Narrative Transportation and Cinematic Advertising:

The Role of Fantastical Thinking in Unrealistic Trailers

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Abstract

In line with transportation theory, narrative realism enhances transportation and persuasion in advertising. Our research investigates motion-picture trailers—narrative advertisements for films—and posits that less realistic trailers impose greater cognitive effort, exploring whether activating fantastical thinking facilitates processing unrealistic ads and thereby moderates the realism-transportation relationship. Two experiments using motion-picture trailers (realistic vs. unrealistic ads and high vs. low fantastical thinking) confirm that realistic ads achieve higher transportation and persuasiveness. Additionally, the studies reveal: (1) fantastical thinking moderates the positive impact of narrative realism on persuasion; (2) individuals with low fantastical thinking are more transported and persuaded by realistic ads; (3) differences in transportation and persuasion due to realism diminish for individuals with high fantastical thinking; and (4) those with high fantastical thinking experience heightened transportation and persuasion, regardless of ad realism.

Keywords: fantastical thinking, narrative transportation, trailer, cinematic advertising, film marketing

Imagination abandoned by reason produces monsters, but when united with it, it becomes the mother of the arts - Francisco Goya

In this article, we delve into the persuasive mechanisms of narrative ads, a highly popular communication medium characterized by chronologically sequenced and causally linked events. These ads employ storytelling and emotional engagement to persuade individuals and reduce their critical counter-arguing. Thus, narrative persuasion differs from analytical persuasion, which instead presents factual product information to rely on logical reasoning, evidence, and critical thinking to influence attitudes and behaviors (Appel and Richter 2007; Green, Garst, and Brock 2004; Green et al. 2008; Kim, Ratneshwar, and Thorson 2017; van Laer et al. 2014). In this research, we specifically examine motion-picture trailers, which function as narrative advertisements for films and represent a highly expressive form of storytelling within the arts. Trailers function as hybrid narrative forms and paratexts that blend promotion and storytelling (Kernan 2004). However, trailers differ from full narrative ads in that they construct expectations through selective cues rather than presenting complete story arcs. They operate simultaneously as promotional artifacts and narrative teasers, shaping audience anticipation through fragments of character, atmosphere, and conflict (Johnston, Vollans, and Greene 2016; Bogdanou 2022; Finsterwalder, Kuppelwieser, and de Villiers 2012). This hybridity underscores the need to examine transportation processes specifically in cinematic advertising, where narrative immersion arises from partial, compressed, and stylized story elements. In doing so, we also respond to Schmitt's (2023) recent call for research on the role of fantasies in the arts by investigating how fantastical thinking enables audiences to engage with unrealistic narrative content.

Although it is now well-known that narrative persuasion relies on the unique ability of stories to deeply engage and immerse people—a phenomenon referred to as 'narrative

transportation' (Green and Brock 2002)—narratives cater to diverse audience needs. The recent study by van Laer, Visconti, and Feiereisen (2018) identified five key needs that narratives can fulfill: understanding the outer world, understanding the inner world, investigating the outer world, forgetting the inner world, and looking after a lonely and suffering self.

Our work posits that these needs manifest in different types of narrative ads, particularly those with varying degrees of realism. Specifically, while the needs for understanding the outer and inner worlds, investigating the outer world, and caring for a lonely and suffering self may be supported by greater realism, the need for forgetting the inner world may also be fulfilled by a higher degree of unrealism, which more effectively facilitates escapism. While realistic narrative ads focus on familiar real-world stimuli that reflect consumers' everyday lives and experiences, unrealistic narrative ads immerse viewers in impossible worlds with mythical creatures, imaginary superheroes, and preposterous events. Realistic narrative ads are typically associated with higher narrative transportation, which can support persuasion. But, despite the recognized greater persuasive power of realistic narrative ads and the uncertain persuasive impact of unrealistic narrative ads (Dodds, Jaud, and Melnyk 2021), unrealistic narrative commercials are becoming quite popular. For example, Paramount+'s 'A Mountain of Entertainment' 2024 Super Bowl ad featured Sylvester Stallone alongside his daughters Sophia, Scarlet, and Sistine, as they set up camp on Paramount Mountain. They were joined by iconic characters like Dora the Explorer, Captain Pike, Ensign Mariner, Lieutenant Dangle, and Beavis and Butt-Head, all immersed in an unreal scenario where Stallone climbed a massive stone version of his own face carved into the mountain, which came to life in an animated and whimsical fashion. Another example is Nissan's 'Thrill Driver' 2022 Super Bowl ad, which showcased the transformative power of a Nissan Z car. Suddenly, Eugene Levy changed dramatically from a mild-

mannered gentleman to a tattooed action hero. The ad featured unrealistic scenes, such as the protagonist flying with the car from a rooftop skyscraper among explosions to save Dave Bautista and his coffee. These ads are part of a trend in which many commercials present unrealistic narratives, immersing viewers in impossible worlds with mythical creatures, imaginary superheroes, and preposterous events. Though such scenarios have become common in advertising, their persuasive impact remains uncertain (Dodds, Jaud, and Melnyk 2021).

This paper focuses on the persuasive mechanisms underlying unrealistic narrative ads like Paramount+'s and Nissan's, which are not currently explained by narrative transportation theory. Recent research shows that immersion can also arise through imagery and emotional dynamics rather than realism alone (Nabi and Green 2015; Appel and Richter 2010). According to this theory, transportation is often facilitated by known, familiar, and culturally relevant events that reflect true-to-life experiences (Green and Brock 2000). This explains the superior effectiveness of a more realistic narrative, but the scant research on the chain of effects highlighted by transportation theory (narrative realism → transportation → persuasion) fails to explain the seemingly paradoxical ubiquity of unrealistic narrative ads (Hall and Bracken 2011). For instance, it has been found that the use of grotesque imagery in luxury brand advertising—through curious, bizarre, and surreal images perceived as uncommon, otherworldly, provocative, and distant from reality—can stimulate transportation and yield significant persuasive effects (An et al. 2020). Because some consumers prefer stories with an air of unreality (Rose, Merchant, and Bakir 2012) and vary in their receptiveness to narrative messaging, which influences advertising effectiveness (Brechman and Purvis 2015), we posit that, under specific circumstances, unrealistic ads can also be highly persuasive. Specifically, we recognize the higher level of cognitive effort required by more unrealistic advertising narratives (Kim, Choi, Wakslak 2019), and we propose that an

additional cognitive resource – namely, fantastical thinking, conceived here as a temporarily activated imaginative mindset rather than a stable trait – can support viewers in coping with this challenge. Specifically, the activation of fantastical thinking can boost an individual's cognitive resources to enhance transportation. Fantastical thinking can thereby moderate the link between narrative realism and transportation so that the positive role of narrative realism might decline or even disappear in the presence of strong fantasizing.

