
Comparative Television Advertising: A Narrative Analysis of Time Warner Cable & DirecTV Commercial Campaigns

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Abstract

This study compares commercial television campaigns from Time Warner Cable and DirecTV. Specifically, the study describes and interprets these competing commercial campaigns from a narrative perspective and evaluates them in terms of relative coherence and fidelity. The study considers four commercials (two each from Time Warner Cable and DirecTV) in regard to their narrative rationality. The analysis describes the narrative content and execution of the commercials. Further, the analysis assesses how the commercials live up to Fisher's logic of good reasons. Finally, commercial campaigns are evaluated and compared as to their perceived success as examples of persuasive, narrative discourse. While the campaigns of both companies were somewhat compelling, the DirecTV commercials earned higher narrative scores by delivering greater narrative rationality.

Keywords: advertising, narrative, analysis, television

Introduction

In 2023, adults in the United States watched an average of three hours of television every day (Stoll, 2023) from a variety of sources. Digital video and streaming services are fast encroaching on traditional television and have changed the competitive landscape for subscribers. Attracting subscribers is becoming ever more challenging in this hyper-competitive space. And though digital advertising has grown astronomically, television advertising is still an economic powerhouse. According to Forbes, video advertising expenditures were estimated to be nearly \$82 billion for 2021 (Adgate, 2021). Indeed, television/video is still one of the most dominant advertising mediums in the United States and impacts the lives of all Americans. Dastjerdi, Davoudi-Mobarakeh & Zare (2012) agree: "there is no doubt that television commercials are among the most pervasive of all media products in the world" (p.118).

According to Dastjerdi et al. (2012), "TV is by its nature the most convincing medium of transmitting all kinds of information including advertisements" (p.118). Television is powerful, pervasive, and dynamic. Further, television advertising is actually an expected, almost necessary, element of the television viewing experience. Nelson (2010) observed that "people report greater enjoyment when shows were interrupted by commercials" (p.36).

As such a force in the U.S. economy and integral part of the viewing experience, it is important that the medium of television advertising continue to be studied. Aaker & Norris (1982) claim that television advertising should be studied because "advertising contributes to the health and vitality of the economic system" (p.61). Due to the great demand for television, there is significant competition among companies as to who will provide video and related services to U.S. consumers and what delivery channels those competing companies will use to deliver those services. While streaming services have encroached on cable and satellite delivery as the most commonly used channels to get television services, the Pew Research Center reports that more than half of U.S. households (56%) still subscribe to either cable or satellite services (Raine, 2021). This study looks at examples of those dominant providers of television services -- one cable company and one satellite company -- in regard to specific advertising campaigns used in commercial advertising to compete for subscribers. Two of the largest video service providers, Time Warner Cable and DirecTV, consistently use their own medium (television) to advertise to appeal to customers.

The medium of television is important and valuable enough to warrant significant study, especially in the economically powerful arena of advertising. Expenditures in television advertising were more than \$66 billion dollars in 2022 (Statista, 2023). Advertising is already measured in a variety of ways -- and almost all are quantitative. Yet the commercials that compose advertising --sometimes called 'the creative' -- are often considered 'mini-stories' so there is an argument that they can be analyzed on the basis of story. Indeed, narrative is "a common technique for increasing the emotional power of advertising" (Kang, Hong & Hubbard, 2020). Therefore, this study proposes a narrative analytical approach that offers a beneficial perspective to study television advertising. Narrative usually feels intuitive and is subsequently often not analyzed objectively. However, narrative approaches to analysis, pioneered by Fisher (1984, 1985 & 1987) and continued by others (Lacasa, Martinez-Bordal & Mendez, 2013; Smith & Monforte, 2020) offer a way to analyze qualitative data on the basis of story. The specific intent of this study is to use a narrative analytical approach to describe and interpret competing commercial campaigns from Time Warner Cable and DirecTV utilizing a narrative perspective and to evaluate those commercials in terms of relative coherence and fidelity. Practically, this analysis will also offer insight as to the success of these commercials as examples of persuasive, narrative discourse. Theoretically, the analysis will provide a structured method for qualitatively evaluating advertising through the use of a narrative approach.

Research Context

Advertising is integrated into many aspects of modern life. In fact, "encountering advertising is a daily occurrence for most people" (Duff & Faber, 2011, p.51). Advertising is also valuable from a historical perspective. "The social history preserved in advertisements is like an archaeological record" (O'Barr, 2005, para. 5). As a result, many scholars have studied advertising. Beginning as early as the 1920's, Daniel Starch (1928) and others began conducting volumes of formal research on advertising effectiveness, including the identification and measurement of concepts such as advertisement noting, recognition and recall. Advertising has evolved along with the media landscape. From the 1700's through the early 1900's, newspapers were the dominant media, thus newspaper advertising was the dominant form of advertising. In

1922, as the medium of radio began to take hold in the United States, the first radio commercials were aired on WEAJ in New York City (Advertising Age, 1999). The first television commercials aired on WNBT (also in New York City) in 1941, ushering in the television advertising era (Advertising Age, 1999). As the American media landscape as evolved, the advertising landscape has progressed right along with it. Unfortunately, the ads themselves were often dismissed as being of little rhetorical value. However, advertising has a story to tell. Surely, the format of advertising is somewhat different from the surrounding media; it is usually much shorter.

