

# Self-Referencing and Persuasion: Narrative Transportation versus Analytical Elaboration

JENNIFER EDSON ESCALAS\*

This article contrasts narrative self-referencing with analytical self-referencing. I propose that narrative self-referencing persuades through transportation, where people become absorbed in a story—in this case, in their storylike thoughts (Green and Brock 2000). When ad viewers are transported by these narrative thoughts, persuasion is not negatively affected by weak ad arguments. Conversely, analytical self-referencing persuades via more traditional processing models, wherein cognitive elaboration is enhanced by relating incoming information to one's self or personal experiences, which results in a differential persuasive effect of strong versus weak arguments. I also propose that ad skepticism moderates the effect of narrative transportation. My assertions are tested in two experiments in the context of mental simulation as a form of narrative self-referencing.

Self-referencing occurs when one processes information by relating it to one's self or personal experiences (Burnkrant and Unnava 1995). Some consumer research has found that self-referencing serves to increase product feature and ad message elaboration, leading to enhanced persuasion when message arguments or product features are strong, but not when they are weak (e.g., Burnkrant and Unnava 1989). Conversely, other research has found that self-referencing can serve to distract attention away from and thus eliminate the differential effects of strong versus weak arguments (e.g., Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner 1993). This article looks at an important variation in the nature of self-referencing that brings together these two research streams: the degree to which self-referent thoughts are narratively structured, that is, in the form of a story.

I begin with a brief review of the relevant literature on self-referent processing. Next, I propose that there are two distinct types of self-referencing: analytical and narrative. On the one hand, analytical self-referencing persuades through dual cognitive response processes (e.g., ELM; Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983). These traditional elaboration-based persuasion models assert that self-referencing facilitates the elaboration of incoming information, enhanc-

ing message recall and ad and brand attitudes, when the ad arguments are strong. On the other hand, narrative processing has been shown to affect persuasion through a mechanism called transportation, which is defined as "immersion into a text" (Gerrig 1994; Green and Brock 2000, 702). Narrative transportation leads to persuasion through reduced negative cognitive responding, realism of experience, and strong affective responses (Green and Brock 2000), mechanisms that differ from the traditional elaboration-based explanations for self-referencing effects. My hypotheses are tested in two experiments. The first examines the effects of narrative and analytical self-referencing on persuasion and examines whether transportation is at work in the case of narrative self-referencing. The second experiment examines a moderator of narrative transportation: advertising skepticism.

## SELF-REFERENT PROCESSING

In cognitive psychology, self-referencing is conceptualized as the cognitive processes individuals use to understand incoming information that pertains to them by comparing it to self-relevant information stored in memory (Debevec and Romeo 1992). Studies in psychology have demonstrated that self-referencing enhances learning and the recall of information (e.g., Klein and Loftus 1988; Rogers, Kuiper, and Kirker 1977). The predominant explanation for these findings is that self-referencing facilitates the elaboration of incoming information because the self is a highly organized, complex memory structure (e.g., Greenwald and Banjai 1989).

In consumer research, self-referencing has been found to affect persuasion (e.g., Burnkrant and Unnava 1995; Debevec and Romeo 1992; Sujan et al. 1993). This research

\*Jennifer Edson Escalas is an associate professor of management at the Owen Graduate School of Management, Vanderbilt University, 401 21st Avenue South, Nashville, TN, 37203 e-mail: jennifer.escalas@owen.vanderbilt.edu). The author would like to thank Mary Frances Luce for her valuable feedback throughout this research process, as well as the editor, associate editor, and reviewers.

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has identified some of the conditions for when self-referencing will and will not enhance persuasion. Burnkrant and Unnava (1989) find that self-referencing increases product feature and ad message elaboration and recall, and therefore it only enhances persuasion when message arguments or product features are strong. These results support the theory that self-referencing facilitates the elaboration of incoming information: when the information is related to the highly complex, well-organized self-concept, elaboration is increased and strong arguments are favored over weak arguments. Burnkrant and Unnava (1995) and Meyers-Levy and Peracchio (1996) also find that self-referencing only enhances persuasion up to a point. Parallel to the resource-matching hypothesis (Anand and Sternthal 1989), too much self-referencing, like too much elaboration, leads to critical (or unrelated) thought processes that hurt persuasion, leading to an inverted-U relationship. Self-referencing is found to harm persuasion when elaboration reaches levels that are too high, either from too much self-referencing (Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1996) or from self-referencing plus other elaboration enhancements (Burnkrant and Unnava 1995).

