

The Role of Narratives in  
Eliciting Strong Audience  
Response to Emotional  
Commercials

A Senior Project Presented to  
The Faculty of the Communication Studies Department  
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Bachelor of Arts

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Let's face it; crying during movies will always be a bit embarrassing even if the movie is worthy of shedding tears. But crying during a commercial is almost humiliating. Surprisingly, it happens. Commercials from the last few years have caused that very reaction among some audience members. These commercials, built on emotional appeals, contain narratives that cause the audience—in one to three minutes—to feel like part of the world created by the advertiser or rhetor. In a day and age where it is easy to skip an ad, advertisers are turning to the use of narratives as a way to reach and persuade their audiences by appealing to the notion that humans like to tell and hear stories. The narratives found in these commercials do not go unnoticed; they cause people to talk and spread the content to reach a farther scope. This paper will seek to understand why this phenomenon occurs by looking at the different rhetorical strategies at play within three different commercials (also referred to as artifacts). The commercials of focus are “A Boy and His Dog Duck” by IAMS, “Moments” by Volvo, and “The Story of Juan and Sarah” by Extra Gum. The commercials featured in this paper all successfully broke through the barrier of audience indifference by providing narratives that resonate with audiences through a reliance on emotional instead of logical appeals.

First, I will provide background on the methods that will drive the analysis as well as recognize some of the scholarly literature about this topic. Next, the details of each commercial will be laid out. The section following will provide a closer look at what is going on within the commercials and how the strategies they contain help to make them work. The last major section of the paper will include my evaluation of the commercials in terms of their rhetorical purposes.

### **Methodological Discussion and Literature Review**

For my analysis of these commercials, I will be using two methods to help bring a greater understanding of their significance. The two approaches are narrative criticism and reception

studies. Fisher (1984) developed narrative criticism through the concept of the narrative paradigm that he brought to light because he sought to challenge the “reigning” paradigm known as the rational world paradigm. The rational world paradigm assumes people are rational and the way to interpret argumentation is through reason but being able to be rational must be learned (Fisher, 1984). Fisher believed that rationale was not the only contributor to how people make sense of the world. As can be found in criticism to another, older approach of rhetorical criticism called Neo-Aristotelian criticism, not all audience members are rational or as rational as the rhetor would like to believe. Fisher recognized that a different paradigm, the narrative paradigm, encompassed how people share stories and parse meanings and interpretations from these stories to socialize and to explain the world around them. Cragan and Shields (1995) agree with Fisher; they argue that all human communication, no matter what context it is in, contains features of narrations. Everyday people are inundated with various and potentially competing stories that they will have to assess in order to decide what they believe. It takes more than pure reason to convince or persuade people.

The presuppositions for the narrative paradigm are that humans are fundamentally storytellers, they communicate through “good” reasons based on history or culture, stories must be coherent and make sense with real life experiences, and people essentially choose how to live their lives from stories (Fisher, 1984). Narratives are an essential part of what it means to be human. They can be found in films, movies, books, pop music and across times and cultures. Stories are important because humans have an innate likeness for them and use them as tools to understand the world (Rowland, 2009). Understanding that narratives are more than just made up stories or stories retold can help a critic gain a better picture of how the persuasive appeals contained within the narrative may work.

Two central tenets of the narrative paradigm, and ultimately the approach of narrative criticism, are narrative probability and narrative fidelity. Narrative probability refers to the internal coherence of a story and narrative fidelity deals with the story resonating and staying true with other stories and experiences in the audience's lives (Fisher, 1984). If the narrative itself makes sense and follows its own logic, then it achieves narrative probability. Fidelity deals more with real-world expectations and truth. Even if the story has unrealistic and fictional aspects, it has to remain true to what people have actually experienced. If someone engages in something unethical, like stealing, we would expect to see that character face consequences for that action (as that usually occurs in real life) instead of being praised for it or getting away with it. Narrative probability and fidelity build the story's credibility in two ways: humans tend to believe stories consistent with experience, and they interpret events through the lens of their own experience in the world (Rowland, 2009). These two concepts combine to make a narrative rationality that can be persuasive. I will be using both narrative probability and fidelity to help guide my analysis of the narratives within the selected artifacts to see how they contribute to the effectiveness of the ads.

Though Fisher set up the initial structure for narrative paradigm theory, it has been adapted in order to narrow or clarify its focus. Rowland (2009) contributed to the effort to try to create a systematic perspective on narrative analysis. He focused on the forms and functions narratives play. Rowland addressed that narrative as persuasion fulfills four functions: keeping the attention of the audience, creating identification between the characters and audience, breaking down barriers to transport the audience to another time and place, and tapping into values to create a strong emotional reaction. The last function is of particular interest for this current study since I will be looking in depth at commercials built on emotional appeals.

Narratives have a way of giving additional meaning to an artifact beyond what other forms of argumentation can.

As part of another expansion on narrative paradigm theory, Clair et al. (2014) presented the idea of narrative clusters, or the idea that no story stands alone, but rather that they are connected in clusters which span across cultures and generations. A story is not necessarily unique; it draws from and connects to various themes and ideas of importance. Clair et al. encouraged narrative rhetoricians to imagine the stories they analyze from a different perspective in order to understand a fuller meaning of the text and see if overarching narratives exist. The idea of narrative clusters is recent and not fully developed or being used by other scholars, yet it presents an interesting potential to look at narratives as a collection, which provides greater information about a certain narrative.

