

## **Emotional Narratives in Advertising: Analysis of the Effects of Negative Emotional Storytelling on Brand Perception**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research examines the often-overlooked role of negative emotional narratives in advertising, specifically how such emotions influence consumer-brand relationships. The primary goal is to assess the impact of negative emotional narratives in advertisements on brand perception, offering a fresh perspective on the strategic use of these emotions in the commercial sector. A comprehensive literature review examines the existing theories on emotions, the phenomenon of negative emotions, their impact on decision-making and other forms of communication between customers and brands, the overall role of emotions in advertising, and the deliberate leverage of negative emotions in social advertising. While there is significant research on emotional appeal in general, this study seeks to address a gap regarding the intentional use of negative emotions in commercial contexts. The study employs a quantitative approach, gathering primary data through an online questionnaire. The collected responses are analysed using linear regression, ANOVA, and correlation methods to measure participants' emotional reactions to selected ads. The analysis also examines the factors that drive these reactions, their subsequent impact on brand attitudes, and the likelihood of consumers engaging with them. The findings of this research offer valuable insights for marketers, enabling them to understand the potential benefits and risks associated with employing negative emotional storytelling. The recommendations include avoiding the deliberate use of emotions such as dislike, discontent, or embarrassment, which can lead to adverse consumer reactions. Instead, priming sadness is suggested as a way to create a more optimistic brand image and increase positive word-of-mouth. Worry, however, should be used with caution and include a relief factor by the end of the narrative.

*Keywords:* Advertising, consumer-brand relationship, brand perception, emotional narratives, emotional appeal, negative emotional storytelling.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The current state of the advertising landscape, which is saturated and complicated, requires increasingly creative yet scientifically based decisions to capture and maintain consumer attention effectively. One of the robust solutions available for marketers is the use of emotional narratives and storytelling techniques that tap into the emotional spectrum of customers' minds. Widely used through various platforms, including TV, social media, and cinemas (Statista, 2022), emotional advertising indeed constitutes an efficient instrument within consumer-brand relations. Research conducted by Campaign (2009) suggests that over 75% of advertisements with the maximum outreach and successful message delivery utilise some form of emotional appeal. The study by Moz (2013) supports that point, highlighting that emotional advertising, both positively and negatively narrated, may result in high viewing rates and tends to "go viral". From public health to political campaigns, negative emotional storytelling, particularly, has gained prominence in sectors that aim to provoke strong reactions among the audience. According to The New York Times (Elliot, 2009), anti-smoking campaigns that employed strong graphic imagery and appealed to the emotion of fear were more likely to result in individuals taking action. The so-called 'shock advertising' was also implemented by brands seeking to stay relevant to the current social agenda. Another vector of utilising negative emotions in advertising aims to forge emotional connections that can enhance brand loyalty or lead to a more intensive form of consumer-brand interaction. For example, Smirnoff's 2023 campaign addressed the "loneliness epidemic", highlighting the brand's alignment with social responsibility and empathy (Springer, 2023). Similarly, John Lewis' Christmas adverts, often shedding light on themes of isolation and emotional vulnerability while criticising the commodification of loneliness in societal trends, have resonated deeply with audiences (Bargh & Williams, 2007). This approach proves effective in fulfilling marketing objectives, as 80% of consumers report being more likely to make a purchase when they feel an emotional connection to a brand, even if the emotions primed in advertising materials are negatively framed (Weber, 2024). It is worth mentioning that despite the effectiveness discussed above, negative storytelling carries several risks. Ads that evoke intense negative emotions, such as fear or anger, may encounter backlash if overused or misused. Such overuse may result in significant ramifications, particularly when emotional intensity levels exceed acceptable thresholds. Inappropriate utilisation, on the other hand, might provoke public outcry and damage the brand's reputation, as was the case with the infamous Pepsi

ad featuring Kendall Jenner in 2017 – the ad faced accusations due to excessive trivialisation of social justice movements. The complex relationship between emotions and consumer behaviour has long been a subject of interest in marketing research. While positive emotions have been extensively studied, the deliberate use of negative emotions in advertising remains underexplored. This study aims to address the gap by examining how advertisements that employ negative emotional storytelling influence consumer-brand interaction (Aaker, 1997; Baumeister *et al.*, 1994). Through the theoretical prism, the findings can offer a new perspective on how different types of negative emotions influence consumer decision-making, brand recall, and overall brand perception. It also offers a fresh perspective on the application of well-established theories, such as the Excitation Transfer Theory (Zillman, 1971) and Attitude Function Theory (Carpenter, Boster, and Andrews, 2013), in the context of their connection to negative emotions.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

