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The Scent of Success: Analyzing Effective Storytelling in Fragrance Advertisements

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Résumé

Les publicités pour des produits dont la caractéristique principale est intangible, comme les parfums, font face à un défi majeur : l'absence de stimuli sensoriels directs. Cette étude explore comment l'immersion narrative peut compenser cette absence et rendre les publicités efficaces. À travers l'analyse de publicités vidéo, nous montrons que des éléments narratifs forts, tels qu'une structure claire et des thèmes comme la reconnexion ou l'excitation, plongent les consommateurs dans l'histoire. En revanche, une représentation excessive du nom de la marque et du produit nuit à l'immersion. De plus, la présence de célébrités dans les publicités renforce l'engagement des consommateurs. Ces résultats offrent des implications pratiques pour les annonceurs de produits aux caractéristiques immatérielles, leur suggérant de tirer parti de la narrativité et des célébrités pour maximiser l'impact de leurs publicités, tout en tenant compte des limites propres à chaque thème narratif pour créer des publicités plus ciblées. **Mots clés :** Transport narratif, storytelling, récits, publicité, parfum

Méthodes de recherche : Analyse de contenu, recherche quantitative

Abstract

Advertising for products whose main feature is intangible, like fragrances and their scents, faces a major challenge: the lack of direct sensory stimuli. This study explores how narrative immersion can compensate for this absence and make ads effective. Through an analysis of video ads, we show that strong narrative elements, such as a clear structure and themes like reconnection or excitement, drive consumers more deeply into the story. In contrast, excessive brand and product name appearances on screen tend to reduce immersion. Furthermore, the presence of celebrities in ads enhances consumer engagement. These findings offer practical implications for advertisers of products with intangible features, who can leverage narrative elements and celebrity presence to maximize the impact of their ads, while considering the specific limits of each narrative theme to create more targeted ads.

Keywords: Narrative transportation, storytelling, narratives, advertisement, fragrance

Research methods: Content analysis, quantitative research

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Preface

Fragrances have always intrigued me. I have always been drawn to their ability to evoke emotions and to bring back a memory. This fascination began with my grandmother, Granny, who was one of those wonderfully eccentric women with a passion for collecting perfume bottles. Her collection played a big role in sparking my interest. As a child, I was captivated by their beautiful designs, the variety of shapes and colors, and the idea that something so small could hold such expressive power. However, they were always kept behind large glass doors, out of reach and untouched. In fact, I never had the chance to smell any of them. This probably sparked a deeper curiosity in me: how could something I couldn't directly experience with my senses still hold such fascination? What was it about those bottles that made them so alluring?

When I began thinking about a thesis topic, my childhood questions quickly became a major source of inspiration. The question that had always intrigued me became the starting point of my exploration. In today's increasingly digitalized world, this question feels even more relevant. In perfume digital advertisements, we are invited to connect with a product we can't physically experience. We can't smell the fragrances through our screens, yet they continue to captivate us. How is it that, despite the absence of scent, we are still drawn to these ads, imagining the fragrance and the emotions they evoke? This paradox of digital communication in the context of a sensory product like perfume inspired me to explore what it is in advertising that helps bridge that sensory gap and create lasting emotional connections with consumers.

This research has helped me answer some of the questions my younger self had about the appeal of fragrances. However, now that I've inherited my grandmother's collection and finally had the chance to smell them, I must admit that most of them have sadly turned bad (but I still enjoy them nonetheless!).

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Fragrance is everywhere: on bodies, in bathrooms, in stores, and even in the way people are remembered. Buying a fragrance is a surprisingly common consumer behavior. Euromonitor International (2023) revealed in a survey that more than half of North Americans use a fragrance at least once a week. Many people own not just one but multiple perfumes or colognes, switching scents for different moods, occasions, or even seasons (Euromonitor International, 2023). Choosing a fragrance is a personal experience; it goes beyond simply smelling pleasant and becomes a way of expressing identity or aspiration.

This everyday act of selecting a fragrance carries serious financial weight. In 2025, the global fragrance market is expected to generate over $60 billion USD, with much of that growth driven by consumers' desire to express identity and individuality (Statista, 2025). For brands, this means that selling a fragrance is not just about marketing a scent, it is about helping consumers see themselves in a story, and more importantly, convincing them to pick one brand's story over dozens of others.

But fragrance advertising faces a unique and fascinating challenge: consumers cannot smell through a screen. As such, fragrance brands must promote a product whose most essential feature (scent) cannot be directly experienced.

To compensate for this sensory lack and still meet success, many brands turn to storytelling and narrative elements (Krishna, 2012). Our findings suggest that this strategy is effective: ads with higher narrativity significantly increase narrative transportation, helping viewers feel immersed in the brand's world. However, the effect of narrativity on engagement (likes, views, comments) is not consistent. Additionally, themes such as excitement, reconnection, and belief play a meaningful role in enhancing narrative transportation. In short, since scent cannot be visually represented, stories and how they are told matter.

This research makes three key contributions. First, it contributes to the literature on sensory and narrative advertising by showing that narrative transportation can make

fragrance ads effective even in the absence of olfactory cues. While prior work has focused on the power of stories in print or general advertising (Chang, 2009), we extend these insights to video formats and to products with intangible attributes like scent. Second, we contribute to the literature on advertising themes (Ghosh et al., 2024) by identifying which types of stories most effectively foster narrative immersion in the context of fragrance ads. Our findings suggest that specific themes such as excitement, reconnection, and belief are especially compelling, while others may be less suited to this category. Finally, this study offers practical implications for marketers: by crafting strong narratives and resonant themes, and by minimizing the visual presence of the brand or product name, advertisers can generate narrative transportation, even without the product's core attribute being directly perceived. Additionally, the presence of a celebrity can enhance consumers' engagement with the advertisement, increasing the likelihood of likes and comments.

The rest of this thesis is organized as follows. First, we begin with a review of prior research on sensory advertising, the challenges of promoting intangible products like fragrance, and the persuasive power of narratives. We then draw on the concept of narrative transportation to explore how story elements can foster imagined sensory experiences. Lastly, we present the results and discuss their theoretical and managerial implications before concluding with a discussion of limitations and future research directions.