Another study used narrative paradigm theory in relation to image advertising. Stutts and Barker (1999) found that businesses tell stories to create loyalty and establish their identities through image advertising (such as commercials) instead of solely relying on rational arguments. An effective image advertisement is one where the audience/consumers extend their feelings to the brand or the product presented (Stutts & Barker, 1999). The results found by the researchers touch largely upon the issue of branding, which is related to this topic, but beyond the scope of this paper. Stutts and Barker noted the romanticized and idealized visuals used in image advertising may not even relate to the business or the product itself. When stories presented in commercials do not represent what real life would look like with this product but are still successful, the reason for this is not rational logic. Stutts and Barker made the claim that, “image advertising appeals to the emotional decision maker in each of us” (p.220). As one of the key

components of narrative paradigm theory suggests, humans are natural storytellers and are persuaded by not just logic but also narratives.

Looking at the narratives within the commercials will point out strategies used to make them memorable and emotionally charged. Beyond looking at the narratives themselves, however, it is also crucial to understand how the audience received them. Reception studies looks at responses from audiences to help infer what message was received and how it was received. In turn, this can either help confirm or guide a critic's analysis and interpretation. Ceccarelli (2001), one of the leading scholars to come up with the method of reception studies, believes it is valuable not only to closely analyze the text but also to closely read intertextual material offered by those responding to the text or artifact. Stromer-Galley and Schiappa (2018) asserted that audience research is important—even necessary—in analyzing texts since mass-mediated messages have a different effect and meaning on audience members. A large aspect of rhetorical criticism is to look at *effect* and looking at the actual effect of an artifact can point rhetors to the areas that either resonated or did not with the audience. Stromer-Galley and Schiappa (2018) argued that, “if rhetorical critics make claims concerning the determinate meanings of the text or the effects those texts have on audiences, then the critic should turn to the audience to support those claims” (p. 49). Though understanding audience reception seems essential for gaining context for an artifact, reception studies is a relatively new addition to the field as scholars have mixed feelings about the role reception plays—or should play—in the field of rhetoric. The majority of audience studies in contemporary rhetorical research contain what Kjeldsen (2018) called “speculative, theoretical constructions of the audience” (p. 4). Rhetorical critics commonly create how they thought the audience would or should respond but fail to look at how the text went over with the real audience. The common idea in rhetorical studies used to

be that text is “king,” so text should be the focus of criticism, not context (Kjeldsen, 2018).

However, scholars using reception studies argue that looking solely at a text and not examining contextual information provides an incomplete picture of the meaning and effect of the text.

Kjeldsen (2018) argued that there is no rhetoric without an audience; therefore, a key aspect of understanding rhetoric comes from understanding the audience. A critic can only understand the audience once she analyzes the audience's expressed views toward the rhetorical artifact.

It is up to the critic how she will use reception to gain meaning about the artifact. In the process of conducting reception studies, the critic can look to the text in depth first and make “hypotheses” about how the readers may respond and what they might take away from the piece (Ceccarelli, 2001). Then the critic can look to test these “hypotheses” through considering responses in forms such as editorials, online reviews, or in even scientific articles. Ceccarelli (2001) argues that this approach offers a “reliable connection between internal form and external function” (p. 8). Including reception in an analysis provides greater insight to the influence of the artifact. After developing the focal points for the analysis, the critic can then use reception as evidence to support her claims. This approach can show the similarities and differences between the significance of the artifact as observed by the critic and the audience. Dissenting or uncommon views purposed by the audience can help steer the critic to areas in the artifact that may not have worked for them or areas she did not pick up on while making her “hypotheses.”

In the second way to use reception, the critic can start by looking at audience reception to uncover trends in responses to an artifact. Here, the reception is used as the driving force of the analysis; it can be used to find themes or highlight the most significant elements in an artifact. The themes found can then be the main points of interest for the analysis. In conducting a rhetorical criticism of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s first inaugural address, Houck and Nocasian

(2002) used this first approach to show how “collective reactions can inform the formation of that speech and its historical contexts” (p. 650). Since the authors analyzed a speech that happened decades ago, reception provided a vital element for understanding the text. By looking at audience reception, the critics gained a better understanding of what people of that time valued, giving insight into why FDR would include certain information. Production, text, and reception came together to form the larger text (Houck & Nocasian, 2002). Houck and Nocasian (2002) emphasized that it is not a critic’s job to only reveal patterns found in reception with rhetorical strategies but also to reveal the “organic” nature of both the text and context to see the influence the artifact had in history (or on its immediate audience). With this approach, the critic does not focus first on her own thoughts but analyzes the thoughts of others and helps reveal why these responses happened. I will use the former approach as it will allow me to isolate the different rhetorical strategies in the artifact without first being influenced by the audience.

For the purpose of this rhetorical analysis, I will look at responses from online advertising magazines and comments on YouTube. In looking at audience responses from these types of sources, I can view some of the effects that the artifacts had on actual viewers. Different people are influenced by different tactics and appeals. A key purpose of reception studies is to look past the fact that the artifact had a certain reception to look at how readers interpreted the artifact (Ceccarelli, 2001). Taking into account the reception of an artifact helps to show what is important in the artifact and how it works from the perspective of its audiences.

Kjeldsen (2007) argued that effective rhetoric that contain visuals built off of both emotional and rational arguments in order to cause the audience to want to respond. Looking at responses to these emotional commercials will help to point out what about these commercials seemed to cause all types of people to have emotional responses. It will also highlight hidden

meanings or interpretations audience members came up with that may go against the intention of the rhetor, which could go undiscovered without looking at reception. The next section will provide detail on the narratives found in each of the three commercials before delving into an analysis of the narratives and their reception.

