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Nurtured and sorrowful: Positive and negative emotional appeals in early COVID-19 themed brand communications

Abstract

This study examines the prevalence of emotional appeals in COVID-19-themed brand advertisements from around the world in the months immediately following the World Health Organization's declaration of the coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic. The study analyses the frequencies of use of positive and negative emotional appeals in the content of the ads, and concurrent combinations of such appeals. A content analysis was conducted on a sample of 376 ads from the "Ads of The World" digital archive. The results reveal a preference for positive emotions, with nurturance and affiliation being the most frequent. Sorrow was the third most preferred emotional appeal, and the most used negative emotion. Some brands have compared the virus to a hurricane (Brazil), an assassin with a chainsaw (US) or the death personified (Peru). Advertisers should be careful when using negative emotional appeal content during COVID-19. According to the law of apparent reality, during times of stress the recommendation is to be cautious with negative emotions, as they may be felt more intensely by consumers. Advertising has a social responsibility, which can be directed at promoting consumer behaviours that leave a positive or negative impact on their communities. In a situation such as the pandemic, brand communication professionals must use emotions rigorously,

employing this resource to contribute to society, avoiding giving rise to harmful attitudes or behaviours. The research findings are consistent with the literature and lead to future examination of emotional appeals in advertising in stressful and uncertain circumstances.

Keywords

Emotional appeals, COVID-19, communication, brand advertisements.

1. Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak started in December 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan (Mejova & Kalimeri, 2020). Since then, global health has been threatened as the virus spreads from continent to continent. This has increased people's stress levels as they face health, economic and emotional risks, concomitant with the difficulty of anticipating short-term events. Anxiety, depression, and stress related to COVID-19 have been reported (Cowan, 2020; Huang & Zhao, 2020; Fitzpatrick, Harris & Drawve, 2020). Depending on the advertising

content promoted during this crisis period, messages have been able to increase feelings of anxiety and stress among consumers and others (Nabi, 2003; Frijda, 1988); every day consumers are exposed between 3,000 and 5,000 advertisements, which can influence their attitudes and judgments (Furnham, 2019; Opeodu & Gbadebo, 2017; Royo-Vela, 2005). It's critical to examine the emotional resonance of the pandemic-related information that consumers have been exposed to; understanding this content will enable advertisers to use emotional appeals in their advertisements with greater responsibility and awareness. When ad material has the potential to either improve or worsen a consumer's mental health during a pandemic, advertising cannot ignore its social responsibility (Cowan, 2020; Huang & Zhao, 2020).

The academic literature encompasses studies on the use of emotions in advertisements. However, in the context of a widespread occurrence like COVID-19, the use of these resources in advertisements is novel. This study aims to analyse positive and negative appeals in COVID-19 themed advertisements from around the world, produced in the immediate months after the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic.

Researchers carried out a quantitative content analysis, providing a comprehensive study related to each of the research questions:

RQ1. What were the frequencies of use of positive and negative emotional appeals featured in COVID-19 themed advertisements during the first months of the pandemic?

RQ2. What were the preferred combinations of emotional appeals used by advertising agencies in the COVID-19 themed ad contents during the early period of the pandemic?

RQ3. How did the frequencies of use of emotional appeals evolve during the initial months of the pandemic?

People's emotions have been more vivid than ever in the early months of the pandemic, promoted by a state of instability, insecurity and fear, accompanied by moments of bewilderment about the future (Cowan, 2020; Huang & Zhao, 2020; Fitzpatrick, Harris & Drawve, 2020). Bueno-Notivol (2021) found that the rates of depression in the global population have been 7 times higher during COVID-19. According to Bueno-Notivol (2021), COVID-19 saw a 7-fold increase in the prevalence of depression worldwide. According to the Broaden and Build theory, negative emotions stimulate depressive or anxious states of mental health whereas positive emotions promote positive attitudes toward adversity (Fredrickson 2001; 1998; Pinto & Yagnik, 2016). This notion is related to the theory of emotional contagion, which describes the phenomena of adopting another person's emotional state or feelings (Bell *et al.*, 2018; Herrando & Constantinides, 2021). This process entails observing, tolerating, recognizing, and replicating other people's feelings (Zhang, *et al.* 2022).

Depending on the emotions that are conveyed through advertisements during this period, they may encourage a person's positive or negative emotional side in a pandemic, where emotions are amplified (Cowan, 2020; Huang & Zhao, 2020). It is important to examine the content that ads have delivered during this period.

