You are My Friend but We are from Different Worlds: Actor Type Effects on Audience Engagement in Narrative Video Advertisements

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

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Abstract

Narrative video ads often use either celebrities or unknown actors to engage consumers and convey their message. Although research suggests that celebrities (vs. unknown actors) could enhance the effects of narrative videos on brand attitudes, this hypothesis has yet to be empirically tested, and the mechanisms behind such potential effects remain unclear. We compared the effects of celebrity and unknown actors in narrative video ads on brand attitudes and examined potential pathways through which the actor type might increase or decrease persuasion. In Studies 1a–c and 3, we used a narrative video in two distinct versions: the original with a celebrity and an alternative where we used face-swapping technology to replace the celebrity with an unknown actor. In Study 2, we analyzed responses to unmodified ads. In Studies 1a–c and 2, we found no evidence that the celebrity actor increased transportation into the story or identification with the actor, but we consistently observed that celebrities increased perceptions of a para-social relationship with the actor. However, this effect was not enhanced for a narrative video ad compared to a non-narrative one in Study 3. Furthermore, celebrity actors were associated with reduced retrospective reflection in the path models.

Keywords: Character Type, Narrative Advertising, Celebrity, Persuasion

Advertisers hope to enhance attitudes toward a brand or product and purchase intentions by wrapping their persuasive message in a story. In fact, research suggests that narrative ads have the potential to be more persuasive than non-narrative ads (Kim, Ratneshwar, and Thorson 2017) and often reduce the likelihood of eliciting critical thoughts in consumers (e.g., Escalas 2004a, 2007).

A key component of a compelling narrative ad is the main character, as the main character drives the story, establishes a connection between consumers and the narrative (Escalas and Stern 2003), and ultimately enhances persuasion (Moyer-Gusé 2008; Slater and Rouner 2002). Given the importance of the main character, it is not surprising that advertisers often use celebrities in their stories in the hope of increasing persuasion. However, unknown actors can also portray the main character in a story, and there is no clear evidence that celebrity actors increase persuasion in narrative video ads.

In a recent meta-analysis (Knoll and Matthes 2017), the effects of celebrities in ads on several outcome variables were rather weak, but stronger for certain types of celebrities, such as actors. However, the meta-analysis examined the effects of all types of advertisements, most of which were standard text advertisements, not stories. Very few studies have examined the relationship between celebrities and stories (e.g., Addis and Holbrook 2010), and there is no solid evidence on how having a recognizable celebrity as the main character in a narrative ad supports the effectiveness of the story. Although narrative video ads featuring celebrities are common (e.g., the Cadillac Superbowl 2021 ad), not much is known about the effectiveness of celebrities in such ads.

Because consumers rarely see their lives as similar to the lives of celebrities, the use of celebrities in stories appears to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it could strengthen persuasion through a perceived closeness to the actor, because people are familiar with a celebrity they know, and familiarity with the characters increases the persuasive power of a

story (Chang 2009; Kaufman and Libby 2012; van Laer et al. 2014). On the other hand, it could create a distance (dissimilarity) from the character's experience when reflecting on the story, and the perceived distance from the celebrity's life could hinder the effectiveness of a celebrity endorsement. Some researchers have argued that dissimilarity between the story character and the viewer reduces the effectiveness of a story, while similarity increases it (e.g., Sestir and Green 2010), but for different effects of dissimilarity, see Bhatnagar and Wan (2011).

In the present study, we address the research gap regarding the effects of celebrities in narrative video ads. We examine three pathways of story involvement through which celebrities might increase the effectiveness of narrative ads and one pathway that might decrease the effectiveness of these ads. Specifically, we hypothesize that a celebrity actor who is recognized by the consumer, as opposed to an actor who is unknown to the consumer, might influence a) the degree to which consumers are immersed in a story and vicariously experience the events of the story (transportation; Green and Brock 2000), b) the degree to which consumers have or form an imagined relationship with the actor (*para-social relationship*; Horton and Wohl 1956), and c) the degree to which recipients identify with the actor (identification; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). We argue that these three aspects of involvement represent related but distinct pathways that are linked to the effectiveness of narrative ads, for example, changes in brand attitudes. However, we also propose a mechanism that counteracts the aforementioned pathways of ad effectiveness. Consumers may reflect retrospectively on the meaning of the story and become aware that the story represents a world far removed from them (reflection; Hamby, Brinberg, and Daniloski 2017). Therefore, celebrities may reduce retrospective reflection compared to unfamiliar actors, and this reduction in retrospective reflection may also negatively affect persuasion.

In three studies, we investigate the effects of known celebrities and unknown actors by comparing existing narrative video ads (Study 2) and by manipulating the actor's face using face-swapping technology (Studies 1a-c and 3). Study 1a provides a first test of the predicted positive pathways through which a celebrity could influence brand attitude (transportation, para-social relationship, and identification). Study 1b-c expands the model by adding the hypothesized negative effect through retrospective reflection, with 1c using slightly adapted stimuli and verifying the narrativity of the stimuli in the sample. In an experimental manipulation of a video ad using face-swapping technology (Studies 1a-c), we find that whereas known celebrities (vs. unknown actors) evoke higher perceptions of a para-social relationship, they do not induce higher levels of transportation or identification. These results are tested for generalizability in a quasi-experimental setting using a larger variety of narrative video ads with different celebrities, product categories, and stories which were matched with ads featuring unknown actors but the same product categories and similar stories (Study 2). Moreover, a direct comparison of a narrative and a non-narrative video ad with a celebrity vs. an unknown actor shows that the effect of the celebrity on the perception of a para-social relationship is not stronger for a narrative than for a non-narrative video ad (Study 3), which indicates that narrativity does not amplify celebrity effects in narrative video ads. In the path models, we also find that known celebrities can reduce retrospective reflection on the story. These results suggest that celebrities are not necessarily better at conveying a brand message in narrative video ads.

Our research on actor types in narrative video ads extends prior research on celebrity persuasion (Knoll and Matthes 2017) and character types in narrative video ads (Dessart 2018). Previous studies have not investigated how the use of celebrities in narrative ads affects the mechanisms that characterize the effectiveness of these ads. In particular, they have not examined paths enhancing and impeding persuasion in parallel, nor have they used videos as experimental stimuli. In this respect, the use of face-swapping technology to create otherwise identical videos (Studies 1a–c and 3) and the replication of results with existing ads from

different product categories (Study 2) strengthen the conclusions that can be drawn from our studies. Moreover, our focus on video ads responds to recent calls to use audiovisual stimuli instead of static stimuli to approximate the ads that consumers attend to in reality (Hamby and Russell 2022). It also addresses the concern that differences in persuasive effectiveness between different narrative media are not fully understood (e.g., Shen, Sheer, and Li 2015).

Theoretical Background

Identification, para-social relationships, and transportation are three aspects of involvement that might have the potential to mediate persuasion by known celebrities in narrative video ads. Identification and the formation of para-social relationships with the main character are important aspects of character involvement, while transportation is an important form of story involvement that refers to recipients' interest in following the events in the story (Moyer-Gusé 2008). To clarify the differences between the three forms of involvement, imagine that a consumer perceives a story as an experience that is easy to relate to (high degree of transportation) without believing that she is much like the characters (identification) or without feeling a relationship to them (low para-social relationship) (Slater and Rouner 2002). Even if identification, para-social relationships, and transportation refer to different aspects of involvement, we suggest that the three aspects of involvement together support the persuasiveness of a story in narrative ads.

