

BEYOND REFRESHMENT: HOW COCA-COLA EMOTIONAL MESSAGING POSITIONS THE BRAND AS A SYMBOL OF HAPPINESS AND TOGETHERNESS

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Abstract

Coca-Cola has built a distinctive global identity through sustained emotional branding that associates its products with happiness, social connection, and shared experiences. This paper critically examines how the company's messaging has transformed a carbonated beverage into a powerful cultural symbol of togetherness and optimism. Drawing on historical developments and theoretical insights from consumer psychology, the study explores how emotional appeals enable consumers to reconcile pleasure-driven consumption with growing health awareness. The analysis suggests that while such messaging fosters strong brand loyalty and emotional attachment, it may also divert attention from health implications of high sugar intake. Furthermore, recent health-conscious repositioning efforts appear largely symbolic, as affective storytelling continues to dominate brand communication. A review of existing scholarship reveals a lack of integrative research, linking emotional branding, cognitive dissonance, and health perceptions, particularly in non-Western contexts. The paper therefore calls for more responsible emotional marketing that balances persuasive appeal with ethical transparency.

Keywords: Emotional branding; Consumer psychology; Cognitive dissonance; Health Communication; Ethical marketing

Introduction

Coca-Cola has built a global identity through more than a century of strategic emotional marketing that associates its products with happiness, togetherness, and shared cultural experiences. Rather than promoting functional product attributes alone, the brand has consistently associated itself with happiness, friendship, celebration, and shared cultural moments (Kumar, 2023; Khanna, 2018). Through slogans such as: "Open Happiness" in (2009) "Share a Coke" (2011) "Taste the Feeling" in

(2016) and “Real Magic” in (2021), the brand has positioned its products as a vehicles for emotional experience rather than mere refreshments (Kumar, 2023). Undoubtedly, Coca-Cola taglines have been a significant contributor to the brand’s sustained success, strengthening its positioning and conditioning consumers to instinctively associate joy and togetherness with the product. This early and consistent emotional positioning made the brand synonymous with positive human values that transcend cultures and generations.

This strategy reflects a broader shift in marketing from product-centred communication to emotion-centred branding (Gobe, 2003; Acharya, 2018). By occupying a symbolic space in consumer’s lives, the brand cultivates attachment that transcends taste, price or nutritional value (Aaker, 1997). Such positioning is particularly significant in the soft-drink market, where product differentiation is limited and competition is intense (Vrontis & Sharp, 2003).

At the same time, increasing public awareness of sugar-related health risks has created tension between the brand’s positive emotional imagery and the nutritional realities of its core products (World Health Organisation (WHO), 2021). Understanding how emotional messaging mediates this tension is therefore crucial for evaluating both its marketing effectiveness and its ethical implications (Brownell & Warmer, 2009).

This paper critically reviews the literature to examine how emotional branding has enabled Coca-Cola to sustain its image as a symbol of happiness and togetherness while navigating health concerns and evolving consumer expectations,

Methods

This study employs a narrative literature review to synthesise existing research on emotional branding, consumer psychology, and health communication in relation to Coca-Cola. A narrative approach is appropriate because the objective is conceptual integration and critical interpretation rather than quantitative aggregation of findings (Gurunathan, 2025).

Relevant literature was identified through structured searches of academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and JSTOR. Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and reputable institutional reports were prioritised. Selected sources were organised thematically and analysed using interpretative approach. Aaker’s (1997) Brand Personality Framework and Festinger’s (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory guided the analysis of how

emotional narratives shape consumer attitudes despite awareness of health risks.

Coca-Cola and Emotional Messaging: A Historical Background

Coca-Cola, a beverage company founded in 1886 by pharmacist Dr John Pemberton, has a rich and storied history (Khanna, 2018). Initially introduced as a medicinal tonic, Coca-Cola quickly gained popularity for its refreshing taste and energising properties. With more than 500 brands available in over 200 countries and 2 billion servings a day, Coca-Cola is the world's largest beverage manufacturer and distributor (Guo & Wen, 2021). Over the years, Coca-Cola has evolved into one of the most recognised and beloved global brands, offering a wide range of beverages and becoming synonymous with joy, happiness, and celebration.

