

Narrative Persuasion

Narrative persuasion is the use of story to convey arguments that influence belief change. Persuasive storytelling can be effective due to a combination of factors and mechanisms. For example, people naturally think in story form. Therefore story-based arguments are a natural road into the human mind and are less likely to encounter resistance than non-narrative arguments (Beach et al., 2016; Haven, 2007). In addition, information received that is already formatted as story is less likely to be changed to fit existing stories in the mind (Haven, 2007). Because of a person's proclivity to think in story form, narrative arguments are also easier for the mind to process (Bullock et al., 2021). Mechanisms that affect narrative persuasion include narrative transportation, getting lost in the world of a story (Appel & Richter, 2010; Green & Brock, 2000, 2002) and character identification, cognitively and emotionally taking on the perspective and experience of a story protagonist (Cohen, 2001; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002).

Roots of Storytelling

Stories have a unique form in comparison to non-narrative communication such as lectures, research papers, and technical manuals. Narratives are composed of a sequence of events known as the plot (Isbouts & Ohler, 2013). The plot follows a pattern of beginning, middle, and end. Stories have a central character, or protagonist, who must overcome a challenge or series of challenges and undergoes personal transformation in the process. While both narratives and non-narratives may have intellectual appeal, narratives are designed to be emotionally captivating as well. Some messages may have both narrative and non-narrative elements.

Stories have existed since the earliest days of humankind as evidenced by the action-packed adventures of a hunt or battle depicted on cave walls. Isbouts and Ohler (2013) state that some stories garnered a strong resonance within larger communities such as a clan or village. These collective stories became myths that gave sense and meaning to life which helped to build cultures and nations.

Through evolution, humans have developed a propensity to think in narrative form. They have become imbued with "the narrative urge" (Beach et al., 2016, p. 35) which is a natural drive to impose order on experience through story. Psychologists who have studied narrative thought suggest that it is used to explain the past, link it to the present, and from that, anticipate the future (Beach et al., 2016; McAdams, 2001; Oatley, 2021). Early homo sapiens who learned to think in story form were more likely to survive and reproduce (Beach et al., 2016; Oatley, 2021). They were better able to predict what might happen and adapt accordingly. The storied connections of past, present, and future also give meaning

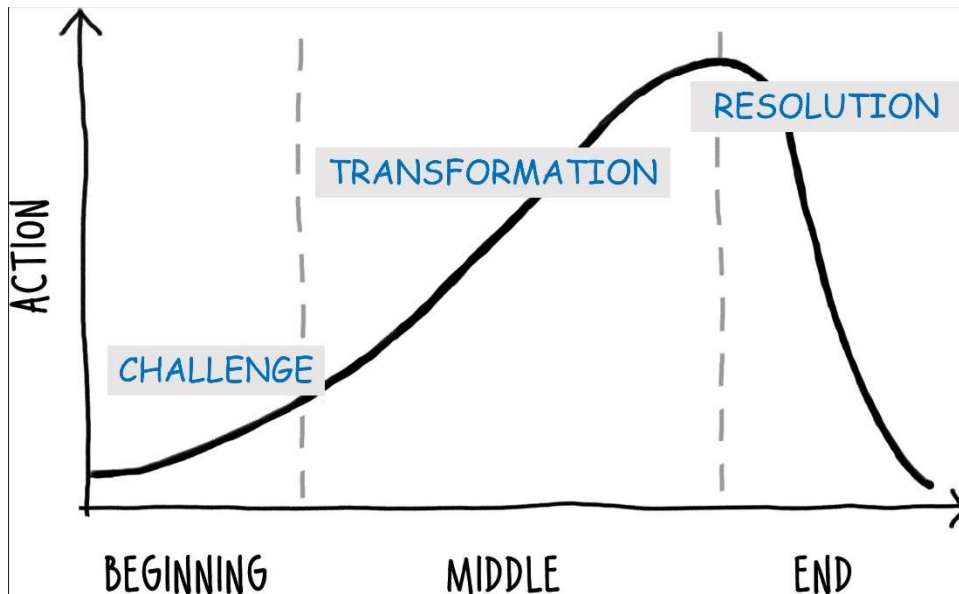
to life which further fuels the narrative urge and shapes the narrative form of life. Sigmund Freud recognized this natural means of thought and expression in people's lives: "...it still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories... I must console myself with the reflection that the nature of the subject is evidently responsible for this, rather than any preference of my own" (Freud, 1893-1895/1955, p. 160).