Narrative Transportation and Story Characters

When consumers engage with a story, such as by reading a book or watching a movie, they can become immersed in the story world, forget their surroundings, and share the experience of the story characters (Gerrig 1993; Green and Brock 2000). Research suggests that familiarity with elements of a story prior to exposure should facilitate such a transportation into the story world (Chang 2009; Green 2004). Hence, the familiarity that consumers associate with a celebrity may increase their willingness to immerse themselves in the story and may make it clear to them who the central character of the story is (van Laer et al. 2014). For example, familiarity with story characters can sustain immersion (experience taking) in a narrative, even for outgroup characters (Kaufman and Libby 2012), and there is a close relationship between narrative engagement and readers being reminded of prior personal or media experiences (Strange and Leung 1999). Therefore, we hypothesize that having a known celebrity as the main character increases transportation compared to having an unknown actor. Moreover, we hypothesize that transportation mediates the effects of narrative ads on brand attitudes. Research has repeatedly shown that transportation is positively linked to attitudes evoked by narrative ads and that it acts as a mediator between story characteristics and persuasion outcomes (Escalas 2004a; Seo et al. 2018). A meta-analysis has indicated that the positive association between transportation and persuasion is a robust finding (van Laer et al. 2014).

H1: The celebrity (vs. unknown) actor has a positive effect on transportation (H1a) and a positive indirect effect on the brand attitude through transportation (H1b).

Para-social Relationships with Story Characters

A further assumption of our research is that consumers often experience a para-social relationship with celebrities that can further enhance the persuasiveness of a narrative ad. The prefix "para-" denotes the mimicry of real social relationships (Horton and Wohl 1956), and para-social relationships reflect an illusory social relationship, such as one developed with soap opera characters (Rubin and Perse 1987), that can be regarded as a "bond of intimacy" (Horton and Wohl 1956, 217).

A review of 60 years of research in the field suggests that para-social phenomena influence many different persuasion outcomes, from voting to organ donation behavior to purchase intentions (Liebers and Schramm 2019). Research also indicates that para-social relationships reduce the likelihood of consumers responding with reactance to persuasion attempts (Moyer-Gusé and Nabi 2010). It is therefore not surprising that researchers have found that consumers evaluated an advertised brand more positively when they experienced a more intense parasocial relationship with the character of a narrative advertisement (Liu, Liu, and Zhang 2019).

We assume that consumers are more likely to form para-social relationships with celebrities than with unknown actors, because they encounter celebrities frequently in their daily lives through media (Giles 2002). Moreover, we suppose that para-social relationships mediate the effect of actor type on brand attitude, because of the positive relations found between the perceived para-social relationship and advertising outcomes (Liu, Liu, and Zhang 2019).

H2: The celebrity (vs. unknown) actor has a positive effect on the felt para-social relationship (H2a) and a positive indirect effect on the brand attitude through the felt para-social relationship (H2b).

Identification with Story Characters

In addition to forming a para-social relationship with a story character, consumers can identify with a story character in such a way that they perceive their actual or ideal self as overlapping with the character's image. Celebrities are known targets of identification, and consumers can aspire to be like a celebrity (Erdogan 1999). Hence, we suppose that consumers are more likely to perceive an overlap of their actual or ideal self-image with the image of a celebrity than with the image of an unknown actor (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Erdogan 1999). Because empirical evidence shows that identification with characters in narrative ads increases the likelihood of positive brand attitudes (Dessart 2018), it is plausible that a known celebrity will increase brand attitude through identification compared to an unknown actor.

H3: The celebrity (vs. unknown) actor has a positive effect on identification (H3a) and a positive indirect effect on the brand attitude through identification (H3b).

Retrospective Reflection and Story Characters

In the introduction, we suggested that the use of celebrities in narrative ads could also have the undesired effect of illustrating that the lives of the consumers and those of the celebrities are different, even if the consumers identify with the celebrities. Hence, a celebrity actor in a narrative video might affect retrospective reflection, "a process through which this correspondence is created by bringing to mind similarities between the story world and observed experience (personal or mediated)" (Hamby, Brinberg, and Daniloski 2017, 13).

The concept of retrospective reflection is similar to what Liebes and Katz (1986), in their analysis of the series *Dallas*, called referential reflection, where viewers would put the story message into the context of their own life and problems in discussions. Reflection is assumed to evoke deeper processing that is otherwise often impeded because individuals are not motivated to process a story or do not have the cognitive resources to do so (Hamby, Brinberg, and Daniloski 2017).

Although consumers identify with celebrities because of their desirable social status (Erdogan 1999), they can realize that the life circumstances of a celebrity are different from their own, and they might then perceive the story as less relevant for their lives. Therefore, we hypothesize that the celebrity actor reduces retrospective reflection.

H4a: The celebrity (vs. unknown) actor decreases retrospective reflection.

While we assume an undesired effect of celebrity actors in narrative ads on retrospective reflection, we still expect that retrospective reflection is an important component of the persuasiveness of narrative ads and that the effects of transportation, para-social relationship, and identification are also transmitted through retrospective reflection on persuasion. Indeed, it is plausible that all these elements of involvement increase the closeness to the story, and thus impact the brand attitude at least partly through retrospective reflection. Hamby, Brinberg, and Daniloski (2017), for instance, observed that transportation augments reflection, which in

turn mediates the effect of transportation on persuasion. Thus, we expect countervailing effects similar to the case of competitive mediation in simple mediation as outlined in prior literature (Zhao, Lynch Jr, and Chen 2010). We hypothesize that, as reasoned above, celebrities elicit higher levels of para-social relationship, transportation, and identification, and that effects of story and character involvement on the brand attitude are mediated by retrospective reflection.

H4b: The celebrity (vs. unknown) actor has a positive effect on transportation, which in turn increases reflection, which mediates the effect on brand attitude, resulting in a positive indirect effect on brand attitude.

H4c: The celebrity (vs. unknown) actor has a positive effect on para-social relationship, which in turn increases reflection, which mediates the effect on brand attitude, resulting in a positive indirect effect on brand attitude.

H4d: The celebrity (vs. unknown) actor has a positive effect on identification, which in turn increases reflection, which mediates the effect on brand attitude, resulting in a positive indirect effect on brand attitude.

H4e: The celebrity (vs. unknown) actor decreases brand attitude mediated by reflection. Figure 1 summarizes the research model and hypothesized effects.



Figure 1. Research model and hypothesized effects.

Note: Actor type effect is depicted for celebrity actor (in comparison to unknown actor).

The Present Research

We conducted three studies to test our hypotheses. The objective of Study 1a was to provide a first test of the effect of the predicted positive pathways through which a celebrity could influence brand attitude (transportation, para-social relationship, and identification). In Studies 1b–c, we added retrospective reflection to the model as a variable that potentially impedes the effects of a celebrity on brand attitude. In Study 2, we used a variety of narrative ads with celebrities and unknown actors to examine the generalizability of the results. Finally, Study 3 provided a comparison between a narrative and a non-narrative ad to investigate whether celebrity effects are amplified for the narrative video ad.

Studies 1a–c

Studies 1a–c tested the predicted path model and varied in only a few aspects. In all three studies, we used an original video with Julia Roberts and an edited version of this video with an unknown actor, and we measured identification, para-social relationships, transportation, and brand attitude using the same scales. In Studies 1b and 1c, we added a scale to measure retrospective reflection. Study 1c used a slightly modified version of the video in which we added frames to emphasize the story being told.

