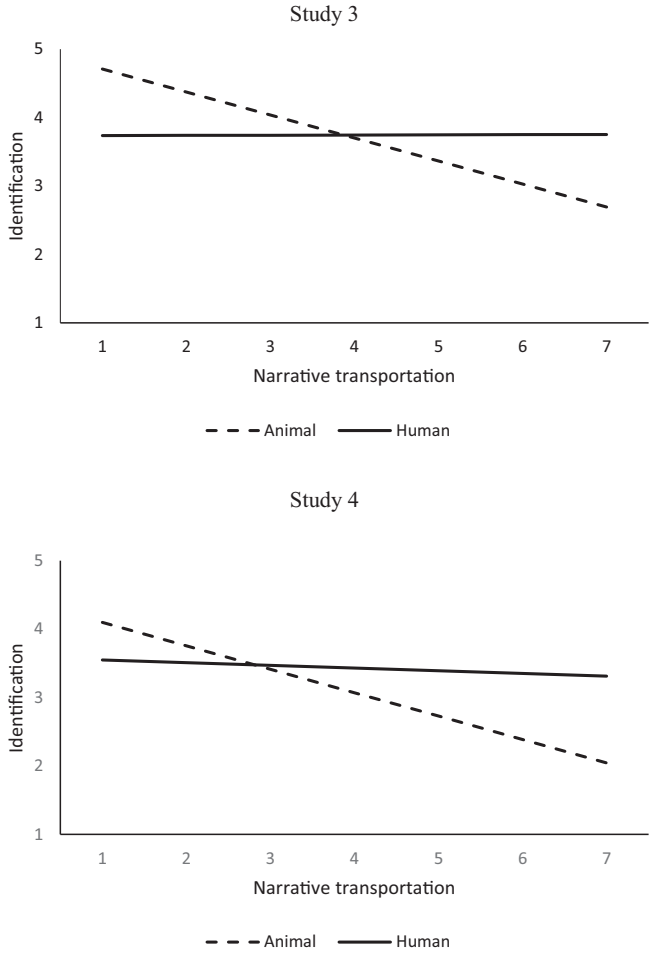


Fig. 2. (Studies 3–4): Identification as a function of narrative transportation and character type.

7.1. Participants

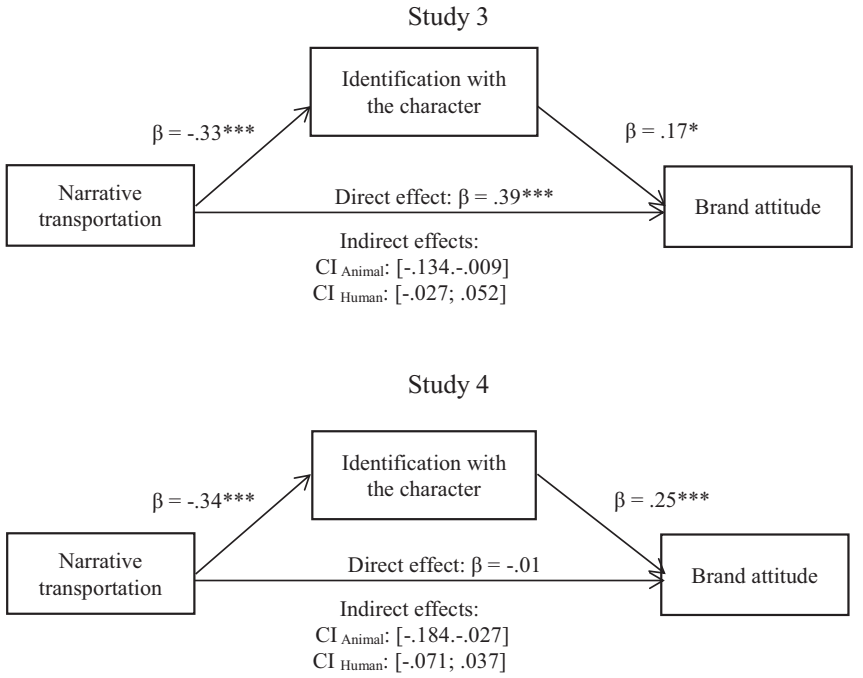
Respondents were 240 people from the United Kingdom who were contacted by the panelist Prolific Academic. Because all the answers from one respondent were found to be extreme values (either 1 or 7), it was decided to remove this observation from the data set, leading to a final sample of 239 respondents (45.2% male, mean age of 33.5, ages ranging from 18 to 64) who declared watching videos on YouTube at least once a week.

