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Research Article

Fast Food Love-themed Ads: Brand Experience in Storytelling

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand how the brand experience of Jollibee and McDonald's were co-created through its love-themed ads. Using a case-based approach and a netnographic data collection method, it finds that brand experience may be co-created individually and communally. Brands have many opportunities to engage with and co-create value with their consumers through engaging stories that consumers find relatable.

Keywords: Advertising, Brand experience, Experience co-creation, Storytelling

Introduction

Consumers today are exposed to multi-channel advertisements, video ads shown on social media platforms, that are created not just by traditional brands but also by content creators and influencers. For this reason, marketing and advertising professionals find it increasingly challenging to capture and hold consumer attention to build brand awareness and to sustain brand-consumer relationships. This challenge has led to innovations in the marketing and advertising fields. However, what has remained constant is the popularity of arousing emotions through these multichannel advertisements.

In the Philippines, mass market brands in the quality service restaurant industry have made use of storytelling in television advertising. Some use humor, others use drama. The storytelling approach has shifted into the digital space, with many brands creating videos in short film formats. For example, some of the

popular and memorable commercials from McDonald's and Jollibee are ones that explore romantic love in varying degrees: blossoming love, unrequited love, and second chances.

Value of Storytelling

The use of emotions in advertising is widely believed as an effective and powerful means of persuasion, particularly through storytelling that can arouse strong emotions in consumers (Tellis, 2003). Commercials that tell stories are powerful brand communication tools because they evoke an emotional response from the audience (Aaker et al., 1986), specifically positive and warm feelings (Escalas et al., 2004). Furthermore, audiences who develop either sympathy or empathy towards an advertisement, its characters and situations, are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward the ad (Escalas & Stern, 2003) and eventually, for the brand. Storytelling, therefore, is an important tool that builds brand value.

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Ads that tell stories get viewers hooked through relatable and meaningful stories that allow them to bond with the characters and empathize with the experience (Escalas et al., 2004). The more hooked viewers are, the more intense the positive and warm feelings become (Escalas et al., 2004). Storytelling ads hook viewers by making them feel as though they are experiencing what is happening, recall similar experiences that happened to them, or see situations or circumstances that they want to experience themselves (Escalas et al., 2004). Consumers who find the ad's main characters relatable are more likely to possess a positive attitude towards the ads, a process called self-referencing (Debevec & Iyer, 1988). According to the consumer culture theory, consumers "*rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements*" to manifest and further their identities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Advertisements communicate brand identity, contributing to or resulting in a consumer-brand bond (Loureiro, 2013). This bond may lead to the enhancement of an individual's self-concept (Fournier, 1998) or even to the willingness of a consumer to identify with a brand (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Consumers are motivated to identify with the brand because of four needs: to understand who they are, who they want to be, who they were, and what makes them unique (Sichtmann et al., 2019). CBI leads to brand loyalty and brand advocacy (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012).

Brand Advocacy and the co-creation of Brand Experience

The focus is on word-of-mouth marketing—of influencing brand consumer-to-consumer communication (Kozinets et al., 2010). Consumers who are happy with their experiences with particular brands become brand advocates. Storytelling ads that tell vivid, relatable, and meaningful stories generate positive attitudes toward the brand (Ching et al., 2013; Kang et al., 2020) and are more likely to share, promote, and spread positive word of mouth (Kang et al., 2020; Coker et al., 2021).

A different way of looking at it is to see the ad itself as a brand offering that is meant to be consumed and experienced by the brand's consumers. Brand experience pertains to "*sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments*" (Brakus et al., 2009). This definition correlates with Holbrook and Hirschman's (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) experiential aspects of consumption, in this case, ad consumers develop "*fantasies, feelings, and fun*" towards the ad. How consumers feel, think, engage, interact, and react towards the ad become part of the brand experience.

