

**The Risks and Rewards of Emotion: The Effects of Humour and Disgust in Fast Food**

**Advertising**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines how positive (humour-based) versus negative (disgust-based) emotional appeals in fast-food corporate advertising influence consumer perceptions of brand warmth, competence, trustworthiness, and authenticity. Drawing on the Elaboration Likelihood Model and schema congruity theory, it employs a mixed-methods design comprising a pre-post experimental survey ( $N = 93$ ) and semi-structured interviews ( $N = 8$ ). Results reveal that McDonald's humour advertisement significantly reduced perceptions across all four brand dimensions (e.g. authenticity declined by  $M = -1.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting humour can undermine brand equity when perceived as superficial. In contrast, Burger King's disgust-based advertisement produced only modest declines, with trust and competence remaining statistically stable. Qualitative findings indicate that disgust may signal authenticity if congruent with brand identity, while humour risks triviality. The study highlights that emotional appeals must align with brand values and audience expectations to avoid reputational harm.

**Keywords:** Corporate Advertising, Emotional Appeals, Humour in Advertising, Disgust in Advertising, Brand Perception, Fast Food Industry, Brand Authenticity

# 1. Introduction

In today's saturated and hyper-competitive advertising environment, brands face increasing pressure to do more than inform consumers. They must capture attention, evoke emotion, and cultivate long-term connections. This is especially true in sectors where products are largely commoditised, and consumer loyalty is fleeting, such as the fast food industry. Here, advertising plays a critical role, not only to promote offerings but to shape brand perceptions, values, and ultimately consumer loyalty (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

In response to these challenges, corporate advertising has become an increasingly strategic tool. Unlike product advertising, which focuses primarily on driving short-term sales, corporate advertising aims to build a long-lasting brand identity by reinforcing reputation, values, and trust among key stakeholders (Balmer & Greyser, 2006). This approach aims to communicate the essence of the brand beyond individual offerings and to position the brand in a way that resonates deeply with its target audience (Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006).

As fast food products have become increasingly similar in terms of function and quality, brands are increasingly turning to emotional storytelling as a key differentiator. In this space, emotional advertising is no longer just about the product itself but about creating lasting emotional connections with consumers, fostering trust, relevance, and likeability. The evolution from transactional messaging to identity-based communication is not only about showcasing product features but creating deeper, more meaningful relationships with consumers (Batra & Ray, 1986; Holbrook & Batra, 1987).

The need for emotional engagement has become particularly important in the face of information overload and short consumer attention spans. Today, advertisements are judged not

just on the quality of the product they showcase, but on their ability to emotionally connect with the audience (Belch & Belch, 2018). As a result, mastering emotionally resonant corporate advertising has become a core competency for brands that seek to remain relevant in an ever-evolving media landscape.

Historically, positive emotional appeals such as humour, warmth, and joy have dominated corporate advertising strategies. These strategies are well-supported by empirical research that demonstrates their effectiveness in enhancing brand recall, increasing likeability, and reducing resistance to persuasion (Eisend, 2009; Pham, 2007; Strick et al., 2009). However, recent trends show an increasing number of brands experimenting with negative emotional appeals, such as sadness, anger, or disgust, in order to trigger moral reflection, build authenticity, and differentiate brand tone. For example, KFC's "FCK" campaign in the UK openly acknowledged a national chicken supply crisis with self-deprecating humour and a bold apology, featuring a rearranged logo spelling "FCK" on an empty chicken bucket, which aimed to transform public frustration into empathy and reinforce the brand's transparency and authenticity (Gwynn, 2018)

Despite the growing use of such negative emotional appeals, the academic literature on their role in corporate advertising remains limited. Negative emotional appeals have been extensively studied in public health campaigns (e.g., Morales et al., 2012; Hibbert et al., 2007), but little is known about how they function in for-profit, brand-driven communication contexts. This gap is particularly relevant in the fast food industry, where corporate advertising has historically been associated with comfort and enjoyment.

Introducing negative emotions like disgust into this context presents a paradox. While it offers the potential for differentiation and greater credibility, it also risks alienating consumers or

clashing with the brand's established identity. This study aims to explore this gap by investigating how positive (humour-based) and negative (disgust-based) emotional appeals influence perceptions of key brand attributes, such as warmth, competence, trustworthiness, and authenticity, in the context of fast food corporate advertising.

A critical concept influencing this dynamic is brand congruity, which is the alignment between the emotional tone of the advertisement and the established brand identity (Aaker et al., 2010; Williams & Aaker, 2002). Emotional appeals that deviate from the brand's core attributes may result in cognitive dissonance, erode brand trust, and negatively affect consumer perceptions. In contrast, humour, while widely used, may backfire by eroding perceived authenticity if it is seen as inconsistent with the brand's character (Morhart et al., 2014).

This study adopts the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) as its theoretical framework. The ELM identifies two routes to persuasion: the central route, which involves deep cognitive engagement, and the peripheral route, which relies on superficial cues like emotion. The likelihood of using either route depends on the motivation of the individual to process the message. In the context of fast food advertising, where consumer involvement is generally low, emotional appeals typically function as peripheral cues. However, when these advertisements tap into broader societal concerns, such as environmental issues, they may prompt more thoughtful engagement, triggering central processing. This is particularly relevant for Burger King's advertisement, which focuses on environmental issues and may stimulate deeper reflection among consumers concerned with sustainability and corporate responsibility (Nabi, 2012).

**Research Question:** How do positive (humour-based) versus negative (disgust-based) emotional appeals in corporate advertising affect consumer perceptions of a fast food brand?

This study seeks to contribute to the literature on emotional persuasion by exploring the nuanced role of emotional tone in corporate brand communications. Specifically, it aims to provide insights into the under-researched role of negative emotional appeals in shaping perceptions of warmth, competence, trustworthiness, and authenticity—key attributes that influence long-term brand loyalty and consumer behaviour.

Practically, the findings will provide guidance for marketers navigating the increasingly values-driven media environment, where consumer expectations around transparency and moral integrity are rising. By understanding how different emotional tones influence brand perception, advertisers can design campaigns that not only resonate with their audience but also differentiate their brand, creating lasting reputational equity.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Corporate Advertising: Purpose and Distinction

Corporate advertising refers to the strategic communication of an organisation's identity, values, and societal role, distinct from product-level messaging that seeks immediate consumption (Balmer & Greyser, 2006). Unlike product advertising, which typically focuses on tangible attributes such as taste, price, or convenience, corporate advertising aims to cultivate symbolic capital by projecting trustworthiness, authenticity, and alignment with stakeholder values (Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006). In this sense, it operates within the domain of corporate reputation, managing intangible assets that shape long-term consumer loyalty and societal legitimacy (Argenti, 2007).

In the fast food sector, the stakes for corporate advertising are particularly high. The industry frequently faces criticism for contributing to public health issues, environmental degradation, and exploitative labour practices. In response, leading brands have moved beyond product-centred narratives, embracing purpose-driven messaging to redefine their cultural role. Campaigns focusing on sustainability, social inclusion, and ethical sourcing exemplify this shift. Here, corporate advertising is not merely persuasive; it is performative, signalling a brand's active engagement in public discourse and its responsiveness to evolving cultural expectations (Du et al., 2010; Kapoor & Dwivedi, 2020).

