TOWARD A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF VIDEO COMMERCIALS
AND NARRATIVE ADVERTISEMENTS

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Abstract

Video commercials, or television advertisements, have gained a lot of attention in scholarship since the first television advertisement aired in 1941. In recent years, scholars have examined advertisements using the lens of narrative persuasion and as entertainment features on their own. This study builds on previous literature by identifying types of advertisements – non-narrative and narrative – and further describes narrative advertisements in terms of structural aspects and appeal types using exemplars. A set of nearly 200 unique award-winning and otherwise popular advertisements are categorized by Advertisement Type based on prior works in advertising as well as Primary and Secondary Appeal Types that emerged during analysis. Ads that had poor responses are categorized by Ad Type and in terms of their Missteps. The Narrative Advertisement Continuum, which positions non-narrative and narrative advertisements on a sliding scale, is proposed. This study is further consolidated into an easy-to-navigate Narrative Advertising Guide with the intent to serve as a resource grounded in scholarship for marketing and advertising practitioners.
Dedication

To my dear (still new) husband, Tanner, who carried me when I couldn't carry myself, laughed, celebrated, and cried with me, encouraged me to keep going, and reminded me who I am and whose I am all while navigating law school, the Bar Exam, a global pandemic, and the first year of marriage. Thank you for believing in me.

To my parents, who told me years ago that I should go to graduate school and to whom I did not listen, who planned and hosted the most beautiful wedding for me, and who constantly inspire me to be good fruit. Thank you for loving me so fiercely.

To MaMa and Daddy Bob who are always so supportive, loving, and who inspire me to be a million times better than the person I am.

To my siblings who I apparently never tell anything important to – guys, I’m getting my Master’s. When I get this printed, I’ll show you what’s in it.

To my “new” family, the Riley’s, who took me on as their own and who bring such joy and meaning to my life. And for MaMa, who made sure we were always full of food and scripture and anything else she thought we might like.

To Grace, Savannah, Camille, Daniel, Andrew, Will, and your s/o’s who made planning a wedding in the midst of grad school a thing of dreams.

To Love Fest.

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Finally, to the version of me who forgets to believe in herself. Look at what you’ve done! With prayer, community, and a little faith so much is possible.
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I acknowledge the work of scholars who came before me who cared as much about commercials and narrative as I do. This work would not have been possible without your contributions.

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Dream, Jump, Remember

A young wrestler with no legs took on an opponent with two, a homecoming queen made a critical tackle as linebacker, a Liberian refugee joined the MLS as the youngest-ever player to compete in the organization, and a girl from Compton competed on the world’s biggest stage to become one of the greatest athletes of our time. Love them or hate them, Nike did something amazing with its 2018 “Dream Crazy” campaign. The original two-minute mini-film featured incredible athletes “who are household names and those who should be” (Nike, n.d.) and won Nike the 2019 Outstanding Commercial Creative Arts Emmy, beating out Apple, Amazon, and Sandy Hook Promise (Diaz, 2019; Haithman & Blyth, 2019). The ad, narrated by NFL deviant Colin Kaepernick, urged viewers not to ask if their dreams are crazy, but rather to “ask if they’re crazy enough” (Acord, 2018). Timed to kick off the 2018/19 NFL season, the celebration of the 30th anniversary of Nike’s “Just Do It” tagline sparked conversations among those in support and those in opposition (Beer, 2019).

The response was “swift and severe” (Chadwick & Zipp, 2018, para. 4). Some people applauded, flooding the internet with images and videos of themselves and celebrities sporting Nike apparel. Others scoffed, sharing images of Nike shoes and apparel aflame alongside the hashtags #NikeBoycott, #BoycottNike, and #BurnYourNikes (Chadwick & Zipp, 2018; Cosentino, 2019; Thomas, 2018). While the content of the advertisement was not explicitly polarizing, the spokesperson was. Colin Kaepernick, and subsequently Nike’s endorsement, re-opened the discourse on some of “America’s biggest fault lines – race, patriotism, sports, and business” and elicited strong
emotional responses from viewers (Beer, 2019, para. 3). Nike broke post and media coverage records, receiving nearly $43 million in media exposure in the first 24 hours and nearly $220 million worth of media exposure in the first week (Kish, 2018; Novy-Williams, 2018). Two days following the release of the ad, Nike’s stock plummeted 3.2% before hitting an all-time high on September 21 (Yahoo! Finance, n.d.). By the end of the year, Nike had claimed billions in brand value increase and a 31% boost in sales (Beer, 2019; Burke & Klingemann, 2019; Hector, 2019; LLLITL, 2019; Thomas, 2018). The advertisement and overall campaign worked well for the brand and positioned Nike as a corporate ally for social justice.

About 18 months prior, in April of 2017, another major corporation attempted a similar feat, releasing a commercial with a far more explicit appeal to emotion and, specifically, social justice. The two-and-a-half-minute documentary-style advertisement presented a protest advocating for “peace.” The protest featured people of different ages, cultural backgrounds, and sexualities and followed the journey of a musician, photographer, and model as they joined in the march. The commercial climaxed when the protesters reached a line of police officers. The model grabbed an ice-cold soda and handed it to one of the officers who accepted and took a sip. The protesters celebrated with hugs and high-fives, the officer gave a grin, and the protesters walked off in unity as the words “Live Bolder. Live Louder.” were displayed at the bottom of the screen. The major corporation was Pepsi, the model none other than Kendall Jenner, and the commercial the infamous “Jump In” installment to PepsiCo’s “Live for Now – Moments” campaign.
Like “Dream Crazy,” this advertisement reaped a lot of publicity. Unfortunately for PepsiCo (Pepsi), though, the publicity was almost entirely negative. In fact, the responses were so overwhelming that the ad was removed within 24 hours of its release and all subsequent campaign plans were put on hold (Fordyce, 2018; Liffreing, 2017; Smith, 2017; Tillman, n.d.). Cries of insensitivity and “tone-deafness” echoed throughout social media as people posted violent images of (mainly Black) protesters being brutalized by (mainly White) police officers with captions like “Kendall please! Give him a Pepsi!” (Dozé, 2019; Fordyce, 2018; Liffreing, 2017). Bernice King, youngest daughter of the late Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., joined the conversation by posting a photo of her father being pushed by a White police officer during a peaceful protest with the caption “If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi.” (Dozé, 2019; Fordyce, 2018; Smith, 2017; Tillman, n.d.). The long-standing satirical television show *Saturday Night Live* even created a sketch mocking the advertisement’s blatant insensitivity. Pepsi’s advertisement incited a Public Relations crisis to which its marketing and PR teams had to respond with care and haste. While the market and monetary effects on Pepsi were not as severe as those on Nike following their advertisement with Colin Kaepernick, the effects on millennials’ purchase considerations and brand perception, strong indicators of potential sales revenues, dropped 3% immediately following the ad and have continued to drop, maintaining a low Purchase Consideration of only 23% (Tillman, n.d.).

More recently, in February 2020, Google took the world by storm with their Super Bowl LIV advertisement, “Loretta.” The commercial was aesthetically simple,
utilizing only a white backdrop, black text, and the occasional pop of color and photos. It opened on a white screen with an empty search bar and blinking cursor, then zoomed out to reveal that the search bar was that of Google. The viewer saw evidence of someone typing the words “how to not forget” into the bar, which yielded a result stating the importance of repeating the details one wants to remember. Then the voice of an elderly man calling for his Google Assistant (“Hey Google”) broke in and the viewer heard the man asking it to “show me photos of me and Loretta.” Google Assistant rang its short tune and responded via chat box ‘here are your photos.’ Then a photo appeared of an older man with big-framed glasses, presumably our main character, hugging a woman, seemingly his wife Loretta, grinning at the camera from inside of a wood-paneled home. The image switched to a sepia-tinged photo with the same but much younger couple smiling at the camera wearing white coats and carrying travel bags; the woman donning a bright red bow around her neck and the man sporting a robust mustache. The man chuckled and said “Remember, Loretta hated my mustache!” and chuckled again. The Google Assistant confirmed with a chime that it would remember. As the commercial continued, the viewer saw the searches that the man posed (“that little town off the coast of Juneau”), photos and videos of the couple and their family through the years, their favorite movie (Casablanca), as well as the list of things he asked Google to remember (“Loretta used to hum showtunes,” “Loretta used to say tickled pink,” “Loretta always said, don’t miss me too much, and get out of the dang house”). Finally, the man called on Google and requested that it remember “I’m the luckiest man in the world.” The commercial concluded with the sounds of the man taking his dog out for a walk as a plain
white screen revealed the sentence “A little help with the little things,” followed by the classic Google “G” logo.