Furthermore, with the introduction of the theory of value co-creation, brand communication and experience became less firm-centric; they became more about communication shared between and among consumers, which creates "*communities of connected, informed, empowered, and active consumers*" (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004). While the ads themselves provide brand experience, which affects customer satisfaction and loyalty directly and indirectly through brand personality associations indirectly (Brakus et al., 2009), the full brand experience comes not just from the individual consumption experience (or viewing the ad) but also from the communal consumption of the ad.

Methods

This study sought to understand how the brand experience of Jollibee and McDonald's was co-created through its love-themed ads. Given the nature of the research objective and the locus of the subject matter, this study employed the case study approach and a netnographic data collection method. This study chose two social media platforms, Facebook and YouTube, using criteria prescribed by Kozinets (Kozinets, 2019). Table 1 summarizes the criteria.

Table 1. Criteria for choosing Facebook and YouTube

Criteria	Rationale
Relevance	Brands published the ads on Facebook and YouTube.
Activity	Facebook and YouTube are the largest social media platforms with a large active userbase
Interactivity	Many fans and followers of Jollibee and McDonald's interact with the brands through social media
Diversity	Because of the large following, different viewpoints are expressed on Facebook and YouTube
Richness	Users on Facebook and YouTube contribute diverse opinions varying in breadth and depth

This study examines six advertisements: three created for Jollibee and three created for McDonald's. The advertisements are chosen based on their popularity, as measured by social media views on both YouTube and Facebook, and based on three plot themes: (1) reflections on unrequited love, (2) revisiting old love, and (3) finding new love. It reviews reactions and responses to the advertisements through social media engagement: reactions, shares and comments left by viewers on both Facebook and YouTube. All short films were published on social media by their brands, except for one McDonald's commercial that was released as a television commercial years prior to the popularity of social media. In this case, the study chose a video post uploaded by a fan. While McDonald's published many other short films/advertisements on social media, the popularity of this particular advertisement, even to this day, makes it a worthy video to be discussed and analyzed in this study.

Data

Ad Theme: Unrequited Love

Table 2. Social Media Engagement for Jollibee's "Vow"

	Views	Likes/Reactions	Comments	Shares
Facebook	16.2M	190,000	621,000	489,000
YouTube	2.9M	28,000	3,476	N/A

Viewers were drawn to the short film's bittersweet twist, which became the central discussion point on social media. Social media fans and followers shared their thoughts on social media, and specifically on the comments section of the original posts on Facebook and

Jollibee: Vow

Jollibee released three Valentine-themed short films in 2017 as part of its #KwentongJollibee short film series, which is one of their popular social media brand campaigns. Of the three videos, the "Vow" became the most popular and most talked-about. It is a two-minute and forty-three second short film that follows a man who befriends and falls in love with a woman, who eventually becomes his best friend. The story begins with the man waiting for the woman to walk down the aisle. In a surprising twist in the end, the woman marries a different man.

On YouTube, the short film earned 2.9 million views, 28,000 likes, and 3,476 comments. On the other hand, it accumulated 16 million views, 621,000 reactions, and 190,000 comments on Facebook. It also spawned a host of reaction videos, or videos created and posted by viewers to show their reaction and response to the short film, in the Philippines and internationally. Table 2 summarizes the ad's social media engagement.

YouTube. Some expressed sadness and feelings of sympathy for the male protagonist, while others were dismayed at finding out that the story was about unconditional albeit unrequited love. Others recalled similar experiences and expressed empathy for the characters.

"This is heartbreaking."

"Huhuhuhu....what a nice short story."

McDonald's: First Love

McDonald's commercial "First Love" begins with a flashback memory of a pair of young children meeting in a McDonald's restaurant. It ends real time, with the same pair, now adults, meeting again inside a McDonald's. The woman introduces the male protagonist to her

husband and her daughter. Many viewers felt that there were many similarities between this commercial and Jollibee's Vow, with some claiming that "First Love" served as an inspiration for "Vow."

The ad was released as a television commercial more than a decade before "Vow." For this study, a video uploaded by a fan on YouTube was used. Table 3 summarizes the ad's social media engagement.