2. Literature review

Appeals are intentional resources to engage the needs, desires, or interests of potential customers (Bathia, 2019). They are a means for motivating the propensity of subjects to purchase the advertised goods or services, driving interest in the product, building long-term loyalty, and creating a sense of belonging to a brand community (Bathia, 2019; Pinto & Yagnik, 2016). The academic literature addresses two types of advertising appeals: rational and emotional (Kotler, 2003; Pinto & Yagnik, 2016). Rational appeals are driven by information processing at the conscious level, while emotional appeals are driven by the unconscious mind or people's feelings (Bhatia, 2019), these appeals focus on the individual's functional needs and

emphasise objective product and service features (Rochford, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2014). These claims often focus on the utilitarian benefits of the product, such as pointing to the superior quality, value, performance, and reliability of a good (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). Emotional appeals seek to elicit negative or positive emotions that prompt consumers to ease brand recall and promote purchase decisions (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999; Kotler & Armstrong, 1991; Marchegiani & Phau, 2013; Zhang *et al.*, 2014).

2.1. Positive Emotional Appeals

According to Broaden and Build theory, positive emotions extend people's attention to their creativity, courage, kindness, perseverance and optimism, which in turn can increase their resilience (Fredrickson 2001; 1998; Han *et al.*, 2008; Kobau *et al.*, 2011). In a health crisis situation such as COVID-19, positive emotions can quickly quell or undo the adverse effects of negative experiences by reducing stressful reactions (Fredrickson *et al.*, 2000; Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998; Kobau *et al.*, 2011). Fredrickson and Levenson (1998) identified that people in whom positive emotions were promoted immediately after a stressful situation had faster recovery of mental health, concluding that positive emotions are a necessary foundation for everyday life. Heyn, Ellington and Eide (2017) found that positive and negative emotions produce changes in peoples' thoughts and actions. Positive emotions include pleasant or desirable situational responses, and enhance well-being, improving the ability to cope with adversity. This result is consistent with Han *et al.* (2008), in which the authors showed that positive emotions have psychological benefits and, in turn, help build coping resources to confront difficult situations. Sontag (2018) found that participants with depression that viewed advertisements with positive emotions reported an increased aspiration to be in a good mood. COVID-19 has been and continues to be a stressful experience, and depending on what positive emotions they communicate, advertisements can help alleviate mental health problems. For example, security can elicit peace of mind and excitement can evoke a positive mood (see Table 1).

In advertising, the use of positive emotional appeals is based on the assumption that consumers are emotionally stimulated, so marketers try to trigger this variable to achieve their goals (Pinto & Yagnik, 2016). Marketing and ad executives seek to make the consumer feel good about the product by linking it to positive emotions, resulting in increased brand liking and strengthening positive attitudes related to the brand (Hornik, Ofir & Rachamim, 2017; Panda, Panda & Mishra, 2013). Bathia (2019) identified linguistic markers and strategies in emotional ads and found that positive emotional grounding is critical for brand recognition, the development of a positive attitude towards the brand, and customer loyalty. Lin (2011) conducted a study to examine the impact of positive emotional appeals used in advertising on attitudes and purchase intentions. The author reported that emotional appeals do influence individuals' attitudes toward the ad. After examining positive emotional appeals in tourism TV commercials, Li (2019) argued that adventure and excitement are the most effective appeals to engage with consumers. Further authors found that positive appeals can also increase consumer attention (Chang & Chang, 2014; Czarnecka & Mogaji, 2020; Hornik, Ofir & Rachamim, 2017; Panda, Panda & Mishra, 2013; Wu *et al.*, 2018).

Table 1. Positive emotional appeals.

Type of emotional appeal (Czarnecka & Mogaji, 2020)	Concepts comprised	Authors in academic literature
Adventure	Boldness, daring, bravery, courage, seeking adventure or thrills.	Hetsroni (2000); Mogaji (2016); Pollay (1983).
Affiliation	To be social, bond in friendship, companionship, cooperation, reciprocity; to conform to social norms, have manners, social graces, and decorum, tact and finesse.	Hetsroni (2000); Mogaji (2016); Pollay (1983).
Beauty	Beauty is a cognitive process accompanied by continuously upgrading affective states that results are appraised as an aesthetic emotion and/or judgment.	Hagtvedt & Patrick (2008); Leder <i>et al.</i> (2004); Zarzosa & Huhmann (2019).
Excitement	Emotional, pleasure, satire, wit, relief, positive mood, provokes amusement, joy and fun.	Chang & Chang (2014); Czarnecka & Mogaji (2020); Hornik, Ofir & Rachamim (2017); Li (2019).
Nurturance	Nurturance appeal was defined as one which evoked the idea of caretaking, such as parents caring for their children's health and well-being.	Bleakley <i>et al.</i> (2015); Meadows-Oliver & Hendrie (2013).
Popular	Commonplace, customary, well-known, conventional, regular, ordinary, normal, standard, typical, universal, general, every day.	Hetsroni (2000); Mogaji (2016); Pollay (1983).
Relief (Relaxation)	Relief can be conceptualized as warmth, a highly positive emotion that people enjoy in their relationships with family or friends, involving a moderate level of arousal.	Aaker, Stayman & Hagerty (1986); Abele & Gendolla (1999); Faseur & Geuens (2006).
Security	Confident, secure, possessing dignity, self-worth, self-esteem, self-respect, peace of mind.	Hetsroni (2000); Mogaji (2016); Pollay (1983).
Sex	Emotional, physiological arousal, sensation, fantasy, dreams, self-esteem.	Hornik, Ofir & Rachamim (2017); Reichert & Lambiase (2014); Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa (2020).
Pride	Pride is a feeling of satisfaction, delight, or pleasure in something one has achieved and/or one is able to do. Individuals experience pride when they appraise the self as being responsible for a positive outcome.	Coleman, Royne & Pounders (2020); Decrop & Derbaix (2010).
Nostalgia	A preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favourable affect) toward objects (people, places, or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable, or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood, or even before birth).	Havlena & Holak (1991); Holbrook & Schindler (1991); Marchegiani & Phau (2013); Stern (1992)
Youth	Being young or rejuvenated, children, kids, immature, underdeveloped, junior, adolescent.	Hetsroni (2000); Mogaji (2016); Pollay (1983).