The function of corporate advertising is also deeply intertwined with stakeholder theory and the concept of institutional legitimacy. Brands today are increasingly expected to act as moral agents, participating in public discourse not only for competitive advantage but also to



satisfy the normative expectations of civil society, investors, and regulatory bodies. In such an environment, advertising becomes a symbolic act that reinforces a company's licence to operate.

## 2.2 Constructing Brand Perception through Corporate Messaging

Corporate advertising influences brand perceptions primarily by shaping how consumers view a brand's character. Four key dimensions are central to this process:

- **Warmth** refers to the perception that a brand is benevolent, socially attuned, and well-intentioned. Fiske et al. (2007) highlight warmth as a primary dimension of social perception, where both people and brands are judged based on qualities like likability and kindness. Warmth fosters emotional attachment, encouraging consumers to form an emotional bond with the brand.
- **Competence** reflects the belief that a brand is capable, effective, and professionally managed. Aaker (1997) defines competence as a crucial aspect of brand personality, influencing how consumers assess a brand's reliability and performance. High competence builds consumer confidence and is a fundamental pillar of brand credibility.
- **Trustworthiness** concerns the perception that a brand behaves consistently and ethically. Trust is central in both corporate social responsibility and brand management literature, with ethical conduct and brand consistency forming the basis of lasting consumer relationships (Morhart et al., 2014). Brands perceived as trustworthy are more likely to cultivate strong consumer loyalty.
- **Authenticity** refers to the sense that a brand's actions are sincere, value-consistent, and transparent. Napoli et al. (2013) emphasise authenticity's growing importance in

fostering brand loyalty, particularly as consumers increasingly demand transparency in corporate practices.

These four constructs do not exist in isolation but form an evaluative framework through which consumers interpret a brand's moral and emotional credibility. Warmth and competence, as foundational social perception dimensions, provide the lens through which consumers assess a brand's intentions and capabilities. Trustworthiness and authenticity serve as integrative constructs, shaping how emotional messages are evaluated in terms of sincerity and moral legitimacy (Fiske et al., 2007; Morhart et al., 2014; Napoli et al., 2013).

Importantly, these perceptions are not solely cognitive judgements but are deeply intertwined with emotion. Consumers "feel" a brand's warmth or authenticity just as strongly as they intellectually "believe" in it. This interplay between affect and cognition underlines the significance of emotional tone in corporate advertising, particularly as brands strive to maintain or reshape public perceptions in response to socio-political changes. When advertising resonates emotionally, it can enhance perceived warmth and authenticity, helping forge stronger and more meaningful connections with consumers.

### 2.3 Emotional Appeals and Their Strategic Function

Emotions in advertising are not merely tools for attracting attention but are powerful mechanisms that shape how consumers perceive brand character. They serve as meaning-making devices that activate consumer schemas, trigger identity alignment, and influence memory encoding (Pham, 2007; Kotler & Keller, 2016). In low-involvement contexts like fast food

advertising, where rational analysis is limited, emotions operate as shortcuts that guide consumer judgements. Often, they exert more influence on perceptions than factual content.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) provides valuable insight into how emotions influence these processes. Under peripheral-route processing, emotional cues become central determinants of brand perception. Positive emotions, such as warmth and humour, can enhance perceptions of warmth and authenticity because they signal friendliness and cultural relevance, making the brand appear approachable and sincere. In contrast, negative emotions, like disgust or sadness, may prompt deeper cognitive engagement, leading consumers to assess competence and trustworthiness, especially when the message resonates with moral or ethical considerations. This transition to central-route processing reflects more thoughtful engagement and can contribute to lasting persuasion (Nabi, 2012).

Moreover, emotional responses are filtered through consumers' prior experiences and expectations, a process related to schema congruity theory. Lee and Labroo (2004) suggest that emotionally congruent messages are processed more fluently and generate more favourable brand evaluations. For instance, a humorous advertisement that fits with a brand's established identity as fun and playful is likely to boost perceptions of warmth and authenticity. By contrast, an emotional tone that feels out of place may disrupt brand perceptions or prompt more careful processing, especially when the message touches on significant moral or social themes. Emotional tone communicates not only content but also intent. Brands that adopt emotionally resonant tones aligned with audience values signal empathy, cultural understanding, and relational closeness, fostering stronger consumer relationships and influencing perceptions of trustworthiness and authenticity.

This emotional interplay provides the basis for understanding how different emotions relate to brand perception. Positive emotions often enhance perceptions of warmth and authenticity, while negative emotions more frequently influence perceptions of competence and trust, particularly when they encourage moral reflection or deeper engagement. This connection sets the stage for exploring how specific emotions, such as humour and disgust, function within corporate advertising strategies.

#### 2.4 Positive versus Negative Emotional Appeals in Corporate Advertising

Positive emotional appeals, particularly humour, are among the most commonly used affective strategies in fast food advertising. Such appeals are linked with social bonding, cognitive ease, and entertainment value. Humour reduces psychological defences, which increases liking, and fosters a sense of familiarity (Strick et al., 2009; Eisend, 2009). In corporate contexts, humour can humanise the brand and provide an engaging narrative frame that makes communication feel approachable and memorable.

However, humour is not without risk. Its effectiveness depends heavily on novelty, cultural relevance, and congruity with the brand's established identity. Humour that feels predictable or forced can undermine perceptions of authenticity, particularly if the brand is already facing reputational challenges (Morhart et al., 2014). Moreover, humour that trivialises serious issues may be perceived as tone-deaf which could potentially lead to eroding trust, and creating an impression of detachment from social realities.

Conversely, negative emotional appeals—including emotions such as sadness, anger, or disgust, have historically been less common in corporate advertising. Nonetheless, they are gaining prominence as brands seek to communicate strong values and differentiate themselves

through emotionally charged storytelling. Disgust, in particular, occupies a unique and complex space within emotional appeals. It typically activates avoidance mechanisms but also signals moral contamination or ethical failure (Rozin et al., 2009). When deliberately employed, disgust can provoke moral reflection, draw attention to systemic issues, and underscore a brand's commitment to transparency and honesty (Hagtvedt, 2011; Morales et al., 2012).

Drawing on these theoretical insights, this study proposes that emotional tone will produce different effects on key dimensions of brand perception. Specifically, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1:** Positive emotional appeals in corporate advertising, such as humour, will have a more favourable impact on consumer perceptions of brand warmth and brand authenticity compared to negative emotional appeals like disgust.

This hypothesis is based on the idea that humour fosters interpersonal closeness, openness, and a sense of sincerity, all of which contribute to perceptions of warmth and authenticity. In the context of brands with stable reputations, humour can reinforce familiarity and strengthen socio-emotional trust.