7.2. Procedure

Because Study 4 aims to replicate the effects observed in Study 3, the study had a similar 2 (ad framing: storytelling versus factual) × 2 (character type: human versus animal) between-subjects design. Individuals were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and asked to watch an online ad and to complete a questionnaire.

7.3. Pretest

To ensure that the ads used in the experiment differed in storytelling and character type in the way expected by the researchers, a similar pretest as in Study 3 was conducted. From a pool of ads selected on the Internet, the researchers decided to use Virgin Media for the brand from which to pick ads. This decision was made due to its strong reputation, making this brand more likely to communicate on social media. Also, Virgin Media communicates through advertisements that differ in their storytelling versus factual framing and in the type of the characters featured in the ads. A pool of six ads from this brand was selected, among which two featured an animal and four featured an individual. Three were in a storytelling format, and three were in a more factual format. These ads were pretested to select the four that scored the highest and the lowest in their storytelling ad structure and highest and lowest in the human traits of the main character.



Note: n.s.: $p > .05$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Fig. 3. (Studies 3–4): The moderating role of character type in the mediating effect of identification with the character.

The pretest was conducted online with 50 participants from the United Kingdom recruited on Prolific Academic. The storytelling format of the ad was manipulated as a between-subjects variable (ads 2, 4, and 6 being in a storytelling format) and character type as a within-subject factor (ads 1 and 2 featuring an animal, and ads 3, 4, 5, and 6 featuring an individual), making respondents exposed to three ads (either ads 1, 2, and 3 or ads 4, 5, and 6). After watching each ad online, respondents were asked to rate the narrative ad structure, the character type, and how funny they found the ad, using the same scales as in the pretest of Study 3.

Results revealed that the ads differed in the expected way, with ads in the storytelling condition scoring higher on narrative ad structure ($M_{Storytel.Ad2} = 5.51$, $M_{Factual.Ad1} = 3.76$, $F = 43.89$, $p < 0.001$; $M_{Storytel.Ad4} = 5.42$, $M_{Factual.Ad3} = 4.01$, $F = 18.85$, $p < 0.001$; $M_{Storytel.Ad6} = 4.85$, $M_{Factual.Ad5} = 3.78$, $F = 16.52$, $p < 0.001$). Also, a repeated-measures ANOVA indicated that the two sets of ads with a human character scored higher on human traits ($M_{Ads3\&4} = 6.32$, $SD = 0.88$; $M_{Ads5\&6} = 6.30$, $SD = 0.83$) than the ads with an animal ($M_{Ads1\&2} = 4.90$, $SD = 1.06$; Wilks' Lambda $= 0.47$, $F = 25.60$, $p < 0.001$). Considering these results, the decision was made to retain for the human character condition the first set of ads featuring an individual (ads 3 and 4), because this set of ads scored the highest on human traits and also presented the strongest difference in the storytelling format of the ad ($M_{Storytel.Ad4} = 5.42$, $M_{Factual.Ad3} = 4.01$, $F = 18.85$, $p < 0.001$). To ensure that the final selection of the four ads (1, 2, 3, and 4) was effective, another repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted with only these four ads to check that there was no interaction between ad framing and character type. The results were reassuring (Wilks' Lambda $= 0.96$, $F(1, 48) = 1.86$, $p = 0.179$) and showed that by choosing the four ads (1, 2, 3, and 4), we selected ads that differed as expected in storytelling and type of the main character, without these two variables interacting. The four ads selected for Study 4 are presented in Appendix 1.

7.4. Measures for the study

Measures were the same as in the preceding studies ($\alpha_{Narrative\ ad\ structure} = 0.74$; $\alpha_{Narrative\ transportation} = 0.70$; $\alpha_{Identification} = 0.92$; $\alpha_{Brand\ att.} = 0.95$), except that a measure of joy was included ("joyful," "happy," "delighted," "pleased"; Holbrook & Batra, 1987; $\alpha = 0.92$). Also, because brand congruence could affect brand attitude (Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004), and because perceived similarity with the character was likely to affect identification (Fisher, 1998; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005), measures of these variables were included to be used as covariates. Precisely, the three-item measure of brand congruence was adapted from Rifon et al. (2004; "compatible," good fit," "congruent"; $\alpha = 0.93$), and the three-item measure of perceived similarity with the character was adapted from Hanks, Line, and Yang (2017; "The character in the ad seems similar to me in terms of 'lifestyle,'

'personality,' and 'values'"; $\alpha = 0.91$). Finally, Aad was measured using a three-item scale from MacKenzie and Lutz (1989; "My opinion toward this ad is 'positive,' 'good,' 'favorable'"; $\alpha = 0.94$). All measures used seven-point Likert scales.