### **Rhetorical Situation and Description**

In 2015, the pet food company IAMS drew inspiration from a previous advertisement it created sixteen years before that served as an unforgettable, heart-warming experience for those who watched it. With a change of ownership in 2014, the new owner, Mars, wanted to look at what helped boost brand growth in the previous twenty-five years (Richards, 2015). One advertisement in particular, entitled “Casey,” brought exponential growth in sales for the following three to four years. “Casey,” which aired in 1999, was about a girl with a dog named Casey. It shows quick scenes of the two growing up together with the dog eating IAMS along the different stages of her life. It presents a warm and fuzzy feeling. The senior brand manager of IAMS described the spot as effective: “If you are a dog owner, the thing you aspire to most is the dog will live a youthful, vibrant life from puppyhood to maturity” (Richards, 2015). The same storytelling concept showing a kid growing up with his dog was the crucial essence that advertising firm DDB New York wanted to keep and even expand on decades later. Since it worked then, it could work again. Everyone loves a story about a kid and her pet.

The commercial used for this analysis is IAMS’ “A Boy and His Dog Duck.” The commercial shows the main character as a little kid with Duck as a puppy; quickly, the viewer sees snapshots of the boy growing up and Duck growing alongside him. The boy travels in the car with Duck, he reads with him, and Duck even cheers him up during one of his baseball games. Wherever his owner goes, Duck is always there with him—in good times and bad times.

The boy becomes a teenager and at this point in time, Duck looks a lot older and has gray hair on his face. The next scenes show Duck trying to sneak in the car to head to prom with his owner, then the boy and him at the beach, where Duck struggles a bit to get into the car. While there, a teenage girl the boy seems interested in asks him why he named his dog Duck. As soon as she does, a flashback takes the viewer to the moment when the boy's parents are giving him a puppy. His mom says, "this is Duke," to which the boy says, "hi Duck" since he could not say Duke. This is the heartwarming moment when the name Duck finally makes sense. In the end of the commercial, there are a few more highlights from over the years with the boy petting his dog and Duck licking him. The commercial ends with the IAMS logo and the tagline "good for life," as this commercial implies how IAMS dog food helped give this dog have a happy, healthy, and long life. The commercial captures the same feeling of being a part of or seeing a great relationship between a dog and his owner as the "Casey" ad. However, the most precious moment is the flashback showing how Duck got his name. Mars managed to create a new campaign to emphasize a vital relationship that society loves in order to illustrate the benefits of IAMS dog food.

Though this next commercial features vignettes like the IAMS commercial, it flashes forward into what the future of a little girl may look like instead of relying on flashbacks. The commercial "Moments" by Volvo highlights the XC60, which is a vehicle all about safety. It came out in 2017 and helps illustrate the new safety features of the car. The features of this car include a steer support added to Volvo's City Safety autonomous emergency braking system, steer assist to lessen head-on collisions, and an updated blind spot information system with steer assist to reduce the risk of lane-changing collisions (Nudd, 2017). With a highly emotive narrative, the advertisement shows how vital these features are for protecting the safety of

drivers and pedestrians. The safety aspects of the XC60 “should reduce the human factor, which after all is responsible for some 94 percent of traffic accidents” (Nudd, 2017). Volvo prides itself in being at the top in regards to safety. The focus in the commercial is to show that this car has the ability to prevent tragic or careless accidents from happening altogether.

The commercial begins with a little girl nervous about her first day of school. Her mom is trying to calm her down and telling her to enjoy this new experience. She communicates to her daughter that she is the one to decide how it is going to be; she is the one in control of her own life. Then, she asks the little girl to imagine what her life will look like. The girl then starts to come up with the details, starting with making two life-long friends once she heads to school.

As she describes this to her mother, the image shown onscreen is of the little girl walking by herself to school. At the same time, there is a parallel story happening with a woman heading to work in the morning, driving her Volvo XC60. The audience watches scenes of the three friends growing up. The little girl then paints the picture of heading to college, which the audience sees, and then reveals that she plans to travel the world. The little girl invites her mother to come along for the travels, but the mom replies that she will not be alone. At this point in time, there are scenes showing the young woman falling in love with a man she met abroad. They participate in a few activities together, then they part ways with a tearful goodbye. Next, the girl imagines getting a job as a photographer then finding someone with whom to settle down, buy a house, and start a family. The music builds and moves faster as the girl says these last things.

As the audience sees moments from the little girl’s imagined future, the camera keeps flashing to the Volvo on the road. The woman in the car has coffee that spills over and as she is trying to clean it up, the little girl is walking in front of her car at a crosswalk. The automatic

braking system activates and stops the car. The woman was caught off guard and unprepared, but the brakes save the life of the little girl. The words “sometimes the moments that never happen matter the most” appear on the screen, in which the viewer, little girl, and woman driving are all thankful that the brakes stopped a tragic situation from happening. Now the girl can live out her dreams just as she imagined. It is both a heart-racing and relieving conclusion to the story. The commercial serves as an example of how vital the new safety features are of the XC60 and fully illustrates what it would look like to prevent injury or death from cars.

The final commercial attempts to make extraordinary moments out of life’s everyday moments. It is part of Extra’s campaign to “Give extra, get extra.” Gum sales were low starting in 2009 for a variety of reasons: high unemployment rates for teenagers, other snack foods were becoming more popular, and the pockets in skinny jeans were arguably too skinny to hold gum packs (Schultz, 2013). Wrigley Jr. Co., the company that owns Extra Gum, had to look for new marketing strategies that would appeal to teenagers since they make up the age group that chews the most gum.

The senior gum category director Anne Marie Splitstone of Wrigley Jr. Co. argued that the best approach would be through functional and emotional messages (Schultz, 2013). This thought process created an opportunity for deeper narratives. After the success of the first commercial of the campaign—about a dad and his daughter before she left for college—the company wanted to continue using emotional approaches (Cobo, 2015). For their next ad, the team wanted to build on a romantic relationship between two teenagers, appealing to the age group of their targeted audience.

