

The Construction of Attitudinal Meaning in Response to Food Advertisements: Six Case Studies

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Abstract

Emotional responses are an important part in the response to an advert. Often this is related just to the information directly provided but sometimes it relies, either intentionally or not, on information derived from wider social contexts and knowledge. In Appraisal Theory, this part of the process is described as Appreciation. This study considers six adverts and how different parts of Appraisal Theory may be key to their understanding and whether there is a link between advert design and the adopted meaning making process.

Keywords: advertising, Appraisal Theory, appreciation

1. Introduction

1.1 Outline

Traditionally advertising has had one of two roles: of bringing a product to consumer's attentions; or, more specifically, encouraging them to buy. Both roles rely on an emotional response (Fennis & Stroebe, 2020), conventionally of being interested and/or attracted to the product. The component elements of an advert will support these goals of gaining attention, creating a desire to possess or consume the object and triggering a desired action by the potential consumer. Conventionally, advertising is designed around the sequence of: setting out a problem; showing how the product will resolve that problem; and, then showing the rewards that follow from overcoming the problem (Dastjerdi, Davoudi-Mobarakeh, & Zare, 2012). In this context, an advert for a soft drink may start from the idea of 'thirst', show how the chosen product can overcome the thirst and then usually go on to suggest that the drinker will be happier as a result (Kotler, Armstrong, Wong, & Saunders, 2008).

By its nature, advertising now almost always uses a multi-media multi-modal approach (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and usage just of text or speech with no supporting images has become exceptionally rare. This means that when reading an advert the user must combine the provided semiotic modes and also respond with an emotion. The intent of a food advert is often to trigger the emotions of need and thus of consumption of the product. However, the advert is not always designed as a linear process moving from desire to consumption and it may use other emotions to trigger an interest in the given product (Scudder, 1999) in particular, controversy can be effective as a tool to raise brand recognition through the resulting sharing of images across social media and discussion (Gurrieri, Brace-Govan, & Cherrier, 2016). Appraisal theory can be used to study this process (Ellsworth, 2013; Martin & White, 2005; Roseman & Smith, 2001; Wu, 2013) as it uses the concept of attitude to understand how someone responds to an external stimulus (Smith & Kirby, 2001) and captures both the role of emotion and of wider context.

This study uses six adverts, five are for different forms of fast food and the other uses an image associated with fast food advertising. Consideration is given to how they create their message and the range of responses they evoke. Some, quite explicitly, use references that can only be interpreted using information outside the advert. In consequence, interpretation is both one of inter-semiosis (Iedema, 2003; Terry, 2007) combining (in these cases) words and images but also re-semiosis (O'Halloran, Tan, & Wignell, 2016) as the viewer draws on other knowledge and frames of reference to interpret the advert. How this process of combination is carried out will in turn influence their emotional response (McEachrane, 2009; Moors, Ellsworth, Scherer, & Frijda, 2013) and thus the decision to purchase or not.

1.2 Appraisal Theory and Emotional Response

In Appraisal Theory, Attitude (Martin & White, 2005) is used to capture the process by which a reader both understands an image and responds. Particular emphasis is placed on the process of evaluation and the expression of individual feelings. Within this wider framework, the concept of Affect captures how a viewer understands the emotions embedded in the image, Judgement reflects how the image allows for an assessment of the character and behaviour of others and Appreciation has a wider social aspect as both creator and viewer will draw on the context (either within the text or in wider society) to inform their understanding and interpretation (Coffin, 2003). In general the theory is not predictive in the sense that a given criteria will dominate but a common assumption (Hamby & Jones, 2022; Troiano, Oberländer, & Klinger, 2023) is that affect will tend to be the dominant element.

In consequence emotions are built up from various components such as an appraisal of the situation, action choices (or options), physiological responses and feelings (Moors, Van de Cruys, & Pourtois, 2021; Roseman & Smith, 2001). The sequence is one where an emotion is created by the provided stimulus and its nature is then assessed (sometimes without active cognition) and leads to a form of response including possibly physiological aspects (so for example disgust may be related to a decision to step back from the stimulus) and becomes the chosen response (Briñol et al., 2018). One consequence is that the size of the reward (or threat) and the degree to which it is unexpected become important in determining the strength of the resulting emotion, perhaps moderating mild interest into fascination or dislike into outright disgust (Moors, et al., 2021; Watson & Spence, 2007).

