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## MRS Awards 2023

Creative Development Research

### Winner

The Outsiders

McDonald's

Leo Burnett

Peek Content

house51

How insights led to McDonald's  
most popular campaign ever

## Summary

In 2022, McDonald's faced two problems.

First, their famous 'Love' advertising was losing emotional impact. Second, incoming legislation would soon radically restrict any such communications for high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) products.

They needed a new approach: one that could rejuvenate the connection between British customers and the brand, without showing a single product.

Faced with this challenge, they engaged The Outsiders to find a new emotional role for McDonald's in British life.

We conducted three phases of research:

1. **Data review & analysis - of the pressures felt by the mass-mainstream audience**
1. **Focus groups - exploring consumers' stories about these pressures and how McDonald's answered them**
  - **Film ethnography and follow up depth interviews** - focussed on the moment when customers said 'sod it' to these pressures and grabbed a McDonald's

By using innovative story-based techniques, we uncovered two all-new insights:

- The invitation to get a McDonald's was even more emotional than the food
- Invitations were often communicated with an unspoken gesture, such as an eyebrow raise

This was the creative spark for the award-winning 'Raise your Arches' campaign, which went on to become 'most liked by consumers' and generate £45m in incremental revenue.

## Synopsis

McDonald's is a well-loved brand, with widely-loved advertising. So, back in 2021, planners at the company's ad agency, Leo Burnett, were surprised to realise they had a problem. Actually, two problems.

First, their tried and tested communications approach was tired. McDonald's 'Love' advertising had successfully grown the brand over the last decade, but successive campaigns were having less impact and competitors were catching up.

Second, the UK government was threatening legislation forbidding the promotion of HFSS products (high in fat, salt and sugar). This was a problem: McDonald's traditionally showcased their products prominently in their advertising. See image one.

It was time for a new approach. The planners needed a strategy that could rejuvenate the connection between consumers and the brand without showing the products. They set out to find a new emotional role for McDonald's in British life, beyond the food.

In the end, the insight they found, based on work by the Outsiders, led to the most popular [McDonald's campaign](#) ever, and generated an estimated £45m in incremental revenue.

### Insight, not intuition

Ad planners often rely on intuition and the team had developed a gut feel for what would work, based on years of successful campaigns for McDonald's; they call it 'having ketchup in your veins'. However, they realised that in a changing world, intuition alone wouldn't serve them; they made the bold decision to recommend an investment in research.

The existing creative platform, 'Fancy a McDonald's', was based around the idea that McDonald's could act as a release for people experiencing the pressures of modern life. However, they now needed to find out how this idea showed up in culture in 2022, and among a mass-mainstream audience, far removed from the liberal Shoreditch bubble.

The team commissioned The Outsiders – Steven Lacey and behavioural expert Ian Murray at [House 51](#) – who are both renowned for their expertise in working with underrepresented audiences. The research objectives were as follows.

- **Identify 'human truths'**: what are the universal pressures that mainstream audiences are facing?
- **McDonald's as an antidote**: understand how McDonald's relieves these pressures.
- **Identify invitation stories**: explore the human stories behind the 'fancy a McDonald's' moment.

### What we did

We conducted a three-phase programme of research, as follows.

### Phase one - knowledge crunch

A secondary research review and cultural analysis around pressures felt by the mainstream audience at the end of Covid and the beginning of the cost-of-living crisis. This phase identified four key territories:

- **Monotony vs spontaneity:** in our increasingly predictable lives, McDonald's is an invitation to be spontaneous
- **Responsibility vs liberation:** in a world of mounting responsibility, McDonald's is an invitation take some time out and just do what feels good
- **Judgement vs acceptance:** with mounting pressure to be a certain way, McDonald's is an invitation to be ourselves, free from judgement
- **Seriousness vs frivolity:** at a time when everything's so serious, McDonald's is an invitation for fun and frivolity

### Phase two – focus groups with pre-tasks

For the pre-tasks, we wrote statements that brought each of the territories to life using a form of free verse, such as the example below for the territory 'monotony vs spontaneity'.

*“Life can feel a bit predictable sometimes”*

*God, life can get repetitive.*

*The same routine, day after day.*

*The same alarm, the same school runs, the same work obligations, the same foods.*

*Everything is scheduled,*

*Everything the same,*

*And then we do it all again.*

*It never used to be like this, did it?*

*Sometimes it feels like we could all do with a bit more spontaneity in our lives.*

We asked participants to write stories about how this pressure played out in their lives and the role of McDonald's as a release. We then conducted 11 mini-group discussions with five audience segments - teens, young adults, parents, single parents and grandparents. The key insights from this phase of the research were as follows:

1. We delved deeply into the stories behind the invitation and the 'sod it' moment – the moment when, just for a second, you step away from the pressures and grab a McDonald's; this brought forward fresh, raw and honest stories that participants were brave to tell, and McDonald's was brave to embrace.
1. **Responsibility vs liberation** stood out as the territory with the greatest opportunity.