“Loretta” was a surprising separation from what has mostly become the norm of Super Bowl commercials – cinematic quality, comedy, and celebrities (Oster, 2020; Schad, 2020). Comedian Kumail Nanjiani expressed what was likely the reaction of many Super Bowl viewers: “2020. The year I cried at a google commercial” (@kumailn, 2020). A quick glance at Twitter showed that the response to Google’s ad was immediate and immense. Regular Joes and celebrities alike were Tweeting, sharing videos, memes, and gifs, and talking about “Loretta.” USA Today’s Ad Meter (2020) ranked “Loretta” number three out of all of the Super Bowl LIV spots. While not all of the responses to Google’s “Loretta” were positive – some reviews called the ad “creepy” and chastised the tech company for collecting and storing personal data (see Dowd, 2020; Lyons, 2020; Renstrom, 2020) – the overwhelming emotional response from viewers is worth examination.

This detailed study of narrative advertisements serves a two-fold purpose. First, this study aims to fill a gap in advertising literature by providing a comprehensive explanation of narrative versus non-narrative advertisements as well as by bolstering understanding of narrative advertisement types by providing exemplars of each. Advertising scholarship has been functioning without a definitive common language, which this study intends to provide. Second, this study seeks to identify narrative features and appeal types utilized in award-winning and popular commercials so practitioners in the fields of marketing, advertising, and public relations may create and produce narrative
advertisements with greater success in terms of recollection and buzz. In all, this analysis is meant to serve as a basis for future studies in advertising and as a resource grounded in scholarship for practitioners.

**A Very Brief History of the Television Advertisement**

Television commercials have been around since 1941 when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) legalized advertising on a handful of networks. The official first television ad, or commercial, ran on NBC and was a single, shaky shot of a simplified map of the USA, then only 48 states, featuring a Bulova brand clock face in the center displaying the time and a voiceover announcing, “America runs on Bulova” (Poggi, 2016). There were many skeptics following the announcement by the FCC that television advertisements were to be legal. Even Advertising Age (now Ad Age), the premier global media brand that has been publishing analyses on marketing and media since 1930, had little faith in the future of television advertisements (Ad Age, 1941).

Nearly 80 years later, though, the television advertisement industry has grown immensely as commercials can be considered cultural artifacts or even entertainment features in and of themselves (Alsop, 1985; Esslin, 1979; McAllister & Galindo-Ramirez, 2017; McAllister, 1999). In 1941, the first commercial ever cost Bulova about $4, or about $71.50 in 2021. In 2020, a typical 30-second commercial spot averaged around $115,000, a Super Bowl spot of the same length could cost as much as $5.6 million, and overall spending for television advertising in North America amounted to nearly $63 billion (Main, 2021).
As television advertising evolved through the 20th century, a new type of advertisement, the narrative advertisement, was introduced. Narrative has been described as a basic tenet of human communication and the most important way by which human experiences are made meaningful (see Bruner, 1986; 2004; Polkinghorne, 1988; 1991; Riceur et al., 1984; Schneider et al., 2004; Shankar et al., 2001). Slater and Rouner described narrative as an account of social information, or “the unfolding of human relations and events” (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 179). Narratives help people achieve closure (Kerby, 1991), make sense of events and experiences (Escalas, 2004a), and gain perspective to make evaluations and decisions (Bruner, 1990). Though scholars have differing opinions on the specific features that constitute a narrative, they generally agree that narrative structure consists of temporality and causality (Escalas, 1998; Shankar et al., 2001). Many scholars also conclude that narratives routinely involve some form of character and conflict (Green, Melanie et al., 2020; Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). When strong narratives are included in advertisements, they have been found to elicit stronger emotive responses than advertisements without narratives, which in turn causes higher success rates for the ad, product, and brand (Kim et al., 2017)

**Narrative Advertisements**

Narrative advertisements do not focus as much on a product as they do the narrative, or story of the advertisement (Escalas, 1998; Shankar et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2016). Rather than focusing on the value or specifications of a product, narrative advertisements are designed to draw viewers into an experience. It has been found that narratives in advertisements elicit greater physiological responses such as greater
attention, mental stimulation, and emotional responses (Lang, 1990; Toppano & Roberto,
2017) and are more persuasive than non-narratives (Escalas, 2004a; Kim et al., 2017).
Therefore, narrative advertisements are typically designed for the purpose of persuading
people to buy a product or identify with brand meanings, values, or overall personality
narrative in television commercials as an effective style of “presenting products and the
lifestyles associated with them” (Johnson, 2008, p. 12).

*Apple’s ‘1984’*

Apple’s ‘1984’ commercial, arguably the first true narrative advertisement, is a
bellwether of its kind. The commercial drew on George Orwell’s novel *1984* and
portrayed a dystopian society in which a “Big Brother” figure addressed a crowd of
indistinct people, all male, from a large screen as he droned on about “Information
Purification Directives” and “Unification of Thought.” A female runner in bright color,
 starkly contrasting the industrial blues and grays of the rest of the set, was shown running
towards the screen carrying a large sledgehammer. The runner hurled the sledgehammer
and smashed the screen, exposing the crowd to bright light and covering them with dust.
The commercial ended with text overlaying images of the men’s shocked faces and a
voiceover stating “On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And
you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like “1984.”” (Scott, 1984).

The now-iconic ad was 60 seconds long and aired nationally only once – during
halftime of Super Bowl XVIII – yet is touted as one of greatest commercials of all time
and is often referred to as a defining moment for the advertising landscape (Tomkovick et
Apple’s ‘1984’ told the story of a dystopian world, elicited a desire to break free, and offered a solution to escape a monotonous and dreary fate. The advertisement showed that Apple was preparing to flip the script on traditions and expectations, and implied that alignment with Apple would mean that the consumer was prepared to do the same.

Nearly 60 years after the FCCs initial approval of television commercial advertisements, Jennifer Edson Escalas (1998) conducted an analysis in which she examined 231 television advertisements that aired in Tucson, Arizona over a three-week period. She coded the advertisements by degree of narrative as determined by two five-point scales of story development and temporality. By her assessment, 21.6% of advertisements contained well-developed stories and over 40% scored either equal to or higher than the midpoint score of narrativity. Esslin (1979) argued that even among those that are not explicitly narrative advertisements, most are “essentially dramatic, because … they use mimetic action to produce a semblance of real life, and the basic ingredients of drama” even if only implicitly (p. 97). Even in 1979, five years before Apple’s revolutionary Super Bowl spot, Esslin identified that most nationally distributed commercials exhibited at least the basic characteristics of drama: character and plot.

Defining Narrative Ads

Based on her own research and review of other scholarship in narrative and advertising, Escalas (1998) created a table describing different types of advertisements, including elements of narrative. The table, originally printed in the book Representing
While comprehensive, the table presented by Escalas does not explicitly describe which types of advertisements are predominantly “narrative” in nature. With such a focus on narrative persuasion and narrative advertising, it would be beneficial for advertising scholars to come to a consensus, or at least have a framework of understanding, for which types of advertisements constitute, in general, “narrative advertisements.” Referenced in
Escalas’ work, Deighton, Romer, and McQueen (1989) created the “drama scale” that illustrated the contrast between argument and drama – or non-narrative and narrative – advertising in an attempt to provide some frames for better understanding some basic differences of narrative advertisements. The four-step continuous scale, read like a table with ad types paired with presence or absence of narration, character, or plot, explained the differences between Argument, Demonstration, Story, and Drama ads in which Drama were the most narrative in nature.