Judgement as such is more concerned with an evaluation, in the initial model, primarily of character or the actions of an individual. So in text and speech judgement often appears as a qualifying adjective such as ‘honest’ or ‘unreliable’ (Križan, 2016). When applied to an advert, this judgement can either reflect the text actually presented (‘we are a friendly company ...’) or the judgement placed on it by the viewer such as finding a given product attractive or revolting. As a result there is some ambiguity as to quite which process is being followed, an issue common across the use of Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005; Page, 2003) partly as over time authors have created different taxonomies within the framework (Soo-Guan Khoo, Nourbakhsh, & Na, 2012; Wei, Wherrity, & Zhang, 2015; Alhuthali, 2018) and partly as new situations are considered using the theoretical lens provided.

Appreciation (Watson & Spence, 2007) can again be ambiguous but essentially captures when or if the potential consumer draws on wider knowledge and attitudes in reaching a response. This wider framing can form the bedrock of a judgement (‘I do not buy from X because ...’) or context for understanding (an advert may include a reference to other media, long standing beliefs or social norms). So in particular Appreciation may either precondition the likely response or provide information missing from the actual image to come to an understanding.

In summary the main strands of Appraisal Theory can be set out as:

Table 1. Appraisal language choices in food adverts

Element	Role	Issues
Affect	Emotional understanding of advert	
Judgement	Evaluation of the advert	May be either (or both) an evaluation of the provided advert or of own emotional response
Appreciation	Usage of wider context	Can overlap with Judgement, in particular in terms of preheld attitudes that may dominate a response in some situations.

There is an element derived from Psychological theories of attribution in this structure (Graham, 2020). While that has a focus on the believed reasons for success or failure it is useful for answering emotional judgements especially as to ‘why’ a given outcome occurred. In terms of both judgement and appreciation there is an element of asking why – often implicit – in the sense of why some reacts positively or negatively to an advert (Yu, 2020).

1.3 Interpretation of Advertising

The role of advertising varies according to why it has been created but invariably it aims at producing an emotional response in the viewer. When produced for a commercial product the intent is usually to create a positive emotion in the viewer (Watson & Spence, 2007) most often to purchase the presented product but in fields such as public health (Fynn, Hardeman, Milton, & Jones, 2020) the goal can be to warn against certain behaviours or to inform about the associated risks. In many situations the goals of the advert may not be fully met or may instead trigger mixed emotions (Ruth, Brunel, & Otnes, 2002). In general it is assumed that positive emotions will tend to dominate over negative ones in such decision making (Hussin & Abdul Wahid, 2023) with this balance strongly influenced by overall perceptions of the brand. However, the interaction maybe more complex in situations where

the consumer is confused (Anninou, 2018) as to the intent of the advert as they may have to draw more on their own context in the process of meaning making.

Particularly in a political context, advertising (Sanz, 2013) may have primary goals of either encouraging support for a given party or cause or discouraging support for a rival view. In this case the likelihood is that an advert will trigger mixed emotions is larger, not least in that it is likely many observers will disagree with the underlying premise. Government information campaigns, especially when health related (Landy, Shigeto, Laxman, & Scheier, 2022; Padilla & Padilla, 2022), again differ slightly in that by design they may wish to warn against certain behaviours (Al-Hasan, Khuntia, & Yim, 2020) or to encourage take up of vaccines. Equally they may aim at encouraging alterations in life style. As such they may quite deliberately evoke negative emotions, such as fear, as to the consequences of not following the advice (Kershaw, 2018).

In each of these instances, Appraisal Theory is useful as an analytic tool (Hamby & Jones, 2022). Some studies have suggested that prior beliefs have a more substantial role in the context of political advertising (Scudder, 1999) with prior views on the topic tending to dominate response to a particular formulation. One consequence is that both positive and negative emotions may come into play in a situation where either the consumer is confused or if there are already strongly held pre-beliefs. In turn, that might make it more difficult for the advert to achieve its intended goals.