At the beginning of the commercial, the audience sees Sarah and Juan in their different circle of friends. The two make eye contact, smile, and give each other a knowing look like

something great is about to happen. They meet when he helps her pick up papers and books she dropped. She then hands him a piece of spearmint Extra Gum—the first of many gum exchanges that happen between the two. The audience next watches their first date. Sarah offers Juan another stick of that spearmint Extra gum to calm the nerves that come from a first date. It works as they then go in for their first kiss. After Sarah leaves his car, Juan pulls out a pen and captures the moment by drawing an illustration on the inside of the wrapper.

Next, Juan and Sarah experience a perfect day at the park. They go on more dates with the exchange of Extra Gum becoming almost a ritual between the two. Also, woven into the scenes is Juan drawing inside the gum wrappers without Sarah's knowledge.

One scene shows Sarah and Juan fighting as she is about to move for work after graduating. She eases the tension by giving Juan a peace offering in the form of gum. As they say goodbye to each other in the airport, Juan quickly grabs a gum wrapper to commemorate the moment.

The following scenes show Sarah at work in a different city and the strain of a long-distance relationship. After time, the two are reunited. Sarah walks by herself into a small art gallery. The gum wrappers Juan drew on from over the years are hanging in frames throughout the room. Sarah is taken back to all those moments in her relationship through the illustrations they hold. She walks around the room to look at them, and then Juan is on one knee as she turns to see him proposing. The camera flashes back to them, making eye contact at school for the first time. The very last image provides a stark contrast to the mood of the commercial as it pans to a bright, green background—the color of the spearmint gum pack—and the words, “Give extra, get extra” are shown. At this point, the audience is abruptly taken out of feeling a part of the story to be reminded that yes, this is an advertisement.

In these three commercials, narrative creates a way for them to be persuasive yet appeal to the audience through emotion. Now, I will analyze the successful aspects of the commercials and look at why they were successful. I will also draw attention to one key difference among the commercials and how it influences the effectiveness of the ads. After the analysis, I will include an evaluation of the commercials and a judgment about their strength as rhetorical artifacts.

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

Across the three commercials, similar strategies emerged. The first is the use of time. One commercial is a minute long, another is two minutes, and the longest is three minutes. In the span of this time, a story must be told and developed enough to have the audience follow along. Time is compressed in the commercials. Clearly, the audience does not see everything that happens with the characters; each snapshot or short scene is crucial to building the story since not a lot can be included. The audience is given the framework of the story, and the responsibility is on them to fill in the gaps.

In the IAMS commercial, the audience sees clips that are only a few seconds long of the boy and Duck chasing each other around, playing together in a fort, riding in the car together, etc. From this, audience members can infer that the two participate in as much as they possibly can together. The activities presented in the commercial are everyday occurrences. Both the kid and dog age through these scenes; they grow up together. They remain as close as ever even when the boy becomes a teenager and the dog is older and not as agile. In the Extra Gum commercial, scenes play out from when Juan and Sarah first meet and their first interactions with one another. Soon after, the viewer sees them develop their relationship further. About forty-five seconds later, Juan proposes to Sarah in the final scenes. The Volvo commercial is the longest of the three commercials and uses time more freely to provide visuals of what the girl describes to

her mom. She focuses on the “big” aspects of life and covers all her bases from attending college, to traveling the world, to acquiring a job, and then to settling down with a family within the span of just three minutes. The scenes included help to build the plot and build the story. Time is spent wisely on these special moments, the moments that help move the storyline forward as monotonous aspects of everyday life would diminish the effect and take up too much time. The audience understands those moments happen too but they do not have to witness them. Since this is the case, the limited amount of time is reserved for showing the interactions of the characters.

When reflecting on the stories in the three commercials, they do not include a lot of information. The audience’s job is to fill in all the missing puzzle pieces in order to understand the bigger picture. The ability to believe the story and make sense of it relies upon the experiences of the audience. This develops the narrative fidelity. While watching the commercials, viewers draw on situations in their own lives or those of others they are aware about. Dog owners reflect on the joys of living life with a dog. Maybe they remember when they were kids and grew up with dogs. Though the IAMS commercial does not show the difficult aspects of having a puppy, like potty training or teaching them not to chew, there is something so special about having a puppy and being with it while it grows up. The positives outweigh the negatives as the commercial presents, and dog lovers know this to be true. People watching the Extra commercial think back to what it was like to be in love for the first time or what it is like to be in love in general and fill in the gaps in the explicit narrative in the commercial with activities they did with their significant others. Even if the love story in the commercial looks a little different than the one an audience member previously experienced, each person gets to personalize the details he or she inserts into it. This points to why people have such strong,

emotionally charged responses to the commercial—by having to fill in the details of the story they make it their own, which increases the likelihood of the commercial’s narrative resonating with them. In the Volvo commercial, anyone can relate to planning out one’s life and what that would look like. The plan the little girl in the commercial has for her life is a desirable one that captures and highlights common values. Even if her life does not end up exactly how she planned, she is unafraid to dream and is undeterred by the world. The audience can also fill in how their lives may look a bit different than this but that they want happiness, too.

The phenomenon of the audience filling in missing pieces to a story draws from the tenants of a rhetorical theory. In his theory about text as fragmentation, McGee (1990) suggested that text construction falls upon the audience, as is the case in these commercials. A viewer pieces together fragments from her culture, experience, or other stories in order to understand and bring meaning to the story (McGee, 1990). When this happens, the viewer becomes the storyteller because she supplies the missing information in order to create a whole story. Since each audience member is pulling from different fragments in their lives, the interpretation of the story may be different, yet it is also more personal and therefore more likely to strike a chord with them.

