



Are there universal themes in story advertisements? a cross-country study on identification, usage, and attitudes towards story ad themes

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Abstract

This study is a pioneering investigation into the themes present in story ads, examining both universal themes and the influence of viewers' culture-mediated self-construal on their attitudes towards themes. Using a mixed-methods approach, we analyzed story advertisements from the six largest economies (the USA, the UK, China, Japan, Germany, and India) to identify common themes (studies 1 and 2) and conducted experimental testing in three of these countries (the USA, Japan, India) to evaluate the identified themes (study 3). The results revealed that story ads from different countries contain a limited number of universal themes. Additionally, we found that favorability towards these themes varies across countries and is moderated by viewers' self-construal. These findings build a case for incorporating themes into future academic research and managerial practice, highlighting the significant role that culture-mediated self-construal plays in shaping audience attitudes towards story themes.

Keywords Universal themes · Thematic abstract unit (TAU) · Story ads · Theme favorability · Ad favorability

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1 Introduction

“You can’t tell any kind of a story without having some kind of a theme, something to say between the lines.” Robert Wise.

Telling stories, which is “hard-wired” into our brains, is unique to humankind (Baskin, 2004). Unsurprisingly, story ads, or advertisements containing stories (Escalas & Stern, 2003), are pervasive in marketing. By boosting the emotional response to advertising (Kang et al., 2020), such ads have been argued to be the most effective advertising strategy (Anaza et al., 2020).

Previous research on story ads is rich and varied. Initially analyzed as instances of drama (Esslin, 1979), story ads were later explored through processing mechanisms (Deighton et al., 1989), taxonomy (Stern, 1994), and argument strength (Kang et al., 2020), among other aspects. Past studies also explored the narrative structural elements of story ads and their impact on viewers’ perceptions (Ghosh & Deb, 2022).

More recently, advertising research has started to explore ads’ themes, or their focal points or critical messages, such as “good overcomes evil” or “hard work brings happiness” (Graesser et al., 2002). Defined as “the ideas that hold the story together” (Williams, 1993), story themes, also referred to as thematic abstract units (TAU) (Zhang, 2005), capture the “aboutness” of the narrative and serve to represent similar episodes in memory.

However, despite being extensively investigated in the literary domain (e.g., Kintsch, 2002), TAUs have rarely been studied in the domain of advertising. The few relevant studies either focused on themes in ads of certain products only (e.g., Roberts & Pettigrew, 2007) or analyzed a select few themes across different ads (e.g., Zheng & Zhang, 2022). In addition, previous studies did not empirically validate the identified themes (e.g., Moin et al., 2020). Thus, identifying and understanding TAUs in story ads remain a relatively unexplored area in marketing research, with little known about how TAUs impact audiences.

To fill this gap in the literature, in this pioneering study, we explore how current artifacts of drama and mythology can contribute to identifying recurrent, or universal, TAUs in story ads (studies 1 and 2). Furthermore, assuming that some of the universal TAUs may be preferred in different societies for various psychological or sociological reasons, we explore self-construal as one plausible construct that may influence viewers’ attitudes towards the TAUs (study 3).

2 Literature

2.1 Universal themes in story ads

A common idea in literary scholarship is that there is a limited number of recurrent themes. Over a century ago, inspired by the work of Gozzi (1720–1806), Polti (1916/2016) argued that each dramatic narrative can be categorized into 36

“dramatic situations.” This idea was further developed by archetypal literary criticism inspired by the works of Frazer (1854–1941), Jung (1875–1961), and Frye (1912–1991). This school of thought interpreted literary works, myths, dreams, and social rituals through recurrent themes, narrative designs, action patterns, character types, and images. Such recurrent plots were identified both in the literature (e.g., Reagan et al., 2016; Tobias, 2012) and story ads (Ghosh & Deb, 2022).

Furthermore, folklore studies established that mythological narratives from geographically distant cultures share a high level of similarity. In 1910, Finnish folklorists classified fairy tales worldwide into fewer than 100 different types (Aarne & Thompson, 1961). Likewise, in a study on 50 different mythologies, Kluckhohn (1959) found that 39 of those myths contained a common motif—precisely, that of incest.

