

Persuasive Elements in Fast-Food Advertisements: Teenagers' Interpretations Through the Elaboration Likelihood Model Framework

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how persuasive elements in fast-food advertisements influence teenagers' attitudes and perceptions. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, ten popular McDonald's and KFC advertisements on YouTube released in the past five years were analyzed. Each ad featured celebrity collaborations, vibrant visuals, and strong audience engagement. Visual, verbal, and audio components were examined through a semiotic framework focusing on denotation, connotation, and underlying cultural meanings. The findings reveal that teenagers mostly respond to advertisements through emotional and visual cues rather than rational evaluation. Elements such as celebrity endorsements, catchy music, humor, bright color schemes, and limited time offers strongly shaped their attitudes toward fast-food brands. A smaller group of students considered product quality and value, but these instances were less common. Overall, the advertisements present fast-food consumption as part of a modern and desirable lifestyle, influencing how teenagers form preferences and social identities. The results highlight the need for stronger media literacy and educational programs that help young people critically assess persuasive messages in digital marketing and make more informed choices in their daily media consumption.

Keywords: Persuasive Elements; Elaboration Likelihood Model; Peripheral Route; Teenagers; Fast-Food Advertisements

INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, advertising has undergone a major transformation, shifting from traditional mass media platforms to highly interactive and personalized digital spaces. Fast-food companies have become some of the most active users of digital advertising, targeting teenagers through social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. These platforms allow brands to use visual storytelling, emotional appeal, and influencer endorsements to shape consumption preferences among young audiences. Teenagers, as one of the largest groups of digital consumers, are especially vulnerable to these marketing strategies because of their

high social media exposure and developmental sensitivity to peer influence and identity formation (Santos et al., 2024).

Recent studies have shown that digital food advertisements frequently appear on platforms that teenagers access daily, often using entertaining formats such as short videos, music, and memes to make marketing messages seem less commercial and more relatable (Ramadan & Yusof, 2024). Such marketing techniques blur the line between advertising and entertainment, making it difficult for young audiences to recognize persuasive intent. While this phenomenon has been widely acknowledged, the interpretative process how teenagers perceive, internalize, and respond to these digital advertisements remains underexplored in existing literature.

Previous research has mainly concentrated on the frequency of exposure to food advertising and its correlation with unhealthy eating habits or brand preferences (Chambers et al., 2023; Junaidi & Hassan, 2025). Although these studies have made valuable contributions to understanding the behavioral effects of advertising, they often neglect the meaning-making process that occurs when young audiences engage with these messages. In other words, there is still a lack of empirical evidence on how teenagers actively interpret digital fast-food advertisements, the persuasive elements that most influence them, and how those perceptions shape their attitudes toward fast-food consumption. This gap is particularly critical as digital advertising becomes more subtle, personalized, and emotionally engaging.

According to Fardouly et al. (2024), adolescents exposed to high volumes of digital food marketing are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward fast-food products, often perceiving them as part of a modern and aspirational lifestyle. Similarly, Lin and Wang (2025) found that emotional appeal and influencer endorsement play a central role in shaping teenagers' trust and preference toward fast-food brands. However, these studies primarily focus on exposure effects and emotional responses rather than the interpretive frameworks adolescents use to understand persuasive intent or construct meaning from such advertisements. This limitation calls for qualitative approaches that delve into the subjective perspectives of young consumers—how they decode visual symbols, music, and language in digital ads, and how these semiotic cues align with their social identities and values.

The Indonesian context provides a particularly relevant setting for this exploration. Indonesia has one of the fastest-growing digital advertising markets in Southeast Asia, with teenagers representing a dominant portion of internet users (Utami & Pradana, 2025). Major fast-food chains such as McDonald's, KFC, and Burger King frequently release online campaigns that leverage celebrity collaborations, local cultural themes, and limited-edition menus to attract younger consumers. The accessibility of smartphones and the popularity of social media platforms mean that teenagers are constantly exposed to persuasive digital content that promotes fast-food consumption as convenient, trendy, and socially rewarding. Yet, despite this growing influence, limited research in Indonesia has examined how teenagers

interpret and negotiate these advertising messages in their everyday digital environments.