Stimulus Development

In order to vary the actor type, we selected an appropriate narrative video ad and edited it by replacing the face of a celebrity with that of an unknown actor. We showed the altered video ad to marketing students, researchers, and consumers, none of whom noticed any visual irregularities in the stimuli.

For the manipulation, we selected a perfume ad by Lancôme featuring Julia Roberts. What was most important to us was that the video ad fit the definition of a narrative (Kreuter et al. 2007) in having characters (main actor and bystanders), having a causal event structure (one event in the ad leads to the next), being bounded in space and time (the setting is a hall in Paris

and it is evening), and having a message (with the perfume, life is beautiful). Specifically, the ad had the prototypical characteristics of classical drama (an ideal type of narrative), namely a single action, linear chronology, unity of space, progression, and a change of end state (Stern 1994). The selection of the ad took into account evidence that actors are more effective than most other endorser types (e.g., musicians; Knoll and Matthes 2017).

We conducted a posttest to determine whether participants perceived the ad as a narrative. Participants viewed the narrative ad and then indicated their level of agreement (disagree = 0; agree = 1) with four items (e.g., "The ad told a story") from a narrativity measure (Escalas 2007; Lien and Chen 2013). We summed the four items to create a narrativity index ranging from 0 (no narrative characteristics present) to 4 (all narrative characteristics present). The results confirm the narrativity of the ad, as the mean was significantly higher than the midpoint of the scale (M = 2.95, SD = 1.26, t(97) = 7.44, p < .001).

In Study 1c, we included the narrativity measure in the questionnaire. The results were similar and verified that respondents perceived the ad as a narrative, as the mean was significantly higher than the midpoint of the scale ($M_{\text{Narrativity}} = 2.99$, SD = 1.36, t(315) = 12.92, p < .001).

Experimental Design and Procedure

In Studies 1a–c, participants were assigned at random to one of two actor type conditions (celebrity vs. unknown). After viewing the stimulus, participants answered a manipulation check question (an unaided recognition question about the main actor), questions about the measures of interest, questions to measure additional variables, and questions to measure demographics. We determined that a control variable would be included as a covariate in the model if experimental conditions differed on the control variable despite random assignment of participants to the conditions. Table 1 shows which variables differed significantly between

conditions and were therefore included as covariates (see Web Appendix A for detailed analyses).

Participants

We recruited participants with the help of students (Study 1a–b) and on the Prolific platform (Study 1c). Responses from participants who did not recognize the celebrity, mistook the unknown actor for a celebrity (according to the manipulation check for actor type), or failed any of the attention, technical, or distortion checks were excluded from the analyses. The same attention check was included in all studies: "If you are reading this, please leave this item blank" (e.g., Paas and Morren 2018). All studies included the manipulation check for actor type (open text question), while Study 1b also included a distortion check and Study 1c a technical test. The technical test verified that respondents could play and hear the video, while the distortion check verified that respondents had not seen the original ad with the celebrity before. As a result of these checks, we excluded 35 cases in Study 1a, 94 in Study 1b, and 64 in Study 1c from the analyses. After exclusions, the sample consisted of 201 cases in Study 1a, 210 in Study 1b, and 316 in Study 1c (see Table 1 for more details).

Study	Sample	Ν	$M_{ m Age} \ (SD_{ m Age})$	Gender (Female)	Covariates Included
1a	Convenience consumer sample	201	32.29 (12.98)	<u>(%)</u> 57.5	 Attractiveness, M_{Unknown} = 5.78 (SD = 1.04), M_{Celebrity} = 6.05 (SD = 0.86), t(199) = -2.01, p = .045 Age, t(176.78) = -2.11, p = .037
1b	Convenience consumer sample	210	30.58 (12.23)	60.5	• Attractiveness, $M_{\text{Unknown}} = 5.85$ ($SD = 1.13$), $M_{\text{Celebrity}} = 6.17$ ($SD = 0.88$), $t(208) = -2.30$, $p = .022$
1c	Prolific academic	316	38.09 (12.38)	64.56	• Attractiveness, $M_{\text{Unknown}} = 5.92$ (SD = 0.94), $M_{\text{Celebrity}} = 6.12$ (SD = 0.86), $t(314) = -1.86$, $p = .064$

Table 1. Overview of study characteristics, Studies 1a–c.

Measures

The measures used in Studies 1a–c and indicators for the reliability and discriminant validity are listed in Table 2 (see Web Appendix E for details). We also checked that no problems of multicollinearity would compromise the regression analyses (for all studies and each calculated regression, VIF \leq 4.30; for more details, see Web Appendix C). The confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) of each study's measurements showed a good to excellent fit, with RMSEA \leq .063, SRMR \leq .055, TLI \geq .93, and CFI \geq .94. We assessed discriminant validity following Rönkkö and Cho (2022) using the package semTools (Jorgensen et al. 2021), and the results showed that discriminant validity was not a major concern in the studies (see Web Appendix B).

Transportation was measured using four items from Appel et al. (2015) (e.g., "I wanted to learn how the commercial ended"), *para-social relationship* using five items from Rubin and Perse (1987) (e.g., "The main character in the commercial makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend"), *identification* using three items from Currás-Pérez, Bigné-Alcañiz, and Alvarado-Herrera (2009; see also Dessart 2018) (e.g., "I am similar to what the lead actress represents"), *retrospective reflection* using four items from Hamby, Brinberg, and Daniloski (2017) (e.g., "Some parts of the ad reminded me of people I know personally"), and *brand attitude* using a semantic differential scale with five items (Spears and Singh 2004; e.g., "unfavorable–favorable").

In addition, we measured variables that might be relevant for the assessment of the product but that should not differ between the experimental conditions. In case of differences between the experimental conditions on one or more of these variables, we added the respective variables to the model as a covariate. Specifically, we assessed product category involvement (Mittal 1995), brand familiarity (Kent and Allen 1994), attractiveness of the actor (Ohanian 1990), and endorser fit (Till and Busler 2000).

Study	Measures	α	AVE	CR	Results of CFA					
				-	χ^2 (df)	RMSEA 90% CI [LL, UL]	<i>p</i> -close	SRMR	CFI	TLI
1a	Transportation, para-social relationship, identification, brand attitude, product category involvement, brand familiarity, attractiveness.	≥.79	≥.50	≥.80	621.34 (384)	.056 [0.047, 0.063]	.125	.051	.946	.939
1b	Transportation, para-social relationship, identification, brand attitude, retrospective reflection, product category involvement, attractiveness, endorser fit.	≥.83	≥.57	≥.84	904.55 (499)	.063 [0.056, 0.069]	.001	.055	.936	.928
1c	Transportation, para-social relationship, identification, brand attitude, retrospective reflection, product category involvement, attractiveness, endorser fit.	≥.80	≥.51	≥.81	1,055.89 (499)	.060 [0.055, 0.065]	.001	.051	.944	.937
2	Transportation, para-social relationship, identification, brand attitude, retrospective reflection, product category involvement, attractiveness, endorser fit, brand familiarity.	≥.88	≥.68	≥.89	1,416.61 (593)	.057 [0.053, 0.061]	.001	.043	.952	.946
3	Para-social relationship, attractiveness, brand attitude, product category involvement, retrospective reflection.	≥.90	≥.65	≥.90	525.48 (242)	.052 [0.046, 0.058]	.255	.043	.972	.968

Table 2. Overview of measures, validity, and reliability, Studies 1–3.