This evidence led scholars to speculate on the existence of specific basic ideas and thoughts that are common across all human communities. Regarding the reasons underlying this commonality, various explanations have been proposed. For one thing, stories frequently reflect fundamental—and thus shared by all human societies—needs or experiences such as survival, love, self-actualization, conflict, or death. On the other hand, theory of the collective unconscious (Jung, 1969) posits that a part of the unconscious mind is shared among all humans, containing universal memories, symbols, and archetypes inherited from our ancestral past. Furthermore, scholars note on the existence of universal metaphors or symbols (e.g., light vs. dark, journey, transformation) that resonate across different cultures and, therefore, lead to similar thematic manifestations in stories (Lévi-Strauss & Wilcken, 2013). Finally, several scholars argued that, through trade, conquest, migration, and communication, cultures have historically exchanged stories and themes (Dundes, 1962). As a result, in both literary works and in advertising, several basic advertising appeal themes were found across different cultures (e.g., Cho et al., 1999). Building on this understanding, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Story advertisements contain a limited number of universal TAUs.

2.2 Self-construal and attitude towards TAUs

In previous thematic research, it was observed that story themes, or TAUs, can be either ego-focused or other-focused (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982; McAdams, 2001). While the former highlight the protagonist’s self-development, personal triumphs, and struggles (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989), the latter emphasize empathy, cooperation, and social harmony (Banovic & Barone, 2021; Fiske et al., 1998; Kuijpers et al., 2019).

Analogously, in cultural psychology, it was proposed that individuals differ in their self-construal: an independent self-construal, which leads to behaviors determined by personal drive, and an interdependent self-construal, which drives relatedness with group-related goals and values (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Combining the two aforementioned observations, and considering the evidence that structurally similar stories elicit different emotional responses (Sadoski et al.,

1988), we argue that, despite being universally present, common TAUs may not be universally valued in different societies. Accordingly, we anticipate that individuals' self-construal may impact the way in which they perceive TAUs, in the sense people with independent self-construal would favor stories with ego-focused themes, and vice versa. Hence, our second hypothesis is as follows:

H2: Individuals with independent self-construal will have favorable attitude towards ego-focused TAUs, whereas individuals with interdependent self-construal will have a favorable attitude towards other-focused TAUs.

3 Study 1

3.1 Methodology

We selected story advertisements from the six largest economies—the USA, China, Japan, Germany, India, and the UK. Six business and marketing students from each country began by choosing ads featuring a story plot and character(s) from the nominees of prestigious advertising awards in each country (e.g., the Dentsu Advertising Award in Japan and the British Television Advertising Awards in the UK) from 2010 to 2018. After reviewing the award nominees, the search expanded to include competitors of the nominated brands, conducted alphabetically, to ensure coverage of essential product and service categories. This expanded search started in 2020, gradually covering earlier years until 336 potential ads were included.

The ads were then rated on a 7-point scale (Escalas & Stern, 2003) based on 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. Only ads scoring above 5 on all three attributes were retained, resulting in 336 potential ads initially included.

Themes in the ads were identified using a five-stage qualitative content analysis approach (Schilling, 2006). First, each ad was converted into raw data using Freytag's five-act structure (Freytag & Macewan, 1898) and transcribed in detail by native graduate students. Second, we prepared condensed summaries of the stories by reviewing the transcriptions and the actual ads. An advertising professional cross-checked the output to ensure all nuances were comprehensively captured. After a detailed review, 32 ads that did not fully conform to the definition of a "story" were excluded. Third, two independent coders (advertisement professionals) and the researchers reviewed the ads and their summaries, developing a preliminary list of themes for each ad. This list was refined iteratively through discussion until a consensus was reached. Fourth, we revisited all ads and their summaries using this final list and classified them into themes, achieving an intercoder reliability of 87%. Differences were resolved through discussion; in cases where no consensus was reached ($N=8$), the ads were excluded from further analysis. The final sample included 296 ads. Finally, several interpretations and conclusions were made based on the identified themes.