Individual and group identity is developed through story structure (McAdams, 1993, 2001). Since a person's mind naturally arranges life in story form, narrative persuasion, or story-based argument is a natural route into that mind (Beach et al., 2016; Haven, 2007). Narrative persuasion can be a potent means of affecting personal and societal change (de Graaf, et al., 2012). Used effectively, it can alter beliefs and inspire action. Not all people, however, are swayed by stories. Affecting persuasive outcomes is a highly complex and nuanced area of study (Moyer-Gusé, 2015; Nabi & Green, 2015). Scholars have sometimes found puzzling or conflicting results while studying the dynamics underlying narrative persuasion (see Lien & Chen, 2013; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Schreiner et al., 2018).

Why Stories Can Persuade

Narrative persuasion can be effective because it conveys an argument the way a mind naturally thinks (Beach et al., 2016; Haven, 2007). The persuasive information is embedded within a specific structure in a way that can impact beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Appel & Richter, 2010; de Graaf et al., 2012; Dill-Shackleford et al., 2016). That structure often follows the hero's journey and consists of three primary phases that make up the story arc (Figure 1) (Campbell, 1949/2004; Lichaw, 2016a; Ohler, 2013). The first phase of the arc is an initiating question or challenge to the protagonist that creates tension (Ohler, 2013). In the second phase, the character responds to the challenge through a transformation as tension continues to build while transitioning to hope and possibility. Thirdly, their change through trial leads to resolution, answering the question or solving the problem, which brings tension relief. It is the emotional flow, the affective shift of tension rise and release, in the story arc that engages the audience (Alam & So, 2020; Nabi & Green, 2015) and triggers strong neural rewards (see Haven, 2007).

Figure 1: The Story Arc Structure



The User's Journey: Challenge, Transformation, Resolution ([CC BY 2.0](#))

(Adapted from Lichaw, 2016b, chapt. 2, figure 2.2)

When focused on a story, people are less likely to perceive attempts at persuasion (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). In a study with 367 undergrad students, Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010) demonstrated that persuasive information presented through an entertaining narrative was more likely to overcome audience reactance (defense) by reducing impressions that the content was intended to persuade. However, if the audience construes a message to be overly moralistic or that there is an overt attempt at persuasion, they are likely to disengage from the story and reject its message (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

People construct a personal life-story that connects and explains life events (McAdams, 1988, 1993, 2001). Non-narrative information received by the mind is converted into story form to be overlaid on a person's existing narrative (Haven, 2007). In this process, "Each mind will fill in with its own version of goal, motives, values, beliefs, attitudes, cause-and-effect relationships, etc. That is, each mind will create and remember its own meaning" (Haven, 2007, chapt. 4, section Mad about What's Missing, para. 13). Information that is already in story form does not need to be modified and is more likely to be accepted as intended and, "then it will pass through the conscious mind with few, if any, internal alterations, additions, and restructurings" (Haven, 2007, chapt. 4, para. 6).

Narrative arguments are also easier for the mind to process than non-narratives (Bullock et al., 2021) allowing fluent message analysis. Bullock et al. claim that when the mind requires less effort to process information, it can evaluate the material more quickly.

The message also becomes associated with positive feelings. This positive effect creates momentum that promotes even higher levels of message processing. When processing is easier and accompanied by positive feelings, a persuasive effect is more likely. Bullock et al. (2021) hypothesized that processing fluency would mediate the effect of message format (narrative or non-narrative) on persuasive outcomes. They conducted a study with 554 undergraduate students who listened to either a narrative or non-narrative version of an audio message concerning the health risks of consuming high levels of caffeine. The non-narrative version eliminated plot and character elements from the story version. The researchers measured strength of agreement with the concept presented about the dangers of consuming too much caffeine. Results supported the researcher's claims that a narrative message was easier to process and participants were more likely to be persuaded by a narrative than non-narrative.

Narrative Transportation

The influence of the story arc occurs through various mechanisms. One of these mechanisms is narrative transportation (Appel & Richter, 2010; Green & Brock, 2000, 2002). Transportation is the mental and emotional journey of disconnecting from the real world (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2020) and joining with that of a story as "parts of the world of origin become inaccessible" (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 702). To the degree that a person immerses themselves in a story's world, that story can change their real-life beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000).

