

# CONCEPTUALIZING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CONSUMER NARRATIVES FOR DESTINATION MARKETING

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## ABSTRACT

Using tourists' stories to promote destinations is believed to be an innovative approach in destination marketing. This study conceptualizes and investigates the effectiveness of such approach based upon the underlying premise that human possesses narrative reasoning with which they can retrieve information better through a story. The results of the study suggest that the increased knowledge of a destination will have a stronger effect to intention to visit the destination if the audiences can identify themselves as similar to the story characters. Several managerial implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** consumer narratives, eWOM, destination marketing, advertising effectiveness

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social media on the internet has led to a surge of interest in the use of consumers' narratives (e.g., consumers' reviews and/or stories) for marketing purposes (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2007; Wang, Tussyadiah, & Mattila, 2008; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, In Press). Narratives are widely believed to have a potential to be an effective way to market products/services (Anderson, 2007). Indeed, Learned (2007) argued that storytelling, in its many forms, is one of the most powerful tools for presenting the truths of products, services, or brands. Previous research on the use of narratives in the field of advertising has focused on the influence of narrative structure to audiences' information processing (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Escalas, 2004a; 2004b). Adaval & Wyer (1998) found that consumers tend to favorably evaluate products of which the information is conveyed through narratives (i.e., in thematically and temporally related sequence) instead of merely a list of attributes. This claim is supported by the study of Mattila (2000; 2002). Escalas (2004a; 2004b) introduces the term "mental simulation" in narrative processing, whereby audiences form the cognitive construction of hypothetical scenario based on the chronology (i.e., temporal dimension) and causality (i.e., relational organization) of the story.

In the field of tourism and hospitality, narrative marketing is particularly significant since tourism and hospitality products are characterized with their experiential values. Polkinghorne (1997), Gabriel (2000), and Mattila (2000; 2002) argue that stories are uniquely effective in representing and conveying lived experiences because they offer a logic for the narrators and audiences. Therefore, narrative appeals might be effective in communicating the value of tourism and hospitality as experiential products to audiences (Padgett & Allen, 1997; Mattila, 2000; 2002). Recent studies on consumers' narratives in the context of tourism marketing have focused on the contents of travelers' stories to draw implications to destination marketing (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2007). Utilizing narrative theory and following the narrative structure analysis proposed by Escalas (2004a; 2004b), Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2007) attempted to conceptualize the effectiveness of narrative marketing by extracting the key marketing strategies from blog contents of a DMO website. Unfortunately, this study does not directly assess the marketing effectiveness of stories. Thus, this study aims to assess the effectiveness of consumers' stories for marketing tourism and hospitality products by analyzing the influence of story comprehension to product evaluation and, more importantly, behavioral intention of audiences. This study seeks to develop a theoretical foundation for narrative marketing in tourism based on conceptual framework formulation and empirical analysis. Furthermore, this study also draws some managerial implications for DMOs and other tourism and hospitality businesses.

## 2. MARKETING THROUGH NARRATIVES

Narrative, and the act of narrating, has been a subject of research across different disciplines. Most of such research came to a common belief that narrative is the most effective device to understand human experience. Several scholars have attempted to define the term narrative, particularly in verbal context, in contrast with other form of (non-narrative) verbal/text. In the attempt to conceptualize the definition of narrative, most scholars focus on its structure and features (i.e., what constitutes a narrative). One of the widely appraised descriptions of narrative structure is the concept of “narrative connection” introduced by philosopher Noël Carroll (2001). In outlining the theory of narrative, Carroll refers not to a clear set of necessary and sufficient conditions of narrative, but to a networked notion that emerged from a number of important features within narrative that are connected together to make the narrative understandable. Based on Carroll’s argument, the narrative discourse is not merely a list of several events or state of affairs, but there must be some sort of sequence of events which implies a temporal ordering. However, a mere temporally ordered list of events cannot be considered narrative because it has no unified subject. As an example, Carroll contrasted annals to stories based on this assumption (see further explanation in Kindt & Muller, 2003; Worth, 2005). In addition to the conditions suggested by Carroll, another necessary condition links the multiple states of affairs together in a way that would make a narrative consistently identifiable as a narrative is causation (Carroll, 2001; Worth, 2005). Causal connection within a story, however, is not a simplistic view of direct or necessary causation (i.e., the earlier events would always causally entail to the later events). Carroll suggests that an earlier event in a narrative connection is at least a causally necessary condition or ingredient for bringing about later events.

