



Affective resistance to narrative persuasion

Markus Appel

Human-Computer-Media Institute, University of Würzburg, Oswald-Külpe-Weg 82, 97074 Würzburg, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Despite the popularity of narrative persuasion, little is known about the processes underlying *resistance* to stories. Affective resistance in terms of perceived inauthenticity and corniness is introduced. We show that – akin to counterarguing in non-narrative persuasion – stories may elicit affective resistance, leading to less story impact. Two pre-registered experiments were conducted. Experiment 1 demonstrated that narrative commercials (vs. non-narrative commercials) increase affective resistance, yielding an indirect negative effect on ad attitudes and intentions to share the ad online – while at the same time the stories impart a residual positive effect on the DVs. Presenting narrative commercials only, Experiment 2 showed that affective resistance mediated the influence of a manipulative intent forewarning (vs. control) on participants' attitudes and behavioral intentions. Narrative transportation was an additional mediator, counterarguing was unrelated to the experimental treatment. Practitioners are advised to abstain from stories that are likely perceived as corny and inauthentic by many consumers.

1. Introduction

Stories have been used to change attitudes and behavior throughout human history (Gottschall, 2012), and today's bestsellers on the practice of persuasion recommend storytelling as a key to getting one's message across (e.g., Biesenbach, 2018; Choy, 2017). The impact of stories has been examined in several applied settings (e.g., as a way to improving inter-group attitudes, Murrar & Brauer, 2019, or in health communication, De Graaf, Sanders, & Hoeken, 2016) and a substantial amount of theory and research focused on narrative impact in the realm of advertising (e.g., Brechman & Purvis, 2015; Deighton, Romer, & McQueen, 1989; Escalas, 2004; 2007; Wu, Xu, Li, & Yuan, 2020). Are stories irresistible? In the last 20 years empirical research on the persuasive effects of stories has increased substantially (Green, Bilandzic, Fitzgerald, & Paravati, 2020; Walter, Cody, & Ball-Rokeach, 2018; Van Laer, de Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014; 2019). Primary research and meta-analyses are usually guided by the assumption that narrative communication is more persuasive than non-narrative communication (Braddock & Dillard, 2016), but evidence for the superiority of stories, as compared to non-narrative media, is mixed (Shen, Sheer, & Li, 2015; Zebregs, van den Putte, Neijens, & de Graaf, 2015). Whereas a substantial amount of evidence is available on how stories can overcome resistance (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Ratcliff & Sun, 2020), processes underlying *resistance to stories* have received little attention. In

this paper we¹ introduce affective resistance to stories (in terms of perceived inauthenticity and corniness) as a novel process variable to complement extant theoretical approaches on narrative persuasion (e.g., Escalas, 2004; Green & Brock, 2002; Hamby, Brinberg, & Daniloski, 2017; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Two pre-registered experiments are presented. Experiment 1 compared responses to non-narrative versus narrative commercials of the same products and observed affective resistance along with indirect and residual downstream effects on attitudes towards the narrative ad and intentions to share the ad online (eWOM intentions). In Experiment 2, resistance to stories was examined under conditions of an increased (versus regular) resistance likelihood. We forewarned half of the recipients of an upcoming narrative that was meant to manipulate the audience and examined the contribution of affective resistance to the subsequent narrative commercials in explaining effects on attitudes towards the narrative ad, attitudes towards the advertised brand, purchase intentions, and eWOM intentions. Well-established narrative process measures transportation (Green & Brock, 2000) and counterarguing (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004) were assessed to delineate the incremental contribution of affective resistance.

1.1. The power of storytelling

A story or narrative (we use both terms interchangeably) is defined

E-mail address: markus.appel@uni-wuerzburg.de.

¹ This is a single-authored manuscript. For the sake of reading fluency, the more familiar plural pronoun is used.

as a representation of an event or a series of events (Abbott, 2002). Characteristic elements of narrative ads are the depictions of the actions and experiences of one or more protagonists that are causally related (Escalas, 1998). Research on the persuasive power of stories has attracted a considerable amount of attention in recent years (Green et al., 2020; for meta-analyses see Braddock & Dillard, 2016, Ratcliff & Sun, 2020; Shen et al., 2015; Van Laer et al., 2014; 2019). That said, the ability of media to convince recipients through a systematic processing of arguments was highlighted as the main means to elicit stable attitude change in much of the persuasion literature (Briñol et al., 2019). The mechanisms outlined for the processing of lists of arguments, however, do not readily capture the experience of stories and the mechanisms underlying the influence of stories (Escalas, 2007; Green & Brock, 2000; Hamby et al., 2017; Prentice & Gerrig, 1999; Slater & Rouner, 2002). The power of narratives has been attributed to the cognitive and emotional processes that occur while being immersed or absorbed in the story world (e.g., Green & Brock, 2002; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Whereas concepts such as transportation (Green & Brock, 2000) or narrative engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008) capture a holistic experience of having entered a story world, concepts such as identification (Cohen, 2001; De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012) focus on recipient's adoption of a main character's goals and plans. According to the Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model (E-ELM, Slater & Rouner, 2002), transportation and identification jointly predict the acceptance of the persuasive subtext of a story and therefore predict story effects on attitudes and behavior. Indeed, research evidence is in support of an association between post-exposure measures of transportation and identification on the one hand and story-consistent attitudes on the other (e.g., De Graaf et al., 2012; Isberner et al., 2019; Van Laer et al., 2014).