In a different stream of research, Sujan et al. (1993; see also Baumgartner, Sujan, and Bettman 1992) evoke self-referencing by eliciting autobiographical memories, defined as the recollection of earlier events from one's life. In these studies, self-referencing does not enhance product elaboration but, rather, distracts attention away from, and thus eliminates the differential effects of, strong versus weak arguments. Thinking about the self is shown to be an attention-consuming task; with an increase in self-focus, attention to the environment diminishes, and there may be interference with the encoding of new information (Sujan et al. 1993). In the autobiographical memory studies, persuasion is still enhanced as a result of self-referencing, but the effect results from the transfer of affect from the memory to the brand. This only occurs when the link between the brand and the autobiographical memory is made explicit in the ad.

### NARRATIVE SELF-REFERENCING

One important distinction between the autobiographical memory self-referencing research and the other studies discussed above is that autobiographical memories are usually in the form of stories or narratives (Fiske 1993; Polkinghorne 1991). Autobiographical memories can be considered part of a larger cognitive category, that of mental simulation, which is the imitative mental representation of some event or series of events, including rehearsals of likely future events, fantasizing about less likely future events, realistically reexperiencing past events, or reconstructing past events while mixing in hypothetical elements (Taylor and Schneider 1989). When we simulate events, we frequently think about our own actual or potential behaviors by creating behavioral scenarios, similar to stories, in which we are the main character. Krishnamurthy and Sujan (1999) refer to self-relevant mental simulation as anticipatory self-refer-

encing and autobiographical memory retrieval as retrospective self-referencing. They treat both anticipatory and retrospective self-referencing as forms of episodic processing, a view consistent with my categorization of mental simulation and autobiographical memory retrieval as forms of narrative self-referencing.

Narrative processing has been shown to affect persuasion through transportation (Gerrig 1994; Green and Brock 2000). While "elaboration leads to attitude change via logical consideration and evaluation of arguments," transportation leads to persuasion through reduced negative cognitive responding, the realism of the experience, and strong affective responses (Green and Brock 2000, 702). Thus, under conditions of narrative transportation, affective responses influence persuasion rather than the systematic analysis of message strength. The results found in the Baumgartner et al. (1992) and Sujan et al. (1993) papers are consistent with how transportation is said to affect persuasion, in this case, through affect transfer. When one self-references by thinking about an episode from one's past, one is "transported" by the autobiographical story, enhancing persuasion without increasing the elaboration of the ad's arguments.

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HYPOTHESES

The primary goal of this article is to identify narrative self-referencing, exploring the mechanisms through which this type of self-referencing persuades. Narrative self-referencing differs from analytical self-referencing, where research finds a differential effect of argument strength on attitudes because of increased elaboration. In analytical self-referencing studies, the ad text is written in second person ("you") with a few requests to recall generic, repeated incidents (Burnkrant and Unnava 1995), or with a photo taken from the consumer's perspective (Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1996). I assert that self-referencing in response to these manipulations does not evoke stories; rather, it enhances ad elaboration by relating incoming information to the complex self-structure leading to logical argument evaluation. Conversely, autobiographical memories are a form of narrative self-referencing. Here, research finds that weak arguments do not significantly harm persuasion, because the storylike memory "transports" the individual and less attention is paid to argument strength. Thus, I hypothesize that the degree of narrative thought moderates the impact of argument strength on persuasion:

- H1:** Differences in argument strength will have a greater effect on brand evaluations under conditions of analytical self-referencing compared to conditions of narrative self-referencing (and narrative self-referencing will be persuasive regardless of argument strength).

Based on narrative transportation theory, I propose that the underlying reason for the relationships proposed by hy-

pothesis 1 is that consumers engaged in narrative self-referencing become lost in or absorbed by their thoughts. Transportation leads to persuasion through reduced negative cognitive responding and strong affective responses (Green and Brock 2000). Transportation distracts people from thinking analytically about the message strength in an advertisement and evokes positive feelings that may be associated with the brand being advertised (if the narrative is favorable). Here, I formalize the notion that narrative self-referencing leads to transportation (hypothesis 2A) and distracts attention away from the analytical evaluation of the product and ad (hypothesis 2B). Furthermore, I propose that the degree of transportation will not vary across different levels of argument strength (i.e., participants engaging in narrative self-referencing will be transported, while participants engaged in analytical self-referencing will not be transported, regardless of argument strength).

