

# Narrative Transportation as a Factor of Psychological Impact of the Movie

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The article presents an approach to studying the psychological impact of cinema in the context of narrative influence. The theory of transportation developed by M. Green and T. Brock (Transportation Theory) and the concept of transportation introduced by them as a special state of involvement and immersion in a narrative. It helps to enhance the psychological impact and can lead to a change in a person's beliefs related to the content of the narrative. There are two main groups of factors, which determine the level of narrative transportation: the quality of the narrative and the individual psychological characteristics of the recipient. The empirical study conducted on 1171 university students aged 17 to 29 years (49,3% men and 50,7% women;  $M=19,8$ ,  $SD=1,9$ ) showed that the level of narrative transportation differs depending on gender, which may be due to the greater proximity of a particular film to a certain audience. The study revealed a connection between transportation, empathy, as well as openness to experience and extraversion. Empathy was the most significant predictor of transportation. The feedback of the respondents with high and low levels of transportation helped us to identify the characteristics of transportable narratives. Among them were that the film had an idea, the importance and relevance of the problems posed, a potential impact, as well as the plot of the film, its logic and dynamism, the realism of what was shown, and the attractiveness of the story itself.

**Keywords:** psychology of film, psychological impact of film, narrative transportation, Transportation Theory, narrative.

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# Нарративная транспортиция как фактор психологического воздействия кино

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В статье представлен подход к изучению психологического воздействия кино в контексте нарративного воздействия. Рассматривается теория транспортиции, разработанная М. Грин и Т. Брокком (Transportation Theory), и введенное ими понятие транспортиции как особого состояния вовлеченно-

сти и погруженности в нарратив, которое способствует усилению его психологического воздействия и может привести к изменению связанных с содержанием нарратива убеждений человека. Выделяются две основные группы факторов, определяющих уровень нарративной транспортиции при просмотре фильма: качество самого нарратива и индивидуально-психологические характеристики субъекта. Эмпирическое исследование, проведенное на выборке из 1171 студента от 17 до 29 лет (49,3% мужчин и 50,7% женщин), выявило половые различия в выраженности нарративной транспортиции, что могло быть обусловлено большей близостью конкретного фильма к определенной аудитории. Обнаружена связь транспортиции с эмпатией, а также с такими чертами личности, как открытость опыту и экстраверсия. Эмпатия явилась наиболее значимым предиктором транспортиции. В результате анализа высказываний о фильме респондентов с высокими и низкими значениями уровня транспортиции выделены характеристики транспортабельных нарративов: наличие смысла в фильме, важность и актуальность поставленных проблем, потенциал воздействия, а также сюжет фильма, его логичность и динамичность, реалистичность показанного и привлекательность самой истории.

**Ключевые слова:** психология кино, психологическое воздействие кино, нарративная транспортиция, теория транспортиции, нарратив.

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## Introduction

The psychology of film in modern psychological science has become a separate field of research, which has gained new significance in the context of an actively developing information society [2]. Studies in this area are also being conducted in Russian science, involving a fairly wide range of issues [1; 7, etc.]. At the same time, it should be noted that such works are still insufficient, there is a lack of general approaches to conducting psychological studies of films, the absence of special psychometric tools that allow to determine and evaluate the factors of the effectiveness of their impact.

When considering foreign studies, it is found that the problem of psychological impact of films is examined in the context of narrative influence. Narrative is defined as "... a representation of connected events and characters that has an identifiable structure, is bounded in space and time, and contains implicit or explicit messages about the topic being addressed" [19]. It is stated that narrative influence is more effective than rhetorical influence because it reduces distrust of the information received, increases emotional involvement and personal engagement with the story presented, which lead to greater realism of what is perceived [14]. Immersed in the narrative, a person may not notice a change in his or her beliefs or not connect their cause with the source of influence, i. e. the narrative itself [16].

