

# Influence of Manipulative Marketing Tactics

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## Abstract

This study examines the influence of manipulative marketing tactics, specifically visual, linguistic, and emotional appeals, on teenagers' food choices in fast-food advertising. With adolescent obesity rates continuing to rise globally, marketing strategies from corporations such as McDonald's, Burger King, and Chick-fil-A play a critical role in shaping unhealthy eating behaviors. While previous research has identified the general impact of advertising on youth, few studies have isolated which specific tactic exerts the strongest influence. To address this gap, two surveys were conducted with teenagers ages 12 - 19, analyzing responses to ads categorized by appeal type. The findings reveal a notable discrepancy: although participants frequently selected linguistic appeals in multiple-choice sections, their open-ended responses consistently emphasized visuals—color, imagery, and food presentation—as the most persuasive elements. This suggests that visual appeal holds the greatest subconscious influence, despite teenagers' perception that they attend to text. These results highlight the vulnerability of adolescents to visually dominant marketing in a media-saturated environment and underscore the need for greater media literacy, policy intervention, and ethical advertising practices. Future research should explore how visual persuasion extends beyond food advertising into other consumer, lifestyle, and social domains.

## Keywords

Marketing, Tactics, Advertising, Teenagers, Adolescents, Emotional, Visual, Linguistic

## 1. Literary Review

### 1.1. Introduction

According to the World Health Organization, a United Nations agency responsible for international public health, amidst the 7.9 billion people in the world in 2022, "2.5 billion adults aged 18 years and older were overweight, including over

890 million adults who were living with obesity” (World Health Organization, 2024). Not only that, but just in the United States, 67% of individuals were classified as overweight (World Health Organization, 2024). Michael Greger, a physician and internationally recognized speaker on public health issues, claims that extensive studies demonstrate that marketing, primarily through advertisement, significantly impacts people’s eating behavior, often leading to increased consumption (Greger, 2024). This is in light of “Marketing tactics [that] often operate on a subconscious level, influencing decisions without individuals being fully aware of it” (Greger, 2024). The American Psychological Association, the largest psychological association in the world, claims that the youth obesity epidemic is a serious public health issue that raises rates of illness and death, bringing substantial long-term economic and social expenses and concerns for the future (American Psychological Association, 2010). Accordingly, to remedy this situation, one must understand the youth’s role as consumers, different advertisement tactics, and what tactics popular fast-food chains use, which is what this literature review will focus on to provide a basis for the research study.

## 1.2. Teenagers’ Role as Consumers

The increase in obesity is not a new phenomenon; in the last quarter century, “rates of obesity in America’s children and youth have almost tripled... In teens ages 12 to 19, prevalence rates have tripled (5.0% to 17.6%)” (American Psychological Association, 2010). This results from the idea that today’s children, aged 8 to 18, are exposed to various forms of media and spend around 44.5 hours weekly on screens, such as phones, computers, and televisions, making it their main activity aside from sleeping (American Psychological Association, 2010). Children and teenagers, just as adults, are impacted by ads on a subconscious level. However, most of them, unlike adults, cannot understand the persuasive intent of advertising, as its very nature is exploitative and specifically directed towards them (American Psychological Association, 2010). Jessica Packer et al., writers of the National Library of Medicine, claim that at 16 years of age, reasoning abilities are not fully developed, and they keep maturing into adulthood (Packer et al., 2022). This suggests that young people, including adolescents, may struggle to assess advertising and protect themselves from its potentially harmful effects. Regardless, teenagers continue to be targeted in advertisements. According to Anastasia Tsochantaridou et al., from the Department of Public Health Policy at the University of West Attica, children and teens are valuable consumers and crucial to the market as they buy products directly, influence family purchases, and develop early brand loyalty (Tsochantaridou et al., 2023). These connections optimize the market, ensuring continued sales over time and giving corporations a reason to persist in aiming toward the youth (Tsochantaridou et al., 2023). Nevertheless, through this, the vicious cycle repeats, as targeted advertising leads youth to develop unhealthy eating habits, ultimately contributing to the rise in obesity. Thus, this information highlights the need for increased awareness and action to reduce the

impact of targeted advertising on youth and encourage healthier choices.

### 1.3. Advertisement Tactics

There are two types of advertisements: non-manipulative and manipulative advertising. As stated by Victor Danciu, from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, non-manipulative advertising presents the product “in the best possible light. The advertiser doesn’t need to lie, omit details or intimidate the consumer. This type of advertising is truthful, that is the facts presented are real, the information is given in a clear, logical manner” to convince through informing (Danciu, 2014). On the other hand, manipulative advertising is “focused on getting the consumers to do what the advertiser wants through subversive manners” or simply optimally alter reality (Danciu, 2014). This is seen through a number of tactics, such as emotional or guilt appeals, linguistic appeals, and visual appeals. Emotional advertising “consists in an emotional game which has a goal to favorably influence the decision of the consumer” (Danciu, 2014). In these, Jacek Michalak and Mateusz Stypiński, both Faculty of Economic Sciences at the University of Warmia and Mazury, state that it aims “to evoke positive emotional reactions in consumers to the products or services being advertised” (Jacek & Stypiński, 2023). This could be done through the use of sounds, music, stories, or images that are supposed to arouse specific emotions, such as joy, sadness, anxiety, or frustration, and render a response making a purchase (Jacek & Stypiński, 2023). Then, according to Leanne Proctor, a researcher from Northeastern University, advertisements exhibiting linguistic appeals “are often called “catchy” and are associated with attracting a consumer’s attention” through speech or writing (Proctor, 2013). For example, evaluative words such as “best,” “perfect,” “ideal,” and “extraordinary” are “popular because they help convince consumers that a product or service is unique, that is, the best on the market” (Jacek & Stypiński, 2023). To go on, the use of structures that prevent negation is a tactic where the message is crafted to make refutation difficult. For instance, instead of saying, “Our product is not expensive,” advertisers might say, “If you’re looking for a good-priced product, ours is a great option,” emphasizing the positive while minimizing objections (Jacek & Stypiński, 2023). Lastly, incorporating visual elements and graphics has long been a critical, effective strategy in marketing. According to The Yale Ledger, a student-led weekly magazine from Yale University, “By creating an ad that is colorful, well-designed, and attractive, marketers are more likely to catch the attention of their potential customers as well as remain in their memory” (The Yale Ledger, 2023). Additionally, visuals, graphics, and photos improve memory retention and recall, as people remember information better when presented visually and create mental associations that make the message and brand more memorable (The Yale Ledger, 2023). So, just as all of these tactics are designed to persuade and manipulate consumer behavior, they often target the youth who are especially susceptible to these tactics, as explained earlier. As studies show, these strategies exploit psychological vulnerabilities, leading adolescents to make purchasing de-