1. **Parents, single parents and grandparents were the most interesting audiences, as they were subject to some of the greatest pressures and had the most impactful stories to tell.**

### Phase three – film ethnography and follow-up depths

We engaged 14 parent, single parent and grandparent participants to generate high-quality self-shot ethnographic content, working with our partner [Peek Content](#) and using their proprietary smartphone app. We followed up with six filmed deep-dive interviews to put context around the ethnography. The interviews in phase three used only four questions to capture the human stories around the 'sod it' moments.

Phase three built on the insights from phase two, focusing on liberation from responsibility, the invitation and the sod it moment. The interviews were all filmed, not just to provide a record or to help with analysis, but specifically to capture the way that people look and behave when talking about McDonald's in the context freedom from responsibility. See image two.

### The four questions

1. **The Pressure:** tell us about the responsibilities you have in life that put you under pressure.
1. **The Release:** tell us about how McDonald's helps you put these pressures to one side and enjoy yourself.
1. **The shared moment of invitation:** tell us about the exact moment when you decide to get a cheeky McDonald's with someone else.
1. **Tell us a story:** about a moment you and someone else decided to put your pressures to one side for a moment, and get a McDonald's

### Creative development - the unspoken invitation

The filmed content was pivotal for Leo Burnett. As the heart of the brief for the creative team, the planners created a short film from the hours of interviews. The creatives were transfixed. Two unexpected insights arose from the extensive research and expert analysis by The Outsiders team.

1. **The suggestion – let's go for a cheeky McDonald's – was more emotional than the actual consumption of the products.** The assumption had been that the moment of release would come from the food – but just the invitation was enough to produce a host of emotional reactions such as shouts of joy, widening eyes, mischievous smiles and bursts of excitement.
1. **The invitation was so universally understood that it didn't need to be spoken.** What triggered the emotional fireworks was not what was said but came from a range of unspoken cues being used to extend the invitation such as a knowing look, a head point, and emoji... an *eyebrow raise!*

**The outcome: a smash hit for McDonald's**

One of the creative team made the connection between the eyebrow raise in the filmed content and the shape of the Golden Arches, and the Raise your Arches campaign was born. The campaign was the most talked about McDonald's campaign ever, scored highest on emotional intensity and got brand love back into growth, **all despite not showing the food**. Whilst there are many factors driving sales, the campaign helped to smash projections for January and February 2023. See image three.

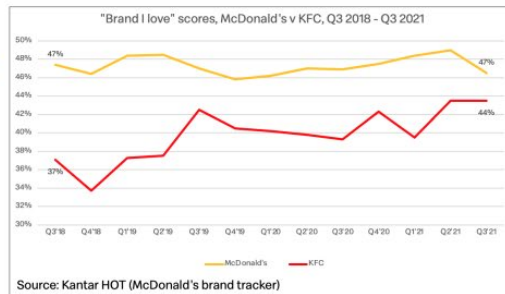
**Why this should win**

There are six reasons that this work should win:

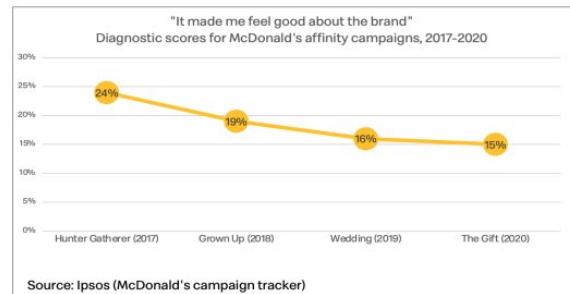
- 1. **The outstanding creative advertising that resulted.** The ad won the TV creativity **Thinkbox** award in January 2023, **three Cannes Lions** and **System1's** 'ad most liked by consumers' and has smashed all metrics.
- 1. **The huge business impact.** The ad contributed to a huge uplift in sales.
- 1. **The complex, multilayered, thorough and extensive nature of the research.** Not satisfied with just doing some qual, the Outsiders team put together a thoughtful and considered layered approach to dig deep, then deeper, then deeper again, spending more hours in field for this campaign than the planners did behind their desks.