**Table 2**

*Drama Scale*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Narrated</th>
<th>No character</th>
<th>No plot</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Argument</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demonstration</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Story</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Plot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drama</strong></td>
<td>Unnarrated</td>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Plot</td>
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Deighton et al. (1989) described that on one extreme of the scale (“Argument”), the “indicative mood can be quite explicit about what consumers should believe and why” while on the other extreme (“Drama”), the “subjunctive mood” cannot make explicit claims but can, rather, embrace “the power of empathy” (p. 336). The authors further acknowledged that there are mixed forms of advertisements that can be placed throughout the scale including “narrated drama,” “dramatized argument,” or even variations with character and no plot (p. 336), but provided the scale to help better frame advertising research.
Because there still seems to be confusion and disagreements on what qualifies as a narrative advertisement, I have synthesized the definitions of advertising types as provided by Escalas (1998) and the Drama Scale specifics proposed by Deighton et al. (1989) to create a continuum scale of narrative in advertising in which types of advertisements have been separated into two simple categories: narrative and non-narrative.

**Figure 1**

*Narrative Advertisement Continuum*

The narrative end of the continuum contains five ad types as described by Escalas and Deighton et al. Slice of Life ads are advertisements that contain story-like scenarios and therefore contain some semblance of narrative, but are less elaborate than a narrative or story ad. Vignette ads contain series of scenes and people edited together without particular emphasis on chronology or causality. Story ads are like Narrative and Drama ads in that they tell a cohesive story and contain traditional dramatic elements. However, Story ads typically have more of an emphasis on plot, character, and, most distinctively, the presence of a narrator. Narrative ads and Drama ads both contain a narrative, classic
dramatic elements such as temporality, causality, and character, and typically lack narration. Because Narrative and Drama ads have such similar definitions and are often used interchangeably, they are placed at the same point on the continuum and grouped together in analysis.

As with most continuum scales, there may be variants that fall between categories. As well, there may be some advertisements, especially in the case of those that fall into categories placed near the center (i.e. Transformational ads and Vignette ads), that may belong on the other side of the scale. However, the goal of this continuum is not to provide a definitive and unmoving rule for narrative advertisements but rather to provide a theoretical framework to simplify the parameters for this and future narrative advertisement research.

Utilizing the Narrative Advertising Continuum, Apple’s ‘1984’ can be considered an exemplar of a narrative advertisement as it aligns with the definitions of multiple types of advertisements that fall within the narrative category. Based on Escalas’ (1989) definition of a Narrative ad as “an ad containing one or more episode(s) of actors engaged in actions to achieve goals” (p. 273, 276), Apple’s ‘1984’ is, at its core, a Narrative ad. Furthermore, according to Wells’ (1989) and Stern’s (1994) definitions, ‘1984’ could also be considered a Drama ad in that it includes classical dramatic elements such as exposition (setting of the stage, introducing the “Big Brother” character), rising action (woman running toward the screen), climax or turning point (hurling of the sledgehammer), and resolution (supposed enlightenment and a call to action). The ad cost Apple $400,000 to produce and did not feature an image or any specifications of the new
computer (Stein, 2002; Tomkovick et al., 2001), yet 72,000 Macintosh computers were sold in the first 100 days of availability (Tomkovick et al., 2001; Yelkur et al., 2004). Since 1984, narrative commercials with strong affective appeals have continued to evolve, become more expensive to produce and disseminate, and carry more weight in brand image.

**Persuasiveness of Narrative Advertisements**

Advertisements have become an integral part of society and play a major role in organizations’ and corporations’ marketing and financial plans. Some commercials are designed specifically to elicit strong affective responses that, in turn, may encourage actions implied by the advertisement itself. Humans are storytellers, and narratives are known to “evoke more meaning and emotions than bare facts” (Toppano & Roberto, 2017, p. 1). Narrative ads elicit more positive feelings and cognitive responses (Kim et al., 2017), evoke empathetic processing (Deighton et al., 1989), and the presence of emotion within commercials has even been found to increase the intensity of cardiac response and physiological arousal in viewers (Lang, 1990). Effective narrative advertisements have also been shown to increase brand attitudes among viewers (Escalas, 2004a; Escalas, 2004b; Kim et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2016). It has been empirically tested and proven time and again that narrative advertisements are more persuasive than non-narrative ads, so it is necessary here to discuss some possible reasons why.

**Narrative Structure and Expected Outcomes**

Narrative broadly refers to a message technique or story structure that conveys events in a story-like format (Ball & Applequist, 2019; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Narrative
structure is the design of a message that makes the message feel as though the creator is
telling a story. Narrative structure can be expected to increase a viewer’s involvement
and thus reduce reactance. Reactance, introduced in Brehm’s (1966) *A Theory of
Psychological Reactance*, is described as the determination to reassert one’s
independence in the face of overt persuasive messages (Brehm, S. & Brehm, 1981;
Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2012). Reactance is
an arousal response with which people engage when they perceive their personal
freedoms are being threatened (Brehm, J. W., 1966; Brehm, S. & Brehm, 1981).
Narrative structure within entertainment-education has been proven to facilitate an
experience of involvement in the feature, therefore reducing reactance (Moyer-Gusé,
2008). The extent to which a viewer is involved with a program determines their
reactance to the message, and they more they are involved, the less reactance they should
experience. When a message is not overtly persuasive, or is more narrative in nature, it
can be expected that the arousal response of reactance will not be engaged because the
viewer’s perception that they are being manipulated will be lessened.

Although Moyer-Gusé’s (2008) predictions, found in the Entertainment
Overcoming Resistance Model (EORM), were based in entertainment-education features,
they can easily be transferred to other forms of narrative, including narrative
advertisements. Commercials can be considered entertainment features in and of
themselves, as they make their way into popular culture, often contain traditional
dramatic elements, and are even celebrated as such (Alsop, 1985; Esslin, 1979;
McAllister & Galindo-Ramirez, 2017; McAllister, 1999; Siefert et al., 2009). Therefore,
it stands to reason that the predictions of the EORM would hold true for narrative advertisements: the narrative structure of an advertisement should reduce reactance to that advertisement’s persuasive claim. Furthermore, other predictions of the EORM (e.g. transportation reduces counterarguing, parasocial interaction reduces reactance and counterarguing, identification reduces counterarguing and changes outcome expectations) should also hold true.

**Transportation and Counterarguing**

Chen and Chang (2017) found in their study of mini-film narrative advertisements that transportation was the best predictor of changes in attitudes and behaviors resulting from narrative persuasion. Narrative involvement, also referred to as transportation, immersion, and engagement, is “the interest with which viewers follow the events as they unfold in the story” (Moyer-Gusé, 2008, p. 409). The idea of narrative involvement is that one ignores their present environment and is instead both cognitively and affectively invests in a narrative (Green, Melanie C. & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). The influence of persuasive messages embedded within a story can often be determined by the extent to which a viewer is transported into the narrative (Chen & Chang, 2017). As predicted with non-advertising narratives, narrative advertisements, through transportation, draw the viewer into the story, thus reducing counterarguing and encouraging the viewer to adopt the attitude(s) of the character(s) in the narrative (Chen & Chang, 2017; Deighton et al., 1989).
Identification, Parasocial Interaction, Reactance, and Counterarguing

Narrative advertisements are more likely to encourage identification than non-narrative advertisements (Kim et al., 2017). Identification, perceived similarity, and liking can play a powerful role in people’s interaction within and outside of the mediated context (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). A similar concept, parasocial interaction (PSI), refers to the perceived relationship that a consumer of media has with the people or characters within that media and has been described as the imagined interaction between viewer and media personnel, whether fictional or not (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Hoffner, 1996). When viewers are engaged with PSI, they show greater propensity to react to stimuli in the ways of a typical social relationship (Giles, 2002). Though it is important to note that PSI and character liking are two distinct concepts (Slater & Rouner, 2002), liking is often paired with PSI as both relate to an evaluation of a character and subsequent desire for a relationship with that actor, actress, or character (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Multiple studies have shown that PSI, also referred to as parasocial relationships or parasocial experiences, and character-liking reduce reactance and counterarguing to narrative messages (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2012). Within narrative advertisements, identification with characters can also foster self-brand connections, making it difficult to counterargue the advertisement’s claims (Escalas, 2004b; Kim et al., 2017). Because main characters in narrative ads are often portrayed in a positive light, the character’s experiences, thoughts, and feelings are likely to transfer to the viewer and subsequently foster positive emotions toward the brand or product being advertised (Deighton et al., 1989; Kim et al., 2017; Puto & Wells, 1984). For example, at
the end of ‘1984,’ the viewer is positioned to feel a wishful identification with the runner (Stein, 2002), desiring to be different from the industrial drones idly sitting by. These feelings of Identification and PSI can result in stronger brand connections and further intentions to support the brand or purchase the advertised product.