**H2A:** Narrative self-referencing will lead to more transportation than will analytical self-referencing, and this relationship will not be moderated by argument strength.

**H2B:** Narrative self-referencing will lead to less critical evaluation of the ad and/or brand compared to analytical self-referencing.

The most obvious way to attenuate transportation is through a poorly constructed narrative. Bad stories do not transport readers into their fictional worlds. However, in response to the same stimuli, other mechanisms may moderate the extent to which individuals are caught up in their storylike thoughts. Nevertheless, traditional elaboration-based manipulations have not been able to “turn off” transportation. Green and Brock (2000) find that differences in the need for cognition and levels of cognitive elaboration do not affect transportation. Transportation is not a lack of thought; it is a process distinct from analytical thought. To moderate transportation, therefore, we need to change the thought process involved and move people from being caught up in a story to critically evaluating the ad. One potential mechanism to move people from narrative processing to analytical processing is advertising skepticism.

I propose that consumers who are skeptical about the persuasive intentions of the advertiser are more likely to be critical of an ad and evaluate it in a more analytical fashion, rather than becoming caught up in, and hence transported by, advertisements. Consumers realize that ads are meant to be persuasive; they develop persuasion knowledge that helps them “identify how, when, and why marketers try to influence them” (Friestad and Wright 1994, 1). In the process of developing persuasion knowledge, consumers develop coping tactics, such as avoiding being drawn into an advertisement, that is, avoiding being transported by the ad, perhaps by remaining detached from and skeptical of the advertisement. In situations where a consumer processes an ad with skepticism, it is unlikely that narrative transportation will occur, and consumer thoughts will tend to be a critical

analysis of the ad, consistent with analytical thought processes (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998). Thus, this hypothesis examines the interaction of ad skepticism and argument strength, with the prediction that an ad designed to evoke narrative self-referencing will not be able to transport individuals who are highly skeptical. They will engage in analytical self-referencing rather than narrative self-referencing, resulting in a differential effect of argument strength on persuasion. By contrast, for the less skeptical participants, narrative transportation will result in equally high levels of persuasion, regardless of argument strength.

**H3:** In response to an advertisement intended to evoke narrative self-referencing, advertising skepticism will preclude transportation, leading to analytical processing that is sensitive to argument strength.

## EXPERIMENT 1

This experiment is designed to examine the differential effect of analytical versus narrative self-referencing across varying levels of argument strength (hypotheses 1 and 2). Experiment 2 will explore these relationships further, testing whether advertising skepticism moderates the effects of narrative transportation (hypotheses 2 and 3).

### Development of Manipulations

This study starts with the experimental manipulations used by Burnkrant and Unnava (1989, 1995) and Sujan et al. (1993). Burnkrant and Unnava’s (1989, 1995) manipulation has two parts: ad messages address participants directly with second person pronouns (e.g., “you”) versus third person pronouns (e.g., “one”) and also encourage the limited recall of past product experiences (e.g., “you may remember feeling that razor technology can never be improved”; Burnkrant and Unnava 1989, 631). While their recall instructions do not appear likely to evoke experiential, episodic processing that would result in stories or narratives, any experiential recall represents a potential confound between analytical and narrative self-referencing. Therefore, my analytical self-referencing manipulation only employs second person pronouns. Sujan et al. (1993) use an ad message that encourages participants to retrieve an autobiographical memory in the context of a fictitious wine product. The authors manipulate a specific link to the brand, because autobiographical memories often may have nothing to do with the brand being advertised. Krishnamurthy and Sujan (1999) find that autobiographical memories contain many contextual details that might prove distracting. In order to avoid these potential confounds, as well as to extend the narrative effect to a new type of narrative processing, this study manipulates narrative self-referencing by asking participants to imagine themselves using the product. It is generally accepted that mental simulation of possible events is usually in the form of stories or narratives (e.g., Fiske 1993; Polkinghorne 1991). I also include a third, no-self-referencing condition. This will allow me to examine the effects

of strong and weak arguments under conditions of no self-referencing, because Burnkrant and Unnava (1989) find no effects, while Sujan et al. (1993) find significant differences. Finally, consistent with both Burnkrant and Unnava (1989) and Sujan et al. (1993), I manipulate strong versus weak ad arguments embedded in the ad text.

## Method

**Participants.** Fifty-eight undergraduate introductory marketing students from the University of Pennsylvania and 194 undergraduate introductory marketing students from the University of Arizona participated in this study in exchange for experimental credit toward the fulfillment of a course requirement, for a total of 252 participants. There were no significant differences between the two groups on any of the variables of interest, so the data were merged into one set for analysis.