Further, besides the condition of how multiple events are causally interconnected, the description of narratives also focuses on the transition from one event to another, which characterizes a narrative with its beginning and end. This refers to construction of plot. Plot is what crafts the multiple events into a story (Carroll, 2001; Worth, 2005). Indeed, Jameson (2001) argues that plot is what holds a story together, in that there is an abstract concept that explains the nature of a narrative. Furthermore, Ricoeur (1984) claims that a story must be an organization of events into an intelligible whole such that audience can always capture the “thought” of the story. Then, according to Jameson (2001), stories operate in two levels: (1) the concrete recounting of events and (2) the abstract concept that unifies the events into a whole and implies their significance (p. 478).

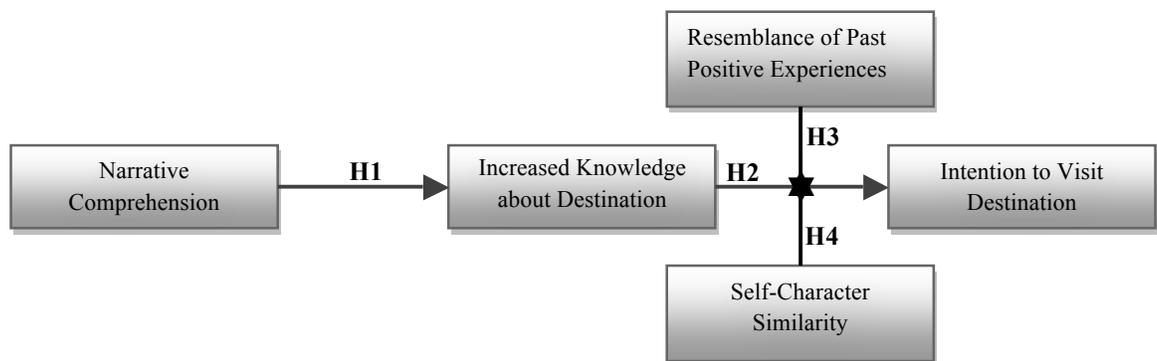
Escalas (2004a; 2004b) suggests two elements that can be used to characterize a narrative: temporal dimension and relational organization. Temporal dimension refers to a plot, which is translated by Escalas as the chronological nature of a narrative. A narrative constitutes of episodes within a timeline which characterize a narrative into its beginning, middle, and end. Relational organization refers to the causality within a narrative; that is a narrative consists of episode schema which explains the characters’ goal–action–outcome. In a more recent study to analyze text processing in advertising, Luna (2005) proposes two conditions that characterized a narrative (or multiple narratives): coherence and referential continuity. Coherence refers to the enabling of audience to draw causal, intentional, or temporal structure of narratives. Referential continuity means how each of the narrative parts refers to an entity introduced in the previous parts. These conditions are believed to influence the narrative processing which affect audiences’ information processing and, in the end, behavior toward advertising.

The underlying premise that puts the great importance of narrative in information processing is the belief that people possess (use and can develop) a skill called narrative reasoning which emerged from narrative meaning construction. Worth (2005) argues that people have the capacity to reason narratively in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience. The narrative knowledge (i.e., knowing what it is like) is beyond the traditional form of knowledge (i.e., knowing how and knowing what) (Worth, 2005). Furthermore, it is argued that narrative reasoning is different from discursive reasoning (Polkinghorne (1988) uses the term “logico-scientific” for this type of reasoning). While discursive reasoning captures the logic, narrative reasoning is related with imagination. Narrative processing is the process of retrieving the readily available information in a story. As imagination has a potential to help facilitating causal judgments of likely future events, the capacity to imagine and narrative meaning construction are intertwined (Worth, 2005). Formulating narrative processing in the context of advertising, Escalas (2004a; 2004b) define the concept of mental simulation, in which audiences form an imitative mental representation of events (i.e., in the form of a story), and the process of narrative transportation, which is the immersion into the text (i.e., a situation where a person becomes lost in a story). Researchers in Psychology define mental simulation as the “instruction to imagine,” in that narrative has a potential to be persuasive. Extensive

research indicates that the narrative power of a story has the ability to “manipulate” mass audiences (Boje, 1999). In brief, stories has the ability to give audiences an instruction to imagine (i.e., to form a mental representation of) the consumption of a product/service.