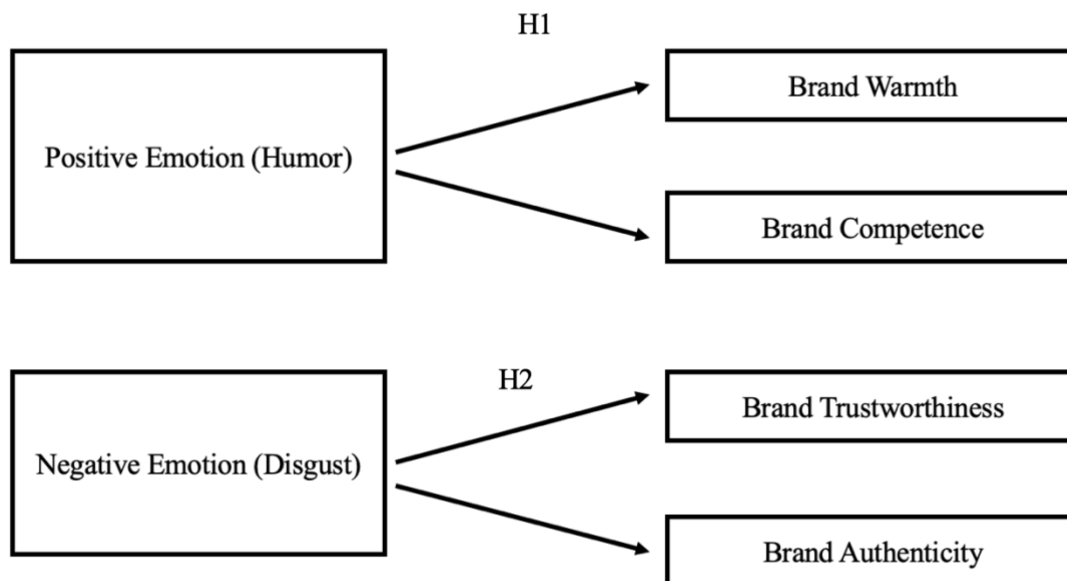
Disgust therefore represents both a risk and an opportunity. It can alienate audiences if perceived as excessive or irrelevant, yet it can also convey boldness, sincerity, and ethical courage, especially for brands known for irreverent or activist positioning. A prominent example is PETA's advertising campaigns, which frequently deploy graphic images of animal suffering to shock viewers, provoke moral outrage, and underscore the brand's uncompromising ethical stance (Lindenmeier et al., 2017). In these cases, emotional discomfort serves as a powerful tool

for brand differentiation and moral signalling. Based on these considerations, the second hypothesis is proposed:

**H2:** Negative emotional appeals in corporate advertising, specifically disgust, will have a more favourable impact on consumer perceptions of brand competence and brand trust compared to positive emotional appeals such as humour.

This hypothesis rests on the notion that disgust, when perceived as purposeful and congruent with the brand's identity, can serve as a signal of transparency, moral seriousness, and operational discipline. It may also challenge category conventions and reposition the brand as ethically rigorous and strategically self-aware.

*Figure 1: Conceptual framework*



In summary, the contrasting nature of humour and disgust provides a compelling framework for examining how different emotional tones influence core perceptions of brand character. This study seeks to explore these dynamics within the context of fast food corporate advertising, contributing to both theory and practice in the field of brand communication.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to investigate how emotional appeals, specifically humour-based (positive emotion) and disgust-based (negative emotion), influence consumer perceptions of fast food brands. The design unfolded in three phases:

1. An emotional stimulus validation using the prEmo instrument (Desmet, 2002).
2. A controlled experimental survey to measure the effect of emotional appeals on brand perceptions.
3. A set of semi-structured qualitative interviews to provide interpretive depth.

This design enabled both the generalisation of the results and a deeper exploration of the context, merging quantitative data with rich, qualitative insights.

All research procedures were approved by the BMS Lab, and ethical guidelines regarding informed consent (Appendix 3) , data privacy, and participant welfare were strictly observed.

### 3.2 Online Experiment

#### *3.2.1 Stimulus Design and Pre-Test (prEmo Validation)*

To ensure the emotional clarity of the stimuli, a pre-test was conducted using the prEmo tool (Desmet, 2002). This method enables respondents to indicate their emotional response to visual stimuli through animated icons representing 14 discrete emotions. The PrEmo method was essential to validate that each advertisement reliably elicited its intended emotional response.



Initially, four candidate advertisements were initially selected based on different types of emotional content and relevance to corporate branding. These included different emotions such as; inspiration, empathy, humor and disgust.

**Table 1:**

*Advertisement and storyline description*

<b>Advertisement</b>	<b>Storyline Description</b>	<b>Intended Emotion</b>
<b>Every Table Has a Story</b> (Starbucks)	This ad showcases a year in the life of Kay, an inspiring creative entrepreneur who experiences both highs and lows while working from her favorite Starbucks table, highlighting the brand's role as a supportive "third place."	Inspiration
<b>First Customer</b> (McDonald's)	A heartwarming ad where a family arrives to support their son, who is about to work his first shift at McDonald's. The ad highlights the brand's emotional connection to families and its long-standing role in everyday moments.	Empathy
<b>Can I Get Uhhh</b> (McDonald's)	A humorous Super Bowl commercial featuring various individuals, including NASCAR driver Bubba Wallace and rapper Kanye West, all struggling to decide what to order at McDonald's, highlighting the universal experience of indecision.	Humour
<b>Mouldy Whopper</b> (Burger King)	A bold campaign showing a Whopper burger decaying over time to emphasize the brand's commitment to removing	Disgust

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artificial preservatives, aiming to promote transparency and authenticity.

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A purposive sample of ten participants viewed each advertisement and selected prEmo icons that best represented their emotional response. The prEmo tool (Desmet, 2002) is a well-established method for assessing emotional reactions to visual stimuli, using animated icons to represent 14 distinct emotions, from joy to sadness and surprise to anger. This method ensures the emotional clarity of the advertisements.

Advertisements were retained for the main study only if at least 80 percent of respondents agreed on the primary emotion evoked. McDonald's "Can I Get Uhhh" was intended to evoke humour, aligning with its light-hearted brand image, while Burger King's "Mouldy Whopper" aimed to evoke disgust and transparency, challenging food quality perceptions. Two ads met this threshold; McDonald's "Can I Get Uhhh" (humour) and Burger King's "Mouldy Whopper" (disgust), while the others were excluded due to emotional ambiguity. Due to this, the research aim was made to be positive versus negative emotions. The validated ads were then embedded in the experimental survey as stimulus material representing the two emotional conditions.

### 3.2.2 Measures

The study measured four key brand perception constructs: warmth, competence, trustworthiness, and authenticity. These constructs are essential for understanding consumer attitudes toward brands, especially in corporate advertising where emotional appeals significantly influence perceptions. Each construct was assessed using adapted scales and

measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Below is a breakdown of the measures, their sources, and reliability (Appendix 2) :

### *Warmth*

- **Scale Name:** Warmth Scale
- **Number of Items:** 3
- **Source(s):** Adapted from Fiske et al. (2007)
- **Example Item:** “This brand feels friendly.”
- **Measurement Scale:** 7-point Likert scale
- **Reliability:** Cronbach’s alpha = .81

The warmth scale assesses how benevolent, socially attuned, and well-intentioned a brand is perceived. In fast food branding, warmth reflects a brand's ability to create an emotional connection with consumers, fostering feelings of affection and trust. A higher score on this scale indicates that consumers view the brand as approachable, humanised, and welcoming.

### *Competence*

- **Scale Name:** Competence Scale
- **Number of Items:** 4
- **Source(s):** Adapted from Morhart et al. (2014)
- **Example Item:** “This brand is capable and effective.”
- **Measurement Scale:** 7-point Likert scale
- **Reliability:** Cronbach’s alpha = .79

The competence scale measures perceptions of a brand's capability and operational efficiency. In the context of fast food, competence relates to how consumers perceive the brand's quality, reliability, and ability to meet expectations. Brands scoring higher on this scale inspire greater consumer confidence, which can drive trust and long-term loyalty.