The brand's emotional messaging of Coca-Cola has evolved significantly since its inception from being marketed merely as a refreshing beverage to becoming one of the most powerful symbols of happiness, togetherness and optimism in global advertising. The brand's emotional messaging has developed through distinct historical phases, reflecting cultural trends, consumer values and shifts in global communication. The early years (1886-1930s) of its advertising, Coca-Cola positioned itself as a drink of refreshment and vitality with slogans such as "Delicious and Refreshing" (1886) and "The Pause That Refreshes" (1929) communicating pleasure, energy and relief from daily stress (Pendergrast, 2013). In the Mid-Century Era (1940s-1960s), Coca-Cola advertisements took on a distinctly emotional and patriotic tone with campaigns such as "Have a Coke and Smile" and "It's the Real Thing" reflecting ideals of unity and shared humanity (Allen, 2015).

As Coca-Cola expanded globally, its marketing strategy shifted toward universal emotional themes rather than cultural specificity, with slogans such as "Can't Beat the Feeling" (1988) and "Always Coca-Cola" (1993) emphasising joy, optimism and emotional satisfaction, while fostering a sense of personal happiness and brand intimacy (Zhou & Wong, 2008). The 21st century witnessed a transformation towards experiential and participatory emotional branding. Campaigns such as "Open Happiness" (2009), "Share a Coke" (2011) and "Taste the Feeling" (2016) personalized Coca-Cola's emotional appeal. 2020s till date saw Coca-Cola's current positioning encapsulated in the "Real Magic" campaigns (2021) integrating emotional storytelling with digital engagement emphasizing authenticity, inclusivity and human connection.

Emotional Branding in Contemporary Marketing

Emotional branding, as a powerful tool for establishing strong and lasting relationships with consumers, has gained significant attention in marketing. In order to position a brand at the center of the consumers' lives and help them identify with the brand, emotional branding become imperative. According to Acharya (2018), emotional branding is the successful attachment of a specific emotion to a brand. Gurunathan (2025), citing Marc Gobe (2001), opines that emotional branding is the process of forming a personal connection between the brand and the consumer, which influences loyalty beyond rational product benefits.

Awasthi et.al. (2024), while explaining the theoretical underpinning of emotional branding, posits that consumers develop deep-seated connections with brands that evoke specific emotions. They further notes that emotions are not mere byproducts but integral determinants shaping how consumers perceive, evaluate, and ultimately choose one brand over another. Gurunathan (2025) reinforces that emotional branding goes beyond functional benefits and seeks to establish a psychological bond with consumers by invoking sentiments such as trust, happiness, nostalgia, and love. Brands like Coca-Cola have successfully used emotional branding to differentiate themselves, create memorable experiences, and secure loyal customer bases. While Coca-Cola has continuously changed its tagline from "Open Happiness" to "Taste the Feeling," it has maintained its focus on happy images of people connecting and engaging with one another.

Emotional branding, anchored in Aaker's Brand Personality Framework (1997), explains how brands, much like humans, can possess distinct personality traits that influence how consumers perceive, relate to, and emotionally connect with them. Aaker (1997) defined brand personality as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand," adding that consumers often ascribe human-like qualities such as sincerity and excitement to brands, shaping how they feel and behave toward them. These traits create emotional meaning beyond functional product features. While brand personality provides emotional identity of a brand, emotional branding becomes the process of using that identity to build emotional relationships.

Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory on the other hand, provides an explanatory lens for understanding why consumers continue to embrace Coca-Cola's happiness narrative despite growing health awareness. Emotional branding reduces psychological discomfort by offering consumers symbolic justification, thereby associating consumption with joy and identity rather than with caloric intake. Together, these two theories suggest that Coca-Cola's emotional appeal

function as a psychological reconciliation mechanism, allowing consumers to maintain a positive self-concept while engaging in behaviour they recognise as potentially unhealthy.

Undoubtedly, Coca-Cola's long-standing emotional appeal aligns most strongly with sincerity and excitement. Such emotional connections, formed through brand personality, lead to long-term consumer loyalty even in competitive markets. Coca-Cola, through its "Open Happiness" and "Share a Coke" campaigns, promote themes of togetherness, kindness, and joy, which reinforces its sincere personality. Its brand personality makes consumer feel emotionally close to the brand. They don't just buy Coke, they relate to it.

Coca-Cola, on the other hand, through its "Taste the Feeling" and "Real Magic" campaigns, which often features music, dance, friendship, and celebration, embodies excitement. While competitors may emphasise taste or price, Coca-Cola differentiates itself through its emotional persona, making it a lifestyle symbol, not just a soft drink.