Escalas (2004a) states that “while one can mentally simulate an episode involving other people, mental simulation typically involve the self” (p.38). Specifically, Phillips, Olson, and Baumgartner (1995) suggest the term “consumption visions;” that is, consumers form self-constructed mental simulations of future consumption situations. They assert that the consumption visions can motivate consumption behavior because these visions involve self-enacting, detailed, product-related behavior. The self–brand connection may be formed based on the perceived psychological benefits from the product (Escalas, 2004b: 168). People are motivated to act positively to a product if they could see themselves in the self-constructed mental stories (within the settings described in the narratives) deriving values from consuming the product. In other words, people will have positive attitudes toward products in self-relevant stories. When consumers read the stories of other consumers, the ability to relate to the stories is significant with the concept of psychological connection suggested by Feagin (2007). When relating to a story, a consumer might link the products in a narrative to the achievement of self-related goals. The connection is a result of a process of mapping the goal–action–outcome structure within the narrative with self-related stories in the memory. This mapping process can be achieved through the association of self with the narratives. In conclusion, it is argued that audiences will be able to imagine the benefits of consuming the same products with the characters in the stories if: (1) they see themselves as similar to the characters (i.e., the audiences think that the characters resemble themselves) and/or (2) they can relate the story to stories stored in their memories (i.e., the audiences recognize similar occurrences in the past).

Based on the conceptualization of narrative structure, narrative processing, and the effectiveness of advertising through narrative, several hypotheses can be developed (Figure 1). Within the context of destination marketing, the narrative structure of a tourist story will help audiences to comprehend the tourist experience in the destination. The narrative reasoning involves retrieving information and recognizing coherence in the story (i.e., plot and causal connection of goal–action–outcome); through narrative reasoning, audiences will be able to form a better knowledge about the destination. **H1:** *The ability to comprehend the narratives of tourists’ stories will increase the overall knowledge about the destination.* When audiences are able to develop a better knowledge about a destination, they will be able to have sufficient information to assess and evaluate the value of the destination. This, in turn, will influence the intention to visit the destination. **H2:** *The increased knowledge of a destination will influence the intention to visit the destination.*



**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework of Narrative Comprehension and Visit Intention

Based on the concept of consumption visions (Phillips, Olson, & Baumgartner, 1995), the attitude toward advertising is influenced by the ability to form a mental construct of the consumption. The process of forming mental construct of a tourism experience can be influenced by the past experiences. The increased knowledge about a product will influence the intention to purchase if the audiences perceive that the process and outcome of consumption is similar to their past positive consumption experiences stored in their memories. **H3:** *The increased knowledge of a destination will influence intention to visit the destination under condition of resemblance of the tourists’ story with own past positive experiences.* The process of forming the intention to visit the destination also

depends on the ability to relate the self to the consumption settings and the consumption outcome. Having enough information about a product through a story will influence the intention to consume the product if the audiences can relate themselves with the character(s) in the story. **H4:** *The increased knowledge of a destination will influence intention to visit the destination under condition of similarity between the self and the character(s) in the story.*