1.4 Hypothesis

The nature of the advert may see different aspects of Appraisal Theory invoked. Some adverts are designed to be self contained, others may make references to aspects of popular culture, common norms or related campaigns. The extent the viewer is invited to invoke external knowledge may also mean they are more likely to access their own external framework leading to an evaluation perhaps different to that intended by the designers.

2. Method

The images in this analysis were selected using a google search for fast food advertisements in English. The six selected offer a range of approaches and in particular allow consideration of how they seek to invoke emotions and how these may influence consumer behaviour.

The images were selected to give a range of multimodal designs, to include some that drew on external cultural influences that might be expected to be shared in the target group and some that are using at least part of the image as a negative emotion (in other words do not buy this).

Overall this gives a qualitative research design with the images selected to allow an exploration of how the concept of Appraisal Theory can be used to explore how emotions are evoked and how Affect, Judgement and Appreciation inter-relate in this process.

The analytic tool is mainly a description of the image and this is fitted to the concepts of Appraisal Theory (Hofmann, Troiano, Sassenberg, & Klinger, 2020; Troiano, et al., 2023).

3. Results

The first image is an advert for Macdonalds (MacDonalds, 2024) and placed in the American magazine 'Playboy'.



Figure 1. Macdonalds Advert

The image part is relatively standard, being a picture of one of their range of burgers. The text is unusual in that it seeks to invoke a complaint often made about misogynistic behaviour (Glapka, 2018) of seeing women as a ‘piece of meat’ rather than directly promoting the product as tasty, desirable or essential to daily living. The combination is a complex (to interpret) advert that is very reliant on how a viewer responds to the text.

This makes appreciation a critical part of Appraisal Theory in this instance as how the text is understood becomes critical to the wider process of Affect as the viewer responds to the advert. Here the process of appreciation can be best set out as a grid depending on whether or not a viewer actually recognises the reference and if they see it as derogatory (in a different context) or perfectly standard speech. In turn, there is a feasible distinction between those who then assume the use is ironic (which is presumably the goal) or in some way to be meant literally.

Table 2. Distinctions between appreciation and affect

Process of Appreciation	Process of Affect
Recognise the intended context?	
Yes, as a misogynistic trope	Accept as ironic, accept the advert Find Offensive. Reject the advert.
Yes, as normal speech	Confusion
No	Probably fail to understand the advert

Clearly there are more possible combinations but in some ways the advert is risky. Presumably the intent is to emphasise that this particular meal is far more than just a piece of meat but a carefully crafted highly desirable product. However, if a viewer actually did not recognise the wider context of the slogan then it is simply confusing. Perhaps it is an advert for a vegetarian burger? Equally some who recognise the phrase as often linked to misogynistic speech would probably reject the advert. In this sense context becomes important. The advert was placed in an American magazine known for combining pornographic images with long articles (Beggan & Allison, 2003) and presumably with a readership that would see themselves as well able to interpret the ambiguity of such an image.

In summary this is an instance where the text and image diverge in that the linkage between them is not immediately obvious unless one has the additional information as to where the advert was originally placed. Even so, Appreciation is more important than Affect in the meaning making process. The risk for a company such as McDonald's is that while they may well have targeted the advert to a specific audience, it can be easily accessible to everyone.

The second image is straightforward in semiotic terms. The advert (Arctic Gardens, 2016) suggests that buying

this particular brand of lasagne will be far more attractive to a young consumer than any alternative.



Figure 2. Advert for Lasagna

The design shows a young person's face shifting from displeasure to pleasure at being presented with this particular brand of lasagna. This transformation is emphasized by the tagline 'Remove the grimace'. Interpreting the advert places primary emphasis on Affect to understand that the intended emotion is a shift from displeasure at the provided meal to one of pleasure. Judgement to some extent comes into play as a tool to evaluate how plausible the claim is but essentially this is a much more straightforward relatively conventional advert.

The third image is an advert for a variety of Heinz Tomato Ketchup (Heinz, 2007).

