Advertising and Affinity:
A Quantitative Perspective of Walter Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm and Rational World Paradigm.

Elaine Petitgout

Jack Lane
Narrative Paradigm and Rational-World Paradigm

Review of Literature

Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm has been a controversial idea since it was introduced. Many scholars insist that humans are rational beings and in order to influence them, one must make a solid, reasonable argument (Griffin, 2009). Through a review of literature and an experiment, we intend to specifically define the Rational-World Paradigm and Narrative Paradigm, discover how each are used in advertising, and discover which has the most effect on consumer behavior.

In a primarily consumerist culture, the cacophony of advertisements creates confusion for consumers. Brands can no longer create appeal and differentiate themselves using traditional methods. Brands must discover and implement marketing strategies that appeals to and effects more consumers. Fisher’s Narrative paradigm uses storytelling devices through the use of pathos speech, while the Rational-World Paradigm appeal uses logos to reason with the consumer and persuade him to make a purchase. There has been little research that explores Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, and even less comparing it to the Relative-World paradigm. We will define and examine both of these devices according to the available literature.

Narrative Paradigm

Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm defines humans as storytelling animals. They interpret a story and respond based on values. Humans live in a world of stories, and from them they create their own reality. Determining what they find valuable results from history and culture. This means narratives can only be interpreted through built understandings. If a narrative hangs together, has coherence, and has fidelity it can be persuasive (Fisher, 1987).

Söderlund and Dahlén (2010) offered insight into how certain story elements must be used carefully to illicit the desired consumer response. For example, if surprise is valuable in storytelling, it must not affect consumers so much that they doubt the plausibility of the ad or dismiss it as unlikely or
impossible. Surprise must be used purposefully. The article explains that only violent or controversial images used within a narrative format affected consumer behavior (p. 1812). Fewer viewers remembered ads from companies such as Benetton that juxtaposed the brand name with violent images, but did not use the images as part of a larger story process. However, ads that used violence as an element of surprise within a story structure appealed more to viewers, because the suspense became a reason to remember the ad (p. 1814).

Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm does not leave room for the complexities of human nature. According to Olsen (1999), “If Fisher’s conception of human and human communication is correct, than messages that rate high in appealing to the narrative rationality of audience members should also rate high in other measures of effective persuasion” (p. 42).

Complementary to this view, Wang and Calder (2006) tested whether an ad’s intrusiveness within an existing story had an effect on the persuasiveness of the advertisement. Transportation describes an experience when a consumer gets “caught up” or “lost” in a narrative (p. 151). If an ad interrupts the flow of a narrative while a subject is experiencing high transportation, the ad may have a negative reception. Alternatively, ads that are unobtrusive during high transportation receive positive reactions from focus groups (p. 161).

While these sources helped structure our understanding of Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm and its applications, we found fewer examples of experiments and quasi-experiments that focused specifically on how narratives influence consumer behavior. Lebel & Cooke (2008), described how consumers participate in constructing brand narrative but did not probe into how responding to brand characters affected their buying behavior. They assessed familiarity with specific brand spokes characters but did not evaluate whether familiarity correlated with consumption.

Olsen (1999) experimented with this concept by randomly assigning rational and narrative messages to a group. He measured their responses through a questionnaire. To eliminate sampling error
he used a modified version of the COFIDEL Instrument, which reduced bias by replacing lead words like “story” with neutral words like “message” (p. 47). The questionnaire assessed the test groups’ perceived narrativity of the messages (p. 47). The results concluded that there were not significant statistical differences, meaning that the strengths of persuasion between narrative and rational were nearly the same. However, his study focused on the effectiveness of religious tracts rather than consumer products, so our results may be different.

*Rational-World Paradigm*

The Rational-World Paradigm is made up of five ideas. (1) Humans, by nature, think in a rational way; (2) humans make decisions and communicate through inferential and implicative arguments; (3) the form an argument takes is a result of the circumstances that are being argued; (4) one's specific knowledge, skilled arguing, and employing rules of advocacy determines his rationality; and (5) the world's questions can be answered through proper analysis and argument (Fisher, 1987, p. 59).