### *Trustworthiness*

- **Scale Name:** Trustworthiness Scale
- **Number of Items:** 3
- **Source(s):** Adapted from Aaker et al. (2010)
- **Example Item:** "This brand behaves in a trustworthy manner."
- **Measurement Scale:** 7-point Likert scale
- **Reliability:** Cronbach's alpha = .84

The trustworthiness scale evaluates how reliable and ethical consumers perceive a brand to be. In the fast food industry, where consumer trust is crucial for repeat business, this scale reflects a brand's ability to consistently meet expectations and align with consumer values. Trust is a key component in fostering long-term relationships, particularly in the context of increasing consumer demand for brand transparency.

### *Authenticity*

- **Scale Name:** Authenticity Scale
- **Number of Items:** 4
- **Source(s):** Adapted from Napoli et al. (2013)
- **Example Item:** "This brand feels sincere."

- **Measurement Scale:** 7-point Likert scale
- **Reliability:** Cronbach's alpha = .76

The authenticity scale measures perceptions of a brand's sincerity, moral integrity, and alignment with its stated values. In the current socially-conscious marketplace, authenticity is a key factor for consumer engagement, especially in the fast food industry. A brand with high authenticity is seen as genuine and transparent, making it more likely to resonate with consumers who prioritize integrity and corporate responsibility.

### 3.2.3 Procedure

The experiment was conducted online using Qualtrics. Participants were randomly assigned by the survey software to one of two experimental groups:

- **Condition A (Positive Emotion):** McDonald's "Can I Get Uhhh" (humour)
- **Condition B (Negative Emotion):** Burger King's "Mouldy Whopper" (disgust)

Upon accessing the survey, participants were presented with an information sheet and a digital consent form. Those who consented proceeded to complete a baseline questionnaire measuring their initial perceptions of the assigned brand.

Following the baseline measures, participants viewed the advertisement corresponding to their assigned condition. The video was embedded directly within the survey and played automatically, ensuring that participants watched the full advertisement without the option to skip or fast-forward.

After viewing the advertisement, participants completed the same set of brand perception questions a second time to capture any shifts in attitudes resulting from the exposure. This pre-post design enabled direct comparison of brand perceptions before and after viewing the ad. A manipulation check was incorporated to confirm the emotional tone elicited by each advertisement. Participants were asked to select the emotion that best described how the advertisement made them feel and to rate the intensity of that emotion on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely).

The survey also collected demographic information, including age, gender, brand familiarity, and frequency of fast food consumption. Brand familiarity was measured on a 5-point scale ranging from “Not at all familiar” to “Extremely familiar.” Frequency of fast food consumption was captured on a scale from “Never” to “More than four times per week.” On average, the survey took approximately ten minutes to complete.

#### 3.2.4 Participants

Of the 120 individuals who accessed the survey, 93 provided complete and valid responses and were included in the final analysis. Participants were excluded if they failed to complete the full survey ( $n = 18$ ), declined consent ( $n = 1$ ), or progressed through the survey without providing substantive responses ( $n = 8$ ).

The final sample ( $N = 93$ ) was diverse in age and gender and exhibited varying levels of brand familiarity and fast food consumption frequency. Random assignment was employed to distribute participants evenly across conditions. Table 1 summarises key demographic and baseline characteristics for each experimental group:

**Table 2:**  
*Participant Characteristics by Condition*

Characteristic	Humour Condition (McDonald's, n = 49)	Disgust Condition (Burger King, n = 44)
Age (Mean $\pm$ SD)	28.9 $\pm$ 12.6	27.5 $\pm$ 10.7
Gender Distribution	26.5% Male, 73.5% Female	34.1% Male, 65.9% Female
Brand Familiarity (Mean $\pm$ SD)	McDonald's: 3.89 $\pm$ 1.12	Burger King: 3.25 $\pm$ 1.14
Visiting Frequency (Mean $\pm$ SD)	2.45 $\pm$ 1.32	2.05 $\pm$ 1.25

Participants in the McDonald's humour condition were slightly younger, more female-skewed, and reported higher brand familiarity as well as visiting frequency than those in the Burger King disgust condition. These differences may reflect varying baseline exposure to the brands across conditions.

### 3.3 Qualitative Interviews

#### 3.3.1 Participants

A sub-sample of seven participants was selected for follow-up interviews based on their availability and willingness to participate, as indicated at the end of the main survey. Because the survey responses were anonymous, participants were not chosen based on their specific answers or emotional responses. Instead, a combination of random selection and convenience sampling was used. Participants with different gender identities and how often they eat fast food were included to ensure a variety of perspectives in the qualitative analysis.

### *3.3.2 Interview Procedure and Protocol*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via video conferencing or in-person and lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Each session followed a flexible interview guide focused on the four dependent variables; warmth, competence, trustworthiness, and authenticity, as well as participants' subjective responses to the advertisement (Appendix 4).

Key questions included:

- What do you think the brand was trying to communicate in the advertisement?
- How would you describe the tone of the ads?
- What type of emotion would you relate to each one of the ads?

Do you think the emotion conveyed in the ads fits well with the brand's identity? All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed using Otter AI.

### *3.3.3 Data Analysis*

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, following the structured approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data. The process began with reading the transcripts multiple times to familiarise with the data and identify key parts related to the emotional tone, brand fit, and the changes in brand perception. Initial codes were developed directly from the data and then grouped into broader themes that captured common patterns across interviews.

The focus was on understanding meaning and connections within the data, rather than counting how often certain ideas appeared. The analysis was conducted manually without the use



of coding software. Transcripts were reviewed several times to find patterns that supported or added to the quantitative results. Participant quotes were included where useful to show emotional responses to the brands and to explain how emotional tone in advertising can influence consumer views.

Overall, the qualitative findings added depth to the statistical results and helped explain how personal values, brand associations, and emotional content shape consumer responses to corporate advertising.

## 4. Results

This chapter presents the findings from both the online experiment and the qualitative interviews, reflecting the mixed-methods design. The first section details the quantitative outcomes of the online experiment, which investigated whether exposure to humour-based versus disgust-based corporate advertisements influenced consumer perceptions of brand warmth, competence, trustworthiness, and authenticity. The second section describes insights from the semi-structured interviews, adding interpretive depth to the quantitative results. Together, these findings offer a comprehensive understanding of how emotional appeals operate in corporate advertising within the fast-food sector.

### 4.1 Baseline Brand Engagement and Attitudinal Benchmarks

Before ad exposure, significant differences existed between how participants perceived McDonald's and Burger King. Despite higher familiarity and visit frequency for McDonald's ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ;  $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) compared to Burger King ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ;  $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ), Burger King achieved superior ratings across all perceptual dimensions:

**Table 4:**

*Baseline brand engagement*

Dimension	McDonald's M (SD)	Burger King M (SD)	t	p
Warmth	3.29 (0.99)	4.42 (1.20)	-4.93	< .001
Competence	3.93 (0.83)	4.63 (1.17)	-3.28	.002
Trust	3.13 (1.00)	4.41 (1.13)	-5.76	< .001
Authenticity	3.13 (1.03)	4.25 (1.18)	-4.85	< .001

The findings reveal an interesting contrast: although people eat at McDonald's more often, they view Burger King as warmer, more competent, trustworthy, and authentic. This suggests that Burger King's brand connects more strongly with people on an emotional and moral level, even without recent advertising. It supports earlier research showing that how often people use a brand doesn't always match how positively they feel about it (Aaker, 1997; Keller, 2003).