7.5. Results

7.5.1. Manipulation checks

A series of two-way ANOVAs that included the conditions of ad framing (storytelling versus factual) and character type (human versus animal) as fixed factors were conducted with, respectively, narrative ad structure, joy, brand familiarity, and brand congruence as the dependent variables. Results revealed that participants exposed to the storytelling ad reported a significant stronger perception of the ad as telling a story ($M_{Storytelling} = 4.96$, $SD = 1.07$; $M_{Factual} = 4.26$, $SD = 1.07$; $F(1, 234) = 26.29$, $p < 0.001$). No main effect of character type ($F(1, 234) = 0.554$, $p > 0.10$) or any interaction with the manipulation of ad framing ($F(1, 234) = 1.99$, $p > 0.10$) were found on respondents' perception of the ad as telling a story. Joy did not differ across conditions of ad framing ($F(1, 234) = 0.702$, $p > 0.10$), or across conditions of character type ($F(1, 234) = 0.783$, $p > 0.10$), or their interaction ($F(1, 234) = 0.084$, $p > 0.10$). Similarly, brand familiarity did not differ across the conditions of ad framing ($F(1, 234) = 0.019$, $p > 0.10$), character type ($F(1, 234) = 0.773$, $p > 0.10$), or their interaction ($F(1, 234) = 0.082$, $p > 0.10$). Brand congruence was not different across the conditions of ad framing ($F(1, 234) = 0.004$, $p > 0.10$), character type ($F(1, 234) = 2.98$, $p = 0.08$), or their interaction ($F(1, 234) = 0.001$, $p > 0.10$). The manipulations were thus successful.

7.5.2. Hypotheses tests

The same procedure as before was followed, except that brand congruence and perceived similarity were included as additional covariates. A serial mediation analysis (5000 bootstraps) revealed a similar pattern of results as in previous studies, with a significant indirect effect of the use of a storytelling ad on brand attitude through narrative transportation and identification with the character (95% CI = −0.058; −0.004). Specifically, using a storytelling ad increased narrative transportation ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$), and this effect decreased identification with the character ($\beta = -0.16$, $p < 0.05$), which had a positive effect on brand attitude ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$). These results replicate those observed in Studies 1 through 3 and bring further support to H1 and H2. Neither the storytelling framing of the ad ($\beta = -0.14$, $p > 0.10$) nor narrative transportation ($\beta = 0.07$, $p > 0.10$)—as opposed to what was found in Study 3—had a direct effect on brand attitude. The lack of significant direct effect of transportation on attitudes might be due to the very naturalistic and life-like setting of the ads in this study.

Among the covariates, brand congruence increased narrative transportation ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$)and brand attitude ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.05$). Perceived similarity had similar effects ($\beta_{Nar.transp.} = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta_{Brand\ att.} = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$) and also increased identification ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$), as did age ($\beta = 0.02$, $p < 0.05$). A similar analysis with Aad as the dependent variable revealed an indirect effect of the storytelling framing of the ad on Aad through narrative transportation and identification (95% CI = −0.031; −0.001), indicating that not only brand attitude but also Aad can also be negatively and indirectly affected by the storytelling framing of the ad.