This research therefore aims to fill this significant gap by analyzing teenagers' interpretations and attitudes toward fast-food advertisements on digital platforms, focusing on how visual, verbal, and audio elements influence their perceptions. Unlike earlier studies that mainly quantified advertising exposure or examined health outcomes, this study adopts a qualitative approach to uncover how teenagers make sense of fast-food marketing through their emotional, cognitive, and social responses. By focusing on meaning construction rather than behavioral correlation alone, this study provides a richer understanding of the complex relationship between advertising, identity, and consumption among youth in the digital age.

Moreover, the study builds upon the theoretical foundation of media literacy and persuasion analysis, emphasizing that teenagers are not merely passive recipients of media messages but active interpreters who negotiate meaning based on personal experience, peer influence, and cultural context. This aligns with contemporary perspectives in media studies that highlight audience agency in decoding advertising content. However, such agency can be constrained by factors like digital literacy and socio-cultural pressure, which affect how critically teenagers engage with persuasive media (Ramadan & Yusof, 2024). By exploring these interpretative processes, this study seeks to understand both the persuasive power of fast-food ads and the varying levels of awareness among adolescents regarding their influence.

The findings from this research are expected to contribute significantly to educational and policy development. For educators, understanding how teenagers interpret fast-food advertisements can inform media literacy programs aimed at helping students critically evaluate persuasive messages and make informed consumption choices. Schools and community organizations can integrate such findings into curricula that teach students to recognize manipulative advertising strategies, particularly in digital spaces that they engage with daily. For policymakers, the results can serve as a basis for developing more effective regulations on digital food advertising, ensuring that young audiences are not unduly influenced by persuasive techniques that encourage unhealthy consumption patterns.

Ultimately, this research seeks to bridge the gap between advertising analysis and adolescent interpretation by revealing how digital media constructs and reinforces consumption ideals among youth. In doing so, it highlights the importance of strengthening critical media awareness as part of modern education systems. By focusing on the lived experiences and perceptions of teenagers, the study aims to illuminate how digital advertising not only influences consumer behavior but also shapes identity, values, and social aspiration. Understanding these dynamics is essential for promoting healthier, more informed, and media-literate generations in an increasingly digitalized world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Persuasive Communication Theory

Understanding how fast-food advertisements influence adolescents requires an examination of how persuasive messages are cognitively processed. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), is one of the most influential frameworks for explaining attitude change. ELM posits two routes of persuasion: the central route, involving careful and logical evaluation of message content, and the peripheral route, which relies on simple cues such as attractiveness, music, or celebrity presence. The route chosen depends on the audience's motivation and ability to process information. Adolescents—who often engage with media while multitasking and are more responsive to emotional and social cues tend to rely more heavily on peripheral processing (Te'Eni-Harari et al., 2007).

To deepen the analysis of the persuasive elements embedded in digital advertising, this study integrates ELM with semiotic theory, particularly Barthes' (1977) concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth. Semiotics allows researchers to examine not only what advertisements explicitly show but also how cultural meanings and symbols shape audience interpretation. Beasley and Danesi's (2002) theory of persuasive signs further contributes to this lens by highlighting how visual, verbal, and auditory elements in advertising function symbolically to construct desire, identity, and emotional appeal. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing how teenagers interpret the multimodal messages embedded in fast-food advertising.

Central Route Processing

Central route processing occurs when individuals engage in careful, analytical evaluation of the arguments presented in a message. For persuasion to occur through this pathway, individuals must be both motivated and able to process information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In fast-food advertising, central route engagement may occur when consumers evaluate nutritional content, ingredient quality, value propositions, or menu diversity (Deng et al., 2021). For example, advertisements highlighting calorie counts, balanced meal options, or affordability appeal to adolescents who are health-conscious, physically active, or budget-oriented.

However, fast-food companies rarely foreground health information because the industry is primarily associated with pleasure, indulgence, and convenience. Still, the increasing visibility of alternative menu items such as salads or plant-based products has introduced opportunities for central-route persuasion among specific adolescent subgroups. These teens may scrutinize whether the visual and verbal claims made in advertisements align with their dietary preferences or perceived product quality. Research shows that young people with higher health awareness or

stronger personal involvement in food choices are more likely to activate deeper cognitive processing when confronted with such information (Cyr et al., 2018).