#### 4.2 Manipulation Check

To confirm that the emotional manipulations functioned as intended, participants rated how humorous or disgusting they found the ads:

**Table 5:**

<i>Manipulation check</i>				
<b>Measure</b>	<b>McDonald's Ad M (SD)</b>	<b>Burger King Ad M (SD)</b>	<b>t(91)</b>	<b>p</b>
<i>Humour</i>	5.37 (1.47)	4.36 (1.87)	-2.90	.005
<i>Disgust</i>	2.20 (1.29)	4.66 (2.02)	7.05	< .001

Table 5 presents participants' ratings of humour and disgust for each ad. The McDonald's ad was rated significantly more humorous ( $M = 5.37$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ) than the Burger King ad ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ),  $t(91) = -2.90$ ,  $p = .005$ , although overall humour ratings were moderate. The Burger King ad was rated significantly more disgusting ( $M = 4.66$ ,  $SD = 2.02$ ) than the McDonald's ad ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ),  $t(91) = 7.05$ ,  $p < .001$ . These findings indicate that the emotional tone of each ad was perceived as intended, though not in extreme terms. The Burger King ad also received moderate humour ratings, suggesting a combination of emotional responses. This mix

of disgust and humour may have encouraged more reflective processing (Nabi, 2012), possibly influencing how the brand was perceived.

#### 4.3 Brand Perception Change: Within-Brand Comparisons

**Table 6**

*McDonald's Pre vs Post Test*

*McDonald's (Humour Condition, N = 49)*

Dimension	Pre M (SD)	Post M (SD)	MeanΔ	t	p	95% CI	Interpretation
Warmth	3.29 (0.99)	1.96 (0.87)	-1.33	-9.11	< .001	[-1.62, - 1.03]	Large decrease
Competence	3.93 (0.83)	2.63 (0.90)	-1.30	-8.75	< .001	[-1.60, - 1.00]	Large decrease
Trust	3.13 (1.00)	1.94 (0.88)	-1.19	-9.56	< .001	[-1.44, - 0.94]	Large decrease
Authenticity	3.13 (1.03)	1.63 (0.82)	-1.50	- 11.84	< .001	[-1.75, - 1.25]	Largest decrease

Table 6 shows that McDonald's humour ad led to significant declines across all brand perception dimensions: warmth, competence, trust, and authenticity. The largest drop was in authenticity ( $Mean\Delta = -1.50$ ), suggesting the humour may have felt off-brand or insincere to viewers.

Declines in warmth, trust, and competence indicate a broader weakening of the brand's emotional and professional image following the ad. While humour is often associated with improved brand perceptions (Eisend, 2009), these results suggest its effectiveness may depend

on alignment with the brand's established character. This underscores the importance of emotional consistency between advertising tone and brand identity.

**Table 7:**

*Burger King Pre vs Post Test*

*Burger King (Disgust Condition, N = 44)*

Dimension	Pre M (SD)	Post M (SD)	Mean $\Delta$	t	p	95% CI	Interpretation
<b>Warmth</b>	4.42 (1.20)	4.20 (1.15)	-0.22	-2.10	.041	[-0.43, -0.01]	Small decrease
<b>Competence</b>	4.63 (1.17)	4.34 (1.16)	-0.29	-1.92	.062	[-0.59, 0.01]	Marginal decrease
<b>Trust</b>	4.41 (1.13)	4.23 (1.12)	-0.18	-1.47	.148	[-0.42, 0.07]	Not significant
<b>Authenticity</b>	4.25 (1.18)	3.84 (1.15)	-0.41	-3.37	.002	[-0.66, -0.17]	Significant decrease

The table above shows that Burger King's disgust ad led to more modest shifts in brand perception, with only small to moderate declines. The most notable change was a significant decrease in authenticity ( $Mean\Delta = -0.41$ ,  $p = .002$ ), while warmth also declined slightly ( $Mean\Delta = -0.22$ ,  $p = .041$ ).

Changes in competence and trust were not statistically significant, indicating that the ad did not strongly affect perceptions of Burger King's capability or credibility. These results suggest that although disgust can be risky, it did not substantially damage core brand traits. It is possible that

the emotional tone signalled boldness or honesty, helping to preserve key elements of brand strength despite the negative framing.

#### 4.4 Scale Reliability

All scales demonstrated strong internal consistency:

- Pre-Exposure Measures:  $\alpha = .94$
- Post-Exposure Measures:  $\alpha = .96$

These figures confirm the reliability of the measurement tools and support the robustness of the statistical comparisons.

##### *4.4.1 Linking Quantitative and Qualitative Insights*

Taken together, these findings show a surprising pattern. Contrary to expectations from prior literature (Eisend, 2009; Pham, 2007), humour did not enhance brand perceptions for McDonald's and instead sharply reduced them. Disgust, often feared for its negative valence, proved less damaging than anticipated for Burger King, potentially due to brand congruity and narrative authenticity. To understand these paradoxes, the following qualitative findings delve deeper into consumers' subjective experiences.

#### 4.5 Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis of seven semi-structured interviews provided deeper insight into the experimental results, revealing how consumers interpreted emotional appeals in corporate advertising and how these interpretations influenced brand perceptions. Five major themes

emerged, reflecting both affective and cognitive responses to the McDonald's humour-based advertisement and the Burger King disgust-based advertisement.

### Theme 1: Emotional Salience and Appeal Recognition

Participants largely recognised the intended emotional tone of the advertisements, though the intensity and clarity of these emotions varied considerably. The McDonald's advertisement was widely perceived as humorous, but several respondents described it as unoriginal or lacking novelty. As Participant 2 explained:

*"It was trying to be funny, but I've seen this type of joke a hundred times. It didn't surprise me or make me feel closer to McDonald's. It felt like they're repeating what everyone else does."*

Conversely, Burger King's disgust-based ad triggered strong visceral reactions, evoking both fascination and discomfort. Participant 5 remarked:

*"It was revolting. I had to look away. But honestly, that's why it sticks in my mind. It forces you to think about what's in your food, and not many ads do that."*

This pattern reflects the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Under the peripheral route, emotional appeals like humour function as simple cues that trigger immediate but shallow processing. However, highly arousing emotions such as disgust can push viewers into central-route processing if the message feels personally relevant or morally significant.

Thus, while McDonald's ad remained on the periphery of participants' attention, Burger King's provoked deeper engagement by raising ethical considerations about food quality and corporate transparency.

## Theme 2: Message Clarity and Interpretation

While participants understood the surface narratives of both advertisements, interpretations varied in depth and resonance. Four of seven participants recognised Burger King's message as an attempt at transparency in food quality. Yet, this clarity often failed to produce a positive response. Participant 3 reflected:

*"I get that they're being honest, but even knowing the point, I still don't want to eat a mouldy burger. It's a hard sell because the image just sticks in your head."*

In contrast, McDonald's ad was viewed as straightforward but lacking distinctiveness.

Participant 1 noted:

*"It felt like McDonald's was relying on being familiar. The ad was clear, but it didn't say anything new or meaningful. It was like background noise."*

This resonates with Schema Congruity Theory (Lee & Labroo, 2004), which suggests that information congruent with consumers' expectations is processed more easily and fluently.

While congruity can promote favourable evaluations, excessive familiarity without novelty can result in cognitive complacency, reducing engagement and leaving brand impressions unchanged. Conversely, incongruent stimuli such as disgust in a fast-food context can lead to rejection or increased engagement, depending on whether the message is seen as meaningful and aligned with consumer values.