Literature review

The Challenge of Advertising the Intangible

Fragrance advertising presents a unique challenge rarely encountered with other types of products. Considering fragrances are primarily defined by their scents, how, then, can marketers sell a product that consumers cannot smell through their screens? Traditional advertising strategies typically rely on showcasing a product's benefits, demonstrating its use (as seen with cleaning products), illustrating its effects through before-and-after comparisons (as in skincare ads), or highlighting specific features (such as a car's speed

or a phone's camera; Percy & Rossiter, 1992; Laskey et al., 1989). In fragrance's case, it is difficult to convey the scent (its main feature) through visual and auditory means. As a result, its advertising must then rely on alternative persuasion techniques to convince the consumer to choose one specific fragrance in the endless sea of possibilities there are on the market. The fragrance market is projected to generate $61.11 billion USD in 2025 (Statista, 2025). The size and growth of the market is largely due to consumers' interest in expressing their individuality and personal style through fragrance (Statista, 2025). This leads to the crucial question: How do fragrance advertisements guide consumers in their search for identity and help them choose the fragrance that feels uniquely suited to them? Which ads are they going to like and watch, and most importantly, why? To better understand these questions, it is essential to consider the role of sensory perception in advertising. Since scent cannot be directly communicated through screens, we explore how advertisers compensate for this absence in the following sections.

The Role of the Senses in Advertising

Advertising engages multiple senses, yet video formats primarily rely on sight and sound. While touch can be visually suggested, smell is frequently absent.

Scent is profoundly connected to memory and emotions (Herz, 2004; Rimkute et al., 2016). Among all the senses, it is considered the most powerful trigger of emotional memories, particularly those rooted in personal life experiences (autobiographical memories; Herz, 2004). In advertising research, scent has primarily been examined in environmental contexts, such as ambient fragrances used in retail settings, as summarized in the review by Rimkute et al. (2016). Studies have shown that the presence of a pleasant ambient scent can elevate mood. Participants exposed to such scents reported more positive emotional states (Knasko et al., 1990). However, very little research examines how scent can be communicated in audiovisual media. Research on food advertising provides some hints. Namely, Krishna et al. (2016) found that prompting consumers to imagine a food's scent increases their desire to eat the food advertised, especially when combined with visuals. As such, it seems that consumers may use visual cues and imagination to simulate the scent of products.

Visual elements, particularly colours, play a significant role in how consumers interpret and respond to olfactory cues in advertising (Labrecque et al., 2013; Distel & Hudson 2001; Engen, 1972). Research suggests that colour can interact with other sensory inputs (such as scent) to influence consumer perceptions and behaviour (Labrecque et al., 2013). In particular, people tend to process scent-related information more effectively when it is paired with colours that are semantically linked to the scent (Distel & Hudson, 2001; Engen, 1972). For example, a lavender scent may be more easily identified and appreciated when accompanied by purple hues visual. Additionally, Gvili et al. (2018) demonstrated that congruence between scent and colour cues in advertising can enhance emotional engagement, brand attitude, and purchase intention. When the sensory elements align, consumer responses tend to be more positive.

Most studies on scent rely on physical stimuli which are impossible to replicate through screens (Herz, 2004; Krishna, 2012). As a result, advertisers face a challenge when attempting to convey the sensorial components of a fragrance in a purely audiovisual form. To overcome this challenge, advertisers often turn to creative storytelling techniques, which allow them to evoke sensory experiences and emotional responses through narrative rather than direct sensory input.

Narratives
Narratives form the backbone of many advertisements, organizing content into coherent and engaging storylines. They are typically defined as frameworks that unfold through a beginning, middle, and end, and follow a logical temporal sequence (Escalas, 1998). Causality is central to narrative structure (events are not random but linked through causeand-effect relationships), which helps the audience make sense of the story and enhances credibility (Escalas, 1998).

Several elements contribute to the construction of an effective narrative. A coherent chronology guides the viewer through the unfolding events, while characters create opportunities for empathy, emotional engagement, and perceived realism (Stern, 1994; Escalas & Stern, 2003). An effective narrative also establishes a context, providing spatial or situational cues that ground the story. Conflict and climax play a central role in sustaining attention and building tension, while closure offers a resolution that creates a

satisfying sense of completion (Van Laer et al., 2018). Some narratives also incorporate suspense and curiosity by hinting at future developments, as well as surprise which are techniques that increase engagement through anticipation and emotional payoff (Berjemo-Berros et al., 2022). Additionally, narrative ads often revolve around identifiable themes, such as transformation or new relationships (Ghosh et al., 2024). All of these components contribute to the construction of a strong narrative. However, it is worth noting that not all advertisements are equally narrative driven. As Escalas (1998) observes, advertising campaigns can vary significantly in the richness of their narrative structure, from minimal narrative elements to fully developed story arcs.

Stylistically, elements like evocative music, celebrity presence, movement, and foreshadowing contribute to making the story world feel vivid and immersive (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024). Also, when the narrative is closely linked to the product being advertised, it helps viewers make sense of the story in relation to the brand. A strong product-story connection enhances immersion and comprehension, aligning the viewer's imagination with the brand message and leading to more favorable brand attitudes (Glaser & Reisinger, 2021).

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Narratives are particularly powerful because they encourage self-referencing, allowing viewers to project themselves into the story and mentally simulate its events (Green & Brock, 2000). This enhances emotional resonance and facilitates narrative transportation. Compared to argumentative ads, which emphasize factual product claims and lack characters or plot (Deighton et al., 1989), narrative formats have been shown to improve message processing, increase emotional involvement, and enhance persuasive impact (Chang, 2009; Escalas, 2004). Indeed, narratives create a deeper connection with audiences by moving them (Fryer, 2003). They have been shown to stimulate consumers' emotions as they might mentally link the story to their own experiences, enhancing personal relevance (Escalas, 2007). These positive emotions can sometimes lead to an increased amount of word of mouth (Kang et al., 2020). As such, storytelling is

recognized as an effective advertising format for delivering messages and promoting engagement (Padgett & Allen, 1997). Moreover, storytelling is believed to be a powerful persuasive tool due to its ability to deeply engage audiences (Fryer, 2003). It increases ad involvement, increasing motivation to process information (Laczniak & Muehling, 1993).