When it comes to the potential advantages of telling stories, theories on narrative persuasion usually contain two broad threads of argumentation which were recently summarized meta-analytically (Ratcliff & Sun, 2020). One thread pertains to the facilitation of processes that bring about attitude change, the other pertains to the inhibition of processes that impede attitude change. Both families of processes are typically considered to work in tandem. They are represented by or go along with transportation, identification, or both (Green & Brock, 2002; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). The first thread incorporates cognitive and emotional processes that facilitate attitude change. Such processes include the able fit of narratively structured information to human memory (e.g., Schank & Berman, 2002), vivid imagery of the events taking place (e.g., Green & Brock, 2002; Isberner et al., 2019), mental simulation and perspective taking (De Graaf et al., 2012; Oatley, 1999), and strong and dynamic emotional responses to stories and characters (e.g., Appel, Schreiner, Haffmans, & Richter, 2019; Nabi & Green, 2015). The second theoretical thread addresses the power of stories to reduce processes that lead to recipients' resistance to change when confronted with non-narrative attempts to persuade (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Theory suggests that stories can circumvent routine epistemic monitoring of incoming information at the early stages of processing communication (e.g., Isberner & Richter, 2014). Moreover, the narrative form is theorized to reduce the likelihood of more effortful cognitive activities to resist persuasive attempts (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Igartua & Vega Casanova, 2016; Slater & Rouner, 2002). A main mechanism of resisting persuasion is counterarguing, that is, "the generation of thoughts that dispute or are inconsistent with the persuasive argument" (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 180). It is difficult to argue against the lived experiences of a story character (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Stories appear to "get under the radar" of recipients' attempts at protecting themselves from persuasive information (Dal Cin et al., 2004).

Despite the extensive theory and research on the power of narrative persuasion, stories are not always more persuasive than other communication formats. A meta-analysis that compared narrative and non-narrative messages in a health communication context yielded

substantial heterogeneity and a modest overall effect size of $r = 0.06$ in favor of narratives (Shen et al., 2015). Another meta-analysis in the same field showed that statistical evidence-based messages were more persuasive than stories addressing the same topic with respect to beliefs ($r = -0.16$), and no significant difference emerged for attitudes and intentions (Zebregs et al., 2015). These results suggest that the limitations of narrative communication and possible resistance to narrative influence deserve further attention.

1.2. Stories and affective resistance: Predictions and study overview

We argue that in the case of narrative communication, resistance may not be (exclusively) due to a rejection of specific arguments – as expressed by the concept of counterarguing, but a rejection of the emotions displayed and imposed upon the recipients. At times, recipients may not feel the emotions that a screenwriter, or art director intended to elicit (e.g., sadness, when an older-aged person is alone on Christmas Eve), rather, participants' feelings are directed towards the movie or commercial itself (Tan, 1996; Appel et al., 2019a). Such unintended emotional responses are often negative. Research dealing with eudaimonic narratives support this notion. Stories that deal with human virtues, major life transitions, and life's meaning (eudaimonic narratives) have attracted a lot of scholarly attention in recent years (e.g., Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver et al., 2018). Responses to these stories have been described in terms of appreciation, inspiration, elevation, and other tender feelings (see also Menninghaus et al., 2019). There may, however, be story features, situations or individual predispositions that lead to negative responses (Oliver et al., 2021): Recipients may find these stories to be inauthentic and corny (perceived corniness: Appel, Slater, & Oliver, 2019; for the distinct but related concept of *kitsch* see Ortlieb & Carbon, 2019). In an experiment that focused on individual differences (Appel et al., 2019b) recipients with high scores on the dark triad of personality (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) were particularly likely to reject eudaimonic videos.² They felt that the eudaimonic stories were over-sentimental, contrived, inauthentic, and corny. This response, labelled as perceived corniness, could be a key indicator of affective resistance more generally.

In our first experiment we examined resistance to narrative advertising by comparing responses to non-narrative and narrative ads in terms of ad attitude or intentions to share the ad online (eWOM intentions). In this setting, there should be a negative *indirect* effect of the narrative format on recipient responses, mediated by affective resistance. This indirect effect notwithstanding, a residual opposite (i.e., positive) effect of the narrative format could occur. Both paths working in parallel, ad attitudes and eWOM intentions may not differ for narrative versus non-narrative ads. Our formal hypotheses focused on affective resistance to stories and were as follows (see also Fig. 1):

Hypothesis 1: Narrative ads should elicit more affective resistance than non-narrative ads.

Hypothesis 2: There should be a negative relationship between affective resistance and (a) the attitude towards the ad, and (b) eWOM intentions.

Hypothesis 3: Connecting Hypotheses 1 and 2, an indirect effect between the narrative vs. non-narrative ad condition on a) the attitude towards the ad and (b) eWOM intentions should be observed, mediated by affective resistance.

In our second experiment, we observed resistance to stories under conditions of high versus low resistance likelihood. To increase resistance likelihood, the mechanisms underlying narrative persuasion along

² The dark triad and related operationalizations are conceived as (measuring) personality traits within the non-clinical range of personality. As such, they are used in several fields of research including organizational behavior and consumer behavior (e.g., Blair, Gala, & Lunde, 2022; Soral, Pati, & Kakani, 2022).

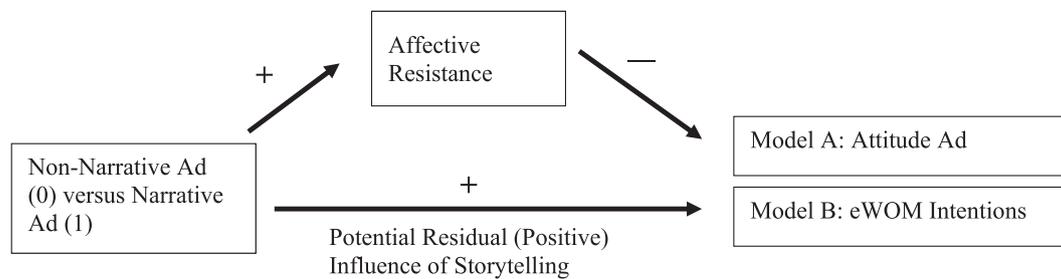


Fig. 1. Graphical Representation of the Model and the Hypotheses Underlying Experiment 1.

with the creator's supposedly manipulative intent were introduced before recipients were exposed to a narrative ad. Theory suggests that making salient manipulative intent and outlining the mechanisms underlying narrative persuasion reduces its effectiveness, but empirical research on forewarnings within the field of narrative persuasion is rather indirect. Some prior work focused on the related concept of perceived persuasive intent: In one study (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010) self-reported perceived persuasive intent was lower when participants were exposed to a narrative than to a non-narrative message. Moreover, correlations for the narrative conditions showed that perceived persuasive intent was positively associated with a cognitive measure of resistance.³ In contrast to what could be expected from theory (e.g., Slater & Rouner, 2002), perceived persuasive intent was also positively associated with identification and transportation in this study. No relationship with counterarguing was found, and perceived persuasive intent did not predict the dependent variable behavioral intentions (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010).