### Theme 3: Impact on Brand Perception

The emotional tone of the advertisements translated into divergent impacts on brand perceptions. McDonald's humour was often perceived as safe but insufficient to alter attitudes. As Participant 4 described:

*"It didn't make me like McDonald's more or less. It just reinforced what I already thought, that they're a big brand trying to be funny without really saying anything important."*

In contrast, Burger King's disgust approach generated more polarized reactions. Four participants admired its boldness. Participant 6 shared:

*"It was bold. They're not afraid to be gross to prove a point, and that's kind of cool. It makes me think they're honest and that they're not hiding things."*

Yet, three participants found it alienating. Participant 7 confessed:

*"If that's their idea of appetising, I'm concerned. It puts me off eating there because I can't get that mouldy image out of my head."*

These diverging perceptions reflect the affect-as-information framework (Schwarz & Clore, 1983), where emotions serve as signals that inform judgments about the source. The perception that McDonald's humour was superficial appears linked to lower perceived authenticity and warmth, aligning with the quantitative findings. Humour might indicate approachability but may lack depth, while disgust can signal authenticity and moral urgency, though at the risk of discomfort.

#### Theme 4: Brand Congruity and Emotional Alignment

Brand congruity strongly shaped how participants evaluated the advertisements, though perceptions were not uniform. McDonald's humour advertisement was widely viewed as consistent with its family-friendly, approachable image, yet participants questioned its originality and impact. As Participant 2 summarised:

*"It's on-brand, sure. But it doesn't push any boundaries. It felt safe, maybe too safe. I expect McDonald's to be fun, but not necessarily innovative."*

Similarly, Participant 4 noted:

*"It's the kind of ad you'd expect from McDonald's its harmless, but it doesn't make me think differently about them."*

In contrast, Burger King's use of disgust elicited mixed interpretations regarding congruity with the brand's rebellious identity. Some participants felt it fit Burger King's history of provocative marketing. For example, Participant 5 explained:

*"They've always been a bit weird, so this fits them. It's shocking, but I'd expect that from Burger King. It makes them stand out."*

However, others questioned whether the mould imagery was too extreme, even for Burger King's brand. Participant 7 remarked:

*"I get the point, but mouldy food feels like crossing it's a line. It's gross, and I'm not sure it matches wanting people to eat there."*

These mixed reactions reflect principles of brand personality congruence (Aaker, 1997) and the broader Brand Schema Theory (Fiske et al., 2007), which suggest that consumers prefer communications that align with a brand's established identity. Yet even disruptive emotions like disgust, while potentially reinforcing brand distinctiveness, can be perceived as off-brand if they provoke excessive discomfort or conflict with core consumer expectations.

#### Theme 5: Platform Relevance and Media Context

Participants raised concerns about the suitability of each advertisement for different media platforms. Six participants suggested that McDonald's humour ad was better suited for short-form, entertainment-oriented platforms like TikTok.

Participant 1 noted:

*"McDonald's ad is perfect for TikTok. Quick, light, and you don't have to think too hard. It's the kind of thing you'd laugh at and keep scrolling."*

In contrast, Burger King's ad was seen as more fitting for long-form formats or earned media contexts. Participant 6 observed:

*"It's the kind of thing that makes headlines or goes viral because it's shocking. But it's not the ad you want popping up while you're casually scrolling through your feed."*

This underscores the importance of media-context fit (De Pelsmacker et al., 2010), where message effectiveness depends not just on content but also on the platform's typical usage patterns and audience expectations.

**Table 8***Summary Table of Qualitative Themes (Code book extract, Appendix 5)*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>McDonald's (Humour)</b>	<b>Burger King (Disgust)</b>
Emotional Salience & Recognition	“Funny but predictable”; mild impact	Strong visceral reactions; memorable but polarising
Message Clarity & Interpretation	Clear but shallow; lacking novelty	Clear message of transparency but off-putting imagery
Impact on Brand Perception	Safe but ineffective at changing perceptions	Seen as bold and honest by some; alienating to others
Brand Congruity & Emotional Alignment	Consistent with family-friendly image but uninspired	Congruent with rebellious brand identity
Platform Relevance & Context	Better suited for short-form, casual platforms like TikTok	More effective in long-form storytelling or news coverage

Overall, these findings show that consumers interpret emotional signals in corporate advertising by combining feelings with judgments about brand identity, message fit, and media context. Emotional recognition alone does not ensure effectiveness; persuasion depends on how well the emotional tone aligns with consumer expectations and brand authenticity. The results will be further discussed in the following section.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Reinterpreting Emotional Effectiveness: Beyond Valence

This study examined how humour and disgust in advertising influence consumer perceptions of fast food brands. While humour is often seen as effective in boosting brand appeal (Eisend, 2009; Strick et al., 2009), the findings show it can have negative effects when it feels superficial or out of sync with the brand. For McDonald's, the humour ad led to significant declines across all brand measures, especially authenticity, challenging the idea that positive emotions always strengthen brand equity.

In contrast, Burger King's disgust-based ad led to smaller and more selective changes. Warmth and authenticity declined, but trust and competence remained largely unchanged. The absence of significant effects in some areas suggests that negative emotions do not automatically harm brand perceptions. Their impact depends on how the message is interpreted, whether as honest and bold or simply off-putting. Qualitative responses help explain these patterns. McDonald's humour was often described as predictable and lacking originality, which may have reduced its effectiveness. Burger King's ad was seen as bold by some and unsettling by others, showing that disgust can trigger both attraction and discomfort.

These results suggest that emotional impact is not just about whether an emotion is positive or negative. What matters is how well the emotion fits the brand, the clarity of the message, and whether it aligns with consumer values. Even small changes in perception can have lasting effects, especially when they involve trust and authenticity in a values-driven market.

## 5.2 Brand Equity Versus Brand Familiarity: Interpreting the McDonald's Paradox

A notable paradox emerged from the findings. Although participants were more familiar with and frequently used McDonald's, the brand scored lower than Burger King on all perception measures. This challenges the assumption that high brand usage naturally leads to stronger brand equity, especially when reputational issues are involved.

While not directly measured, recent controversies involving McDonald's, including reported geopolitical boycotts (Bitter, Business Insider, 2024), may have shaped participants' views. Qualitative feedback suggested the humour ad felt out of touch or dismissive, implying that the brand's existing reputation may have undermined the intended message. This reflects Brunk's (2012) research on consumer moralisation, which shows that people increasingly evaluate brands through ethical and social lenses. In this context, light-hearted messaging can appear poorly timed or evasive if it fails to acknowledge broader societal concerns. Audiences now expect brands to demonstrate awareness, not just entertain.

The McDonald's paradox shows that brand equity is not built on familiarity alone. Emotional appeals, even those meant to be positive, can fall flat if they do not align with the cultural and social climate. In today's marketplace, humour must connect meaningfully with consumer values to have a lasting impact.

### 5.3 Disgust in Advertising: Risky but Resonant

The findings on Burger King's disgust-based advertisement add meaningful depth to the understanding of negative emotions in brand messaging. Disgust is typically used in public health campaigns to provoke behavioural change through shock (Morales et al., 2012), but in commercial settings, it is often seen as too volatile and likely to damage brand perception.