Given the challenges of conveying tangible product attributes in fragrance advertising, narrative formats, through their qualities discussed above, may provide an effective way to overcome this limitation and engage consumers on a more sensory and affective level.

Narrative Transportation

Narrative transportation refers to the psychological state in which individuals become cognitively and emotionally absorbed in a story. According to Green et al. (2004), it is "the process of temporarily leaving one's reality behind and emerging from the experience somehow different from the person one was before entering the milieu of the narrative." In advertising, this immersive feature helps explain why stories can be so persuasive: when people are transported, they are less likely to counter-argue and more likely to accept the message (Green & Brock, 2000; Escalas, 2004; Shaffer et al., 2018).

Transportation is facilitated by both structural and stylistic features (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024). Structurally, a high degree of narrativity (with characters people can identify with and information presented narratively) supports immersion. By bringing viewers into the world of the ad, narrative transportation aligns the viewer's imagination with the brand message. In fragrance advertising where sensory experience cannot be directly conveyed, this imaginative leap is crucial. It helps the consumer mentally construct the sensation of wearing a fragrance, making the product more desirable, memorable, and emotionally resonant.

Narrative transportation has several downstream effects. It can increase ad involvement, enhance brand memory, positively influence product attitudes and generate purchase intentions and emotional reactions (Van Laer et al., 2014; Green & Brock, 2000; Escalas, 2004; Huang et al., 2018). In the context of fragrances, it might help consumers mentally simulate the product imagining how it might feel, smell, or affect their identity.

While narrative elements are assumed to boost ad effectiveness, it remains unclear whether they directly influence engagement metrics such as likes, comments, or views. This study thus also aims to investigate how narrative features relate to viewer reactions, contributing to a better understanding of their role in persuasive, sensory-limited advertising contexts.

Storytelling

While narratives serve as the structural foundation of a story, storytelling refers to the broader communicative approach used to convey narratives (Escalas, 2004). Namely, a narrative can be told through visual and auditory cues (Grisby et al. 2023) and can rely on a specific storyteller (Petroshius & Crocker, 1989). The way the story is delivered to the audience can transform a simple narrative into an emotionally rich and immersive experience.

First, storytelling is enhanced by visual movement. In video ads, movement is represented by the pace, the cuts or the use of slow-motion. Movement enhances narrative transportation leading to more empathy towards characters (Grisby et al. 2023). The use of music also plays a key role. Its tempo and mode (major or minor key) can influence how viewers interpret and feel the story (Parncutt, 2014; Rigg, 1940). Generally, a minor

key evokes mystery or melancholy, while a fast tempo in a major key conveys excitement or joy.

Lastly, the story might be delivered by someone. Ads usually tend to use celebrities or charismatic spokespersons, whose persona, if congruent with the product advertised, can shape audience expectations, product attitude and enhance message credibility (Petroshius & Crocker, 1989; Kamins & Gupta, 1994). Petroshius and Crocker (1989) also emphasized on the fact that attractive spokesperson had a more positive impact on the attitude towards the ad than less attractive ones.

The appeal of storytelling may be particularly relevant when promoting products that lack tangible attributes, such as fragrances. It functions as a communicative strategy to express what cannot be directly described. When there are no concrete product features to demonstrate, advertisers often turn to metaphors to create meaning and emotional resonance. As Levitt (1981) argues, metaphors are frequently used to convey intangible benefits and bridge the gap between the product and the consumer's imagination. This communicative strategy may be especially effective because it aligns with how people naturally process emotional and sensory experiences (Murphy et al., 2021). In this light, storytelling in advertising does not merely reflect a creative choice but resonates with the way individuals make sense of what they feel. It helps consumers mentally simulate and give meaning to an otherwise abstract product experience such as the sensation of wearing a fragrance. This helps explain the frequent use of narrative formats in fragrance advertising: by evoking emotional and sensory imagery, storytelling allows consumers to internally simulate experiences that cannot be physically conveyed. Despite its popularity, however, the actual impact of storytelling strategies on consumer perception and behavior in fragrance advertising remains underexplored. Existing literature rarely addresses whether such narratives truly enhance scent imagination, shape product preferences, or influence purchase intentions, or whether they primarily serve an aesthetic or entertainment function.

To conclude, it is useful to clarify the distinction between a story and a narrative, as the terms are often used interchangeably but refer to different concepts. A **story** is the raw content: what happens, to whom, and why. It includes the characters, events, and plotlines that form the basis of meaning. A **narrative**, on the other hand, refers to the way this story content is structured and delivered to the audience. It organizes events through time, connects them causally, and provides coherence and closure (Escalas, 1998; Van Laer et al., 2014). In this way, a story is the "what," while a narrative is the "how." This distinction matters in advertising research, where some campaigns may use narrative techniques without telling a full story, while others craft complete story arcs designed to maximize emotional engagement and consumer immersion.

Chapter 1 Methods

Participants

The advertisements analyzed in this study were selected from YouTube, using the official channels of brands listed in Yahoo Finance's ranking of the top 50 perfume brands (Yahoo!Finance, 2023). This approach ensured that the videos collected were authentic and representative of each brand's official marketing strategy.

The selection process was designed to provide a diverse yet consistent sample of recent fragrance advertisements. Ads had to be among the most recent available at the time of data collection but could not have been released in 2025 to maintain a stable and defined time frame for analysis. When multiple versions of the same advertisement existed, the longer version was selected to capture the fullest narrative structure. Each advertisement had to promote a single fragrance rather than an entire collection, and a maximum of two different products per brand was included to prevent overrepresentation of any single company's advertising strategy. Advertisements that focused on specific product features, such as refillable formats or redesigned bottles, rather than on the fragrance itself, were not considered. Additionally, event-based advertisements, such as those linked to holiday campaigns like Christmas, were excluded to ensure the focus remained on standard product marketing. After applying these selection criteria, a final dataset of 70 advertisements was compiled, offering a representative sample of contemporary fragrance advertising and a variety of narrative approaches within the industry.

Procedure

Each advertisement was then analyzed by the first author following a pre-established coding guide. The coding guide is described below and included Appendix 1. The coding guide was developed iteratively between all authors including some coding of sample ads pulled from YouTube. The first author did the final coding independently.