Zurstiege (2011) observed "Roland Marchand has indicated that since the beginning of the twentieth century, art has become an instrument of advertising in order to accomplish a cultural uplift" (p.2). Even with the Super Bowl, that once-a-year NFL Championship that also serves as "the showcase to unveil newly created commercials, and to display the comedic genius of the marketing teams assigned to create the ads," (Dotterweich & Colins, 2005, p. 20) viewers talk about the narrative content of the ads the next day. Viewers evaluate ads based on the stories they tell – or fail to tell.

However, much of television advertising continues to be studied outside the area of actual commercial content. Many of these studies focus instead on topics such as executable strategies (Calli, Weverbergh & Franses, 2012; Stanton & Herbst, 2006) or advertising targeted to special groups, such as children (Kelly et al., 2010; Magnus, Haby, Carter & Swinburn, 2009). Additionally, a significant number of research studies have been conducted dealing with the content of commercials in a more general manner. These studies focus on whether the commercials include various perceived elements, such as humor (Spotts & Weinberger, 1989; Gartenschlaeger et al., 1997) or violence (Hetsroni, 2011; Gunter, Furnham & Pappa, 2005).

Further, the majority of the advertising effects research has been of the social-scientific variety – utilizing quantitative measures almost exclusively. Aaker & Norris (1982) conducted a content analysis of 524 television commercials that focused on the "information/rational/cognitive approach to advertising" which they claim "is so important" (p.61). Later, Aaker & Stayman (1990) observed more quantitative development: "there have been a host of efforts to generate a set of adjectives, scales, or phrases that can be used to tap the perceptions of advertising by audience members" (p.7) including studies by Wells, Leavitt, & McConville (1970), Schlinger (1979), Aaker and Bruzzone (1981) and Modovan (1985). Further quantitative advertising effects research has been conducted by Stewart (1989) in his discussion of models and measures of advertising. In addition, Sheinin, Varki & Ashley (2011) studied ad creativity impacts on message recall.

Research Gap

However, none of these efforts focused on the narrative content of the messages themselves. More recent research further acknowledges that television commercials offer "a figurative/narrative/dramatic message" (Martínez-Camino & Pe'rez-Saiz, 2012, p.460) but even these authors do not focus on this figurative/narrative/dramatic aspect of the commercials in their actual analyses. It is clear that the lion's share of the existing literature focuses on measuring the

perceptions of the advertising while virtually ignoring the narrative content. But Van Laer et al observed that "narrative persuasion is notably different from the more established customer engagement outcomes that traditional advertising pursues," (2019). While the effects of advertising represent fertile ground for research, the narrative content of commercials is also an important area of study. As mini-narratives that are exposed to so many people, commercials deserve to be studied with respect to their creative content and storytelling abilities. Despite the dearth of narrative-based research into television commercials, some researchers are beginning to establish a rationale for narrative as applied to television commercials as artifacts worthy of study. Ertike (2011) observed that commercials have "the presence of narrative" and that "in general the success of advertising depends not on its logical propositions but on the kinds of fantasies it offers" (p.201).

There is near universal agreement "on considering the audiovisual story-narration as a discourse or text, and even as a discourse mostly narrative" (Rausell, 2007, p.122). In addition, Sellnow (2010) argues that the narrative paradigm "is a useful tool for studying mediated popular culture texts such as TV programs and commercials" (p.39). Chang (2019) argues "narrative advertisements tend to be more effective than argument advertisements" (p.251) and calls for continuing research to look at narrative advertising. Therefore, a narrative perspective is justified for this area of research.

While the rational world paradigm, the system of logic, argument structure, debate, science and proofs, still exists, Walter Fisher (1984) argues that the narrative paradigm is not a separate approach but a combination of the rational world and the narrative. "The narrative paradigm, then, can be considered a dialectical synthesis of two traditional strands in the history of rhetoric: the argumentative, persuasive theme and the literary, aesthetic theme" (p.2). He proposes that the narrative paradigm "does not so much deny what has gone before as it subsumes it" (p.3). In a follow-up to his original essay introducing the narrative paradigm, Fisher (1985) proposes that the main use of the paradigm "is to offer a way of interpreting and assessing human communication that leads to critique, a determination of whether or not a given instance of discourse provides a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world" (p.361). The application of the narrative paradigm to this analysis will yield the benefit of a rich, descriptive comparison of specific commercial campaigns used by direct competitors in the television and video services industry.