### **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

#### **3.1 Research Context**

The aim of this study is to assess the effectiveness of destination marketing using tourists' stories. Several conditions were considered to select the stories for this study: (1) the stories must be written by actual tourists, (2) the stories must portray tourism experiences at the destination, and (3) the stories must be made available to audiences by DMO for marketing purposes. As a result, the blog section of Pennsylvania Tourist Office website (*visitPA.com*) was selected for the study. The blog section of *visitPA.com* entitled "Roadtrippers" and themed "Stories from the Road" was introduced during summer 2005. The agency offer travelers to Pennsylvania to share stories about their experiences within the state of Pennsylvania on the website. However, the feature is not an open platform (such as Web 2.0). Interested public can submit their stories (i.e., a submission form is provided on the website), but the Pennsylvania Tourist Office select which stories to be published and also moderate some of the stories. Nevertheless, explaining about the storytellers on the blog, the website states that "...PA Roadtrippers were real people, not actors or advertising types, and they filed their dispatches faithfully so that their audience could experience the State of Independence through their eyes" (*visitpa.com/visitpa/roadtrippers.pa*). The Website features six different story genres; a story genre contains three to four trips to different parts of Pennsylvania and each trip contains several stories about daily tourism experience, i.e., one blog entry represents one day of experience. Besides text, the blog also features photographic images associated with the stories. On average, a blog entry features at least an image that is placed within the text. Due to the small number of the images available on the blog, this study focuses only on the narratives represented through text. The stories posted on four blog themes were used as stimuli for data collection.

#### **3.2 Research Instruments**

A questionnaire was designed with questions addressing the variables illustrated in the conceptual framework of this research. The first variable, story comprehension, consists of four questions related to audiences' understanding to the plot of the stories (i.e., two questions are related to motivation, goals, and feeling, two questions are related with outcome or fulfillment of perceived goals). Further, there is a question addressing each of the following: the knowledge about destination, self-character identification/similarity, resemblance of past experiences, and intention to visit the destination and experience the same trip as the characters in the story. These questions were assessed on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 5. Questions in the last part were concerned with the participants' demographic.

#### **3.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

This preliminary study was conducted to provide initial feedback on the hypothesis testing to provide a better understanding about the conceptual framework. A total of 126 Students enrolled in four introductory classes in tourism in Spring and Fall 2007 were asked to fill out the questionnaire as an additional task to the required class assignment on blog marketing. Students were chosen for this particular study based on the fact that most bloggers (both writers and readers) are of younger age. Furthermore, according to the MacKay and Smith (2005), younger respondents recalled the written description about tourism destinations more than older respondents. The task was a take-home assignment; each student was given a specific URL address of a series of stories on the RoadTrippers Blog. Stories assigned to a particular student were written by the same storyteller(s) in a chronological order. All students were required to read the whole series of stories thoroughly by navigating through all the provided links on the specified URL address. The data collection resulted in 85 valid responses. Based on the demographic information of the respondents (i.e., about 77% female and 20 years of age in average), linear and multiple regression analysis were applied to examine four hypotheses this proposed in this research. The research framework was verified using regression analysis in order to illustrate, interrelate, and explain the relationship between story

comprehension and the increased knowledge about destination. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to test the subsequent hypotheses.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The correlation matrix is presented in Table 1. Although not all the results show significant results, the variables are inter-correlated. That is, Narrative Comprehension variable correlates with Knowledge about Destination and Self-Character Similarity, while Knowledge about Destination correlates with Resemblance of Past Experience. In addition, Resemblance of Past Experience and Self-Character Similarity are significantly correlated with Intention to visit destination.

**Table 1.** Correlation Matrix among Measured Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Narrative Comprehension					
2. Knowledge about Destination	.27*				
3. Resemblance of Past Experiences	.15	.24*			
4. Self-Character Similarity	.22*	.15	.36**		
5. Intention to visit destination	.10	.19	.24*	.59**	
Mean (SD)	3.63 (.62)	3.49 (1.0)	3.02 (1.2)	3.37 (.92)	

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

**Hypothesis 1.** The first analysis was performed to investigate the influence of the understanding of story on the increasing knowledge about a destination by using linear regression. As represented in Table 2, the relationship between the independent and dependent variables was significantly positive ( $F = 6.25, p < .05$ ). This favorable results support the underlying ability of a story to convey information and knowledge about a product. The ability to understand the narrative of tourists experience at a destination, although it is presented in a first-person perspective (i.e., the description is mainly focused on personal experience consuming the product and not about the product itself), is important to grasp the information and develop knowledge about the destination. This research does not propose the relationship of the narrative comprehension with intention to visit a destination. In order to verify the model, additional regression analysis was executed. As expected, the understanding of narrative does not have a direct effect on the intention to visit a tourism destination ( $F = .84, p > .05$ ). This result verifies the proposed research framework.