3.2 Results

Based on the results, we identified a total of ten themes: “relationship warmth,” “relationship coming to rescue,” “relationship reconnection and togetherness,” “establishing new relationships,” “excitement in staid life,” “new realization,” “belief and inspiration,” “transformation/rebirth,” “good deed,” and “embarrassing realization.” Descriptions of these themes and examples of corresponding ads are provided in Appendix A.

4 Study 2

4.1 Methodology

For the analysis, the participatory theme elicitation (PTE) technique (Best et al., 2022) was used. We recruited ten business and marketing management students: two each from India, China, the USA, and the UK, and one each from Germany and Japan. After two training sessions on PTE, the students were given explanations of the act structure of story ads and performed several grouping activities with the data.

Before the sorting exercise, students were instructed to sort the ads into at least two piles based on relevant criteria (Rosenberg & Kim, 1975) and set aside any ads they felt could not be grouped. No further instructions were provided to avoid constraining their analysis (Garfield et al., 2016). Each participant conducted the sorting independently, without influencing each other. The authors were available to clarify questions but did not offer opinions on the sorting.

After sorting, each researcher had between 5 and 12 piles of ad stories. Each pile was compiled in a spreadsheet, and a similarity score for each pair of ads was computed based on how many sorters grouped those two ads into the same pile. This similarity was then converted into a distance score matrix. Finally, Agglomerative Hierarchical Clustering using Ward’s minimum variance method was applied to the distance scores. The purpose of this analysis was to determine whether the same or similar themes would emerge while clustering the ads rather than to assess the accuracy of classification compared to study 1.

4.2 Results

The results of Agglomerative Hierarchical Clustering (Table 1; Appendix B) showed nine clusters that could be unambiguously mapped onto the nine themes identified in study 1, confirming that, similarly to marketing professionals, lay consumers are also able to identify nine of the ten themes. The only theme that did not emerge among the lay consumers was “relationship togetherness,” as most of the times consumers seem to group it with “relationship warmth” theme.

Table 1 Cross-tabulation of themes and AHC clusters

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5	Cluster 6	Cluster 7	Cluster 8	Cluster 9	Total
Belief and inspiration	17	0	4	0	2	1	0	1	2	27
Embarrassing realization	0	7	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	9
Excitement in staid life	1	0	36	2	6	0	0	0	1	46
Good deed	1	0	0	14	2	1	1	1	0	20
New realization	1	3	5	5	19	0	3	1	0	37
New relationship	0	0	0	1	4	7	2	2	0	16
Relationship coming to rescue	1	0	1	1	0	0	15	7	0	25
Relationship togetherness*	2	0	2	0	1	1	4	11	1	22
Relationship warmth	2	2	5	2	4	0	6	46	1	68
Transformation/rebirth#	7	0	4	2	3	0	0	2	8	26
Total	32	12	57	27	41	10	32	72	13	296

*No cluster classifies “Relationship togetherness” as the primary

“Transformation/rebirth” is prominently cross-classified with the “Belief and inspiration” cluster

However, we chose to retain them as separate themes due to the nuanced differences (see Appendix A for descriptions).

Also, while “transformation/rebirth” emerged as a distinct theme, some of the ads previously identified in study 1 as belonging to this theme clustered with “belief and inspiration” (cluster 1).

While 57% ($N=169$) of all ads mapped unambiguously with the classification in study 1, the remaining did not map precisely. This outcome can be attributed to the following three reasons: (1) the themes contained elements of multiple TAUs (for the presence of multiple themes in a narrative, see Graesser et al., 2002; see also the example below); (2) similarity of specific themes—from a lay consumer perspective, some themes identified in Study 1 were somewhat similar (e.g., “relationship togetherness” and “relationship warmth,” “realization,” and “transformation/rebirth”); (3) subjectivity of interpretation/focus—where one sorter could have seen a person coming to another person’s rescue, another sorter could have focused on the warmth of the protagonists’ relationship.

