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Dina Pynssi & Oona Sasse

## **Turning Flaws into Content**

Self-Deprecating Humour and Generational Responses to Meme Marketing  
in Ryanair's Social Media

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<b>Author:</b>	Dina Pynssi & Oona Sasse		
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**ABSTRACT:**

Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tarkastella itseironisen huumorin roolia brändiviestinnässä, sekä sen vaikutuksia kuluttajien kokemaan brändikuvaan eri sukupolvien välillä. Tutkimus keskittyy erityisesti meemimarkkinointiin sosiaalisen median kontekstissa ja hyödyntää case-esimerkkinä halpalentoyhtiö Ryanairia. Ryanair on tunnettu humoristisesta ja itseironisesta viestintätyylistään sosiaalisen median kanavoillaan. Aihe on ajankohtainen, sillä digitaalisen markkinoinnin ja sosiaalisen median kehittyminen on muuttanut brändien kommunikointitapoja ja huumorin merkitys osana viestintää on kasvanut. Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys rakentuu mainonnan vaikuttavuuden, huumorin mekanismien, sekä brändikuvan muodostumisen ympärille. Keskeisiä käsitteitä ovat itseironinen huumori, meemimarkkinointi, brändikuva, sekä sukupolvien väliset erot, etenkin huumorin kokemisessa. Aiemman tutkimuksen perusteella huumorin on todettu vaikuttavan etenkin kuluttajien tunnepohjaisiin reaktioihin. Tutkimus tuotettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena, aineisto kerättiin puolistrukturoiduilla teemahaastatteluilta, joihin osallistui eri sukupolien edustajia (Z-sukupolvi, milleniaalit, ja X-sukupolvi). Haastatteluissa osallistujille esitettiin alustavien kysymyksiä jälkeen esimerkkejä Ryanairin TikTok-kanavan sisällöstä, jonka jälkeen heidän tulkintojaan ja näkemyksiään brändiin liittyen tarkasteltiin. Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että itseironinen huumori ymmärretään kaikissa ikäryhmissä, mutta siihen liittyvät tunnepohjaiset reaktiot vaihtelevat vahvasti eri sukupolvien välillä. Nuoremmat vastaajat kokivat sisällön viihdyttävänä ja samaistuttavana, kun taas vanhemmat haastateltavat suhtautuivat siihen neutraalimmin tai kriittisemmin, osa koki sisällön jopa vaikeasti tulkittavana. Lisäksi havaittiin, että huumori ei merkittävästi muuta jo olemassa olevia käsityksiä Ryanairin brändistä, se pikemmin vahvistaa jo olemassa olevia mielikuvia, kuten esimerkiksi edullisuutta ja alemmaa palvelun laatua. Tutkimuksen johtopäätöksenä voidaan todeta, että itseironinen huumori voi toimia tehokkaana keinona lisätä brändin lähestyttävyyttä ja sitouttaa erityisesti nuorempia kohderyhmiä sosiaalisessa mediassa. Huumorin käytön vaikutus brändikuvan parantamiseen on silti rajallinen ja sen toimivuus riippuu vahvasti kohdeyleisöstä. Tutkimus korostaa siis tarvetta huomioida sukupolvien väliset erot huumorin käytössä ja vastaanotossa osana markkinointiviestintää.

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**KEYWORDS:** self-deprecating humour, meme marketing, brand communication, consumer engagement, generational differences, Ryanair

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## 1 Introduction

According to Strick et al. (2013, p. 33) humour is a well-studied messaging strategy in marketing and advertising literature. They note that not only being well studied, the positive effects of using humour in marketing activities are widely agreed and acknowledged amongst the researchers. As the landscape of marketing evolves through digital platforms and social media, marketers have now a new tool for brand-building and driving better engagement with consumers: internet memes (Kamath & Alur, 2025, p. 225).

While internet memes have evolved on their own from vague forms of humour on websites, specifically on anonymous online forums such as 4chan, to viral multimedia formats such as videos and photos that circulate on various social media platforms (Malodia et al., 2022, p. 1779). This shift in mediums has created an opening for brands to participate in meme culture and to analyse consumer behaviour and engagement with memes and internet culture in a new era.