Therefore, the goal of this study is to introduce an operationalization of narrative analysis for television advertising. As such, this study continues the long tradition of measuring advertising effectiveness and combines it with the relatively new perspective of advertising as "story" by comparing four television commercial campaigns from Time Warner Cable and DirecTV. In so doing, it will attempt to fill a gap in the literature by employing a rhetorical-critical perspective that emphasizes the narrative content of commercials and uses narrative as the primary basis of analysis using Fisher's narrative elements. The analysis will compare and contrast commercials from Time Warner Cable and DirecTV as they advertise to sell video and related services (i.e. cable television) using competitive television advertising campaigns.

Research Question

How do commercials from competing video providers Time Warner Cable and DirecTV compare when analyzed from a narrative perspective?

2. Method

The framework of this analysis followed Sellnow's (2010) three, broad recommendations for evaluating artifacts from a narrative perspective: describe, interpret and evaluate. The analysis was applied to these recommendations through four steps. First, the study describes the elements of "setting, characters, 'narrator,' events, causal relations, temporal relations, and intended audience" for the artifacts (Sellnow, 2010, p.41). In addition, the study reviews how the stories were told, looks for patterns, and observes which techniques were used, e.g. humor, violence, celebrity, etc. Second, the study interprets coherence in terms of structural, material and characterological dimensions. Third, the study assesses fidelity in terms of Fisher's logic of good reasons. Fisher (1987) offered a method of operationalizing the narrative critique by recommending "a systematic set of procedures that will aid in the analysis and assessment" (p.106). West & Turner (2010), in their overview of Fisher's narrative paradigm, explained Fisher's method as two series of five questions for evaluating narratives. This study used that approach in order to more fully explain the fidelity of the artifacts. These questions examined the narratives from the rational world perspective versus the narrative perspective. Further, the study considers what the Time Warner Cable and DirecTV commercials wanted the audience to believe.

Fourth and finally, this analysis evaluates the implications for viewers of these competing advertisements and offers an opinion as to the relative success of these advertising campaigns. The success, or lack of, is discussed on the basis of the narratives as examples of persuasive and narrative rhetorical discourse in terms of their characteristics of narrative rationality. In order to operationalize the evaluation and comparison of the selected commercial campaigns, the following measurement approach is introduced:

Narrative Assessment Scale (NAS)

- 5 - Extremely Effective
- 4 - Mostly Effective
- 3 - Partially Effective
- 2 - Minimally Effective
- 1 - Not Effective

The next step is to consolidate the NAS measures for the narrative components into a single score, dubbed the "Consolidated Narrative Score (CNS)," which is an average NAS of 7 narrative elements, coherence, and logic.

To interpret the rhetoric of economically valuable commercial campaigns, the following commercial campaigns were selected for comparison. They were chosen, not only because they advertised on television, but also because they advertised to sell television and related services. Thus, these examples reflect the power of the medium itself as well as the economic value of advertising. During 2012, competing video providers (DirecTV and Time Warner Cable) ran a series of competitive television commercials: the DirecTV "What Happens" series and the Time Warner Cable "Enjoy Better" series. Both campaigns competed to attract the same consumers to purchase products and services from their respective companies. These campaigns featured several commercials that aired in heavy rotation in the service areas of each company and both were likely seen by a large swath of the television viewing audience. Two commercials from each campaign were selected as representative samples for this analysis. Four storyboard-style screen captures for each commercial are provided below.

DirecTV Commercials



Figure 1. "Don't Sell Your Hair to a Wig Shop" (DirecTV, 2012) "Wig Shop"



Figure 2. “Don't Wake Up in a Roadside Ditch” (DirecTV, 2012) “Roadside Ditch”

Time Warner Cable Commercials



Figure 3. “Time Warner Cable – Enjoy Better Anthem” with Ricky Gervais (Popman09TV, 2012) “Gervais”



Figure 4. “Enjoy Tribeca Better - Tribeca Film Festival On Demand” with Robert De Niro (Time Warner Cable, 2012) “De Niro”

3. Analysis

Each of the four commercials is described in terms of setting, character, narrator, events, causal relations, temporal relations, intended audience and morals. But first, a few observations of the commercial attributes – outside of the specific narrative content – are in order. These observed attributes come in the form of five elements: commercial length, actors, competitive approach, humor and violence.

Commercial Attributes

Length. The DirecTV commercials are both 30 seconds in length, while the Time Warner Cable Commercials are 60 seconds in length. Part of this differential may be attributed to the cost of airtime as Time Warner Cable does not have to pay for a majority of its television commercials and can therefore afford to schedule longer duration copy.

Actors. The DirecTV commercials use unknown actors while the Time Warner Cable commercials employ celebrities. Both companies use males as the main characters in their commercials. However, DirecTV featured only white males, while Time Warner Cable integrated females and minorities in its commercials.