**Procedure.** This experiment is based on the presentation of stimuli and collection of questionnaire responses via a computer program. Participants are presented with the color print ad stimulus for a fictitious brand of running shoe. The ad shows a slightly out-of-focus picture of a man jogging through a park, with a close-up of the shoes superimposed on top of the trees. There are six versions of ad text, placed at the bottom of the screen, which manipulate three levels of self-referencing (no self-referencing: "Introducing Westerly running shoes"; analytical self-referencing: "We'd like to introduce you to Westerly running shoes, designed with you in mind"; and narrative self-referencing: "Imagine yourself running through this park . . . [with] Westerly running shoes on your feet") and two levels of argument strength (weak arguments include descriptions of reinforced shoe laces and water resistance; strong arguments include light weight [10 ounces] and an advanced stability system). The ad is followed by a series of scale questions, answered on a zero to 100 sliding scale. The study ends with a debriefing statement and takes approximately one-half hour to complete.

**Dependent Variables.** After viewing the print ad, participants were first asked to type a list of all the thoughts they had while they looked at the ad. The thought protocols were later coded by two independent coders blind to the hypotheses, using three five-point scale items designed to measure the degree to which the thought protocols are in the form of a story ("To what extent do these thoughts consist of actors engaged in actions to achieve goals?" "To what extent do these thoughts provide you with insight about the personal evolution or change in the life of a character?" and "To what extent do these thoughts have a well delineated beginning (initial event), middle (crisis or turning point), and ending (conclusion)?"). The three items were averaged to form one narrative score for each coder for each participant. The two coders' average narrative scores are significantly correlated ( $r = .56, p < .001$ ), so they were averaged to form one narrative processing score per participant

( $\alpha = .71$ ). The thought protocols were also coded by two different independent coders into the following categories: positive, neutral, and negative ad-focused thoughts; positive, neutral, and negative brand-focused thoughts; and other thoughts (not focused on either the ad or the brand, e.g., "I thought about my cat"). Interjudge reliability was 81% for the proportion of negative brand thoughts (or counterarguments; see below). Disputes were resolved by discussion with the two coders and the author (blind to the experimental conditions).

After typing in their thoughts, participants filled out a reduced set (29 items) of Goodstein, Edell, and Moore's (1990) 57-item feelings scale, from which I derived an index of positive and negative emotions (15 positive items,  $\alpha = .93$ , 14 negative items,  $\alpha = .85$ ). Next, brand attitudes were measured with two items anchored by very favorable/very unfavorable and very bad/very good, and behavioral intentions were measured by one willingness to try on the shoe item and one likelihood of purchase item. These four brand-related items were averaged to form one brand evaluation measure (BE,  $\alpha = .88$ ). Finally, participants answered three items designed to measure transportation ("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";  $\alpha = .82$ , adapted from Green and Brock 2000).

**Manipulation Checks.** Two items check the argument strength manipulation, anchored by weak/strong and not at all convincing/very convincing ( $\alpha = .87$ ). In order to assess the degree of self-referencing (SR), participants completed two items ("The ad related to me personally" and "To what extent did your thoughts focus on you personally?"  $\alpha = .65$ ; Burnkrant and Unnava 1995).

## Results

This study is a  $3 \times 2$  between-subjects design, crossing self-referencing (no SR vs. analytical SR vs. narrative SR) with argument strength (strong vs. weak).

**Manipulation Checks.** Participants in the self-referencing-encouraged conditions (analytical SR and narrative SR) report significantly more self-referencing compared to the no-self-referencing condition (no SR = 39.17, analytical SR = 45.43, narrative SR = 47.56;  $F(2, 247) = 3.00, p < .05$ ; preplanned contrast, no SR < analytical SR = narrative SR:  $F(2, 247) = 5.63, p < .05$ ). The argument strength manipulation check is also significant (strong = 51.94, weak = 46.36;  $F(1, 247) = 4.01, p < .05$ ). No other significant main effects or interactions were found.