This research contributes to arts management by offering insight into how narrative and imaginative elements in film promotion shape audience engagement and persuasion—issues at the core of cultural product marketing.

In what follows, we (1) present the cognitive load associated with processing narrative advertising; (2) describe the transportation-related relevance of realistic stimuli in the narrative; (3) propose fantastical thinking as an additional cognitive resource; (4) develop our conceptual framework and hypotheses; (5) present the experimental research design and its results; and (6) conclude with a general discussion of the results and their implications for future research.

Narrative Advertising Processing: A Demanding Cognitive Activity

By 'narrative,' we mean any 'message frame' featuring chronology and causality, regardless of format, media, or length (Escalas 2004). According to narrative transportation research (Gerrig 1993; Green and Brock 2000; Van Laer et al. 2014; van Laer, Visconti, and Feiereisen 2018), narratives present four essential story elements, namely identifiable characters, imaginable plot, climax, and key takeaway or moral.

Research shows that, in advertising, narrative persuasion elicits more favorable consumer attitudes than analytical persuasion (Escalas, Moore, and Britton 2004; Kim, Ratneshwar, and Thorson 2017) by fostering deeper engagement with the story rather than extensive

evaluation of the product (Brechman and Purvis 2015). This explains why narrative advertisements make up approximately 24.5% of prime-time commercials (Chang 2012b).

Narrative ads promote mental simulation (Kim, Ratneshwar, and Thorson 2017), creating imitative mental representations of events or sequences of events that impact individuals' cognition, affect, motivation, and behavior (Sanna, Schwarz, and Kennedy 2008). This has been identified as a fundamental activity for imagination (Taylor et al. 1998). However, mental simulation requires substantial cognitive resources (Chang 2009a), and high cognitive load can hinder effective engagement (Adaval and Wyer 1998). This cognitive effort may become even more demanding when narratives incorporate unfamiliar or unrealistic elements, which require additional imaginative elaboration (Kim, Choi and Wakslak 2019). Mental simulation keeps individuals more cognitively occupied compared with processing information analytically, potentially overloading cognitive resources in ways that pose threats to persuasiveness (Chang 2009a). Mental simulation plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of narrative ads, yet it necessitates the allocation of cognitive resources. When these cognitive resources are strained, additional imaginative capacities may be required to sustain simulation. The ease with which information is processed significantly affects individuals' responsiveness to the message within narrative ads. For mental simulation to be effective, narratives should present information that can be easily processed subjectively (Adaval and Wyer 1998). Such ease of processing enhances the transportation of individuals into the narrative.

Transportation into the narrative world involves a guided form of mental simulation (Green and Donahue 2008) that integrates attention, imagery, and feelings (Green and Brock 2000) and generates flow (Wang and Calder 2009). Consistent with Appel and Richter (2010), we treat immersion and engagement as facets of the broader transportation construct, reflecting focused attention, emotional absorption, and vivid mental imagery as

interconnected components of narrative experience. Recent perspectives emphasize that transportation can also arise through imagery and emotional shifts, independently of realism (Nabi and Green 2015; Winkler et al. 2023). Increased transportation enhances familiarity, emotional reactions, character identification, and discussion of the narrative (Green 2004; Seo et al. 2018). For example, influencer illness disclosures in narratives lead to greater transportation (Kim 2022). Despite extensive research, much about the mechanisms of transportation remains undiscovered (Zheng, Phelps, and Pimentel 2019). Moreover, individuals differ in their readiness to engage with narrative stimuli, which affects their susceptibility to transportation (Brechman and Purvis 2015)

Narrative Realism: A Key Driver of Transportation

Transportation is influenced by narrative features, individual traits, and contextual factors. Key narrative elements include high quality (Green and Brock 2000), detailed character aspects (Green et al. 2004), and realistic stimuli (Cho, Shen, and Wilson 2014; Green et al. 2008). Perceived realism, the extent to which a narrative seems to reflect the real world (Gerbner and Gross 1976), increases perceived authenticity (Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink 2008; Busselle, Ryabovolova, and Wilson 2004) and personal connection with characters or narrative worlds (Green and Donahue 2008), making the narrative more plausible and engaging. Beyond geophysical or factual accuracy, realism can also be conceptualized as anthropological proximity—the degree to which depicted situations resonate with universal human experiences such as family relationships, aspiration, conflict, or loss. This type of experiential realism may support transportation even when settings or events are fantastical or implausible (Bogdanou 2022). For example, the perceived realism of movies stimulates individuals to approach them more personally (Holbrook 1999; Meyer, Song, and Ha 2016) and more enjoyably (Koordeman, Anschutz, and Engels 2014). Similarly, realistic television

programs and ads have often been found to be more persuasive than unrealistic ones (Shrum, Wyer, and O'Guinn 1998). In many situations, realistic ads, leveraging familiar material (i.e., events, contexts, causal links, or other stimuli related to perceivers' previous experiences), require less cognitive effort and make the viewer's cognitive task easier (Fiske 1993). Hence, using realistic images like photos in ads stimulates mental simulation of consuming the products more effectively than unrealistic images like digital illustrations or caricatures (Kim, Choi, and Wakslak 2019). Increased perceived realism also drives the widespread use of product placement in advertising (Lee, Sung, and Choi 2011; Sung et al. 2009). In contrast, unrealistic narratives – those with a low perceived likelihood of occurrence in reality (Cho, Shen, and Wilson 2014) – challenge individuals' preexisting schemas, reducing plausibility, transportation (Green and Donahue 2008), and mental simulation (Sanna, Schwarz, and Kennedy 2008). However, recent research indicates that narrative engagement can also arise from imagery-based processing and emotional dynamics, independently of perceived realism (Nabi and Green 2015). Among the four essential elements that define a story (Gerrig 1993; Green and Brock 2000; Van Laer et al. 2014; van Laer, Visconti, and Feiereisen 2018), two can significantly vary in their level of realism. While the climax and the key takeaway or moral do not inherently affect a story's realism, the identifiable characters and the imaginable plot are pivotal in shaping its perceived realism. This is clearly illustrated in Paramount+'s commercial: the process of identifying with the emotional and cognitive consciousness of characters can occur even with fictional personas, including those in animated cartoons (Grudin 2006; Wirth et al. 2017). Meanwhile, the imaginable plot can incorporate elements such as temporal embedding, spatial embedding, intertextuality, and verisimilitude, all of which influence how realism is perceived (Ryan 2001).

