

Original Research Article

Factors Influencing Narrative Transportation in Short Film Public Service Announcements on Social Media: An Integrated Structural Model

Wei Jinxi, Hasrul Hashim & Mohd Nor Shahizan Ali*

Faculty of Social Science & humanities, The National University of Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: shahizan@ukm.edu.my

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Abstract: Short film public service announcements (PSAs) are an increasingly prominent medium of public discourse on social media. However, research analysing how short film PSAs cultivate immersion in narrative experiences is still scarce. This research examines narrative transportation in the context of short film PSAs by bringing together features of the narrative, the audience, and the social media platform in a holistic model. A Solomon four-group experiment was conducted to expose participants to the short film PSA stimuli, and hypothesized relationships were examined with partial least squares structural equation modeling. These findings reveal that attention, identifiable characters, and the interaction of bullet screen among them significantly positively influence narrative transportation. By contrast, none of several factors typically linked with narrative persuasion, such as complete storyline, drama, verisimilitude, familiarity, transportability and likes, has any significant direct effect when tested in the integrated model. The results indicate that narrative transportation in short form public service storytelling is most strongly influenced by character-focused narrative cues, cognitive processing while viewing, and interactive platform affordances. The research extends the narrative transportation literature to the context of short film PSA on social media and offers practical recommendations for the development and distribution of digital public service communication.

Keywords Narrative transportation; short film public service announcements; identifiable characters, audience attention, bullet screen interaction, social media storytelling

Introduction

The swift growth of digital media has altered the nature of public discussion, especially in terms of how social problems are constructed, spread, and felt among audiences (Gillespie et al., 2014; Sivakumaran, 2023). Governments and civic groups are increasingly asked to deal with multifaceted, emotionally charged problems like family disputes, mental illness, or social obligation that are not amenable to simple informational messaging. As a result, narrative-based communication is once again attracting attention because tales can trigger empathy, maintain attention, and lower resistances better than rational argumentative forms (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013; Braddock & Dillard, 2016). Among this literature, narrative transportation remains one of the most potent explanatory processes (Green, 2021; Van Laer et al., 2014), involving an immersion experience into a story world. Recent reviews also indicate that the role of transportation continues to be prominent in the explanations for narrative effects in new media environments (Green & Appel, 2024; Watts, 2023).

Short film PSAs have been developed as a unique narrative form on media platforms in the past decade. Based on all of the above, short film PSAs do not represent a homogenized type of PSA - as a form, it is rooted in cinematic storytelling with the means and elements of character building, dramatic conflict, visual realism, and emotional journey to deliver social themes in a short pack [6,7] (Dennis et al., 2021; Chen, 2022). Furthermore, emerging evidence affirms that narrative transportation can also occur in short-form narrative

video despite its temporal limitation (Cao et al., 2021). This transformation is in line with the general trend of more aesthetic and affective public communication in digital settings. Yet, although transportation theory has been extensively applied in advertising (Green, 2021; Boukes & LaMarre, 2021), entertainment-education (see Green, 2021), and corporate storytelling (Green, 2021) – which is especially popular among small segments of literature focusing on public service narratives in short form, platform-embedded (e.g. Davies et al., 2017) – the specific workings of transportation in these types of narratives were still underdetermined. The current literature usually points to narrative-level survival factors of transportation, such as plot coherence, emotional intensity or character-involvement (Van Laer et al., 2014; Green, 2021). Simultaneously, it has been observed that certain characteristics at the level of the viewers, such as attentional focus and an individual's tendency to be immersed in media experiences, also impact transportation (Bilandzic et al., 2019; Bezdek & Gerrig, 2017). But it adds narratives layer in social media, that further shaped by platform affordances. Interactive features, engagement metrics visible to all participants, and real-time overlays could influence cognitive and attentional processes during media consumption (Sundar et al., 2015; Ma, 2024). Consequently, transportation in short film PSAs circulating in social media may not be entirely attributable to narrative quality and audience predisposition.