Measures

The data for this study was compiled using the coding guide, which included a wide range of variables relevant to marketing communication. The coding guide was designed to capture various aspects of the advertisements, such as:

Engagement. Engagement was assessed by examining audience interactions with the advertisements on YouTube. This included the number of views, likes, comments, and the subscriber count of the brand's official channel. These metrics provided an indication of the reach and reception of each advertisement, reflecting both its visibility and the extent to which it generated reactions from viewers (Oba et al., 2024).

Days. This variable represents the number of days between the advertisement's publication date on YouTube and the day the coding was done and served as a control variable.

Music. The salience of the music was evaluated first (1 = yes/0 = no) to determine whether it was a prominent feature (1) or more subdued in the background (0). For prominent music, the mode (major key = 1/minor key = 0) and tempo (beats per minute) were then assessed using Song BPM or TuneBat. If the music was not salient, its mode and tempo were not assessed. These measures were based on and adapted from the works of Parncutt (2014) and Rigg (1940).

Self-referencing. This category examined whether the ad used the word "you". It was noted 1 if the viewer was directly addressed, 0 if not.

Narrativity. Narrativity was measured by summing several qualitative elements, each rated on a scale from 0 to 2 (none, some, very). These elements include: (1) Story, assessed based on Escalas and Stern's (2003) three attributes: whether the ad tells a story, whether it has a clear beginning, middle, and end, and whether it depicts the personal evolution of one or more characters; (2) Chronology, evaluating whether the events unfold in a logical temporal sequence; (3) Character**(s)**, determining the presence of clearly identifiable characters and their role in the story; (4) Context, assessing whether the setting or environment of the ad is explicitly stated; (5) Conflict, identifying any

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tension or struggle that drives the storyline; (6) Climax, recognizing the presence of a peak or particularly intense moment; and (7) Closure, examining whether the ad concludes with a resolution or final statement that provides a sense of closure.

Foreshadowing. This variable coded for elements in the ad that created anticipation or suspense, rated on a Likert scale from 1 (very low foreshadowing) to 7 (very high foreshadowing). The ads were coded for (1) whether they sparked curiosity or built suspense, and (2) the extent to which the ad introduced unexpected twists or surprises.

Theme. This variable captures whether a theme is identifiable in the advertisement (1 = yes, 0 = no). If a theme is present (1), the underlying message(s) or motive(s) based on a predefined list of 10 themes derived from Ghosh et al. (2024), available in Appendix 2, was also identified. For example, if the advertisement appears to depict the development of a new romantic relationship according to Ghosh et al. 's definition (2024), "1" was selected to indicate that a theme is present. Then, after referring to the list of themes, "1" was entered next to the specific theme: new relationship in this case, to reflect its presence in that advertisement. "0" was then entered in all the other themes. In some cases, no clear theme could be identified, and in those instances, "0" was selected everywhere without attempting to force a categorization.

Depicted Movement. This variable evaluates the visual dynamics of the advertisement and was assessed in two separate ways. First, the level of activity in the ad was rated using
Grisby et al. 's (2023) item: "*How much movement was depicted in the ad*?", on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = very little movement, 7 = a lot of movement). Second, the number of visual cuts was manually counted for each advertisement. These two measures were coded separately to capture both the perceived intensity of movement and its visual representation through editing.

Product-Story Link. This category assessed how strongly the product was integrated into the story. The measure was constructed upon 4 items selected from Glaser and Reisinger's product-story link items (2022) and coded as a single item on a Likert scale from 1 to 7, 1 being the weakest product-story link and 7 the strongest. For example, one of the items

used to guide this assessment was: "*If the product were changed, it would change the story of the ad substantially*."

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Length. The total duration of the advertisement was recorded in seconds. If the ad included more than two seconds of a black screen at the end, those seconds were excluded from the measurement.

Visual Brand Prominence. This variable captures how often and how prominently the brand is visually represented in the ad. Specifically, the number of times the brand name, product name, and slogan appear were recorded, along with the exact second they first and last appear (if at all), and the total duration of their appearances. Two ratios were then calculated: (1) the total duration during which the brand name was visible divided by the total duration of the ad, and (2) the total duration during which the product name was visible divided by the total duration of the ad. A mean ratio of these two values was also computed to provide an overall measure of visual brand prominence.

Oral Brand Prominence. Similarly, this variable captures how frequently the brand is mentioned verbally in the advertisement. The number of times the brand name, product name, and slogan were spoken or otherwise presented orally (e.g., in voiceover) were recorded. Additionally, the exact second at which each element was first and last mentioned was noted. This allowed for a detailed analysis of the brand's oral presence throughout the ad.

Target Audience. This variable assessed the perceived gender orientation of the advertisement's intended audience. The ads were initially coded as 1 = male, 2 = female, and 3 = androgynous. For analytical purposes, this variable was then transformed into two dummy variables, with female (2) used as the reference category.

Narrative Transportation. This category assessed the extent to which the advertisement was likely to transport the viewer into its narrative world. It was based on the short form of the Narrative Transportation Scale developed by Appel et al. (2015) and was coded as a single item on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates very low transportation and 7

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indicates very high transportation. For example, one of the items guiding this evaluation was: *"I was mentally involved in the advertisement while looking at it."*

Celebrity. Whether a celebrity appeared visually or orally in the ad. It was coded as 1 if a celebrity was present and 0 if not.

Chapter 2 Results

We used linear regressions to examine the effect of the main variables on likes, views, comments, and narrative transportation. The combined results are presented in Table 1.

Story. As expected, the narrativity (the sum of all the story elements) had a highly significant positive effect on narrative transportation ($\beta = 0.52$, SE $= 0.07$, $p < 0.001$). Interestingly, the effect of story elements on the number of likes was also positive, although not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.28$, SE $= 0.06$, $p = 0.151$). This suggests that story elements may not only foster greater narrative transportation but could also indirectly contribute to increased engagement.