Malodia et al. (2022, p. 1776) state that marketing via memes has been noted as one of the simplest and efficient ways of engaging with consumers, it is both cost effective and relatable from the viewpoint of the target audience, since this style of marketing leverages popular memes that consumers likely have already seen thus making them easily recognizable and relatable.

Literature supports the idea that meme marketing is an efficient and powerful tool when driving for better engagement and brand awareness and image. This agreement creates new questions and concerns for brands that operate in different fields and industries with different business models and whom have different target audiences. Deciding to participate in this new way of marketing and using memes as a tool to communicate to consumers, brands might want to consider their audience demographics to avoid possible negative impacts. Differences in preferred humour styles in communication might vary across generations, nevertheless among different industries. Communication styles between a premium positioned brand and low-cost budget friendly brand might not

achieve same levels of engagement or positive impacts of meme marketing, due to the differences in target audience views on both humour and marketing in general.

Sundaravalli & Krishna (2025, p. 81) state that the sense of humour in generation Z can be differentiated from other generations sense of humour due to its reliance on irony, absurdity and self-deprecation. This would indicate that younger generations find humour infused with irony and self-mockery more amusing than for example classic knock knock jokes that might appeal to older generations. Moreover, meme culture has significantly impacted the development of gen Z individuals' sense of humour, with the distinctive formats such as reaction images and inside jokes on online communities (Sundaravalli & Krishna, 2025, p. 81). Similarly, the generation Y, also known as the millennials, have a sense of humour described as a coping mechanism, which stems from both uncertainty due to the economic downturn as well as the culture of comedy experienced during life that ultimately manifested into a dark sense of humour (Kräussl, 2022, p. 50-51).

Differences in the usage of memes in social communications can be identified based on age (Du Bois, 2024, p. 2). In a study that investigated the use of humour in online communications across ages and sexes, Du Bois (2024, p. 11) discovered that self-enhancing and self-defeating humour type was far more used by the younger generations, whereas the silent generation demonstrated an inclination towards affiliative humour, boomers and generation X towards aggressive forms. Noteworthy finding in the study conducted by Du Bois (2024, p. 12) was that the older generations showed little to no use of self-deprecating humour.

From previous literature, it can be concluded that generational differences in preferred humour style can be observed, particularly within the realm of self-deprecating or self-directed humour, the question of how this affects or should affect marketing efforts when managing brand image remains. As stated previously, meme marketing has disrupted the traditional marketing realm with the surge of social media platforms and

brands migrating to these new mediums of marketing. This indicates a need for further study on generational differences in humour specially related to brands using humour as marketing tool when communicating with their target audiences.

This study aims to understand specifically these generational differences in preferred humour styles by conducting a literature review on the subject, as well as to understand meme marketing in general via a case study on a low-cost carrier, Ryanair, that utilizes this type of marketing communication. The specific subgenre of this type of marketing that this study will examine more closely is the use of self-deprecating humour or irony in meme marketing, since irony as a humour style might have different outcomes due to the provocative nature of it. Moreover, if humour can benefit brand image as well as engagement rates, can it mitigate negative brand image?

### **1.1 Background and research problem**

Chen & Tseng (2010, p. 25-26) highlight, that a strong airline brand image is crucial for the brand's success, moreover, playing a central role in building customer-based brand equity, consisting of brand awareness, perceived quality, brand image, and brand loyalty. Within these, brand image is a key perceptual component that shapes how customers evaluate and emotionally connect with a specific airline. In the airline industry services are intangible and cannot be evaluated before purchase, thus brand image helps customers form expectations and trust. The authors note that strong brands "increase customers' trust from an invisible purchase and enable customers to better visualize and understand intangible products or services" (p. 25).