Table 3. Social Media Engagement for McDonald's "First Love" (fan uploaded video)

	Views	Likes/Reactions	Comments	Shares
Facebook	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
YouTube	1.3M	7,000	1,560	N/A

As with the "Vow," the audiences' reactions varied. Viewers expressed disbelief, sadness, sympathy and empathy. The most common positive reaction for both films was the appreciation for unconditional love, even if it is unrequited.

"I think this is a happy commercial. It shows that they could still be the best of friends even if they didn't work out as a couple."

"When I watched Jollibee's (commercial "Vow"), I immediately remembered this, now that's why I'm here. The OG of fast food romantic commercials."

**Ad Theme: Old Flames
McDonald's: Kumusta Ka**

"Kumusta Ka" is one of McDonald's most talked-about advertisement in the Philippines to date because they cast well-known actors and former onscreen and real-life partners Sharon Cuneta and Gabby Concepcion. Released in 2018 to celebrate Valentine's Day, ad shows the former couple serendipitously meeting up and sharing a meal inside a McDonald's. On Facebook, the short film generated 18 million views, 467,000 reactions and 40,000 comments, while it earned 4.3 million views, 12,000 likes, and 1,447 comments on YouTube. Table 4 summarizes the ad's social media engagement.

Table 4. Social Media Engagement for McDonald's "Kumusta Ka"

	Views	Likes/Reactions	Comments	Shares
Facebook	18M	467,000	40,000	101,000
YouTube	4.3M	12,000	1,447	N/A

The advertisement was well-received, particularly by older viewers who considered themselves fans of the actors. Popular comments on both Facebook and YouTube expressed feeling a sense of nostalgia after watching the short film. Fans of Sharon Cuneta and Gabby Concepcion were particularly ecstatic and pleased that McDonald's was able to set up a reunion for the actors.

"Nakakakilig!" (So romantic!)

"I normally skip ads when I see one. But this one, I watched it until the end. Nakakakilig (so romantic)! Thank you, McDo!"

"This hits different! You nailed it, McDonald's!"

“OMG! My fave loveteam in the 80s is back! Superb and kilig (romantic) to the max! Nothing beats the original! Job well done McDonald’s!”

Jollibee: Crush

Set in the 1980s, the short film “Crush” features two college co-eds who fall in love. The

short film was released on Valentine’s Day 2017, together with “Vow.” To date, the video generated 3.2 million views, 13,000 likes and 997 comments on YouTube, while it earned 18 million views, 1 million reactions and 122,000 comments on Facebook. Table 5 summarizes the ad’s social media engagement.

Table 5. Social Media Engagement for McDonald’s “Crush”

	Views	Likes/Reactions	Comments	Shares
Facebook	18M	1M	122,000	379,000
YouTube	3.2M	13,000	997	N/A

The film begins with a young man meeting and falling in love with a young woman while in university. Unfortunately, the young woman is already dating somebody else. The young man, however, pursues the woman and leaves Jollibee hamburgers with notes attached for the young woman to find whenever she feels sad. Years later, we see an older woman, presumably the young woman in the early scenes, sitting along in a table during a homecoming reunion. At the end of the evening, she is approached by an older man bearing a Jollibee hamburger and a note apologizing for being late. It is suggested that the young couple in the early scenes ended up together, are now married, and have grandchildren.

Many viewers expressed liking the ad, particularly the happy ending. This was in response to the bittersweet ending in “Vow,” which was released together with “Crush.”

“Wow! It made me cry after watching the ad.”

“How cute! Sure brings back memories!”

“Such a wonderful ad!”

Ad Theme: Moving On and Finding New Love

McDonald’s: Kaya Niya, Kaya Mo

McDonald’s television commercial, “Kaya Niya, Kaya Mo,” was released in 2017 and explores a favorite romantic trope of finding new love after heartbreak. The scene opens with a young man spotting an old flame inside a McDonald’s restaurant, on the same seat where he broke up with her. Another young man approaches the young woman, who seems to be the woman’s new love. The scene is bittersweet, leaving the young man feeling both sad and happy at the same time.