Source: Own elaboration.

Other studies compare positive and negative emotional appeals in ad content. For example, Czarnecka & Mogaji (2020) reviewed positive and negative emotional appeals in advertisements for financial loans. Their results convey that these advertisements use positive emotions such as relief, security or excitement, and that negative emotional appeals were employed only occasionally. Wu *et al.* (2018) analysed a sample of positive and negative emotional appeals on click intention in digital ads, revealing a strong effect related to positive emotions, and a weak one towards negative ones.

2.2. Negative Emotional Appeals

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the depressed mood of people around the world (Cowan, 2020; Huang & Zhao, 2020; Fitzpatrick, Harris & Drawve, 2020). Indeed, depression has risen between 30–40%; for example, in China, depression rose 35% and in the United States 40% (UN, 2020). The law of apparent reality explains that if a consumer is experiencing a difficult or stressful situation and sees an advertisement with a negative emotional appeal, the effect of the advertisement will be more intense (Frijda, 1986). Given this, and that the Broaden and Build theory suggests that negative emotions promote negative mental health states, it is important to monitor the content of negative emotions communicated by advertisements during COVID-19.

Advertising messages use negative emotional appeals less frequently and the literature is divided about their effectiveness (Czarnecka & Mogaji 2020; Deborah & Nicole 2009; Dens & De Pelsmacker 2010; Zheng 2020) (Table 2). Some authors assert that negative emotional appeals might produce negative associations with the brand (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Evans, Adamo & Czarnecka, 2020), especially when consumers perceive the ads as manipulative (Brennan & Binney, 2010; Coleman, Royne & Pounders, 2020; Coulter & Pinto, 1995; Garfin, Silver, & Holman, 2020). Brennan and Binney (2010) explored guilt in advertising, finding that when used intensively, it can be perceived as a blatant attempt at manipulation and can cause responses such as anger, offence, or irritation. This idea is consistent with Drakulich (2015), who found that the overuse of negative emotions in advertising can even lead to mental and physical health problems, such as social withdrawal from others and engagement in unnecessary social avoidance and protective behaviours. Hence, advertising messages that transmit these effects could heighten consumers' emotional experience and exacerbate stress if the content of advertisements causes feelings of guilt, dread, or grief during COVID-19 (Kemp, Kennett-Hensel & Kees, 2013; Poels & Dewitte, 2019; Royo-Vela, 2005). However, ad practitioners prefer to match current emotions –even if they are negative– with the emotions that consumers are feeling in that moment, as a way of appealing to them (Mogaji, 2016). As such, some scholars explain that negative feelings can contribute to good advertising judgement and attitudes towards the product (Brennan & Binney, 2010; Coleman, Royne & Pounders, 2020; Coulter & Pinto, 1995; Grossman & Wood, 1993). For example, in the case of healthy products, Krishen and Bui (2015) found that, after seeing images of obese bodies in advertisements, participants increased their preference for these products due to fear of obesity.

Table 2. Negative emotional appeals and description.

Type of emotional appeal (Czarnecka & Mogaji, 2020)	Concepts comprised	Authors in academic literature
Fear	Emotional, anxiety, tension, danger, threat that people have when facing risks or crisis.	Ahorsu <i>et al.</i> (2020); Drakulich (2015); Giachino <i>et al.</i> (2017); Krishen & Bui (2015); Rhodes (2017); Zheng (2020).
Guilt	Individuals experience guilt when they feel their behaviour has transgressed a personal or social moral standard	Basil, Ridgeway & Basil (2006); Brennan & Binney (2010); Coleman, Royne & Pounders (2020); Kemp, Kennett-Hensel & Kees (2013); Wang (2008).
Sorrow	Sadness is an emotional response when people suffer from separation, loss and failure.	Basil, Ridgeway & Basil (2006); Durkin <i>et al.</i> (2018); Wang (2008); Zheng (2020).