Our knowledge regarding the influence of forewarnings on the processing of stories and story-consistent attitudes and behavior is limited. Still, the available theory and initial results point at the detrimental influence of forewarnings within a narrative persuasion framework. Transportation is a likely mediator for this effect (Slater & Rouner, 2002; Wentzel, Tomczak, & Herrmann, 2010). As outlined above, counterarguing – the main mechanism signifying resistance to non-narrative persuasive messages – could play a role, but its applicability to the processing of stories remains an open question (Niederdepppe et al., 2012; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Importantly, we further assumed that affective resistance would serve as a mediator over and above the influence of process variables transportation and counterarguing. In our second experiment, we increased the breadth of dependent variables; in addition to attitude towards the ad and eWOM intentions, we assessed attitude towards the brand and purchase intentions (Fig. 2).

Hypothesis 4: We expected a negative effect of a forewarning about the manipulative intent and the supposed mechanisms underlying a narrative commercial on (a) attitudes towards the ad, (b) attitudes towards the brand, (c) purchase intentions, and (d) eWOM intentions.

Hypothesis 5: We expected that the negative effect of the forewarning on the DVs is mediated by recipients' experience of transportation (Hypotheses 5a – 5d).

Hypothesis 6: We expected that the negative effect of the forewarning on the DVs is mediated by recipients' counterarguing (Hypotheses 6a – 6d).

Hypothesis 7: We expected that the negative effect of the forewarning on the DVs is mediated by recipients' affective resistance (Hypotheses 7a – 7d).

³ Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010) used a cognitive measure of reactance for their analyses, e.g., "the show tried to force its opinions on me" (p. 36). They assessed anger as well but decided to discard this measure based on low validity of this measure in a narrative context.

The hypotheses and methods were pre-registered (see Method sections). The data, analysis codes, and supplementary materials (including the commercials used as stimuli) can be found online (<https://osf.io/fxwhe>). Both experiments were conducted in German, with German-language participants.

2. Experiment 1

2.1. Method

In an experimental study conducted online, participants were exposed to a narrative audiovisual ad or a non-narrative audiovisual ad for the same product. To increase generalizability, two pairs of ads were used, the advertised products were the *Audi A6* or the *iPad*. The commercials were presented by random assignment. This experiment was pre-registered (<https://aspredicted.org/59me7.pdf>).

2.1.1. Participants

The number of participants was determined a priori using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009). Our main hypotheses involved a comparison between the narrative and the non-narrative ad condition, and the correlation between affective resistance and the dependent variables. A Pearson correlation of $\rho = 0.20$, two-tailed, with alpha-error probability = 0.05, and beta-error probability = 0.20 (power = 0.80) requires 193 participants. A *t*-test with alpha-error probability = 0.05, and beta-error probability = 0.20 (power = 0.80) and a medium effect size of $d = 0.50$ requires a sample size of 200. Note that mediation analyses (Hypothesis 3) have substantially more power than tests of simple effects or associations (Kenny & Judd, 2014). Given the additional variance of the two different videos and the possibility of exclusions due to careless responding, our sample size goal was 280. The participants were recruited at the German language Crowdsourcing platform clickworker.de, they received 1€ reimbursement.

Of the 277 participants that completed the survey, 18 participants had to be excluded based on the pre-registered exclusion criteria. The control question that was hidden in the dependent variables section („Please answer 'fully agree'") was failed by seven participants, one person reported technical problems with the video streaming, two persons watched the video without sound, and an additional eight participants took less than two minutes to answer the survey, indicating that they merely clicked through the survey. The remaining sample consisted of 259 participants (123 female, one person indicating 'other') with an average age of 39.15 years ($SD = 12.20$, range between 19 and 71 years). Around half of the participants were employed (47.9%), 22.8% were self-employed, a minority of 14.3% were college or university students.

2.1.2. Procedure

After information on the study was provided on the first page of the survey, the participants gave their informed consent. Next, one of the ads was randomly assigned and presented, followed by the affective resistance measure and the dependent variables. Before the socio-demographic questions we asked the participants about technical problems and whether they had watched the video with sound. On the

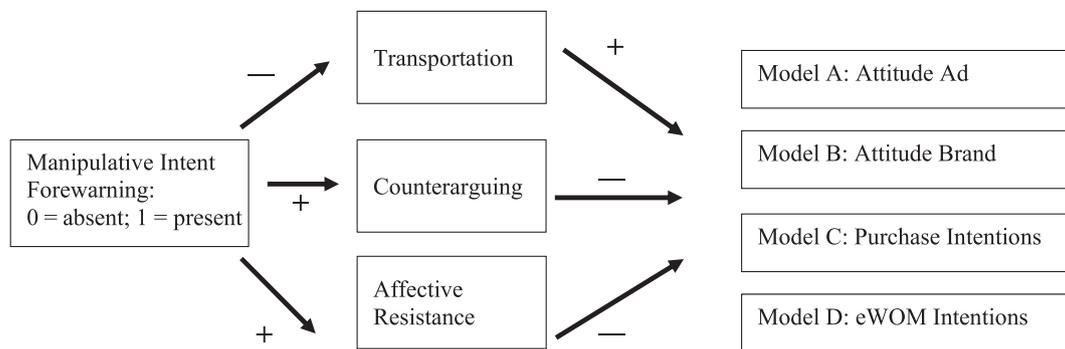


Fig. 2. Graphical Representation of the Model and the Hypotheses Underlying Experiment 2.

final page the participants were thanked and debriefed.

