

Audience perception of humorous content in shaping brand awareness (case study of TikTok account @teammafiapentol.sub)

Fidel Achmed Wirayudha^{1*} and Budi Dwi Arifianto¹

¹ Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*Corresponding author email: budi_arifianto@umy.ac.id

Abstract

The rise of social media, particularly TikTok, has transformed digital marketing communication, with humorous content becoming a key strategy to attract attention and build emotional connections between brands and audiences. This study examines how audiences interpret humorous content and its relationship with brand awareness on the local culinary account @teammafiapentol.sub. Grounded in humour appeal theory and the brand equity model, the findings show that culturally embedded and absurd humor enhances emotional engagement while strengthening brand memory and associations. Using a descriptive qualitative approach within a post-positivist paradigm, data were collected through purposive in-depth interviews with five actively engaged followers and analysed thematically to identify patterns of humor interpretation and brand perception. Results reveal that brand recognition is reinforced through a distinctive mix of absurd situational humor, vernacular linguistic play, and improvisational creator–audience interaction that defines the account’s content style. Overall, the study highlights practical implications for emotional branding strategies in short-form video platforms for contemporary digital marketing communication contexts globally.

Keywords

Audience perception, Humorous content, Brand awareness, TikTok, Digital marketing communication

Introduction

The shift from traditional to digital media has transformed marketing strategies, with platforms such as TikTok facilitating rapid audience engagement through short-form video content. Within this environment, local culinary brands face a strategic tension between utilizing chaotic, entertainment-driven humor to capture attention and maintaining clear brand identity and product recognition. For example, Mafia Pentol, a culinary business in Surabaya, utilizes the TikTok account @teammafiapentol.sub, which has millions of followers. They present content in the form of product

Published:
May 04, 2026

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the 7th BIS-HSS 2025 Committee

introductions, responses to comments, and in-store interactions using humor, the stitch feature, and the distinctive Javanese tagline “Reti dewe to barange?” to attract audience attention and foster brand awareness through entertaining and interactive communication strategies.

Content marketing plays an important role in building long-term relationships between brands and audiences through relevant and authentic messages. Humor is an effective strategy because it triggers positive emotions, increases engagement, strengthens brand recall, and supports psychological well-being and social relationships. [1] [2]. Humor comes in many forms of language with many linguistic techniques. [3]. Meanwhile, high brand awareness encourages consumers to choose products, increasing credibility, competitiveness, loyalty, and long-term emotional bonds.

Accordingly, this study concentrates on examining how audiences interpret humorous content and how these interpretations relate to brand awareness formation. Instead of attempting to assess multiple marketing outcomes, the research emphasizes audience meaning-making processes, particularly how humor style, cultural familiarity, and communication tone influence audience recognition and brand recall.

Research on humor in advertising has been extensively conducted and discusses how humor affects audience response. Previous studies show that humor can be an attractive feature of advertising that builds positive consumer attitudes toward brands [4]. Humor also serves as a linguistic strategy that can strengthen a brand's image and closeness to the public [5]. However, the dominance of humor in TikTok content can also increase the risk of the Vampire Effect, where audiences may remember entertainment elements such as comedic personas and chaotic humor styles used in Mafia Pentol videos more than the brand or product itself [6]. Overall, humor can have a positive impact, but its effectiveness is greatly influenced by the context in which it is delivered and the characteristics of the audience.

Previous studies show that humor has long been examined as a communication strategy, particularly in television advertising and platforms such as Twitter; however, while humorous content on TikTok has gained increasing scholarly attention, limited research explains how variations of vernacular and culturally embedded humor in local culinary branding shape audience interpretations of brand awareness, especially within organically developed social media content influenced by product context and audience preferences. Thus, the context, platform, and audience characteristics need to be expanded in studies on the effectiveness of humor. The study entitled “Audience Perception of Humorous Content in a Shaping Brand Awareness (Case Study of TikTok Account @teammafiapentol.sub)” aims to fill this gap by examining how local humor (vernacular humor) on TikTok is understood by audiences and plays a role in building local culinary brand awareness.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to explore audience perceptions of humorous content on the TikTok account @teammafiapentol.sub. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with five informants selected using purposive sampling, focusing on active followers who were familiar with and frequently engaged with the account's humorous content. The study also applied digital observation through a netnographic approach to examine audience content interactions, engagement patterns, and performance styles within the platform. The interview protocol explored dimensions including humor interpretation, emotional response, message memorability, brand personality perception, and perceived contribution to brand awareness. Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis to identify patterns explaining how humorous linguistic and performative elements shape audience perceptions of the brand.