Source: Own elaboration.

3. Methods

To analyse the research questions, this study conducted a quantitative content analysis. In this method, messages are the phenomenon to be examined. This analysis distinguishes text as a reality produced in a way that has meaning for another person (Krippendorff, 2019). Content analysis depicts frequencies and patterns within the message content, making it suitable for the purpose of this study. An a priori coding analysis was conducted; by this design, codes were established deductively and then applied to the body of content by the coders (Neuendorf, 2018).

3.1. Sampled ads

The researchers sought to analyse how advertisers around the world used emotions in composing brand messages during the onset of the pandemic. Given the size of this universe, it was necessary to identify a limited repository of recent advertising from different parts of the globe. For this purpose, the online archive “Ads of the World” was selected. This website receives global work submitted by advertising practitioners for its creative quality (Brooks, Craig & Bichard, 2020). The website informs that not all submitted ads are included, but only those that meet one of three criteria 1. the campaign is creative, inspiring, informative about a major brand or agency; 2. it shows original thinking to solve a communication problem; or 3. it represents a culturally interesting topic.

In March 2020, this repository opened a special edition for ads produced because of the Coronavirus pandemic, called the ‘COVID-19 Ad Collection’. The sample composition was made on this sub-catalogue using the technique of purposeful sampling (Riffe *et al.*, 2019). All TV and print ads uploaded to the digital archive between March and June 2020 were analysed. Both formats were selected as they constituted the majority of the work in the catalogue, and months were set as the initial four-month period of the pandemic. During this period, marketing communications professionals had to find the best way to continue to advertise their brands while remaining consistent with the global health context.

In addition, to be included in the sample, advertisements had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (i) they had to be produced by a professional advertising agency and not by an advertising school; (ii) they had to advertise a branded product or service; (iii) they had to include a text (copy) written in the Latin alphabet. A total of 376 advertisements met the inclusion criteria. These ads covered a wide variety of types of products and services, such as fast food, automobiles, telecommunications services, retail shops, packaged food, banking and financial services, among others.

3.2. Coding procedure

Step 1. The researchers developed a codebook to categorise the advertising content of the sample. All coding categories were developed a priori based on Czarnecka and Mogaji’s (2020) content analysis of emotional appeal in advertising. Both authors compiled a list of emotional appeals following a literature review on the use of emotions in advertising content (Tables 1 and 2). The list of categories to be examined, their definitions, and directions for recording the analysis on the coding form made up the study’s codebook. The categorisation of emotional appeals covered two domains: positive emotional appeals (adventure, affiliation, beauty, excitement, nurturing, popularity, relief, security, sex, pride, nostalgia, youth) and negative emotional appeals (fear, guilt, sorrow). Each ad in the sample was assigned an identification number. The coding unit was each of the press and television advertisements included in the sample.

Step 2. As discussed in the literature review, rational appeals focus on the individual’s functional needs and objective characteristics of the advertised products, such as their utilitarian benefits (Bhatia, 2019; Rochford, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, emotional appeals aim to arouse negative or positive emotions in individuals, aimed at facilitating brand

recall and promoting purchase decisions (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999; Kotler & Armstrong, 1991; Marchegiani & Phau, 2013; Zhang *et al.*, 2014). Based on these assumptions, a guide was established to identify emotional appeal among the advertisements in the sample during the analysis procedure. The guide consisted of three questions: (i) does the ad have elements that elicit an emotional response through the characters in the ad, their behaviour or what they say?; (ii) does the ad have elements that convey an emotional response through the objects and their relationship to the setting?; (iii) does the ad use factual information and focus on cognitive aspects (e.g. product features, functionality, quality or price)?; and (iv) does the ad use factual information and focus on cognitive aspects (e.g. product features, functionality, quality or price)? The analysis was conducted on the graphical components of the advertisement –photographs, illustrations, visual tone– and the textual content –copy (Sontag, 2018). The presence or absence of emotional appeal was recorded on the coding form. Each identified appeal was then coded according to the theme of each category specified in the codebook. Table 3 shows the categories and their thematic delimitation used for the inclusion of the messages and their coding.

Table 3. Coding framework for emotional appeals in the COVID-19 thematic ads published in Ads of the World.