Competitive approach. Both campaigns are competitive in the sense that they are advertising to compete for customers. On one hand, the DirecTV approach is direct and negative in the sense that it attacks cable providers directly, using the tag line "Get rid of Cable." On the other hand, the Time Warner Cable approach is positive in that it focuses on the applications and services that the cable company offers and improves upon. Time Warner Cable's commercials end with the tag line "Enjoy better."

Humor. Both of the campaigns use humor in their presentations, although in different ways. The DirecTV commercials both utilize an exaggerated string of events, involving loss – supposedly triggered by the cable company – to create humor. Meanwhile, the Time Warner Cable commercials use humor in more situational contexts, playing on their choice of celebrity actors in the commercials. In the Gervais spot, humor is utilized by mixing outlandish, obviously cinematically-exaggerated events, while the De Niro spot creates humor by emphasizing ordinary events and playing on De Niro's "tough guy, movie star" image.

Violence. Both of the campaigns use violence to an extent. Each campaign utilized violence in one of the pair of commercials analyzed. DirecTV used violence in its Roadside Ditch spot by having the lead actor end the commercial lying in a roadside ditch after being beaten up by some thugs. Time Warner Cable used violence in its Gervais spot. Ricky Gervais was attacked with a grenade and runs through a war zone-like montage of exploding artillery and gunfire. In both instances, the violence seems to have been presented primarily to emphasize humor. The second commercial from both campaigns did not use violence.

Elements

DirecTV – Wig Shop

Setting. This commercial features a series of rapid location changes in a contemporary American environment with a suburban feel. It begins with a man watching cable television in his home. Next he goes to a seminar. Then he travels to Las Vegas. The commercial ends with him in a wig shop. NAS = 4

Characters. This commercial features one main character, a white male of approximately 28-30 years old. The unspoken implication is that he is the “everyman.” The assumption is that he makes television decisions for his household. NAS = 4

Narrator. This commercial uses a narrator exclusively to tell the story directly to the audience. There is no dialog. NAS = 4

Events. This commercial portrays a series of events. First, the main character gets depressed. Then he goes to a seminar where he learns to feel like a winner. Next, he goes to Las Vegas and loses his money, and finally, he ends up at a wig shop, selling his hair for money. NAS = 4

Causal and temporal relations. This commercial is a series of (ostensibly) causal events. They are all temporally syntagmatic, with one leading naturally to the next. In fact, the causal and temporal nature of the events is the foundation of the narrative. The causation is wildly exaggerated for the sake of humor. NAS = 5

Intended audience. The audience is those who pay for television service, primarily those who already have the competing service of cable television. NAS = 4

Moral. The direct moral is explicit and stated at the end of the commercial: Get rid of cable. The underlying moral is that everyone needs good television and good television choices. DirecTV

implies that the viewers' experiences will be better with DirecTV than with the cable company although the commercial does not offer any reasons for this implication. NAS = 5

DirecTV – Roadside Ditch

Setting. This commercial features a series of rapid location changes in a contemporary American environment, with a suburban feel. It begins with a man watching cable television in his home. Next, he goes to play racquetball, followed by a visit to the doctor's office. Then he is riding a bus, followed by a scene of him running down the street. The final setting is the man lying in a roadside ditch. NAS = 4

Characters. This commercial features virtually the same main character as the first commercial (albeit one played by a different actor), a white male of approximately 28-30 years old. The unspoken implication is again that he is the “everyman.” The implicit assumption is still that he makes television decisions for his household. NAS = 4

Narrator. This commercial uses a narrator exclusively to tell the story directly to the audience. As in the other DirecTV commercial, there is no dialog. NAS = 4

Events. This commercial portrays a series of events. First, the main character gets angry. Then he goes to play racquetball where his eye gets injured. Subsequently, he visits a doctor's office and gets an eye patch. Next, he rides the bus home but is attacked by hooligans who want to see how tough this guy with the eye patch is. The spot ends with him left lying in a roadside ditch. NAS = 3

Causal and temporal relations. This commercial is a series of (ostensibly) causal events. They are all temporally syntagmatic, with one leading naturally to the next. The causal and temporal nature of the events is the foundation of the narrative in this commercial as it follows the same pattern as the previous DirecTV commercial in the campaign. Again, the causation is wildly exaggerated for the sake of humor. NAS = 5

Intended audience. The audience is those who pay for television service, primarily those who already have the competing service of cable television. NAS = 4

Moral. The direct moral is consistent with the previous commercial. It is explicit and stated at the end of the commercial: Get rid of cable. The underlying moral is also the same: that everyone needs good television and good television choices. DirecTV implies that the viewers' experiences will be better with DirecTV than with the cable company although the commercial does not give any reasons for this implication. NAS = 5