Besides filling in information about the story, it is also the audience’s job to personally attribute qualities to the characters. All character development is self-provided; we believe the characters are like us but we actually do not know much about them. Sarah and Juan do not speak, yet at the end people are touched enough by the commercial to cry. Of all the characters, the audience only knows their names and that is merely because the commercial includes them in the title. Yes, the audience knows Duck’s name, but only because it is an integral part of the story. Not knowing the names of the characters makes it easier for viewers to further insert their

experiences to those of the character. The barrier between the character and the audience is broken. It is the viewer who gets to determine the name and other basic information about a character. The audience empathizes with the characters not because of who they are but because of what they represent. Each of the three commercials focuses on a key relationship and uses archetypal characters. They include the relationships between parent, pet, and partner. The reason the audience can relate is due to the emphasis and care *we* place on these connections. They are fundamental in American culture. The audience can relate to all of the relationships presented based on personal experience or observations of others. People root for strong, healthy relationships between these types of people and want them to work out. With this personalization, the persuasive power of the narrative is enhanced. A viewer is likely to be positively influenced by the message since she already related to the values in the commercial.

In terms of narrative probability, each of the stories in the commercials only make sense and come together within the last few seconds of the videos. There is a moment of payoff at the end. While watching the ads for the first time, an audience member experiences cognitive dissonance with the information presented to her. Though stemming from the field of psychology, cognitive dissonance theory is relevant to the field of communication as it contends that when presented with inconsistencies, a person will face psychological discomfort (Festinger, 1957). The dissonance leads the person to try to reduce the inconsistencies she is facing to reach consistency and a greater level of comfort. Festinger (1957) defined dissonance as the presence of “nonfitting relations” with cognitions. For these commercials, this theory comes into play when the audience is being drawn into the narrative by relating to the characters and wanting to believe the narrative. However, dissonance occurs as the stories do not make complete sense to the audience since some of the information about the narratives is withheld. As the commercials

progress, the narrative coherence hangs in the balance since the audience has to wait to the end for the whole story to unfold.

Questions arise as the audience watches. In the Extra commercial, it is unclear exactly what Juan is doing with the gum wrappers. The audience is clued into him saving them and doodling on them but the reason why is unknown. The subject of the doodles is not revealed in the moment either. With the Volvo commercial, there are two different stories that are happening at the same time. The main story is the one of the little girl with her mom imagining her future but a woman is shown driving to work simultaneously. Nothing is known about this other woman, other than it appears she is running late. No connection is made between the two storylines, and it actually gets a bit confusing when the focus of the commercial is on her. From the beginning of the IAMS commercial, there is no denying the interactions between the boy and his dog are precious, yet it makes no sense why a dog would be called Duck. These dissonance-inducing aspects of the commercials cause an audience member to wonder what she is watching and why she is watching it. Seemingly, the narratives lack internal coherence, harming their narrative probability, which is a key aspect of narratives that persuade, according to Fisher. Since the coherence does not come until the end of the commercials, audience members experience cognitive dissonance in how they feel about what is presented to them in the commercials. They want to follow the story and like it, yet it somehow does not come together.

Once the resolution of the stories happens, each commercial makes sense and holds to narrative probability. The moment of payoff eases the dissonance experienced and makes the commercial worth watching. The final puzzle piece is given to the audience to finish the construction of the narrative. It all clicks into place. The delayed coherence of the narrative helps strengthen the narrative probability. The delay stirs the audience to want the story to make

logical sense, so once they have all the information from the commercial, it seems as if everything connects perfectly. Also, this approach adds to the persuasiveness of the commercials as the audience has to stay engaged throughout the commercial in order to understand what is going on. When viewers find out the ending, the story and the product being represented seem more credible and representative of something they can agree with.

In the Extra Gum commercial, Sarah walks into a small gallery. There she finds gum wrappers from over the years with doodles on them capturing what was happening when she gave the gum to Juan. She looks around and is reminded of different memories they share. The last wrapper she looks at has an image of Juan proposing to her and when she turns around, he is on one knee asking her to marry him. The gum wrappers are like love letters Juan has written, and they become precious mementos chronicling the relationship between the two. Finally, the audience understands what Juan was doing with the wrappers. They are an integral part of their relationship. Not only is there significance in her handing him gum, but also the wrappers are important as they preserve these memories. Something as mundane as a wrapper—what some would deem as trash—turns into an amazing memory keeper. The audience wants a happy ending with Juan and Sarah staying together and can be satisfied with the ending of the commercial. The connection of the wrappers to different aspects of their relationship helps bring on the tears and leads to the emotional response.

At the end of the Volvo commercial, the audience understands the connection between the little girl and the woman driving in her car as she takes her eyes off the road when her coffee spills. Her car is going straight to where the little girl is walking on the crosswalk. Just as the two are about to collide, the sound of the autonomous emergency brakes can be heard, everything goes black, and the words “sometimes the moments that never happen matter the most” appear

on the screen. The buildup of emotion as the audience becomes involved in the story of the little girl hangs in the air in this moment of uncertainty. Every goal and dream the girl imagines for her life almost does not become a reality. It takes panning back to the little girl unharmed by the car and continuing to walk to school to be able to breathe again. The whole time the audience is immersed in the story of the projected life for the little girl when in an instant, her future almost gets taken away, shattering the story from having the potential to take place. However, the end of this narrative has a happy ending. Though drastic, this moment also reveals how the little girl and woman in the Volvo are connected. The commercial provides a vivid image of the safety features and what the autonomous emergency braking system can look like in action. It is a beautiful demonstration of exactly what a Volvo car can do. Now, the little girl will be able to live out her dream.