When mental representations of events don't align with reality, plausibility is threatened, limiting mental simulation and its benefits (Taylor et al. 1998). As Hall and Bracken (2011)

observe, ‘realism is like air. It is only probably noted in its absence’ (p. 93). In unrealistic scenarios, people find it harder to relate and process the message, increasing uncertainty. Processing narrative ads is a cognitively demanding activity that relies on viewers’ existing narrative knowledge structures and cognitive abilities (Chang 2009a, 2009b). When one of these drivers is lacking, individuals experience more stress. Consequently, unrealistic narratives can impose greater cognitive demands, necessitating additional cognitive efforts, may result in lower levels of narrative transportation, and may therefore achieve lower levels of persuasion.

Ordinary logic supports these points. However, empirical evidence challenges such assertions. Indeed, a significant portion of narrative advertising incorporates unrealistic elements while achieving a persuasive impact comparable to realistic portrayals. These findings suggest that realism is not the only pathway through which narratives can achieve persuasive impact. This paradox can be explained by the activation of additional cognitive resources that sustain the persuasiveness of unrealistic narrative ads. To investigate the mechanism underlying this cognitive enhancement, we introduce the concept of fantastical thinking, which is a cognitive process that enables deep transportation into worlds filled with exploration, representations of the past or future, dreams, myths, legends, supernatural phenomena, and other fantastical elements (Dodds, Jaud, and Melnyk 2021; Schmitt 2023).

Fantastical Thinking: Activating an Additional Cognitive Resource

Lack of adequate information, knowledge, and control creates uncertainty and apprehension (Kramer and Block 2011). When cognitive resources are constrained, the difficulty of imagination increases (Philips 2017). Stress, uncertainty, and anxiety prompt diversion activities (Plante et al. 2017; St. James et al. 2011), with fantasizing being a common approach.

Fantastical thinking, defined as the cognitive process through which people construct alternative realities that challenge conventional understanding (Johnson 1997), ignites the imagination and encourages individuals to seek the extraordinary and to pursue the unexpected (Bardhi and Arnould 2005). This mechanism aligns with evidence that narrative immersion can emerge from imaginative or emotionally driven processing, independently of realism. In the present research, we conceptualize fantastical thinking as a temporarily activated cognitive state, distinct from fantasy proneness, which instead is a stable trait found in only a small portion of the population (Merckelbach et al. 1999). By entering fantastical thinking, individuals can better process and transport themselves into unrealistic narrative ads, thereby maintaining the ads' persuasiveness despite their lack of realism. When fantasizing, individuals enter temporarily into unreal worlds (Dodds, Jaud, and Melnyk 2021) in which everything is possible – even the impossible (Martin 2004) –consciously and deliberately suspending their 'disbelief in nonreality' (Plante et al. 2017, p. 127). The activation of fantastical thinking prompts behaviors, experiences, or cognitive processes that defy established laws of nature, thereby facilitating a temporary escape from the constraints of the real world (Johnson and Harris 1994). Fantastical thinking cultivates novel understanding of the world and boosts cognitive abilities (Lynn and Rhue 1986; 1988); it aids individuals experiencing a lack of control in critical situations (Hertzig and Farber 1999) and fosters an 'illusion of control' over significant matters (Bolton et al. 2002). As a result, anxiety and fear decrease, supporting any cognitive elaboration task (Taylor and Carlson 1997) and enhancing performance in activities such as role-playing, simulated identities, storytelling, and the fabrication of narratives (Merckelbach 2004). Further, fantastical thinking mitigates the perceived complexity of cocreation endeavors and improves overall performance in such tasks (Addis, Miniero, and Ricotta 2020). Throughout a person's life

span, fantastical thinking is a common coping strategy, invoked whenever the situation needs a boost in cognitive abilities (Langer 1975).

The cognitive processing of narrative advertisements entails such situations when people suffer from inadequate cognitive resources (Lord and Burnkrant 1988) and must confront elevated levels of stress (Taylor et al. 1998). In these cases, every distinction between fantasy and reality vanishes, and individuals engage in new interpretations of the world (Seregina 2014). Considering the beneficial effects of fantasizing on both children and adults (Weibel et al. 2018), the cognitive process of fantastical thinking – which involves transcending the bounds of reality and contemplating concepts lacking empirical evidence – is recognized as a facilitator of cognition. Fantastical thinking activates a cognitive resource that enhances cognitive elaboration (Proulx and Heine 2009). Through this mechanism, fantastical thinking enables individuals to sustain transportation even when narratives contain implausible or unrealistic elements. Consequently, engaging in fantastical thinking reduces emotional distress (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004). Moreover, the possibilities of narrative development expand, encompassing a broader range of potential outcomes (Dodds, Jaud, and Melnyk 2021; Weibel et al. 2018). This supports Schmitt's (2023) suggestion that fantasizing is not just a form of escapism, but a fundamental way through which people engage with and make sense of artistic experiences. Recent evidence also shows that emotional shifts and imagery-based processing can sustain transportation independently of realism (Nabi and Green 2015; Winkler et al. 2023), supporting our theorization that fantastical thinking can redirect attention from plausibility judgments toward experiential engagement.

Although fantasy proneness—as a stable individual trait—characterizes only about 4% of the population (Merckelbach, Muris, and Rassin 1999), fantastical thinking can nevertheless be intentionally activated as a temporary cognitive resource, thereby expanding

its practical relevance for advertisers, who potentially can leverage fantastical thinking as a strategic tool to engage and captivate their target audience.

Framework for Understanding the Role of Fantastical Thinking in the Transportation of Unrealistic Narrative Advertisements

The present research builds on previous studies of narrative advertising, transportation, realism, and fantastical thinking to understand the transportation mechanism in the case of unrealistic narratives. Our work focuses on the activation of fantastical thinking (low vs. high) and a narrative ad's level of realism (realistic vs. unrealistic). As mentioned previously, more unrealistic narrative ads are more challenging for people to process because they entail reduced levels of familiarity with knowledge structures and require higher levels of cognitive resources to deal with the relevant information (Kim, Ratneshwar, and Thorson 2017). When a lower level of mental simulation results, leading to higher stress and less persuasiveness, viewers typically favor more realistic and easier-to-process narratives (Chang 2009a, 2009b). Transportation theory typically suggests that individuals processing more realistic narrative advertisements tend to experience higher transportation, which can result in higher persuasion (McFerran et al. 2010). Indeed, realistic narratives may fulfill several of the five audience needs identified by van Laer, Visconti, and Feiereisen (2018), while escapism is more readily facilitated by unrealistic narratives. However, recent work indicates that realism is not a necessary precondition for transportation, as imagery-driven and emotionally driven engagement can also generate immersion (Nabi and Green 2015).