**Table 2.** The Result of Linear Regression Analysis

Variables	Increased Knowledge about Destination	Intention to Visit Destination
Narrative Comprehension ( $\beta$ )	.27*	.10
$R^2$	.07	.01
Adjusted $R^2$	.06	-.00
F	6.25*	.84
Degree of Freedom	1	1

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

**Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4.** A series of multiple regression analyses (hierarchical regression) was conducted to examine the degree of which knowledge about destination influence the intention to visit a destination, either directly (Hypothesis 2), or with moderating factors, which are resemblance of past experience (Hypothesis 4) and self-character similarity (Hypothesis 3). Table 3 shows the beta coefficient and the amount of variation accounted for after each step. The results of Model 1 supports the second hypothesis which posits that increased knowledge about destination (positively) affects the intention of visit but very little variation ( $\Delta R^2 = .04, p < .05$ ). It is argued that knowing more about a tourism destination alone is not sufficient to effectively persuade audiences to have an intention to visit the destination. It is also argued that the increased knowledge of a destination seems to rather not the crucial factor that accentuates the merit of narrative marketing compared with other forms of advertising. In the

next phase of hierarchical regression analyses, resemblance of past experiences was examined as a moderating effect between knowledge as to where travelers visit and the intention to visit. In Model 2, it was observed that the reflection on the past experience increase the model performance compared with the previous model ( $\Delta R^2 = .07, p < .05$ ); however, the total variance was still low. In Model 3, self-character similarity was employed to investigate another moderating effect. Comparing the two models (between Model 2 & 3), it is indicated that the addition of self-character similarity significantly improved the model performance; Model 3 explains about 34% of variation in the intention to visit a tourism destination ( $\Delta R^2 = .34, p < .00$ ). In addition, the self-character similarity significantly and positively affect the intention of visitation ( $\beta = .89$ ). In Model 4, all possible variables for the context of past experience and self-character similarity interactions were incorporated. The results indicate that Model 4 explains about 34% of the variance of intention to visit destination ( $\Delta R^2 = .34, p < .00$ ). Although the Model 4 is statistically significant, the effects of the interaction of moderating factors with knowledge about destination do not necessarily increase the intention to visit destination. According to the variance explained in Model 2 and 3, we can argue that while the effect of resemblance of past experience is positive and significant, the impact of self-character similarity is much stronger than the reminding past memory, even when considering both factors into the models.

**Table 3.** The Result of Hierarchical Regression Analysis

	Model 1		Model2		Model3		Model4	
	Beta	P	Beta	P	Beta	P	Beta	P
Increased Knowledge about Destination (KD)	.22	.049	.17	.140	.12	.223	.43	.135
Resemblance of Past Experiences (RPE)			.22	.049	.021	.835	.27	.464
Self-Character Similarity (SCS)					.57	.000	.80	.034
Interactions								
KD x RPE							-.33	.497
KD x SCS							-.31	.537
	Model 1		Model2		Model3		Model4	
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	.05		.09		.37		.38	
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	.04		.07		.34		.34	
<b>F</b>	3.99*		4.07*		15.09***		9.26***	
<b>Degree of Freedom</b>	<b>1</b>		<b>2</b>		<b>3</b>		<b>5</b>	

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

The results support the moderation models proposed in the conceptual framework of the study. This finding seems to suggest that for the audiences to fully gain an understanding of the consumption settings (and benefits) through a story is by relating themselves with the story. That is, the ability to relate with the story will be stronger when they can identify themselves as, or similar to, the story character(s); when they think that the characters in the story resemble themselves, they will be able to position themselves in the story and derive a better sense of consumption visions. Hence, the strength of narrative in marketing tourist experience is the ability to provide audiences with an imaginable and relatable lived experience of touristic activities at a destination.