cisions that are not based on rational thought. Therefore, with the constant bombardment of advertisements across various media platforms, these persuasive techniques not only influence teenagers' food choices but also contribute to the rising obesity epidemic through the increase of unhealthy eating habits.

#### **1.4. Fast-Food Chains' Tactics**

For a long time now, fast food chains have been leaders in utilizing aggressive marketing strategies, capturing the attention of consumers, particularly young audiences. McDonald's, for example, became globally known through its marketing approach. According to Rahul Arun, a Senior Research Analyst at Simplilearn, in "2018, the company spent nearly \$1.5 billion on advertising in the US alone" (Arun, 2023). Its strategies included one of its leading practices of visual marketing, where promotional materials are placed in unusual or unexpected locations to grab attention more memorably (Arun, 2023). This strategy not only reinforces their brand recognition but also strengthens their ability to influence purchasing decisions. Similarly, Burger King has become known for its bold campaigns, which often use humor and controversy to engage consumers. For instance, Kevin Urrutia, an E-commerce Marketing Podcast Host, explains that Burger King's use of wit, satire, and humor, mainly through social media platforms like the "Whopper Sacrifice' campaign, which encouraged Facebook users to unfriend 10 people in exchange for a free Whopper," shows how the brand uses unconventional methods to connect with its audience (Urrutia, 2023). Chick-fil-A, in contrast, focuses strongly on emotional marketing to create a personal connection with consumers. According to Justin McLaughlin, Director of Product Marketing at a company, Chick-fil-A's advertisements "highlight family values, kindness, and memorable moments", using an emotional appeal (McLaughlin, 2023). With a clever mix of billboards, television, and radio ads, Chick-fil-A has created originality, emphasizing quality food and meaningful emotional customer experiences (McLaughlin, 2023). By composing ads that evoke emotional responses, Chick-fil-A builds customer loyalty and makes consumers feel like part of the family. Hence, as fast-food giants such as McDonald's, Burger King, and Chick-fil-A continue to refine their marketing strategies, they ensure they remain top of mind for consumers, particularly teenagers, who are especially vulnerable to their persuasive advertising.

#### **1.5. Conclusion and Gap in Research**

Ultimately, the manipulation of youth through advertisement is an undeniably complex problem that must be addressed. Regardless of regulations, such as, according to Victoria L. Rubin, the director of the Language and Information Technologies Research Lab at the University of Western Ontario, "the U.S. Federal Trade Commission [that] distinguishes between puffery and materially harmful misleading ads," this issue continues to persist (Rubin, 2022). If this issue is not mitigated, the youth, who are the future leaders, will face lifelong health challenges, potentially including chronic illnesses such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and

even certain cancers (American Psychological Association, 2010). While much research has examined the impact of advertising on teenagers' behavior and how each tactic works, a crucial gap remains in determining which specific advertising tactic is the most effective in exploiting teenagers' food choices. So, this study intends to decide which tactic is most manipulative and influential towards teenagers and if there is a difference between them. Understanding this could offer insights into mitigating the harmful effects of manipulative advertising, helping to design counter-strategies that promote healthier habits and protect the next generation.

## 2. Hypothesis

Prior to conducting this research, the researcher hypothesized that teenagers would most likely be influenced by the visual appeal in ads more so than the emotional or linguistic appeal. Paul F. Sable and Okan Akcay, both researchers of consumer psychology, claim that colors, imagery, and overall presentation play a dominant role in decision-making, especially in today's digital world, where apps like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube constantly enforce visually stimulating content (Sable & Akcay, 2011). The Media Education Centre, which is in Consultative Status with the United Nations' ECOSOC and promotes the role of media, digital, visual, social, health, peace, and information literacy in transitioning to a sustainable global society, also shows that the brain processes visual information 60,000 times faster than text, making teenagers particularly responsive to bold colors, striking designs, and high-contrast imagery in advertisements (The Media Education Centre, 2010). Moreover, since adolescents' cognitive abilities are still developing, they are more likely to be influenced by visuals and instinctive reactions rather than making a deliberate analysis before a purchase (Luna & Peracchio, 2005). So, as past studies support the idea that visuals tend to stand out to individuals, the researcher predicts that the visual appeal would have the strongest influence on teenagers' food choices.

## 3. Methods

In this study, advertising appeals were categorized as follows: Visual appeal refers to elements such as colors, imagery, and layout designed to capture attention; Linguistic appeal refers to persuasive language, word choice, or slogans; and Emotional appeal involves evoking feelings such as nostalgia, excitement, or comfort.










For the researcher's methods, the researcher began by researching various articles that gave insight into the rising global obesity epidemic, advertisements' roles in influencing consumers' decisions, teenagers' role as consumers, and how Burger King, McDonald's, and Chick-fil-A, the three fast food chains the researcher is focusing on, manage their marketing and advertisement to make them successful. The researcher ended up compiling 50 sources made up of past research, scientific and medical papers, and articles from consumers and corporations. Once completing this, the researcher moved on to the next phase of the research process: creating the researcher's surveys, which would be anonymous for the participants.