Critical Perspective: ethical Concerns and Health Implications

Although emotional branding has been widely celebrated as a marketing success (kumar, 2023), critics argue that it may obscure the health consequences associated with frequent consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (Brownell & warner, 2009).

Coca-Cola's long-standing focus on themes of happiness, togetherness, and shared joy has been universally recognised as one of the most desirable human experiences. Zhao (2023) noted that happiness is a feeling of being content, satisfied, and at ease, and people enjoy this feeling because it provides them with a sense of purpose and fulfilment. Cinney and Wilson (2013), highlighting the impact of emotional branding by Coca-Cola, underscored the significance of the "Open Happiness" campaign message. In other words, "Happiness" is one of the core concepts Coca-Cola uses to evoke emotion.

However, this very emotional appeal has also been criticised for diverting public attention from the health implications associated with excessive sugar consumption. By embedding its brand identity in positive emotions and universal values, Coca-Cola constructs an image of happiness and unity that effectively masks the negative health discourse surrounding its products. Such narratives imply that happiness is attainable through consumption, thereby framing Coca-Cola as an enabler of emotional fulfilment rather than a high-sugar beverage. This emotional rhetoric aligns with what Brownell and Warner (2009) term the "Big Food playbook." By tying its identity to intangible values, Coca-Cola shields

itself from scrutiny regarding the health implications of regular consumption.

Research links high intake of sugar drinks with obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease (WHO, 2021). When emotional appeals dominate communication, consumers may prioritise immediate psychological gratification over long-term wellbeing (Heiss et al., 2021). In other words, the “happiness narrative” acts as a mask that conceals sugar-related harms, creating a paradox where the pursuit of joy through consumption leads to long-term health risks.

Corporate social responsibility initiatives and sponsorship of sport events can reinforce perceptions of healthfulness, a phenomenon described as “healthwashing” (Heiss et al., 2021; Serodio et al., 2020). While such activities may offer social value, they can also enhance brand legitimacy without fundamentally altering the nutritional profile of flagship products.

Health-Conscious Repositioning Efforts

While Coca-Cola’s emotional branding has been critiqued for overshadowing the health risks of sugar consumption, the company has in recent years adopted measures to reframe its brand identity around themes of choice, moderation and well-being. In response to growing global awareness and in adherence to the World Health Organization’s (WHO) recommendations on the intake of free sugars to reduce the risk of obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in adults and children with a particular focus on the prevention and control of unhealthy weight gain and dental caries (WHO, 2021), Coca-Cola has diversified its product portfolio and communication strategy. This includes the launch of Diet Coke (1982) and Coke Zero (2025), marketed as providing “the same taste” but with “no sugar” thereby allowing the brand to maintain its emotional appeal while addressing consumer concerns about calorie intake. According to Kotler and Keller (2016), such repositioning efforts reflect the concept of “adaptive branding”: a strategy in which a company evolves its emotional narrative to align with emerging consumer values without dismantling its core brand identity.

Moreover, Coca-Cola’s messaging has increasingly incorporated themes of balance and active lifestyles. Campaigns like “Together we Move” a campaign that runs from October 1, 2025 along with sponsorship of sporting events, aim to link the brand with physical activity and well-being, subtly reframing its association from indulgence to vitality. This positions Coca-Cola as a brand that is both emotionally engaging and socially responsible. These recent branding initiatives can be viewed

as attempts to reconcile emotional appeal with health consciousness, as well as to present the company as valuing happiness and holistic wellness.

However, these adjustments remain symbolic rather than structural, as the emotional emphasis on joy and social connection continues to dominate the brand's global narrative. The persistence of high-sugar variants as the brand's flagship product undermines the credibility of its health messaging. As Kantar (2022) notes, Coca-Cola's emotional storytelling often outpaces its nutritional reform. Simamora, Putra, Pinardi and Nuh (2024) asserts that Coca-Cola use of smart marketing strategies such as Word-of Mouth Marketing, "Coca-Cola Happiness Machine," "Share A Coke" campaign, and sponsoring sporting events to rhetorically strengthens its brand position. Yet, its core emotional positioning still serves as a strategic distraction from its less healthy reality.