Results and discussion

Results

1. Audience perceptions of humorous content in Mafia Pentol videos: Findings from interview narratives

The majority of TikTok audience @teammafiapentol.sub are aged 19–26 years old, consisting of students and employees, and are active TikTok users with a viewing duration of 2–8 hours per day. They have been following this account since 2022–2024 and watch its content mainly for entertainment, humor, or as a mood booster, in addition to following other culinary accounts. Mafia Pentol's content is perceived as creative, light hearted, and entertaining, with a humor style dominated by absurdity, parody, puns, and slapstick. This humor evokes positive emotions such as laughter, amusement, admiration, and amusement. Thematic analysis showed that audiences perceived the humor as relatable and culturally familiar, reflected in the use of youth slang and East Javanese vernacular language that supports the informal and approachable identity of the pentol brand. Informant responses were grouped into themes such as vernacular relatability, spontaneous performance, and absurd or slapstick humor. Although some audiences viewed the humor as exaggerated, these perceptions indicate that the humor style helps strengthen brand memorability and authenticity by making the content more entertaining and recognizable.

The audience's acceptance of this content is high, as evidenced by active interactions such as likes, comments, shares, and watching videos until the end or replaying them. Two-way communication, such as comments replied to by creators, creates a sense of being cared for and an online community atmosphere similar to a “hangout,” thereby increasing the emotional closeness and loyalty of the audience. Humor also plays a role as a soft selling promotion

strategy, entertaining the audience without making them feel pressured to buy. Beyond entertainment, humor is a crucial factor in building brand recall. Funny scenes make the name “Mafia Pentol” easy to remember and stand out from other culinary brands, while also shaping a fun, creative, and “crazy” brand persona. Humor also encourages word-of-mouth and the audience's desire to try the product, because entertainment associates positive emotions with the brand, so humor not only increases engagement but also strengthens emotional connections and brand recognition.

2. Audience perception of image and brand awareness of “Mafia Pentol”

Humor is the main strategy in shaping a unique and memorable identity for the TikTok account @teammafiapentol.sub. The audience perceives Mafia Pentol as a creative, crazy, laid-back snack brand that is close to young people, with a distinctive communication tone that is “fast-paced,” “cheesy,” and “chaotic,” making the brand name easy to remember (top of mind). Compared to culinary accounts that focus mainly on aesthetics and taste, audiences perceive Mafia Pentol’s content as entertainment-oriented while still embedding promotional messages, allowing humor to function as an engagement strategy that supports brand awareness and product interest. Consistency, relevance, and a natural communication style create positive emotional bonds, connecting the entertaining experience with brand memory reinforcement. Humorous content also shapes a strong brand personality, making Mafia Pentol feel exciting, creative, relaxed, and “human.” Its absurd, exaggerated, and silly communication style has become an entertaining trademark, distinguishing this brand from formal culinary accounts and making the audience feel like they are interacting with an online friend. This increases audience retention, strengthens brand awareness, and instills positive experiences that facilitate brand recognition.

Through humor, the audience captures the brand's core values, especially entertainment, creativity, authenticity, and locality. The use of East Javanese dialect, everyday language, and jokes such as puns, parodies, and absurd situations reinforce a relaxed and down-to-earth image, in line with the product of pentol as street food. The consistency of the humor style, creator chemistry, and distinctive expressions make the content feel authentic, enjoyable, and relatable to audiences, contributing to perceived brand closeness and loyalty. Rather than directly influencing purchasing behaviour, audiences associate humorous content with increased curiosity toward the product, supported by the positive atmosphere and non-intrusive soft-selling approach presented in the videos. Audiences also demonstrate a willingness to share or recommend the humorous content to peers or social groups, suggesting that they interpret humor as encouraging engagement and organic brand dissemination.

Discussion

This study found that humorous content on the TikTok account @teammafiapentol.sub was effective in strengthening brand identity and increasing brand awareness through audience emotional engagement. Young audiences (aged 19–26) showed high levels of participation, in line with literature on social media user characteristics, humor in marketing, and digital marketing strategies. On the TikTok platform, creative, fast-paced, and culturally relevant content is key to attracting attention. The high consumption and reasons why audiences follow entertainment accounts, such as seeking humor and mood boosters, indicate that Mafia Pentol's strategy is in line with the characteristics of social media, which emphasizes creativity, authenticity, and viral potential.