**Emotion and Recollection**

Narrative thought helps people orient themselves to the world around them (Escalas, 1998). Furthermore, narratives have been known to prompt stronger emotional responses in viewers than non-narratives (Lang, 1990; Toppano & Roberto, 2017). Though not all narratives may seem emotional, narratives have the power to transport readers and viewers into a story, which results in stronger psychological responses than non-narratives, thus eliciting some kind of emotion. Emotional commercials have consistently shown superior responses – including greater liking, purchase intentions, positive brand attitudes, and better recall – than non-emotional commercials (e.g. Batra & Ray, 1986; Friestad & Thorson, 1986; Hitchon & Thorson, 1995; Kim et al., 2017; Siefert et al., 2009). Though a thorough discussion of the cognitive processing that takes place while watching an advertisement is outside of the parameters of this study, it is worth noting that the effects that media (advertisements) have on viewers take place through psychological processes that have been examined elsewhere (see Batra & Ray, 1986; Escalas, 1998; Escalas, 2004a; Escalas, 2004b; Hitchon & Thorson, 1995; Kim et al., 2017; Siefert et al., 2009; Tsfati, 2011) and play an important part in people’s enjoyment, purchase intentions, brand attitudes, and recollection.
In the early 1980s, there was a widespread belief that emotional advertisements did not “recall well” (Zielske, 1982). However, in 1986, Friestad and Thorson conducted a study in which they discovered that emotional messages have positive long-term effects on memory and show stronger levels of memory when compared to neutral messages (Friestad & Thorson, 1986). In fact, numerous studies since then have shown that recollection of narrative advertising messages are easier and more efficient than recollection of non-narrative messages (Slater & Rouner, 2002). In terms of “wearout,” or the feeling of growing tired of an advertisement, emotional impact of ads have been found to significantly reduce wearout opposed to those advertisements that did not have any emotional impact (Hitchon & Thorson, 1995). Hitchon and Thorson (1995) also pointed out that although their same experiment showed no significant effects of Emotion or Involvement on brand name recall, it did indicate that experiential or emotion-inducing advertisements were effective, especially in viewer’s attitudinal responses.

Siefert et al. (2009) conducted a study of emotional engagement with Super Bowl commercials in which they measured the relationship between dial ratings for enjoyment of Super Bowl commercials (as reported by USA Today), online buzz (measured on Myspace.com), and biometric data. They found that emotional engagement with the advertisements was a significant predictor of the amount of internet engagement (downloads, views, and comments) – or “buzz.” In an intricate study about the mediating effect of affective responses in acceptance of advertising performed by Batra and Ray (1986), Surgency, Elation, Vigor/Activation (SEVA) and social affection responses to commercials were found to be predictors of positive attitudes toward ads. Further,
viewers’ attitudes toward ads were found to be strong influencers of viewers’ brand attitudes, which predicted purchase intentions.

Since 1984, commercials with strong affective appeals have continued to evolve, become more expensive to produce and disseminate, and carry more weight in brand image. In the wake of massive successes like Nike’s “Dream Crazy” and utter failures like Pepsi’s “Jump In,” a consequential question remains: how might advertisers achieve the viewer response they aim to elicit? The studies mentioned above showcase the effectiveness of emotional appeals in commercials and point to the importance of understanding key factors that lead to viewers’ emotional responses. Friestad and Thorson (1993) mentioned that research in psychology shows that events that evoke emotional responses tend to be more memorable than those that do not, but the same has not always been found to be true in advertising. In light of the strong emotional responses to both Nike’s and Pepsi’s advertisements as well as the swift response to Google’s “Loretta” and the staying ability of Apple’s “1984,” scholars and practitioners alike should consider what about these advertisements made them stand out among the rest.

This Study: Commercials That Did it Right

Considering that narrative advertisements have been found to elicit stronger emotive responses than those non-narrative advertisements (Kim, Ratneshwar, & Thorson, 2017), it seems appropriate to identify and examine current advertisements that fall within the “narrative” category. In this study, I examined award-winning advertisements from the last twelve years as well as commercials cited on popular listicles, or articles consisting of a series of items presented and ranked in list form, of the
“best” or “most memorable” commercials to identify what narrative features and types of appeals were used. After examining roughly 1,770 advertisements, 173 fell into the scope of this study. Of those 173, two award-winners repeated, fourteen ads were referred to on multiple listicles, and four advertisements held spots as award-winners and on listicles. Adjusting for these, the final set consisted of 144 unique commercials.

Award-winning advertisements were selected from the winners of the American Advertising Awards from 2014 to 2020 and Clio Awards from 2009 to 2019. The American Advertising Awards and Clio Awards were selected because they fit two criteria for the scope of this study: they are American agencies and the awards are specific to commercials and advertising. The five-year deficit between the American Advertising and Clio Awards came simply from availability on their respective websites. The 2020 Clio Award winners had not been announced at the time of this evaluation.

Listicles used for this study came from those found using the simple Google searches “best commercials” and “most memorable commercials.” The commercials used in this study came from five unique sources (Biteable, considerable, Quality Logo Products, The Empire, and The Pioneer Woman). Although there are many websites with similar lists, saturation began to hit after these five. Of the five lists, one was Super-Bowl-commercial-specific while the rest were general lists of popular commercials.

The advertisements examined were selected based on pre-determined criteria and categorized as described in the Narrative Advertisement Continuum. Their narrative features and appeal types were also identified.
Criteria

The criteria for selected advertisements were carefully crafted to define strong parameters to fit this study’s purpose. Those studied were video advertisements between 0 and 5 minutes in length that consisted of at least one basic feature of narrativity (temporality, causality, character) and a persuasive appeal imbedded in the narrative. All selected were considered to have been intended for an English-speaking, North American audience, though some advertisements in other languages (e.g. Spanish) for North American brands with English subtitles were included.

Because advertisements often have multiple versions that are lengthened or shortened according to boundaries set by the network or medium, it seemed reasonable to examine commercials and mini-film advertisements up to 5 minutes long. As well, some advertisements that were prepared for an ambiguous audience (e.g. Jameson Irish Whiskey’s “Fire” [2012]vi) were included. Finally, because of the ever-evolving landscape of television in the form of network streaming on cellphones, tablets, computers, and smart televisions as well as modern forms of television like Hulu, HBO Max, and YouTube TV, the medium of the commercial (television or internet) was deemed inconsequential.

Each of the advertisements were marked as having at least one of the narrative features described above: temporality, causality, and character. Those that contained Temporality had a clear beginning, middle, and end, simulating “lived time” (Bruner, 2004; Escalas, 2004a). As many as 81% of the commercials examined had some element of Temporality. Causality (89% of the total) established relationships between elements
and made consequences of actions taken throughout the narrative clear or, at least, inferable (Allen, 1984; Escalas, 2004a; Toppano & Roberto, 2017). Finally, those with an established Character (88%) consisted of a human or human-like agent that engaged in the actions of the narrative (De Graaf et al., 2016). Many commercials contained various combinations of the three narrative features, and 63% contained all three elements (55% of award-winners and 69% of listicle ads). A table with full details of the results can be found in Table A1 of Appendix A.