Peripheral Route Processing

Peripheral route processing is triggered when individuals respond to surface-level cues rather than message content. These cues may include visual aesthetics, music, color, humor, animation, brand jingles, and especially celebrity endorsements. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) argue that when motivation or ability to process information is low as often observed among teenagers peripheral cues become the dominant basis for attitude change. Fast-food advertisements frequently use bright colors (e.g., red and yellow), catchy soundtracks, rapid cuts, and visually appealing food imagery to create emotional responses that require minimal cognitive effort (Luzar, 2011). Celebrity endorsements also play a significant role: collaborations with music groups like BTS, NewJeans, or widely followed celebrities such as Travis Scott and Jack Harlow leverage social identity cues that adolescents find appealing. These associations influence attitudes not through logical reasoning but through emotional resonance and cultural symbolism (Smith et al., 2019). Research consistently supports this pattern. Teens are more susceptible to advertisements that rely on peer influence, aspirational figures, humor, and entertainment value (Elliott & Truman, 2024). Because digital platforms such as YouTube are designed to maximize attention through immersive audiovisual content, peripheral processing becomes even more salient, shaping teenagers' emotional and social responses to fast-food brands (Ardrini et al., 2020).

Integrating ELM and Semiotics in Advertising Research

Combining the Elaboration Likelihood Model with semiotic analysis provides a multidimensional understanding of how persuasive messages operate. Semiotics reveals how signs colors, gestures, celebrity appearances, and music construct cultural myths and identities that resonate with adolescent audiences. ELM, on the other hand, explains how and why these signs influence attitudes depending on the audience's level of cognitive engagement. For teenagers, multimodal features such as visual symbolism, celebrity culture, humor, and music often become meaning-making anchors. These peripheral signs operate at the connotative and mythic levels, shaping interpretations that support brand loyalty and emotional attachment. This integrative framework is therefore valuable for investigating fast-food advertising, where symbolic meaning and persuasive cues converge to influence adolescent perception and behavior.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study used a qualitative descriptive design to examine how persuasive elements in fast food advertisements shape teenagers' perceptions and attitudes. A

qualitative approach was chosen to explore the psychological, social, and symbolic processes through which adolescents interpret persuasive messages and to describe multimodal features that are not easily captured by numbers (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Three lenses guided the interpretation: the Elaboration Likelihood Model (central vs peripheral processing), Beasley and Danesi's persuasive signs (visual, verbal, and audio cues), and Barthes' semiotics (denotation, connotation, myth). The sample comprised ten YouTube advertisements from KFC and McDonald's released in the last five years. Ads were purposefully selected if they featured celebrity collaborations (for example BTS, NewJeans, Travis Scott, Jack Harlow), showed high viewer engagement, and displayed rich combinations of visual, verbal, and auditory persuasion. YouTube was chosen because it is a primary platform for teen media use and a major channel for fast food campaigns (Smith et al., 2019).

Instrument and Procedure

The study used an analytic worksheet that combined a transcription protocol, a semiotic coding grid (for denotation, connotation, and myth), and an ELM checklist to note peripheral and central cues. Data collection followed five steps. First, advertisements meeting the criteria were identified and downloaded. Second, each ad was viewed repeatedly to become familiar with storyline, aesthetics, and multimodal structure. Third, all verbal text, key visuals, and salient audio segments were transcribed and organized for coding. Fourth, a semiotic reading was conducted to describe literal meanings, associated meanings, and broader cultural narratives expressed in the ads. Fifth, results from the semiotic reading were interpreted with the ELM to judge whether teenage audiences would likely process the messages through central evaluation of arguments or through peripheral cues such as celebrities, music, color palettes, humor, and limited time offers.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive cycle. During data condensation, transcripts and screenshots were coded and grouped into categories that captured recurring persuasive elements and audience-relevant cues. For data display, coded segments were organized into matrices and brief narrative tables to compare patterns across brands, celebrities, and creative strategies. Conclusion drawing and verification involved developing themes about how specific multimodal features shape teenagers' attitudes, then checking those themes against the full corpus, the three guiding frameworks, and the study aims. This process ensured a systematic, transparent, and theory-informed interpretation of the persuasive strategies embedded in the selected fast-food advertisements.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Visual, Verbal, and Audio Persuasive Elements in Fast-Food Advertisements