Celebrity. The presence of a celebrity in fragrance ads significantly increased both the number of likes ($\beta = 0.42$, SE $= 0.28$, $p = 0.009$) and the number of comments ($\beta = 0.31$, SE $= 0.24$, $p = 0.032$). Celebrity presence also showed an effect ($\beta = 0.27$, SE $= 0.36$, $p = 0.084$) on views, but this did not reach conventional levels of significance. These results indicate that celebrity presence plays a key role in enhancing user engagement across most forms of online engagement.

Target Audience. The target audience of the ad also affected engagement. Namely, ads targeting an androgynous audience (i.e., masculine and feminine consumers) had fewer views ($\beta = -0.22$, SE $= 0.32$, $p = 0.094$) compared to ads targeting women, although this effect did not reach conventional levels of significance. Ads targeting men receive more views than ads targeting women, however this also did not reach conventional levels of significance ($\beta = 0.17$, SE $= .36$, $p = 0.199$). Concretely, compared to when an ad adopts a female target, we noticed that views decreased for androgynous ads and increased for male ones.

Ad characteristics. Some ad characteristics also affected narrative transportation and engagement. Namely, salient music had positive effects on narrative transportation ($\beta = 0.16$, SE $= 0.33$, $p = 0.121$) and number of comments ($\beta = 0.20$, SE $= 0.21$, $p = 0.138$), although neither reached conventional levels of significance. Moreover, self-referencing ($\beta = 0.19$, SE $= 0.38$, $p = 0.114$) had a positive effect on the number of comments, although not conventionally significant. Interestingly, narrativity only approached significance in predicting likes and did not significantly influence comments or views in our study. This contrasts with the findings of Van Laer et al. (2014) and Huang et al. (2018), who suggested that narrativity plays a role in enhancing

audience engagement. Similarly, we were surprised to find that the product–story link did not significantly predict narrative transportation. This finding diverges from Glaser and Reisinger's (2021) conclusion, which implies that a strong connection between the product and the story can foster deeper viewer immersion into the story. These discrepancies may be due to the characteristics of our sample, its relatively small size, or the specific context of fragrance advertising, which may engage audiences differently than other product categories. Further research would be needed to explore these results. Lastly, the mean duration of the brand and product name appearances (Mean Ratio) had a significant negative effect on narrative transportation ($\beta = -0.19$, SE $= 0.01$, $p = 0.035$).

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TABLE 1 Regression results predicting engagement and narrative transportation (β, SE, R^2)

Predictors	Likes	Views	Comments	Narrative Transportation
	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)
Narrativity	.28 (.06) $^\Psi$	.15 (.07)	.18 (.05)	.52 (.07)**
Self-referencing	-.08 (.39)	-.15 (.53)	.19 (.38) $^\Psi$	-.03 (.49)
Theme	-.05 (.29)	.07 (.35)	-.15 (.23)	.10 (.33)
PS Link	.00 (.08)	-.02 (.10)	.06 (.06)	.10 (.09)
Salient Music	.07 (.27)	-.15 (.35)	.20 (.21) $^\Psi$	.16 (.33) $^\Psi$
Celebrity	.42 (.27)**	.27 (.35) $^+$	.31 (.24)*	-.02 (.33)
Cuts	.12 (.01)	.09 (.01)	.17 (.01)	.09 (.01)
Male	-.09 (.29)	.17 (.36) $^\Psi$	-.03 (.22)	.00 (.34)
Androgynous	-.01 (.26)	-.22 (.32) $^+$	-.08 (.21)	.05 (.31)
Visual Brand Prominence	-.05 (.01)	-.07 (.01)	-.13 (.00)	-.19 (.01)*
Days Since Ad Publication	-.11 (.00)	-.01 (.00)	.01 (.00)	.03 (.00)
Length	-.04 (.01)	-.06 (.01)	.06 (.01)	.10 (.01)
Observations	59	68	60	68
R^2	.43**	.29$^+$	.59**	.70**

$^\Psi p<.20, +p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01$

For the second model (Table 2), we aimed to dissect the individual effects of each narrative element that comprised the sum score of narrativity used in the first regression and understand their effect on narrative transportation. This model significantly explained 64% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.64$, $p < 0.001$).

With no surprise, the story (also understood as the plot) played a highly significant positive role on narrative transportation ($\beta = 0.42$, SE $= 0.28$, $p = 0.001$). The more a plot is perceived as present in the ad, the more transportation there is. It is also worth noting that, although not statistically significant, characters ($\beta = 0.16$, SE $= 0.21$, $p = 0.131$) and

conflict ($\beta = 0.14$, SE $= 0.51$, $p = 0.124$) may also contribute positively to narrative transportation. However, we were surprised to observe nonsignificant results for chronology, context, climax and closure. We expected, based on Escalas & Stern (2003) and Van Laer et al. (2018)'s work, that these variables would somehow have a bigger influence on narrative transportation.

TABLE 2 Regression results predicting narrative transportation from story elements (β, SE, R^2)

Predictors	Narrative Transportation
	β (SE)
Story	.42 (.28)**
Chronology	.54 (.05)
Character	.16 (.21)$^{\Psi}$
Context	-.01 (.28)
Conflict	.14 (.51)$^{\Psi}$
Climax	.13 (.40)
Closure	.15 (.38)
Celebrity	.02 (.30)
Observations	68
R^2	.64**

$^{\Psi}p<.20$, $+p<.10$, $*p<.05$, $**p<.01$

The final regression analysis initially included all 10 themes from Ghosh et al. (2024)'s framework. However, four of these themes were not observed in the coded dataset and were therefore excluded from the analysis. Consequently, only six themes (relationship warmth, reconnection, new relationships, excitement, belief, and transformation) were included in the final model. As shown in Table 3, this model explains approximately 34% of the variation in narrative transportation and is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

Among the predictors, reconnection, excitement, and belief have significant positive effects on narrative transportation, with excitement showing the strongest influence ($\beta = 0.44$, SE $= 0.46$, p

< 0.001). In contrast, relationship warmth, new relationships and transformation do not significantly predict narrative transportation, suggesting that these themes have a lesser impact on narrative transportation in ads.