Emotional appeal dominion	Emotional appeal category	Coding themes. Ad conveys content oriented to arouse an emotional response consistent with one of these themes:
Positive emotional appeals	Adventure	audacity, courage, daring, freedom, openness, absence of limits.
	Affiliation	friendship, fellowship, cooperation, group membership, belongingness, reciprocity.
	Beauty	aesthetics, harmony, order, proportion.
	Excitement	enjoyment, happiness, pleasure, positive mood, fun, entertainment.
	Nurturance	affection, love, attention, care, well-being.
	Popular	known, regular, habitual, typical, accepted.
	Relief	relaxation, calm, peace, tranquillity.
	Security	confidence, self-esteem, control, predictability.
	Sex	eroticism, physiological excitement.
	Pride	sufficiency, honour, dignity, magnanimity, being responsible for a positive outcome.
	Nostalgia	memories, a positive past, preference for objects/persons from previous time.
Youth	vitality, freshness, rejuvenation, children, adolescents.	
Negative emotional appeals	Fear	anxiety, tension, danger, threat, fear, distress.
	Guilt	guilt, judgment, experiencing that you have transgressed a social/moral standard.
	Sorrow	grief, sorrow, loss, separation.

Source: Own elaboration.

For example, the Kellogg's ad shows a picture of a happy infant playing in a cardboard castle that is set up inside the house, the emotional appeal was recorded and coded as 'excitement', 'security' and 'youth' (Figure 1). The other ad, from the Smart brand, does not use emotional appeal, its claim is grounded on objective data about the size of the car as a reference to the physical separation distance that the authorities urge to keep during the pandemic.

Figure 1. Example of sampled adverts retrieved from Ads of the World, COVID-19 Ad Collection.



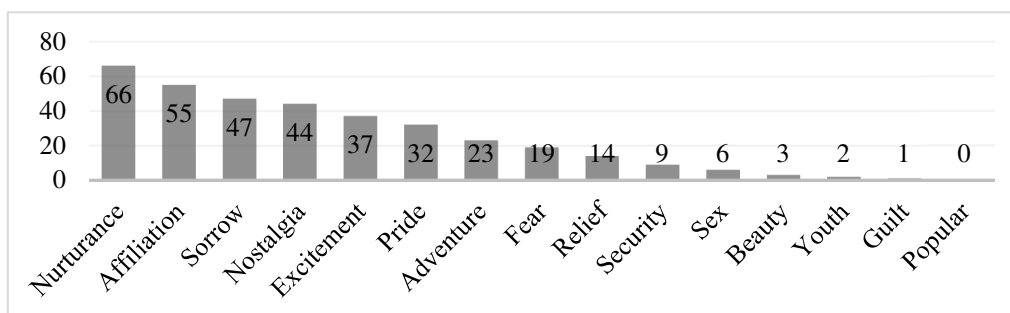
Source: Ads of The World.

Step 3. Both researchers independently coded the advertisements in the sample. Preliminary coding was conducted with a set of 40 advertisements to ensure understanding of the guidelines, the thematic delineation of the codes and the indications set out in the codebook. After pretesting, the researchers examined the discrepancies in the coding and re-evaluated some guidelines for the procedure of including the advertisements in each code. A second round of preliminary coding was conducted with the same number of advertisements, after which intercoder reliability was calculated across all codes and a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.85 was obtained. The sample was then split equally between the two coders, who proceeded with the analysis of the advertisements.

4. Results

The number of ads analysed from March to June was 376. The selection of ads incorporating at least one emotional appeal was 208, revealing that 55.3% of advertisements included in the sample comprised this appeal. Most of these ads used positive appeals (72%), a smaller number used a mix of positive and negative appeals (21%), and only a few ads used negative emotional appeals (7%). Data revealed that the appeals with highest use frequency were Nurturance, Affiliation, Sorrow, Nostalgia, Excitement and Pride (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percentage of frequency of use of emotional appeals in advertisements.



Source: Own elaboration.

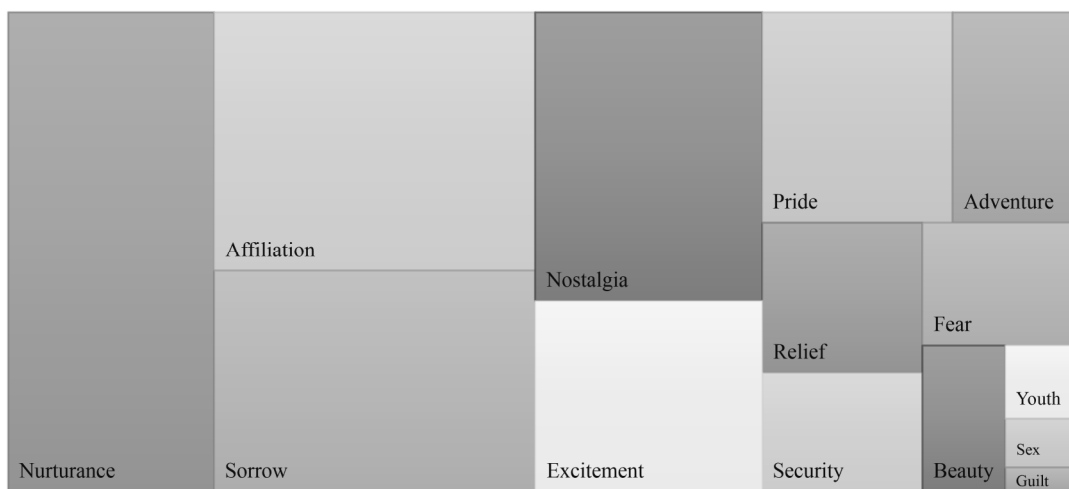
Regarding the concurrence of emotional appeals in each advertisement, 70 ads featured 2 appeals concurrently; 39 ads featured 3 appeals; 6 ads featured 4 appeals, and 3 ads featured 5 emotional appeals simultaneously (total number of ads using concurrent emotional appeals = 118) (Table 4). The categories nurturance, affiliation, sorrow and nostalgia reveal the highest concurrent frequencies (Figure 3). Preferred combinations were nurturance and affiliation (featured in 36 concurrent opportunities); sorrow–nostalgia (17 opportunities); nurturance–pride (16 opportunities); nurturance–nostalgia, and nurturance–sorrow, and fear–sorrow (14 opportunities); nostalgia–affiliation (12 opportunities) (Figure 4).