Note: α = Cronbach's α , AVE = average variance extracted, CR = composite reliability, CFA = confirmatory factor analysis (factor variances were set to 1 allowing for free estimation of all loadings), and *p*-close = *p*-close fit (RMSEA \leq .05).

Study 1a

Results

To test the model, we used PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes 2018; R Core Team 2020). See Figure 2 for the path model; we provide detailed results in Web Appendix C.

The celebrity (vs. unknown) actor significantly increased para-social relationship (H2a), $a_2 = 0.88$, p < .001, which in turn was positively associated with brand attitude, $b_2 = 0.22$, p < .01. The indirect effect of actor type on brand attitude via perceived para-social relationship was significant (H2b), with indirect effect = 0.192, *SE* = 0.080, 95% CI [0.050, 0.361].





Contrary to our hypothesis, using a celebrity instead of an unknown actor in the narrative ad did not significantly increase transportation, $a_1 = 0.30$, p = .133 (H1a). However, in line with expectations, transportation was positively associated with brand attitude, $b_1 = 0.29$, p < .001. The indirect effect of the celebrity (vs. unknown) actor on brand attitude via transportation (H1b) was not significant, indirect effect = 0.087, *SE* = 0.061, 95% CI [-0.024, 0.219].

The effect of the celebrity actor (vs. unknown) on identification was not significant, $a_3 = 0.39, p = .090$ (H3a), and identification was not associated with brand attitude, $b_3 = -0.029$, p = .618. The indirect effect of celebrity actor (vs. unknown) on brand attitude via identification was not significant (H3b), indirect effect = -0.011, SE = 0.027, 95% CI [-0.070, 0.042]. *Discussion*

Study 1a illustrated that the celebrity actor positively influenced brand attitude, mediated by perceived para-social relationships. This finding extends previous research by highlighting the role of para-social relationships in narrative video ads and suggesting that they contribute to the persuasive impact beyond identification and transportation.

Consistent with prior research, we found that increased transportation is associated with a more favorable brand attitude (e.g., Escalas 2004a). However, neither transportation nor identification were influenced by actor type. This suggests that celebrities may have a limited impact on the pathways typically thought to boost the effects of narrative advertising (e.g., Dessart 2018).

Study 1b

In Study 1b, we added retrospective reflection (Hamby, Brinberg, and Daniloski 2017) to the model to take into account the possibility that a celebrity in a video ad increases the perceived distance from the events in the story. In addition, we measured endorser fit as an additional variable, because the fit between an endorser and a product could be positively associated with the attitude toward the endorsed product (Knoll and Matthes 2017).

Results

To test the predicted model, we applied PROCESS Model 80 (Hayes 2018); see Figure 3 for the path model. Consistent with our hypotheses, the effect of the celebrity (vs. unknown) actor on para-social relationship was significant (H2a), $a_2 = 0.53$, p = .010, and para-social relationship was positively associated with brand attitude, $b_2 = 0.26$, p < .001. The indirect

effect of actor type on brand attitude via para-social relationship was significant, indirect effect = 0.135, 95% CI [0.018, 0.290] (H2b). Furthermore, the celebrity actor (vs. unknown) was negatively linked to reflection in line with our expectation (H4a), $a_4 = -0.43$, p = .020, while the strength of para-social relationship was related to increased reflection, $d_2 = 0.22$, p = .010. Finally, identification was positively related to brand attitude, $b_3 = 0.13$, p = .025. None of the other predicted paths was significant. The detailed results are presented in Web Appendix C.



Figure 3. Path model, Study 1b.

Note: Dummy coding (X): unknown = 0; celebrity = 1, unstandardized regression coefficients, 95% CI in squared brackets, ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05. For aesthetic reasons, covariate attractiveness is not displayed.

Discussion

Study 1b, consistent with Study 1a, highlights para-social relationships as a crucial mediator for actor type effects on brand attitude. It underscores the mixed impact of celebrity actors, with positive effects on para-social relationships but negative effects on reflection. However, only the effect through para-social relationship on brand attitude was significant, and not the effect through reflection on brand attitude. This replicates the lack of effect of actor type on transportation and identification. Thus, transportation and identification may be less influential in driving celebrity effects in narrative video ads than previously suggested. However, transportation and identification could become more relevant with a clearer and emphasized story line, a possibility we explored in Study 1c by adding title frames to the video.

Study 1c

In this study, we edited the stimulus material to increase the narrativity of the advertisement by adding explanatory title frames at the beginning of each section of the narrative ad (e.g., introduction and climax). These frames followed the sections of the classical drama model (compare Stern 1994, 605).

Results

We calculated the same model as in Study 1b, see Figure 4 for the path model. Again, we found an effect of celebrity (vs. unknown) actor on para-social relationship (H2a), $a_2 = 0.906$, p < .001, and para-social relationship in turn increased brand attitude, $b_2 = 0.141$, p = .015. The indirect effect of the actor type on brand attitude via the perceived para-social relationship was significant (H2b), indirect effect = 0.128, 95% CI [0.015, 0.258]. The celebrity (vs. unknown) actor was negatively linked to reflection (H4a), $a_4 = -0.234$, p = .048. In addition, the paths from transportation to reflection and from para-social relationship to reflection were also significant, $d_1 = 0.231$, p = < .001, $d_2 = 0.139$, p = .018. Finally, transportation was significantly related to brand attitude, $b_1 = 0.348$, p < .001. None of the other predicted paths or indirect effects was significant (for detailed results, see Web Appendix C).



Figure 4. Path model, Study 1c.

Note: Dummy coding (X): unknown = 0; celebrity = 1, unstandardized regression coefficients, 95% CI in squared brackets, ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05. For aesthetic reasons, covariate attractiveness is not displayed.

Discussion

The results of Study 1c are consistent with those of Studies 1a–b. The impact of actor type on brand attitude was solely mediated by para-social relationships, and the celebrity actor once more had a negative effect on reflection compared to the unknown actor. Although transportation was positively associated with a more favorable brand attitude, it was not a pathway for actor type effects.

Collectively, Studies 1a–c confirm the robustness of the indirect actor type effect through para-social relationship on brand attitude. The results suggest that the perceived relationship with a celebrity is pivotal in enhancing the persuasiveness of narrative videos featuring celebrities. However, a limitation of these studies was the use of the same celebrity and product. Therefore, to enhance external validity, Study 2 employed existing ads with different products but with comparable storylines in which either a celebrity or an unknown actor appeared. While this increased external validity, it did potentially reduce internal validity. To mitigate this risk,

we analyzed average effects across ten videos (five videos with a celebrity matched with five videos with an unknown actor).

Study 2

We selected a variety of different narrative advertisements, including different brands, celebrities, and stories, to test the generalizability of the results. Given the variety of ads, we measured endorser fit and brand familiarity as potential covariates in case of a difference between the conditions (unknown vs. celebrity actor).

Experimental Design and Procedure

Before the start of the experiment, we tested whether the participants could play a video and hear the sound (technical test). Moreover, to reduce the number of failed recognitions of celebrities, participants had to pass a celebrity recognition test before starting the experiment. The celebrity recognition test consisted of photographs of the celebrities featured in the selected stimuli ads (e.g., George Clooney) and two mock photographs of a male and a female person who were not celebrities. In order to pass the test, respondents had to recognize at least one of the celebrity and not confuse the people in the mock photos with celebrities. Depending on which celebrity the respondents had recognized, the respondents were assigned at random to either the corresponding celebrity or the unknown actor ad. After exposure to the stimuli, respondents responded to the measurement items.