### *Narrative transportation and its features*

The Transportation Theory developed by American researchers M. Green and T. Brock states that the extent of a person's immersion in a narrative correlates with the effectiveness of its influence on a person's beliefs, regardless of whether the events presented in the narrative are fictional or real [15]. The concept of transportation is used to describe a special state of immersion of a person

in a narrative, including emotional and cognitive reactions to its content [15]. In the state of transposition, firstly, there is a lack of awareness of surroundings, disengagement from the real world in favour of the narrative world. Second, transportation can trigger the experience of strong emotions, even when it is known that the events presented are unrealistic. Thirdly, the experience of transportation can lead to changes in beliefs associated with the story and the behaviour that correspond to them. Transportation has common characteristics with flow, engagement, presence, immersion, and identification that describe narrative experience [23].

Along with the theory, an appropriate psychometric instrument measuring the level of transportation, the Transportation Scale (TS), was developed. Three aspects of transportation (cognitive, emotional, and imagery) were identified, which made up the overall transportation score, reflecting the holistic experience of immersion in a narrative. The Russian version of the Narrative Transport Scale was tested in 2023 [3].

The first studies within the Transportation Theory were conducted using textual materials [15], and later audiovisual products were also used [14]. Despite the fact that the key psychological components of transportation are preserved regardless of the modality of the stimulus material [17], different types of narratives have their own specifics. Thus, narrative transportation in TV and film production has its own distinctive features, representing a more complex process defined by dual modality [11].

### *Manipulation of experimental conditions and stimulus material in transportation studies*

Over the past decades, many studies have been conducted to identify factors that influence the level of transportation to audiovisual production. For example, manipulations of experimental conditions and stimulus

material have been carried out [25]. It has been shown that interrupting viewing significantly reduced the level of transportation [16]. A positive review of the film enhanced it [10], while presenting the film as fictional or based on real events had no effect [13]. Revealing the plot prematurely also had no effect on the level of transportation [18]. A formal characteristic such as screen size had no effect on transportation [8]; however, viewing frequency, namely “binge watching”, could impair it [26].

Manipulations of the narrative itself also had an impact on the level of transportation. Thus, the removal of logically key scenes and some emotional episodes from the film led to a decrease in the level of transportation [25]. The significance of the story’s structure and the place of events in it were noted, at the same time the importance of the absence of contradictions with the knowledge of the real world or the rules of the fictional world, which could interrupt the feeling of immersion in the story and cause a sceptical attitude to it [17].

In general, it was found that although some external manipulations influenced the level of transportation, they had a small and diverse effect [25]. The strongest determinant of transportation was the quality of the narrative [16; 17].

#### ***Characteristics of qualitative narratives***

The assessment of narrative is a complex research task, nevertheless, in accordance with the ideas about narrative and based on the analysis of accumulated data on transportation, the main components determining its quality are identified: sequence, characters, structure, bounded in space and time (chronotope), and production techniques [19].

*The sequence* implies: *coherence* of events for easier comprehension; *development of the plot* through the culmination to the denouement to enhance emotional and cognitive involvement; *correspondence to psychological models* of characters’ actions to create a sense of reality of what is happening.

*Characters* are defined by: *development*, understandable motives and emotions to identify with them and increase emotional and cognitive engagement; *eloquence*, clarity of expression to hold attention, facilitate information processing and understanding of meaning; *intensity and variety of emotions* to increase emotional engagement and personal significance of the story.

*The structure* includes: *dramatic tension, suspense* to increase emotional and cognitive involvement; *breaking the canon*, unpredictable plot twists to attract attention and increase cognitive involvement, to form a new view of what is happening.

*The chronotope* is characterised by: *realism* of situations and characters to enhance identification with them and increase trust in what is being seen; *familiar images* and symbols to remind previous experience and facilitate perception of what is being seen; *correspondence to the cultural specifics* of the audience to increase identification, facilitate comprehension of the plot and enhance the sense of reality.

*Production techniques* includes lighting, editing, sound, etc., which can be used to manage the attention of the audience and increase the visual appeal of the story, as well as make the characters more intimate and appealing.

Not all characteristics have been sufficiently studied at the moment, so determining the contribution of each of them to the quality of the narrative is a relevant task for new research [16; 19]. Nevertheless, summarising what has been said above with reference to empirical research, we can outline the key criteria of transportable narratives: coherence of the story, character development, emotional intensity of the plot, dramatic tension, and psychological realism [17].

#### ***Connection of transportation with individual characteristics***

It is believed that the state of narrative transportation is universal and is experienced by all people when engaging in narratives, but the intensity of this experience may be determined by individual differences.