In the IAMS commercial, the flashback of the kid as a toddler reveals how Duck receives his name. The scene shows the boy's parents introducing their new puppy as Duke. When the little kid says "hi Duck" instead of Duke, the name makes a lot more sense and adds to the emotional buildup of the commercial. It is the finishing touch on this adorable story between a boy and his dog. This moment answers questions about the name.

Any confusion or incoherence in the plots of these stories is cleared up once the moments of resolution happen. The first viewing of the commercials is disorienting since the audience spends so much of the time wondering how everything is going to fit together. The power of each of the resolutions fuels the emotional response to these commercials, whether it be chills or tears. Better clarity comes from re-watching the commercials. When thinking about this aspect, it is amazing that the producers created a commercial people will not only want to watch in its entirety, but also be willing to watch it more than once. For all the commercials, there were

viewers who commented that they do not skip that ad, even if they normally skipped ads. Others mentioned they had watched the commercial more than once and would turn to it when they wanted to feel something. Not only did people enjoy watching the commercials, but they also declared them to be the best advertisements since they contain quality stories. The number one comment about the commercials was that they made people cry. Many acknowledged that they never thought they would have cried over an advertisement in general or one about gum or cars, but they did not mind expressing emotion in response to these commercials. Beyond feeling emotions, viewers commented that they needed to go out and buy the product from the commercials.

The purpose of the stories in these commercials is to play on the audience's emotion. The intention is to draw in the audience by giving them something to care about. Since the missing piece is revealed during the moment of resolution, people remain interested to keep watching and to be invested emotionally in what they are watching. If the audience was aware of everything and the story all made sense along the way, the commercial and the narrative itself would be boring and unexciting. There would also be low incentive for a viewer to keep watching until the end. Once the pieces fall into place, the viewer is no longer just watching a commercial; she is engaging in a highly emotive narrative. She is invested in the situation and feels connected and personally affected by the ending. Clearly, the advertisers successfully developed stories to lead to emotional responses. The text construction of the audience member comes into play again here. A fuller picture comes from watching the commercial more than once, which can only happen if the viewer so chooses. When watching again, it is on that person to look for clues and areas that did not make sense the first time that correspond with the ending. The audience has to do work to help establish the narrative coherence. It requires participation from the audience not

just passive watching. This results in a greater personal investment of the audience with the narrative, and in turn, the narrative will seem more persuasive because the audience wants to connect with and promote whatever the commercial is promoting. The audience will want to buy or engage with the products because they used a good amount of effort while watching the commercials. Since the commercials are worthy to connect with an audience member, the product advertised may be, too.

Each of the commercials uses similar techniques to captivate the audience through the narratives presented such as the condensation of time, the relatability of the characters, and the moment of resolution. However, one of the glaring differences is the role of the product itself within the three commercials. Though the commercials contain riveting narratives, the role of the product is vastly different in each of them. In the IAMS commercial, IAMS dog food plays no direct role. Duck does not eat dog food in any of the scenes, and it is never made clear dog food is being advertised. One can presume the commercial will be for something related to dogs, but there is no information tying to any brand. In the last scene, IAMS and the slogan “good for life” come on the screen as Duck runs by. This approach of revealing the product at the end can be intriguing as it leaves the audience trying to guess what is being promoted. If people want their dogs to live long, happy, healthy lives, then IAMS seems like the dog food to get.

However, this approach comes with repercussions. It is easy to forget IAMS is associated with the commercial since it plays an invisible role in the dog’s life and in the commercial. No other images reinforce IAMS with this commercial; the connection is weak and forgettable. Though the emphasis is on the emotional appeals, no logical appeals are present. The commercial fails to address anything about IAMS dog food and IAMS in general. The audience is not given information on why people should buy IAMS. Yes, it is understood Duck eats

IAMS, but it is never clearly shown. The omission of dog food in the commercial not only lessens the argument for IAMS, but it also leads to the more problematic chance of the audience making the wrong brand association with the commercial. In 2012, Subaru came out with a commercial featuring a chocolate lab that is shown over the years sitting in a Subaru car. The concept contains a simpler plot line than the IAMS commercial, but the idea is relatively similar. The two dogs grow up yet live long and healthy lives alongside their owners. Both commercials even feature scenes of the dogs riding in cars with their owners. The narrative in the IAMS commercial is more fully developed and sentimental. Without seeing the name IAMS earlier and for a longer period of time in the commercial and without showing any visuals of dog food, it is difficult to first figure out and then remember that this commercial is indeed for IAMS dog food. The commercial includes Duck getting into the car. In the shortest version of the commercial, the majority of the scenes are of Duck jumping into the car throughout the years. Since the Subaru commercial exists and the IAMS commercial actually shows a chocolate lab getting into a car, it is understandable for a viewer to be even further confused about which company/product to associate with the commercial.

However, it needs to be acknowledged that there are three different versions of “A Boy and His Dog Duck.” The longest is a minute and sixteen seconds long and is the one analyzed in this paper. The medium one is thirty seconds long and features how Duck gets his name and Duck eating IAMS dog food. The shortest is only sixteen seconds long, does not include how Duck gets his name, but shows him eating the dog food. The shortest version makes a clear connection between Duck’s long, healthy life with him eating IAMS dog food. It lacks the buildup of the narrative though. The medium one in length foregoes any of the confusion about the product being represented. There are three images on the screen towards the end, all of Duck

in different stages of life eating the dog food. The relationship between the story and the product make sense as IAMS dog food helped Duck to live a long and healthy life. This makes sense, but the exclusion of Duck eating the dog food in the long version can cause the viewer to forget or not know the commercial is for IAMS. It is surprising that this crucial information is not made available in every version of the commercial.