In addition to identification as a mediator of the effect of narrative transportation on brand attitude relationship, joy was tested as an alternative mechanism that could explain this effect. Hence, a similar serial mediation analysis (Process, Model 6, 5000 bootstraps) was conducted, but this time with joy as the mediator of the effect of narrative transportation on brand attitude. Gender, age, familiarity with the ad, brand congruence, and perceived similarity were included as covariates. Results showed that narrative transportation and joy positively mediate the effect of the storytelling framing of the ad on brand attitude (95% CI = 0.002; 0.043). Specifically, and in addition to the already observed positive effect of the storytelling framing of the ad on narrative transportation, the results showed that this latter variable (i.e., narrative transportation) positively affects joy ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$), which then increases brand attitude ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$), making joy another mechanism explaining the effect of narrative transportation on brand attitude. A similar serial mediation analysis was performed with Aad as the dependent variable. Again, a significant serial mediation was found (95% CI = 0.002; 0.040), with joy being affected by narrative transportation ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$) and affecting Aad ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$). This result indicates that storytelling can not only positively affect brand attitude but also Aad, provided that narrative transportation prompts joy.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 were tested as in Study 3, with brand congruence and perceived similarity being included as additional covariates. Regarding H3, results revealed a main effect of narrative transportation ($\beta = -0.34$, $p < 0.001$) and, in contrast with what was found in Study 3, no effect of character type ($\beta = -0.85$, $p > 0.10$) on identification with the character. Importantly, a significant interaction was observed ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.05$; Fig. 2), which brings further support to H3. Regarding H4, results revealed a similar pattern as in Study 3 with a significant index of moderated mediation (95% CI = 0.011; 0.196). Specifically, when the character is an animal, identification exerts a negative mediating role between narrative transportation and brand attitude (95% CI = −0.184; −0.027), whereas no such mediating effect of identification is observed when the character is human (95% CI = −0.071; 0.037; Fig. 3). These results thus bring further support to H4.

7.6. Discussion

Results of Study 4 provide further support to the notion that a storytelling ad can lead to lower attitude—either brand attitude or Aad—due to the negative effect of narrative transportation on identification with the character when this character is not human. However, and interestingly, the results also indicate that the effects of storytelling ads can be either negative or positive, depending on the effects of narrative transportation. If being immersed into the story drives identification directly, then a decrease

in attitude will be observed. On the contrary, the experience of immersion can have positive effects on attitude if the positive emotion of joy is induced by the experience of being transported by a storytelling ad. Further, Study 4 replicates the moderating effect of character type and shows that when the character is an animal, narrative transportation prevents consumers from identifying with the character of the ad, which leads to a decrease in brand attitude and makes the ad less effective.

8. General discussion

8.1. Theoretical contributions

The findings of the four studies bring insight into the role of storytelling in advertising and brand relationships research by making three important contributions. First, in line with previous research (van Laer et al., 2014), this research demonstrates the differential role of storytelling versus factual ads on narrative transportation. This effect is observed in two different contexts, for three different types of brands, and using two types of story characters. These results are important in asserting the generalizability of the role of storytelling structures in activating narrative transportation, beyond restricted empirical contexts (van Laer & de Ruyter, 2010) and conceptual premises (Green et al., 2005; Green, Garst, & Brock, 2004; van Laer et al., 2014). These findings indicate that in two different cultural settings, the product category, and whether they are enacted by humans or animals, consumers are more likely to be transported when the ad is framed as a story. This asserts the applicability and potency of storytelling ad formats for online brand communication strategies.

The second and probably most important contribution lies in the finding showing the negative impact of narrative transportation on character identification and subsequently on attitude, either toward the brand or the ad. This finding is the logical result of the powerful transportation effect, indicating that stories that work well—that is, that engross the consumers to the point of carrying them away into another world—might in fact fail to bring them back to their own reality, including their reality as a consumer. The prediction made by Hirschman (1983) regarding the propensity of consumers to use brands and products as tools to escape their bleak realities has moved to a whole different level in the last few years. This study shows that, in a similar fashion to geeky online gamers escaping their reality online (Yee, 2006), high levels of transportation exist in other spheres of online brand consumption.

Going further still into the virtualization of the digital consumer and in a digital context of dematerialized consumption, this phenomenon of "losing oneself" can be explained as the result of total immersion and telepresence, whereby the consumer does not identify his or her self-concept with the character anymore but simply merges his or her own self with that of the character (Belk, 2013). Similar to what happens in a flow experience (Hoffman & Novak, 1996), narrative transportation induces a removal from self-consciousness. As marketers are more and more trying to engage consumers in immersive brand experiences (Mollen & Wilson, 2010), this study warns about the dangers of carrying the consumers away excessively to a point at which they do not construe themselves as consumers when watching branded content, and they forget to cognitively identify with the ad characters. This phenomenon is also reinforced by the tendency of brands to use storytelling ads where they remove any representation of their products. Further, Stern (1994) explains that if the advertisement fails to establish verisimilitude, audiences might not accept the illusion of the advertising's reconstructed reality.