2.1.3. Stimuli

Our stimulus material consisted of two pairs of commercials for the Audi A6 model 2018 and the Apple iPad 2018 respectively. The Audi A6 non-narrative commercial (01:03 min in length) shows the automobile driving through a desert, using different angles, with intermittent wide and close shots and occasional split screen edits. No human is visible. The audio consists of an electronic song by Kingsley, Davies, and Hart. The Audi A6 narrative commercial (00:54 min in length) portrays a father figure and a male toddler. The boy refuses to say “auto” (“car” in German) when his father plays with a toy Mercedes-Benz and when both protagonists later drive in a Mercedes-Benz. The boy appears to be in a bad mood. The boy rejoices when he sees an Audi A6 through the window, saying “Audi”. In the iPad non-narrative commercial (00:55 min in length), the iPad is seen against a white background, with the hands of a human moving the iPad and demonstrating its functionalities, such as applications with the Apple pencil. The audio consists of a mid-tempo synthesizer song. The iPad narrative commercial (01:00 min in length) starts with a family driving in a car. Two early adolescent girls quarrel on the back seat and a father figure is giving them an iPad for distraction. They arrive at the grandfather’s house, it appears to be a few days or hours before Christmas Eve. Reminded of their late grandmother, the girls are shown engaging in a project with the iPad, using different functionalities such as applications with the Apple Pencil. It turns out, their project is a present to the grandfather, an audiovisual presentation played on the iPad, as an homage to their grandmother (the grandfather’s wife). The grandfather is moved to tears and expresses his gratitude.

2.1.4. Measures

Affective resistance. Six items measured affective resistance, operationalized as the perceived corniness and inauthenticity of the video. The participants’ responses to the video were assessed with six attributes (*silly, oversentimental, corny, cheesy, authentic* [reverse-scored], and *genuine* [reverse-scored]) based on the English-language version by Appel and colleagues (2019b). The items were measured with a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much* (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.89$).

Attitude towards the ad. This variable was measured with a semantic differential following Cui and Yang (2009). It consisted of five items (e.g., *dislikable – likable; unattractive – attractive*, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.95$) and a seven-point scale was provided ranging from 1 to 7.

eWOM intentions. The extent to which participants considered disseminating the video on social media was assessed with the help of three items (e.g., “I would consider sharing this video on Facebook or Instagram”). We adapted these items from prior research (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017). The items were accompanied by a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.85$).

2.2. Results

An ANOVA was conducted to examine the influence of the narrative format on participants’ affective resistance. As expected, participants in the narrative condition perceived stronger affective resistance than participants in the non-narrative condition, $F(1, 255) = 25.58, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.091$. This applies to both products, the Audi A6 (non-narrative: $M = 2.88; SD = 1.12$; narrative: $M = 3.87, SD = 1.37$), as well as the iPad (non-narrative: $M = 2.80; SD = 1.21$; narrative: $M = 3.42, SD = 1.42$, see Fig. 3). We neither observed a main effect of the product, $F(1, 255) = 2.67, p = .104, \eta_p^2 = 0.010$, nor an interaction between product and format, $F(1, 255) = 1.40, p = .238, \eta_p^2 = 0.005$. Thus, we found conclusive support for Hypothesis 1, suggesting that narrative ads elicited stronger affective resistance than non-narrative ads. We had not expected a total effect of the narrative format on ad attitudes or eWOM intentions, and indeed, there was none. All main effects and interactions were not significantly different from zero (see Supplement S1).

In line with Hypothesis 2, zero-order correlations show that affective resistance was strongly correlated with attitude towards the ad $r(257) = -0.618, p < .001$ and eWOM intentions, $r(257) = -0.457, p < .001$. Attitude towards the ad and eWOM intentions were highly related as well, $r(257) = 0.536, p < .001$.

We assumed that the narrative form yielded an indirect effect, more negative ad attitudes and less eWOM intentions should be observed – mediated by affective resistance. Relatedly, we examined the possibility of a residual effect (a direct effect in mediation analysis terms, Hayes, 2018) of the narrative format that was positive, once affective resistance was controlled for. We used PROCESS version 3.5 (Hayes, 2018) for our mediation analyses, model 4, with default settings. Our first model included the experimental factor (non-narrative = 0; narrative = 1) as the predictor, affective resistance as the mediator, and attitude towards the ad as the DV. As expected in Hypothesis 3a, a negative indirect effect emerged, effect estimate = $-0.67, SE = 0.15, 95\%CI[-0.97; -0.40]$. Moreover, we found a complementary positive direct effect of the narrative ad format, effect estimate = $0.61, SE = 0.16, 95\%CI[0.28; 0.93]$. Thus, the narrative ad format elicited two effects, that in sum ruled out each other: It increased affective resistance yielding a more negative ad attitude and it unleashed the well-known residual power of story format (e.g., Escalas, 2004; Green & Brock, 2000) contributing to a more positive ad attitude. The same pattern of results was observed for eWOM intentions as our second DV. As expected in Hypothesis 3b, a negative indirect effect was observed, effect estimate = $-0.60, SE = 0.14, 95\%CI[-0.91; -0.34]$. A complementary positive direct effect of the narrative ad format amounted to effect estimate = $0.91, SE = 0.21, 95\%CI[0.50; 1.32]$.

2.3. Discussion

We successfully showed that narrative ads lead to higher affective resistance than non-narrative ads for the same product. This translates to

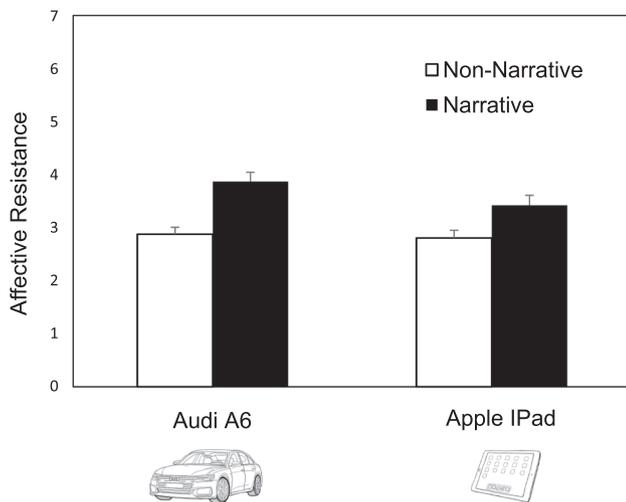


Fig. 3. Affective Resistance as a Function of Ad Type (non-narrative vs. narrative) and Advertised Product (Audi A6, Apple iPad, Experiment 1).

more negative ad attitudes and lower scores in eWOM intentions, as indicated by significant indirect effects. When the negative effect on affective resistance was statistically controlled, the narratives yielded more positive ad attitudes and higher scores in eWOM intentions (direct effect). These effects were observed similarly for two brands and commercials that were part of Audi's and Apple's marketing campaigns. In this experiment, affective resistance was the only process measure included. Experiment 2 was meant to examine alternative, well-established processes. Affective resistance should explain variance over and above counterarguing and narrative transportation in a setting in which resistance to stories was likely.