In the Extra Gum commercial, Extra gum plays a clearer role. From Juan and Sarah's first encounter, Extra gum represents more than just gum, it becomes a token of their relationship. During every encounter between the two, Extra Gum is there playing an active role. It breaks the ice, eases tension, and turns into a sign of Sarah's love for Juan. Extra Gum is in the commercial and serves as a focal point. However, though gum plays an important role, it is a bit too forced and stretched. No one knows if their first love is going to work out. When thinking about it more, it is almost creepy that Juan kept gum wrappers—something no one would think to keep—from the first time they met. Yes, it is cute that he draws memories on the wrappers, but that is not realistic. Gum has never been that romantic. However, it is clear from the beginning of the commercial that it is an advertisement for Extra Gum. Unlike with the long IAMS commercial, the clear link between the commercial and Extra Gum is more distinct and memorable. People may be persuaded to buy the correct product—Extra Gum—if they find the commercial persuasive. Actually using this product on a day-to-day basis will hardly look like its use in the commercial, but people will want to buy the gum because of their feeling toward the commercial, not because of any characteristic of the gum itself.

In the Volvo commercial, the Volvo car plays a role both vital to the ad and one that mirrors its use in day-to-day life. The woman who is heading to work in the morning is featured driving her Volvo XC60 throughout the commercial. The audience gets a look inside and outside

the car. Not only is the Volvo brand shown on the car, but the new features of the car are on display. Though the Volvo commercial may not contain traditional appeals based in logic, it appeals to logic in a meaningful way. Volvo wants to demonstrate how safe this model is through the use of the automatic emergency braking system. Volvo found a way to include a narrative in its commercial by having the car as an important yet not overbearing part of it. The brakes end up saving a life in the commercial. Unlike the Extra Gum commercial, the placement of the car in the Volvo ad makes sense, too. It is not forced or random but gives an example of how the car would be used and safety features utilized in real life. After viewing the commercial the audience knows the XC60 is a quality car focused on safety and reducing human error.

The responses to this video on YouTube recognized that it may be an over dramatized portrayal, but it was necessary in order to demonstrate the lives that can be saved with the car's safety features. One of the top comments referred to it as no longer just a car commercial but a compelling public service announcement about how such a little moment or distraction can take away a life. People even expressed how much they love not just the commercial but also Volvo. This response is unique to the Volvo ad as similar sentiments were not made about IAMS and Extra Gum. It has something to do with the powerful messages about car safety that Volvo is making. Volvo's ad provides a captivating story with the product intricately tied into the narrative, which leads to the greatest support of the commercial and product amongst the different commercials.

### **Evaluation**

Altogether, the commercials successfully use narrative to present sound arguments relating to audience values and experiences. The arguments presented are ones the audience can easily agree with, since the narratives in these commercials focus on the importance of

relationships between partners, parents/children, and pets/owners. But the commercials also rely heavily on emotional appeals rather than logical ones. These emotional appeals serve as the main arguments within the commercial. As Fisher suggested, people are convinced more by a solid narrative than just logic. People reacted emotionally to the commercials since they drew from widely-shared experiences and focused on what people care about. Countless comments on the YouTube pages for these videos included audience members believing they should buy the product presented or continue to support the brand. They associate the positive feeling they had while watching this commercial with the product it represented. Though emotional appeals have the potential to manipulate people's emotions in order to make them feel a certain way, the ones used in these commercials do not seem to be overly manipulative. Numerous audience members accepted the emotions they felt from watching the commercials. None seem to reveal in their comments that they felt manipulated.

The commercials value the relationships presented and communicate this through tapping into the emotions of the audience by relying on the near universal appeal of a first love, a mother encouraging her young daughter to dream, and a boy growing up with his dog. These are all meaningful connections. Our society values such things. The impact of these narratives becomes more significant when an audience member has to draw on personal experience to complete the narrative presented, making the story told even more relatable. Narratives are used effectively since people engage with them, make sense of them, and feel affected by them. The stories cause the audience to care in a way that is ethical as nothing in the commercials is inherently immoral.

However, the advertisers should not just rely on emotional appeals to build their argument. It is not enough to create a good story. That is not what commercials are for.

Ultimately, a commercial is made to try to sell something. One of the arguments contained within a commercial should relate somehow to why people should buy the product presented or at least care about the product. Each of the three commercials tackle this criterion differently, based on the representation of the product or brand in the commercial. The most effective argument highlights the quality (and purpose) of the product. The Volvo “Moments” commercial is the one that best does this. The commercial creates a captivating narrative and also shows the audience the Volvo XC60 is a safe, reliable car that can save lives. The argument that this car is safe is shown in the commercial and in a way that does not detract from the narrative.

In “A Boy and His Dog Duck,” IAMS does not provide this argument in every version of the commercial. It fails to provide insight on the dog engaging with IAMS dog food in the long version. The failure of any visual proof of this makes it hard to make the connection between a dog who has lived a happy, long life and a dog who eats IAMS. With the inclusion of the visual depiction of the dog eating the product being sold in the medium length version, the argument is made that IAMS dog food really is “good for life” and a life well lived for a dog. The audience does not have to guess or make the connection themselves; it is clearly laid out. Without this information, the argument is not fully made and in turn, it falls apart.