An example of multiple themes in story ads, as interpreted by the students, is provided: (“belief and inspiration” + “transformation/rebirth”); in one of the educational campaigns for FinishYourDiploma.org (USA), a women protagonist who could not finish high school on time manages to do so (“transformation/rebirth” theme). Her confidence in this pursuit comes after encouragement from a caring mentor (“belief and inspiration” theme).

After validating the existence of ten TAUs in story ads, we checked their universality by looking at the prevalence of these TAUs in the six countries. To this end, we conducted a frequency analysis of the primary themes by the countries. The results revealed that seven of the ten themes were used in story ads in all six countries (for exceptions, see Appendix C) and the rest in five of the six countries.

Collectively, the results of studies 1 and 2 provide robust support to hypothesis 1. We find that there is indeed a limited number (10) of TAUs used in story ads, and these themes are recurrent in a diverse set of countries.

5 Study 3

5.1 Methodology

From the ten themes identified in study 1, we selected two ego-focused TAUs (“embarrassing realization” and “transformation/rebirth”) and two other-focused TAUs (“relationship coming to rescue” and “relationship warmth”).

To control for external variables (e.g., brand familiarity, identification with the protagonist, quality of production, and cultural impact), we developed new textual stories representing the themes. This decision to use textual stories (instead of actual ads) was underpinned by available evidence showing that, compared to the on-screen format, narratives in the text format are more effective in engaging customers in the story (Felty, 2020). We then conducted a survey using these new stories as stimuli to capture the study participants’ attitudes towards the stories.

5.1.1 Country selection

We focused only on the USA, Japan, and India as the most dissimilar cultures. This dissimilarity was established by a hierarchical clustering algorithm on the culture dimension scores of the six countries from which the story ads were collected (see Appendices D and E), which established their high cultural dissimilarity.

5.1.2 Stimulus development and pre-test

A professional scriptwriter created the stories following Gygax et al.'s (2007) approach. We discussed the themes with the writer, showing actual ads as examples. Each story was about 200 words, with protagonists named from popular lists in the respective countries to minimize bias. Five independent coders fluent in English, but coming from different countries (India, Japan, USA), rated how well the stories matched the themes without knowing which theme each story was intended to represent. The scriptwriter revised stories that did not represent a theme. This process was repeated until each story was rated as the best fit for its intended theme. For Japan and India, native writers adapted the stories to reflect local nuances, followed by the same refinement process with feedback from three independent coders from each country (see Appendix F for examples of the developed stories).

5.1.3 Survey and measures

A total of 220 US, 224 Japanese, and 227 Indian respondents, recruited through the SurveyGizmo panel and balanced by gender and age, underwent self-construal (SC) measurement using the eight-item R-SC and I-SC scales (Hofmann et al., 2021), which showed Cronbach's α scores of 0.79 and 0.83, respectively. Then, the study participants were asked to record, on a 7-point scale (with anchors like "favorable/unfavorable"), their attitudes (A_{st}) to four randomly presented stories. The A_{st} scale was constructed based on Holbrook and Batra (1987).

On filtering out (1) the responses that failed to correctly answer the attention check question; (2) identical responses to multiple stories; and (3) overly general responses to open-ended questions (e.g., "I like it"), responses of a total of 200 US, 200 Japanese, and 198 Indian participants were retained. Cronbach alpha scores of the items were 0.91, indicating very good reliability. The scores of the five semantic differential items were averaged to compute the composite story attitude (A_{st}) score for each of the stories.

5.2 Results

Averaging the SC scale items, an independent-interdependent index was created (Singelis, 1994), and participants in each country were grouped into either

independent SC or interdependent SC groups (Block, 2005). US participants generally scored higher on independence ($M = +0.22$) compared to their Japanese ($M = -0.63$) and Indian counterparts ($M = -0.23$).

A repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted with the stories at different factor levels. Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated in all three countries, so degrees of freedom were corrected using Greenhouse–Geisser estimates of sphericity. Significant differences in attitudes towards the TAUs were found. The differences between the two groups were then tested using t -scores (see Table 2).