Against this background, our study theorizes and empirically examines an integrated structural model to predict narrative transportation in short film public service announcements (PSAs) on a social networking site. The model includes three sets of predictors: short film PSA characteristics (complete storyline, drama, verisimilitude, identifiable characters), audience characteristics (familiarity, attention, transportability), and social media characteristics (likes, bullet screen). Employing PLS-SEM analysis to estimate these predictors simultaneously, the study differentiates between simple bivariate associations and the unique explanatory ability of the predictors, i.e., which of the predictors had the most powerful influence in a multivariate setting (Hair et al., 2019).

This integrative perspective addresses two recenter limitations in narrative persuasion research. First, to our knowledge, the specific narrative genre of short form public service storytelling on social media has not been studied. Few research, however, integrate narrative, audience and platform dynamics in one analytical framework. By bringing transportation into this complex system, the current study advances theoretical understanding of immersive effects in today's digital public communication.

Instead of considering that all narratively rich features or audience characteristics facilitate immersion, this study investigates which of these features has the highest practical relevance for predicting transportation. In so doing, it presents an enhanced theoretical formulation of narrative transportation in short film PSAs and offers insight into the framework in which immersion is most likely to take place in social media.

Narrative Transportation in Short Film PSAs

Narrative transportation is a unified state of mind or body in which an individual's cognitive attention, emotional involvement, and mental imagery are focused on the narrative world (Green, 2021; Van Laer et al., 2014). Transportation is a more complex construct than simply liking or agreeing with a message, but represents a temporary mental shift toward story events and story characters. In the domain of persuasion, this media-based state lowers contradicting thoughts and enhances receptivity to narrative-consistent propositions (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013; Braddock & Dillard, 2016).

A majority of the transportation literature has focused on long-form narratives (e.g., novels, films, and advertising narratives) (Green, 2021; Boukes & LaMarre, 2021). An emerging strand of research has started to adapt the principles of transportation theory to visual and digital narratives, underlining the salience of visual narrative cues for the immersion effect (Nikulina et al., 2024). Nevertheless, short film public service announcements (PSAs) are a form of narrative that is truncated in terms of structure. Their time is limited and yet they try to tell a full dramatic story in social media consumption environment of distracted viewing. This leads to an important question: Are the conventional antecedents of transportation in short form public service announcement storytelling alike?

In doing so, the current article informs narrative transportation research in short film PSAs as a result of three converging realms: narrative, audience, and platform. The conceptual model from above is the integrated framework in Figure 1.