However, when considering the relevant literature, we expect that when people activate fantastical thinking, the difference in transportation between realistic and unrealistic narrative advertisements decreases or even disappears. Here, assisted by fantasizing, unrealistic narrative ads depict worlds in which consumers can lose themselves in the

narrative and easily believe its claims (Escalas 2007; McFerran et al. 2010), because fantastical thinking boosts imagery-based mental simulation, supporting transportation even when realism is low. Thus, we propose that fantastical thinking is an additional individual cognitive resource that plays a key role in processing unrealistic narrative ads, supporting cognitive elaboration, leading to higher transportation, and, via that, promoting greater persuasiveness (Figure 1).

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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As indicated by previous research (among others, Wang and Calder 2006, 2009), we anticipate that transportation into narrative ads will mediate the influence of realism on persuasion in general and specifically on consumers' evaluations of and intent to purchase the advertised product (Escalas 2007). Meanwhile, the ability of fantastical thinking to extend the realm of possibilities is crucial in narrative ads because 'the ease of accepting unrealism in stories facilitates a viewer's perception of the story as being close to real life' (Bilandzic, Schnell, and Sukalla 2019, p. 613). Fantastical thinking can actively support cognition and moderate the relationship between the realism of the narrative ad and transportation, which mediates the impact on persuasion. We propose that the narrative processing of unrealistic advertisements is a challenging activity for individuals, which can be better faced with boosted cognitive abilities. Activating fantastical thinking contributes an additional cognitive resource that helps individuals cope with unrealistic narratives. Thus, we propose that the link between narrative realism and transportation is moderated by fantastical thinking such that individuals who are higher in fantastical thinking process realistic and unrealistic narrative

ads more similarly (leading to less difference in levels of persuasion) while individuals who are lower in fantastical thinking are more transported (and persuaded) by more realistic narratives. More formally, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a: The narrative realism of the ads positively affects the level of transportation.

H1b: Transportation positively and directly influences the level of persuasion.

H2: Fantastical thinking negatively moderates the link between narrative realism and transportation such that the positive effect that appears under H1a declines or even disappears for higher vs. lower levels of fantastical thinking.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted an experimental study based on the integrated approach to advertising theory (Thorson and Rodgers 2012), which identifies three types of factors that trigger narrative processing: source factors, message factors, and receiver factors (Chang 2012a). Our study focuses on two such drivers. One relates to the message – i.e., its level of narrative realism. The other relates to the receiver – i.e., the activation of fantastical thinking. Meanwhile, we control for the third factor – i.e., the source.

As the context of investigation, we use movie trailers – i.e., hybrid narrative–promotional paratexts for motion pictures – which are interesting narrative ads because of two opposing features. On one hand, because of their prevalent storytelling nature (van Laer, Visconti, and Feiereisen 2018), films commonly stimulate viewers to identify and experience transportation (Wang and Calder 2006). On the other hand, the trailers are cinematic ads communicating information about specific films (Hennig-Thurau and Houston 2019). Being the most common advertisement for movies during their prerelease (Eastman, Bradbury, and Nemes 1985), they have often attracted the attention of scholars (Karray and Debernitz 2017). Indeed, previous studies have explored the link between videos and transportation en route to persuasion (Cao et al. 2021; Pitardi 2019), finding it particularly strong for mini-film advertising (Wu et al. 2020)—immersive stories presented in three- to 10-minute videos

disguising product-related information and distributed over the Internet (Karpinska-Krakowiak and Eisend 2020).

We report two between-subjects experimental studies that test our hypotheses and, before them, two pretests conducted to select the stimuli. The first pretest helped to select the movie trailers as the main independent variable. The second assessed a procedure for manipulating fantastical thinking. To the best of the authors' knowledge, such a manipulation has never before been pursued.

Empirical analyses

Pretest 1: Choice of Movie Trailer

To select the two different conditions of narrative realism, we conducted a pretest with 214 subjects (130 men, age *M*=24.45, *SD*=3.32) to identify two movies that could be regarded as realistic and unrealistic, respectively. An initial sample of thirty-one potentially comparable motion pictures included 15 assumed to be realistic and 16 assumed to be unrealistic. An online survey asked student participants to rate the extent to which they perceived each as being realistic and imaginative (on seven-point scales from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*). The 15 assumed-realistic films were rated 4.25 (*SD*=.32) on realism and 1.60 (*SD*=.33) on imagination, while the 16 assumed-unrealistic motion pictures scored 1.79 (*SD*=.35) on realism and 4.39 (*SD*=.38) on imagination. Based on this information, for the unrealistic condition, we chose *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride* (2005) – a story with fictitious characters, enhanced by animation – with scores of 1.64 (*SD*=.90) on perceived realism and 4.62 (*SD*=.64) on imagination. For the realistic condition, we chose *Capote* (2005) – a movie based on a true story, with specific physical, psychological, social, and temporal dimensions – that scored 4.33 (*SD*=.78) on realism and 1.67 (*SD*=.65) on imagination. These two trailers were also used in a further preliminary study to test their relative abilities to generate

transportation. As expected, an independent sample of 55 students (23 men, age *M*=22.35, *SD*=2.74) randomly exposed to the realistic or unrealistic trailer replicated Green and Brock's (2000) main effect of realism/unrealism on transportation (53.78 / 45.73; $F(1,53)=11.43$, $p<.05$). In addition, consistent with Green and Brock (2000) and Escalas (2007), transportation triggered a positive effect on persuasion, as measured by evaluation (on a 10-point scale from 1 = *terrible* to 10 = *excellent*) and willingness to watch (on a 7-point scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*). Specifically, in regressions on transportation, we found positive effects for both evaluation ($R^2=.53$, $F(1,53)=58.79$, $p<.001$) and willingness to watch ($R^2=.46$, $F(1,53)=45.32$, $p<.001$). Further details on this pretest, omitted here to save space, are available by emailing a request to the first author.