3. Experiment 2

Experiment 2 involved narrative commercials only, and our focus was on processes under low versus high resistance likelihood. Before showing a narrative commercial, we presented information that emphasized the artistic value of the commercials (control) or the persuasive and emotionally manipulative character of the commercials (heightened resistance likelihood). Given that we were interested in the incremental contribution of our affective resistance measure beyond counterarguing and transportation, the mediators were examined in parallel. The paths underlying Hypotheses 4 to 7 were depicted in Fig. 2. To increase generalizability, two ads were used (for *MetLife* insurance or *Jollibee* fast food). Based on the focus on these lesser-known brands, we were able to examine attitudes towards the brand and purchase intentions, in addition to Experiment 1's DVs attitude towards the ad and eWOM intentions. This experiment was pre-registered (<https://asprected.org/ny59b.pdf>).

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

The number of participants was determined a priori using G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner & Lang, 2009). Our main hypotheses were based on a comparison between two persuasive intent conditions. A *t*-test with alpha-error probability = 0.05, and beta-error probability = 0.20 (power = 0.80) and a medium effect size of $d = 0.50$ requires a sample size of 128. Given the additional variance of the two different videos, our sample size goal was 256 participants. The minimum sample size was determined to be 128. The data was not analyzed before data collection was completed.

The survey was advertised on several social media platforms. All

participants could take part in a lottery of $5 \times 10\text{€}$ as prizes. Potential participants were informed that the survey needed to be answered on a PC, laptop, or tablet computer. Of the 284 participants that completed the survey, 66 participants had to be excluded based on the pre-registered exclusion criteria. More specifically, two participants failed the instruction to summarize the text that introduced the ads (see below), 18 participants failed a control question that was hidden in the dependent variables section („Please answer ‘fully agree’”), eleven had technical problems with the video or their internet connection (e.g., the video was a stop-and-go), and six participants reported to have watched the video without sound. An additional 29 participants took more than 20 min to answer the survey, which, according to a priori considerations, indicated that they did not focus entirely on the survey. The remaining sample consisted of 218 participants (141 female, one person indicating ‘other’) with an average age of 28.19 years ($SD = 9.87$, range between 18 and 76 years). Half of the participants ($n = 109$) were college or university students, a large part of the remaining half worked full-time ($n = 90$).

3.1.2. Procedure

After information on the study was provided on the first page of the survey, the participants gave their informed consent for the study. The experimental manipulation of resistance likelihood (random assignment of one of the two conditions, see below) followed on the subsequent page. Next, one of the two narrative ads was presented with random assignment. The mediators and dependent variables followed. On the next page the manipulation check items were presented. After a subsequent page on demographics, questions on prior exposure to the ad and knowledge of the brand ensued. We further asked the participants about technical problems and whether they had watched the video with sound. On the final page the participants were thanked and debriefed. Those interested in the lottery were guided to a different survey to assure anonymity.

3.1.3. Narrative ads

Two ads were chosen that met two criteria. First, the ad needed to incorporate a complete story with exposition, protagonists, goals, and conflict (Abbott, 2002; Escalas, 1998). Second, the brand it advertised needed to be largely unfamiliar among the recipients, in order to prevent the overarching influence of prior preferences on attitudes towards the brand and purchase intentions. The first ad (3:18 min) was a commercial by the insurance company *MetLife* Honk Kong. It tells the story of a father who takes care of his primary school-aged daughter. The clip starts with a letter the daughter has written about her father. He is described as her superhero, but also as a liar. The video shows how the father tries to hide his unemployment while trying to find a job and to make ends meet for the little family.

The second ad (2:53 min) was a commercial for the Philippine fast food chain *Jollibee*. The story is set in the late 70s and starts with a high school age boy taking interest in a same aged girl. He tries to win her heart with hamburgers as little gifts and post-it messages attached to the burgers. The girl, however, starts dating another boy (a basketball player), but she is unhappy. Fast forward to the present. During a high-school reunion it becomes clear that the boy and the girl got married and live a happy life.

The *MetLife* ad had been seen by 15 participants before (14.0% of the 107 participants who saw this ad by random assignment), the *Jollibee* ad had been seen by 1 participant before (0.9% of the 111 participants who saw this ad by random assignment). Ten participants (9.3%) indicated that they knew the *MetLife* brand prior to the study, four participants (3.6%) knew the *Jollibee* brand. We considered neither to be fatal to the treatment and therefore retained these participants in the sample.

3.1.4. Manipulation of resistance likelihood

One out of two texts was presented by random assignment. In the manipulative intent forewarning condition ($n = 101$), the text consisted

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations of the continuous variables (Experiment 2).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) Transportation	4.93	1.43						
(2) Counterarguing	2.18	0.99	−0.343***					
(3) Affective Resistance	4.08	1.43	−0.539***	0.448***				
(4) Attitude towards the ad	5.05	1.44	0.720***	−0.423***	−0.628***			
(5) Attitude towards the brand	4.43	1.01	0.389***	−0.305***	−0.450***	0.510***		
(6) Purchase intentions	3.65	1.53	0.295***	−0.101	−0.241***	0.351***	0.660***	
(7) Social media sharing intentions	2.65	1.70	0.485***	−0.234***	−0.429***	0.419***	0.183**	0.240***

Notes. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

of a short interview sequence in which a ‘PR manager’ explains that he intended to manipulate recipients by evoking strong emotions and positive feelings that could be transferred to the focal brand. In the control condition ($n = 117$), a text of similar length and style was presented that consisted of a short interview sequence in which the supposed director explains that he intended to immerse and move recipients (Supplement S2). Participants were asked to briefly summarize the interview.