Often, advertisers will attempt to appeal to a consumer’s rational nature in order to influence their behavior. Mediums, like home shopping networks and infomercials use this marketing tactic much more than network commercials. This type of advertising utilizes semiotics in order to influence a purchase. Details like logos, demonstration, premise, values, appeals, sound and music are used to reproduce the quality of a product, so that the potential consumer might be able to better understand how the item might be useful or valuable (Choi, 2011, p. 647).

Unless a celebrity or guest gives testimonials, for the purposes of this study, their appearances will be considered a rational appeal. Celebrities are used to enhance and elevate a brand's image (Choi, 2011). An audience wishes to identify with celebrity guests, including the products a celebrity may use. Celebrities promote a feeling of reliability in consumers. “During this process, persuasion power comes from the authority, knowledge, and the charisma that some experts and celebrities have. These factors
become rhetorical strategies that have strong power to persuade viewers (i.e., implying the reliability of products because they are endorsed by famous people or experts)” (p. 5).

Choi (2011) addresses the effect the word “chance” has on consumers. Phrases like, “last chance,” “chance of a lifetime,” and “don't miss your chance” give consumers the sense that the product will not be available for long, or that they may miss a unique opportunity. Korean home shopping networks implement a countdown to reinforce that assumption. Audiences are manipulated into immediate action because they are convinced they will lose the chance to purchase the commodity (p. 648).

Advertisers are also burdened with presenting a sense of safety. A consumer must be convinced that the potential benefits of the purchase will outweigh both the risk and the cost. These conditions are much more extreme in Korea than in the United States. According to Korean Home Shopping Advertising, after a product is opened Korean stores will no longer refund the price of the purchased goods. So, Koreans are much more influenced when the stability and reliability of a product is emphasized. However these appeals are not lost on Americans. Promises of free shipping, free service, and 100% money-back guarantees increase confidence in a product or service and can often be a deciding factor when a consumer is unsure about a purchase (Choi, 2011).

The Rational Model of Trust explores how the ego perceives potential loss and gain. According to Gabbay & Leenders (2003), “Trust is an essential rational (common view) placing trust is like placing a bet a rational actor will trust if the chance of winning is greater than the amount that will be lost. Ego trusts if the odd ratio is higher than loss ratio” (p. 511-512). In order to influence the rational mind, advertisers will focus on favorable information, make negative information seem less relevant, and redefine negative information to make it seem positive.

Literature addressing rational appeals in advertising discussed methods that Korean home shopping networks used to sell products, described how semiotics are used to support rational appeals,
and explained how people come to trust advertisements. However, there are large gaps in research regarding Rational-World paradigm. Choi (2011) discusses how Koreans are influenced through rational arguments, but this may be a result of Korean culture and have no effect on western consumers.

Very little research has been done to see the effect that Fisher's Narrative paradigm has on the modern consumer. A minimal number of studies explore how buyers choose their purchases rationally. However, there has been no research comparing the two paradigms. Our research seeks to fill the gap of knowledge regarding how the Narrative Paradigm and Rational-World Paradigm influence consumer behavior, and more specifically potential consumer buying habits.

**Purpose of Study**

Fisher's Narrative Paradigm suggests that humans store memories as stories, they consider their lives in a story format, and their emotions are most easily influenced through narratives (Griffin, 2009, p. 298). However, other communication specialists insist that people are much more rational beings. The Rational-World paradigm states that people are logical and make decisions based on evidence and lines of argument (p. 301).

RQ: Which marketing strategy (Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm or Rational-World Paradigm) has the most affect on consumer behavior?

H: When a purchase is low-risk/ transformational, narratives will be more influential. If a purchase is high-risk/ informational, rational arguments will be more persuasive.

**Method**

Our method will be an experiment in which two groups of people will be shown different ads for POM Wonderful pomegranate juice and take a post-test based on their reaction. By using both a rational ad and a narrative ad, we will be able to determine if there is a significant difference in consumer response to either category of advertisement. The separate groups will be alike enough in sample that we will be able to consider their reactions comparable.
Participants

According to Treadwell (2011), our group should use a convenience sample. Constraints on time and money make this our best option. We will not assume that this sample represents any larger group, i.e. city, state, country. This sample would give us a general idea about which kind of arguments are the most effective in advertising (p. 109).