Pretest 2: Fantastical Thinking Activation

A second pretest was designed to validate our manipulation of the fantastical-thinking conditions, treating fantastical thinking as a temporarily activated cognitive state rather than a stable trait. In this pretest – conducted on 53 students (13 men, age *M*=24.57, *SD*=2.27) in return for course credit – participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions that were developed and tested: one for the low fantastical-thinking state and two for the high fantastical-thinking state. To induce a low fantastical-thinking state, participants were trained to calculate a company's market share by providing a concrete example with facts and figures related to a fictitious company; in this exercise, fantastical thinking was discouraged by presenting it as a threat to individual, personal, and professional performance and success. For the high fantastical-thinking condition, we developed two alternatives – both based on training to activate imaginative behavior, as suggested by Faber, Saayman, and Papadopoulos (1983) and consistent with Guided Affective Imagery (Leuner 1969) – to induce waking fantasies even for individuals who are unable to freely create a sequence of pictorial associations. For exploratory purposes, we developed two different alternative approaches –

the ‘basic’ (shorter) and the ‘complete’ (more demanding). In both cases, participants were invited and encouraged to use their ability to fantasize and were told that fantastical thinking is an excellent way to achieve personal and professional success.

Specifically, the ‘basic’ high fantastical-thinking condition presented a relaxing 8-minute video followed by a detailed explanation of autogenic training techniques (Faber, Saayman, and Papadopoulos 1983) in a calm and relaxing environment (a sound-attenuated, darkened, temperature-regulated laboratory). The ‘complete’ high fantastical-thinking condition used the same treatment plus the symboidraniatic method commonly adopted in psychoanalysis (Leuner 1969). Here, participants were instructed about six training techniques based on the symboidraniatic method and were asked to invent a story by employing one of the six symboidraniatic techniques and to think for one minute about the specific technique they had employed (Scott, Lerizt, and Mumford 2004).

The Creative Experience Questionnaire (Merckelbach, Horselenberg, and Muris 2001) served as a manipulation check for all three treatments. A one-way ANOVA (low vs. basic high vs. complete high fantastical-thinking conditions) was performed on the Creative Experience Questionnaire scores. A significant main effect of the fantastical-thinking manipulation appeared ($F(2,50)=34.08$, $p<.001$), with participants in the low fantastical-thinking condition showing the lowest level of Creative Experience (2.80, $SD=.72$), as expected. A subsequent contrast analysis between the two alternatives for high fantastical thinking ($F(1,51)=7.42$, $p<.01$) demonstrated that participants in the complete high fantastical-thinking condition showed a greater level of Creative Experience activation (4.68, $SD=.51$) than participants in the basic high fantastical-thinking condition (4.06, $SD=.83$). Accordingly, for the empirical studies presented in what follows, we employed the low fantastical thinking and the complete high fantastical-thinking conditions. (Again, further

details on the pretest just described are available by sending an email request to the first author.)

Study 1

Study 1 examines the effect of fantastical-thinking activation (high vs. low) and narrative realism on transportation (H2), with the latter mediating the influence of narrative realism on persuasion (H1a, H1b).

Participants and Design

The participants were 189 students (76 men, age M=22.98, SD=2.15) at an international business school who participated in the study in return for course credit. Study 1 used a 2-factor design – narrative realism (realistic vs. unrealistic) and fantastical-thinking activation (high vs. low) between-subjects on transportation.

Procedure

The entire experiment was conducted via personal computers in the laboratories of two business schools, where 94 and 95 participants were involved, respectively. This study was conducted in strict compliance with the ethical guidelines set forth by the schools. After checking for the non-existence of significant differences in the two samples (results available upon request), the two were merged to create one bigger sample that was used to run the analysis. First, participants were screened to eliminate those who had already seen *Capote* or *Corpse Bride*. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions – realistic (*Capote*) or unrealistic (*Bride*). They then read a synopsis of the movie and watched the relevant cinematic trailer before being randomly exposed to one of the two fantastical-thinking conditions (high vs. low).

Next, the participants completed a questionnaire that included measures of the dependent variables. They were first asked for responses to 12 items adapted from the

transportation scale originally developed for written narratives by Green and Brock (2000), which we use as an established measure of narrative immersion/engagement. Also, to assess persuasion, participants evaluated the motion picture on a 10-point scale (from 1 = *terrible* to 10 = *excellent*) and expressed their willingness to watch the movie on a 7-point scale (from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*). Participants then completed a measure of perceived realism – slightly adapted from Shrum, Wyer, and O'Guinn (1998) to suit the narrative ads employed here – by indicating on a five-item seven-point scale the extent to which they believed the trailer portrayed life realistically and everyday human situations, presented life as it really is, showed situations realistically, showed how other people live, and presented what really happens in other places (from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*). Finally, the participants reported their ages, genders, and nationalities.

Results

Manipulation check. To confirm the narrative realism manipulation, we employed two items related to the participants' perceptions of realism (unrealism) previously used in the pretest. Findings confirm that, compared to the unrealistic narrative ad, the realistic ad was perceived as more realistic (4.88 vs. 3.73, $F(1,187)=36.91$, $p<.001$) and less imaginative (3.05 vs. 4.38, $F(1,187)=29,04$, $p<.001$). To check for the effectiveness of the fantastical-thinking manipulation, we asked participants to what extent they felt able to fantasize at that moment on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1= *not at all* to 7 = *totally*). Results indicated that individuals in the high fantastical-thinking condition showed a greater self-perceived ability to fantasize than those in the low fantastical-thinking condition (5.03 vs. 3.46, $F(1,187)=55.56$ $p<.001$).

Transportation. As suggested by Green and Brock (2000), participants' ratings on the transportation scales were summed to form a unitary measure (α=.75). A two-way ANOVA on the narrative realism of the ad was performed for this transportation index. In support of H1a, a significant main effect appeared ($F(1, 185)=9.21$, $p=.03$) as well as a significant main

effect for fantastical thinking ($F(1,185)=36.15$ $p<.001$). More specifically, for low fantastical thinking participants, realistic ads exert a higher level of transportation (44.92, *SD*= 10.05) than unrealistic ads (37.06, *SD*=9.26). For participants in the high fantastical thinking condition, the positive impact of narrative realism on transportation diminishes, resulting in comparable levels of transportation for unrealistic ads (48.83, *SD*= 9.13) and for realistic ads (48.94, *SD*=7.60). In support of H2, this interaction term was also significant ($F(1,185)=8.71$, $p<.005$). These results appear in Figure 2.

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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Mediation analyses. To extend H2 and include persuasion in the analysis by predicting that fantastical thinking moderates the chain of effects between the narrative realism of the ad, transportation, and persuasion, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis to assess the conditional indirect effects. Here, the movie evaluation and the willingness to watch were averaged to form a single persuasion measure (α=.86). The relevant predictions were tested with the PROCESS macro (Model 7, Hayes 2013). The findings reported in Table 1 support the mediation hypothesis for transportation in the effect of realism vs. unrealism of the narrative ad on persuasion and confirm mediation moderated by fantastical thinking with an index of moderated mediation that is negative (-.66) and with a 95% confidence interval excluding zero (-1.15 to -.21).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Discussion

Study 1 confirmed the expected significant impact of narrative realism on transportation, demonstrating that realistic narrative ads transport participants to a greater extent than unrealistic ones. In addition, the study elucidated how transportation mediates the effect of narrative realism on persuasion, supporting hypotheses H1a and H1b, based on the original theory developed by Green and Brock (2000).