Table 4. Percentage of concurrent emotional appeals featured in ads.

Emotional appeal	Nurturance	Affiliation	Sorrow	Nostalgia	Excitement	Pride	Adventure	Relief	Security	Fear	Beauty	Youth	Sex	Guilt
% of frequency of concurrent featuring	19.3	16.2	13.9	12.8	8.4	7.8	5.1	4.7	3.7	3.7	2.4	1.0	0.7	0.3

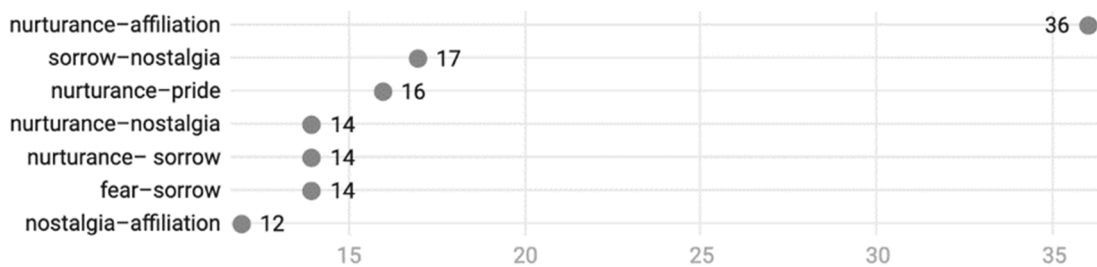
Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 3. Hierarchy chart exhibiting the concurrent frequencies of emotional appeals featured in sampled advertisements.



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 4. Number of emotional appeal concurrencies in COVID-19 themed brand advertisements.



Source: Own elaboration.

As for the evolution of the recurrence of emotional appeals in the period studied, the data show abrupt increases in April and May compared to the other months (Table 5). These data revealed a similar tendency between the number of advertisements per month and the frequency of use of emotional appeals during the same period. The frequency of use of these appeals and the number of ads uploaded to the repository per month were positively correlated, $r(374) = .78, p < .05$.

Regarding the recurrence of positive and negative appeals during the period under investigation, the data reveal a greater presence of positive appeals, with a peak in May, while

negative appeals show their highest use during May. Figure 5 shows the detailed evolution of both types of emotional appeal over the four-month period.

Table 5. Frequency of use of emotional appeals per month and descriptive statistics.

Months and descriptive statistics	March	April	May	June	Mean	SD
No. of ads in sample	42	168	147	19	94.3	64.2
Frequency of feature of emotional appeals in ads	20	144	166	38	92	63.8

Source: Own elaboration.

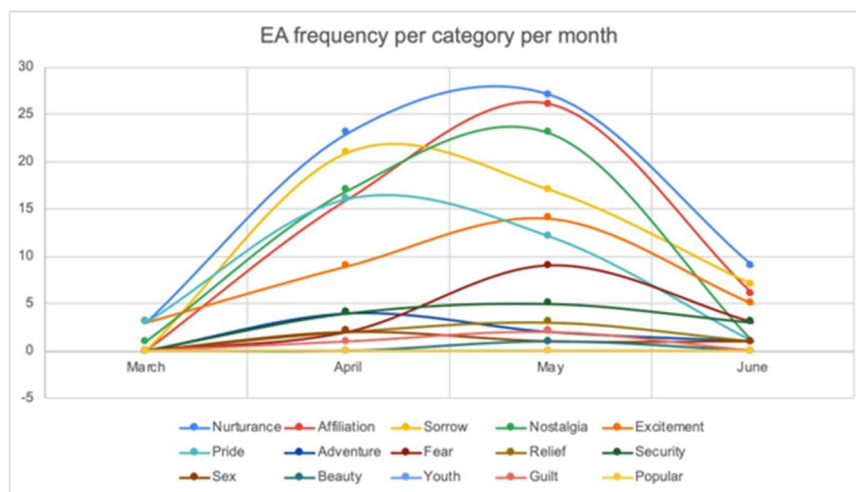
Concerning the origin of the advertisements, Table 6 shows the number of ads per world region included in the study sample, and their distribution over the period under review. Ads from Europe and North America are the largest contributors, followed by ads from Central and South America.