Participants

A total of 500 participants passed the technical test, passed the celebrity recognition test with the photos, and completed the questionnaire. All these participants also passed the attention check, but 75 failed the manipulation check for actor type after watching the ad. The final sample therefore consisted of 425 participants ($M_{Age} = 46.58$, SD = 13.71, 49.41% female).

21

Materials, Pretest, and Measures

As a first step, we looked for six narrative video ads with a celebrity for which we could find a comparable video ad with an unknown actor. It was also important that these video ads represented a variety of product categories, stories, and brands. In a second step, we pre-tested the ads to ensure that they could be classified as narrative ads (N = 117, $M_{Age} = 40.42$, 36.75% female; participants who failed the attention check were not included in this sample). The participants assessed narrativity using the same items as in the previous studies. For one ad, the mean was lower than the scale midpoint (i.e., 2), and this ad was therefore not included in the final selection. The overall mean of narrativity of the retained ads was significantly higher than the scale midpoint (M = 2.80, SD = 1.18, t(116) = 7.34, p < .001), and the means of the individual ads varied between 2.28 and 3.56. The selected ads are described in Web Appendix F. We used the same scales as in Study 1c; see Table 1 and Web Appendix E for more details.

Results: Preliminary Analyses

The conditions did not differ significantly in age, gender proportions, or product category involvement, all p > .17 (see Web Appendix A for more details), but they differed in attractiveness ($M_{\text{Unknown}} = 5.49$, SD = 1.21, $M_{\text{Celebrity}} = 5.87$, SD = 1.20, t(423) = -3.23, p = .001), endorser fit ($M_{\text{Unknown}} = 4.85$, SD = 1.71, $M_{\text{Celebrity}} = 5.29$, SD = 1.57, t(423) = -2.79, p = .005), and brand familiarity ($M_{\text{Unknown}} = 4.82$ SD = 1.83, $M_{\text{Celebrity}} = 4.44$, SD = 1.77, t(423) = 2.20, p = .029). To account for these differences, we included these variables as covariates in the model.

Results: Model Test

To test our hypotheses, we performed the same analyses as in Studies 1b–c; see Figure 5 for the path model. In support of our hypotheses, we found that the celebrity (vs. unknown) actor had a significant positive effect on the perceived para-social relationship (H2a), $a_2 = 0.30$,

p = .028. Para-social relationship was positively associated with brand attitude, $b_2 = 0.20$, p < .001, and the effect of the celebrity actor on brand attitude was mediated through parasocial relationship (H2b), indirect effect = 0.060, 95% CI [0.005, 0.137]. Contrary to our expectations, there was no significant effect of the celebrity actor on reflection, $a_4 = -0.14$, p = .199. However, reflection was positively associated with transportation, $d_1 = 0.16$, p = .002, para-social relationship, $d_2 = 0.31$, p < .001, and identification, $d_3 = 0.27$, p < .001, and transportation was positively linked to brand attitude, $b_1 = 0.25$, p < .001. None of the other predicted paths was significant (for detailed results see Web Appendix C).



Figure 5. Path model, Study 2.

Note: Dummy coding (X): unknown = 0; celebrity = 1, Unstandardized regression coefficients, 95% CI in squared brackets, ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05. For aesthetic reasons, covariates attractiveness, endorser fit, and brand familiarity are not displayed.

Discussion

In Study 2, we examined the robustness of the patterns observed in the previous experiments using a set of narrative ads featuring a celebrity or an unknown actor that we matched in terms of story and product category. Consistent with Studies 1a–c, we found that the effects of actor type on brand attitude were mediated by the strength of the perceived para-social relationship. In addition, we found that transportation was positively related to brand attitude. Thus, the

results of the highly controlled variation of the videos in Studies 1a–c are consistent with the results of real videos with celebrities and unknown actors. The main difference between the results of Study 2 and those of Studies 1a–c was that the negative direct effect of actor type on reflection was not significant, although the direction of the effect was the same. At this point, it remains open whether the negative effect on reflection occurs under certain circumstances only (e.g., when the story is already distant from consumers' lives).

So far, the results of our studies suggest that a celebrity is not necessarily a lever for increasing transportation and the likelihood that consumers will engage with an advertising story, but that narrative ads may benefit from the para-social relationships consumers form with celebrities. A limitation of the studies is, however, that we could not assess whether the effects of the para-social relationships were stronger for narrative video ads than for non-narrative videos. Therefore, we conducted Study 3, in which we compared the effects of a narrative with a non-narrative video ad.

Study 3

Stories are suited to establishing an interpersonal connection between story actor and audience because narrative messages make it easier for consumers to feel connected to the main characters than less narrative messages (Escalas and Stern 2003). Narrative TV commercials are also more persuasive than non-narrative ones because they activate processes such as emotional response more strongly (Kim, Ratneshwar, and Thorson 2017). Thus, narrativity could moderate the impact of actor type on para-social relationship, a form of emotional attachment. It is therefore conceivable that a non-narrative video format does not allow consumers to feel connected to the celebrity in the way a narrative format does. Accordingly, we hypothesized that the narrativity of a video moderates the effect of actor type on perceived para-social relationship. **H5:** The positive effect of the celebrity (vs. unknown) actor on the strength of the perceived para-social relationship will be more pronounced in the narrative (vs. non-narrative) condition.

Material

To test this hypothesis, we created a narrative and non-narrative version of the video ad used in Study 1c and varied whether the main actor was a celebrity or unknown. We measured the strength of perceived para-social relationship as a mediator and brand attitude as a dependent measure. We also assessed reflection to include this variable as a mediator in the model, because in Studies 1b and 1c the path from actor type (celebrity vs. unknown) to reflection was negative.

Experimental Design and Procedure

We manipulated actor type (celebrity vs. unknown) and narrativity (narrative vs. non-narrative). The procedure was the same as in the previous studies.

Participants

We recruited 500 participants via the online platform Prolific. We pre-registered the analyses of the study and the inclusion criteria (AsPredicted#127494). We excluded 69 participants who failed one or more of the following checks: a technical test (checking that the video and audio were working), an attention check, and the manipulation check for actor type. Thus, we included 431 participants in our analyses ($M_{Age} = 43.20$, $SD_{Age} = 12.23$, 63.57% female).

Stimulus Material and Experimental Manipulations

We used the stimulus material from Study 1c as a base, and we used the same actor type manipulation, applying face-swapping technology. To manipulate message narrativity, we followed previous approaches (Escalas 2004b). In the narrative condition, we used the narrative structure from Study 1c. In the non-narrative condition, we rearranged the original order of the

scenes in the video to remove its narrative structure (Escalas 2004b) and changed the text on the title frames to direct the focus onto product information, which is typical for non-narrative ads (Wentzel, Tomczak, and Herrmann 2010). The differences between the two videos are depicted in Web Appendix F.

Measures

The manipulation check for actor type was the same as in previous studies, and message format was measured using the same narrativity scale as before (e.g., "The ad told a story", Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$), but on a 7-point Likert scale (Escalas 2007; Lien and Chen 2013). Other measures included were para-social relationship, reflection, brand attitude, and attractiveness (see Web Appendix E for more details).