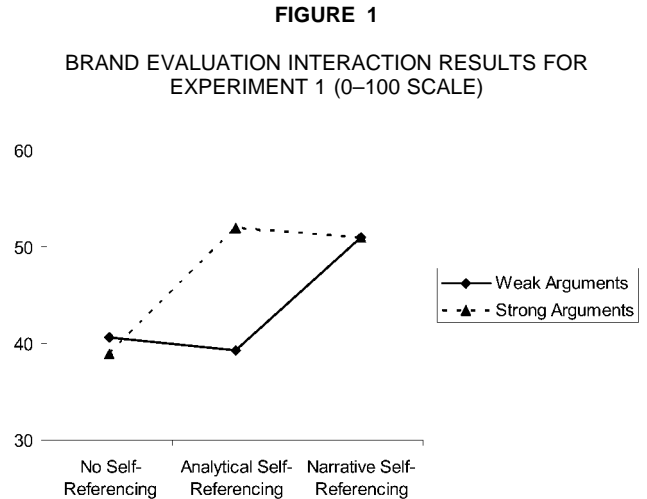
**Hypothesis 1.** This hypothesis examines whether there is a differential effect of argument strength on BE under conditions of analytical self-referencing but not under narrative self-referencing. In terms of main effects, argument strength is not significant, but self-referencing type is (no SR = 40.84, analytical SR = 46.07, narrative SR = 51.37;  $F(2, 247) = 5.64, p < .01$ ). This main effect is qual-

ified by the marginally significant interaction of self-referencing type by argument strength on BE ( $F(2,247) = 2.74, p = .07$ ; see fig. 1). Preplanned contrast results support the idea that transportation distracts attention away from weak arguments in the narrative self-referencing conditions (weak = 50.96, strong = 50.93;  $F(1,247) < 1.0$ , NS), while analytical self-referencing appears to increase elaboration on the ad's arguments, such that only strong arguments are persuasive (weak = 39.26, strong = 51.95;  $F(1,247) = 7.34, p < .01$ ). Hypothesis 1 does not address the no-self-referencing condition; however, I find that argument strength does not have an effect (weak = 40.61, strong = 38.87;  $F(1,247) < 1.0$ , NS), which is consistent with Burnkrant and Unnava (1989).

**Hypothesis 2A.** This hypothesis proposes that narrative self-referencing will lead to transportation and that this effect will not be moderated by argument strength. First, it is important to show that the self-referencing manipulation affects the degree to which participants engage in narrative processing, because participants cannot be transported by their thoughts if the thoughts are not in the form of a story. The thought-coding results find that participants in the narrative SR condition engaged in significantly more narrative processing than those in the other two conditions (no SR = 1.22, analytical SR = 1.24, narrative SR = 1.30;  $F(1,247) = 6.03, p < .01$ ; preplanned contrast, no SR = analytical SR < narrative SR:  $F(1,247) = 6.75, p < .01$ ). In a direct test of the hypothesis, I find a significant effect of self-referencing type on transportation (no SR = 44.52, analytical SR = 51.02, narrative SR = 54.88;  $F(1,247) = 3.33, p = .05$ ; preplanned contrast, no SR = analytical SR < narrative SR:  $F(2,247) = 3.86, p < .05$ ). As hypothesized, neither argument strength nor the interaction of argument strength by self-referencing type has a significant effect on transportation (all  $F$ 's(1,247) < 1.09, NS).

In order to explore hypothesis 2A further, I looked at the relationship between transportation and the positive and negative feelings experienced by participants while they viewed the ad. Consistent with narrative transportation theory, I find a significant positive effect of transportation on positive emotions ( $F(1,251) = 163.38, p < .001, \beta = .43$ ) and a significant negative effect on negative emotions ( $F(1,251) = 53.19, p < .001, \beta = -.23$ ). Thus, it appears becoming absorbed in one's mental simulation evokes positive feelings and inhibits negative feelings (in the context of this study). Finally, transportation is positively correlated with brand evaluations ( $r = .56, p < .001$ ). The more transported participants are by their narrative self-referencing, the better they like the fictitious running shoe brand.

**Hypothesis 2B.** This hypothesis proposes that narrative self-referencing will lead to lower levels of analytical processing (typified by counterarguing). An analysis of the thought protocol coding reveals significantly fewer counterarguments in the narrative self-referencing condition (no SR = .16, analytical SR = .12, narrative SR = .06;  $F(2,247) = 5.42, p < .01$ ; preplanned contrast, no SR =



analytical SR > narrative SR:  $F(1,247) = 7.61, p < .01$ ). Argument strength is not significant, and neither is the interaction of argument strength and processing instructions. I also do not find any differences in the total number of thoughts across any of the four conditions. Finally, the proportion of counterarguments is negatively correlated with brand evaluations ( $r = -.41, p < .001$ ). Critical thoughts about the brand lead to lower evaluations of the fictitious running shoes.