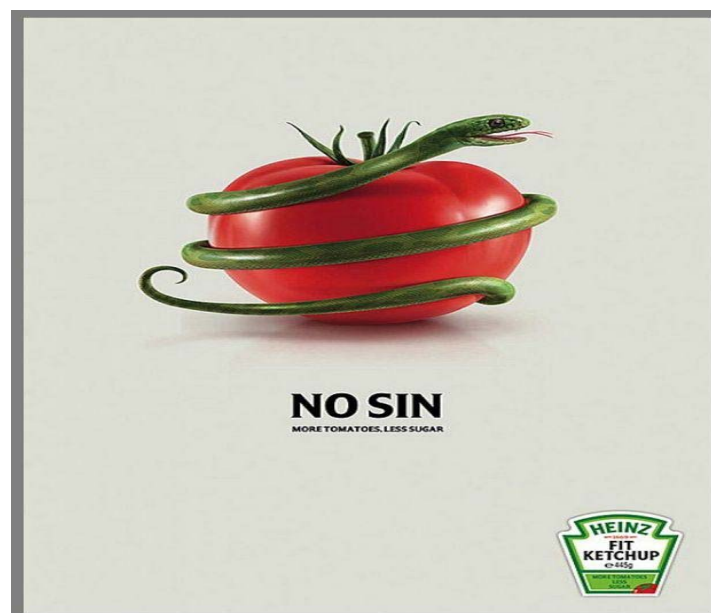


Figure 3. Heinz Tomato Ketchup

The central portion of this advert is a green snake wrapped around a tomato and the supporting text suggests this particular brand of tomato ketchup has more tomato and less sugar than others. In this framing, the implication is that sugar is sinful and we will be eating less of it.

As with Figure 1, this advert places the process of Appreciation at the centre of interpretation and meaning making. If an observer does not recognise the snake as indicating the story of the fall from the Garden of Eden they will struggle to understand quite why 'No Sin' is 'more tomatoes, less sugar'. While it is not location specific, it would probably be more readily understood by someone with an understanding of biblical concepts. As with the first image, there is a similar decision process of an individual understanding (and accepting the premise), understanding and rejecting the premise or not understanding. This is probably less complex to interpret than the first in that even lacking understanding of the snake/sin combination it is possible to infer the claim that lower sugar usage is a good thing?

However, again the multimodal construction of the image places emphasis on appreciation rather than affect at the centre of meaning making. In this case judgement plays some role too, in whether or not more tomatoes/less sugar is actually what is wanted.

Figure 4 is from Burger King and is an example of using conflicting, multiple emotions (Lindsay Stein, 2020).



Figure 4. Burger King – Whopper

This is not helped given the degree of ambiguity between image and text. One reading is that this is what a Burger King burger would look like if it didn't use artificial preservatives in the food. It will be covered in mould, wilted and dried out. In effect the image evokes disgust but is using the text to suggest this cannot happen. Again this is a complex advert and very reliant on how the viewer responds.

In that respect Affect and Judgement become the primary tools for meaning making but Appreciation may play an important role. Anyone used to cooking or food preparation will realise that the degree of mould is not something that can happen at any speed. If so the premise is either incredible or for some reason Burger King are suggesting their food is kept so long (and so badly) that this is a real risk. The other influence from Appreciation is prior beliefs as to whether artificial preservatives are good or something the consumer would prefer to avoid.

Figure 5 is relatively straight forward.

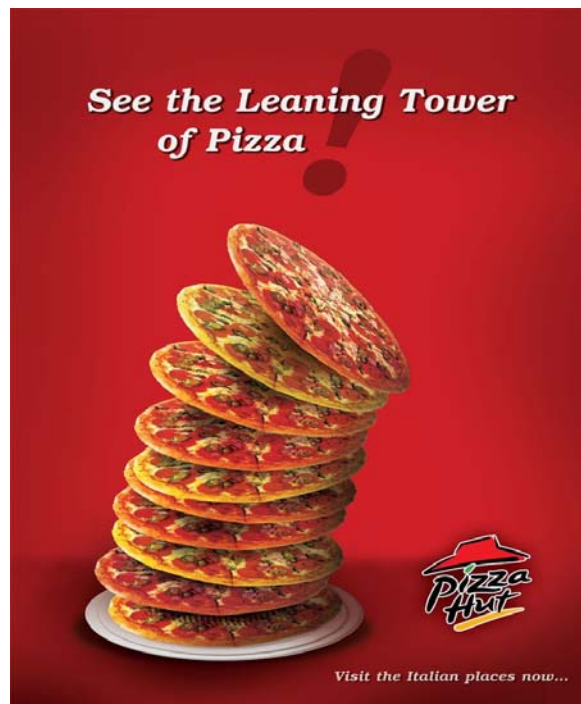


Figure 5. Pizza Hut

There is an important role for Appreciation in that the advert calls on understanding that the Italian city of Pisa has a leaning tower. From this, the consumer is to assume this shows how authentic Pizza Hut's products are (Pizza Hut, 2013).