“The Story of Sarah and Juan” by Extra Gum fails to provide a reason why Extra Gum is a good product to buy. It is true that Extra does not leave viewers in the dark as they are aware it is a commercial for Extra Gum. The commercial does not give any helpful information about the gum itself, like about its quality or the flavors it comes in. Part of the campaign encourages people to “give extra, get extra” but what does this mean? Nothing. An argument about Extra Gum as a product collapses here.

However, going back to the conclusions of Stutts and Barker, image advertising appeals to people making decisions based on emotion. Ultimately, image advertising or commercials may rely on visuals that in no way pertain to the product itself, but they may still be successful rhetorically and that is what we see here. Yes, Extra Gum and IAMS dog food may play unrealistic or invisible roles in their commercials, but this is not the point. People will still remember the way they felt while watching the commercials and associate that positive, emotional response with the product or brand from there on. The two commercials focus more on emotional appeals to reach the audience, but it works.

Although all the commercials are ethical and sound in terms of creating and exhibiting a coherent story, the Volvo commercial is the one that best creates an argument based on more than just emotion. Commercials cannot be judged solely on narrative quality or entertainment values because they are not simply mini-movies. A commercial is created to sell a product and still has to do that, even if it does not rely mainly on logical arguments. There needs to be some sort of inclusion into why the audience should feel called to action or have a certain attitude toward the product. An effective commercial using narrative should establish a story with narrative fidelity and coherence with some sort of reasoning about the product itself. Relying solely on emotional appeals may not work on every audience member either. This is evident in the comments on the Extra Gum video that talked about how Juan must have really bad breath since Sarah keeps giving him gum. For the IAMS commercial, viewers made comments about how they still did not like how the dog was named after a different animal. Other viewers got confused over if his name was “Doug” or “Duck.” As one commenter actually mentioned, the debate about which name was correct detracted from the overall cuteness and effectiveness of the advertisement. The skepticism shown in these comments demonstrates that not everyone bought

into the emotional aspects of the commercials. The viewers who left these comments may have believed the stories to lack narrative fidelity as what was shown in the commercial was not representative of what they have found in real life. The majority of comments and responses were positive and supportive of the ads though. Advertisers who rely heavily upon emotional appeals run the risk of audience members not buying into their story and what they are selling. With these three commercials, the risk is worth it. The majority of the audience gets swept up into the story and actively makes connections to the commercials because of the tactics used in them. The positive and emotional feelings they receive from the commercials transfers to the product or company, too. Connecting the story in the commercial to the brand or product gives people a reason to care and a justification for why the story is being told in the first place.

### **Conclusion**

As much as we may not want to admit it, as human beings we are likely to be persuaded by a good story, not just reason alone. Fisher believed humans are not as rational as they think, and people communicate through stories based on “good” reasons. Narratives become tools people can use to understand and navigate life. They are a deep part of the human experience. Yet, it is important to consider the persuasive potential of narratives. Unlike with pure reason, narratives have a way to engage audiences in a more profound, memorable way since they involve a level of personal attachment.

Using narrative criticism to analyze artifacts focuses on the aspects within the stories that work rhetorically and points out what may not work well. Reception looks at the aftermath or influence of the artifact. It is a type of criticism that moves beyond focusing only on the critic’s interpretation to include additional insight from varying audience members about the effectiveness of the artifact. Though narrative was the focus of this analysis, reception helped

support the claims about the commercials' success by providing viewer responses. Advertisers for the three commercials created pieces that clicked with audience members through the compression of time and the big moment of payoff at the end. All three videos caused emotional responses and gave viewers something to talk about and remember. However, each contained stark differences in the role of the products or brands within the commercials. Though all three commercials provided effective narratives as rhetoric, the Volvo "Moments" commercial provided a clear argument about its product further enhancing its persuasive potential.

While this paper went in depth about the use of narratives within these commercials, it could not address every detail of the commercials themselves. Each of the commercials were played on television, as ads for other videos on YouTube, and on other areas of social media, yet my analysis looked at the reception from YouTube. This provides an easier and more uniform way to sort through responses, yet it is unknown if the comments on YouTube are representative of the audiences across mediums. Also, I did not address aspects of these narratives such as plot, setting, or underlying messages because it was not the focus of this paper, but those parts of a narrative are important, too. Instead, I focused my analysis on narrative probability and fidelity since Fisher pointed to the value of these concepts in determining what makes a "good" story. Finally, my evaluation is based on my own biases about the commercials and may not be the same as how someone else would evaluate them.

Despite these shortcomings, this paper seeks to take a closer look into the workings of narratives within commercials. Within a short amount of time, viewers are given a reason to want to watch and to be a part of this experience. In a broader sense, the condensed nature of time in narratives in commercials sets them up to be more persuasive since the audience has to become engaged to fill in the gaps. Supplying information to the narrative helps audience

members to build the narrative coherence and ensure that the narrative follows its own logic. In turn, their contribution to the coherence will also establish the narrative fidelity as they will set it up to make sense with their own expectations and experiences. The audience thus makes sure the commercial contains a good story, which amplifies the strength of its persuasion.

The shift we are seeing in the trend for marketing to rely upon narratives in commercials shows that active engagement is key for reaching the audience. The stories told need to capture the attention of viewers so they will not only watch the entirety of a whole commercial but will also be persuaded by it. Creating a strong, emotional narrative is something that stands out to the audience. This happens when advertisers make a commercial that draws upon relationships with universal archetypal characters and core values that are personally relatable. The emotions felt while watching the commercial will stick with the viewer when she is faced with potentially buying the product. To ensure the audience has the appropriate response, advertisers should also include some sort of logos while addressing the product in the commercial. The use of narratives in commercials relates back to the notion that humans are storytellers and are largely persuaded and influenced by good stories.

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