TABLE 3 Regression results predicting narrative transportation from themes (β, SE, R^2)

Predictors	Narrative Transportation
	β (SE)
Relationship warmth	.01 (.96)
Reconnection	.42 (.86)**
New Relationships	.06 (.59)
Excitement	.44 (.46)**
Belief	.54 (.65)*
Transformation	.09 (.99)
Observations	68
R^2	.34**

$^{\Psi}p<.20, +p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01$

To facilitate a clearer understanding of the effects of each predictor on the outcome variables, Table 4 provides a summary of the significant findings from all regression models. Each row represents a predictor variable, and each column shows whether the variable had a statistically significant effect ($p < .05$) on one of the dependent variables. Only statistically significant effects are marked with "+" (positive effect) or "−" (negative effect); all others are labeled "No" to indicate no significant effect. Variables tested only for narrative transportation are marked with "−" under engagement outcomes.

TABLE 4 Summary of the regression results

Predictor Variable	Likes	Views	Comments	Narrative Transportation
Narrativity (Total Score)	No	No	No	+
Self-referencing	No	No	No	No
Theme (General)	No	No	No	No
Product–Story Link	No	No	No	No
Salient Music	No	No	No	No
Celebrity Presence	+	No	+	No
Cuts	No	No	No	No
Target: Male	No	No	No	No
Target: Androgynous	No	No	No	No
Visual Brand Prominence	No	No	No	−
Days Since Publication	No	No	No	No
Ad Length	No	No	No	No
Story Element: Plot	−	−	−	+
Story Element: Character	−	−	−	No
Story Element: Conflict	−	−	−	No
Story Element: Chronology	−	−	−	No
Story Element: Context	−	−	−	No
Story Element: Climax	−	−	−	No
Story Element: Closure	−	−	−	No
Theme: Reconnection	−	−	−	+
Theme: Excitement	−	−	−	+
Theme: Belief	−	−	−	+
Theme: Relationship Warmth	−	−	−	No
Theme: New Relationships	−	−	−	No
Theme: Transformation	−	−	−	No

Chapter 3 General discussion

Across a dataset of 70 fragrance advertisements, this study finds that narrative elements, celebrity presence, and themes are key drivers of consumer response and narrative transportation. These findings contribute to a growing body of literature on the role of storytelling in advertising, particularly for intangible products like fragrances, where sensory experience must be evoked through visual and emotional cues.

Narrativity emerged as a central predictor of narrative transportation. In line with prior research (e.g., Van Laer et al., 2014), we found that the more narrative elements an ad included, especially a clear plot, the more it fostered narrative transportation. When examining these elements individually, the presence of a clear plot was the most influential, while characters and conflict also showed positive (though non-significant) contributions. This suggests that audiences are more likely to immerse themselves in a fragrance advertisement when the storyline feels plot-driven, even in short or stylized formats. Surprisingly, other narrative components such as chronology, climax, closure, and context did not significantly affect narrative transportation. This contrasts with past findings (e.g., Escalas & Stern, 2003), where such structural elements contributed to transportation. One possible explanation is that, given the very short duration of most fragrance ads, not all narrative components have enough time to be fully developed.

Another important result concerns celebrity presence, which significantly increased both likes and comments. These findings align with existing literature suggesting that celebrities enhance advertising effectiveness by increasing perceived credibility, attention, and emotional engagement (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024). While the effect on views did not reach statistical significance, the consistent positive trend across engagement metrics suggests that celebrities play a strong persuasive role in this category. This reinforces the idea that in aspirational products like perfumes, associations with admired public figures may enhance both attention and interaction (Petroshius & Crocker, 1989; Kamins & Gupta, 1994)

The data also revealed nuanced effects of the ad's target. Ads targeting a female audience generally performed better in terms of views compared to androgynous ads, while maletargeted ads also showed a slight but non-significant advantage over female ones. These mixed results could align

with broader trends in beauty, where gendered messaging is still influential but increasingly challenged by more inclusive strategies (Williamson & Morris, 2024). Although the differences were not statistically significant, they open up questions about how gender targeting interacts with viewer expectations and cultural shifts in identity and self-expression.

One last notable finding was the negative effect of brand appearance on narrative transportation. This suggests that overt branding might disrupt immersion, possibly by reminding viewers of the ad's persuasive intent, thereby pulling them out of the story. This supports earlier claims in narrative persuasion research that suggest less intrusive branding may facilitate deeper emotional engagement (Green & Brock, 2000).

Finally, our analysis of thematic content revealed that themes such as excitement, belief, and reconnection significantly contributed to narrative transportation. Among these, excitement had the strongest effect, highlighting the importance of affective resonance in the storytelling process. In contrast, themes like transformation, relationship warmth, and new relationships did not show a significant effect, perhaps suggesting that only certain types of emotional appeals foster the kind of imaginative involvement associated with fragrance advertising.

Together, these findings underscore the different ways to craft an effective fragrance ad. They reveal that celebrity endorsements and subtle branding may further support engagement, while strong narratives, particularly those that evoke excitement, relationship reconnection and belief, can transport viewers into the world of the fragrance, compensating for the absence of olfactory information.

Contributions

This research contributes to the literature on sensory and narrative advertising by demonstrating that narrative immersion can compensate for the absence of direct sensory

stimuli in video ads and still make ads effective. Prior work has established the persuasive power of narratives and their ability to evoke emotional responses and drive purchase intention through narrative transportation in general advertising, mostly through print ads (Escalas, 2004; Green & Brock, 2000). This study extends those insights to the context of video ads and explores their

relevance for intangible products such as fragrances. We show that narrative transportation remains effective in this setting, primarily driven by narrativity and the presence of a clear, identifiable plot.

This study also contributes to the literature on advertising by identifying which narrative themes are most effective at enhancing narrative transportation in the context of fragrance ads. Specifically, it extends the work of Ghosh et al. (2024), who identified ten recurring themes in narrative ads. We complement Ghosh et al. by showing that, in the context of fragrance ads, the themes of excitement, reconnection, and belief are effective in fostering narrative transportation. In contrast, themes like embarrassing realizations and relationships coming to rescue did not appear in our dataset, suggesting they may be less applicable or relevant in this category. This more nuanced understanding advances our theoretical grasp of how narrative content, not just structure, shapes immersion in advertising contexts.