## Discussion of Experiment 1 Results

This experiment demonstrates that different types of self-referencing persuade via different mechanisms. Across equivalent levels of self-referencing, I am able to evoke either narrative or analytical processing via the text of a print advertisement. In support of hypothesis 1, under conditions of narrative processing, self-referencing serves as a distraction from message evaluation, resulting in enhanced brand evaluations even when ad arguments are weak. Conversely, under conditions of analytical processing, self-referencing serves to enhance elaboration, such that only strong ad arguments are persuasive. The experiment finds support for the idea that narrative self-referencing persuades as a result of narrative transportation (hypothesis 2A), with more compelling or "transporting" stories leading to more positive feelings and fewer counterarguments (hypothesis 2B).

## EXPERIMENT 2

This experiment is designed to examine whether ad skepticism can change the type of thought process engaged in by consumers, moving them from narrative processing to analytical processing and, in so doing, "turning off" the favorable persuasive effect of narrative transportation when ad arguments are weak. In this study, I manipulate whether or not participants act as ad critics to evoke situational ad

skepticism while they view a shampoo ad designed to evoke narrative self-referencing.<sup>1</sup>

## Method

*Participants.* Ninety-seven undergraduate introductory marketing students from the University of Arizona participated in this study in exchange for experimental credit toward the fulfillment of a course requirement.

*Procedure.* This experiment utilizes the same computer-based methodology as that used in experiment 1. Rather than a print ad for running shoes, the program here presented participants with a print ad for shampoo, with a photo of shampoo bottles for an unknown brand, "Salon-care." In all conditions, the ad text encouraged mental simulation about using the shampoo to obtain clean, shiny hair, similar to the narrative SR condition in experiment 1 (e.g., "Imagine yourself using Saloncare shampoo . . ."). Argument strength was varied in the ad text (based on Escalas and Luce 2003). Half the participants were given the following instructions, intended to evoke ad skepticism, but not dampen self-referencing, prior to viewing the ad: "On the next screen, you will be shown an advertisement. Your instructions are to critique the ad as if you were an ad critic for a magazine such as *Ad Age*. Please, take the time to evaluate the ad carefully. We ask you to think analytically, relating the features described by the ad to you personally in order to evaluate them."

*Dependent Variables.* I once again collected thought protocols, which were coded by two coders blind to the experimental conditions for the degree of narrative processing, using the same three items in experiment 1. The three items were averaged for each coder, and the two coders' average narrative scores were positively correlated ( $r = .56, p < .001$ ); therefore, the two coders' narrative scores were averaged to form one narrative processing score per participant ( $\alpha = .83$ ). These same two independent coders also completed the product focus and ad/brand by valence coding described in study 1. Interjudge reliability was 91% for source derogations (the negative ad thought category; see below). Disputes were resolved by discussion with the two coders and the author (blind to the experimental conditions). In this experiment, in addition to the three transportation items used in study 1, I added two additional items from the Green and Brock (2000) scale: "While viewing the ad, I had a vivid image of the shower" and "While viewing the ad, I had a vivid image of myself washing my hair" ( $\alpha = .86$  for the five-item transportation scale). I was able to add these two items to this experiment because all the participants were shown the ad encouraging mental simulation about product usage. Finally, I used the same four-item brand evaluation scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ) used in experiment 1.

<sup>1</sup>I have replicated the results found in experiment 2 in a third study where I measure individual differences in ad skepticism rather than manipulating ad skepticism.

*Manipulation Checks.* The same manipulation checks were used in this study as in experiment 2: two items for argument strength ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and two items for self-referencing ( $\alpha = .61$ ).

## Results

This study is a  $2 \times 2$  between-subjects design, crossing ad processing instructions (skeptical vs. control/narrative) with argument strength (strong vs. weak).

*Manipulation Checks.* As desired, participants do not report significantly different degrees of self-referencing across ad-processing-instruction conditions (skeptical = 52.86, control/narrative = 52.61;  $F(1, 94) < 1.0$ , NS); argument strength and the interaction of argument strength by ad-processing instructions also do not significantly affect self-referencing. This is important because I desire to reduce narrative transportation with my manipulation, not eliminate self-referencing. The argument strength manipulation check is not significant (strong = 53.02, weak = 47.52;  $F(1, 94) = 2.77, p = .10$ ), and there are no other significant effects on this measure ( $F$ 's(1, 94) < 1.72, NS). However, in a between-subjects pretest of the argument strength manipulation with 66 participants (also students at the same undergraduate introductory marketing course as the primary study participants), the argument strength manipulation check was significant (strong = 55.64, weak = 46.75;  $F(1, 62) = 5.42, p < .05$ ).