Time Warner Cable – Gervais

Setting. The initial setting is at a table outside a restaurant in what appears to be a contemporary, major city, although it's not clear exactly where. The entire commercial appears to take place in the center of this city, mostly along a wide boulevard and its immediate environs. NAS = 3

Characters. The primary character, and only speaking role, belongs to English comedian and talk show host Ricky Gervais, who plays himself. Mary-Louise Parker reprises her role as Nancy Botwik from the Showtime series *Weeds* in a minor, non-speaking role. NAS = 3

Narrator. The Time Warner Cable commercial integrates narration with dialog. However, the majority of the verbal message comes from the narrator. NAS = 3

Events. Ricky Gervais declines a Facebook friend request and finds himself in the middle of a combat zone after a grenade is tossed onto his table. He begins running away. Then motocross motorcycles fly through the air and land on the street. Next, the action moves to a flower shop, followed by zombies walking down the street (a reference to the popular AMC program, *The Walking Dead*). The scene returns to chaos outside, with the zombies and armed troops in combat, along with Gervais running down the street attempting to accept the Facebook friend request. NAS = 3

Causal and temporal relations. This commercial is a series of events that are more syntagmatic than paradigmatic. However, the events do not all necessarily lead from one to the next; they are more temporally co-located (happening at or near the same time). The flow of the commercial is generally from one event to the other, moving forward in time, but the causal relationship is either minimal or non-existent. NAS = 1

Intended audience. The audience is those who pay for television and broadband service, including, but not limited to, current cable customers. NAS = 3

Moral. The direct moral is explicit and stated at the end of the commercial: Enjoy Better. In other words, if you have Time Warner Cable, you can enjoy all of the applications featured in the commercial better, e.g. Facebook, *Call of Duty*, ESPN, Netflix and Showtime. While one Time Warner Cable competitor (Netflix) is actually featured in the commercial, satellite providers (such as DirecTV) are completely ignored. NAS = 3

Time Warner Cable – De Niro

Setting. The setting is a contemporary urban apartment in the United States. The characters are first in a kitchen and then on a living room couch in front of a television. NAS = 4

Characters. There are three characters in this commercial. Robert De Niro plays himself. An unnamed male and female African-American couple is in their apartment preparing to watch TV. All three have speaking parts. NAS = 4

Narrator. Most of this commercial is driven by the actors and their dialog, although narration is integrated at the end. NAS = 4

Events. A couple is in their kitchen making popcorn, getting chips and dip, preparing to watch TV while Robert De Niro waits impatiently on their couch. They come, laden with their snacks, into the living room and sit on the couch with De Niro. He asks them if they are ready to watch TV and if they have taken care of their dog, their popcorn, drinks, and if they have to go to the

bathroom, but they reply that they are all set to watch the movie. As De Niro prepares to push “play” on the remote control, the female character’s cell phone rings. NAS = 4

Causal and temporal relations. This commercial is really one long pre-event, preparing for the actual event of watching a movie. This one pre-event is composed of several sections which lead from one to the next in syntagmatic fashion. There are two causal relationships, one explicit and the other implicit. The explicit causation is that certain activities (e.g. making popcorn, etc.) can delay the planned start of an entertainment event. The implicit causation is that being a customer of Time Warner Cable provides viewers with technology that allows them to start movies at a time of their choosing. (The advertising industry refers to this capability as timeshifting.) NAS = 4

Intended audience. The audience is those who pay for television and broadband service, including, but not limited to, current cable customers. NAS = 4

Moral. The direct moral is explicit and stated at the end of the commercial: Enjoy Better. In other words, if you have Time Warner Cable, you can enjoy movies in general, and Tribeca Films On Demand specifically, better. NAS = 4

Interpretation of Coherence

DirecTV–Wig Shop. The *Wig Shop* commercial definitely has structural coherence. The story flows logically from one element to the next. In fact, the design of the commercial intends to create a logical flow through a connected series of events. In terms of material coherence – “the degree of congruence between one story and other stories that seem related to it (West & Turner, 2010),” – this commercial seems coherent. Although the events that follow from one to the next are extreme and unlikely to occur in real life, each one clearly leads to the next. The main character in the *Wig Shop* commercial seems to be an “everyman” or a “regular Joe.” As such, there are non-specific character expectations. However, the actions and attributes of this character, while “over the top” in nature, symbolize the emotional reaction that a real person might feel, albeit in not quite so dramatic a fashion. NAS = 4

DirecTV–Roadside Ditch. The *Roadside Ditch* commercial has structural coherence as does the *Wig Shop* commercial; both spots have the same basic narrative structure. *Roadside Ditch* exhibits the same sequentially flowing story structure –featuring one event leading to the next to form a logical flow through a connected series of events. This commercial is also materially coherent. As with *Wig Shop*, although the events are intentionally absurd, each one clearly precipitates the next event in the sequence. The main character in the *Roadside Ditch* commercial is also a typical “regular guy” and there are no previously developed character expectations. Similar to *Wig Shop*, the main character in *Roadside Ditch* takes actions and suffers consequences that symbolize what a real person might feel. NAS = 4