To do so, for the researcher’s first survey, the researcher collected existing “appealing” advertisements used by Burger King, McDonald’s, and Chick-fil-A. These included ads with burgers, fries, chicken nuggets, and ice cream as they are more appealing to the researcher’s target audience, teens. The researcher then selected ads that the researcher considered to be each more dominant in a different type of appeal to the consumer, between emotional, linguistic, and visual appeals. In total, the researcher selected nine ads per business and three ads per appeal for each one as well. The researcher then started to make the survey, wherein the first section, the researcher asked about each participant’s demographics. Questions included:

- Gender
- Grade
- Age
- Public or private school
- Place of residence
- Financial status

Then, in the following three sections (sections 2-4), I chose one of the three businesses to focus on per section (between McDonald’s, Chick-fil-A, and Burger King), where I would ask the participants one question three times, with different answer choices each time the question was asked. Each time I asked the question, I showed the participants 3 ads (one of each appeal) and asked them to read the ads and choose which made them want to buy the product more. The participants were not told which ad or letter option corresponded to each appeal, and all the answers were shuffled. Ads were randomly ordered in each instance to minimize presentation bias and improve reproducibility. I repeated this process per each section, changing the ads according to the business and products sold. Questions included are shown in **Figures 1-3**:










Question: Which one of these ads makes you want to buy the product more? Please take your time and read the words on the ads (if they have).

Letter Option	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
A			
B			
C			

**Key**  
 A=Visual  
 B=Emotional/  
 Humor  
 C=Linguistic

Figure 1. Survey 1, Section 2: Burger King Ads.










Question: Which one of these ads makes you want to buy the product more? Please take your time and read the words on the ads (if they have).

Letter Option	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
A			
B			
C			

**Key**  
 A=Linguistic  
 B=Emotional/  
 Humor  
 C=Visual

Figure 2. Survey 1, Section 3: McDonald's Ads.

Question: Which one of these ads makes you want to buy the product more? Please take your time and read the words on the ads (if they have).

Letter Option	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
A			
B			
C			

**Key**  
 A=Linguistic  
 B=Visual  
 C=Emotional  
 /Humor

Figure 3. Survey 1, Section 4: Chick-fil-A Ads.

In the last section, I asked the participants what made them not want to choose certain ads and what did, to truly evaluate if the appeals truly work and determine what the participants look at. Moreover, between ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answer choices, I asked the participants if the ads made them hungry and want to buy the product, if they that ads can manipulate them into buying something, and if they think they are aware when it happens (if they said yes) to determine if they think they are conscious when it happens.










Then, for the second survey, I repeated this process in a similar way but altered some of the questions. Once again, ads were randomly ordered in each instance to minimize presentation bias and improve the results. In the first section, ques-

tions included:

- Grade
- Age
- Ethnicity
- Language spoken at home
- Both parents' highest education level

The researcher then decided that for the second section, the researcher wanted to focus on ads that were not necessarily considered as appealing to teenagers. For this, the researcher chose salads, which are not usually considered to attract teenagers, just as burgers, fries, or ice cream would. Furthermore, these fast-food corporations all have salads as part of their menu, allowing the researcher to maintain the research focus on the three businesses that were chosen. However, as salad ads are less common and harder to find, the researcher decided to change the formatting for the researcher's second section, and rather than asking three questions for each business, the researcher asked the same question three times total, once per business. Each question had three different ads as options, and just like in the researcher's first survey, each option represented a distinct appeal that was shuffled. Ads were randomly ordered in each instance to minimize presentation bias and improve reproducibility. Questions included are shown in **Figure 4**:

Question: Which one of these ads makes you want to buy the product more? Please take your time and read the words on the ads (if they have).

Letter Option	Time 1: Burger King	Time 2: Chick-Fil-A	Time 3: McDonald's	Key
A				A=Visual B=Linguistic C=Emotional /Humor
B				
C				

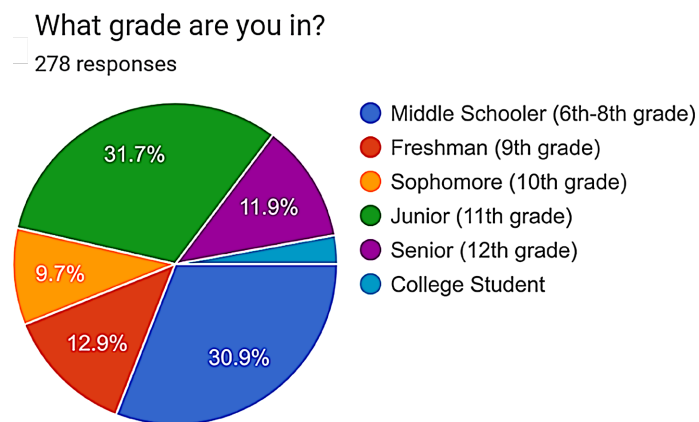
**Figure 4.** Survey 2, Section 2: Salad Ads.

In the last section, the researcher repeated the same questions as in the first survey but added two more questions. The researcher asked the participants which appeal they think makes a fast food ad most effective and asked them if they read the words in the ads, as well as stating why or why not. The researcher did this to determine if the results were congruent with what they thought and if one of the researcher's limitations is that participants did not read the ads.

## 4. Results & Analysis

Both surveys were sent to the same people globally to keep the participants a controlled variable in order to obtain accurate results. However, for the first survey, the researcher obtained two-hundred and seventy-eight responses, and for the second, one-hundred eighty-one, attributed to reduced interest in the second survey. Regardless, results from both surveys still provide valuable and applicable insight regarding the researcher's research topic.