Studies of the relationship between the level of transportation and gender have shown that there are no significant sex differences in narrative transportation [15; 17; 24], although there is evidence that men are more attracted to some stories and women to others [15].

There are many studies on the relationship between transportation and the need for cognition [15; 20, etc.]. Although it is most often weak or absent [15], it has been found that a high level of transportation to serious film is associated with a higher need for cognition [21]. Stronger transportation and more pronounced narrative persuasion effects have been found among people with a high need for affect [9], as well as those prone to fantasy [20]. The links between narrative transportation and empathy are being explored in the ongoing research [24].

Recently, researchers have begun to study the connections between narrative transportation and media engagement with personality traits. A number of studies have found contradictory data on the presence of correlations between neurotism and transportation [20; 22]. Positive correlations of transportability with such personality traits as openness to experience, agreeableness, and extraversion have been found [20]. However, the data obtained are still insufficient to assess the contribution of personality traits to narrative transportation in a general way.

To summarise the review of narrative transportation studies, we can conclude that the obtained data reveal two main groups of factors that determine the level of transportation during viewing a film. One of them relates to the quality of the narrative itself, while the other includes individual psychological characteristics of a person. Due to the fact that the issues raised in the works on narrative transportation are still open and such studies have not been conducted on a Russian-speaking sample so far, *the aim* of this paper was to analyse the factors of narrative transportation of viewers while watching a film using the Russian version of the Narrative Transportation Scale [3]. The goal was to

solve the following *tasks*: to determine the relationship between individual psychological characteristics of a person and the level of his or her narrative transportation; to identify the characteristics of transportable narratives.

**Method**

**Participants**

A total of 1171 individuals participated in the study: university students (49.3% male and 50.7% female). The average age was 20 (M = 19.8, standard deviation SD = 1.9).

Participants were recruited at no-cost through various social media and online platforms of the universities. All respondents gave informed consent for their voluntary and anonymous participation in the study.

**Measures**

Transportation Scale [3; 15]; Emotional Empathic Tendency Scale [5]; Need for Cognition Scale [6; 12]; Big Five Inventory-2 (BFI-2-XS) [4].

To assess the attractiveness of the film, respondents answered the question of how much they liked the film shown on a 6-point scale from “did not like it at all” to “liked it very much”.

**Procedure**

The study was conducted in an online format. Respondents watched the film used as a stimulus material and immediately after watching the film they completed the questionnaires.

To evaluate sex differences in the level of transportation, independent two-sample t-test was used. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the relationships between the dependent variable (narrative transportation) and independent variables (individual psychological characteristics). Data processing was carried out using the statistical software package IBM SPSS Statistics 23.

**Results and discussion**

A comparative analysis of narrative transportation between males and females was carried out. It was found that when watching the same film, narrative transportation of women is significantly greater (Table 1).

Our findings differ from those of earlier studies, which found no significant gender differences in narrative transportation [15; 17; 24, etc.]. This result may be explained by the effect of the greater proximity of a

particular film to a certain audience, making a narrative more transportable to them [15]. In our study, the greater transportation among women is probably due to the fact that the protagonist of the film is also a woman, which may lead to a stronger identification with her by the female part of the audience; the story is also told from a female point of view, further increasing the immersion in the narrative. The divergent research findings may support notions of the influence of the features of the narrative on the level of transportation. In this regard, it is prospective to study the relationship between identification and narrative transportation, which, however, is currently difficult due to the lack of a Russian-language questionnaire to measure viewers’ identification with film characters.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to analyse the relationships between narrative transportation and individual psychological characteristics. The dependent variable was the level of transportation, while the independent variables were gender, personality traits (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, negative emotionality, open-mindedness), level of empathy and need for cognition.

According to the regression analysis, both gender and such psychological characteristics as empathy and personality traits as extraversion and open-mindedness turned out to be predictors of narrative transportation (Table 2).

The level of empathy was found to be the most significant predictor of transportation. This is probably due to the fact that empathy increases emotional response to what is seen and leads to higher levels of transportation to the narrative. It has been claimed that a greater propensity for empathy may directly influence the transportation [20; 24]. There is no correlation with need for cognition found. Despite the existing findings that cognitively prone people are more motivated to pay more attention to what they read or see [15], data similar to ours have been obtained in a number of other studies showing that the relationship between transportation and need for cognition is more often statistically insignificant [15; 20]. However, the results obtained are different, which may be due to the influence of the stimulus material on the power of this relationship [21].