Practically, this research offers valuable guidance for marketers advertising products with intangible attributes, particularly fragrance. We identify two distinct yet complementary strategies: (1) employing strong narrative structures that emphasize plot, characters, and conflict, paired with resonant themes such as reconnection, excitement, and belief to foster immersion and imagined sensory experience; and (2) leveraging celebrity presence to boost direct engagement metrics like likes and comments. Additionally, our findings suggest that minimizing the duration of brand and product name appearances may enhance narrative transportation, as excessive or overt branding can disrupt viewer immersion. These insights provide actionable recommendations for crafting effective fragrance advertisements in media environments where scent itself cannot be communicated.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

One key limitation of this study lies in the subjectivity of the coding process. The content was coded by a single person (the first author), which means that all judgments were based on one perspective. While this approach allowed for consistency, it also introduced potential biases, particularly for more interpretive variables such as perceived movement, product–story linkage, or narrative transportation. Another coder may have perceived or interpreted these elements

differently. Future studies could benefit from multiple coders and intercoder reliability assessments. Additionally, using audience-based methods, such as surveys or experiments, would help deepen our understanding of how viewers themselves perceive these narratives and how they respond in terms of involvement, persuasion, or purchase intent. We also did not explore whether or how the scent itself was imagined, perceived, or "felt" by viewers, nor what precisely could convince them to buy the product, further research would be needed to explore these questions.

Another limitation concerns the dataset itself. We were not able to access the larger database initially planned, which would likely have offered richer and more precise insights. Instead, we used publicly available YouTube ads, which introduced several constraints. For example, we could not control for whether certain ads had been promoted or paid for, potentially inflating views. Additionally, comments and likes sections were sometimes disabled, which limited our ability to fully assess engagement. A more robust database would provide greater accuracy and a wider range of success metrics to analyze, beyond likes, views, and comments, including brand recall, purchase behavior, or ad recall over time.

Together, these limitations point to several fruitful directions for future research: integrating consumer responses, exploring sensory and persuasive elements more directly, and expanding access to more comprehensive datasets for a deeper understanding of what truly makes fragrance and general ads successful. It would also be interesting to explore whether these results replicate in advertisements for other products whose primary feature is intangible. For example, would they replicate for taste?

Conclusion

This study explores how perfume advertisements use storytelling to compensate for the absence of olfactory cues. Through a content analysis of 70 videos, we identify how narrative elements and storytelling contribute to consumer engagement and narrative transportation. This study

bridges literature on intangible product advertising, narrative transportation theory, and narrative persuasion, offering new insights into how stories help make the invisible (smell) feel real and desirable.

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Appendix 1 – Coding Guide

Engagement

Subscribers. The number of subscribers on the channel on the day the video was coded.

Likes. The number of likes on the YouTube ad on the day the video was coded. Kept blank if likes were not visible.

Views. The number of views on the YouTube ad on the day the video was coded. *Comments* - The number of comments on the YouTube ad on the day the video was coded. Kept blank if comments were turned off.

Days

Days. the number of days elapsed between the ad's publication date on YouTube and the day the video was coded (April 1st, 2025)

Music

Salient music. Whether the music is a prominent feature (yes = 1) or more subdued in the background (no = 0)

Mode. Only measured if the music was considered salient first (yes = 1, no = 0). The mode evaluates if the music is in a minor or major tone.

Tempo. Only measured if the music was considered salient first (yes = 1, 0 = no). The tempo is measured in beats per minute (bpm).

Self - referencing

You. Whether the word "you" is used (yes = 1) or not (no = 0) in the ad, addressing the viewer directly.

Narrativity

Story. Based on Escalas & Stern's (2003) three attributes: "*1) the ad tells a story; (2) the ad has a beginning, middle, and end; and (3) the ad shows the personal evolution of one or more characters*". Rated on a scale from 0 to 2 (none, some, very)

Chronology. The logical flow of the ad, whether the events unfolded in a clear temporal sequence, rated on a scale from 0 to 2 (none, some, very).

Character. Whether the ad featured a (some) clearly identifiable character(s), and the nature of their role in the story, rated on a scale from 0 to 2 (none, some, very).

Context. The setting or environment in which the ad takes place is clearly stated or not, rated on a scale from 0 to 2 (none, some, very).

Conflict. The presence of any conflict or tension within the narrative, which drives the storyline, rated on a scale from 0 to 2 (none, some, very).

Climax. Whether there is a peak or very intense moment in the ad, rated on a scale from 0 to 2 (none, some, very).

Closure. Whether the ad concluded with a resolution or a final statement, providing a sense of closure to the narrative, rated on a scale from 0 to 2 (none, some, very).

Narrativity. The narrativity was measured by doing the sum of all the preceding qualitative elements.

Foreshadowing

Suspense/Curiosity. Whether the ad sparked curiosity or built suspense, rated on a Likert scale of 7 points (1 = very low suspense and curiosity, 7 = very high suspense and curiosity)

Surprise. Focused on instances where the ad introduced unexpected twists or surprises, rated on a Likert scale of 7 points (1 = very low surprise, 7 = very high surprise)

Themes (see Appendix 2 for further details)

Theme. whether a theme could be identified in the ad (1 = yes, 0 = no)

Relationship warmth. If this theme was identified, coded as 1. If not, coded as 0.

Relationship coming to rescue. If this theme was identified, coded as 1. If not, coded as 0.

Relationship reconnection and togetherness. If this theme was identified, coded as 1. If not, coded as 0.

Establishing new relationships. If this theme was identified, coded as 1. If not, coded as 0.

Excitement in staid life. If this theme was identified, coded as 1. If not, coded as 0.

New realization. If this theme was identified, coded as 1. If not, coded as 0.

Belief and inspiration. If this theme was identified, coded as 1. If not, coded as 0.

Transformation. If this theme was identified, coded as 1. If not, coded as 0.

Good deed. If this theme was identified, coded as 1. If not, coded as 0.

Embarrassing realization. If this theme was identified, coded as 1. If not, coded as 0.

Depicted Movement

Activity. Evaluates the level of activity using Grisby et al.'s (2022) item "*How much movement was depicted in the ad?*" based on a Likert scale (1 = very little activity, 7 = very high activity)

Cuts. Counts the number of cuts in the whole ad.