Table 3

Criteria: Narrative Feature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temporality</th>
<th>clear beginning, middle, and end; simulating “lived time” (inspired by Bruner, 2004; Escalas, 2004a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Causality</td>
<td>established relationships between elements; consequences of actions clear or inferable (Allen, 1984; Escalas, 2004a; Toppano &amp; Roberto, 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>human or human-like agent (De Graaf et al., 2016)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Award Type

The advertisements selected from the American Advertising Awards or the Clio Awards were Grand or Gold winners or Hall of Fame entrants. Winners won in a variety of award categories from the expected “Product/Service” category to more unique categories like “Direction,” “Cinematography,” and “Technique.” Award categories for both the American Advertising Awards and Clio Awards have evolved since 2014 and 2009, respectively, to better fit the advertising atmosphere. Some categories that were present in the earlier years of evaluation were retired or combined to welcome new, more
relevant categories that fit the current advertising climate. This evolution did not affect the evaluation.

Some award-winning submissions were categorized as “Content and Contact” submissions that, in general, showed how a campaign proceeded and was successful over time. Although many of those submissions showed strong command of narrative and storytelling (e.g. Troy, Michigan Public Library’s “Book Burning Party” (2012) recounted the measures a local public library took to save itself through viral marketing, Bing’s “Decode Jay-Z” (2011) described how everyday people participated in Jay-Z’s book launch), they fell outside of the scope of this project. Similarly, those that won awards for integrated campaigns were not included in this analysis, although they often included a television commercial or online video advertisement. The only advertisements that were selected for this study that won awards for being part of an integrated campaign were ones that won separate from the campaign. Most branded entertainment award-winners were also excluded as most had some form of explicit appeal, not integrated into the story. As well, most video game advertisements were excluded from this study as many of them relied heavily on aspects of the games themselves. Though on the surface they seemed to be narrative advertisements, it became clear that the narratives of the commercials were representative of game narrative options. Lastly, product demonstrations that were shown in video form were largely excluded from this study. Although some companies were creative in their new product and technology demonstrations (see Google’s voice search “Demo Slam: Chubby Bunny” [2011] and IBM’s “Watson” [2011]), the videos fell out of the scope of this study.
Categories

All 144 unique advertisements were coded by Commercial Type (Slice of Life, Vignette, Story, Narrative/Drama) and Primary Appeal Type (Familiar, Relatable, Inspirational, Emotional, Humorous). Some advertisements were also coded with Secondary Appeal Types (Character/Spokesperson, Catchphrase, Nostalgia) that built off of or worked in tandem with the Primary Appeal Type. Commercial types were determined through deduction based on the definitions provided by Escalas (1998) and Deighton et al. (1989) that were used to create the Narrative Advertisement Continuum. Categorization for Primary Appeal Type and Secondary Appeal Type were developed through the process of induction by which themes emerged as more commercials were examined. These themes went through multiple iterations before being deemed the five Primary Appeal Types and three Secondary Appeal Types detailed here.

Types of Narrative Advertisements

Unsurprisingly, Narrative and Drama ads made up the vast majority of advertisements in this set (49%). The nearest second Narrative Ad Type were Story ads at 19% and those considered Slice of Life advertisements and Vignette ads made up about 17% and 15% of the total set, respectively. Within listicles, Narrative and Drama ads were over two and a half times more frequent (52%) than Story (19%) or Vignette (20%) ads and more than five and a half times more frequent than Slice of Life (9%). Of the award-winners, Slice of Life and Vignette ads each constituted 18% of the sample, while Story ads made up 22% and Narrative/Drama ads the remaining 43%. Full details of these results can be found in Table A2 in Appendix A.
Throughout the analysis, some key distinctions in Narrative Advertisement Types became clearer, further strengthening my understanding and hopefully the universal definitions of narrative advertisements. As described in previous work, Slice of Life advertisements are those that contain story-like scenarios that are not as embellished as those in Story or Narrative/Drama ads. Vignette ads contain series of scenes and people edited together, without any particular emphasis on chronology or causality. Slice of Life advertisements and Vignette ads can appear to be very similar, as can Slice of Life and Story ads, but some important distinctions exist. For one, Slice of Life ads rarely include a narrator, while the presence of a narrator is what defines a Story ad, and Vignette ads often utilize narrators to tie the ad together and help viewers make sense of the rapid scene changes. In the same vein, Slice of Life ads may contain any combination of temporality, causality, or character where Vignette ads will not. Story and Narrative/Drama advertisements are very similar with the main difference being the presence (Story) or absence (Narrative/Drama) of a narrator.

Some exemplars of Slice of Life advertisements include the classic Alka-Seltzer “Mama Mia Spicy Meatballs” [1969]xi ad that showed an actor who cannot get his lines right during filming a meatball advertisement, the overwhelmingly popular Budweiser ad “Wassup?!?” (1999)xii, which showed the friendship between four men talking on the telephone about what they are doing, and Honda’s award-winning advertisement “Paper” (2016)xiii, which showed the possibilities of a Honda engine, from award-winning motorbike to everyday family vehicle to F1 racecar. Nike’s recent “Dream Crazier” (2019)xiv ad, which was narrated by Serena Williams and celebrated women in sport
doing what has been deemed “crazy,” falls into the category of a Vignette ad. The modern classic “The Man Your Man Could Smell Like” (2010)\textsuperscript{xv} from Old Spice, which showed images of bizarre scenarios edited together to confuse and entice the viewer, is also an example of a Vignette ad.

Story ads and Narrative/Drama ads can be difficult to differentiate, but Story ads were generally distinguished in this study by the presence of a narrator (FedEx’s “Enchanted Forest” [2012]\textsuperscript{xvi}), the character’s direct involvement with the camera or audience (Bosch’s “Like a Bosch” [2019]\textsuperscript{xvii}), and the true (Gillette’s “Handle with Care” [2017]\textsuperscript{xviii}) or tongue-in-cheek (Great American Soups’ “The Big Production” [1970]\textsuperscript{xix}) acknowledgement that it was an advertisement. Purely Narrative/Drama advertisements made up the largest portion (49%) of this sample and included classics and new favorites alike. Some classic examples of Narrative/Drama ads are Tootsie Roll’s “How Many Licks?” (1969), which followed the story of a child asking forest animals how many licks would take to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop, and Coca-Cola’s “Hey Kid, Catch” (1979), which showed “Mean Joe Green” softening up to a kid who handed him a Coke. Some new Narrative/Drama favorites include Volkswagen’s “The Force” (2011)\textsuperscript{xx}, which showed a child in a Darth Vader costume testing his abilities with “the force,” and Doritos’ “Goat for Sale” (2013)\textsuperscript{xxi}, which showed the story of a Doritos-obsessed goat and the poor guy who adopted it.

**Primary Appeals**

Some common themes emerged and evolved throughout the analysis process. Mind-mapping potential narrative advertisement appeal types as well as cutting scraps of
paper with popular commercial titles and pasting them in globular Venn diagrams describing what made them stand out (seen in Appendix 3) led to the identification of five Primary Appeal Types – Familiar, Relatable, Inspirational, Emotional, and Humorous – by which each advertisement was coded. These Appeal Types served as a Primary code for this analysis. By reflecting on the assumptions and biases with which I entered analysis and through discussions with other scholars, each Appeal Type was expanded upon and detailed to be understood and accepted by other scholars and practitioners and so this study could be replicated, and findings reinforced. Because some of the Primary Appeal Types, like “Familiar” and “Relatable” or “Inspirational” and “Emotional,” seem quite similar on the surface, here I explain more in-depth what each Appeal Type is and is not before continuing with analysis and exemplars.

Familiar advertisements might make the viewer say to themselves “I have seen something like this before.” Familiar ads are reminiscent of popular books, movies, or television shows, and utilize familiar dramatic tropes. Familiar ads may be nostalgic or may be familiar based on the music used in the ad. Familiar advertisements are not reminiscent of everyday life but rather serve as recognizable media. Relatable advertisements may make the viewer see themselves in narrative because it is reminiscent of their own personal experiences or the experiences of close family and friends. Unlike “Familiar” advertisements, Relatable ads are personal and reminiscent of everyday life rather than based on classic tropes or popular media. Inspirational commercials are empowering, encouraging, or motivational. They aim to exhibit something that the viewer wants to be or do, or something that the viewer wants to see in the world.
Inspirational ads typically advocate for something better than the current state, whether that be corporate or personal. Inspirational advertisements may be emotional, but do not totally rely on emotion. On the other hand, Emotional ads are sweet, sad, or touching and play on a full range of emotions. Emotional advertisements make the viewer feel something and can be nostalgic, happy, or cheery but not funny or particularly inspirational. Finally, Humorous advertisements are made with the intent to make the viewer laugh by being funny, slapstick, silly, or even ridiculous. Humorous ads may utilize nostalgia, familiarity, or relatable but serve the main purpose of being humorous.