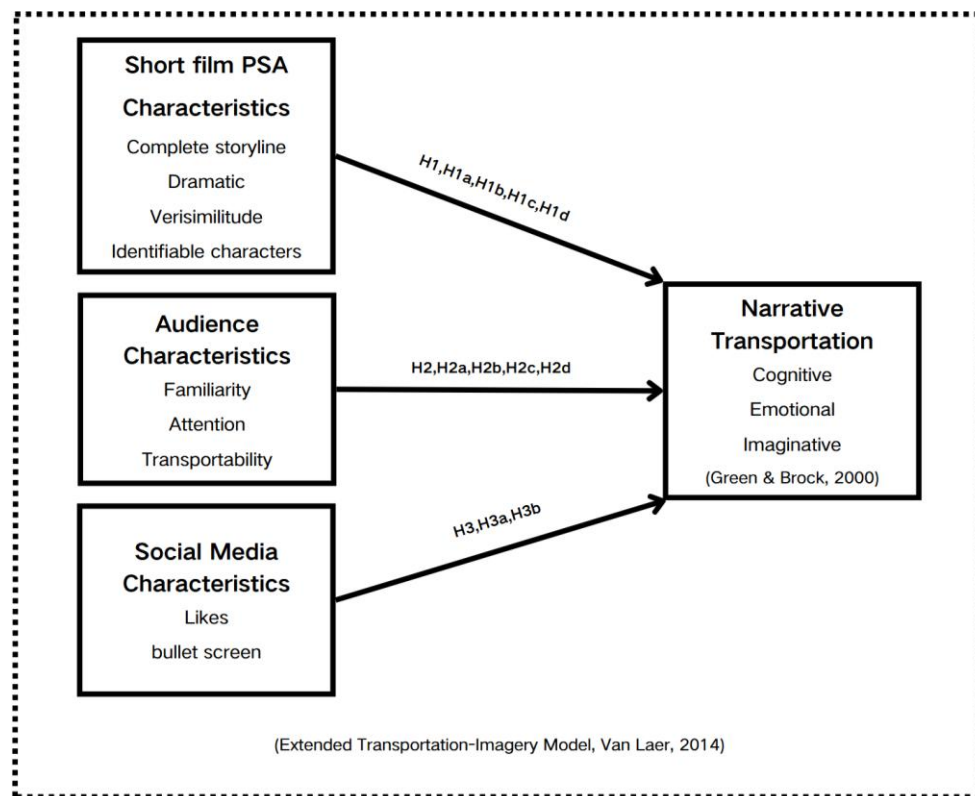


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of factors influencing narrative transportation in short film PSA on social media

Short Film PSA Characteristics

Narrative persuasion research has a long tradition of emphasizing story structures, dramatic tension, realism, and character development as key elements that lead to narrative immersion (Van Laer et al., 2014; Green, 2021). These components are anticipated to serve as psychological gateways in cinematic storytelling to bring viewers into the narrative world.

Complete story is experienced as having a sense of coherence and closure. Consistent narratives make it easier for viewers to trace causal chains, which should lead to greater immersion (Green, 2021). Drama, emotional intensity and progression of conflict, which frequently correlates with prolonged involvement. Verisimilitude refers to perceived plausibility within the narrative world; believable stories are more likely to be accepted and less likely to trigger resistance (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013).

Identifiability of the characters measures the extent to which viewers feel similarity or psychological closeness to the story protagonists. Character-related processes are still predominant in current narrative persuasion research because identification with story protagonists has the potential to enhance transportation and subsequent message responses (Boukes & LaMarre, 2021).

Although these narrative characteristics are the subject of much discussion, more recent evidence suggests that not all narrative attributes have the same predictive power for transportation across contexts (Green, 2021). In short film PSAs, character-centered mechanisms may be more important than plot-level sophistication for the impact of the message, since the compression of time does not permits elaboration of the structure. Therefore, the following hypothesis cluster can be formulated:

H1: Short film PSA characteristics significantly and positively affect the level of narrative transportation.

- H1a: Complete storyline of short film PSA significantly and positively affects the level of narrative transportation.
- H1b: Drama of short film PSA significantly and positively affects the level of narrative transportation.
- H1c: Verisimilitude of short film PSA significantly and positively affects the level of narrative transportation.
- H1d: Identifiable characters of short film PSA significantly and positively affect the level of narrative transportation.

Audience Characteristics

Transportation doesn't operate under the logic of message content only, but is, also, influenced by viewer-level predispositions and momentary cognitive states (Bilandzic et al., 2019). This study examines three factors related to the audience.

Familiarity with the topic may help someone understand better and helping with an easier understand someone could go further with the immersion. But familiarity may also dampen novelty, and lead to less engagement in certain contexts.

Attention is the concentrated cognitive investment in the processing of information during stimulus exposure. Recent research has revealed that transportation is more related to attentional absorption and not passive exposure (Bezdek & Gerrig, 2017), and it may be developed as a process cognitive path in narrative involvement (Tchernev et al., 2023). In digital settings, where distractions are prevalent, attention may act as a gatekeeper variable.

Transportability reflects at a trait level the tendency to become absorbed in stories (Bilandzic et al., 2019). People who score high on transportability are believed to have a better chance to become narrative immersed in different media platforms. Accordingly:

H2: Audience characteristics significantly and positively affect the level of narrative transportation.

- H2a: Familiarity of audience significantly and positively affects the level of narrative transportation.
- H2b: Attention of audience significantly and positively affects the level of narrative transportation.
- H2c: Transportability of audience significantly and positively affects level of narrative transportation.

Social Media Characteristics

As opposed to the viewing of film where one is alone, social media platforms offer interactive affordances that could influence the way a story is processed. Cues from the platform also influence the distribution of users' attention and the interpretation of the narrative (Sundar et al., 2015).