Table 1 summarizes the key persuasive elements identified across ten fast-food advertisements analyzed in this study. The table presents representative examples from McDonald’s and KFC commercials and categorizes their main visual, verbal, and audio features based on recurring themes.

Table 1. Summary of Visual, Verbal, and Audio Persuasive Elements in Selected Fast-Food Advertisements

Type of Element	Dominant Feature	Representative Example/Quote	Persuasive Function
Visual	Color Psychology	Red, yellow, and white backgrounds in KFC’s “It’s Finger Lickin’ Good” ad	Evokes appetite, warmth, and trust
	Food Imagery	“Golden crispy chicken” close-up with steam effect in KFC 2023 ad	Creates sensory illusion of freshness and quality
	Celebrity Integration	BTS and NewJeans featured in McDonald’s collaboration campaigns	Encourages identity-based association and trend participation
Verbal	Value Proposition	“Everything you love, all in one bowl” (McDonald’s 2022 ad)	Appeals to rational choice and variety seeking
	Urgency/Exclusivity	“Limited time only” and “Special collaboration with BTS”	Triggers FOMO and drives impulse purchases
	Humor and Catchphrases	“Can I get uhrrrrrrh...” meme line (McDonald’s ad)	Increases recall and emotional engagement
Audio	Celebrity-Linked Music	BTS’s “Butter” instrumental used as background track	Creates familiarity and positive emotional tone
	Sound Effects	“Sizzling,” “crunch,” and upbeat jingles	Stimulates sensory response and reinforces brand memory

Visual Elements

The advertisements employed rich visual composition as the primary persuasive tool. Three visual strategies stood out: color, food imagery, and celebrity integration. Color psychology was one of the most consistent techniques. Red dominated McDonald's and KFC backgrounds, symbolizing energy and appetite stimulation, while yellow added brightness and friendliness. White appeared as a contrast color, representing cleanliness and modernity. These color combinations created excitement and optimism, encouraging emotional engagement rather than critical thought a clear case of peripheral-route persuasion.

Food imagery was another core persuasive strategy. KFC's ads displayed slow-motion shots of chicken pieces being pulled apart with visible steam, while McDonald's focused on symmetrical burger layers and fresh lettuce textures. For instance, one McDonald's ad closed with the tagline "Freshly made, every time," while showing a glistening bun and melting cheese in close-up. Such visual precision evokes sensory realism and builds expectations of taste and satisfaction even before purchase.

Celebrity integration proved the most powerful visual and emotional cue. Campaigns such as The BTS Meal (McDonald's, 2021) and Jack Harlow's KFC Combo (2023) used celebrity appearances, branded merchandise, and themed packaging to fuse pop culture with consumption. As one ad narrator said, "This isn't just a meal it's a movement." Teen viewers often identified with these stars, interpreting the product as part of a fashionable lifestyle rather than merely food.

Verbal Elements

The verbal layer reinforced visual appeal through slogans, limited-edition cues, and humor. Product information appeared in phrases like "A menu of possibilities" and "Everything you love, all in one bowl," designed to appeal to logic and variety. However, these rational appeals were secondary to emotionally loaded phrases emphasizing exclusivity and time pressure.

Urgency and exclusivity appeared in lines such as "Only for this month!" or "Exclusive collab drop with BTS," accompanied by fast-paced editing and countdown visuals. These verbal strategies activated adolescents' fear of missing out (FOMO), prompting spontaneous purchasing or social sharing.

Humor and catchphrases further personalized the message. For example, McDonald's "Can I get uh-huh-huh..." ad recontextualized an internet meme, generating relatability and humor. This comedic tone lowered psychological resistance, making the message feel less like marketing and more like entertainment. Such humor functioned as a peripheral cue that influenced preference without critical scrutiny.