Table 4

*Categories: Primary Appeal Types*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiar</td>
<td>familiar tropes, reminiscent of familiar stories (books, movies, television shows); “I’ve seen [something like] this before.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatable</td>
<td>reminiscent of everyday life or personal experiences; “I [can] see myself in this.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspirational</td>
<td>empowering, encouraging, motivational; “I could/would like to be/do/see that.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>tugs on heartstrings, may appeal to a range of emotions; “I felt something.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humorous</td>
<td>funny, slapstick, tongue-in-cheek, silly, ridiculous or strange, makes the viewer laugh; “I laughed.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those which were categorized as Familiar (10% total) were either reminiscent of familiar stories (Shake ‘N Bake’s “Ann B. Davis” [1981][xxii] showed the television star seemingly reprising her role as Alice from the hit *The Brady Bunch* as she traveled to the local grocery for dinner supplies, and Apple’s “1984” [1984][xxiii] which played off of George Orwell’s book of the same name) or played on familiar narrative tropes (Axe’s
“Susan Glenn” [2013]xxiv told the classic story of the unattainable girl and the guy who romanticized her memory). Commercials categorized as Relatable (7%) were either reminiscent of everyday life (Saturn’s “Sheet Metal” [2003]xxv featured people acting in place of their vehicles) or, perhaps, one’s personal experience (Puma’s “After Hours Athlete” [2011]xxvi showed people engaging in extracurriculars with friends following the work day). Although relatability is subjective and generally dependent on personal life experiences and current events, those categorized as Relatable were considered to be aimed at a broad audience, mimicking common experiences.

Oftentimes inspirational commercials are also emotional advertisements. However, though most inspirational commercials elicit some level of emotion, not all emotional commercials are inspirational. Therefore, these are two separate categories with specific qualifications. Those with an Inspirational appeal (20%) might make someone viewing the advertisement say, “I could do/be that,” “I would like to do/be that,” or “I would like to see more of that in the world.” Some with the Inspirational appeal were empowering like GE’s “Ideas” [2015]xxvii, which showed how ideas must be nurtured and supported, and Microsoft’s “Be the One” [2020]xxviii, which told the story of the Super Bowl’s first-ever female coach. Others, like The New York Times’ “Perseverance” [2019]xxix which showed the evolution of a Times headline and Chipotle’s “Back to the Start” [2012]xxx which followed the life of a family farmer as he made important decisions about how to run his farm, were encouraging. Even others with the Inspirational Appeal Type were motivational (Jim Beam’s “Parallels” [2012]xxxi reminded people that the choices they make today will impact their tomorrow and
Gillette’s “We Believe: The Best a Man Can Be” [2019] encouraged men to hold one another accountable and raise the next generation of great men).

Emotional appeals, on the other hand, were deemed as those that would make someone say “I felt something” after viewing. Emotional appeals tug at the heartstrings (P&G’s “Best Job” [2013] showed moms of Olympic athletes, Budweiser’s “Puppy Love” [2014] followed the friendship of a puppy and a Clydesdale) and might be sad or downright upsetting (Sandy Hook Promise’s “Evan” [2017] showed how easy it is to miss the signs of a school shooter and March for Our Lives’ “Generation Lockdown” [2019] showed how familiar children are with active shooter protocols). Other Emotional advertisements may be fun or happy (Doritos’ “#NowItsHot” [2020], featuring Chance the Rapper and the Backstreet Boys), and generally appeal to a range of emotions (Google’s “Dear Sophie” [2010] showed a dad’s documentation of his daughter’s life, Extra’s “Origami” [2013] told the story of a dad who made origami birds out of Extra wrappers for his daughter, who kept all of them). Approximately 16% of all advertisements examined were considered Emotional.

Those in the Humorous category were commercials that seemed to have the goal of making people laugh. Approximately 52% of all commercials examined fell into the Humorous category. Humorous commercials are funny, like Reebok’s “Terry Tate: Office Linebacker” [2003] which showed the fictional linebacker tackling coworkers when they did not follow directions or wasted time and Skittles’ “Piñata” [2009] which featured a papier-mâché man confront his coworker for beating him with a stick and hoping Skittles would fall out. Some Humorous commercials rely on situational comedy

While most advertisements were coded with one Primary Appeal Type, some advertisements were categorized with multiples that seemed completely intertwined and inseparable. This was most common with Familiar + Humorous ads (3% of the total) that relied on some level of familiarity to make them funny. For example, Avocados From Mexico’s “First Draft Ever” (2016)xlix, which was set 4 billion years ago and showed plants and animals from around the world waiting to be claimed by different countries as their native species, was clearly designed to make the viewer laugh while also playing off of the concept of the NFL Draft. Doritos’ “The Cool Ranch” (2020)l was a silly advertisement, showing a dance-off between Lil Nas X and Sam Elliott, specifically playing off the Old Western trope of gunslingers and duels. Because some advertisements were coded with two Primary Appeal Types, the percentages of each Appeal Type found in the set combine to more than 100%. Table A3 in Appendix A provides more details on the numbers of each Appeal Type found in this analysis.

Secondary Appeals

Some advertisements (more details in Table A4 of Appendix A) were given a Secondary Appeal code that was not the overarching theme of the advertisement, but felt
relevant to include. For instance, approximately 35% of all advertisements examined contained a recognizable character or spokesperson. Even more interestingly, this percentage was higher (52%) in listicles. In a simple Google search of “most memorable commercials,” the top recommended related search is “Television advertisement commercial characters.” It seems apparent that the inclusion of a familiar character (Bud Light’s Bud Knight in “Joust” [2021], Dunkin’ Donuts’ Fred the Baker in “Time to Make the Donuts” [1982] or spokesperson(s) (Betty White and Abe Vigoda in Snickers’ “Hungry Betty White” [2010], Chris Evans, Rachel Dratch, John Krasinski, and David “Big Papi” Ortiz in Hyundai’s “Smaht Pahk” [2020]). Another popular appeal is the use of a catchphrase.

Though catchphrases, or catchy, recognizable sayings, only showed up in about 3% of all of the ads in this set, it is important to note that many of the advertisements that did utilize a catchphrase were the first of many and some of the catchphrases took on lives of their own in popular culture. For instance, Wendy’s 1984 ad “Where’s the Beef?” introduced a catchphrase that has been called one of the “best” and “most famous” slogans and can still be heard in popular culture and advertising today (Ad Age, 1999; Logie, 2020; Nemetz, 2017). The ad showed three older women examining a burger with a very large bun, calling the bun “very big” and “fluffy.” When one of the women pulled the top of the bun off the burger, the three women seemed surprised and disappointed before one of them asked the now-classic question, “where’s the beef?” Following that advertisement, which stayed on air for 10 weeks, Wendy’s gained 10% more sales in 1984 than the previous year and increased by 31% by 1985 (Logie, 2020; Nemetz, 2017;
Spears, 2018). The phrase made its way onto bumper stickers, into television shows, and even into the 1984 Democratic debate when Walter Mondale used the phrase to criticize Gary Hart’s “lack of substance” during the Democratic primary (Logie, 2020; Nemetz, 2017; Spears, 2018). In 2011, the slogan was resurrected with the addition of the answer, “here’s the beef” (Logie, 2020; Nemetz, 2017).