Likes are a kind of publicly observable social endorsement. Prior research indicates there are effects of visible engagement metrics on content credibility perception and content evaluation (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Bullet screen is a unique interactive function in certain social media platforms. Replies and reactions to a question can be overlaid on the TV screen in real-time through the comment overlay (Ma, 2024), which may improve the co-viewing feeling and collective experience, and strengthen immersion. Meanwhile, these overlays may also compete for the audience's attention. Thus:

H3: Social media characteristics significantly and positively affect the level of narrative transportation

- H3a: Likes significantly and positively affects the level of narrative transportation.
- H3b: Bullet screen significantly and positively affects the level of narrative transportation.

Integrated Structural Model

Instead of analysing these predictors separately, the present study assesses them jointly through PLS-SEM. Unlike traditional component-based SEM, latent variable-based SEM (i.e., structural equation modeling) can

also be used to estimate direct effects while considering the shared variance of theoretically related constructs (Hair et al., 2019; Bollen, 1989). This line of analysis is especially critical in narrative persuasion as narrative quality; predisposition of the audience and features of the platform might be conceptually interwoven. Thus, the model is a test of whether transportation in short film PSAs is a function of individual narrative processing, aseptic audience disposition, platform affordance, or a confluence of these spheres of influence in multivariate terms.

Methodology

Research Design

This research utilized a quantitative methodology, integrating scripted experimental exposure with multivariate statistical techniques to analyse the determinants of narrative transportation in brief film public service announcements on social media. To enhance the internal validity of the study and to account for potential pretest sensitization effects, a Solomon four-group design was used. This design enables the investigation of treatment and pretest effects at the same time and may lead to stronger evidence for causality in experimental research (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Shadish et al., 2002).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. Two of the groups did a pretest prior to seeing the experimental stimuli, the other two groups did not do a pretest. Within each pair, one group saw the original short film PSA stimulus, and the other saw a manipulated version created for the experiment. By comparing results across these groups, the design allowed the researchers to test for an influence of pretesting on later responses and for the presence of effects of the manipulation itself.

While the experimental design allowed for controlled exposure to the short film PSA stimuli, the main aim of the research was to assess a combined structural model of narrative transportation. The study investigated if narrative characteristics, audience characteristics, and social media characteristics collectively impacted the extent of narrative transportation experienced by the users.

Participants and Procedure

Individuals with a similar demographic to the common viewer of short film PSAs typically shared on social media were recruited. The study took place in a multimedia classroom to ensure uniformity of viewing conditions. In each session, participants were individually seated and told not to talk to each other while viewing the videos. Mobile phones were temporarily confiscated to reduce distractions during the experiment.

For those assigned to the pretest condition, the experimental procedure started with a brief survey to collect demographic information and assess transportability as a trait-level construct. Upon finishing the pretest, participants viewed the experimental stimulus. Directly following exposure participants took a post-test questionnaire assessing narrative transportation, along with all IVs in the conceptual model.

Measures

All constructs were assessed with multi-item scales with response anchors that were adapted from the original scales from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The majority of variables were assessed at post-test immediately following the viewing session, though transportability was assessed at pretest to assess participants' general disposition toward narrative transportation.

Narrative transportation is the level of cognitive and emotional immersion of viewers into a narrative space. In this study, narrative transportation was assessed with items that were adapted from the transportation framework initially introduced by Green and Brock (2000) and subsequently modified by further research (Appel, 2015). The scale measures how mentally involved the participants were in the story, how emotionally engaged they were with narrative events, and how much they were absorbed while watching. Four constructs were employed to assess perceived narrative elements of the short film PSAs: Complete storyline, drama, verisimilitude, and identifiable characters.

The overall script is perceived as the level of a coherent narrative with a complete narrative structure. Drama is the emotional intensity and the progression of conflict in a story. Verisimilitude, on the other hand,

is the perceived realism or plausibility of the narrative events. How much the viewers consider the leading characters as they are understandable, relatable, and psychologically accessible (Evans et al., 2012). Prior work showed that character engagement is a primary mechanism through which narratives impact audiences (Boukes & LaMarre, 2021; Van Laer et al., 2014).