For a considerable period, marketing literature has underexplored the role of negative emotions in consumer-brand relations, concentrating instead on positive constructs such as brand attachment (Park *et al.*, 2010), brand loyalty (He, Li and Harris, 2012), and brand love (Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi, 2012). This gap highlights the need to systematise existing research on negative emotions and their implications for advertising and brand communication. The Cannon-Bard Theory provides a core framework, suggesting that emotional and physiological reactions co-occur in response to a stimulus (UWA, 2019). Building on this, Zillman's (1971) Excitation Transfer Theory emphasises how arousal from one stimulus affects responses to subsequent events, a process directly relevant to how negative ad-induced emotions shape brand attitudes. Similarly, the Attitude Function Theory (Carpenter, Boster and Andrews, 2013) categorises attitudes into utilitarian, value-expressive, ego-defensive, and knowledge functions, offering insights into consumer motivations. Research into self-concept and brand personality demonstrates that congruence influences behavioural intentions (Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton, 1976; Avison & Rosenberg, 1981; Sirgy, 2018). While early studies emphasised positive brand traits (Aaker, 1997), later work recognised that consumers may reject negative symbolic associations (Bannister & Hogg, 2004; Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013) or adopt them in adverse behaviours like negative word-of-mouth, theft, or vandalism (Lee, Conroy, & Motion, 2009). Gender has also been identified as a key factor in shaping self-concept and emotional processing (Das, 2014; Chen, King, and Lee, 2018; Rup, Gochhayat, and Samanta, 2018), with women being more likely to express positive emotions and suppress sadness or anger (Chaplin, 2015). Finally, fear-based appeals are theorised through the fear drive model, which notes that excessive fear diminishes message impact (Janis, 1967), and protection motivation theory, which links high fear to maladaptive responses (Tanner, Hunt, and Eppright, 1991).

**H1:** Individuals experiencing negative emotions exhibit a decreased cognitive evaluation of subsequent unrelated events, thereby intensifying their negative responses.

**H2:** Several negative emotions may result in a heightened inclination towards the formation of positive attitudes despite initial expectations of the opposite outcome.

**H3:** The use of fear appeals in advertising can be mediated by subsequent relief, leading to decreased defensive responses and enhanced message acceptance.

**H4:** Gender differences influence consumer-brand relations, with males and females having different types of emotional processing.

**H5:** High arousal levels intensify emotional responses, leading individuals to polarise their attitudes.

**H6:** Emotional states influence judgmental biases, causing individuals to evaluate stimuli in a mood-congruent manner.

**H7:** Pre-existing positive brand attitudes form a bias against generating negative thoughts, resulting in a decreased intensity of negative emotions experienced during exposure to stimuli.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a quantitative research design and utilises an online questionnaire to maximise outreach. A quasi-experimental design was implemented where emotional responses to advertisements functioned as independent variables affecting brand impression, interaction, and recommendation, and as dependent variables influenced by gender, age, emotional state, and arousal level. A pretest-posttest format was chosen, as the study did not target a specific audience but aimed to capture responses from ordinary customers in various conditions. SPSS descriptive analysis profiled demographics, emotional states, prior ad experiences, and brand attitudes, while linear regression examined the impact of ad-induced emotions on brand perception. A one-way ANOVA was used to test the influence of gender, age, arousal, and emotional state, while correlation analysis assessed the links between brand attitudes and emotional intensity. Six negative narrative video ads were selected (Romani *et al.*, 2012), representing different brands and emotional appeals such as Dirt Devil's parody, Little Baby's Ice Cream, Sony PlayStation's Creepy Baby, Skittles' Pox, Orbit's Sarah & Juan, and CareerBuilder's satire. A target of 100 participants was set, with data collected via SurveyMonkey. The sectional design included demographics, arousal and emotion scales (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Paulhus & Lim, 1994), ad reactions, brand familiarity, and rankings based on Romani *et al.* (2012) and Rossiter (2012).

### ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

A total of 102 responses were gathered for this study. SPSS descriptive analysis provided insights into demographics, arousal levels, emotional states, previous ad experience, and brand attitudes. Linear regression, ANOVA, and correlation analyses were employed to examine the impact of emotional responses to six video ads on brand perception and engagement, with gender, age, and brand familiarity serving as key variables. The sample showed a nearly even gender split with 41 males (40.2%) and 61 females (59.8%). Almost half were aged 18–24, one-third aged 25–34, and one-fifth aged 35–44. Only four respondents were

aged 45–54, and none above 55. Regarding their physiological state, 52% reported balanced arousal, 28.4% reported high energy, and 19.6% reported exhaustion. Emotional states were mainly positive (40.2%) or very positive (8.8%), with 45.1% neutral and 6% negative, while no respondents reported very negative states. Usually, respondents encountered video ads 2–5 times a day; however, 43.1% rarely paid attention, 43.1% sometimes, and 13.8% often paid attention. Negative emotions during ad viewing occurred sometimes for nearly half (49.2%), rarely for 37.3%, and frequently for 13.5%. Anger, dislike, and embarrassment were the most common emotions, followed by discontent (36.3%), sadness (17.6%), and worry (12.7%). Familiarity inclined towards Sony PlayStation, Skittles, and Orbit, while Little Baby’s Ice Cream, Dirt Devil, and CareerBuilder were mainly unfamiliar. Negative emotions consistently harmed brand impressions, whereas moderated sadness and worry occasionally increased engagement.

**Table 2.1.** Respondents’ Experience with Negative Emotions Encountered in Video Ads

<i>Emotional response</i>	<i>Count (n=102)</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
<b>Dislike:</b>		
Feeling of contempt/disgust/hate	48	47.1%
<b>Anger:</b>		
Indignant/annoyed/resentful	49	48.0%
<b>Sadness:</b>		
Heartbroken/sorrowful/distressed	18	17.6%
<b>Worry:</b>		
Threatened/feared / worried	13	12.7%
<b>Embarrassment:</b>		
Sheepish/ridiculous/embarrassed	45	44.1%
<b>Discontent:</b>		
Dissatisfied/unfulfilled/discontented	37	36.3%

### Sample 1: Dirt Devil

Table 2.2. represents a linear regression analysis examining the relationship between various emotional responses and the brand impression after exposure to a video advertisement.

**Table 2.2.** Linear Regression: Emotional Response x Impression of the Brand

<i>Emotional response</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
(Constant)	.545	.155		3.511	<.001
<b>Dislike:</b> feeling of contempt/disgust/ hate	-.006	.093	-.007	-.061	.951
<b>Anger:</b> Indignant/annoyed/resentful	-.235	.132	-.190	-1.786	.077
	.175	.192	.081	.910	.365

**Sadness:**

heartbroken/sorrowful/distressed

**Worry:**

Threatened/feared / worried

**Embarrassment:**

sheepish/ridiculous/embarrassed

**Discontent:**

dissatisfied/unfulfilled/discontented

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study confirmed seven hypotheses concerning the influence of negative emotions on advertising responses, highlighting consistent emotional patterns across samples. Hypothesis 1 was supported, as dislike, embarrassment, and discontent negatively affected brand interaction, with discontent also reducing the likelihood of recommendations. The least appealing ad, Little Baby's Ice Cream, triggered these emotions most strongly. In contrast, sadness had a positive effect in some cases, enhancing brand impression and thereby confirming Hypothesis 2. Worry also emerged as a potentially beneficial emotion, particularly when moderated by humour, which validated Hypothesis 3. Gender differences were observed in the intensity of emotions, where men reported stronger experiences of dislike and embarrassment, while women expressed higher levels of sadness, confirming Hypothesis 4. However, Hypothesis 5 was rejected since arousal levels did not significantly affect emotional responses. The emotional state influenced worry specifically, with variations across different positivity levels, thereby confirming Hypothesis 6. Finally, age proved to moderate emotional experiences: younger participants reported higher intensity of dislike and worry, while older groups exhibited reduced extremes. Brand familiarity, evident in responses to Sony PlayStation ads, also lessened adverse reactions, thus partially confirming Hypothesis 7. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that emotional responses to advertising are shaped not only by the type of emotion but also by demographic and contextual factors.

## CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

This research provides a comprehensive analysis of negative emotional narratives in advertising and their impact on consumer-brand relationships, drawing on both established literature and the study's findings. Emotions such as dislike and embarrassment lowered the chances of brand interaction, while discontent stood out as a distinctive negative factor, decreasing both interaction and recommendations. Conversely, sadness resulted in positive outcomes, improving brand perceptions and creating opportunities for more optimistic positioning. Worry also had constructive effects when moderated by humour, emphasising the importance of relief in shaping responses. Gender differences were apparent, with women experiencing sadness more intensely, while men reported higher levels of dislike and embarrassment. Age affected responses to dislike, worry, and anger, with younger groups showing greater sensitivity. Lastly, familiarity with the Sony PlayStation reduced adverse reactions, highlighting the significance of pre-existing brand attitudes in mitigating the impact of negative emotional narratives.

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