An airline's brand image strengthens customer trust and reduces perceived risk, which encourages repeat purchases as well as long-term loyalty. Chen & Tseng (2010, p.31) demonstrate that brand image and perceived quality positively affect brand loyalty, which in turn is the most influential determinant of overall brand equity. Furthermore, airline brand image directly contributes to reputation and competitive advantage. Chen & Tseng (2010, p. 32) point out that brand awareness and image help airlines stand out

among competitors by maintaining customer recognition and preference. With competition in the airline market intensifying, having a trustworthy and distinctive image help airlines secure customer loyalty even with other brands offering similar services.

Low-cost carriers (LCCs) like Ryanair often suffer from a negative brand image due to perceptions of poor service quality, excessive additional fees, and negative media coverage. Evangelinos et al. (2025, p.2-10) point out that Ryanair has faced “persistent negative media attention” and “consecutive years of achieving the lowest rankings in passenger satisfaction surveys in the UK” (p.2). The study also notes reports of “low wages and substandard working conditions” as well as “concerns about carelessness for passenger” (p.2), all of which have contributed to its poor reputation.

Evangelinos et al (2025, p. 2-10) emphasize, that this poor reputation is not limited to operational issues, but also reflects long-term brand associations. Passengers often see Ryanair as an airline that prioritizes cutting costs over comfort and reliability. Evangelinos et al note that Ryanair’s name itself may trigger negative attitudes in booking decisions, as passengers tend to “penalize the brand name” compared to other airlines (p.7). This aligns with the concept that a negative brand image, once internalized by consumers, becomes self-reinforcing, meaning passengers’ expectations of poor service impact their experiences and can further damage the brand’s reputation and credibility.

Humour can be an effective communication strategy for improving a brand’s image reducing perceptions when used appropriately. According to Eisend (2009, 192-203), humour in advertising enhances positive emotions and attention, which can create more favorable attitudes toward the advertisement and, over time, toward the brand itself (p. 197). Eisend’s study’s analysis shows that humour significantly increases positive affect and ad liking while reducing negative feelings such as irritation or scepticism (p. 197). This suggests that humour can help brands appear more approachable, human, and likeable, cancelling out previous negative associations. Furthermore, Eisend highlights that humour works mainly through affective mechanisms rather than rational persuasion. It improves attitudes towards brands by generating warm, emotional responses that transfer from the ad to the brand (p. 199-200).

Supporting this, Duncan, Nelson & Frontczak (1984, p. 432-437) found that humour can improve message comprehension and recall, helping audiences pay more attention and remember an ad's message (p. 432). When humour is perceived positively, it increases engagement and the likelihood that consumers process and retain brand information. However, the authors also note that failed humour can backfire, causing irritation and reinforcing negative attitudes (p. 435). Therefore, humour must be carefully matched to the target audience and tone. When used strategically, humour offers a brand to acknowledge its flaws while showing confidence and authenticity, which can humanize the company and improve public perception.

## **1.2 Research questions and objectives**

The focus of this research is the relationship between age and perceptiveness to marketing communication that uses a specific subtype of humour as a way to engage with the audience. The specific subtype of humour that this study will focus on is self-deprecating humour, in other words humour that targets or uses oneself as a target to create amusement by making fun of one's faults. The aim is to examine how using self-deprecating humour can leverage low-cost carrier airlines in their brand management, since these carriers might struggle with brand image problems. The purpose of this research is to understand consumer experience of humorous brand meme marketing communication in airline context. More specifically, this study aims to understand: *how does self-deprecating humour affect Ryanair's brand image across different demographic groups?* The demographic dimension will be age and different generations.

To answer this research question, two objectives were defined. The first objective is to construct a theoretic framework of the key concepts of this study to create an understanding of how humour, brand image, and generational differences are or are not related to each other. The point of this objective is to form a comprehensive understanding of each concept. This objective will be achieved by conducting a comprehensive and multidisciplinary literature review on the concepts. For example, to understand humours

effects on brand image we will firstly have to form an understanding of why brand image is important and define the concepts of humour types. Moreover, how does humour affect individuals' perception of brand marketing and do generational differences in senses of humour affect things like brand loyalty and image across these generations.