In summary, while Coca-Cola's health-conscious initiatives represent an effort to modernize its emotional branding in response to shifting consumer expectations, these initiatives highlight an enduring paradox. There is no doubt that the brand's strength lies in its ability to embrace a health-driven identity fully. To sustain long-term credibility, Coca-Cola's emotional branding must evolve from symbolic optimism toward authentic well-being and transparent communication.

Gap in the Literature

Although existing scholarship provides substantial insight into Coca-Cola's emotional marketing and its influence on consumer perceptions, a critical gap remains regarding how such emotional narratives produce long-term psychological and behavioural contradictions in consumers, particularly concerning health awareness, ethical consumption, and perceived brand authenticity. Much of the current academic focus remains fragmented. Studies either examine the emotional benefit of Coca-Cola's advertising, emphasising the emotions transmitted by constituent elements such as music (Sánchez-Porras & Rodrigo, 2017), or study brand storytelling highlighting how Coca-Cola builds a strong identity to connect with consumers (Khanna, 2018). Obasi and Onyekachi (2025) present justification for integrating experiential marketing into Coca-Cola's IMC strategy, demonstrating positive impacts on brand awareness, consumer engagement and loyalty. These studies, however, focus on general emotional experiences, failing to account for nuanced and often subconscious emotional reaction in real-time consumer interactions, call for concern. Moreover, there is a lack of research utilising neuromarketing methodologies to explore the

neurological underpinnings of these emotional responses and limited integrative empirically connects emotional resonance with consumer cognitive dissonance about sugar-related health risks within a single analytical framework.

Coca-Cola, as the cornerstone of emotional branding, offers an ideal lens to interrogate this missing link. The brand's legacy of campaigns ranging from "Open Happiness" (2009) to "Real Magic" (2021) provides consistent, longitudinal data through which the emotional appeal of happiness can be studied as both a marketing strength and a psychological contradiction. Scholars such as Vrontis and Thrassou (2007) acknowledge Coca-Cola's global dominance as stemming from its ability to "occupy the emotional field of battle," yet few have empirically measured how this emotional occupation translates into consumer justifications for continued consumption despite rising health literacy and obesity concerns.

Furthermore, literature disproportionately emphasises Western market, where health awareness and media literacy are relatively high, while emerging markets such as Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia remain under-researched. In these regions, Coca-Cola's emotional appeal intersects with local cultural meanings of happiness, status, and modernity, potentially magnifying emotional dissonance and complicating health education efforts. Studies that link cross-cultural emotional perception with behavioural health outcomes are scarce, creating a gap in understanding how Coca-Cola's global emotional strategy adapts and persists in culturally diverse health environments (Kantar, 2022).

Few studies have applied integrated theoretical models combining Aaker's (1997) brand personality framework with Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory to examine how emotional consistency sustains brand loyalty despite rising health literacy. Understanding this interaction could illuminate how emotional branding both constructs and conceals contradictions between brand identity and consumer well-being. Hence, the gap in the literature lies in the absence of integrated, cross-disciplinary models connecting emotional branding, consumer dissonance, and health perception using Coca-Cola as a focal brand. Addressing this gap could illuminate the psychological mechanism that sustain brand loyalty in the face of health concerns and guide ethical branding practices for future marketing in health-sensitive product categories.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on emotional branding and consumer psychology by advancing understanding of how Coca-Cola's emotional narratives interact with consumer cognition and moral judgement. While previous research for example (Kuma, 2023; Vrontis, 2003) emphasises Coca-Cola's success in building emotional associations such as happiness, togetherness and nostalgia, few studies interrogate how these emotional cues neutralise cognitive dissonance arising from health-related awareness of sugar consumption.

By applying Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory (1957) to Coca-Cola's brand communications, this work reveals how emotional storytelling functions not merely as a marketing tool but as a psychological coping mechanism that allows consumers to reconcile conflicting beliefs: the desire for happiness versus awareness of health risk. It argues that Coca-Cola's emotional branding serves a dual purpose: enhancing moral tension associated with unhealthy consumption behaviours.

Furthermore, this critique extends the discourse on ethical branding by exposing a gap in the scholarly debate: the insufficient exploration of how emotional marketing contributes to sustained dissonance and behavioral inertia among consumers aware of sugar-related health risks. By positioning emotional appeal as both a persuasive and defensive mechanism, this analysis offers a nuanced understanding of the "happiness paradox" with Coca-Cola's marketing strategy.

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