Three audience-level variables were included in the study: familiarity, attention, and transportability. Familiarity relies on whether or not viewers have had existing knowledge or real-life experience on the social concern presented in the PSA. Attention is the degree of cognitive resource allocation during the watching procedure. Attention was assessed with three items adapted from the attentional focus subscale of the Narrative Engagement Scale (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009).

Transportability is a personal trait that indicates one is more likely to be immersed in narrative experiences. The assessment was made with the transportability scale as suggested by Jensen (2016) which describes the trait level inclination for narrative immersion. A pair of platform-based features are introduced: likes and bullet screen. Likes are a way for users to actively engage with the content they consume, and they are one of the most important visible signals of engagement on social media platforms. Early studies have indicated that such signals may affect how users perceive the credibility of information and the beauty of the content (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Barrage screen is a real-time comment overlay that appears on a video directly. The effect audiences to enjoy a kind of synchronous co-viewing, watching video content while interacting with other user in social monetization. Prior research has suggested that the bullet screen environment can induce a higher sense of involvement and shared watching experience.

Data Analysis Strategy

The analysis was done in a series of steps. First, we performed correlation and regression analyses to examine the relationships among the independent variables and narrative transportation. These analyses yielded initial evidence of the relationships between narrative, audience, and social media characteristics with transportation outcomes.

Second, full information maximum likelihood estimation was used in a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework to test the integrated conceptual model. PLS-SEM can model complex relationships between multiple latent variables at the same time and is free of distributional assumptions (Hair et al., 2019). The SEM technique also controls for any measurement error by simultaneously modeling all constructs as latent variables.

The Findings

The final structural equation model estimated in this study is shown in Figure 2. The figure shows the standardized path coefficients from the IVs to narrative transportation.

From a predictor's perspective, the amount and significance of the path coefficients differed as shown in Figure 2. A number of variables show positive correlations with narrative transportation, but only a handful of these correlations continue to be significant when all predictors are estimated simultaneously in the structural model. To provide a clearer overview of the structural relationships, the bootstrapped path coefficients are summarized in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, there are three predictors that have positive and statistically significant effects on narrative transportation: attention, identifiable characters, and bullet screen. In contrast, the path coefficients of complete storyline, drama, verisimilitude, familiarity, transportability, and likes become nonsignificant among all predictors.

Taken together, these findings indicate that narrative transportation in short film PSAs on social media is mainly governed by a few mechanisms rather than by all narrative or audience characteristics that are traditionally considered as determinants of immersive storytelling.