These findings expand digital marketing scholarship by showing that humor-based content does not only attract attention but also shapes how audiences assign meaning to brand identity through culturally embedded communication. In this context, short, creative, and culturally familiar content supports brand awareness formation by encouraging emotional involvement and repeated audience interaction [7]. The platform algorithm further amplifies content visibility through personalized content distribution, allowing humor-driven content to gain viral potential and strengthen brand salience [8]. However, the findings suggest that engagement is influenced not only by content creativity but also by how audiences culturally interpret humor as authentic brand expression [9].

In terms of message creativity, Mafia Pentol's humor style includes absurdity, puns, parodies, and slapstick in line with humor theory that emphasizes incongruity, exaggeration, reversal, and wordplay. Audiences perceive this humor as natural, chaotic, and distinctive, making it effective in generating laughter and triggering emotional engagement. Even seemingly unplanned humorous elements are accepted as long as their purpose is to entertain, supporting the view that humor strengthens emotional bonds and increases the appeal of the message. Marketing literature also confirms that humor has long been used to attract attention and build positive emotional perceptions, reinforce messages, and make it easier for audiences to remember a brand [1]. Berger's categorization of humor, which includes language, logic, identity, and action, is also reflected in the content of Mafia Pentol, making humor an effective persuasion tool in marketing communications [10].

This study also reveals that audiences actively interpret content according to their experiences, preferences, and emotions, in line with the concept of audience perception [11]. Within this process, humor appeal functions as a psychological mechanism that attracts attention, generates enjoyment, and enhances message memorability, allowing audiences to form meaning and associate emotional responses with brand identity. Perceptual aspects such as enjoyment, familiarity, and perceived communicator authenticity influence how humorous content contributes to brand awareness formation.

Furthermore, Mafia Pentol's consistent humor style and creator persona shape brand personality characteristics perceived as funny, spontaneous, relaxed, and relatable to young audiences [12]. These findings demonstrate that humor not only serves as entertainment but also constructs relational closeness between audiences and the brand, strengthening brand memorability and differentiation within competitive culinary branding environments. The performative and culturally embedded humor style allows audiences to interpret the brand as socially authentic and approachable.

However, the dominance of exaggerated and entertainment-driven humor introduces a potential risk related to the Vampire Effect, where audiences may focus more on comedic performance than on product information. The findings suggest that localized linguistic elements, particularly East Javanese vernacular expressions, function as a cultural bridge that reconnects humor with brand identity. This indicates that cultural familiarity plays an important role in preventing entertainment elements from overshadowing brand recognition [6].

Finally, humorous content is interpreted by audiences as encouraging curiosity toward the product and motivating content-sharing behaviour, aligning with the concept of soft selling in digital marketing. Rather than demonstrating direct purchasing behaviour, audiences associate humor with increased engagement, interpersonal recommendation, and stronger brand recall processes [13]. Humor also supports audience movement through brand awareness stages, from recognition to recall and, in some cases, top-of-mind awareness [14]. Therefore, humor strengthens brand positioning within audience memory by functioning as an emotionally engaging and culturally relevant communication strategy in contemporary digital branding.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that humor in the TikTok content @teammafiapentol.sub plays a strategic role in effectively building brand identity, brand personality, and brand awareness. Creative, absurd, pun-filled, and slapstick humor creates emotional engagement, enjoyable experiences, and two-way interactions that strengthen audience loyalty, while consistency, cultural relevance, and the creator's unique persona make the content feel authentic and relatable, facilitating brand recognition and differentiation from competitors. Beyond confirming humor effectiveness on TikTok, this study provides a theoretical takeaway that vernacular and culturally embedded digital humor functions as a cultural-signaling mechanism that strengthens brand equity through audience meaning-making, perceived authenticity, and relational closeness, thereby extending traditional brand equity perspectives. However, this study is limited by its small sample size, single-brand focus, and specific local cultural context, suggesting future research should involve broader samples, cross-brand or cross-cultural comparisons, and mixed-method approaches to examine behavioral impacts such as purchase intention and long-term brand loyalty.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank all those who have helped in the preparation of this research, especially the supervising lecturer for the guidance and input provided. Thanks also to the respondents and the TikTok account @teammafiapentol.sub for supporting the availability of research data. Appreciation is also extended to family and friends for their support and motivation during the writing of this journal.

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