Results: Preliminary Analyses

An ANOVA with narrativity (narrative vs. non-narrative) and actor type (celebrity vs. unknown) as independent variables, and the perceived narrativity as dependent variable revealed that participants perceived the ad to be more story-like in the narrative condition (M = 4.87, SD = 1.27) than in the non-narrative condition (M = 3.52, SD = 1.49, F(1, 427) = 101.76, p < .001). The interaction between narrativity and actor type was significant, F(1, 427) = 4.27, p = .039. The post-hoc comparisons (Table 3) show that the participants perceived the ad to be more story-like in the narrative condition than in the non-narrative condition when a celebrity and when an unknown actor was used. The means were more divergent between the conditions for the unknown actor.

Condition	Narrative/	Narrative/	Non-Narrative/	Non-Narrative/	
	Unknown	Celebrity	Unknown	Celebrity	
Mean (SD)	4.94 (1.16) ^a	4.77 (1.40) ^a	3.35 (1.44) ^b	3.73 (1.54) ^b	

Table 3. Narrativity by condition, Study 3.

Note: Post-hoc comparisons (t-tests), Bonferroni adjustment for multiple tests; different superscript indicates significantly different conditions in means at p < .001.

In addition, we computed ANOVAs with narrativity (narrative vs. non-narrative) and actor type (celebrity vs. unknown) as independent variables, and attractivity, age, and product category involvement as dependent variables. Participants rated the attractiveness of the celebrity higher (M = 6.08, SD = 1.03) than that of the unknown actor (M = 5.71, SD = 1.03, F(1, 427) = 14.08, p < .001). Hence, we included attractiveness as a covariate in the model. All other main or interaction effects were not significant, $F \le 1.25$, $p \ge .264$. There were no differences between the four conditions in gender proportions, $\chi^2(3) = 1.82$, p = .610.

Results: Model Test

We applied PROCESS Model 83 (Hayes 2018) to test the main hypothesis and relationships of interest (see **Figure 6** for the path model). Detailed results are reported in Web Appendices C and D. In line with the previous studies, the celebrity (vs. unknown) had a significant positive effect on para-social relationship (H2a), $a_1 = 0.88$, p < .001, and a positive indirect effect through para-social relationship on brand attitude (H2b), an indirect effect in the non-narrative condition = 0.281, 95% CI [0.148, 0.446], an indirect effect in the narrative condition = 0.144, 95% CI [0.040, 0.271], and through para-social relationship and reflection on brand attitude (H4c), an indirect effect in the non-narrative condition = 0.056, 95% CI [0.014, 0.103], and an indirect effect in the narrative condition = 0.029, 95% CI [0.005, 0.061]. However, we expected that the effect of the actor type would be stronger for the narrative than the non-narrative ad (H5). In contrast to this hypothesis, the effect of actor type on para-social relationship was not significantly moderated by the narrativity of the video ad, w = -0.43, SE = 0.23, t = -1.90, p = .058.

The celebrity (vs. unknown) actor type had a significant negative effect on reflection (H4a), $a_2 = -0.49$, p < .001, and a significant negative indirect effect on brand attitude through reflection (H4e), indirect effect = -0.059, 95% CI [-0.113; -0.014].



Figure 6. Overview of results, Study 3.

Note: Dummy coding (X): unknown = 0; celebrity = 1, non-narrative = 0; narrative = 1, unstandardized regression coefficients, 95% CI in squared brackets, ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05. For aesthetic reasons, covariate attractiveness is not displayed.

Discussion

In this pre-registered experiment, we found that narrativity did not moderate the effect of actor type on para-social relationship as hypothesized. However, the negative effect of celebrity (vs. unknown) on reflection was replicated from previous studies. Furthermore, given that the negative indirect effect of celebrity (vs. unknown) actor on reflection was mediated through reflection on brand attitude, the results provide further evidence of the practical relevance of this potential negative effect of celebrities in narrative advertising. The celebrity actor had a positive effect on para-social relationship, which in turn increased brand attitude, but also a positive indirect effect through the second mediator reflection.

Overview of **Results**

Figure 7 gives an overview of the partial effects of the studies conducted, and Table 4 summarizes the main results of the hypothesis testing.



Figure 7. Overview of partial effects, Studies 1–3.

Note: Actor type is dummy coded (unknown = 0, celebrity = 1), + denotes significant positive effect, - denotes significant negative effect, 0 = denotes no significant effect, n = denotes that relationship was not tested; α = .05, first arithmetical sign = Study 1a result / second arithmetical sign = Study 1b result / third arithmetical sign = Study 1c result / fourth arithmetical sign = Study 2 result / fifth arithmetical sign = Study 3 result.

Study 3	Study 2	Study 1c	Study 1b	Study 1a
n/a	Not	Not	Not	Not
	supported	supported	supported	supported
n/a	Not	Not	Not	Not
	supported	supported	supported	supported
Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported
Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported
n/a	Not	Not	Not	Not
	supported	supported	supported	supported
n/a	Not	Not	Not	Not
	supported	supported	supported	supported
Supported	Not	Supported	Supported	n/a
	supported			
n/a	Not	Not	Not	n/a
	supported	supported	supported	
	~ ~			
Supported	Not	Not	Not	n/a
	supported	supported	supported	
	Study 3 n/a n/a Supported Supported n/a Supported n/a Supported	Study 3Study 2n/aNot supportedn/aNot supportedn/aNot supportedSupportedSupportedn/aNot supportedn/aNot supportedn/aNot supportedn/aNot supportedn/aNot supportedn/aNot supportedSupportedNot supportedn/aNot supportedSupportedNot supportedn/aNot supportedSupportedNot supportedSupportedNot supported	Study 3Study 2Study 1cn/aNotNotsupportedsupportedn/aNotNotsupportedsupportedsupportedSupportedSupportedSupportedSupportedSupportedSupportedSupportedn/aNotn/aNotn/aNotn/aNotn/aNotsupportedsupportedn/aNotsupportedsupportedn/aNotSupportedSupportedn/aNotsupportedsupportedn/aNotsupportedsupportedsupportedNotsupportedsupportedSupportedNotsupportedsupportedSupportedNotsupportedsupported	Study 3Study 2Study 1cStudy 1bn/aNotNotNotsupportedsupportedsupportedn/aNotNotNotsupportedsupportedsupportedn/aNotNotNotsupportedSupportedSupportedSupportedSupportedSupportedSupportedSupportedSupportedn/aNotNotNotn/aNotNotNotn/aNotNotNotn/aNotNotNotsupportedsupportedsupportedn/aNotSupportedSupportedn/aNotNotNotsupportedsupportedsupportedn/aNotNotNotsupportedsupportedsupportedsupportedNotNotNotsupportedSupportedsupportedSupportedNotNotNotsupportedSupportedsupportedSupportedNotNotsupportedSupportedNotNotsupportedSupportedNotNotNotsupportedsupportedsupported

Table 4. Overview	of hypothesis	testing, H1–H4,	Studies 1–3
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H4d	n/a	Not	Not	Not	n/a
Actor Type \rightarrow Identification \rightarrow Reflection \rightarrow		supported	supported	supported	
Brand Attitude (+)					
H4e	Supported	Not	Not	Not	n/a
Actor Type \rightarrow Reflection \rightarrow		supported	supported	supported	
Brand Attitude (-)					

Note: n/a = not available, as the hypothesis was not tested in this study.