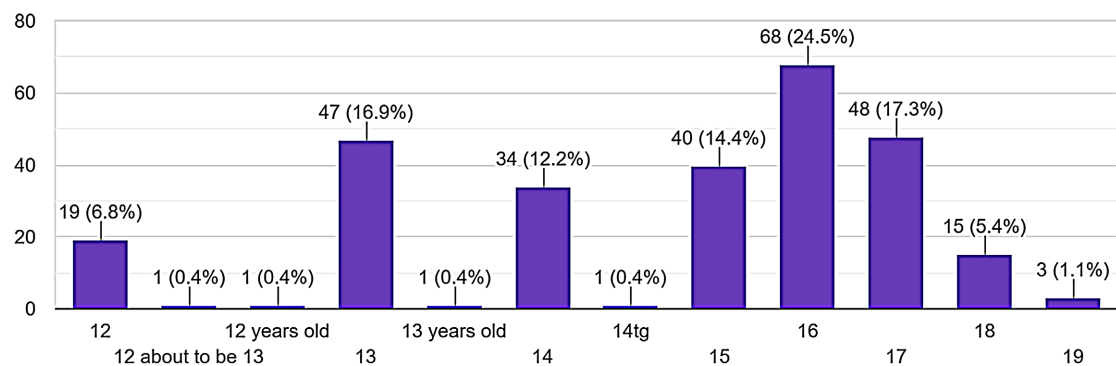
In the researcher's first survey, the researcher had 43% male and 57% female respondents from teenagers ages 12 - 19 in grades 6<sup>th</sup> (middle school) through first-year college students. The break-down consisted as displayed below in **Figure 5** and **Figure 6**:



**Figure 5.** Grade.

How old are you?

278 responses



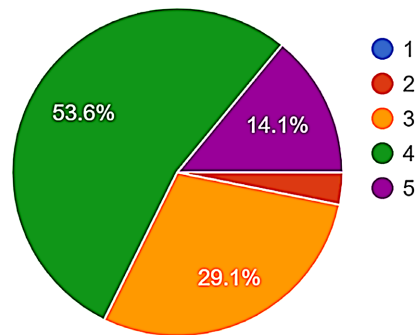
**Figure 6.** Age.

Furthermore, 19.4% of participants stated they went/go to public school while 80.6% claimed they went/go to a private school. When asked where the participants live, 85.6% of participants claimed that they live in Florida, while the rest live out of state or internationally in places such as California, Georgia, Israel, Italy, Venezuela, Colombia, England, Panama, Kentucky, Texas, Argentina, New York, Spain, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and New Jersey. Depending on the participant's

age, place of residence, and the language and culture there, interpretations of ads could vary. Lastly, before going into questions about the advertising, individuals (optionally) rated their financial status. The breakdown consisted as follows, as shown in **Figure 7**:

Choose the financial status you fall into (5 being the wealthiest and 1 being the least stable).

220 responses



**Figure 7.** Financial status.

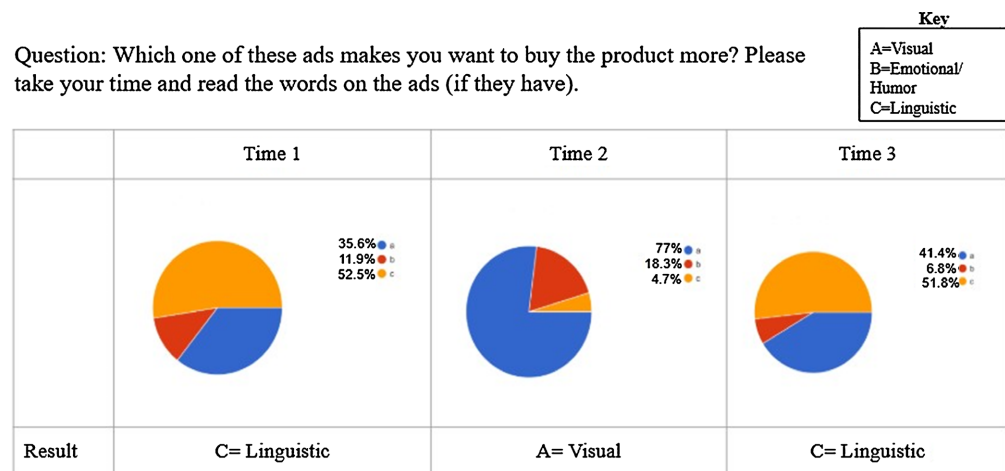
In this, one can see that no participants selected their financial status as one, 3.2% of participants selected two, 29.1% selected a three, 53.6% selected a four, and lastly, 14.1% selected a five. Here, the majority of the participants (53.6%) selected that they believe that they classify as a four when rating their financial status, bringing attention to the fact that my participant's responses in the coming sections will be given with a mentality derived from that.

Moving on from the demographics, results from questions regarding which ads make participants want to buy a product more are as seen below. In each table, each piechart depicts the general opinion of the participants as they chose which ad stands out more to them.

As seen in **Figure 8**, the first time, most participants preferred an ad with a strong linguistic appeal. In the second time, they favored a visually dominant ad, but in the third time, they went back to choosing the ad with a linguistic appeal. Since linguistic appeal was chosen twice out of three times, it can be concluded that it was the most popular appeal for Burger King ads.

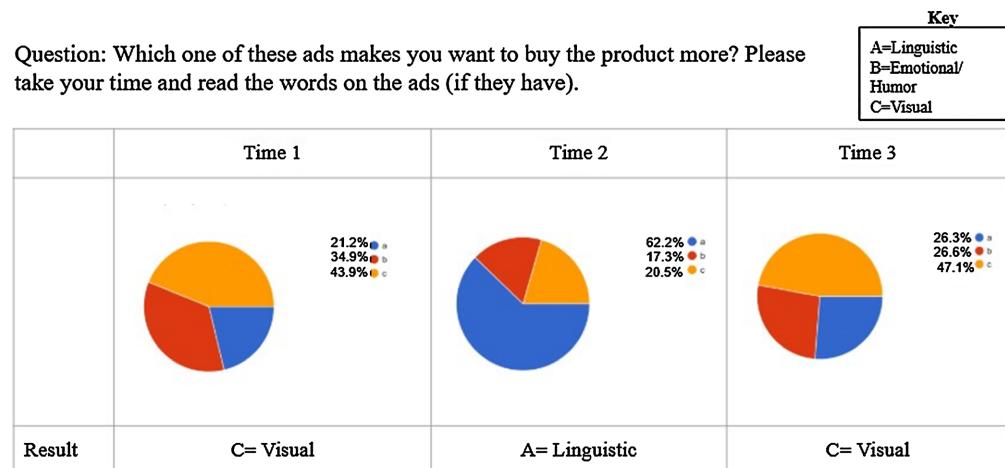
Here in **Figure 9**, participants initially chose a visually dominant ad, switched to a linguistic appeal the second time, and then the third-time chose a visual appeal again. Since visual appeal was preferred two out of three times, it is seen as the dominant appeal for McDonald's ads.