The second objective is to investigate the emotional responses to self-deprecatative humour in Ryanair's marketing via empirical research. Ryanair and its advertising were chosen as a specific company for this study because its advertising relies heavily in humour and irony and uses common social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram and is known for its provocative ads. The case context will be defined in the methodology section to further explain how Ryanair uses humour in its marketing and the background of the company as a LCC. This objective will be achieved by conducting qualitative research across the demographic groups that this study investigates and seeing how they react to this type of humour in marketing. This study will compare reactions to different content types that Ryanair has posted that utilise humour to distinguish possible emotional reactions. The aim is to understand possible differences in the reactions in different age groups. These differences might reveal insights on how humour contributes to brand perception and how humour can enhance brand image in an audience with different demographics. For example, if older consumers are more inclined to find self-deprecatative humour inappropriate or hard to understand, and if younger audiences can relate to the content and engage more with it.

### **1.3 Research approach**

Interpretivism is a philosophical position that focuses on how individuals and groups understand and interpret social situations and experiences (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 20). Moreover, it also focuses on social construct such as language since it follows the assumption that these constructs are the key to access the reality of an individual and the social shared dynamics in groups (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p.20). Since this study aims to understand how consumers interpret meme marketing and what effects these ads have on individuals from different generations, it is connected to language to how

individual interpretation happens in a specific context. As said, interpretivism focuses on how one makes sense of a situation, which is the phenomenon that happens when consumer engages with an ad. Humour as a dimension brings another layer of different possible interpretations as well as age, which is why this study adopts interpretivist philosophy as research paradigm.

The research approach is hermeneutic. Hermeneutics focuses on human intentions to understand actions and perceptions and believes that these factors and understanding them form the base of social sciences (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 21). In this study, humour is understood as a social phenomenon, where meaning is linked to how individual understands and responds to a specific message, in the context of the study: a brand message. The aim is to understand how individuals across different generations experience self-deprecating humour in marketing, and how they interpret it.

The data collection method is a semi-structured thematic interview, which will be conducted as group interviews. This approach was selected to investigate and to understand the meanings, emotional reactions and perceptions that self-deprecating humour in advertising evokes in consumers. Semi-structured thematic interviews allow the interviewees to freely express their thoughts. For the purpose of understanding and investigating differences in emotional responses to humorous advertising individuals from different age-groups will be interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of generational differences in humour perception.

#### **1.4 Structure of Study**

This study begins by establishing its background and relevance, outlining the research problem, objectives, and key concepts. The introduction also defines the focus on self-deprecating humour as a branding tool and explains the motivation for examining its impact within the airline industry. The following part develops the theoretical foundation through a review of literature on brand image, the functions and risks of humour in marketing, and the role of social media and meme culture in contemporary brand

communication. Particular attention is given to how generational differences influence perceptions of humour and engagement with brands.

The case of Ryanair is then presented to contextualise the study. This section describes the characteristics of low-cost carriers (LCCs) the reputation and communication style of Ryanair, and the company's distinctive use of humour and memes as part of its marketing strategy, especially on TikTok. Next, the research design is explained, introducing the qualitative approach and describing how data were collected through XXX and selected examples of Ryanair's social media content. Considerations regarding sampling, reliability, and validity are also addressed.

The results section presents the key findings, including participants' general perceptions or Ryanair, their reactions to humorous marketing content, and differences observed across demographic groups. These findings are then interpreted in relation to existing theories, offering insights into the role of self-deprecating humour in shaping brand image and consumer attitudes. Finally, the study concludes by summarising the main outcomes and their implications for both theory and practice. Reflections on the limitations of the research and recommendations for future studies are also provided.

## **1.5 Delimitations**

This study focuses specifically on the use of self-deprecating humour in Ryanair's brand communication and how it influences consumer perceptions across different age groups. While humour and branding can be examined through numerous perspectives, this research is delimited to age and generational differences as the primary demographic variable. Other potential factors such as gender, socioeconomic background, cultural context, native language, political views, and personal values are acknowledged but remain outside the scope of this study.