Further, and this is the third contribution of this study, the studies show that character type plays a crucial role in explaining the negative effect of narrative transportation on character identification. The findings show that animal characters enable consumers to experience even higher levels of narrative transportation and, as expected, are less easy to identify with. These findings are in line with the notion that animals improve heuristic processing of advertisements rather than systematic thinking (Lancendorfer et al., 2008). However, they challenge the idea that these less rational modes of processing induce a more positive brand attitude (Lancendorfer et al., 2008) because of the mediating role of identification. When identification with the character is decreased by the presence of animals, there is a negative impact of storytelling on brand attitude. As a result, ads with human characters enable avoiding the negative effects that animal characters induce.

In addition, and although not hypothesized, our findings indicate that the effects of narrative transportation on attitude—either toward the brand or the ad—are not always negative and can be positive as long as the positive emotion of joy is induced by the experience of being transported by the story. The current research thus highlights the need to consider the effects of storytelling ads as being not uniform, but rather more nuanced. Our studies evidence that narrative transportation in advertising is a double-edged sword and could lead to either positive or negative effects, thus requiring a careful and though-through treatment.

To sum up, because of the positive direct relationship that is found between narrative transportation and brand attitude, this research first supports existing evidence on the role of the former as a determinant of the latter (Escalas, 2004). The paper nevertheless extends this knowledge by showing the negative impact that the activation of character identification can generate and the moderating role of character type in this process. In conclusion, far from delegitimizing the use of storytelling as an efficient advertising strategy, our research clarifies the danger of relying too much on character identification and how to control its effect through character type.

8.2. Managerial implications

The implications of these findings first relate to the positive effect of framing ads as stories on narrative transportation. Our studies consistently bring support to this notion, and managers can thus frame ads as stories to make consumers escape their reality. However, given the observed negative effect of transportation on identification and brand attitude, and the moderating role

of character type in this effect, the implication also, not to say mainly, regards the importance of designing the most appropriate character in storytelling ads. Managers need to create just the appropriate level of transportation in line with the commercial strategic objectives of the advertisement. Managers should also make sure to include human characters in their stories to avoid reducing character identification. They should also aim to balance storytelling elements in their ads with more factual elements to avoid high levels of transportation. Consumers should either be engaged in cognitive processing that involves situational projection and character identification or be transported by strong joyful feelings.

8.3. Limitations and future research

The experiments here were conducted using storytelling ads from the web. This choice creates certain limitations. First, videos are particularly potent types of content to convey stories. Media other than YouTube videos could be considered to investigate the role of storytelling in advertising strategies. Second, respondents in our studies could be said to have a certain predisposition to liking commercial video content, suggesting a need to involve respondents who are not used to watching online video commercials in future studies. Third, storytelling videos tend to be much more popular than factual ones in terms of views, which is a potential confound not accounted for. Fourth, no direct manipulation on the different components of the ads could be done. A difficulty was finding ads that were in perfect accordance with the academic representation of a narrative ad structure (Escalas, 2004). Ad types tended to blur more and more, and clear-cut storytelling elements are harder and harder to isolate as they become infused in fact-based advertising. This calls for further research into the redefinition of what constitutes storytelling ads, or ads using storytelling elements from an academic perspective, to better match the fast-evolving reality of digital modes of branded communication.

Furthermore, the storytelling ads used in this research were as much as possible chosen to not feature the products in use and only showcase the name of the brand at the end of the video. As creative and viral as these communications might be, by focusing on brand values more than on the product, the studies show that they fail to achieve their intended purpose of reinforced brand relationships. For these "extreme" cases of storytelling ads, it might be that the removal of the product and situational elements of consumption favor transportation into another, less materialistic and consumptive world, which is even more likely to make the consumer forget about the product and the brand itself. Although this technique is not new (Stern, 1994), further research is needed to investigate the effects of storytelling ads that differ in their featuring of products in use.

Additionally, some variables of potential interest have not been included in the current research but would be of help to get a better understanding of the effects of storytelling ads. Some of these variables are memorability and brand awareness. Given that marketers put a great emphasis on creating ads that are memorable and go viral online (as evidenced by the number of views of storytelling ads), a promising avenue for further research would thus be to investigate if the narrative transportation that is induced by the storytelling framing of an ad can positively affect memory and brand awareness and result in more favorable attitude.