Product-Story link

Link. How strongly the product was integrated into the story. The measure was constructed upon 4 items selected from Glaser and Reisinger's product-story link items (2022) listed below and coded as a single item on a Likert scale from 1 to 7 (1 = very little linkage, 7 = very high linkage).

1. *"There is a strong reference between the story of the ad and the advertised product"*

2. *"The advertised product is presented as a solution to a problem in the story"*

3. *"The advertised product plays an important role in the behavior of the character"*

4. *"If the product were changed, it would change the story of the ad substantially"*

Length of the ad

Length. How many seconds does the ad last?

Visual Brand Prominence

*Brand name. D*oes the brand name visually appear (yes = 1, no = 0)

*Product name. D*oes the product name visually appear (yes = 1, no = 0)

Slogan. Does the slogan visually appear (yes = 1, no = 0)

Time Brand name. Only measured if Brand name = 1. How many times does it appear (counted in number of occurrences)?

Time Product name. Only measured if Product name = 1. How many times does the product name appear?

Time slogan. Only measured if Slogan = 1. How many times does the slogan appear?

F/L Brand. Only measured if Brand name = 1. Counts the exact seconds of the first and last occurrences of the brand name visually appearing in the ad.

F/L Product. Only measured if Product name = 1. Counts the exact seconds of the first and last occurrences of the product name visually appearing in the ad.

F/L – Slogan. Only measured if Slogan = 1. Counts the exact seconds of the first and last occurrences of the slogan visually appearing in the ad.

Long Brand. Only measured if Brand name = 1. Counts the total, cumulated duration of the written brand name's appearance in seconds.

Long Product. Only measured if Product name = 1. Counts the total, cumulated duration of the written product name's appearance in seconds.

Long Slogan. Only measured if Slogan = 1. Counts the total, cumulated duration of the written slogan's appearance in seconds.

Ratio Brand name. The ratio of the total duration of appearance of the brand name to the total duration of the video. This ratio is calculated as follows: Long brand name/lengths of the ad in seconds.

Ratio Product name. The ratio of the total duration of appearance of the product name to the total duration of the video. This ratio is calculated as follows: Long product name/lengths of the ad in seconds.

Ratio Slogan. The ratio of the total duration of appearance of the slogan to the total duration of the video. This ratio is calculated as follows: Long Slogan/lengths of the ad in seconds.

Mean Ratio - Average of Ratio Brand name and Ratio Product name.

Oral Brand Prominence

Brand name. Is the brand name heard (yes = 1, no = 0)

Product name. Is the product name heard (yes = 1, no = 0)

Slogan. Is the slogan heard (yes = 1, no = 0)

Time Brand name. Only measured if Brand name = 1. How many times is it heard?

Time Product name. Only measured if Product name = 1. How many times is it heard?

Time Slogan. Only measured if Slogan = 1. How many times is it heard?

F/L Brand name. Only measured if Brand name = 1. Counts the exact seconds of the first and last occurrences of the brand name being heard in the ad.

F/L Product name. Only measured if Product name = 1. Counts the exact seconds of the first and last occurrences of the product name being heard in the ad.

F/L Slogan. Only measured if Slogan = 1. Counts the exact seconds of the first and last occurrences of the slogan being heard in the ad.

Target

M/F/Andro. Is the main target of the ad a male (1), a female (2) or androgynous (3).

Narrative Transportation

NT. Whether the ad is likely to transport the viewer into its narrative. It is based on Appel's and al.'s short form of the narrative transportation scale (2015) and gathered into one item coded on a Likert scale from 1 to 7 (1 = very little transportation, 7 = very high transportation)

Celebrity

Celebrity. Is there a famous person appearing in the ad (yes = 1, no = 0)?

Appendix 2 – Ghosh and al. (2024)'s 10 Themes

Due to copyright restrictions, this appendix does not reproduce the original content in full.

Instead, a summary is provided based on the authors' original classification. This appendix summarizes the key narrative themes identified by Ghosh et al. (2024) in

storydriven advertisements. While the theme names are retained, the descriptions have been paraphrased for academic use.

1. **Relationship warmth**

   These ads evoke comfort and emotional familiarity through family or close relationships, presenting the brand as a source of warmth and connection.

2. **Relationship coming to rescue**

   The narrative involves a protagonist in difficulty being helped by someone close, emphasizing trust and dependable relationships.

3. **Relationship reconnection and togetherness**

   These stories highlight emotional closeness through reunions, celebrations, or shared experiences, portraying the brand as part of the family or social circle.

4. **Establishing new relationships**

   Focuses on the joy and emotional charge of forming new bonds, especially when characters overcome initial uncertainty or misunderstanding.

5. **Excitement in staid life**

   Ads with this theme break the routine by introducing adventure or unexpected thrills, positioning the brand as a gateway to excitement.

6. **New realization**

   Here, a surprising discovery about a brand or product changes the protagonist's perception or behavior, often leading to a breakthrough moment.

7. **Belief and inspiration**

   These stories center on inner strength, motivation, or inspiration—either drawn from others or oneself—triggering personal growth or transformation.

8. **Transformation / rebirth**

   A protagonist undergoes a profound change in mindset, behavior, or selfperception, often symbolized by a simple but powerful act or realization.

9. **Good deed**

   The brand is associated with kindness or altruism, whether through an individual act or a broader societal message, reinforcing moral values.

10. **Embarrassing realization**

    Characters experience a humorous or awkward moment of self-awareness, which leads to learning, humility, or social insight—creating an emotional link with the audience.

Appendix 3 – AI Declaration of Use

Artificial intelligence was used as a support tool in the following areas:

Translation, proofreading and clarification

AI assisted in reviewing and enhancing the quality of my translations and the clarity of some sentences. This process aimed to ensure clarity and accuracy while preserving my original ideas and writing style.

All ideas, interpretations, and final decisions presented in this thesis are entirely my own. AI was not used to generate content or contribute to the intellectual substance of the work. Its role was strictly limited to linguistic support and did not replace my personal reasoning or critical analysis.

DeepL SE. (2025). *DeepL Translator* [Machine translation tool]. https://www.deepl.com/

OpenAI. (2025). *ChatGPT* (GPT-4.0) [Large language model]. https://chat.openai.com/