The empirical data are based on a small, qualitative sample, which aims to provide depth of understanding rather than statistical generalisation. The findings therefore represent subjective interpretations of the participants' perceptions and cannot be extended to all

consumers. Additionally, the research focuses on a single case company, Ryanair, whose brand identity and communication style are unique among low-cost carriers. These delimitations should be considered when interpreting the results and their applicability to other contexts.

## **1.6 Key Concepts**

### Brand Image

According to Keller (1993, p. 1-22) brand image refers to “perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory” (p. 3). These associations, such as attributes, benefits, and overall attitudes, shape what the brand means to consumers and shape how they respond to it. A strong brand image depends on the favourability, strength, and uniqueness of these associations, which help differentiate the brand from competitors and build emotional connections with consumers (p. 3-5). In essence, a positive brand image is formed when consumers hold clear and favourable ideas about the brand that guide their trust, preference, and loyalty.

### Self-deprecating humour

Stewart (2011, p. 201-222) defines self-deprecating humour as a type of humour in which individuals make themselves the target of a joke in order to appear more relatable and likeable. By laughing at their own flaws or mistakes, the speaker – or in a marketing context, the brand – invites the audience to share in the laughter, thus creating a sense of equality and emotional connection (p. 205). Rather than asserting superiority, this style of humour acts as a social strategy that signals humility, confidence, and social intelligence, demonstrating that the communicator is self-aware and comfortable acknowledging imperfections (p. 205-206).

### Memes and meme marketing

According to Malodia et al (2022, p. 1775-1801), memes are self-replicating cultural units that spread rapidly across social networks, often in the form of text, images, GIFs, or short videos that use humour, irony, or relatable themes to communicate ideas (p. 1776-

1777). The study explains that memes have evolved through four stages: from simple units of imitations to internet memes, which are now central to participatory digital culture (p. 1777). Meme marketing refers to the strategic use of memes by brands to communicate messages, promote engagement, and increase brand recall through humour and social media virality (p. 1775). Malodia et al. describe memes as cost-effective marketing tools that allow brands to reach large audiences organically. By tapping into trending topics and existing meme formats, companies can connect authentically with consumers who often ignore traditional advertising (p. 1775-1776).

#### LCCs – Low-Cost Carriers

Low-cost carriers (LCCs) are airlines that focus on reducing operational expenses to offer affordable fees. Majerová & Jirásek (2023, p. 1-14) explain them as airlines that operate with simplified, all-economy layouts, high seat density, and minimal additional services (p. 1). They rely on direct online sales, extensive outsourcing, and rapid aircraft turnaround to keep costs low and efficiency high (p. 1-2). Majerová & Jirásek identify two main LCC approaches: the pure low-cost model, which emphasizes efficiency and punctuality by limiting extra services, and the hybrid model, which offers some added comfort or loyalty programs at the cost of slightly lower operational performance (p. 9-10). The authors conclude that low-cost airlines succeed when they commit to one of these strategies. Meaning, they either focus strictly on cost efficiency or expanding services selectively, since trying to combine both undermines long-term viability (p. 12).

## **2 Using humour brand meme marketing to create consumer engagement**

### **2.1 Theoretical Perspectives Explaining Advertising Effectiveness**

To understand when and why specific ads are effective or influence consumers, it is important to understand how advertising overall can impact consumers behaviours, beliefs, understandings or emotions. According to Vakratsas & Ambler (1999, p. 26-27) advertising has a mental effect on consumers, such as attitude, before it impacts consumer behaviour. They note that this mental effect includes an emotional impact as well as a rational one, in which the consumer might think about and/or feel something in response to an ad before acting on the feelings or thoughts. This would indicate that responses to advertising might be emotional or rational or both at the same time, and the order in which they occur might be random, the main argument is that these cognitive or emotional impacts or responses appear before any behavioural impacts. This is a key concept which this study adopts, as the emotional response, humour, will be investigated in the following chapters.