- 1. **The cultural immersion of the knowledge crunch.** We didn't just dive into qual but conducted detailed desk research and expert analysis to immerse ourselves in the context. This analysis enabled us to immediately go beyond the most obvious pressures and start the research from a point of strength; the resulting territories were critical to the success of the project.
- 1. **The originality of the approach.** For example, creating the poetic pressure statements for participants to react to; the use of four simple questions.
- 1. **The focus on human stories.** This is exactly what market researchers do best and how we add value to clients, taking them beyond the Shoreditch bubble and into the lives of real people. The stories shared were often raw and deeply human. It also took courage for McDonald's to take these stories on and portray the brand as it is *really* seen by its audience. The bravery paid off as evidenced by System1 'most liked by consumers' win and the huge buzz about the ad amongst the target mass-mainstream audience.

McDonald's diagnostics were worrying



Love scores plateauing



Emotional resonance declining since 2017



The 'Love' advert always had the **products** and the truths that surround them at its heart

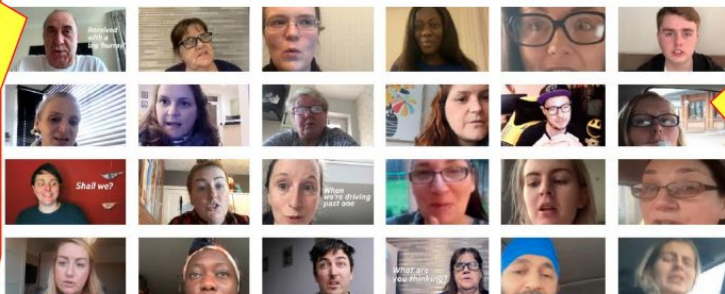


### Research images

It's like a **special treat Friday**, work pay, we get it delivered. It's always the breakfast that we all get. Everyone goes round, like asking, "Oh, what have you ordered? What have you ordered?"  
**Parent**

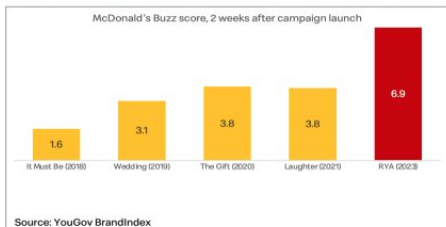
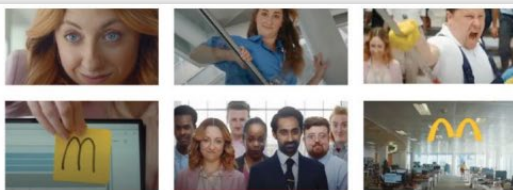
There's certain times in our family that a **McDonald's is happening, and we all know it is going to happen**. After swimming, it's like a ritual. After swimming, you have a McDonald's. When we go shopping, there's no discussion what we're having. We always have a McDonald's.  
**Parent**

It's nice to **switch off and not be doing anything for anyone** as I walk along. McDonald's, it just doesn't use any of your resources. It's easy to pop into, it doesn't cost much.  
**Grandparent**

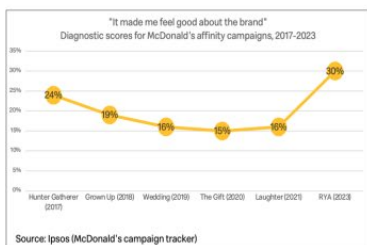


I normally want to be seen as being responsible and encouraging, going to groups and activities.. **set that expectation aside just occasionally** and doing what you want to do is quite healthy as well.  
**Single parent**

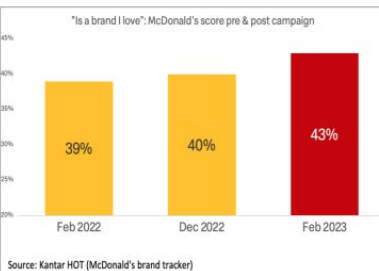
Having a McDonald's is a chance to let go and have some fun together. **My McDonald's moments** are usually with my daughter...today we took the meal home with us so she could eat in front of the television and it was a really great experience. It was nice to spend a bit of bonding time together and catch up.  
**Parent**



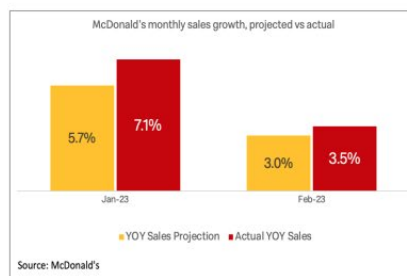
Higher buzz scores than any previous Love campaign



New record scores on emotional resonance



Brand love on the rise again



Sales outstripping prediction after campaign launch