Last, given that storytelling strategies tend to have longer scopes than factual communications (Green, Garst, et al., 2004), further research is needed to replicate the study over a longer period of time to verify if consumers' attitude evolve after being exposed to other storytelling content from brands.

Appendix 1

Video	Type	Main characters	Video content
Study 1: Budweiser			
Lost Dog Superbowl https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7p_3lITiK_Q	Story	Animals: puppy & horse.	A puppy from an adoption farm makes friend with a horse in the farm next door. When the puppy is about to be sold to a new owner, the horse and his friends chase the car and bring back the puppy to the horse farm. Music "Let her go" by the Passengers plays in the background. No voice over.
This Bud's for you https://www.youtube.com/-watch?v=MTergTCbC9U	Factual	Humans: young people, male and female	The video shows the production of beer, then it being served and drank in bars; people enjoying it. The voice over detail the ingredients used, fresh quality of the beer, uniqueness of the production process and benefits for consumers. Pop music is playing in the background.
Study 2: Three			
Dance Pony Dance - The Pony at Christmas #DancePonyDance https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toHw2KCJxjg	Story	Animal: pony	A Shetland pony dances and moonwalks on the tunes of Fleetwood Mac's Everywhere, on a snowy British see shore. The pony dances around, almost falls off the cliff, dances around Christmas trees and with other ponies…When a truck drives past, he stops, then resumes his dance by the water.
Pay as you go at Christmas https://www.youtube.com/-watch?v=NLrk259CwMw	Factual	Animal: pug	The voice over introduces a new pay as you go offer, describing the features of the bundle. In the background, a pug with reindeer hat slides on a sleigh. Music is a Christmassy jingle.
Study 3: Three			
Dance Pony Dance - The Pony at Christmas #DancePonyDance	Story	Animal: pony	A Shetland pony dances and moonwalks on the tunes of Fleetwood Mac's Everywhere, on a snowy British see shore. The pony dances

(continued)

Video	Type	Main characters	Video content
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toHw2KCJxjg			around, almost falls off the cliff, dances around Christmas trees and with other ponies…When a truck drives past, he stops, then resumes his dance by the water.
Pay as you go Just got serious https://www.youtube.com/-watch?v=nbWhQE9GXQo	Factual	Animal: pug	The voice over presents a new Pay as you go bundle and its price features. A pug with a birthday cake as a hat stand on a podium in the background.
Sing it Kitty https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6s-rh6R5ilc	Story	Human: little girl	A little red haired girl rides her bike in a sunny neighborhood, with a cat in her basket. She sings the song "We built this city" by Starship and really embodies the song as she rides fast, startles neighbors, and turns on water hoses. Then she arrives home to her mum as the song ends.
Sony Xperia Z on Three. User Tested. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKY2fn6IIuY	Factual	Human: baby	The video shows a baby playing with a Sony Xperia smartphone; banging it on his chair, munching on it, dropping it in his bath. The quality features of the phone appear on the screen at the same time: toughened glass, water resistant, etc.
Study 4: Virgin Media			
Virgin Media Navy Seal Gaming Advert https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXeQPotCzIE	Story	Animal: seal	This video present Nick, a "navy seal", seen playing games on his superfast TV. While he plays, his (human) wife enters the room with their daughter and they come and interrupt his game, much to his frustration.
Sofa Bear demonstrations. Take 1. Speed. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dh-z873uBBg	Factual	Animal: bear	The video aims to present the features of Virgin Media's operated fibre optic broadband, thanks to the DOCSIS 3 tech. The character "Sofa Bear" shows the speed of Virgin's broadband, by making a comparison with the tortoise and hare.
Inspired https://www.youtube.com/-watch?v=Pws3GwoqOqg	Story	Human: little girl with her mum	A little girl is sitting with her mum on the sofa watching videos of inspiring women athletes and artists on an iPad. The girl is impressed and feels that she interacts with the women in the videos. The music "Woman on fire" by Alicia Keys plays in the background.
Amazing TV with TiVo https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jsKM_SQ3eE	Factual	Human: Actor David Tennant	The video features David Tennant, a famous Scottish actor, watching TV, describing and praising all the different features and benefits of the TiVo box set of Virgin Media.

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