Time Warner Cable – Gervais. The Gervais commercial generally exhibits structural coherence in that elements of the story flow logically. The structural coherence is slightly compromised in the beginning when Ricky Gervais transitions from reading a Facebook message

to speaking aloud to himself. The transition is unclear and causes some minor confusion. However, the remainder of the story flows well. The Gervais commercial has a sci-fi, multi-dimensional angle that integrates elements from various other narratives. These events would obviously never happen in real life. However, if they did happen, the main character's reactions would seem plausible. Gervais, an English comedian playing himself, is the main character in this commercial. In terms of characterological coherence, viewers would get the most effect from the commercial if they were familiar with Gervais and his persona as a celebrity. Although famous by some standards, he may not be well known by some in the United States, especially by sight identification alone. This lack of recognition could diminish the characterological coherence of the commercial. NAS = 3

Time Warner Cable – De Niro. The De Niro commercial flows well and has clear structural coherence. Much less complex than the Gervais spot, the De Niro spot is set in a living room with a couple preparing to watch a movie. Everyone has probably experienced a situation similar to the one depicted in the De Niro commercial: waiting on someone else before you can begin to watch a movie. So this commercial has clear material coherence. Contrary to the Gervais spot, De Niro (also playing himself) has tremendous name and visual recognition. So when De Niro, who is noted for his "tough guy" roles, gets impatient, the comic result is effective and characterologically coherent. NAS = 5

Assessment of Fidelity

Narrative fidelity can be assessed by asking two sets of five questions. The first set of questions address the logic of reasons. The second set of questions extends the analysis to address the logic of *good* reasons.

Questions for the Logic of Reasons.

1. Are the statements that claim to be factual in the narrative really factual?
2. Have any relevant facts been omitted from the narrative or distorted in its telling?
3. What are the patterns of reasoning that exist in the narrative?
4. How relevant are the arguments in the story to any decision the listener may make?
5. How well does the narrative address the important and significant issues of this case?

Questions for the Logic of *Good* Reasons.

1. What are the implicit and explicit values contained in the narrative?
2. Are the values appropriate to the decision that is relevant to the narrative?
3. What would be the effects of adhering to the values embedded in the narrative?
4. Are the values confirmed or validated in lived experience?
5. Are the values of the narrative the basis for ideal human conduct?

Direc TV. Both of the DirecTV spots (*Wig Shop* and *Roadside Ditch*) utilize extreme exaggeration in order to deliver humor. As such, the straightforward factual claims of the narrative are very much in doubt, but that's okay. By design, there are significant gaps in the logic with huge leaps and distorted consequences in both commercials. The basic pattern in both commercials is that one event leads to another event. Each succeeding event is plausible in that it could conceivably follow the previous event – even if the likelihood is exceedingly rare.

However, the arguments do have a relevancy because, integrated within the humor, the arguments start from a common point of frustration: when something isn't working with the subscriber's cable television system. The narrative addresses the important issues of concern (purchase decision for television service). Even though the majority of the content is not intended to be truthful, the slim thread of reality – that common frustrated feeling – ties the narrative together to make the point that DirecTV is an alternative that won't leave a viewer frustrated.

The underlying values of the DirecTV commercials are that consumers should be able to have products that work without causing frustration – in other words, they should get what they pay for. These values are entirely appropriate to the decision at hand (which television service provider should a consumer choose). Since the depicted experience is validated by real-life experience, the intended effect would be for the consumer to choose DirecTV over cable. Although obviously exaggerated, these commercials present an opening problem (frustration) and a closing solution (switching from cable to DirecTV) that could be the basis for realistic human behavior. NAS = Wig Shop: 4; Roadside Ditch: 4

Time Warner Cable. The Time Warner Cable commercials also utilize situations that are either fantastical (the Gervais spot) or completely unlikely to happen in real life (De Niro spot). The Time Warner Cable commercials also omit and distort facts for the sake of humor. The Gervais spot is somewhat similar to the DirecTV spots in that a series of improbable (impossible) events happen but the Time Warner Cable approach is not as clear as with the DirecTV spots. The De Niro spot is relatively much more believable on its face in that a celebrity could possibly sit with a couple in their living room to watch a movie, however unlikely. The arguments of both the Time Warner Cable narratives are relevant to the decision of the viewers (purchase decision for television service) and the narratives address significant issues, such as wanting to be able to watch a movie at the time of the viewer's choosing. However, the Gervais spot is a little less clear because the issues (of bandwidth availability and program timeshifting) are more implied.