Appel and Richter (2010) hypothesized that higher levels of narrative transportation would predict an increased degree of persuasive effect. They further hypothesized that narratives with high emotional content such as the portrayal of strong feelings or enactment of pivotal events in a protagonist's life increase the effect of transportation on persuasion. In an online study with 133 adults, participants read a story with either high or low emotional content promoting organ donation. In the high emotion condition, the protagonist had registered to become an organ donor shortly before being killed in an auto accident. Participants were assessed for transportation and their beliefs about organ donation. Those who scored higher in transportation were more likely to report beliefs consistent with those promoted in the story. However, this was true only for those in the high-emotion condition and not the low-emotion condition.

The emotional flow, the rising tension and release, of the story arc, contributes to experiencing transportation (Alam & So, 2020; Nabi & Green, 2015). As demonstrated by Appel and Richter (2010), transportation is most effective at producing story-consistent beliefs under conditions of high emotional content such as the portrayal of a critical life event or emotional expression. These greater levels of transportation are most likely to

occur when stories induce internal imagery (Green & Brock, 2002). Therefore, stories that have higher levels of emotional content and foster higher levels of internal imagery are more likely to produce more significant experiences of transportation. This imagery is a mental representation of a concept presented in the story as it is applied by the story receiver and mapped onto their own life story (Haven, 2007). These internal representations can then influence belief.

The experience of narrative transportation and its resulting influence through internalized imagery, however, varies from person to person and story to story (Green & Brock, 2002). These formative scholars in transportation research postulate, “Propensity for transportation by exposure to a given narrative account is affected by attributes of the recipient. Among these moderating attributes is imagery skill” (Green & Brock, 2002, p. 327). Green and Brock also state that a story’s adherence to a narrative structure is essential to evoking high levels of transportation and affective imagery. The influence on beliefs is therefore dependent on the narrative craftsmanship of the author as well as the attributes of the receiver. The author’s use of story form and the story receiver’s ability to visually apply the story to their own life are key elements of transportation and the impact on beliefs.

Character Identification

Closely related to the concept of transportation is the idea of character identification. While transported into the story world, a story receiver can detach from their own narrative identity and assume that of the protagonist (Cohen, 2001; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Identification is different from similarity which is based on surface characteristics such as race, gender, or age. Identification is an empathetic response and not a homophilic one (Slater & Rouner, 2002; Stephenson, 2003). With empathy, a person feels the same emotions they detect in another (Preston & de Waal, 2002; Wang & Wang, 2015). Therefore, through identification, an audience member thinks and feels what they perceive that the protagonist thinks and feels. The more a person identifies with a protagonist, the more likely they are to be transported into the story (van Laer et al., 2014).

Identification occurs when an audience member takes on the perspective and experience of a story character as if the story’s events were happening to them (Cohen, 2001; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). The audience yields their sense of self and becomes the character, transcending the boundary between self and other. Through identification “the audience member ceases to be aware of his or her social role as an audience member and temporarily (but usually repeatedly) adopts the perspective of the character with whom he or she identifies” (Cohen, 2001, p.251). This perspective-taking leads to experience-taking as the audience becomes fully engaged in the character’s life.

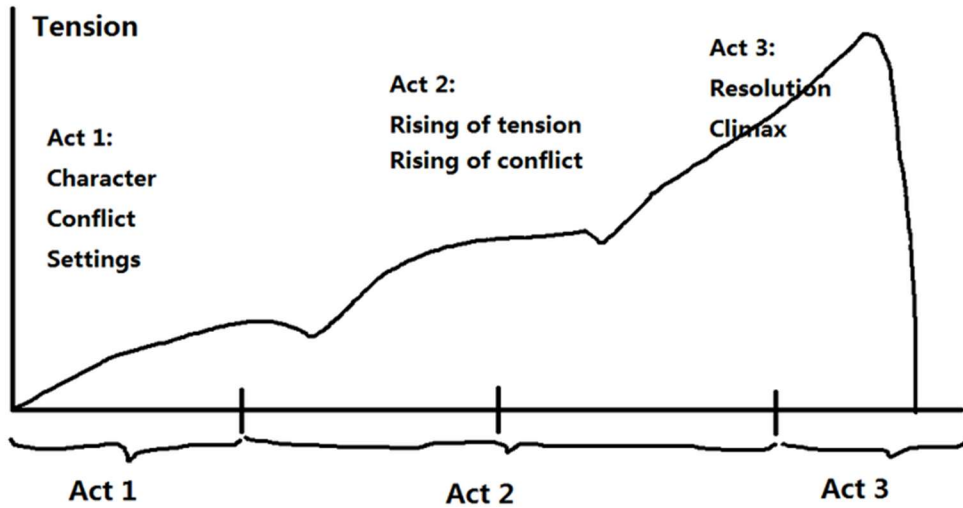
They adopt “the character’s thoughts, emotions, goals, traits, and actions and experiencing the narrative as though they were that character” (Kaufman & Libby, 2012, p. 2).