Audio Elements

Sound and music were integral to shaping mood and memory. Celebrity-associated music enhanced emotional resonance and brand recall. In the BTS Meal advertisement, snippets of BTS's hit "Butter" played throughout, instantly capturing fan attention. Similarly, KFC used upbeat hip-hop beats in its Jack Harlow Meal ad to match the artist's persona and appeal to youth identity.

Audio branding and sound effects heightened sensory involvement. Sounds of sizzling oil, crunching bites, and rhythmic jingles like "Ba-da-ba-ba-baaa" reinforced appetitive desire and brand recognition. These auditory cues operated subconsciously, guiding emotional responses and deepening associative learning between pleasure and the brand.

Application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The ELM analysis revealed that peripheral-route processing dominated teenagers' engagement with the advertisements. The majority of persuasive influence stemmed from emotionally charged, non-cognitive cues such as celebrity presence, humor, bright visuals, rhythmic music, and exclusive promotions. These stimuli triggered quick emotional responses, consistent with adolescent reliance on affective rather than rational decision-making.

Nevertheless, central-route processing appeared occasionally. For example, when McDonald's highlighted price deals ("Two burgers, one price") or freshness claims ("Made from 100% chicken breast"), some teenagers noted rational reasons for preference. This suggests that while affect dominates, rational cues still play a supporting role for value- or health-conscious teens.

Influence of Persuasive Elements on Teenagers' Perceptions and Attitudes

1. Emotional and Identity-Based Responses

Teenagers frequently associated fast-food brands with coolness, belonging, and pop-culture identity. Products such as the BTS Meal or the NewJeans collaboration were perceived as social symbols buying them signified participation in youth culture rather than simple consumption.

2. Cognitive Prototypes and Taste Expectations

Through visually appealing food imagery, teens developed internal standards of what "good fast food" should look and feel like golden texture, melting cheese, or glistening sauce. These cognitive prototypes influenced taste perception even before physical consumption.

3. Behavioral Effects

Time-limited promotions and emotionally driven ads prompted immediate behavioral responses such as ordering online or sharing ad content on social media. Emotional engagement came first, followed by rational justification (“It’s affordable,” “It looks so good”). This post-hoc reasoning pattern reflects ELM’s prediction that peripheral cues dominate teenage consumer behavior in digital advertising contexts.

The findings demonstrate that visual and auditory stimuli particularly color, celebrity association, humor, and sound drive teenage responses to fast-food advertisements primarily through peripheral processing. Rational cues related to price or quality play a secondary role. These persuasive strategies effectively merge entertainment, identity expression, and consumerism, positioning fast-food consumption as an emotional and social experience rather than a simple transaction.

The findings of this study demonstrate that persuasive elements embedded in fast-food advertisements overwhelmingly influence teenagers through peripheral-route processing, as theorized in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). Although central-route engagement does occur occasionally particularly among adolescents concerned with value, nutritional content, or ingredient quality the dominant pattern reflects rapid, emotion-driven processing shaped by visual, auditory, and symbolic cues. A key insight emerging from the analysis is that fast-food advertising does not merely present food products; it constructs cultural narratives that integrate brand identity with youth lifestyle, social belonging, and aspirational symbolism. Celebrity collaborations with figures such as BTS, Travis Scott, NewJeans, and Jack Harlow are not simply endorsements; they function as identity anchors that shape adolescents’ emotional connections to brands. These cues align with Petty and Cacioppo’s (1986) argument that when audiences lack either the motivation or ability to process content deeply conditions common among teenage viewers peripheral cues become the primary drivers of persuasion.

The results reinforce earlier studies showing that adolescents are highly responsive to symbolic, entertaining, and socially embedded advertising features. Te’Eni-Harari et al. (2007) found that teens prioritize aesthetic and emotional cues over argument-based content, while Elliott and Truman (2024) emphasize that digital platforms intensify exposure to targeted, visually rich food marketing. In this study, features such as color psychology, catchy music, humor, dynamic editing, and exclusive packaging further underscore how multimodal design elements activate affective processing pathways.