*Hypothesis 2A.* This hypothesis asserts that narrative self-referencing (which I expect only in the control/narrative condition) will lead to transportation. First, I want to ascertain that my manipulation results in more narrative processing for participants in the control/narrative condition compared to those in the ad-skepticism condition. The thought-coding results confirm this (skeptical = 1.49, control/narrative SR = 1.75;  $F(1, 94) = 4.20, p < .05$ ). (There is no significant effect of argument strength on narrative processing, nor any significant interactions.) In a direct test of my hypothesis, I find that the skepticism instructions attenuated transportation compared to the control/narrative condition (skeptical = 49.93, control/narrative SR = 58.54;  $F(1, 94) = 3.48, p < .05$ , one-tailed). As hypothesized, neither argument strength nor the interaction of argument strength by ad-processing instructions has a significant effect on transportation (both  $F$ 's(1, 94) < 1.43, NS). Finally, transportation is positively correlated with brand evaluations ( $r = .55, p < .001$ ). The more transported participants are by their thoughts, the better they like the fictitious shampoo brand.

*Hypothesis 2B.* This hypothesis asserts that narrative self-referencing results in a less critical evaluation of the brand being advertised. In this experiment, this hypothesis is supported by the proportion of negative ad-focused thoughts (source derogations). I find a significantly lower proportion of source derogations in the control/narrative condition compared to the ad-skepticism condition (skeptical = 0.37, con-

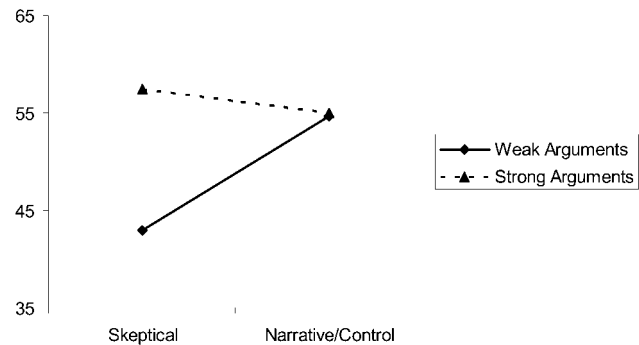
control/narrative SR = 0.21;  $F(1, 94) = 5.12, p < .05$ ). I do not find either a significant effect of argument strength or an interaction of argument strength and ad skepticism on source derogations. I also do not find any differences in the total number of thoughts across any of the four conditions. The proportion of source derogations is negatively correlated with brand evaluations ( $r = -.54, p < .001$ ). Here, critical thoughts about the ad lead to lower evaluations of the fictitious shampoo brand.

**Hypothesis 3.** This hypothesis examines whether there is a differential effect of argument strength on BE under the ad-skepticism condition versus the control/narrative condition. Argument strength has a significant effect (weak = 49.45, strong = 56.38;  $F(1, 94) = 4.29, p < .05$ ), while the argument strength main effect is not significant. The argument strength main effect is qualified by the expected significant interaction of the ad-processing instructions by argument strength ( $F(1, 94) = 3.78, p = .05$ ; see fig. 2). Preplanned contrast results are consistent with the idea that weak arguments will only harm persuasion when transportation is discouraged by ad skepticism: narrative self-referencing is not affected by weak arguments (weak = 54.60, strong = 55.06;  $F(1, 94) < 1.0, NS$ ), while analytical self-referencing (evoked by the ad-skepticism manipulation) appears to evoke high levels of elaboration on the ad's arguments (weak = 42.89, strong = 57.50;  $F(1, 94) = 8.11, p < .01$ ). Thus, increased transportation in the narrative self-referencing condition (demonstrated in my analysis of hypothesis 2A above) appears to result in an insensitivity to weak arguments, while increased criticism of the ad (hypothesis 2B above) in the ad-skepticism condition reverses this effect. Note that there is not a significant difference among the strong argument, the skepticism condition, and either of the two control conditions ( $F_s(1, 94) < 1.0, NS$ ). This indicates that the differential effect of transportation versus more analytical elaboration is concentrated in weak arguments.