The Time Warner Cable commercials promote the value that consumers should be able to control their television services, as the company's mission statement describes, in "ways that are simple and easy" (Time Warner Cable, 2009, p.3). This value is consistent with the decision relevant to the narrative (which television service provider should a consumer choose). As with the DirecTV spots, the intended effect of adhering to this value would be the choice to purchase television service from Time Warner Cable. This value is confirmed by lived experience in that many people have missed the start of a movie or not had sufficient bandwidth to support their web applications. Although also not intended to be realistic, these commercials present opening problems (wanting to control timeshifting of programs and the need for bandwidth and flexibility) and a closing solution (enjoying those capabilities from Time Warner Cable). These expressed values could be the basis for appropriate human behavior. NAS = Gervais: 3; De Niro: 4

4. Results

The Consolidated Narrative Score (CNS) for the commercials indicates that the DirecTV commercials are better from a narrative perspective. The CNS for the DirecTV commercials was above four for each sample, while the CNS for the Time Warner Cable commercials was less than three for the Gervais spot and just under four for the De Niro spot. (See Table 1.)

The DirecTV commercials achieve clear coherence as the narratives easily hang together. The stories flow smoothly with a clear, logical progression. They seem to fit with other stories – at least in principle. The characters behave believably (with the obvious exception that the situations are wildly exaggerated). The narratives of the DirecTV commercials ring true. They fulfill the logic of reasons and the logic of good reasons in that they are easy to follow, sequential and relevant, as well as appropriate to the decision and consistent with the internal values they represent. With the exception that the events are highly unlikely, the DirecTV commercials are congruent with real-life experiences – at least in regard to the problem offered, the emotional reaction, and the solution presented.

Table 1. Consolidated Narrative Score

	Wig Shop	Roadside Ditch	De Niro	Gervais
Setting	4	4	4	3
Characters	4	4	4	2
Narrator	4	4	4	3
Events	4	3	4	3
Causal/Temporal	5	5	4	1
Intended Aud.	4	4	4	3
Moral	5	5	3	3
Coherence	4	4	5	3
Fidelity	4	4	3	3
CNS Average	4.2	4.1	3.9	2.7

The Consolidated Narrative Score Averages ranked high to low from left to right.

The Time Warner Cable commercials also achieve coherence as the narratives of these commercials generally hang together. However, the De Niro spot is the more coherent of the two because the structure is clearer; it addresses a specific problem that would be affirmed by other experiences. The De Niro spot also achieves greater characterological coherence because Robert De Niro is more well-known than Ricky Gervais. The Time Warner Cable commercials fulfill the logic of good reasons as well, but again, the De Niro spot does so more effectively. The statements contained in these commercials are factual (again, excepting the unlikelihood of the circumstances portrayed). However, the Gervais spot is a little less clear in flow than the De Niro spot. The arguments presented are relevant to the decision at hand. The values presented in these commercials are somewhat congruent with real-life experiences even if the characters are fuzzy.

5. Discussion

The commercials described above from DirecTV and Time Warner Cable had a number of similar attributes. They were both set in modern American locations and utilized (primarily or exclusively) white males as major characters. Both campaigns used humor as a major element of the narratives. In addition, both campaigns used violence in one of the commercials. Both campaigns were targeting similar audiences in general: decision-makers for television and video services. Therefore, similar uses of humor would seem appropriate. Furthermore, both sets of commercials utilize a combination of traditional logic and narrative rationality. At their core, all four commercials present a problem and offer a logical solution. However, they present their arguments in the form of different stories.

On the other hand, the two commercial campaigns had significant differences. The DirecTV commercials were 30 seconds in length while the Time Warner Cable commercials were 60 seconds in length. Time Warner Cable utilized celebrities while DirecTV did not. Further, Time Warner Cable used more of a "soft sell" while DirecTV engaged in a more direct competitive approach. While both campaigns shared a similar general target audience, DirecTV was more narrowly focused on young, white men. DirecTV's more specific target audience may explain its simpler use of narrative. Because Time Warner Cable was advertising to a broader audience, especially with the Gervais commercial, that may explain why the message was more complex. Another important difference is that, while DirecTV was ostensibly advertising their one main product offering (DirecTV television service), Time Warner Cable was advertising multiple products simultaneously, which is another factor in message complexity.