Semiotic analysis deepens this interpretation by revealing how visual and auditory signs generate layered meanings. At the denotative level, advertisements present food items and celebrity appearances; at the connotative level, they evoke associations with enjoyment, status, youthfulness, or trendiness; at the mythical level, they reinforce cultural narratives positioning fast-food consumption as a

marker of social identity, contemporary lifestyle, or group belonging. These semiotic dimensions strengthen peripheral-route persuasion by embedding meaning beyond the literal content of the advertisements. Additionally, the findings highlight how FOMO-driven urgency messages (e.g., “limited time only,” special collaborations, exclusive packaging) influence teenage decision-making. Such strategies leverage adolescents’ developmental sensitivity to peer norms and social participation, encouraging swift behavioral responses even when central-route information is minimal.

Taken together, these results illustrate how fast-food advertising employs a highly strategic combination of visual symbolism, emotional resonance, and social validation cues to shape adolescent attitudes. Rather than relying on logical appeals, brands craft immersive multimodal experiences that foster brand loyalty, trigger emotional alignment, and prompt immediate purchasing behaviors. From a theoretical standpoint, the dominance of peripheral-route persuasion in this demographic aligns strongly with ELM predictions, while the semiotic findings highlight the depth of meaning-making processes occurring within seemingly simple advertising images. This study contributes to a growing body of evidence showing how digital food marketing reshapes youth consumer behavior. By revealing the psychological and cultural mechanisms underlying persuasion, these findings underscore the importance of equipping teenagers with stronger media literacy skills to critically evaluate advertising messages and resist undue influence in increasingly saturated digital environments.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital fast-food advertisements primarily influence teenagers through peripheral-route processing, as outlined in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). While a small number of adolescents engage with the central route when assessing product quality or price value, the dominant persuasive force comes from emotional, aesthetic, and symbolic appeals. Visual elements such as color psychology, appetizing food imagery, and celebrity endorsements, combined with auditory cues like rhythmic jingles and sound effects, evoke pleasure, excitement, and social identification that bypass logical reasoning. Limited-time promotions and identity-based campaigns, especially those featuring global icons like BTS and Jack Harlow, further strengthen teenagers’ emotional attachment to fast-food brands by linking consumption to popularity and belonging. By integrating ELM, Barthes’ semiotics, and Beasley and Danesi’s theory of persuasive signs, this research reveals that advertisements operate on multiple layers of meaning literal, emotional, and cultural to shape teenagers’ perceptions and preferences. These findings underscore the subtle yet powerful influence of digital advertising in constructing consumer identities among youth. More importantly, they highlight the urgent need for stronger media literacy education that enables adolescents to critically evaluate persuasive content rather than passively absorb it. In educational practice, teachers can incorporate media analysis activities that help students recognize how advertisements use color, sound, and

narrative to manipulate attention and emotion. Lessons that encourage students to deconstruct real advertisements promote awareness of how persuasion works and strengthen their ability to engage in central-route processing. Integrating this awareness into health and communication curricula can also support informed food choices and healthier lifestyle decisions. Parents and communities should be equally involved in promoting critical discussions about advertising, helping teenagers develop balanced attitudes toward media consumption and brand influence.

For future research, several directions can extend this study's insights. Experimental studies could measure the specific effects of individual persuasive cues such as music tempo or celebrity appeal on adolescent attitudes and purchase intentions. Comparative research across cultures could reveal whether teenagers from different backgrounds interpret fast-food advertisements in similar ways. Further investigation into platform-specific advertising on TikTok or Instagram Reels could also uncover how short-form, interactive content alters persuasion dynamics. Longitudinal studies would be valuable in exploring how sustained exposure shapes dietary habits and brand loyalty over time, while subgroup analysis could examine how factors like media literacy, socioeconomic background, or health awareness influence adolescents' processing routes. This study contributes to understanding how digital fast-food advertising shapes teenage perceptions by merging entertainment, identity, and consumption. The findings reinforce the importance of equipping young audiences with critical media literacy skills and encouraging educational institutions to play a proactive role in fostering thoughtful, health-conscious, and discerning media users in an increasingly digital world.

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