The results showed that the scores of the ego-focused “transformation/rebirth” story were significantly higher in the independent SC groups than in the interdependent SC groups in all three countries. However, the scores of the other ego-focused story, “embarrassing realization,” were higher only in the US independent SC group. Conversely, the scores of both other-focused stories (“relationship coming to rescue” and “relationship warmth”) did not differ between the two SC groups across the three countries, therefore only partially confirming H2.

6 General discussion

In this study, we explored universal or recurrent themes in story ads and investigated the influence of viewers' self-construal on their attitudes towards those themes. Our initial analysis of 296 story ads produced in the six largest economies (USA, UK, China, Japan, Germany, and India) yielded the following ten themes: “relationship warmth,” “relationship coming to rescue,” “relationship reconnection and togetherness,” “establishing new relationships,” “excitement in staid life,” “new realization,” “belief and inspiration,” “transformation/rebirth,” “good deed,” and “embarrassing realization.” We found that these ten themes were almost universally present in story ads produced in all six countries under study.

Comparing our findings to insights from research, we should note that the number of TAUs identified in our empirical analysis is considerably lower than the one previously reported for literature works, such as 36 universal plots identified by Polti (1916/2016) or 20 plots identified by Tobias (2012). This discrepancy could be attributed to several reasons. First, unlike literary works, the key purpose of story ads is to create a positive motivation for consumers to purchase the advertised product or service. In the literature domain, themes like tragedy and loss (e.g., *Hamlet*), isolation (e.g., *Catcher in the Rye*), or oppression (e.g., *To Kill a Mockingbird*) are quite prominent; by contrast, in advertisements, such themes are usually irrelevant, which results in the predominance of positive endnote themes (Ghosh & Deb, 2022). Second, in the time-constrained context of delivering a positive and persuasive message through a story ad, a very elaborate story development is frequently not possible, which leads to story ads' reliance on relatively simpler themes.

Furthermore, we also investigated the impact of individual differences—utilizing the construct of independent vs. interdependent self-construal—on evaluating the story ad TAUs commonly used in story ads across countries. Testing the viewers' favorability for either ego-focused or other-focused TAUs, we found that individuals

Table 2 Difference in attitude towards the TAUs by self-construal groups

	USA						Japan			India						
	A		B		Interdependent SC		C		Independent SC		D		E		F	
	Independent SC	Interdependent SC	Independent SC	Interdependent SC	Independent SC	Interdependent SC	Independent SC	Interdependent SC	Independent SC	Interdependent SC	Independent SC	Interdependent SC	Independent SC	Interdependent SC	Independent SC	Interdependent SC
g	Relationship coming to rescue	5.56 i,j	5.73 i,j	5.73 i,j	5.73 i,j	4.97 i	4.97 i	4.97 i	4.90 i,j	5.99 i,j	5.99 i,j	5.73 i,j	5.73 i,j	5.73 i,j	5.73 i,j	5.73 i,j
SD		1.24	1.48	1.48	1.48	1.04	1.04	1.04	1.09	1.27	1.27	1.56	1.56	1.56	1.56	1.56
h	Relationship warmth	5.56 i,j	5.47 i,j	5.47 i,j	5.47 i,j	4.80 i	4.80 i	4.80 i	4.75 i,j	5.94 i,j	5.94 i,j	5.94 i,j	5.94 i,j	5.94 i,j	5.94 i,j	5.94 i,j
SD		1.33	1.41	1.41	1.41	1.29	1.29	1.29	1.47	1.19	1.19	1.23	1.23	1.23	1.23	1.23
i	Embarrassing realization	5.03 B	4.54	4.54	4.54	3.87	3.87	3.87	3.57	5.07	5.07	5.01	5.01	5.01	5.01	5.01
SD		1.19	1.42	1.42	1.42	1.35	1.35	1.35	1.39	1.45	1.45	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.39
j	Transformation/Rebirth	4.89 B	4.37	4.37	4.37	4.79 D,i	4.79 D,i	4.79 D,i	3.99	5.00 F	5.00 F	4.70	4.70	4.70	4.70	4.70
SD		1.31	1.55	1.55	1.55	1.49	1.49	1.49	1.51	1.41	1.41	1.22	1.22	1.22	1.22	1.22

SD, standard deviation

with independent self-construal appeared to favor ego-focused TAUs such as “transformation/rebirth” significantly more than those with interdependent self-construal. In the case of the second ego-focused TAU (embarrassing realization), we found the independent (vs. interdependent) SC group favoring it more only in the USA. Thus, we find only partial support for our second hypothesis.