3.1.5. Mediating variables

Transportation. We used the Transportation Scale-Short Form (Appel, Gnambs, Richter, & Green, 2015) to measure participants’ experience of being transported into the narrative. The scale consisted of five items (including one item adapted to the specific main character of the story). The items (e.g., “The narrative affected me emotionally”) were accompanied with a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much* (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.88$).

Counterarguing. Four items assessed the extent to which participants generated thoughts that contrasted what was presented in the ad (Moyer-Gusé, 2007, German language adaptation by Krause & Appel, 2020), for example: “While watching the video, I sometimes found myself thinking of ways I disagreed with what was being presented”. The items employed a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.83$).

Affective resistance. The same six-item measure as in Experiment 1 was used (7-point scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.88$).

3.1.6. Dependent variables

Attitude towards the ad and attitude towards the brand. Five items assessed participants’ attitude towards the brand based on a semantic differential by Cui and Yang (2009) (e.g., *worthless – valuable*; *of poor quality – of good quality*, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.87$). Like in Experiment 1, five items assessed attitude towards the ad (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.89$).⁴ A seven-point scale was provided between the anchors ranging from 1 to 7.

Purchase intentions. We measured purchase intentions with three items loosely based on Cui and Yang (2009). The items were phrased to match the service advertised (insurance, fast food restaurant, e.g., “I would consider getting insurance from MetLife”, “I would consider eating at Jollibee’s”). A 7-point scale was provided ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.91$).

EWOM intentions. The same three items as in Experiment 1 were used (7-point scale, 1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.83$). The zero-order associations between all mediators and dependent variables are shown in Table 1.

3.1.7. Manipulation check

After the mediators and dependent variables were presented, three items asked about the producer’s perceived intention underlying the video production, ranging from ‘touching the audience’ to ‘emotional

⁴ One additional item was excluded because it reduced the reliability of the scale.

manipulation in order to develop a better brand image’ (e.g., “He wanted to develop a positive brand image by means of emotional manipulation”). A 7-point scale was applied (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.74$).

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Manipulation check and test for interaction effects of the videos

We first examined whether differences between the perceived intentions, our manipulation check, matched the experimental conditions. As expected, participants perceived the production of the video to be more strongly motivated by commercial intentions in the manipulative intent condition ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.01$) than in the control condition ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.64$), $F(1, 214) = 81.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.275$. This was equally the case for both videos (MetLife, Jollibee), as this difference was not qualified by an interaction, $F(1, 214) = 1.58$, $p = .211$, $\eta^2_p = 0.007$. Likewise, potential interactions between the persuasive intent treatment and the video condition were all negligible in size regarding the mediators, all $F_s < 1$, $p_s > 0.450$, $\eta^2_p < 0.003$, and the dependent variables $F_s < 1.3$, $p_s > 0.250$, $\eta^2_p < 0.006$. Thus, data for both videos were collapsed for the main analyses.

3.2.2. Main analyses

In line with our predictions (Hypotheses 4a-4d), the manipulative intent forewarning led to more negative attitudes towards the ad ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.45$), as compared to the control group, $M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.41$, $t(216) = 2.00$, $p = .047$, $d = 0.27$. Although the descriptives followed the predictions, the manipulative intent forewarning did not significantly lower attitudes towards the brand, $M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.90$ versus $M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.09$, $t_W(215.6) = 1.67$, $p = .097$, $d = 0.23$. Likewise, the manipulative intent introduction did not significantly reduce the intention to share the video online ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.56$) in comparison to the control group, $M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.79$, $t(216) = 1.74$, $p = .083$, $d = 0.23$. Purchase intentions did not systematically vary with manipulative intent made salient, $M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.42$ versus $M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.62$, $t(216) = 0.13$, $p = .896$, $d = 0.02$. Thus, support for Hypothesis 4 was mixed.

We used PROCESS version 3.5 (Hayes, 2018) for our mediation analyses, with default settings and the matrix command to specify models with three parallel mediators. Descriptive statistics and Cohen’s d s for the main effects of the experimental factor on the mediators are further reported. The path coefficients, standard errors, and p -values are shown in Fig. 4a-4d.

As expected, participants who were warned about the manipulative intent underlying the video reported lower transportation scores ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.48$) than participants in the control condition, $M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.34$, $p = .007$, $d = 0.36$. Importantly, the former group responded with higher affective resistance ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.45$) than the latter, $M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.40$, $p = .013$, $d = 0.34$. No differences, however, were found for counterarguing ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 0.90$; $M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.06$, $p = .316$, $d = 0.13$).

As shown in Fig. 4a, all three mediating variables were associated with the attitude towards the ad in the expected directions. We found a significant indirect effect of the experimental treatment on attitude