This figure, **Figure 10**, shows how participants in Time 1 favored a visual appeal, in Time 2, a linguistic appeal, and in Time 3, a linguistic appeal again. With linguistic appeal chosen twice, it was the most common appeal for Chick-fil-A ads. Given that the linguistic appeal was the prevailing result in two out of the three sections, sections 2 and 4, it appears to be the primary appeal teenagers look at in fast-food ads based on participants' selections above.



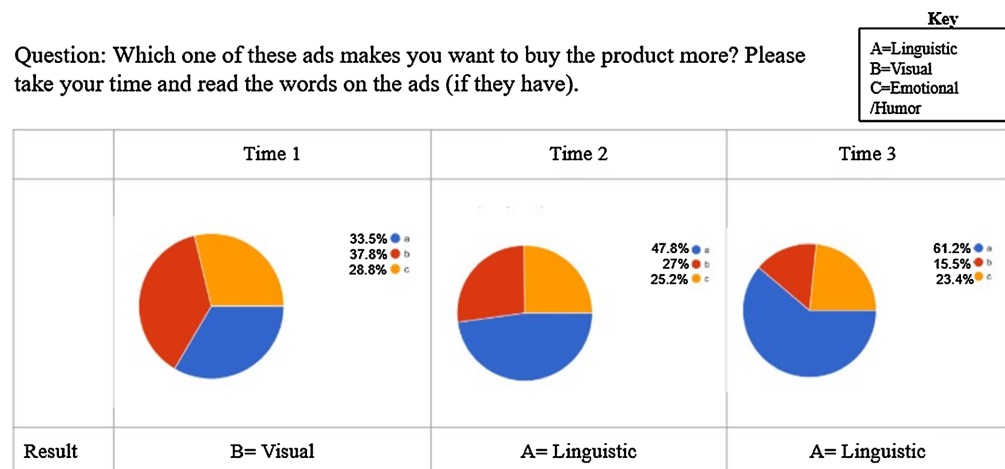
General Finding: Linguistic

Figure 8. Survey 1, Section 2: Burger King Ads Findings.



General Finding: Visual

Figure 9. Survey 1, Section 3: McDonald's Ads Findings.



General Finding: Linguistic

Figure 10. Survey 1, Section 4: Chick-fil-A Ads Findings.

Regardless of the outcome, in the next section, when asking the participants what made them *not* want to choose certain ads, most participants wrote answers such as:

- “Too much text.”
- “If the colors weren’t cool or bright.”
- “Complicated or lengthy words (simple works better). I don’t think the ones that try to be funny work that much.”
- “Not pleasing looking.”
- “They looked gross.”

Thus, this demonstrates how participants claim that they prefer ads with fewer words and a more visually appealing design, despite contradicting their responses in the previous sections, where the outcome was the linguistic appeal. Then, when asked what *did* make them want to choose certain ads, participants predominantly wrote answers including:

- “the colors popped and made me look their way, and the burgers look tasty.”
- “Making the product pop out, enhancing the parts of it which are most liked. Eye-catching colors.”
- “They look good and yummy.”
- “if it was engaging and colorful or fun.”
- “How the product looked.”

Therefore, this highlights how participants continue to assert that they favor the visual appeal in fast food ads, as their responses are in regard to ads’ appearance.

Finally, when asked if the ads made the participants hungry and wanted to buy the product, 64% clicked ‘yes’, and 38% clicked ‘no’, displaying how the ads are effective and manipulative towards viewers at any time of day. Then, out of the two-hundred and seventy-eight respondents, 69.1% selected ‘yes,’ 21.2% selected ‘maybe,’ and 9.7% selected ‘no’ when asking participants if they think ads can manipulate individuals into buying something, showing how participants are conscious of ads’ psychological influence. Out of the 192 participants who chose yes, 167 believed that they are aware when it happens, indicating that participants believe that they are aware when an ad is manipulating them. However, as this seems unlikely in reality, it could be attributed to the fact that participants clicked “yes” because the idea of manipulation was already in their heads due to the previous question.

Subsequently, in the researcher’s second survey, the researcher had 40.9% male and 59.1% female respondents from one hundred eighty-one participants who also completed the first survey. The break-down of gender, grade, and age consisted as displayed below (See **Figures 11-13**):

Then, when asked about participants’ ethnicity, the most common responses were American, Hispanic, European, and Israeli, as participants had the option to select more than one. Numbers indicated that 91 participants chose American, 73 chose Hispanic, 32 European, and 39 Israeli. For language spoken at home,

### Select your gender:

181 responses

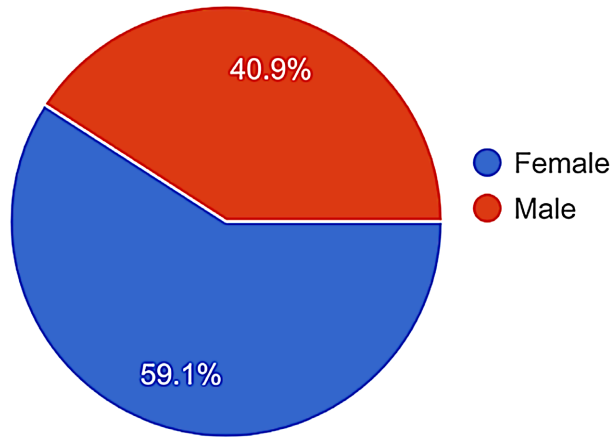


Figure 11. Gender.