General Discussion

Marketers use stories to enhance ad effectiveness, with the main character being a critical component. In the case of human actors, this can be either an unknown actor or a celebrity. The present research investigated the impact of a celebrity versus an unknown actor on three main aspects of story involvement and retrospective reflection. Across three studies featuring different narrative video ads, the use of a celebrity (vs. unknown) actor exhibited mixed effects on ad effectiveness. The celebrity (vs. unknown) actor consistently strengthened the para-social relationship and influenced brand attitude through this pathway. Our final study suggests that this effect was similar for both narrative and non-narrative video ads, and in none of the studies did the celebrity have a significant direct effect on brand attitude compared to an unknown actor, beyond the effect of the para-social relationship. In contrast, we repeatedly observed a negative relationship between the celebrity actor and retrospective reflection in our path models.

Previous research has not definitively determined how celebrities impact the persuasive processes of narrative video ads. While numerous studies have examined the persuasive effects of celebrity endorsements (for a review, see Knoll and Matthes 2017), the mechanisms by which celebrities influence the effectiveness of narrative videos have received limited exploration (e.g., Addis and Holbrook 2010). It has not been clear whether celebrities actually increase the persuasiveness of narrative video ads. On the one hand, there is evidence that a celebrity has the potential to increase involvement in the story, as indicated by the literature on familiarity with narrative characters and transportation (e.g., Kaufman and Libby 2012), para-

social relationships with celebrities (e.g., Liebers and Schramm 2019), and identification with story characters (e.g., Sestir and Green 2010). On the other hand, there is reason to believe that a celebrity blocks the transfer of positive effects, because consumers might consider that the story is not relevant to their personal lives (i.e., retrospective reflection; Hamby, Brinberg, and Daniloski 2017).

Our results challenge the notion of an unconditional positive impact of celebrity endorsers in narrative video ads and the belief that celebrities are the key to increasing narrative video ad effectiveness. Although we focused on celebrities with whom the study participants were familiar and compared the effects to an unknown actor, the celebrity did not increase transportation or identification. Moreover, none of the studies revealed a positive direct effect on brand attitude. This finding is further supported by a single-paper meta-analysis (McShane & Böckenholt, 2017). For all studies and for the narrative video condition in Study 3, the across-study estimate of the effect of celebrities on brand attitudes was .11 (95% CI: –.08, 0.30), which indicates that there is no significant effect of the celebrity vs. the unknown actor across the studies when the para-social relationship is not considered.

Our findings expand the literature on the psychological processes of celebrity effects within a new advertising context: narrative ads featuring celebrities (for a review, see Bergkvist and Zhou 2016). This underscores the need for further research on the conditions under which celebrities can strengthen the persuasiveness of narrative video ads. In line with previous findings (e.g., Kim, Ratneshwar, and Thorson 2017), we observed positive effects of the narrative format compared to the non-narrative format. However, the Study 3 data do not suggest that celebrity effects on para-social relationships differ between narrative and non-narrative videos. This raises questions as to whether the effects of short narrative and non-narrative videos are as different as research on text narratives has indicated. Indeed, the video format is much more immersive than the print format, and even in print ads the inclusion of

visuals might alter the processing of the narrative. For example, transportation mediated effects on persuasion in verbal narrative print ads, but this was not the case in visual narrative print ads (Lien and Chen 2013). Therefore, it is possible that short, dynamic visual formats, such as video ads, may reduce effects evoked by narratives, and that the short video format attenuates the effects seen in text formats because it is more immersive. The immersive nature of video (Walter et al., 2017) could lead to ceiling effects, leaving less room for celebrities to become important in the development of narrative ideas.

Because we did not vary characteristics of the celebrities in our studies systematically, it is too early to conclude that celebrities cannot play a central role in the effectiveness of narrative video ads, and a more important role than in non-narrative video ads. It might be that celebrities strengthen transportation when they are associated with the specific story or appear frequently in similar stories. Future research should illuminate the role of specific aspects of the celebrities and the story, as well as the interaction of these variables.

The contribution of the present research derives from a) the specific manipulation of the video ads (Studies 1a–c and 3) and the validation with real video ads (Study 2), and b) the focus on different potential pathways through which a celebrity could influence the effectiveness of a video ad. In Studies 1a–c and 3, we manipulated actor type in narrative and non-narrative video ads by switching the face of the celebrity with that of an unknown actor, which allowed us to keep all other elements of the video stable. Using videos instead of print or image-text narratives aligns with the need for authentic, audiovisual stimuli in consumer research (Hamby and Russell 2022). Importantly, our results were consistent between the face-swapping and the unaltered real ads studies. Hence, we see face-swapping as a promising method for comparing actor effects in video ads, minimizing differences between different actor conditions. We hope to inspire other researchers to use this approach to study narrative video ads.

The study of the three different aspects of story and character involvement as pathways through which celebrities could influence the effectiveness of the video ad contributes to our understanding of the function of celebrities in video ads. Our analyses show that the three pathways represent distinguishable concepts and are differently linked to the celebrity and brand attitude.

Para-social Relationship, Transportation, Identification, and the Potential to Mediate Celebrity Effects

A main finding of the current studies is that para-social relationships are a potential lever for increasing the persuasiveness of narrative video ads with celebrities. Across studies, we found a positive effect of the celebrity (vs. unknown) actor on para-social relationship and an indirect effect of the celebrity (vs. unknown) actor on brand attitude. Para-social relationships have been found to be important drivers of the effectiveness of videos for brands (e.g., Liu, Liu, and Zhang 2019), but we extend this research to a narrative ad context and link para-social relationship to retrospective reflection, a response to narratives (Hamby, Brinberg, and Daniloski 2017).

While the effects of the celebrity actor on para-social relationship demonstrate a potential lever for increasing the persuasiveness of a narrative video ad, the effects on other aspects of involvement are less promising. Contrary to our expectations that a story character with whom consumers are familiar would induce higher levels of transportation (Green 2004; van Laer et al. 2014), the celebrity (vs. unknown) actor did not increase transportation in any of the four studies where transportation was measured. Therefore, our studies suggest that knowing an actor does not necessarily increase transportation in narrative video ads.

Transportation levels in the video ads were generally consistent with previous studies (in absolute values; Glaser and Reisinger 2022), and transportation was positively related to brand attitude. Therefore, the transportation level cannot explain the weak effect of celebrities on

transportation in our studies. In fact, transportation played a role in the perception of the videos, and there was enough room for a possible reinforcing effect of the celebrities. Rather, our data suggest that a celebrity actor does not have much power to transport consumers into an ad story, and that the staging of the story is probably more important for transportation.

Although we expected higher consumer identification with the celebrity due to the desirable image of celebrities (e.g., Erdogan 1999), consumers did not identify more with the celebrity (vs. unknown) actor in any of the studies, and the effect of identification on brand attitude was significant in only one study. Nevertheless, other studies with human and animal characters have repeatedly found a positive correlation between identification and brand attitudes (Dessart 2018). It should be noted, however, that these studies did not compare the effects of celebrities vs. unfamiliar actors in an experiment which held the ad content constant except for the actor type, as we did in Studies 1a–c and 3.