Both commercial campaigns achieved their narrative goals by demonstrating coherence and fidelity. However, West and Turner (2010) add the important factor of "narrative rationality" as a standard for judging which stories can be believed (p. 351). From this higher vantage point, the DirecTV commercials are more successful at achieving overall narrative rationality than the Time Warner Cable commercials. The Time Warner Cable commercials offered high quality productions with celebrity talent. The special effects and humor were well done. The De Niro spot stands out as particularly effective. Unfortunately, the Gervais spot has several weaknesses that contribute to its lack of narrative rationality. The first weakness is that Gervais is not well known enough for some viewers to determine characterological coherence. One possible reason for the choice of Gervais is that Time Warner Cable has been known to exhibit a New York City-centric approach to its advertising. Inasmuch as Gervais is a trendy, urban star, a New York City-centric approach would be more likely to use a personality of his notoriety and assume his broader popular recognition. The second weakness is that the dialog is unclear at the critical beginning portion when Gervais denies a Facebook friend request which results in diminished structural coherence. A third weakness is Gervais' accent, which may be slightly difficult for some Americans to understand. A fourth challenge area for the Gervais spot in particular, while not necessarily an internal weakness, is the relative complexity of the message in an effort to reach a broader audience. This stands in stark contrast to the DirecTV spots which are much simpler and more clearly focused. On the other hand, the De Niro spot does exhibit a similar level of focus and precise targeting that the DirecTV spots do.

One implication from this study is that clearer focus of message and narrower targeting can yield content that achieves greater narrative rationality. Greater narrative rationality can tell a tighter story and deliver greater persuasive impact. A second implication is that the story itself – the actual words spoken – is critical to coherence. A third implication is that characters matter in terms of the message. It is not safe to assume that a minor celebrity will have the same recognition to a broad audience that he might have to a more narrow audience.

The four commercials in this study support Fisher's assertion that the rational-world approach of argumentation and persuasion can be effectively integrated with the narrative paradigm of literature and storytelling. This study provides an example of applying narrative analysis to for-profit advertising. Expanding the toolset for examining advertising by including narrative analysis could lead to a valuable contribution to communication scholarship. The potential contribution could help extend the advertising effects research beyond the quantitative realm with an example of a fuller, richer descriptive analysis. Advertising is more than just reach, frequency, ROI, and chi squares; there is an important element of story in advertising. This analysis has the potential to open up new lines of exploration in the body of advertising research by exploring television commercials primarily in regard to their narrative content and effect. Narrative studies of advertising could help explain aspects of success or failure of advertising campaigns that are missing from the purely quantitative literature.

This study is the first of its kind to use a narrative analytical approach comparing competitive advertising content. But it should not be the last. Advertising has a huge economic impact on our society: It funds most media and is one of the clearest examples of intentional organizational communication, offering broad utility as a research topic. Television is a powerful and highly penetrated medium. Yet television advertising is most often analyzed exclusively from a quantitative approach lacking critical analysis. By offering an example of describing and interpreting competing commercial campaigns from Time Warner Cable and DirecTV from a narrative perspective, this study has opened the way for similar studies to expand upon this approach.

This narrative analysis of commercials shows that narrative analysis has utility for critical and comparative analyses of television advertising. Two commercial campaigns, from video competitors Time Warner Cable and DirecTV, were analyzed from a narrative perspective. First, the commercials were described in terms of how the stories were told, in addition to the narrative elements that were used. Second, the coherence of the commercials was interpreted in three dimensions: structural, material, and characterological. Third, the fidelity of the commercial narratives was assessed in terms of how they met Fisher's logic of good reasons. In the end, the DirecTV commercials were judged to be more successful at delivering the desired narrative. The DirecTV commercials were judged to have achieved greater narrative rationality and were more successful at communicating their message than were the Time Warner Cable commercials. Creativity is not always as beauty (in the eye of the beholder). As costs of advertising continue to climb, it is becoming increasingly important to analyze the creative content of that advertising using an objective approach. Narrative analysis offers such an analytical approach.

Imitations & Future Research

This study also had several limitations. First, the application of "advertising as story" is relatively new and additional analyses applying this technique could enhance the understanding of how to use it more effectively. Second, this study analyzed only four artifacts from only two advertisers. Additional analyses of a greater volume and variety of artifacts would add different perspectives to the body of knowledge. Third, more elaborate, independent coding could add to the validity of the interpretations. Finally, as with all critical analyses, this study employed a certain perspective that was necessarily influenced by any pre-existing biases of the author. But this area provides fruitful ground for additional research. There has long been a gap between advertising theories of academics and practical approaches to advertising. Nyilasy and Reid (2019) argue for research, such as this study, that can help close that gap. Such research offers practical approaches that can be utilized by advertising practitioners. Narrative approaches can be powerful tools and future research should continue to use narrative as an analytical tool – especially in the advertising discipline. Specifically, more studies should examine higher volumes of different source materials from a narrative perspective. Further use of the Narrative Assessment Scale (NAS) and the Consolidated Narrative Score (CNS) are also encouraged. In addition, other perspectives and operationalizations should be brought to the application of the narrative paradigm as a critical tool for advertising. Beyond Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, there other theoretic approaches to narrative that could also be studied in a practical manner. Advertising from other media should also be explored using narrative analytical approaches. These are all opportunities to delve deeper into narrative tools and approaches to evaluate advertising.

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