However, regarding the second part of our hypothesis 2 related to the interdependent SC group, an interesting aspect identified by our analysis is that other-focused themes were equally favored among people with both independent and interdependent self-construal. Our interpretation of this finding is that other-focused TAUs may be universally favored across different self-construal groups because all humans have an inherent need for social connection and belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and close relationships can provide emotional fulfillment and affection even to those who prioritize independence (Reis et al., 2004). Along with the impact of individual traits such as self-construal, we also observed significant differences in how people favored the TAUs across the three countries included in study 3, which may indicate the moderating influence of cultural attributes in attitude towards themes in story ads.

Hence, we conclude that there are ten universal TAUs in story ads; however, they are not always universally favored. Individual traits of the audience and various cultural variables can influence TAU favorability.

6.1 Contributions to theory

This pioneering study makes three crucial contributions. First, we empirically establish the existence of a limited number of TAUs in story ads ($N=10$) that recur across diverse countries. This study advances our knowledge of TAUs by demonstrating that story ads can be classified into a small set of universal themes, an area previously unexplored.

Second, our study establishes at a broad level that individual traits and differences across countries impact attitudes towards story ad themes. While we explored one particular construct, self-construal differences on how story ads are favored, we believe this should serve as a base for further theory development related to how other individual trait constructs and TAUs are related.

Third, we find that attitudes towards TAUs in story ads vary significantly, suggesting that the use of proper themes in ads can influence audiences’ attitudes towards those ads and, by extension, to the advertised products (Gardner, 1985). This builds a strong case for incorporating themes or TAUs as an important construct or as a variable into academic research on advertisements.

6.2 Contributions to marketing practice

From the applied perspective, the key insight of our findings is that advertising practitioners should understand these ten universal TAUs in detail and their favorability across countries. This knowledge is expected to help them design

their story ads for different countries more efficiently, thus reducing costs and improving the evaluation of the ads and the products shown in the ads.

They also need to carefully evaluate the various theme possibilities for their story advertisements and craft appropriate scripts in full consideration of consumers' potential reactions to the developed ads. Indeed, as revealed partially by our results, product manufacturers or service providers do not necessarily use the most favored themes in their ads. For instance, in Japan, one of the top favored themes of "relationship coming to rescue" was used in mere 8% of story ads, suggesting that advertising practitioners can optimize their choice of themes in ads to ensure that those ads perform better among the target audiences.

Yet our findings should not discourage the practitioners from using the less favored themes like "embarrassing realization." Rather, considering that these themes would fit well with several brands or categories of products (e.g., skin condition medicines, additive products in some cultures), the stories advertising them could be strengthened using other themes (e.g., "relationship coming to rescue").

6.3 Limitations and future research directions

The present study has several limitations. First, the scope of this study was limited to themes, so we did not investigate the effect of other structural elements in story ads, such as plot structure or protagonist portrayal, which were previously reported to impact attitude towards and persuasiveness of story ads (e.g., Ghosh & Deb, 2022). Accordingly, further research would be necessary to investigate the impact of such factors and themes to better understand how story ads work.

The second limitation is that we did not factor in the potential influence of the advertised products or services on consumers' attitudes to the corresponding ad stories, such as using several students in study 1. Accordingly, future studies should consider examining the impact of this parameter.

Finally, exploring attitudes towards TAUs, we compared only a limited number of countries (the USA, Japan, and India) and story ads. Future studies can focus on testing the moderation of self-construal and the impact of all the ten story ads on attitudes towards the ads.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-024-09740-8>.

Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethical approval Not applicable.

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the studies.

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