### Discussion of Experiment 2 Results

In this study, I am able to manipulate ad skepticism, which leads to analytical self-referencing, even in response to an advertisement that encourages narrative self-referencing under baseline conditions. I again find that in response to an ad that asks participants to imagine themselves using a product, participants engage in narrative self-referencing where they are transported by their thoughts (hypothesis 2A) and distracted from evaluating the strength of the message (hypothesis 2B). Conversely, my ad-skepticism manipulation precludes narrative transportation, resulting in analytical self-referencing, where participants elaborate on the ad message and are persuaded only when ad arguments are strong (hypothesis 3). Note that the pattern of results is not consistent with a purely elaboration-based explanation: I do not find more persuasion with strong arguments for the ad-skepticism condition compared to the control/narrative condition. The level of persuasion is the same for highly skeptical

**FIGURE 2**  
BRAND EVALUATION INTERACTION RESULTS FOR  
EXPERIMENT 2 (0-100 SCALE)



individuals with strong arguments and for the control/narrative conditions, where transportation occurs, regardless of argument strength. One limitation of this study is the lack of measurement of affective responses, so I am unable to support the claim that one reason for the increased persuasion found in the control/narrative condition results from affect transfer.

## CONCLUSION

### General Discussion

In conclusion, narrative self-referencing leads to a favorable evaluation of the advertised product, regardless of argument strength, while analytical self-referencing produces high levels of elaboration on the ad's arguments, leading to favorable ad and brand evaluations only when the ad's message is strong. The contribution of the experiments in this article is to demonstrate that different types of self-referencing exist, with two different types of thought processes. On the one hand, participants who engage in mental simulation (including autobiographical memory recall) engage in narrative processing, which can transport participants, leading to persuasion from a reduced attention to weak arguments and a generation of positive affect (Green and Brock 2000). On the other hand, participants who do not think in story form engage in analytical self-referencing that serves to enhance elaboration, facilitating a critical evaluation of the strength of the ad's message.

The effect of narrative self-referencing can be moderated by factors, such as ad skepticism, that reduce the likelihood that ad viewers will be transported by the ad. I am able to replicate the differential effect of argument strength on persuasion found in experiment 1 under conditions of analytical self-referencing by manipulating ad skepticism in experiment 2. In both experiments, narrative self-referencing is able to transport consumers and distract them from weak arguments that, when processed analytically, harm persuasion. To date, it has been difficult to moderate the effects of narrative transportation in psychology studies of nonadvertising stories.

Experiment 2 thus represents a contribution to the general study of narrative transportation beyond the setting of self-referencing. By examining transportation in the context of advertising, I have found a medium where the power of the narrative to transport the reader can be offset by consumers' persuasion knowledge and skepticism about the advertisers' intentions.

### Directions for Future Research

The studies in this article reveal that the structure of self-referencing (narrative versus analytical) is important to persuasion. The two different styles of processing I have identified may also be useful toward understanding how other types of advertising persuade, beyond the advertisements that evoke self-referencing studied in this article. Many types of advertising, including drama ads (Deighton, Romer, and McQueen 1989; Stern 1994), transformational ads (Puto and Wells 1984), and slice-of-life ads, elicit narrative thought and are therefore likely to persuade via narrative transportation. There may be differences in the degree to which narrative thought is evoked and in its subsequent effects across different types of ads. Similarly, there may be differences in the degree of self-referencing evoked and in its effects. For example, West, Huber, and Min (2004) found equivalent preference enhancement for writing a story about oneself and a work of art compared to writing a story about another person and the artwork. Conversely, they found that writing a self-focused story enhanced choice to a greater extent than an other-focused story. Further investigation is warranted across a wide variety of ad types that may evoke narrative processing, but not necessarily self-referencing.

Additionally, it would be interesting for advertising practitioners to know whether ad viewers can be transported too far. Green and Brock (2000) do not find that increased "transportation" has the same negative effects on persuasion that increased elaboration does. However, their persuasion measures were directly relevant to the story being told. In advertising, the link between the persuasion object (i.e., the brand) and the story evoking narrative transportation is not as clear. For example, in the Sujan et al. (1993) autobiographical memory studies, a specific link to the brand had to be formed, because autobiographical memories without the link transported participants so far away from the ad that the ad was not persuasive with regard to the fictitious wine product. While this is less likely with instructions to imagine oneself actually using the product (my chosen narrative context), it may be quite likely with other types of ads that tell very compelling, and hence very transporting, stories. These stories may transport ad viewers into a fictitious world that is not well linked to the brand. Further investigation of when and how this may occur, and how to avoid it, would be interesting.

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