Our study also found support for H2. Specifically, the two-way ANOVA revealed a significant impact for the two main effects and for the interaction effect on transportation. Not only does narrative realism affect transportation, as already known, but also fantastical thinking promotes transportation and thereby enhances persuasion independent of the level of narrative realism of the ad. Further, as expected, fantastical thinking negatively moderates the relationship between narrative realism and transportation. Specifically, the positive effect of narrative realism on transportation that appears at low levels of fantastical thinking declines or disappears at high levels of fantastical thinking. Participants in the low fantastical-thinking condition are more transported by more realistic narrative ads, whereas individuals in the high fantastical-thinking condition show attenuated differences in transportation due to narrative realism.

Limitation. The findings suffer from a limitation. Specifically, they employ two different narrative movie trailers (*Capote* vs. *Bride*) to represent realistic vs. unrealistic narrative advertising. Though both Pretest 1 and all manipulation checks indicated that the two cinematic trailers are perceived as significantly more/less realistic and less/more imaginative, our results might still be affected by other confounding but uncontrolled variables associated with the two different trailers. As just one example, the different genres of the two movies might promote different consumer attitudes. Many other potential biases (actors, budgets, reviews, etc.) lurk in the background. To overcome this limitation, we conducted Study 2.

Study 2

Study 2 tests H1 and H2 while controlling for possible bias stemming from the previous use of two distinct narrative ads. Thus, in this final study, we employ only one movie trailer, manipulated to induce participants to perceive a higher or lower degree of narrative realism.

Subjects and Design

Eighty-eight students from an international business school participated in Study 2 in return for partial course credit. This study was conducted in strict compliance with the ethical guidelines set forth by the school and again followed a 2 (unrealistic vs. realistic) × 2 (low vs. high fantastical thinking) between-subjects design. But, unlike our previous study, in Study 2 we used only one narrative ad, which was manipulated to create each condition. As a result, the level of internal consistency of Study 2 should be improved.

Procedure

To repeat, Study 2 adopted the same procedure found in Study 1 but differed from the earlier study by using only one manipulated narrative ad.

Stimuli

We conducted a pretest to identify a narrative ad whose level of perceived realism could be easily and successfully manipulated. Thus, 159 participants (61 men, age M=23.76, SD=3.41) from the same international business school participated in a two-factor experimental design intended to identify a suitable narrative ad and to test our manipulation of its perceived realism. Based on the requirements of the narrative ads already adopted in Studies 1 and 2, we preselected four trailers – *Capote* (2005), *La Vie en Rose* (2007), *Sliding Doors* (1998), and *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007) – for which the level of perceived realism could be easily manipulated. The preselected movies all share two features: (1) they are based on real-life events and (2) they portray these events ambiguously, in a way that could also easily be

interpreted as unrealistic. Thus, to manipulate the level of perceived realism for each of the four narrative ads, we used the synopsis and the critic's review. In the realistic condition, both the synopsis and the critic's review were manipulated to highlight the real-life details of each ad. All relevant aspects of the cinematic trailer – such as actors, sequence of events, and physical, social, and temporal settings (Padgett and Allen 1997) – were analyzed to identify real-life details and then emphasized in the synopsis and critics' review so that the narrative ads were presented as real stories. In contrast, in the unrealistic condition, all imaginative and unrealistic details were emphasized so that subjects were induced to perceive the narrative ads as being far from ordinary and real-life situations. Participants were exposed to only one of the eight manipulations (4 narrative ads × 2 realism conditions) and then asked to complete the five-item seven-point Likert-scale index of perceived realism (Rubin 1981) to assess the success of our manipulation. Next, participants were asked for responses to the three-item seven-point credibility scale (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). Age, gender, and whether they had already seen the trailer served as control variables. Based on this pretest, we selected *Capote* as the narrative ad for Study 2 because it was the most ambiguous narrative ad – that is, it scored high for credibility when the realistic narrative ad condition was activated (3.46, *SD*=1.69) and also scored high when the unrealistic narrative ad was activated (4.50, *SD*=1.70). Thus, *Capote* emerged as an ambiguous movie that offered room for the successful manipulation of perceived realism.

Results

As in our previous studies, transportation (α=.76) and persuasion (α=.74) showed satisfactory internal validity, with transportation capturing participants' immersion/engagement in the narrative (Green and Brock 2000).

Manipulation check. As in Study 1, to provide a manipulation check for the fantastical thinking condition, we employed one item (a 1-7 Likert scale) to measure the extent to which

participants felt able to fantasize at that moment. As expected, the manipulation of low vs. high fantasizing was effective (3.26 vs. 5.60, $F(1,86)=90.37$, $p<.001$). Similarly, we checked the narrative realism of the ad manipulation. Findings confirmed that the realistic vs. unrealistic condition was perceived on average as being more realistic (5.07 vs. 3.36, $F(1,86)=32.48$, $p<.001$) and less imaginative (3.07 vs. 5.29, $F(1,86)=62.07$, $p<.001$).

Transportation. A two-way ANOVA conducted on participants' transportation yielded the expected significant interaction ($F(1,84)=10.46$, $p=.002$), with main effects for both narrative realism ($F(1,84)=8.74$, $p=.004$) and fantastical thinking ($F(1,84)=32.42$, $p<.001$). Thus, at low levels of fantastical thinking, realism vs. unrealism exerts a positive effect on transportation (48.72 vs. 37.11), whereas, at high levels of fantasizing, this positive effect disappears due to an increase in transportation at low levels of narrative realism (53.33 vs. 53.85) as seen in Figure 3. Subsequent contrast analysis (not reported here) further supports this pattern of results.

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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Mediation analyses. Study 2 also replicated the findings of the moderated mediation analysis. More specifically, a moderated mediation analysis employing the PROCESS macro (Hayes 2013, model 7) was again run, including narrative realism as the independent variable, fantastical thinking as the moderating variable, transportation as the mediating variable, and persuasion as the dependent variable. In more detail (as shown in Table 2), the index of moderated mediation is negative (-.98), with a 95% confidence interval that excludes zero (-1.66 to -.36).