This advertisement was released both for television and on social media. It generated 6.6 million views, 11,000 likes and 1,329 comments on YouTube, while it had 15M views, 713,000 reactions, and 68,000 comments on Facebook. Commenters expressed positive feelings toward the advertisement. Table 6 summarizes the ad’s social media engagement.

“Most of us can relate to the story. It’s so good. This is a winner!”

“I love how they were able to tell the story thru their eyes. Heartfelt. Good job!”

Table 6. Social Media Engagement for McDonald’s “Kaya Niya, Kaya Mo”

	Views	Likes/Reactions	Comments	Shares
Facebook	15M	713,000	68,000	172,000
YouTube	6.6M	11,000	1,329	N/A

Jollibee: Space

In “Space,” a #KwentongJollibee short film released on Valentine’s Day 2020, Jollibee takes on the theme of moving forward after a heart-break and finding new love. While McDonald’s “Kaya Niya, Kaya Mo” uses a melodramatic plot, “Space” is a humorous take on the theme. It is a story about a young man whose girlfriend breaks up with him because of her perceived incompatibilities—she comes off a serious, while he leans on his humor to deal with life’s

situations. He then meets an old friend inside a Jollibee and share a meal with her. He teaches her how he eats a cheeseburger: he places a layer of fries inside the burger before taking a bite. The two fall in love eventually.

Since its release, “Space” has generated 21 million views, 487,000 reactions and 35,000 comments on Facebook, while it earned 10 million views, 35,000 likes and 2,101 comments on YouTube. Table 7 summarizes the ad’s social media engagement.

Table 7. Social Media Engagement for Jollibee’s “Space”

	Views	Likes/Reactions	Comments	Shares
Facebook	21M	487,000	35,000	154,000
YouTube	10M	35,000	2,101	N/A

The central theme of Jollibee’s Space is self-worth and true love. This is reflected in the most popular comments. Many have expressed hope of finding their true love and positive feelings for the story.

“Thank you Jollibee for always touching our hearts.”

Discussion

The brand experience begins with the individual watching the ad—or more specifically, getting hooked by the ad. Some viewers may choose to watch the ads again, even go so far as reliving the experience years after watching the ad for the first time. It implies that these ads have been imprinted in the memories of some consumers and that they leave a positive impression that makes consumers want to view and experience them again.

“Can’t believe this commercial is more than a decade. Still my favorite. The simplicity speaks for itself.”

“It’s been two years, but I’m still watching this! It’s so good!”

“Watching this again 3 years after and I can’t believe I’m still teary eyed even though I’ve watched this a lot of times. This is still the best Jollibee commercial for me.”

Many others will engage further on social media, by adding a reaction or liking the ad. Some may even share their thoughts and feelings on the comment section.

“I normally skip ads when I see one. But this one, I watched it until the end. Nakakilig (so romantic)! Thank you, McDo!”

“This hits different! You nailed it, McDonald’s!”

“This is heartbreaking.”

“Huhuhuhu! What a nice short story.”

Many ad consumers have also expressed how they relate to the ad. Some have expressed how they can relate to the characters, their experiences, situations, or even characteristics as shown in the ad.

“Jollibee #VOW is “my story.” This tearjerker of an ad hit me right in the feels because ... I share an almost uncanny similarity with the turn of events.”

“[This ad] reminds me of my own first love... from another place in another time.”

“This is my love story. I met my wife in grade school and I fell in love with her at first sight. But like the girl, she had many

suitors and I was a nerd with no self-confidence but we were good friends. After so many years things worked out. We are now married with 3 children. Thanks Jollibee!"

"The girl is me because she eats a lot!"

"This proves that not all the lead actors must be boy-next-door material. Jollibee is so good!"

"Guys are rarely, if not never, represented this way. Thank you Jollibee for encouraging guys to realize that they also deserve someone who appreciates them and loves them genuinely."

It is notable that some ad consumers noted nostalgic details on the ad, implying brand knowledge or even brand loyalty given that they remember the brand's history. Jollibee's Crush and McDonald's First Love are set in an earlier time period, likely in the 1980s or 1990s. Ad consumers noted previous food packaging and old restaurant interiors used in the ads.