Verizon Wireless introduced a slogan in their 2002 commercial “Test Man
Launch”\textsuperscript{lvii} that was a familiar refrain for real-life Verizon Wireless test people and cellphone users everywhere: “Can you hear me now?” The ad followed a “test man’s” journey as he set out to obscure places to test the strength of Verizon’s signal. Periodically he asked someone on the other end of the line “can you hear me now?” and, after receiving confirmation, replied “good!” In the first year of the campaign, Verizon’s customers grew by 10% and then by 15% in the second year (Bali Sunset, 2008; The Drum, 2016). The advertisement mimicked Verizon’s actual test people, who drove over 100,000 miles per year to test the network as cell phone use increased in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and continued on to success with the recognizable test man, played by Paul Marcarelli, and slogan showing up in more than 100 commercial spots (The Drum, 2016). Verizon’s slogan and test man campaign were so successful that, in 2016, controversy struck as Marcarelli changed allegiance and joined Verizon’s competitor, Sprint, taking the slogan with him (Baig, 2016; Goldman, 2016). The Sprint ad featured Marcarelli stating that he used to ask, “can you hear me now?” for Verizon, and ends with him looking to camera with a coy grin, saying, “can you hear that?” Sprint’s CEO mentioned that they were relying on people’s recognition of Marcarelli and the slogan
when they launched their campaign featuring both (Baig, 2016). The Sprint ad drew so much attention that Verizon had to respond. Verizon attempted to discredit Sprint by stating that Sprint was using their spokesperson and slogan because, in 2016, they had finally caught up to Verizon’s 2002 network and that the question itself was outdated, having been replaced with a more current “can you see me now?” in Verizon’s 2016 advertisement featuring Jamie Foxx (Matyszczyk, 2016).

Nostalgia, the third Secondary Appeal type examined in this study, is the presence of something reminiscent of a viewer’s past. Though Nostalgia and Familiarity may seem similar, nostalgia has been shown to be its own unique concept and therefore warranted its own code. Similarly, not all that is familiar is nostalgic. Nostalgia has garnered a lot of attention in various areas of scholarship, and has been proven to be an effective marketing strategy (see Muehling et al., 2004; Pascal et al., 2002). Nostalgia was coded as a secondary appeal for this study because advertisements that play on nostalgia tend to have another, more prominent appeal. Approximately 8% of the commercials in this set consisted of nostalgia and had primary appeals of Familiarity, Relatability, and Humor. In the case of the findings here, Nostalgia was considered anything reminiscent of the past, including childhood (SunnyD’s “Rollerblade” [2016] was reminiscent both of spending time with friends as a child and was a nearly shot-for-shot remake of one of SunnyD’s famous ads from the 1990s), previously popular shows, movies, and characters (Snickers’ “Brady Bunch” [2016] combined multiple classic Brady Bunch storylines into one advertisement) and music (HP’s “Awaken Your Force” [2016] featured John
William’s *Star Wars* soundtrack and Heineken’s “Hero” [2016]\textsuperscript{ix} reprised Bonnie Tyler’s classic song Holding Out for a Hero).

**Table 5**

*Categories: Secondary Appeal Types*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character/Spokesperson</th>
<th>famous endorsement or recognizable character created by the brand (e.g. Progressive’s Flo)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catchphrase</td>
<td>popular, recognizable saying (e.g. “Where’s the beef?”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nostalgia</td>
<td>reminiscent of the past (e.g. childhood, previously popular or classic shows, movies, music, and characters)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Campaigns and Narration**

In general, campaigns fell out of the scope of this study because the intent was to examine individual commercials for their narrative features and appeal types. However, some advertisements that won individual awards were part of larger campaigns and were coded as such. Those that were coded as part of campaigns were either part of a campaign that year (e.g. Dos Equis’s “The Most Interesting Man: Amazon” [2011]\textsuperscript{xii} part of the overarching “Most Interesting Man” campaign, Google’s “Dear Sophie” [2012]\textsuperscript{xxxviii} part of Google’s “The Web is What You Make of It” campaign), intentionally reminiscent of a previous advertisement (e.g. Old Spice’s “Dadsong” [2015]\textsuperscript{ix}, follow-up to the previous year’s Momsong), or pointing to more ad content elsewhere (e.g. EA Sports’ “Madden: The Movie” [2016]\textsuperscript{xiv} invited people to go online for more content). About 26% of award-winning advertisements were part of larger campaigns as well as approximately 12% of listicle ads.
Narrators were present in approximately 28% of all advertisements in the set. Other than Story ads, of which 100% had a narrator, Vignette ads most commonly (45%) contained a narrator. In fact, 60% of listicle Vignette ads had narrators, though only 38% of award-winning Vignette ads did. While many of the advertisement narrators were the classic third-person narrators (e.g. Axe’s “Sporty” [2013]lv, Donate Life’s “The World’s Biggest Asshole” [2017]lvii, nearly 38% were characters in the advertisements (e.g. Monster.com’s “When I Grow Up” [1999]lviii, Tempur-Pedic’s “Bear” [2014]lxviii). Though testing the effectiveness of a third-person narrator versus a first-person narrator is outside of this study, there have been studies on the cognitive effects of narrative perspectives (Jahn, 1997) and some research has shown that a first-person narrator may encourage “experience taking” and stronger trust (Kaufman & Libby, 2012; van Lissa et al., 2016).

This Study: Commercials That Did it Wrong?

Even if a brand creates an advertisement that meets all of the aforementioned standards, there is no guarantee that it will be a success. Pepsi’s “Jump In,” was stylistically similar to Nike’s “Dream Crazy”lix and most of the advertisements analyzed here. The commercial consisted of all three narrative features (temporality, causality, and character), can be considered a Narrative or Drama ad, and utilized an Inspirational Appeal Type. However, the advertisement was seen as trivializing to the Black Lives Matter movement and was timed poorly. Other advertisements with seemingly good intentions have met the same fate. By examining four listicles referring to some of the “worst ads ever,” I identified 32 advertisements, 23 of which are unique, that fit the same
general criteria as described above. Though the set seems small, I quickly hit saturation as most listicles had the same things to say about the same sets of ads. I did not use any Super-Bowl-specific listicles as they were either specific to a certain year, which would be inconsistent with my selection for the “best” ads and could potentially skew the results, or they simply reiterated the same commercials that were already examined by other lists. Of the 23 unique ads, 22 of them (96%) showed Temporality, 22 (96%) contained Causality, and 22 (92%) included some form of Character. The majority of the advertisements contained all three Narrative Features (87%) and over half of the advertisements (54%) were Narrative or Drama ads. Story ads made up 29% and Slice of Life and Vignette ads each made up 8% of the sample. By far the most popular Appeal Type for these advertisements was Humorous (58%), followed by Emotional (29%), Inspirational (21%) and Familiar at a mere 4%.

Although these advertisements have similar content and features as well-liked advertisements, the brands clearly missed the mark somewhere along the way. Some common Missteps – Trivialization, Perpetuation, and Otherwise Offensive – emerged, shedding light on what some of the possible factors leading to these advertisement’s failures. Those that were accused of Trivialization were said to be making light of important issues like mental health, social justice, oppression, and tragedy. Those that were marked as Perpetuating upheld harmful racial and gendered stereotypes, including misogynistic ideals as well as homophobia and transphobia. Finally, some ads were accused of being hypocritical or otherwise offensive, advocating for something in opposition to the brand, insulting groups of potential customers, or simply timed poorly.
The most common Misstep that emerged from the set was the Perpetuation of negative stereotypes and power imbalances. These advertisements, approximately 48% of the sample, perpetuated racial stereotypes (SalesGenie.com’s “Chinese Pandas” [2008], Mountain Dew’s “Police Lineup” [2013], misogynistic ideals (Miller Lite’s “Catfight” [2003], Peloton’s “The Gift that Gives Back” [2019]), as well as trans- and homophobia (Holiday Inn’s “Bob Johnson” [1997], Snickers’ “Mechanic’s Kiss” [2007]), sexual harassment (Quizno’s “Toasty Torpedo” [2009]), social justice (Pepsi’s “Jump In” [2017]), and oppression (Groupon’s “Tibet” [2011]). Approximately 22% of the ads in the set were accused of Trivialization of important issues. They were seen as trivializing serious issues such as suicide (General Motors’ “Suicidal Robot” [2007], Hyundai’s “Pipe Job” [2013] sexual harassment (Quizno’s “Toasty Torpedo” [2009]), social justice (Pepsi’s “Jump In” [2017]), and oppression (Groupon’s “Tibet” [2011]).