In effect, in this case, appreciation is meant to make the message clear and affect captures the desired emotion of fun or whimsy at the pun and image.

The final example (Rightway Coffee Bean Extract, 2017) is partly a case of negative advertising, in effect do not buy this but use our product instead.



Figure 6. Rightway Coffee bean extract

This image uses aspects common to fast food advertising in particular that the burning fries are in the sort of package commonly associated with fast food restaurants. The suggestion in the main image is that such fries are a major source of fat. By setting them on fire, rather than eating them, we can prevent becoming fat but the product – Green Coffee Bean Extract – will help us to lose fat.

The text is an important part of the advert with the image designed to attract attention. As is often with this sort of health food advert the claims are presented as being scientific but with the wording very carefully chosen. ‘Clinically studied’ is not the same as clinically proved and discussion on daytime television is rarely seen as a substitute for conventional clinical trials. The design is an attempt to offer a closed advert, here is the image, here is the text that tells you how to interpret this image (and the product). The risk is that a reader may bring in other knowledge to read the text more critically than intended. So the intent could be to have created a relatively simple advert but the risk is that it becomes complex in the process of evaluation. Appreciation is thus an important part of consumer response, in whether the text is at all seen as convincing.

4. Discussion

Appraisal Theory is one of a number of similar approaches that have a basis in the psychological concept of attribution (Graham, 2020) and how that links emotion to meaning making (Fennis & Stroebe, 2020). However, like other similar theories it is perhaps stronger at categorising the various processes that can be invoked and weaker at suggesting which maybe dominant in a given situation (Anninou, 2018; Ellsworth, 2013; Watson & Spence, 2007). In some ways it can be better described as a framework for analysis rather than a tool for predictive understanding. This is not unusual in theories of meaning making (McEachrane, 2009) and some attempts to reach beyond that have essentially just created a different typology of characteristics (Watson & Spence, 2007).

However, the six instances in this paper do suggest some links between the semiotic structure of the advert and the subsequent meaning making process, in particular which aspect of Appraisal Theory is primarily invoked. In this respect the degree of ambiguity (either intentional or accidental) in the advert has implications for the relative importance of appreciation (Martin & White, 2005) in the process.

Figure 1 can be characterised as multi-modal with the text forming an important part of the constructed advertisement, it demands appreciation drawing on wider cultural discussions around a particular misogynistic stereotype. More than this for the advert to work (on the assumption it is either designed to create controversy or to attract customers) then the process of appreciation needs to link to judgement in a particular way. In effect if the response is some variant of ‘offended at the use of such a phrase’ then it is unlikely to generate new business. So the emotional part of any response is important and possibly dominant.

Figure 2 really relies on the visual element with the limited text really seeking to reinforce the image. In effect it is multimodal in so far as it has both elements but reliance is heavily placed on the visual element. As such the meaning making process can be seen as reliant on affect with an understanding of the challenges of feeding children who can be choosy about their food.

Figure 3 is again multimodal but in this case the text remains relatively limited. As with Figure 1, it demands appreciation in this case of the role of the serpent in the stories about the fall of man from Eden. If this link is missed then the phrasing ‘no sin’ loses much of its meaning, perhaps being reduced to the idea that this form of ketchup is good for you (it’s not a sin to eat it). Again, relative complexity and ambiguity of image places an emphasis on appreciation in meaning making.

Figure 4 is multimodal but while the text is secondary it is essential to modulate the impact of the main image. The message seems to be complex: that their burgers do not look like this due to using artificial preservatives in their preparation. However, judgement, especially using emotions such as disgust is important in meaning making as is the process of affect. For this to work, one assumes the logic is someone sees the image, finds it disgusting but is re-assured this would not be served as the preparation process mitigates any risk. The issue is there are other readings depending on the importance of appreciation for an individual response. In particular anyone used to food preparation would realise that food does not look like that for some time after cooking (and being kept badly) and, of course, plenty of people seek to avoid artificial preservatives if they can.