Table 6. Number of ads in sample per world region per month.

World regions and descriptive statistics	March	April	May	June	Total	Mean	SD
Europe	16	72	57	10	155	62	30.5
North America	13	43	48	0	104	41.6	23.2
Central and South America	5	21	12	4	42	16.8	7.9
Asia	0	9	15	2	26	10.4	6.9
Middle East	6	10	5	2	23	9.2	3.3
Australia and Oceania	0	5	7	1	13	5.2	3.3
Africa	2	8	3	0	13	5.2	3.4

Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 5. Evolution of the frequency of use of use of emotional appeals over the studied period.



Source: Own elaboration.

5. Discussion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of positive and negative emotional appeals appearing in a sample of early COVID-19 themed ads, drawn from a repository that curates ads from around the world for their high creative quality, and is a benchmark in the marketing communications industry (Brooks, Craig & Bichard, 2020). Our results show an increase in the use of emotional appeals as time elapses since the onset of the outbreak. This increase was characterised by the simultaneous use of different emotional appeals, which may indicate an eagerness to increase the strength of messages, or reflect the mixed emotions that individuals experienced in the uncertain first months of the pandemic.

Nurturance was the emotional appeal with the highest frequency of use among the ads in the sample (66%). This positive appeal is defined as one that evokes caring, such as parents who care about the health and well-being of their children (Bleakley *et al.*, 2015; Meadows-Oliver & Hendrie, 2013). Sloan *et al.* (2021) studied the extent to which US citizens feared the virus, and the results showed subjects' awareness of caring for others, especially family members, close friends and elderly relatives. Advertisements during COVID-19 have communicated the risk of being outdoors, encouraging people to stay indoors, wear masks or to respect distance or care for others. Affiliation (55%) was the second most frequently used positive emotional appeal. Caring about maintaining good relationships with family members and other peers, having friendly and social ties, being a reciprocal and cooperative person, are attitudes and actions related to affiliation (Hetsroni, 2000; Mogaji, 2016; Pollay, 1983). Images of enjoyment, celebrating or playing with friends, family or neighbours, even proposing marriage through a screen appear in the "Connections" campaign of Heineken (Italy).

Marketers know that positive emotions pose less risk than negative emotions when used in brand communications (Chang & Chang, 2014; Czarnecka & Mogaji, 2020; Hornik, Ofir & Rachamim, 2017; Marchegiani & Phau, 2013; Wu *et al.*, 2018). This observation is consistent with results reported by Czarnecka and Mogaji (2020). These authors studied financial services advertising and found that adverts predominantly used positive emotional appeals, while rarely using negative appeals. The results of this study show a preference for positive emotions over negative emotions.

However, sorrow (47%) was the third most preferred emotional appeal in the sample and the most used negative emotion. Some brands have compared the virus to a hurricane (Brazil), an assassin with a chainsaw (US) or Death as a character (Peru). Advertisers should be careful when using content with negative emotional appeal during COVID-19. According to the law of apparent reality, during stressful times the recommendation is to be cautious with negative emotions, as they may be felt more intensely by consumers, especially in a pandemic (Frijda, 1988; Mantovani & Tazima 2016). Advertisers use negative emotional messages, such as sorrow, to achieve greater persuasive influence (Coleman, Royne & Pounders, 2020; Coulter & Pinto, 1995). For example, COVID-19 advertisements used sorrow as a way to raise consumer awareness of the danger of the virus. This strategy is not without risk, as Berger and Milkman (2012) found that grim content causes lower arousal and decreases people's motivation. Following this idea, Drakulich (2015) found that negative emotions in advertising can lead to mental and physical health problems.

Nostalgia (44%) replaced sorrow as the preferred negative appeal in the months following the onset of the pandemic. Nostalgia is grounded in evocations of the personal past, as the individual remembers how it used to be, memories made up of past events and emotions (Havlena & Holak, 1991; Holbrook & Schindler, 1991; Stern, 1992). Consumers long for the past when they lose confidence in the future or when reality changes unexpectedly in the present (Clarke & Schmidt, 1995). Advertisers and their clients resort to nostalgia during the early months of the pandemic to appeal to consumers by referring to a better past and projecting a

brighter future. For example, travel companies such as Tour Skills (Bulgaria) –a tour operator– or Iberia (Spain) –an airline– had advertisements that talked about how amazing it was to travel, and the joys of visiting attractive destinations before the lockdowns. These messages are consistent with Marchegiani and Phau (2013) and Zhang *et al.* (2014), who argue that nostalgia is an effective emotional appeal that is adopted in advertising when people face insecurities, as they are more aware of the past and want to remember it.