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Discussion

In addition to confirming the results of Study 1, Study 2 makes a further contribution. Specifically, the realism of trailers was differently manipulated. Whereas in Study 1 we used two different movie trailers, in Study 2 we controlled for potential confounding factors by manipulating just one movie trailer in two conditions (realistic vs. unrealistic). Employing the same stimulus for the narrative realism manipulation adopts a more rigorous manipulation of narrative realism and rules out possible biases connected with the narrative ad that might have confounded previous results. Study 2 thereby corroborates previous findings and shows convincing support for H1a, H1b, and H2.

General Discussion

Even though consumer researchers have long acknowledged that fantasies drive customer value (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), little empirical work has examined the impact of fantastical thinking on consumer attitudes and behaviors, so Schmitt (2023) has argued for a deeper comprehension of the role that fantasies play in consumer behaviors. Indeed, the strong correlation between imagination and perception was discovered by Nyberg, Olsson, and Wendin (2021) in their research on children and insect-based nutrition. The present study investigates the role of imagination in perceptions and specifically focuses on the area of narrative advertising. Within the framework of the widely accepted theory of transportation, proposing that the perceived realism of a narrative has a significant positive

impact on immersion into the portrayed world (Green 2004; Green and Brock 2000), we test the moderating role of fantastical thinking. Here, across two experimental studies, we show that an unrealistic narrative advertisement is as capable as a realistic ad of triggering transportation and persuasion when the additional resource of fantastical thinking is activated. Our findings give empirical support to the key role played by individual fantasy in arts consumption, showing that fantastical thinking can actively help audiences connect with even the most unrealistic narratives. Our findings also clarify the psychological mechanism through which fantastical thinking operates. When activated, fantastical thinking reduces the perceived implausibility of unrealistic content, redirects cognitive processing toward imagery-based elaboration, and increases emotional absorption. In this sense, it both compensates for the lower realism of the narrative and enables an alternative pathway to transportation that does not rely on realism.

Our study provides a deeper understanding of the mechanism underlying the persuasive effect of unrealistic narrative ads, thereby investigating the power of storytelling. Such a result refers not only to narratives but also to any other escapist consumption. The latter is based on unrealistic situations (Scott 1994) and is widespread. Indeed, from hedonic products to imaginative advertisements, consumers greatly appreciate escapism (Brierley 1995). Thus, forgetting the inner world has been identified as one of the five audience needs in narratives (van Laer, Visconti, and Feiereisen 2018). In these cases – as in any unrealistic narrative, according to transportation theory – persuasive power is expected to be low. Their lack of narrative realism should render them unpersuasive. But our study sheds light on fantastical thinking as a potential psychological resource that, if activated while facing unrealistic narratives, results in persuasion in ways not anticipated by conventional transportation theory. Specifically, our findings revise the widespread assumption that realism is a necessary antecedent of transportation (van Laer et al. 2014). We demonstrate

that imaginative engagement activated through fantastical thinking can substitute for realism, enabling persuasive outcomes even when narratives diverge from everyday experience.

Managerial implications. These findings offer valuable insights for marketers in the creative industries, especially those promoting films where realism is not central—such as fantasy, animation, or experimental cinema. Trailers are more than advertisements; they are narrative experiences that shape how audiences approach a film. Our results suggest that even highly unrealistic trailers can be persuasive if they succeed in stimulating the viewer's imagination. This highlights the potential of using immersive storytelling, interactive content, or digital experiences (e.g., AR/VR) to enhance engagement. A striking example is A24's use of ambiguous, surreal trailers—such as for *The Green Knight* or *Everything Everywhere All At Once*—which immerse viewers in fantastical worlds through atmosphere rather than exposition. Understanding an audience's openness to fantastical thinking can also inform segmentation and media planning, leading to more targeted and effective promotional strategies. This suggests that marketers may rely on fantastical thinking – either to compensate for the lower realism typical of fantastical or experimental films or to enable a distinct persuasive route grounded in imagination rather than verisimilitude. These two roles—compensatory and enabling—reflect distinct psychological pathways: one fills the gap created by low realism, while the other activates an alternative immersive route based on imagery and affect rather than narrative verisimilitude.

Although fantastical thinking may not seem to be a primary explanatory mechanism, it nonetheless serves as an intriguing moderator. Thus, even if realistic narrative ads are generally more transporting and persuasive than unrealistic narrative ads, the latter could increase their transportation and persuasiveness if associated with activities that stimulate fantastical thinking. However, challenges in stimulating fantastical thinking may hinder its popularity. While fantasy and imagination can be effectively stimulated in certain scenarios,

such as through creative teaching strategies (Horng et al. 2005), managers in other consumption contexts may face difficulties in this regard, which can be time-consuming.

Future research. Further research is needed to explore whether stimulating fantastical thinking can be achieved through simpler protocols, thus emphasizing crucial managerial implications for advertisers (De Pelsmacker 2021). In this regard, the strong and varied connection between fantasy, fun, and gaming (Verberckmoes et al. 2016) may offer insight. Specific games that generate fun and are easily accessible in digital environments could serve as successful drivers of fantasy. A better understanding of this link could help develop innovative managerial manipulations of fantastical thinking, a promising topic that reaches beyond the scope of the present paper. Our study suggests that in gaming contexts, unrealistic narrative ads are as persuasive as the realistic ones. However, other potential impacts of fantastical thinking still need further investigation. By activating fantastical thinking, viewers might also relax and experience more enjoyment throughout the process since, according to flow theory, people experience enjoyment by matching levels of challenges and skills toward optimal experiences. Specifically, enjoyment 'happens only because of unusual investments of attention' (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 46). To delve into that aspect, we must rely on our imagination and embrace a different narrative in which fantastical thinking plays a central role in the persuasiveness of advertising. A limitation of our work is that fantastical thinking was examined as a temporarily activated state. Future research should compare state-based activation with stable trait fantasy proneness, which may shape responsiveness to unrealistic narratives in different ways. Yet individuals differ in trait-level fantasy proneness (Merckelbach, Horselenberg, and Muris 2001), which may interact with state activation in shaping responsiveness to unrealistic narratives. Future research should compare how these two facets jointly influence transportation.

While this study focuses on film trailers as a form of narrative advertising, the findings may not be directly transferable to all areas of arts and cultural promotion. For example, persuasive mechanisms in theater, classical music, or visual art marketing may rely on different audience expectations and engagement patterns, especially regarding realism and emotional immersion. Furthermore, genres within the film industry—such as documentaries, arthouse cinema, or mainstream comedies—may activate fantastical thinking to varying degrees. Future research could explore how narrative realism and imaginative engagement function across diverse cultural sectors, helping to refine promotional strategies tailored to specific artistic formats and audience profiles. This aligns with research showing that promotional paratexts such as trailers actively construct interpretive frameworks for audiences (Johnston, Vollans, and Greene 2016; Bogdanou 2022), suggesting that fantastical thinking may play different roles across cultural domains depending on genre conventions and audience expectations.