We conceptualized identification as self-other (image) overlap, an approach that is widely used in the marketing literature (e.g., Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) and in social psychology (e.g., Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992). Nonetheless, our conceptualization of identification leaves open whether higher overlap is the consequence of seeing oneself in the actor or whether the actor becomes part of the self (Galinsky, Ku, and Wang 2005). Alternative measures of identification that view it as perspective taking clearly refer to seeing oneself in the actor (Cohen 2001). Future research could distinguish whether the effects of narrative advertising depend on whether the actor is included in the self or whether the self is projected onto the actor.

Reflection as the Impeding Pathway in Celebrity Effects

Retrospective reflection on the relevance of a story to one's life is considered an important mechanism of story persuasion (Hamby, Brinberg, and Daniloski 2017). A highly relevant finding of the current studies is the potential of celebrities to block retrospective reflection in

narrative video ads. We suppose that when consumers reflect on a story, they may feel that a celebrity's story world is far removed from the world they experience, and that a kind of ambivalence occurs in which they feel related to the celebrity in a para-social way, while being aware that celebrities live in a different world. The presence of a celebrity may have fostered an enhanced para-social relationship in which consumers felt a closer connection or bond with the portrayed character than with an unknown actor. Conversely, consumers are aware of the difference between their everyday lives and the glamorous, often distant world of celebrities. Thus, this competition between para-social relationship and reflection may be at least partly responsible for the weak effects of celebrity.

However, our data suggest that the opposing function of retrospection varies for different ads. While we found consistent effects for the Lancôme ad used in most of our studies, we did not observe a significant effect in Study 2. At this point, we can only speculate about which aspects of ads contribute to this opposing effect of retrospection. One possibility is that retrospection opposes the effect of other forms of involvement (e.g., the perception of a parasocial relationship) when ads depict contexts significantly distant from consumers' lives, as seen in the Lancôme ad. In contrast, some of the stories in Study 2 were more relatable to everyday experiences.

Managerial Implications

In our studies, celebrities positively impacted brand attitudes only indirectly, through perceived para-social relationships. When disregarding the indirect effect through para-social relationship, none of our studies (see Web Appendix C) showed that celebrities outperformed unknown actors in narrative video ads in terms of brand attitude through any other pathways. This suggests that using celebrities in this advertising context is risky, not least because of the potential to diminish retrospective reflection. Celebrities are often used in advertising to signal exclusive brand positioning, but in narrative ads they may signal an exclusive story world that

is very different from the consumer's world, which may reduce consumer reflection on the story.

Further, even when disregarding any potential risks mentioned above, recognized celebrities did not outperform the unknown actors in terms of immediate effects on brand attitude in narrative ads. Given our exclusion of responses from participants who were unable to identify the celebrity, the persuasive impact of a celebrity is likely even more limited than our findings indicate. Advertisers should evaluate their marketing performance metrics carefully against the added cost of hiring a celebrity versus an equally attractive but unknown actor. For brand attitude alone, unknown actors may be a more cost-effective choice, although a comprehensive assessment should consider other factors such as brand building (e.g., non-evaluative meaning transfer of traits from a celebrity to a brand; Bergkvist and Zhou 2016), media echo (e.g., having a celebrity in one's advertising campaign creates a lot of word of mouth and thus likely more reach), brand recall, and long-term celebrity-brand conditioning (e.g., when consumers think of Nespresso, they think of George Clooney and vice versa, an outcome that is beneficial to both parties).

The results of Study 3 suggest that actor type effects on para-social relationships remain consistent, unaffected by the narrativity of the ad. This suggests a universal and stable quality to celebrity persuasion via para-social relationships, irrespective of narrative or non-narrative formats. However, it also means that the narrative format does not enhance the celebrity effects. Although the role of format appears minor in this context, advertisers should note that narrative video ads are generally more effective (e.g., Kim, Ratneshwar, and Thorson 2017), and they should assess how format attributes can impact their campaign success metrics.

Limitations and Future Research

In Studies 1a–c and 3, our stimulus was limited to one celebrity and one product category (perfume). In these studies, we used face-swapping technology to create a control condition

with an unknown actor that was nearly identical to the videos with the celebrity. This increased the internal validity of these studies compared to previous research. However, this approach had limited external validity, since we used just one ad, one brand, and one actor gender. To increase the external validity of our research, Study 2 involved 10 different ads with different actor genders in which we aggregated ratings across ads and products to reduce the effects of story context. However, an important limitation remains, namely that we did not use the same technology for Study 2. As technology advances, stimuli like those we used in Studies 1a–c and 3 will become easier and less costly to produce. This would allow future research to use a larger sample of experimentally manipulated narrative ads with different celebrities and product categories (e.g., utilitarian and hedonic products) and could strengthen the generalizability of the results observed in our studies. For example, we limited our studies to popular celebrities and characters with positive appeal, on the grounds that companies want to leverage the positive image of the celebrity for their brand. Future studies, however, could explore variations in story and character characteristics, including disliked celebrities or less positive character roles in narrative ads.

Furthermore, given our aim of highlighting significant celebrity effects, we only examined the effects of celebrities who were recognized by consumers. Despite our focus on recognized celebrities, the effects on brand attitude were unexpectedly weak. We would not expect stronger effects when consumers have previously been exposed to a celebrity but do not consciously recognize the celebrity in the video. However, it would be very interesting to examine the effects of such unrecognized celebrities. Indeed, not recognizing a celebrity might reduce consumers' tendency to correct for a potential influence that might be quite obvious when they watch a video that features a celebrity (Genschow and Florack 2014). However, given the current findings, it might be more promising to study such effects in advertising contexts associated with stronger celebrity effects than those found in narrative video ads. Although transportation scores were at a similar level compared to prior studies that have used video advertisements as stimuli (e.g., Glaser and Reisinger 2022), data on transportation of video ads are limited. Given the relevance of video in the daily life of consumers, this shortcoming should be addressed. However, it has to be taken into account that longer videos (full-length or short movies) may have a much higher level of transportation, and celebrities might unfold effects in such longer formats. Therefore, the interpretation of the results may be limited to the degree of transportation we studied.

Given the lack of effect of actor type on transportation, future research could distinguish between mediated perceptions of familiarity with story characters (e.g., knowing someone from movies) and immediate perceptions of familiarity (e.g., meeting someone in person) in narrative ads and test for potential differences in transportation. Researchers may also wish to examine differences in the effects of narratives when the actor is included in the self and when the self is projected onto the actor. Furthermore, although we did not find moderating effects of message format (narrative vs. non-narrative), the results in this area warrant future research. Finally, the lack of expected advantages of the known celebrity over the unknown actor may be related to the choice of medium, as much of the previous research has focused on print and not on video, as we did.

Conclusion

Narrative video ads present a unique advertising form, posing challenges in studying the impact of different characters due to a lack of comparable control conditions. In the present research, we employed face-swapping technology to investigate how altering only the actor's face affected ad effects. We replicated these effects by comparing ratings across videos with stories that were similar but not identical. The consistency of the results underscores the distinct processes driving persuasiveness in narrative video ads compared to other contexts. In three studies, we discovered that the celebrity impact in narrative video ads was notably weaker than is typically reported in persuasion literature. Our findings indicate that celebrities may influence brand attitudes indirectly through para-social relationships, but we did not find direct effects of celebrities. Nor did we find that celebrities enhance other forms of character involvement; on the contrary, the presence of celebrities may have the effect of reducing the reflection that the story has a connection to one's own life. Future studies should aim to shed light on other story elements that might enhance celebrity effects in narrative video ads on involvement and attitudes, as our studies show that such effects cannot be taken for granted.

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