In this study, however, the ad elicited strong reactions without triggering major declines in brand evaluation. Trust and competence remained steady, and some participants described the ad as transparent and honest. This suggests that under certain conditions, negative emotions like disgust may signal authenticity, especially when they reflect the brand's established identity.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) offers one explanation. In low-involvement categories such as fast food, consumers often respond to surface-level cues like humour. However, the graphic imagery and moral framing in Burger King's ad may have encouraged some viewers to engage more deeply with the message, prompting reflection on the brand's values. At the same time, the lack of significant overall change suggests that such responses vary and remain difficult to predict.

Burger King's history of bold campaigns, including the "Mouldy Whopper" and "Whopper Detour," may have shaped how this ad was received. Audiences familiar with this pattern may have seen the ad not as an error but as a deliberate extension of the brand's identity. Research by Curtis et al. (2011) supports this possibility, showing that moral framing can reduce the backlash typically associated with negative emotional appeals, and instead enhance perceptions of honesty and courage.

While the overall impact of the ad was limited, Burger King's approach suggests that disgust may hold potential as a brand strategy when used deliberately and in line with brand identity. Its effects are likely to depend on audience expectations, prior brand associations, and the perceived intent behind the message.

#### 5.4 Emotional Congruity and Brand Schema Alignment

The interaction between emotional tone and brand identity emerged as a key driver of advertising effectiveness. McDonald's humour ad matched its family-friendly image but was criticised for lacking novelty and depth. Schema Congruity Theory (Lee and Labroo, 2004) suggests that messages closely aligned with existing schemas are processed fluently yet leave weak impressions when they add no fresh meaning.

Burger King's disgust ad broke category norms but remained consistent with its history of provocative and rebellious campaigns. Strategic incongruity can increase engagement and memorability when new meanings are effectively transferred to the brand (McCracken, 1989), strengthening distinctiveness and perceived authenticity. However, this strategy carries risks. Emotional incongruity can lead to dissonance or rejection if the content is seen as too extreme or misaligned with personal values. Mixed responses to Burger King's ad reflect this tension: some participants viewed it as honest and bold, while others found it unappealing.

According to the affect-as-information framework (Schwarz and Clore, 1983), emotional reactions serve as cues for judging brand sincerity. In this study, McDonald's humour was occasionally perceived as superficial, whereas Burger King's use of disgust was sometimes seen as a signal of transparency and intention.



Overall, emotional appeals are most effective when they align with brand identity while offering fresh and meaningful insight. In saturated markets, bold emotional strategies may enhance differentiation, but their success depends on whether they reinforce the brand narrative without distancing key audiences

### 5.5 Strategic Implications for Brand Communications

This study highlights how emotional advertising shapes how consumers judge a brand's values and intentions. Emotional appeals do more than generate feeling; they act as signals of identity, inviting consumers to decide whether a brand feels genuine, relevant or out of touch. As audiences grow more aware of advertising tactics, they increasingly scrutinise emotional content and question its purpose.

The McDonald's ad shows that even familiar, brand-consistent humour can fall flat if it lacks originality or depth. Humour that simply reinforces expectations may be processed quickly but leave no impression. In contrast, Burger King's more confrontational ad invited reflection in some viewers, not because of its tone alone but because it challenged assumptions and conveyed a clear sense of intent. This suggests that emotional strategies should not only fit the brand but also carry meaning. Emotion without purpose risks being dismissed as manipulative or forgettable. Strong emotional content like disgust can be powerful when it signals honesty or courage, but it must feel deliberate and believable. How consumers respond is shaped not just by the ad itself but by their own cultural frameworks, prior beliefs and expectations of the brand.

The media platform also influences how emotional appeals land. Humour may be particularly effective on short-form platforms such as TikTok, where audiences expect fast, light

content that rewards immediacy and entertainment. For brands like McDonald's, whose messaging relies on humour, these platforms may offer a better fit than traditional formats. Emotionally complex messaging, however, requires more time and space to resonate. Choosing the right platform is not just a tactical decision but a strategic one that can shape how the message is interpreted and whether it connects at all.

## 5.6 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study offers useful insights into emotional appeals in corporate advertising, several limitations should be considered;

First, the sample size, although adequate for initial analysis, limits the generalisability of the findings. A larger and more diverse sample would enable stronger conclusions about how emotional appeals operate across different demographic and cultural groups. Future research could explore how factors such as age, gender, cultural background, or media habits influence responses to different emotional tones.

Second, the study focused on two fast food brands with distinct brand personalities. This allowed for a clear comparison between humour and disgust, but limits the applicability of findings to other industries. Sectors like technology, finance, or fashion may rely on different emotional strategies or have consumers with different expectations. Future studies should investigate how emotional appeals perform in those contexts, where trust, innovation, or identity may play a more central role. Third, the study only examined two emotional appeals. Emotions such as inspiration, nostalgia, or sadness may function differently, depending on the context and audience. These emotions may evoke more personal or reflective responses and could interact

with brand identity in unique ways. Expanding the emotional range in future research would provide a more complete understanding of how different feelings shape brand perception and consumer judgement.

## 5.7 Conclusion

This study examined how humour-based and disgust-based emotional appeals in corporate advertising affect consumer perceptions of fast food brands. Contrary to expectations, the humour appeal did not enhance perceptions of warmth or authenticity; instead, it diminished all four brand dimensions. Similarly, the disgust appeal failed to improve perceptions of competence or trust, producing only marginal declines in warmth and authenticity. Neither hypothesis was supported, indicating that the positive or negative nature of an emotion alone does not predict advertising effectiveness.

The results highlight the importance of emotional congruity, narrative richness, and brand consistency. Humour without novelty or depth is processed superficially and may even backfire, while negative emotions can preserve credibility if they align closely with a brand's values but they will not automatically elevate brand perception. In refining brand congruity theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, we identify emotional fit and perceived intent as the critical mechanisms that determine whether consumers engage superficially or thoughtfully with advertising messages.

These insights carry implications for brand communication strategies. Emotional campaigns must integrate affective cues with coherent brand narratives, undergo rigorous validation for authenticity and audience interpretation, and be adapted to the strengths of different media formats. Future research should explore additional emotional tones across various industries and cultural contexts, and investigate how evolving digital platforms shape the depth and direction of emotional engagement. In an environment of sophisticated and critical consumers, only emotionally congruent and narratively robust advertising is likely to establish lasting brand resonance.

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1: AI Statement

This project has used Open AI (ChatGPT) for the purpose of checking grammar, enhancing flow and the polishing of certain ideas. It has also been used to aid with the r-code for obtaining quantitative results . This project has also used Otter. Ai for the transcription of scripts

## Appendix 2: survey questionnaire

The following summarises the survey instrument used in the study:

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### Consent Statement

Participants confirmed:

- they were at least 18 years old;
- participation was voluntary;
- they could withdraw at any time without consequences;
- their responses would remain anonymous and used solely for research.

---

### Demographics

- Age (open text)
- Gender: Female / Male / Non-binary / Prefer not to say

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### Brand Engagement

- How often do you visit Burger King? (5-point scale: Not at all – Often)
- How often do you visit McDonald's? (5-point scale: Not at all – Often)
- How familiar are you with Burger King? (5-point scale: Not familiar at all – Extremely familiar)
- How familiar are you with McDonald's? (5-point scale: Not familiar at all – Extremely familiar)

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## Brand Perceptions

**Participants rated the following statements separately for McDonald's and Burger King:**

- feels friendly and approachable
- seems warm and kind
- gives the impression of caring about its customers
- appears capable and effective
- is a brand that knows what it's doing
- performs its services reliably and professionally
- I trust [brand].
- I can rely on [brand] to keep its promises.
- treats customers fairly
- is honest in its communication
- appears genuine and true to its values
- stays consistent with what it stands for
- communicates in a sincere and honest way
- feels like a brand with integrity

Responses on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree).