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Table 1. Study 1 – Regression Results for Conditional Indirect Effect

MEDIATOR VARIABLE MODEL ***Dependent: Transportation***				
Predictor	*B*	*SE*	*t*	*P*
Constant	29.21	3.06	9.52	0.000
Narrative Realism	7.85	1.94	4-03	0.001
Fantastical Thinking	19.51	4.17	4.67	0.000
Narrative Realism X Fantastical Thinking	-7.75	2.62	-2.95	0.036
DEPENDENT VARIABLE MODEL ***Dependent: Persuasion***				
Constant	0.78	0.47	1.66	.098
Narrative Realism	.421	.188	2.23	.026
Transportation	.086	.009	9.10	0.000
Direct Effect of Ad Realism on Persuasion				
	0.42	.188	2.23	.026
	Boot Indirect Effect	*Boot SE*	*Boot LLCI*	*Boot ULCI*
Low Fantastical Thinking	0.67	.204	.298	1.10
High Fantastical Thinking	.009	.147	-.270	.312
Index of moderated mediation				
	Index	*Boot SE*	*95% CI*	
			Boot LLCI	*Boot ULCI*
Fantastical Thinking	-0.66	.245	-1.15	-.211

Table 2. Study 2 – Regression Results for Conditional Indirect Effect

MEDIATOR VARIABLE MODEL ***Dependent: Transportation***				
Predictor	*B*	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Constant	25.5	4.43	5.76	0.000
Narrative Realism	11.61	2.67	4.34	0.000
Fantastical Thinking	28.89	5.9	4.89	0.000
Narrative Realism X Fantastical Thinking	-12.13	3.75	-3.23	0.002
DEPENDENT VARIABLE MODEL ***Dependent: Persuasion***				
Constant	0.35	0.77	0.45	0.653
Narrative Realism	0.68	0.3	2.27	0.026
Transportation	0.08	0.01	5.76	0.000
Direct Effect of Ad Realism on Persuasion				
	0.68	0.3	2.27	0.026
Conditional Indirect Effect				
	Boot Indirect Effect	*Boot SE*	*95% CI*	
			Boot LLCI	*Boot ULCI*
Low Fantastical Thinking	0.94	0.29	0.39	1.51
High Fantastical Thinking	-0.04	0.16	-0.37	0.28
Index of moderated mediation				
	Index	*Boot SE*	*Boot LLCI*	*Boot ULCI*
Fantastical Thinking	-0.98	0.34	-1.66	-0.36

Figure 1. Our model

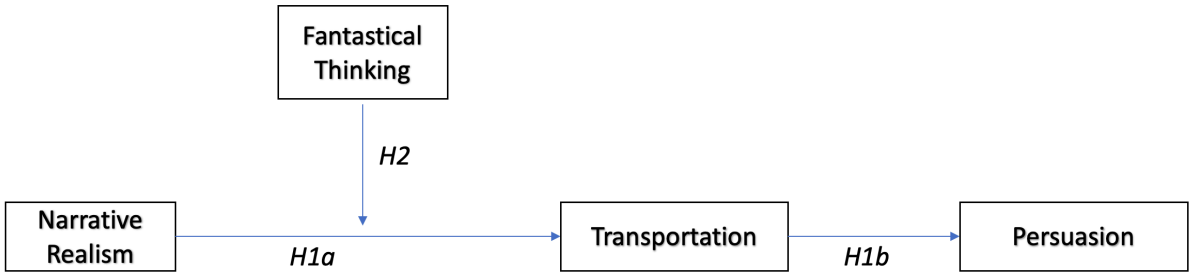


Figure 2. Study 1 – Results

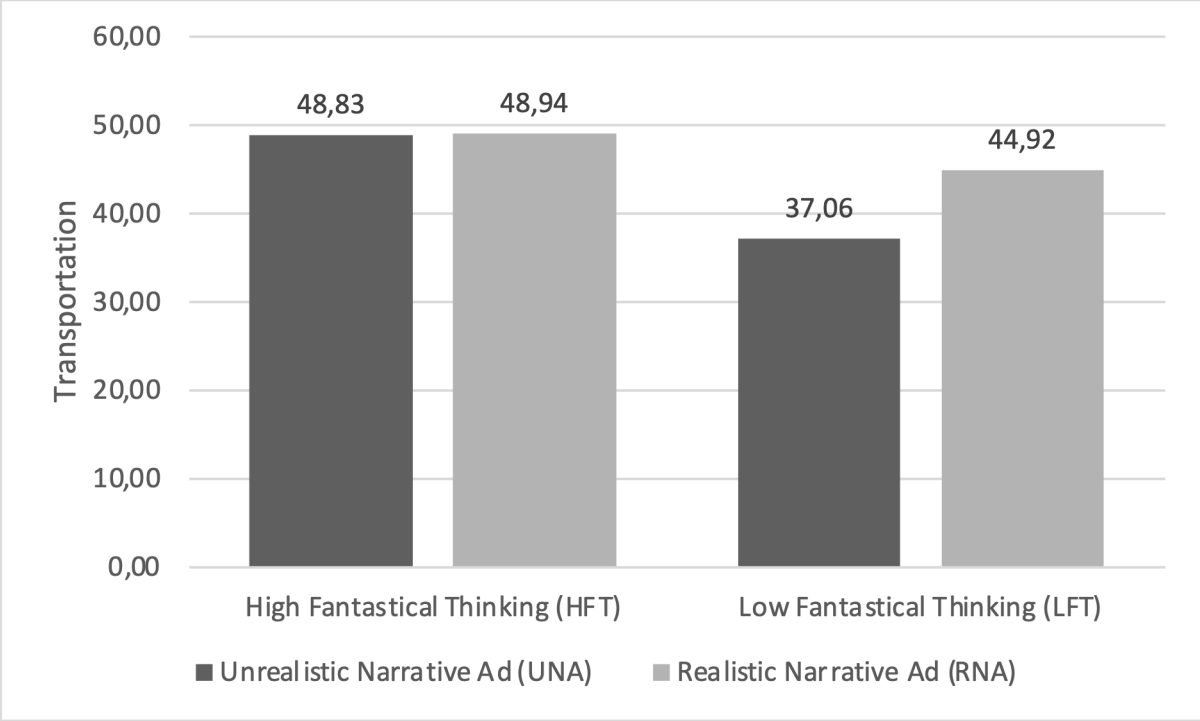


Figure 3. Study 2 – Results