We need three separate samples in order to complete this experiment with the least amount of sampling error. The groups would be randomly assigned into three groups: a control group, a group that observes a narrative advertisement, and a group that observes a rational-argument advertisement. Random sampling removes all control from the researcher, reducing the sampling error (Olsen, 2011b).

As students our resources are limited, so we would ask a few professors to suggest that their class attends. Ninety-six percent of volunteers age 18-30 cited financial compensation as their main motive for volunteering for an experiment (Van Gelderen, Savelkoul, Dokkum, and Meulenbelt, 1993). This leads us to believe that financial compensation would improve attendance to our experiment. If the professors offered similar compensation (extra credit), our experiment attendance would most likely improve. However, we could not ask or require a professor to provide these, only suggest it as an option.

Alternatively, our group could request volunteers from other departments, or from community. This does create the problem that the only participants are the type of people who volunteer for experiments. Though this does limit the psychographics and possibly the demographics of our sample (Olsen, 2011a), it should not have a huge impact on the way in which these volunteers receive and interpret the ads.

For a larger, more complex experiment, a stratified sample would reduce the sampling error (Treadwell, 2011). However, realistically we cannot ensure that all demographics and psychographics
will be present within our volunteer group. Random sampling will be sufficient in order to conduct our experiment.

*Instrumentation*

The rational argument groups will receive advertisements that use facts, logic, and reason to make their argument. The narrative groups will receive advertisements that use storytelling elements to make their argument. All groups, including the one not shown an advertisement, will take a post-test to express their thoughts and opinions (Olsen, 2011).

Our questionnaire will implement both nominal and interval measurements (Olsen, 2011b). Nominal variables will make up the demographic portion of our instrument. These questions will help us classify the experiment participants. If age, race, or employment status affects the way people perceive and react to advertisements, nominal questions will allow us to identify those trends. The demographic portion will also allow us to evaluate whether or not we have a representative sample of the population. If we find that our demographics lean towards one group, such as white males who are juniors in college, we will not be able to extrapolate the data to the rest of the population.

The interval questions will allow us to identify how consumers could receive the ads, interpret their meaning, and then act as a result of those interpretations. Richins points out that usage rating scales are used to separate unsuitable items. Our-post test includes rating scales for question 9-14, in order to put this practice in effect and decipher which ad techniques were most effective (Richins, 1997). The intro of Study 1 in this article also suggests that non-scaled questions allow us to identify the different emotions a consumer experiences during consumption situations, while also giving us a wide array of unique vocabulary (Richins, 1997). Questions 7 and 8 drew from this technique, in an effort to help us determine a correlation within these emotions.

To eliminate sampling error, we also derived some of the testing methods from the article “Measuring Audience Perceptions of Commercials and Relating Them to Ad Impact”. The section
“Relating perceptions to Ad Impact” describes the importance of post and pre-testing to determine if previus perceptions affected results (Aaker & Stayman, 1990). Because of this, we used questions 5, 6, and 15 to gauge these factors.

Data analysis

The independent variable (advertisements) will be classified nominally (Treadwell, 2011). For the purposes of the study, Appendix B will be considered Narrative and Appendix C will be considered Rational.

Narrative contains elements of plot, character, and conflict. The advertisement in Appendix B tells a story in which POM Wonderful pomegranate juice is a hero and poor health is a villain. The narrative suggests that the antioxidants in POM juice will save the consumer's life. The weakness of this specific ad is that the consumer must construct the meaning story on his own. Print ads lack elements of chronology, making interpretation difficult for a consumer.

Rational appeals must include an argument, well-used facts, and an effective presentation of the facts. Appendix C argues that POM wonderful has more antioxidants that various other drinks known for their antioxidant power. This ad uses facts found in a study sponsored by POM Wonderful. While the presentation is clear, concise and communicates the message well, the weakness of this ad is that POM Wonderful’s involvement in the experiment makes the validity of the ad unreliable (Treadwell, 2011, p. 81).

Consumer behavior is the dependent variable in the experiment and will be measured intervally using a Likert scale (Treadwell, 2011). Interval measurement will allow the group to determine which ad has the most effect and how much more affect either ad has.