### What grade are you in?

181 responses

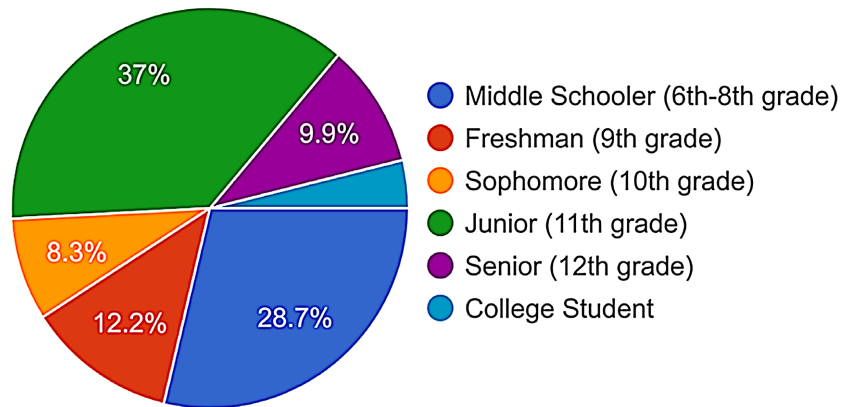


Figure 12. Grade 2.

### How old are you?

181 responses

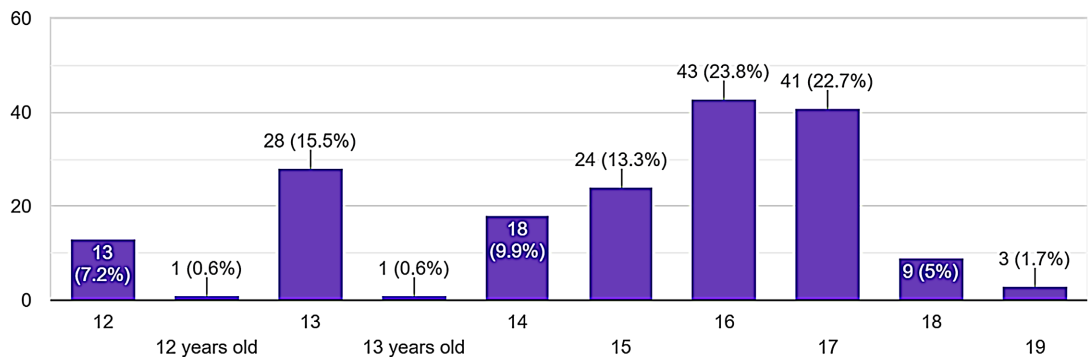
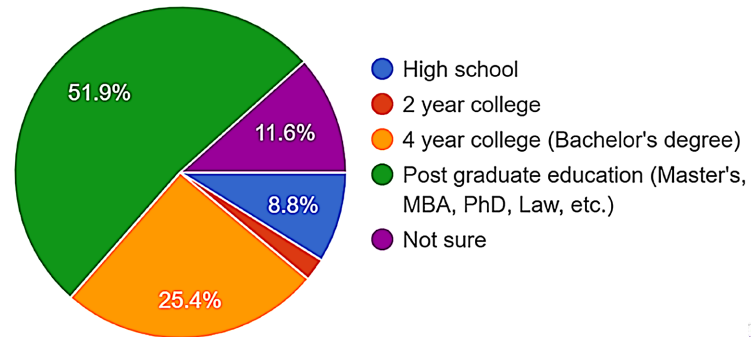


Figure 13. Ages 2.

participants were also allowed to select multiple, with 122 participants choosing English, 64 Spanish, and 38 Hebrew as the three most prevalent. This opens up the possibility for participant's opinions when reading ads to be influenced by the language spoken at home as there was no translation for the ads. Next, for participants' parent's highest education level, the breakdown was as follows (See **Figure 14** and **Figure 15**):