Excitement (37%) was the fifth most frequent emotional appeal. This emotion is linked to pleasure, satire, wit, relief, positive mood, provoking amusement, joy and fun (Chang & Chang, 2014; Czarnecka & Mogaji, 2020; Hornik, Ofir & Rachamim, 2017; Li, 2019). According to Hornik, Ofir and Rachamim (2017) and Li (2019) excitement is a strong emotional appeal to engage with consumers. Czarnecka and Mogaji (2020) noted that this emotion projected joyful and enthusiastic experiences. Finally, the emotional appeal that followed excitement was pride (32%). Pride was especially present in ads that told stories of strength and resilience, usually accompanied by epic scores, and connected to a spirit of patriotism and love of country.

Advertising has a social responsibility, which can be directed at promoting consumer behaviours that leave a positive or negative impact on their communities (Cowan, 2020; Huang & Zhao, 2020). In a situation such as the pandemic, brand communication practitioners must make thorough use of emotions, using this resource to contribute to society, avoiding giving rise to harmful attitudes or behaviour. As Broaden and Build theory explains, positive emotions generate positive attitudes and negative emotions generate negative attitudes (Fredrickson 2001; 1998; Pinto & Yagnik, 2016). In this study, safety (9%) was found to have a low percentage compared to fear (19%) among the emotions preferred by the ad creatives in the sample. The former evokes reassurance and the latter anxiety, tension and danger. Advertising professionals can make relevant contributions during the duration of the pandemic by advertising brands and at the same time contributing to people's well-being. This can be manifested, for example, in messages that do not provoke further stress, that promote healthy relationships in the home or that reinforce preventive health behaviours.

One limitation of this study is that the sample was drawn from a database whose content is based on the advertisements that authors choose to submit. Although the archive has an inclusion guide that governs submissions and can be edited by the repository team, the selection of advertisements depends on the judgement and collaboration of practitioners around the world. Because of this crowdfunding-like design, the sample is not only unrepresentative, but allows conclusions to be drawn about choices and trends among marketing communications creatives and executives in different regions of the world.

Future studies could examine the emotions present in advertising messages from the perspective of specific theoretical frameworks. Some perspectives consider that emotions do not have a biological origin, nor are they an exclusively mental process of the individual's inner life, but arise from the social dimension of people. Harre and Averil are influential authors of this position (Aranguren, 2017); the former bases his position on a constructivist stance and argues that emotions are mostly socio-cultural constructions (Belli & Harré, 2010). Averil (1980) argues that while nature is immutable, culture is self-produced and adaptive, so emotions are expressions of social roles mediated by the norms of a society. From these views, emotions are agreements that are made visible in language and are modified over time (Enciso & Lara, 2014). These positions have received various criticisms, pointing out the unlikelihood that emotions are entirely constructed realities and disconnected from people's biological and volitional experience (Ross, 2006). However, they are approaches that provide the possibility of exploring the language of emotional appeals from the cultural perspective where advertising originates.

This study opens up the possibility for future research to delve deeper into the effectiveness of the sample advertisements and show whether they achieved the expected results within their target markets. Li (2019) argues that different emotional appeals can

contribute to different affective responses among people and lead to particular communication outcomes. Turner (2007) argues that the success of a message depends on matching the emotion with the audience so that the content is processed and not rejected. This is in line with Hong and Zinkhan (1995), who explain that the emotion conveyed by the brand must synchronise with the self-emotion perceived by each individual to be effective. The effects originated by the various audience segmentations could be further analysed. For example, Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1991) found that men and women differ in their treatment of information, with women showing greater sensitivity than men in making judgements. It would be possible to analyse the emotional outcome of each advertisement across genders, including its effect according to age, cultural and market contexts. Another issue of interest would be the simultaneous use of positive and negative emotional appeals, as research on this is inconclusive (Xie *et al.*, 2004; Gross, 2008).

It seems plausible to assume that the emotional appeals used in the COVID-19-themed advertisements were chosen to match the emotions that the public experienced during the quarantine and the threat of the pandemic virus. The creative decision-making process that marketing communication experts used to develop these ads and choose the emotional appeals could be the subject of future research. Additional research can also examine how contextual variables hindered the development of branded advertisements. Variables such as clients' budget constraints, the challenge of having to produce messages while in quarantine, and stress caused by concern for their own health and that of their loved ones. There is an extensive literature on motivation and the factors shaping the advertising creative process (Turnbull & Wheeler, 2017; Ahmad, Stufhaut & Labianca, 2017; Vanden Bergh & Stuhlfaut, 2006) however, it will be interesting to learn how this occurs in unusual circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

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