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## Video Stimulus Section

- Instruction to watch one assigned advertisement.
- Manipulation check:
  - “From which brand was the video you just saw?” (McDonald's / Burger King)
  - “What phrase did customers repeat in the McDonald's ad?” (“Can I get uhhh...”, “I'm lovin' it”, “Just one coffee please”)
- Open-ended: “In a few words, describe what stood out to you from the video you just watched.”

---

## Ad Evaluation

Participants rated the advertisement on:

- humour or amusement
- disgust or revulsion
- neutral or emotionally flat tone

(7-point scale: Strongly disagree – Strongly agree)

Impression pairs:

- Bad – Good
- Unpleasant – Pleasant
- Uninteresting – Interesting
- Boring – Entertaining
- Uninvolving – Involving

Impact:

- “Please indicate if the video advertisement impacted your perception about McDonald’s.”  
(7-point scale: Negatively impacted – Positively impacted)

Final open-ended question:

- “Is there anything else you’d like to share about the advertisement or your impression of the brand?”

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### **McDonald’s Advertisement**

- Title: “Can I Get Uhhh”
- Description: A humorous Super Bowl commercial featuring various individuals, including NASCAR driver Bubba Wallace and rapper Kanye West, all struggling to decide what to order at McDonald’s, highlighting the universal experience of indecision.
- Intended Emotional Appeal: Humour
- Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djG52oBOeeg>

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### **Burger King Advertisement**

- Title: “Mouldy Whopper”
  - Description: A bold campaign showing a Whopper burger decaying over time to emphasise the brand’s commitment to removing artificial preservatives, aiming to promote transparency and authenticity.
  - Intended Emotional Appeal: Disgust
  - Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxSWUacpa5M>
-

## Appendix 3 : Consent Form for Interview

**Study Title:** Understanding Emotional Appeals in Advertising  
**Researcher:** Danyshara Pal  
**Contact:** d.a.pal@student.utwente.nl

### About the Study

You are invited to take part in a research interview lasting about 15 minutes. The purpose of the study is to understand how emotional appeals in advertising (such as humour or more serious themes) influence how people perceive brands.

The interview will involve some open-ended questions about your thoughts and feelings regarding certain types of advertising. There are no right or wrong answers, and your honest opinions are very valuable.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any time without giving a reason.

### Privacy and Confidentiality

- Your responses will be kept strictly confidential and used only for research purposes.
- Your name and personal details will not appear in any reports, presentations, or publications.
- The interview will be audio-recorded with your permission, to help ensure accuracy in analysing the results.
- All data will be securely stored and accessible only to the researcher.

### Consent

- ☐ I have read the information above and agree to participate voluntarily.
- ☐ I consent to the interview being audio-recorded.
- ☐ I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Appendix 4: Interview guide**

- We just watched the two ads. Can you describe your immediate thoughts and feelings right after watching these ads for both McDonald's and Burger King?
- Did anything in either of these ads make you feel emotionally engaged, in a positive or negative way?
- Would you say the advertisement was relatable, or did it disconnect you from your own experience?
- In your own words, what do you think the brand was trying to communicate in the advertisement?
- How would you describe the tone of the ads?
- What type of emotion would you relate to each one of the ads?
- Do you think the emotion conveyed in the ads fits well with the brand's identity?
- After watching these ads, did your perspective of either brand change in any way?
- Did the brand feel trustworthy to you after watching the ad?
- Would you describe the brand as warm or friendly after this ad?
- Did the brand come across as authentic or genuine?
- Do you think that using humour (in the case of McDonald's) and disgust (in the case of Burger King) in a fast-food advertisement was effective?
- Which type of emotional advertising do you think has a more lasting impact?
- If you came across this ad on social media, for example when scrolling through TikTok or Instagram reels, how would you react?
- Would the ads make you more or less likely to choose the brand in the future

## Appendix 5: Code book extract

Theme	Definition	Example Codes	Illustrative Quotes
<b>1. Emotional Salience and Appeal Recognition</b>	How participants recognised and described the emotional tone of the ads, and the strength or clarity of those emotions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Humour recognition</li> <li>- Disgust reaction</li> <li>- Emotional intensity</li> <li>- Visceral impact</li> </ul>	<p>“It was trying to be funny, but I’ve seen this type of joke a hundred times. It didn’t surprise me or make me feel closer to McDonald’s.” – Participant 2</p> <p>“It was revolting—I had to look away. But honestly, that’s why it sticks in my mind.” – Participant 5</p>
<b>2. Message Clarity and Interpretation</b>	How participants interpreted the ads’ narratives and perceived clarity, novelty, or meaning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Message clarity</li> <li>- Narrative simplicity</li> <li>- Lack of novelty</li> <li>- Moral or social meaning</li> <li>- Cognitive engagement</li> </ul>	<p>“I get that they’re being honest, but even knowing the point, I still don’t want to eat a mouldy burger. It’s a hard sell because the image just sticks in your head.” – Participant 3</p> <p>“It felt like McDonald’s was relying on being familiar. The ad was clear, but it didn’t say anything new or meaningful. It was like background noise.” – Participant 1</p>
<b>3. Impact on Brand Perception</b>	Perceived shifts in attitudes toward the brand after viewing the ad, including positive, neutral, or negative effects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reinforcement of existing views</li> <li>- Erosion of brand trust</li> <li>- Increased brand respect</li> <li>- Ambivalence</li> </ul>	<p>“It didn’t make me like McDonald’s more or less. It just reinforced what I already thought, that they’re a big brand trying to be funny without really saying anything important.” – Participant 4</p> <p>“It was bold. They’re not afraid to be gross to prove a point, and that’s kind of cool. It makes me think they’re honest and that they’re not hiding things.” – Participant 6</p>
<b>4. Brand Congruity and</b>	How well the ad’s emotional tone fit the brand’s established	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- On-brand vs off-brand</li> <li>- Emotional fit</li> </ul>	<p>“It’s on-brand, sure. But it doesn’t push any boundaries. It felt safe, maybe too safe. I expect</p>

Theme	Definition	Example Codes	Illustrative Quotes
<b>Emotional Alignment</b>	identity and personality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Brand personality match</li> <li>- Strategic daring</li> </ul>	<p>McDonald's to be fun, but not necessarily innovative." – Participant 2</p> <p>"They've always been a bit weird and controversial, so this fits them. It's shocking, but I'd expect that from Burger King. It makes them stand out." – Participant 5</p>
<b>5. Platform Relevance and Media Context</b>	Participants' views on how suitable each ad was for different media platforms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social media suitability</li> <li>- Platform fit</li> <li>- Short-form vs long-form</li> <li>- Virality potential</li> </ul>	<p>"McDonald's ad is perfect for TikTok. Quick, light, and you don't have to think too hard. It's the kind of thing you'd laugh at and keep scrolling." – Participant 1</p> <p>"It's the kind of thing that makes headlines or goes viral because it's shocking. But it's not the ad you want popping up while you're casually scrolling through your feed." – Participant 6</p>