Narrative transportation was found to be significantly related to two of the Big Five personality traits, extraversion and open-mindedness, which partially coincides with the findings of other studies [20]. Extraverts are known to be oriented towards seeking stimulation

Table 1

**Comparison of narrative transportation between females and males**

	Males		Females		t-test		Effect size
	M	SD	M	SD	t	p	Cohen’s d
Transportation	57,82	15,036	63,25	15,751	6,030	0,000	0,353
Cognitive factor	22,29	6,352	25,31	6,491	8,040	0,000	0,47
Affective factor	14,25	5,828	15,06	5,998	2,326	0,020	0,137
Imagery factor	21,28	6,813	22,89	6,747	4,054	0,000	0,237

Results of regression analysis

Variables	Narrative transportation		
	B	SE B	β
Gender	2,154	0,935	0,069*
Empathy	0,925	0,108	0,290***
Need for Cognition	0,046	0,052	0,028
Extraversion	0,503	0,165	0,094**
Agreeableness	0,347	0,209	0,052
Conscientiousness	-0,353	0,185	-0,060
Negative emotionality	0,099	0,176	0,020
Open-mindedness	0,409	0,190	0,066*
$R^2$	0,147		
$F$	25,061***		

Note: «\*\*\*» –  $p < 0,001$ ; «\*\*» –  $p < 0,01$ , «\*» –  $p < 0,05$ .

outside of themselves, so when watching films they are probably more likely to be transported into the narrative for greater effect. People who are open-mindedness are open to new knowledge and experiences, and therefore may be more interested in new stories presented in films, which enhances their narrative transportation. At the same time, the contradictory data on the relationship between personality traits and transportation may be due to the influence of the film genre itself on the level of transportation, the attractiveness of which is determined, among other things, by personality traits [2]. Thus, the choice of dramatic films is associated with such a trait as openness to experience [1]; and in the case of watching a drama, as was the case in our study, the genre attractiveness of the film may have contributed to the enhancement of narrative transportation. Our findings of a significant relationship between transportation and the attractiveness of the film seen (Pearson correlation coefficient  $r = 0.628$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) are consistent with this assumption.

Despite the differences in narrative transportation between males and females identified in the comparative analysis, regression analysis showed that the contribution of gender was less than psychological characteristics.

In general, the obtained results demonstrate the presence of weak but significant links between individual psychological characteristics and narrative transportation, allowing us to speak about different predisposition to it [15]. This predisposition is primarily determined by the level of empathy, which is confirmed in most studies of narrative transportation. At the same time, the data on the links with other characteristics vary, which can be explained by the influence of the quality of the narrative as one of the main factors of narrative transportation.

Therefore, the next task was to compare how respondents who had experienced different levels of transportation expressed their attitudes towards the film they had watched. Despite the fact that they watched the same film, it seems that the data obtained will help in identifying the characteristics of films that enhance transporta-

tion and, consequently, determine the quality of transportable narratives.

The analysis of comments about the film allowed us to identify a number of characteristics that were attributed by respondents to both the story told in the film and its cinematic realisation. Here are the main characteristics mainly noted by them: presence of meaning, relevance of the problem, impact, emotional experience, plot, characters, finale, realism of what was shown, personal significance, play of actors, attractiveness of the story. It should be noted that viewers with a high level of transportation were more likely to express a desire to comment on the film and to do so in a more detailed manner.