## 5. CONCLUSION

While many tourism researchers (Brucks, 1985; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004) suggested the positive influence of knowledge of products on the intention to purchase the products relating the knowledge of consumer/tourists, the research to increase knowledge is scarce. This research suggested a noteworthy innovative information and/or advertising format within context of consumer narratives in the context of destination marketing. While previous researches define the scope of “narrative marketing” as an approach to introduce “some stories” behind the product (e.g., Escalas 2004a; 2004b) or description instead of list (e.g., Adaval & Wyer, 1998), this research narrow its scope to investigating consumers’ stories (i.e., written in a first-person perspective), journal-like stories of tourism experiences (i.e., not only consumers’ reviews), utilized by DMOs to promote tourism destinations. Since this form of narrative marketing, particularly related with the use of digital media, has recently been embraced

by many companies in tourism and hospitality business, this research significantly contributes to the latest development in tourism marketing by providing a better understanding of the effectiveness of using consumers' narratives in destination marketing. The main limitation of this research is the number of sample size (i.e., 85), which is not enough to generalize the results. The instrument to measure the variables can be another weakness of this research. In operationalizing variables (i.e., Increased Knowledge about Destination, Resemblance of Past Experiences, Self-Character Similarity and Intention to Visit Destination), only one question was asked to analyze each variable. Although the study reported in this paper was conducted with limited number of respondents, the results support the conceptual framework, and instruments, developed for this research. This research opens a pathway to similar research investigating the innovative use of digital media for marketing purposes in tourism and hospitality business.

This research supports the concept of narrative reasoning as human ability to retrieve information and derive coherence from narratives. The results of this study indicate that the high ability to understand the story (i.e., narrative comprehension) has a direct effect on the increased knowledge about a destination (see Table 2). The chronology and causality within a story particularly add to the detailed information about a particular tourism activities within a period of time. Compared with other advertising approach, narratives seem to be able to present multiple interrelated information about particularities of a tourism destination, including, but not limited to, attractions, facilities, infrastructures, and a more abstract value such as the overall atmosphere. In short, the narrative structure is an important device to aid the narrative reasoning and narrative processing to gain knowledge about the characteristics of experiential products. Another contribution of this paper, significant to the concept of mental simulation and narrative transportation (Escalas 2004a; 2004b) and consumption visions (Phillips, Olson, & Baumgartner, 1995), is the vital importance of identification of self with the story characters to aid to story persuasion. In this sense, the mental simulation and consumption visions can be formed when audiences experience the present non-self-referencing narrative processing (i.e., reading stories about others) that leads to future self-referencing imagery (i.e., imagining the self experiencing the same things). This process is enabled when audiences find resemblances of the stories with the stored stories in their memories (i.e., the stories remind them to past positive experiences), and much strongly when audiences can identify the characters as having similarities with them (i.e., audiences fully understand why the characters choose some actions to fulfill certain recognizable goals).

Several implications can be drawn for DMOs. This research signifies the merit of introducing consumers' stories to promote destination, for example with introducing blog capabilities on the official tourist websites. Since the story format is easy to understand, the story may help for novice/inexperienced travelers to obtain information, to make decision to visit the destination, and to make their itinerary. Furthermore, many previous researchers emphasized the importance of word-of-mouth. In this sense, the narrative is also one of the sources of word-of-mouth information. That is, the blog system in which visitors can write down what they experienced by using their own words possess both information provider and advertising functionality to purchase the product. To be able to persuade audiences to visit the destinations, the stories should be able to give the positive notions of the different places at a destination and the touristic activities that the places can afford. DMOs should integrate the narrative marketing strategies with their overall marketing plans. Designing stories for marketing purposes should start with choosing the right character(s) that match the target market. Destinations targeting younger, more adventurous tourists will not benefit from family-oriented stories. On the other hand, destinations can introduce different genres of stories to diversify or expand the current market. Portraying different stories will be effective to provide diverse hypothetical scenarios of travel. Introducing different travel genres and different characters stories can be regarded as customization in advertising; the message about the product (bundles of products) is delivered differently to different market segments. Since audiences tend to relate to the lived picture of a character in the story, introducing characters with different tastes, preferences, and backgrounds can be effective in stimulating empathy among different audiences.

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