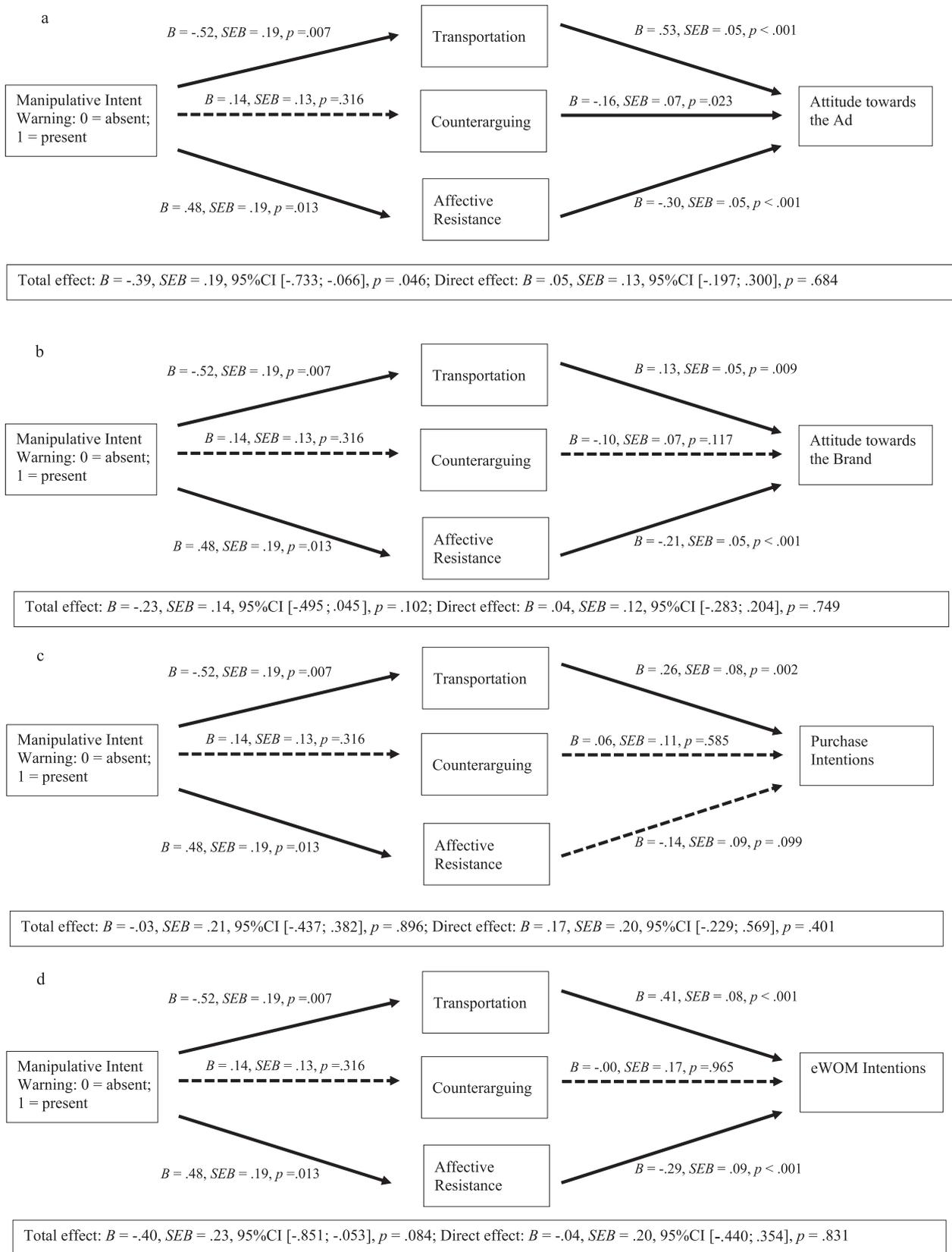


Fig. 4. Main results of the parallel mediator models (Experiment 2).

towards the ad, mediated by transportation, effect estimate = -0.27 , $SE = 0.11$, 95 %CI[-0.50 ; -0.07]. We further found a significant indirect effect of the treatment on this dependent variable, mediated by affective resistance, effect estimate = -0.15 , $SE = 0.06$, 95 %CI[-0.28 ; -0.03]. Given the missing link between the experimental treatment and counterarguing, this variable did not serve as a mediator (see Supplement S3 for details on all indirect effects).

Transportation and affective resistance predicted attitudes towards the brand in our parallel mediator model whereas counterarguing was unrelated (Fig. 4b). We found a significant indirect effect of the manipulative intent forwarning on attitude towards the brand with both transportation, effect estimate = -0.07 , $SE = 0.04$, 95 %CI[-0.16 ; -0.01], and affective resistance as mediators, effect estimate = -0.10 , $SE = 0.05$, 95 %CI[-0.21 ; -0.02]. Again, counterarguing did not serve as a mediator.

Regarding purchase intentions, transportation was the only significant predictor among the three mediating variables (Fig. 4c), and only for transportation as a mediator an indirect effect of the experimental treatment on this dependent variable was found, effect estimate = -0.14 , $SE = 0.07$, 95 %CI[-0.31 ; -0.02].

The intention to share the video on social media was associated with transportation and affective resistance but it was unrelated to counterarguing (Fig. 4d). A significant indirect effect of manipulative intent on this dependent variable was observed for the mediating variables transportation, effect estimate = -0.21 , $SE = 0.09$, 95 %CI[-0.40 ; -0.06], and affective resistance, effect estimate = -0.14 , $SE = 0.08$, 95 %CI[-0.31 ; -0.02]. Like for the other dependent variables, counterarguing did not serve as a mediator.

3.3. Discussion

We showed that under circumstances in which we deemed resistance to a narrative persuasive attempt to be rather likely (manipulative intent high) recipients' transportation was reduced. Lower transportation, in turn, led to lower attitudes towards a narrative ad, attitudes towards the advertised brand, purchase intentions, and eWOM intentions. Counterarguing was unrelated to the experimental treatment. Importantly, the manipulative intent forwarning increased recipients' affective resistance. This variable mediated the impact of the experimental treatment on persuasive effects for three of the four persuasion indicators. This influence was observed over and above the influence of transportation in our parallel mediation model, demonstrating the incremental contribution of this variable.

4. General discussion

4.1. Affective resistance to stories

The practice of telling stories to persuade has a long history, and the prevalence of persuasive storytelling appears to have increased with the internet and the rise of social networking sites. Communication technologies that are projected to grow in the next years, such as virtual reality or companion robots, readily incorporate narrative content (e.g., Appel, Lugrin, Kühle, & Heindl, 2021; Wiederhold, 2018).