#### What is your parents highest education level? (Parent 1)

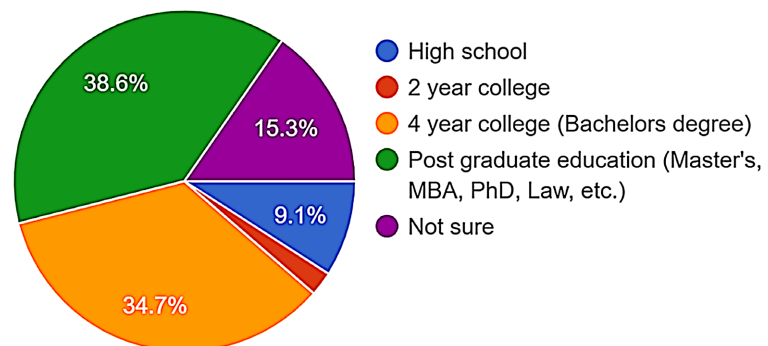
181 responses



**Figure 14.** Parents highest education level-1.

#### What is your parents highest education level? (Parent 2)

176 responses

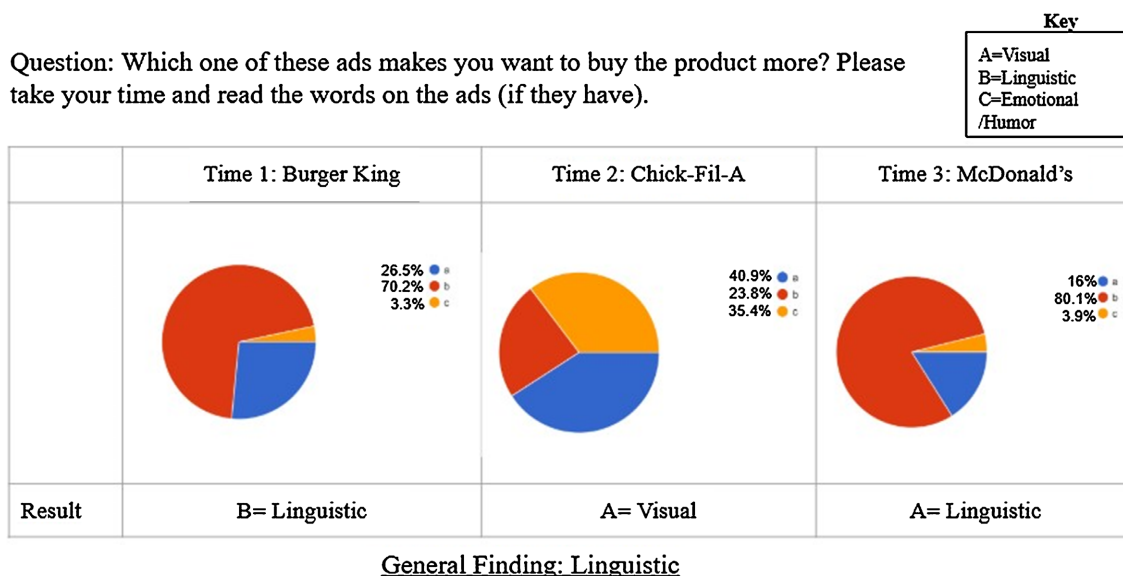


**Figure 15.** Parents highest education level-2.

Through this information, one can obtain more intel on the financial status of the participants. The higher the parent's education level is, the more likely participants are to have a better economic status. With this data, I can better understand the participant's responses, as those participants with a higher economic status are less likely to pay attention to the linguistic appeal when referring to pricing or discounts. Accordingly, as seen by the breakdown above of **Figure 14** and **Figure 15**, most of my participants' parents' education level is a Bachelor's Degree or better, showing how the majority of my participants must have a comfortable economic status.

After demographics, the second section's results from questions regarding which appeals in salad ads make participants want to buy a product more are seen

below. In the table, each pie chart shows the consensus of the participants as they selected which ad makes them want to buy the product more.



**Figure 16.** Survey 2, Section 2: Salad Ads findings.

In **Figure 16**, most participants chose the ads with linguistic appeal when Burger King salad ads were displayed in the first question. For the second question, Chick-fil-A ads, the majority of participants chose the visual appeal, and for the third question, McDonald's ads, participants preferred the linguistic appeal once again. Therefore, as the linguistic appeal was picked in two out of three questions, it is seen as the dominant appeal for salad ads as well.

Just like in the first survey, in the next section, when asking the participants what made them *not* want to choose certain ads, most participants wrote answers such as:

- “Looks and presentation.”
- “Some food looked bad.”
- “If the food looks unappetizing or not presented well.”
- “They didn't look like they had very good quality.”

This expresses how participants' responses are consistent with the first survey, as their reasoning for not liking certain ads still pertains to their appealing look. That being said, there were no responses regarding the words on the ads, unlike in the first survey. Then, when asked what *did* make them want to choose certain ads, participants predominantly wrote answers including:

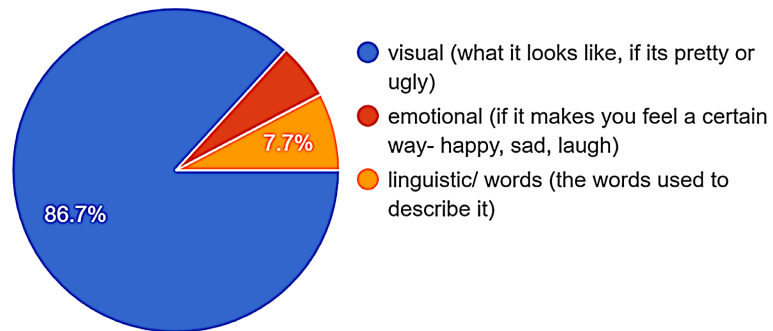
- “The color and presentation.”
- “More colorful.”
- “The food looked the most appealing.”
- “If the food looked yummy.”

Once again, participants stated their reasoning with claims that the appearance of the ads and salads was most important to them, continuing the trend from the

first survey. Not only that but when asking participants what appeal they think makes a fast food ad most effective, most participants (86.7%) responded “visual” as shown below in **Figure 17**:

Which appeal do you think makes a fast food ad most effective?

181 responses



**Figure 17.** Participants’ beliefs on effectiveness of appeals.

While participants’ responses with the ad selection showed that they favored a linguistic appeal, their responses to the question above in **Figure 17** show what is truly important to them when viewing the advertising.

Finally, in the open-ended, optional question, “Did you read the words in the ads? Why or why not?” 96 participants gave ‘Yes’ responses, and 58 responded ‘No’.

Reasons for reading the ads included are shown in **Table 1**:

Reasons for not reading the ads included are seen in **Table 2**:

This data shows that participants were not very interested in reading the text in ads. While some participants did read the ads, many of them only did so because they were told to, not because they wanted to. That being said, the most common reason for not reading was focusing on the food, with 27.59% of

**Table 1.** Survey 2. Reasons for Reading Words on Ads.

Reasons for Reading	Percentage (out of those who said “yes”)
Told to read them	18.75
Wanted to understand what was advertised	12.5
Big, eye-catching text	10.41667
Curious if words influenced decision	8.333333
Entertainment (e.g., Chick-fil-A ads)	6.25
Ensure the product was something they wanted	8.333333
Reading is a habit/instinct	6.25
Analyze/evaluate the ad	6.25
Check if ad was misleading	7.291667
Look for deals/promotions	5.208333

**Table 2.** Survey 2. Reasons for Not Reading Words on Ads.

Reasons for Not Reading	Percentage
Focused on the food	27.58621
Text too long	20.68966
Didn't care about the words	15.51724
Lazy/short attention span	10.34483
Visual person	6.896552
Already knew what was being sold	5.172414
Words don't impact decision	5.172414
Advertising is exaggerated	3.448276
Food looked appetizing without text	3.448276
Preferred video/audio over reading	1.724138

responses related to that, followed by complaints of text being too long (20.69%) and not caring about the words (15.52%). Even though some participants claimed they read the ads to understand them, others felt advertising was exaggerated or unimportant, exemplifying that even when participants read the text, they did not fully trust or pay attention to it. Ultimately, as seen through their responses, participants were more drawn to images than words, revealing that teenagers focus more on the visual appeal, rather than the linguistic when looking at fast-food ads.