Figure 5 is again multimodal but as with Figure 2 the text is in a secondary role in that the image is comprehensible from the picture alone. The advert could be easily understood as selling pizzas even if the pun ‘pizza-Pisa’ was missed with its connotations of authenticity. In this case affect dominates as appreciation is present but relatively unimportant.

Figure 6 is multimodal and unusual in that it is a form of negative advertising with the main image being something that should be avoided. The text is very important as it carries the pseudo-scientific message that the product is

well regarded as a tool for weight loss. In one sense the goal could be said to avoid too much use of appreciation but there is a strong possibility that a viewer will recognise the specific phrasing used as attempts to imply a scientific basis for the product that is actually lacking.

Table 3. Classification of complexity and ambiguity

Figure	Type of multimodality	Complexity	Dominant form of meaning making	Ambiguity
1	Text dominates	High	Appreciation	High
2	Image dominates	Low	Affect	Low
3	Image dominates	High	Appreciation	High
4	Image dominates	High	Judgement	High
5	Image dominates	Low	Affect	Low
6	Text dominates	Medium	Affect/Appreciation	Low

This suggests some complexity in linking advert design to the emotional and meaning making process in a response. It can be argued that simple adverts, usually dominated by the image, trigger affect and a relatively unambiguous response. This also fits to the issue in Appraisal Theory that the degree of active cognition in meaning making can vary, in some situations the process can be one of simple recognition and response with little more engagement.

Where appreciation is invoked either as the primary or an important part of the meaning making process then there is a secondary dynamic. In Figures 1 and 3 the intent seems to be that relatively well known information is used to make sense of the advert. So in effect the viewer is expected to use existing contextual knowledge, presumably to then make the interpretation of the advert as originally intended. In practice it is feasible that some viewers will not make the link, thus misunderstanding, or indeed make the link and not appreciate the advert as intended. Thus Figure 1 could be misunderstood (is it an advert for a vegetarian burger?), understood and disliked (there is nothing funny about a long standing misogynistic trope) or understood and liked (a clever play on an idea?).

Figure 6 presents a different role for appreciation. Presumably the advert is meant to be seen as self-enclosed and seen without any additional evaluation. All the information for the desired meaning making is presented, the image implies do not eat fast food fries (as they cause weight gain) and, in any case, the text gives the scientific reasons why this approach to weight loss works. The problem, of course, is if a viewer draws on their knowledge of how dubious (potentially non-existent) medical evidence is dressed up for advertising purposes. If so the appreciation may have the role of bringing in unwanted cultural references, in this case to undermine the intended message of the advert.

This study uses the various elements of the concept of attitude within the wider approach of Appraisal Theory to consider if any of the sub-elements dominate and, if so, if there is a consistent pattern. This follows on from earlier studies (Scudder, 1999; Watson & Spence, 2007) that suggest there are important differences and that the wider theory can be given a predictive as well as descriptive role.

Broadly this study supports a view that in the case of a relatively simple semiotic design for an advert Affect will dominate the appraisal process. The linkage being that understanding is relatively easy making it equally straightforward to reach an agree/reject emotion simply based on the directly provided information. However, where appreciation is important, the linkage to emotion and thus response is much more complex. This suggests that there are at least two main types of appreciation that can come into play:

- 1) As intended by the advert designer, a viewer will recognise the wider reference and use that to frame their understanding and emotional response; or
- 2) Not as intended by the advert designer, but a viewer may draw on their own previous attitudes or knowledge to frame understanding and their response.

The first can be sub-divided into instances where the viewer misses the reference, or recognises it and uses that knowledge in a manner not intended. This may also hint at audience segmentation. The intent maybe that only those likely to respond in a particular way (and this is most important for Figure 1) will even see the advert. At the least this suggests that the use of complex adverts, that can be misinterpreted, runs the risk of triggering adverse emotional responses in viewers. Equally being controversial might trigger favourable responses around being innovative or daring or unfavourable responses finding the framing offensive or repulsive.

This suggests a role for further research focussed on the concept of Appreciation in Appraisal Theory. How it is invoked, how this may differ to the response intended and how the final emotional response relates to external information are all valid fields for closer study.

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