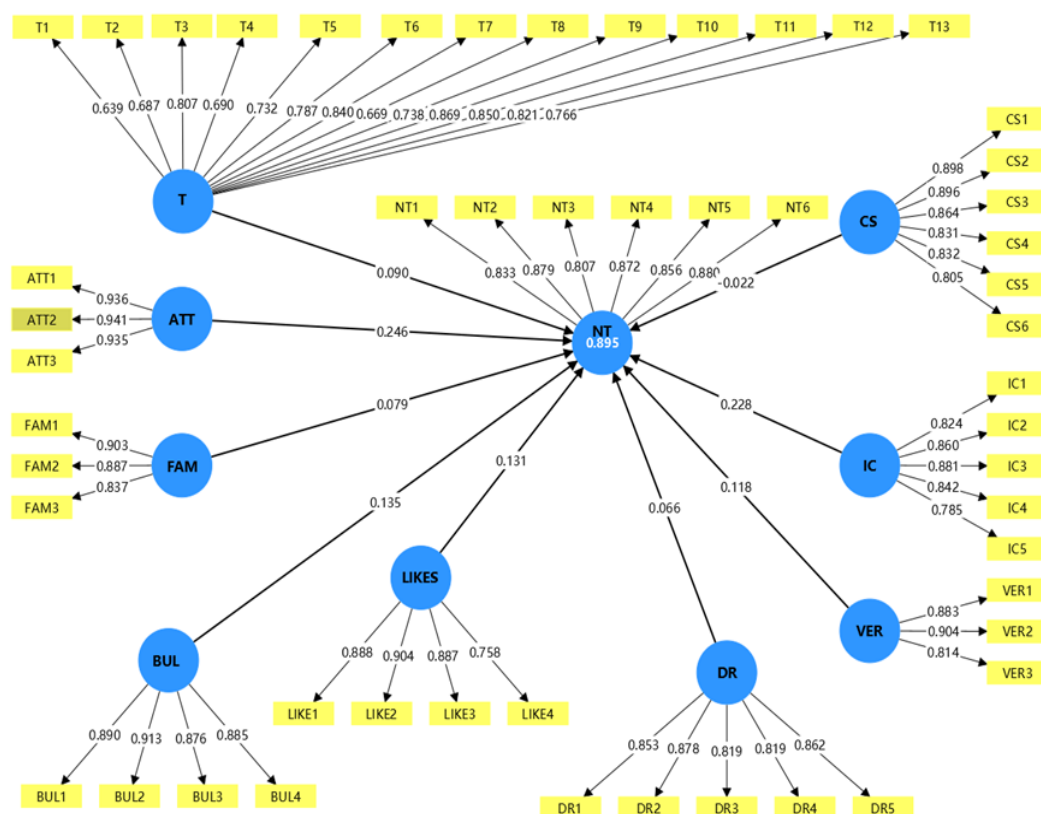


Figure 2. Final structural equation model for narrative transportation (NT)

Table 1. Bootstrapped Path Coefficients Predicting Narrative Transportation (NT)

Path	β (O)	Sample mean (M)	STDEV	t	p
ATT → NT	0.246	0.244	0.102	2.419	0.016
BUL → NT	0.135	0.134	0.066	2.063	0.039
CS → NT	-0.022	-0.021	0.069	0.323	0.746
DR → NT	0.066	0.064	0.103	0.644	0.520
FAM → NT	0.079	0.074	0.069	1.152	0.249
IC → NT	0.228	0.226	0.114	1.999	0.046
LIKES → NT	0.131	0.142	0.084	1.557	0.120
T → NT	0.090	0.083	0.057	1.564	0.118
VER → NT	0.118	0.125	0.065	1.830	0.067

Discussion

This study is the first to assess the embodiments of narrative transportation in a short film PSA on social media by combining narrative characteristics, audience characteristics, and social media characteristics into one integrated structural model. The results offer a number of insights on the mechanics of transportation in

short form public service storytelling in the context of digital platforms. This also lends credence to recent calls for the revitalization of transportation theory by taking into account future digital narrative forms and the consumption environments associated with unique platform offerings (Watts, 2023; Green & Appel, 2024).

First, the findings illustrate the importance of character identifiability in eliciting narrative transportation in short film PSAs. Of the four narrative elements in the model, only identifiable characters had a significant positive direct effect on the narrative transportation. This result is consistent with narrative persuasion work highlighting the role of engagement with characters as a means to transport an audience (Van Laer et al., 2014; Boukes & LaMarre, 2021). When audience members find story characters comprehensible and relatable, they tend to simulate (mentally) the lives of these characters, which promotes narrative transportation (Cohen, 2001; Green, 2004; Buselle & Bilandzic, 2009).

Meanwhile, the finding that long storyline, drama, and verisimilitude had no significant effects in the short form context implies that traditional narrative components may play a differing role in short form narratives. Previous research has frequently emphasized the influence of narrative linearity, emotional arousal and realism in fostering transportation (Green, 2021). Nevertheless nonnarrative PSA short films necessarily have to contend with their own temporal restrictions, which constrains the evolution of complex narrative arcs. In these circumstances, spectators might pay less attention to narrativity and more to immediate emotional signals, including those concerning the characters. This suggests that the accessibility of characters might be the initial level of entry for narrative immersion within short form public service storytelling.

Second, the viewer's attention is pivotal in determining narrative transportation. Of the audience characteristics considered, attention was the only statistically significant predictor of transportation. This finding is consistent with the theoretical assumption that transportation involves cognitive attention to the narrative stimulus (Green & Brock, 2000; Bezdek & Gerrig, 2017). In social media platforms where users are often exposed to several information flows at a time, the importance of a narrative's ability to seize and keep viewer's attention is even greater. The results thus imply that attentional engagement during presentation could be an essential prerequisite for narrative immersion in the context of digital media.