## 5. Discussions

### 5.1. Implications

Prior to conducting the researcher's research, the researcher hypothesized that visual appeal would be the most influential factor for teenagers when seen in fast food ads. After researching, the researcher's hypothesis was proven correct. The data the researcher collected showed that the majority of teenagers focus on the visual aspects of ads rather than words or emotional appeals. While teenagers predominantly selected the linguistic appeal in sections two through four of the first survey and in section two of the second survey, as shown by the pie charts, the following sections revealed that the visual appeal was, in fact, the true conclusion, as participants explained their reasoning. This could be explained by the open-ended questions, where participants truly expressed their reasoning and mentality when making their choices such as in **Table 1** and **Table 2**. While most participants selected that they read the ads as seen in **Figure 17**, the reasoning behind it was not because the words attracted them, but more so because they were asked to read them by the directions in the survey. Not only that, but in their responses when not reading the ads, most participants gave reasons saying that they were focused on the food in the pictures. This data, while it counters the respondent's answers from the first few sections, shows the real motive behind the participant's choices, pointing to the visual appeal as the most dominant. Despite there being a

couple of responses supporting the linguistic appeal, the majority of the participants who selected that they read the ads gave their reasoning that it was only because they were told to, suggesting that the larger part of the participants who did read would have preferred not to.

Interestingly, while linguistic appeals were more frequently selected in the multiple-choice sections of both surveys, open-ended responses strongly indicated a preference for visual elements. This contradiction may be explained by the structured format of the surveys: participants were likely influenced by the presence of persuasive words or slogans in the options provided. However, when allowed to express their reasoning freely, they consistently emphasized visuals such as color, food presentation, and design. One possible explanation is that visual stimuli activate more immediate, emotional reactions, while linguistic content requires more deliberate processing. Teenagers, whose cognitive development is still in progress, may default to visual impressions even if they believe their choices are based on text. Furthermore, survey instructions that explicitly asked participants to read each ad might have artificially increased attention to language, resulting in higher selection rates for linguistic appeal. This highlights a key limitation of self-report measures, as participants may not be fully aware of the subconscious factors that actually influence their decisions. Understanding this discrepancy helps clarify the true power of visual marketing, particularly for adolescent audiences.

No matter what belief is held, the visual appeal in fast food advertisements is shown to be the most influential on teenagers when buying products. Hence, this suggests that teenagers are particularly vulnerable to visual marketing tactics that contain imagery, esthetics, and color more than text or emotional appeals. Moreover, as fast-food companies continue to invest billions in advertising strategies, such as Burger King, McDonald's, and Chick-fil-A do, there will be a constant contribution to unhealthy eating habits as there are a number of businesses that prioritize aesthetics over nutritional transparency ([American Psychological Association, 2010](#)). Ultimately, beyond fast food, this study also identifies a broader trend: in an era when visual media and digital content are increasingly influential, people are forming opinions and making decisions based on what looks appealing rather than what is logically or factually true. As a result, it raises a concern for the future of an individual's decision-making regarding visual influence from the media. By understanding the power of visual appeal, society can take steps to create a more informed and health-aware generation of consumers.

## 5.2. Limitations

The limitations of this study must be taken into account when viewing its results. A significant limitation is the census of the researcher's participants and their demographics. For starters, participants were mainly from Florida, private schools, and were middle-to-upper class as concluded by [Figure 7](#), [Figure 14](#), and [Figure 15](#), even though the researcher's study was taken at a global scale with diverse

backgrounds and education, which could hinder the validity of the researcher's results. Moreover, while on the researcher's first survey, the researcher obtained two-hundred and seventy-eight responses, on the second survey, the researcher only had one-hundred eighty-one, possibly suggesting that the results in the researcher's second survey are not as accurate. Additionally, the language barrier with those participants who either are international or do not speak English as a first language should be taken into account, as there were no translations for the text in the ads. Thus, there is the possibility that the researcher's respondents' selections would have been different with a greater understanding of the text's meanings. Then another notable limitation is the fact that in most, if not all, linguistically and emotionally dominant ads that the researcher selected for the researcher's surveys, there are visual appeals present, as businesses tend to use words to enhance their ads to either explain a product, pricing, or entice/attract the consumer. Due to this, while the ads the researcher selected did have an appeal stronger than the rest, there is a chance that the researcher's respondent's selections would have been different if that was not the case, and the researcher completely isolated each appeal. Lastly, time constraints affected the depth and scope of the researcher's research. With more time, the researcher could have gathered a larger sample size and conducted a more thorough analysis of which marketing tactics and advertising strategies most effectively influence teenagers as consumers. This demographic skew may limit the generalizability of findings beyond the middle-to-upper class private school population in Florida.

## 6. Future Studies

While this study concluded that the visual appeal is the most dominant factor shaping teens' food choices as consumers viewing fast food ads, the implications extend beyond their food choices. Future research should focus on determining if teenager's opinions on health, lifestyle, and even political and social issues may also be shaped more by what they see rather than what they read or hear. This brings up important questions about media literacy, consumer awareness, and the responsibility of advertisers, since visuals and aesthetics continue to shape public opinion and influence consumer choices in ways people often do not realize or question. For example, future research should explore how digital media and advertisements driven by algorithms amplify the effects of visual marketing, particularly on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where teenagers are constantly exposed to visually compelling ads. A comparison of digital ads to traditional ones could reveal whether social media's highly personalized, image-heavy content reinforces unhealthy consumer behaviors more than television or print ads. On top of that, future research could determine if this trend, of the visual appeal being selected as the most influential, is only within fast-food ads, or if it also continues when teenagers see advertisements for other products, such as sneakers. Additionally, cross-cultural studies could examine whether teenagers from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds respond similarly to vis-

ual advertising, or if external factors such as economic status, education, or cultural norms influence their susceptibility to these tactics, which is something that was not possible for my research due to time constraints. All in all, this research not only isolates which tactic, in particular, is most effective in manipulating teenage consumers' decisions, but it also provides a starting point to address the obesity epidemic, such as policy discussions on food marketing regulations. As marketing keeps evolving, future research could focus on policy changes, media literacy programs, and ethical advertising guidelines to help teenagers make more informed choices instead of being unknowingly influenced by visual marketing tactics.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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