This experiment tests for the difference that each type of ad has on consumers and the purchase decisions they make. So, to analyze the data taken from the questionnaire (Appendix A) a T-test table will be used. A T-test will allow the group to see the mean differences in the scores and enable it to
compare the two easily. For the purposes of this study, the ad with the highest mean score is most likely to have the greatest affect on consumer behavior (Treadwell, 2011).

Conclusion

Our study questioned whether Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm or the Rational-World Paradigm had more influence on consumer choices when applied in advertising. By conducting an experiment using rational and narrative advertisements, we hope to see a significant difference in consumer choices based on their reaction to these ads. We predict that narrative ads for POM Wonderful pomegranate juice would have a greater effect on consumer behavior than ones using a rational argument.

From the information found in our literature, we predict that rational ads will affect consumer choices when the purchases are high involvement/informational, meaning that there is a high risk and negative motivation for purchasing. Similarly, narrative ads will affect consumer choices when the purchases are low involvement/transformational, meaning there is low risk and positive motives (Persuit, 2011). Because the motivations for purchasing POM Wonderful juice are positive and little risk is involved with the purchase, we predict the narrative ad is more likely to affect consumer choices. For the purposes of this study, POM Wonderful is involved with sensory gratification and social approval (Persuit, 2011). The rational ad may have a neutral affect on the participants, who may not have positive motivations in this low risk purchase.

However, each consumer is different and there may be purchasing motivation we have not accounted for in the study. While buying juice is a low risk choice and considered low involvement/transformational, there may be negative motivations tied to the decision. For example, a consumer may choose to drink juice to prevent becoming ill rather than because they will enjoy the sensory experience of the product. If this is the case for a consumer, the rational ad may have great effect on them.

If our predictions are correct, POM Wonderful as a brand may want to focus their energy on creative narrative ads and limit their use of rational ads. They may find that rational ads are better
suited to sources where consumers with negative motivations will look, such as health magazines or their brand website. Meanwhile, narrative ads may be more effective on their general population of consumers who consider the purchase to be a casual choice.

Throughout the process of this project, our group has refined its analytical skills in order to find appropriate sources and to create an effective instrument. We developed a more open mindset to see the many ways our questions and study could be interpreted. We used critical thinking to create a study that would give us reliable results. Writing our product required that we be concise and use effective language, while examining our question with enough. This project became the culmination of the skills we learned in the course, and represents the resulting knowledge.


Persuit, J. (2011, November). Five steps in the IMC process. *Integrated Marketing Communication*. Lecture conducted from University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, NC.


Appendix A

Our post-test consists of fifteen questions, four of which are demographic, two of which measure pre-existing knowledge of the advertisement, and eight of which evaluate the advertisement’s effectiveness in appealing to the audience. The final question offers participants the chance to voice their opinion in their own words, which will account for any options we may not have considered in our other questions. Questions 7 and 8 use emotional responses pulled from the Consumer Emotions List (Richin, 1997). Questions 9 through 14 evaluate responses using a Likert scale.
Post-test
Circle the answer that best describes your current status.

1) Gender?
M   F   Other

2) Age?
17 or under   18-24   25-31   32-38   39-45   46-52   53-59   60-66

3) Employment Status:
Employed   Laid off   Unemployed   Receiving Government Aid   Student   Retired

4) Ethnicity:
American Indian / Native American   Asian   Black / African American
Hispanic / Latino   White / Caucasian   Pacific Islander

5) Were you previously aware of this ad?
Yes   No

6) Were you previously aware of this product?
Yes   No

7) How do you feel about the ad? (circle all that apply)
   e. Hopeful   g. Delighted   h. Thrilled

8) How do you feel about the product? (circle all that apply)
   e. Hopeful   g. Delighted   h. Thrilled

9) I would buy this product
Strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   Strongly agree

10) I would tell others about this product.
Strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   Strongly agree
11) How much did this ad appeal to you?
Not appealing at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 Highly appealing

12) How affective was this ad’s argument?
Not effective at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 Highly effective

13) How informed did you feel about the product?
Not informed at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 Highly informed

14) I would buy other products from this brand.
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly agree

15) Do you have any additional comments?
Appendix B

Note. From “POM Wonderful: Pure Genius Advertising,” by Nubby Twiglet, n.d.,

Appendix C

Note. From “POM is the Antioxidant Superpower,” by POM Wonderful, n.d.,

www.pomwonderful.com