The largest number of mentioned characteristics had to do with the meaning of the film. More than a third of the viewers in the high transportation group (34% of those who commented) wrote about the presence of meaning or attempted to state it (“*I think the film tried to draw attention to the great misunderstanding of generations nowadays...*”) in contrast to the group of respondents with low transportation, 20% of whom, on the contrary, noted its absence (“*The film does not bring any new ideas*”). Almost a third of respondents with high transportation (31%) point to the relevance of the film and the importance of the issues raised in it (“*The problem is really relevant in our time*”), while with low transportation only one respondent mentions this. Similar results were obtained concerning the impact of the film: 21% report a positive impact of the film (“*The film really makes you think*”) and 15% describe the emotional experience (“*The film, in general, caused positive emotions*”); while in the case of low transportation, no one notes the impact of the film, and only a few participants mention the negative emotional experience (“*The film causes a storm of negative emotions*”). Another characteristic that demonstrates the difference in the groups contrasting in transportation is the plot of the film. In general, it is assessed negatively by 25% of respondents with low transportation, and positively by 5%, with high transportation – 3% and 18%, respectively. At the same time, the former often write about the film as boring, banal and illogical

(“*Too boring and predictable plot*”), while the latter define it as dynamic, interesting and exciting (“*interesting and exciting plot*”). In addition, 11% of viewers with high transportation evaluated, although in different ways, the ending of the film (“*unexpected finale*”), while with low transportation only one person paid attention to it. It is worth mentioning such a characteristic as realism. In the low transportation group, 20% of respondents pointed out the untruthfulness of the events presented (“*I don't think such things exist in life*”), while in the high transportation group, almost the same number of respondents noted the realism of what was shown (“*Very truthful, perfectly reflects the current reality*”). Another characteristic, which is represented in the comments of high transportation viewers (10%) as opposed to low transportation participants, is the personal significance of what they have seen (“*The film reminds me of my life*”). Viewers in both groups also commented on the “technical” characteristics of the film, with equally positive evaluations of the music and camera work, while the play of the actors was mentioned more often by low transportation viewers (18% vs. 13%) and in half of the cases negatively, in contrast to high transportation viewers who mentioned good artistic performance.

Finally, an important characteristic was the appeal of the story itself. In this case, viewers evaluated the events of the film, its characters and their actions, perceiving them directly, as if “from inside” the story. Such statements are found in both groups of viewers – with both high (24%) and low (22%) transportation, but in the first group, the attitude to the story is more often positive, with sympathy and empathy for the characters (“*Borja is handsome because he sold his headphones and bought cakes*”); in the second group, a negative assessment of what they saw prevails (“*For me, the main character, together with her boyfriend, are stupid teenagers who did not think the situation through at all and 'ran away'*”). As noted above, the overall assessment of the film's attractiveness corresponded to the level of narrative transportation.

The results obtained coincide in many respects with the ideas about qualitative narrative that have been described earlier [17; 19]. These are, first of all, the plot of the film, its logicity and dynamism, as well as the realism of what is shown. Especially “vividly” viewers with low transportation describe the inconsistency of their perceptions of the surrounding reality with what is depicted in the film, which reduces trust in the story told

and does not contribute to transportation [17]. Much less noted by respondents were the “technical” aspects of the film, although regardless of the level of transportation they were assessed rather positively. At the same time, we also identified such characteristics as meaning, relevance, and potential for impact, which seem to contribute to narrative transportation, and which have not been widely mentioned in previous studies of narrative quality. The questions remain as to whether these characteristics are specific to films of certain genres and whether they would be as important for narrative transportation in other films, such as entertainment films.

## Conclusions

Consideration of the problem of psychological impact of films in the context of narrative impact expands the possibilities of studying the effectiveness of film influence, one of the factors of which is narrative transportation. Transportation is a special state of involvement and immersion in a narrative that enhances psychological impact and can lead to a change in a person's beliefs related to the content of the narrative. A strong determinant of narrative transportation is the quality of the narrative itself, while there is evidence of individual psychological differences in the propensity for transportation.

The results of our research show that narrative transportation is related to gender and some psychological characteristics, allowing us to speak about different predispositions to it. These characteristics include, first of all, empathy, as well as such personality traits as open-mindedness and extraversion. At the same time, differences in the level of narrative transportation between female and male audiences can be explained by the effect of the greater proximity of a particular film to a certain audience, making a narrative more transportable for them.

As a result of the analysis, we have identified the characteristics of the narrative that contribute to the increase of imagery into it. These are, first of all, the presence of meaning in the film, the importance and relevance of the problems posed, and the potential for impact. In addition, the film's plot, its logicity and dynamism, the realism of what is shown, as well as the attractiveness of the story are important.

The data obtained in this study imply further clarification and outline the prospects for the development and conduct of new experimental studies.

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