As with transportation, identification can affect the persuasive influence of a narrative. De Graaf et al. (2012) explored the causal role of character identification in narrative persuasion in a study using 120 first-year students at a Dutch university. Participants read one of two versions of a story about a job interview for a computer programmer position, each from the perspective of a different character. One was the job applicant, a young man in a wheelchair. The other was the interviewer, a member of the job selection committee. Participants answered questions that measured their opinions related to issues about disabled persons and the job market. The questionnaire also assessed participants’ identification with both characters. Those who read the applicant-perspective version identified more with the applicant. Those who read the interviewer-perspective version identified more with the interviewer. Identification with a character predicted attitudes consistent with that character’s perspective. This finding suggests that identification was a mechanism of persuasion, and that perspective played a role.

Synthesis

Both narrative transportation and character identification signal an emotional investment by audience members. The emotional content itself and the emotional flow stimulate transportation and identification and therefore support narrative persuasion (Alam & So, 2020; Nabi & Green, 2015). Those emotional shifts are inherent in a story arc. While some stories have a single narrative arc, in many there are multiple arcs, multiple instances of rising tension and emotional release, only to have the emotional sequence repeated again and again as the plot builds to a final crescendo (Ohler, 2013). The longer the story, the more arcs may be present (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Tension of the Three Arc Structure



Tension of the Three Act Structure ([CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/))

(UfofVincent, 2015)

Each arc then builds emotional flow, an affective flux, that encourages transportation and identification. Alam and So (2020) conducted research based on the assertions of Nabi and Green (2015) about the impact of emotional shifts in a narrative, including emotional valence and valence direction. Using a group of 347 university students in the United States, Alam and So (2020) tested their hypotheses that stories with an emotional shift would result in higher levels of both transportation and identification than those without an emotional shift. In addition, transportation and identification would result in more story-consistent beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral intentions. The researchers also measured if the direction of emotional valence (negative to positive shift or positive to negative) influenced transportation or identification. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of four versions of a narrative about the risks of consuming alcohol mixed with energy drinks (AmED). The four conditions were 1) no emotional shift – positive valence only, 2) no emotional shift – negative valence only, 3) emotional shift – negative to positive, and 4) emotional shift – positive to negative.

The study illuminated the role of emotional flow, the affective fluctuations, in narrative persuasion. The first two hypotheses were supported (Alam & So, 2020). Participants in the emotional shift conditions registered higher levels of both transportation and identification. Hypotheses three and four were partially supported. Both transportation and identification were associated with greater levels of story-consistent beliefs and behavioral intentions, with partial effects on story-related attitudes. The researchers also found that the valence change orientation (negative-positive or positive-negative) of emotional shifts did not

predict transportation or identification. While transportation and identification were related to emotional fluctuation, the direction of that flow was not significant.

Narrative Engagement

The concept of narrative engagement as introduced by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) combines and simplifies the ideas of narrative transportation and character identification. Narrative engagement incorporates four aspects of absorption in a story and connection with its characters. These four factors are “narrative understanding, attentional focus, emotional engagement, and narrative presence” (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009, p. 321). Narrative presence is an audience member’s sense that they have left the real world and instead have become a part of the story world, an idea similar to transportation. Emotional engagement includes the idea of feeling for and with the protagonists.

Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) conducted three studies with different groups of college students (N = 443, 223, 179) to assess correlations between the original transportation and identification scales compared to their narrative engagement scale. The studies were similar in that participants watched an assigned television show (studies 1 and 3) or feature-length film (study 2) and then completed the original transportation scale, identification scale, and narrative engagement scale. Each study in progression was used to further refine the narrative engagement scale until it reached its final 12-item format. Those 12 items were used for final comparisons with the transportation and identification results. The 12-item narrative engagement scale was highly correlated with both transportation ($r = 0.73 - 0.86$) and identification ($r = 0.64 - 0.74$).

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