"Great! The production, [I] see the old packaging/wrappers; they [represented] it well and the location ... perfect!!!"

"Well-played, Jollibee. Btw, miss the old packaging. Felt nostalgic seeing it."

"[I miss the] old architecture/design of McDonald's."

"I like the attention to details. [The] plastic cup and the wrapper, so retro. That's how it looked like in the 80s. Impressive!"

Comments also show that ad consumers try to recreate certain situations in the ad, specifically how food is consumed by the characters of the story. For example, in McDonald's "First Love," the main characters were shown eating fries that were dipped in sundae, while characters in Jollibee's "Space" were shown adding a layer of fries in the burger.

"Aw, that is so cute! I like eating my fries that way, too. But it's so hard to decide whether to have them plain, with ice-cream, or with ketchup! They are just good."

"And so I tried it (placing fries with the burger patty)"

"Now trying that burger stuffed with fries."

Another way that ad consumers try to replicate situations in the ad is by purchasing and consuming food from the fast food chain.

"Jollibee's ads are so effective. It made me order chicken and spaghetti last night!"

Other comments show that the brand experience is not necessarily an individual experience. What is notable in the comments is the intention of some ad consumers to engage others, providing another dimension of the brand experience. For example, some consumers use the comment section to address the brand and express how they feel. The social media managers of both Jollibee and McDonald's engage commenters, particularly during the period immediately after the ads were published on social media.

"Congratulations Jollibee! You catch our hearts. Beautiful."

"McDonald's, you made a lot of Sharon-Gabby fans happy! Thank you, thank you so much! We love you. My family loves McDonald's so much!"

Some ad consumers initiated discussions with other consumers. One example is how some comments focused on discussing the similarities between Jollibee's "Vow" and McDonald's "First Love". The following comments were found in the YouTube comment page of "First Love".

"Who went to this page as soon as you finished watching the Jollibee commercial"

"When I watched Jollibee's [commercial 'Vow'], I immediately remembered this ['First Love'], that's why I'm here. The OG of fast food romantic commercials."

"It's funny how similar the two commercials are. I like this one better. It's more effective, because I want to try dipping my fries in chocolate syrup of my sundae. The length is just right and the song...the song is immortal!"

Other comments focused on finding other ad consumers who may share a similar experience or sentiment. Others used the opportunity to share positive messages to encourage others.

"In a scale of 1 to Sharon, how ready are you to face your ex? Kidding aside, good job McDonald's!"

"To anyone who's reading this, you deserve someone who will appreciate you."

There are also ad consumers, particularly in Facebook, tag friends and family to share the experience. This is to remind them of a similar experience, to express the sentiment conveyed in the ad, or to recreate a line uttered in the ad. Still, there are others who just tag friends to encourage them to watch the ads.

"[Tagged name of friend] i remember our 'post it' messages sa locker nung ER days!"

"[Tagged name of friend] I loved you once. I loved you twice. I love you more than chicken joy and rice."

"You're the one [tagged name of friend]!"

Conclusion

Consumers may experience a brand through exposure to marketing communications, including advertising. How viewers engaged with the six ads show the different ways in which a consumer can experience a brand through advertising. The behavior of ad consumers show that brand experience in social

media may be experienced individually, by viewing the ad and getting hooked. Consumers may also express their feelings and thoughts about the ad, adding a different layer to the experience. They may react to the ad, comment on the ad, or even share the ad to their social media network—outcomes that marketing professionals work on influencing consumers to do. Many consumers use the comment section to express how they feel about the ad, or even how they felt after watching the ad.

The brand experience may also become a communal experience, with ad consumers engaging the brand on social media through its social media managers and even fellow ad consumers. In doing so, the experience is co-created not just with the brand but also with other consumers.

What this implies is that brands have many opportunities to engage with and co-create value with its consumers through interactive and engaging brand communications. The brand experience that resulted from consumer engagement shows the significance of storytelling—it is a powerful tool that help imprint and co-create meaningful brand value in consumers, particularly because they can relate to the characters and their situation.

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