Describing and explaining resistance to persuasion is arguably one of the greatest challenges to theory and research on narrative persuasion. Counterarguing – a major form of resistance to non-narrative appeals – may not fit the processing of stories (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Affective resistance, introduced as the emotional reaction of perceived inauthenticity and corniness, had been conceived as a response to eudaimonic stories in prior research (Appel et al., 2019b), particularly among individuals for whom moral virtues are of little relevance. We hypothesized and showed in two experiments that this variable describes a relevant aspect of responding to narrative ads. The concept of affective resistance adds to and extends current theories of narrative processing and effects such as the E-ELM (Slater & Rouner,

2002) which had focused on counterarguing as a major mechanism of resistance to change. Moreover, we assume that the concept of affective resistance could play a substantial role in research outside the field of narrative persuasion. Given the popularity of emotionalizing strategies in many fields of communication (e.g., political communication: Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017; science communication: Flemming, Cress, Kimmig, Brandt, & Kimmerle, 2018), the concept of affective resistance could contribute to a broad range of research questions in marketing, communication science, and psychology. Our work is a first step at delineating antecedent variables (message, recipient, situation, and related interactions), correlates, and consequences of this response. Practitioners are advised to consider affective resistance as a detrimental response to narrative communication. We recommend narrative approaches to persuasion that abstain from storylines that are likely perceived as corny and inauthentic by many consumers.

4.2. Limitations and directions for future research

Despite the contribution of our work, limitations need to be noted. Like in much of the research on narrative persuasion, affective resistance (as well as transportation and counterarguing) was examined after exposure and participants had to assess their experience for the commercial as a whole. Story experience is dynamic, though. Consider the Budweiser Super Bowl 2022 commercial *A Clydesdale Journey*, for example. A Clydesdale is seen trying to jump over a barbed-wire fence, but falls. The horse is severely injured, much to the chagrin of a little dog. In the last ten seconds of the commercial it becomes clear that the horse survived, galloping forcefully along a sandy street, with the little dog following enthusiastically. The narrative arc implies a dynamic change of emotional responses (Appel et al., 2019a), more specifically a pronounced shift from sadness to happiness (relief). Prior research showed that the allocation of attention (using a secondary task paradigm: Bezdek & Gerrig, 2017) and event-congruent emotional responses to a story (using facial response analysis: Appel et al., 2019a) vary as a function of the story events taking place. We assume that the processes underlying resistance to change fluctuate during reception as well, and their effect on attitudes may vary with the corresponding story events. Perceiving a story to be inauthentic and corny should have a larger negative impact on attitudes when this response occurs during a scene of the narrative in which the main message is transferred (e.g., the protagonist commits to a brand and solves the conflict) as compared to a scene less relevant to the main message. On a related note, counterarguing was measured with a self-report scale (Moyer-Gusé, 2007). Alternative methodologies, such as thought listing techniques, could be used to provide a more nuanced assessment (Niederdeppe et al., 2012).

In Experiment 2, we increased the likelihood of resisting the narrative appeal by providing a short text in which a supposed PR manager clarifies that his manipulative intention had been to establish a strong brand image by carrying away the recipient emotionally. In the control condition, a short text was provided in which a supposed director clarifies that his intention had been to touch and move the audience and he tells a story about the emotions during the shooting of the film. The control text was deliberately created in this way to keep constant the notion of touching the recipients emotionally, but rather than emphasizing the pragmatic function (developing a brand image through emotional manipulation) it was described that the production team was moved as well. Note that mentioning the intention of touching and moving the audience in both introductions (experimental and control) may have affected recipients' expectations to be touched and moved (Tan, 1996; Tiede & Appel, 2020).

We observed three mediating variables to examine responses under conditions of high resistance likelihood. Future research could extend this list to state anger which had served – jointly with counterarguing – as an indicator of resistance for non-narrative stimuli, but its applicability to narrative communication is yet unclear (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). Likewise, trait measures that address individual differences in the

tendency to respond with resistance, such as the Hong Psychological Reactance Scale (Hong & Faedda, 1996), may complement insights gained on individual difference measures meant to predict processes that facilitate narrative persuasion (e.g., need for affect, Appel & Richter, 2010, or narrative engageability, Bilandzic, Sukalla, Schnell, Hastall, & Busselle, 2019).

The hypotheses were tested with the help of commercials for two different brands in each experiment. The results hold for both of these commercials and we assume that the insights gained translate to other commercials and brands. On a related note, we acknowledge that the narrative ads used (particularly those in Experiment 2) were remarkably long (i.e., around three minutes). Video sharing websites such as YouTube allow the presentation of longer commercials. Many longer ads include a narrative storyline and are meant to initiate sharing among consumers (see Akpınar & Berger, 2017). Indeed, commercials on YouTube that range between 1.2 and 1.7 min are most likely to be shared (Tellis et al., 2019). We assume that the results reported will replicate across other brands, other narrative ads, and commercials with a more typical 20–30 s length. That said, future research is encouraged to test affective resistance to narrative persuasion in new settings using a range of different stimuli.

An important challenge to scholars and practitioners interested in narrative persuasion is to identify ad elements that are more or less likely to elicit affective resistance in terms of perceived corniness and inauthenticity. These factors could be the general theme of the story (e.g., romance; parent-child interactions), the verisimilitude of the conflict and resolution (Deighton et al., 1989) or the use of music (Breves, Herget, & Schramm, 2020). Previous meta-analyses on the comparison between narrative and non-narrative persuasive messages (Shen et al., 2015; Zebregs et al., 2015) yielded limited evidence for stronger effects of narrative persuasive attempts. Identifying factors that contribute to affective resistance could be key to increasing the persuasive power of narratives.

5. Conclusion

Storytelling is a main means of persuasion, but the processes underlying recipients' and consumers' resistance to stories have remained largely unexplored. In two pre-registered experiments we showed that affective resistance, introduced as the perception of corniness and inauthenticity, is a process that can impair the persuasive effect of stories. Given the proliferation of emotional appeals in persuasive communication, the novel concept of affective resistance can contribute substantially to future basic and applied research as well as to persuasion practice.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Markus Appel: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data, analysis codes, and supplementary materials are provided online (https://osf.io/fxwhe/?view_only=b7f833073e084e9396c272f1db016137)

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Markus Appel, Dr. phil (University of Cologne, Germany) is a psychologist and professor of Media Communication at the University of Würzburg, Germany. Much of his research deals with the processing and effects of narrative communication.