On the other hand, familiarity and transportability is found not to have significant direct effects within the structural model. Familiarity with a subject may make one easier to understand, but that doesn't mean someone will be more immersed in narrative in a brief film PSA. Thus, the lack of a significant effect for transportability suggests that trait-level tendencies to become involved in narratives might be weakened in short-form media environments. Although transportability has been traditionally considered as a motivational antecedent of transportation in longer narrative-based media (Bilandzic et al., 2019), the brief exposure time and fast consumption nature of social media videos may have the potential to weaken the effect of stable audience traits.

Third, the findings highlight the value of interactive platform features on narrative transportation implications. Among the three interaction patterns, bullet screen interaction has a positive and significant impact on transportation, while likes do not have a significant effect. Bullet screen comments form a dynamic atmosphere of watching in which the real-time reactions of audiences pop up on the video panel, enabling audiences to feel a sense of collective watching when chasing the story line. This type of real-time communication may contribute to emotional involvement and the immersive nature of the audience's viewing experiences.

The null effect of likes, however, implies that passive social cues do not have a direct effect on narrative transportation after audiences have started watching a video. Likes serve mainly as signs of popularity or social endorsement (Grace et al., 2015; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016), which can affect users' decisions on whether to choose particular content before they consume it. In comparison, bullet screen comments directly impact the viewing process, which makes viewers more susceptible to its psychological underpinnings, transportation.

Another meaningful finding from this study results from comparing the earlier regression models to the final structural model. A number of predictors appeared to be significantly related to narrative transportation in the initial analyses. Yet, of the four predictors, three were able to predict narrative transportation uniquely

and independently, when estimating simultaneously within the two-group structural model. This pattern underscores the power of SEM in distinguishing simple correlations from unique causal associations. Variables like narrative structure or familiarity might be related to transportation on surface levels, but their explanatory power when placed in an integrative model may overlap with other variables.

Overall, the results imply that narrative transportation in short film PSAs presented on social media is a mediated experience influenced by narrative design, audience engagement, and platform affordances. Instead of being a narrative-structure driven process, transportation seems to be the result of the interplay between character-centered narrative cues, attentional focus during the viewing, and interactive elements of the social media platform.

Conclusion

This research investigated the determinants of narrative transportation in short film public service announcements (PSAs) on social media with narrative, audience, and social media characteristics as antecedents within a structural model. With a Solomon four-group experimental design and structural equation modeling, the research offers an all-encompassing analysis of the process by which short film PSAs create engaging viewing experiences in new media contexts.

The results indicate that narrative transportation is influenced by three main elements in the short film PSAs: the attention of the audience, the presence of identifiable characters, and the interaction through the bullet screen. The results imply that fusional immersion in short form public service storytelling relies less on traditional narrative structure and more on interplay among character-centered narrative cues, cognitive processing during viewing, and interactive platform features. Specifically, the predictive strength of identifiable characters underlines the role of character accessibility as an entry-point to narrative immersion, while the influence of attention reflects the necessity of focused cognitive engagement in the context of viewing in social media.

The study also shows that when all these factors are considered in one integrated model, some of the usual suspect narrative or audience effects do not hold up as significant predictors of transportation. Narrative elements (complete storyline, drama, verisimilitude) and audience predispositions (familiarity, transportability) cease to be significant predictors when all relationships among variables are estimated simultaneously. This result underscores the need to focus on mechanisms of narrative transportation in full analytical models rather than on individual pairwise associations.

In the light of broader issues, this study makes a contribution to the literature in that it is the first to apply narrative transportation theory to short film PSA on a social media platform. It demonstrates that transportation in digital public communication is manipulated not only by narrative structure and the audience within the context of platform but also by platform-based interactive features as the viewing experience. This research, by combining these three aspects into one explanatory model, adds depth in understanding the operation of narrative persuasion in current social media.

Together, these results indicate that short film PSAs on social media are likely to be effective when they focus on character-based storytelling, hold audience's attention while they are watching, and utilize platform features (e.g., interactive ones) that augment engagement. These findings advance theoretical development in narrative persuasion research, as well as offer practical considerations for the (digital) design and delivery of public service communications.

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