Advertisements that were deemed Otherwise Offensive (30%) were considered hypocritical, insulting, grotesque, or otherwise insulting to viewers. Some advertisements were criticized not necessarily for the messages themselves, but rather for the advertisement’s placement within larger narratives or the perceived hypocrisy of the associated brands. McDonald’s “Signs” (2015) ad showed images of McDonald’s signs across the US with various messages: “#PrayforDrew,” “Boston Strong,” “Happy 30th Ed n Beth,” “It’s a Girl Rosalie Kay.” The ad was intended to be inspirational, showing the integral role McDonald’s plays in their communities across the country. However, the advertisement was criticized for attempting to capitalize off tragedies. Nationwide’s shocking “Boy” (2015) Super Bowl spot had similar backlash. The endearing young protagonist in Boy was found to be recounting all of the things he would
never be able to do after perishing in what is presumed to be an accidental drowning. Nationwide was criticized for attempting to profit off of tragedy as well as for airing it during the Super Bowl.

McDonald’s was also criticized for the timing of its “Signs” ad because it premiered at a time when the organization was struggling with sales and other internal issues (Bowerman, 2015). Viewers expected that McDonald’s was using the heartwarming commercial to circumvent addressing other corporate issues. Similarly, Gillette’s “We Believe: The Best a Man Can Be,” also on the list of best commercials of all time, received backlash for being hypocritical in their calls to be better and respect women. While some of the backlash came from misguided men who believed the ad was saying ‘all men are terrible,’ some of the backlash pointed out that the company itself could make small changes to support women, including not charging more for products advertised for “women” than the same products advertised for “men.”

**Conclusion**

The case of Gillette’s “We Believe” commercial, as well as Nike’s “Dream Crazy,” Google’s “Loretta,” and countless others on these lists prove that creating advertisements is a tricky business with a delicate balance. Even in the case of a technically and stylistically flawless commercial, there is always the possibility that the ad will receive harsh criticism or backlash. However, some risks (e.g. partnering with polarizing spokespeople or sticking to a specific advertising style even if it may turn some people off of your brand) are worth taking. One key takeaway I have found from this analysis is that you cannot please everyone; and if your goal is to do so, you will
reach no one. Regardless, there are some steps that can be taken to try to alleviate those negative responses.

Kim, Ratneshwar, and Thorson (2017) offered some tips that are directly applicable to what was seen here. First, they state that narrative structure should promote high emotional involvement and create a “positive hedonic experience” for the viewer (p. 293). Secondly, they state that the narrative should be credible. From my own analysis, it is abundantly clear that timing is also of the utmost importance. Nationwide’s Boy got terrible backlash for being aired during the Super Bowl, an event usually enjoyed in large groups of family and friends. Death of a child may have been too shocking for the environment in which the ad was viewed. Though it is impossible to know, it is at least conceivable that the company would not have gotten such harsh reviews if they had simply aired the ad at another time. Secondly, while it is important for brands to stay on the pulse, it is also important to ask, “should our brand get involved?” Sometimes, like in the case of Pepsi, the answer is no.

We know that narratives, in general, help people circumvent their natural desire to reassert personal freedom in the face of persuasive messages (Moyer-Gusé, 2008) and that narrative advertisements elicit more positive feelings and cognitive responses such as identification, liking, purchase intentions, positive brand attitudes, and better recall than non-narrative advertisements (Batra & Ray, 1986; Friestad & Thorson, 1986; Hitchon & Thorson, 1995; Kim et al., 2017; Siefert et al., 2009). The Narrative Advertisement Continuum defines the types of advertisements respective to each type’s level of narrativity. The continuum serves two purposes: to define which types of advertisements
are considered “narrative” and might benefit an agency with the desired benefits seen in narrative advertising; and to provide a clearer vocabulary and understanding for advertising researchers and scholars to build upon the literature with clear parameters and communal understanding. Key Appeal Types used in successful narrative advertisements have also been identified along with exemplars of each type. Furthermore, key Missteps have been identified to help creators attempt to avoid harsh backlash like that of any of the “worst” ads identified here.

With these findings, I have created a Narrative Advertisement Development Guide that outlines the Narrative Ad Types, Narrative Features, and Primary and Secondary Appeals detailed here for use in industry. The guide describes the differences in Narrative Ad types as well as provides archetypal examples of each. Primary and Secondary Appeal Types are characterized with exemplars and explanations of their intended audience. A brief overview of research done on narrative features and anticipated psychological responses to those features is described. Finally, some examples of the greatest ad failures and their Missteps are exhibited.

**Limitations and Future Research**

There were many types of advertisements and commercials that were not included in this study for various reasons. Future studies should take the framework of this study and apply it to other types of advertisement media. As well, awards given outside of the United States should be examined along with identifying Appeal Types for other countries. This study focused mainly on English-speaking, North American audiences.
Future research examining narrative advertisements from around the world would add an interesting dynamic to the growing research on narrative advertising.

This analysis was done by one researcher with limited coding input by anyone else. Future scholarship along the same lines should include other researchers so proper intercoder reliability can be established. Though I took care to triple and quadruple check labels and codes, recoding with new and clearer understanding of each Ad and Appeal Type up until the day this was turned in, it is possible that some advertisements could appear to have different features, types, and appeals to other scholars that I could see.
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Appendices
Appendix A

Results Tables

Table A1

*Results: Narrative Features*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Total* (Awards)</th>
<th>Total* (Listicles)</th>
<th>Total (Combined)**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temporality</td>
<td>57 (77%)</td>
<td>65 (87%)</td>
<td>117 (81%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causality</td>
<td>68 (92%)</td>
<td>63 (84%)</td>
<td>128 (89%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>62 (84%)</td>
<td>69 (92%)</td>
<td>127 (88%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Adjusted to exclude repeats within Awards or Listicles.
**Adjusted for repeats in both categories (Awards and Listicles).

Table A2

*Results: Narrative Advertisement Types*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Total* (Awards)</th>
<th>Total* (Listicles)</th>
<th>Total (Combined)**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slice of Life</td>
<td>13 (18%)</td>
<td>13 (9%)</td>
<td>25 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette</td>
<td>13 (18%)</td>
<td>10 (20%)</td>
<td>22 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story</td>
<td>16 (22%)</td>
<td>11 (19%)</td>
<td>27 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative/Drama</td>
<td>32 (43%)</td>
<td>41 (52%)</td>
<td>70 (49%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Adjusted to exclude repeats within Awards or Listicles.
**Adjusted for repeats in both categories (Awards and Listicles).
Appendix A (continued)

Table A3

*Results: Appeal Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appeal Type</th>
<th>Total* (Awards)</th>
<th>Total* (Listicles)</th>
<th>Total (Combined)**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Familiar</strong></td>
<td>11 (15%)</td>
<td>4 (5%)</td>
<td>15 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relatable</strong></td>
<td>6 (8%)</td>
<td>3 (4%)</td>
<td>9 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inspirational</strong></td>
<td>14 (19%)</td>
<td>15 (20%)</td>
<td>26 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional</strong></td>
<td>17 (23%)</td>
<td>8 (11%)</td>
<td>23 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Humorous</strong></td>
<td>32 (43%)</td>
<td>48 (64%)</td>
<td>75 (52%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Adjusted to exclude repeats within Awards or Listicles.
**Adjusted for repeats in both categories (Awards and Listicles).

Table A4

*Results: Secondary Appeal*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secondary Appeal</th>
<th>Total* (Awards)</th>
<th>Total* (Listicles)</th>
<th>Total (Combined)**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Character/Spokesperson</strong></td>
<td>14 (19%)</td>
<td>39 (52%)</td>
<td>51 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Catchphrase</strong></td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>4 (5%)</td>
<td>5 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nostalgia</strong></td>
<td>7 (9%)</td>
<td>4 (5%)</td>
<td>8 (6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Adjusted to exclude repeats within Awards or Listicles.
**Adjusted for repeats in both categories (Awards and Listicles).
Appendix C

Globular Venn Diagram: Mind Mapping Phase

Early Appeal Types