The dimension where consumers experience advertising on a mental level before behavioural responses can be defined as intermediate responses, in which cognitive, the rational impact, affective, the emotional impact, and experienced responses are located (Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999, p.26). These intermediate responses might explain why certain types of advertising is successful in creating behavioural impacts in consumers even if they do not make sense in a more rational view. Since feeling and thinking might appear simultaneously or in any order, more irrational outcomes are possible when investigating how advertising impacts consumers.

Rathee & Milfeld (2024, p. 10) explore what makes a sustainability ad effective and create a framework of effectiveness that includes ad context, source characteristics and

message design. This study focuses on humorous advertisement, but this framework will be applied in order to understand the general process effectiveness in marketing.

According to Rathee & Milfeld (2024, p. 10-13) ad context describes the factors that affect an ads effectiveness outside of the ads own influence, these factors things such as culture and the macro-environment that encapsulates political, social and economic events. De Pelsmacker et al. (2002, p. 49-50) refer to the media context when discussing what influences persons stimuli towards advertising. They also point out the importance of of media context, moreover the surrounding media content that the ad is inserted into, such as other television ads that surround one specific ad in the specific medium (p.49).

These factors create the overall context in which the ad operates. Another factor of ad context is the ad execution, which refers to the platforms that the ad appears on (Rathee & Milfeld, 2024, p. 14). Moreover, the surrounding content also contributes to the ad's effectiveness, with the notion that surrounding content that aligns with the ad might enhance the effectiveness (Rathee & Milfeld, 2024, p.14). Other research agrees with the idea that positive surrounding context might enhance the effectiveness, and in other research this is defined as context appreciation, which refers to the phenomenon where individuals might appreciate ads more when they are presented in appreciated contexts (De Pelsmacker et al., 2002, p. 51). This would indicate stronger effects when for example humorous ads are shared across platforms that produce similar content, whether it is commercial or not. For example, a social media movement that involves social justice issues and in which individuals participate in the movement via sharing content on social media. In this situation a brand participating in the movement with advertising material by sharing content that aligns with the movement values, might be well appreciated even if the nature of the content is commercial.

Rathee & Milfeld (2024, p.14-15) state that source characteristics define how well the audience accepts the message, and it consists of three dimensions: expertise,

trustworthiness and attractiveness. Accordingly, expertise refers to audience's trust of the source, whether the audience trust that the source is competent or knowledgeable of the subject they are messaging about (p.15). For example, in medical commercials using doctors as spokespersons or ambassadors for the ad could lead to increasing of the perceived expertise. Trustworthiness refers to objectivity, if the audience believes that the source information is objective or not (p.15). For example, a meat eater or meat specialized chef advertising meat alternatives in paid collaborations might be viewed as more objective than a vegan influencer advertising the same product. Lastly, attractiveness refers to the audience liking the source or the message giver (p.15). For example, one's preferred pop idol might have a different impact in advertising to their fanbase, or a widely liked public figure versus controversial one. In social psychology literature, the consensus has been that sources with high credibility sources are typically more persuasive, regardless of if the credibility relies on expertise or trustworthiness (Tormala et al., 2006, p. 684).

Tormala et al. (2006, p. 685, 689) also point out an important notion about source credibility and how it affects how the message is perceived. In their study they test out the possibility that more credibility might not influence more persuasion in situations where the recipient has negative thoughts about the source (p. 685). In the study they found that if the message was weak, meaning for example weak argumentation, the high credibility sources in fact did provide less persuasion than low credibility sources (p.689). This would imply that, for example, using doctors as sources in advertising might backfire opposed to making the ad more persuasive, if the doctor uses weak arguments or otherwise creates negative emotions in the message recipients. This finding brings another level to source characteristic decision making, in which leaders should assess the risk factor or if there is possibility of backfiring in using a high credibility source as the message sender. In social media context, well trusted or liked influencers might be considered as high credibility sources. In situations where these sources deliver weak messages, bad outcomes in message reception might be observed. In the context of social media marketing, this creates another level of consideration, since influencer marketing also

differs from traditional high credibility marketing such as using lawyers or doctors in ads, in the sense that they might not be experts of a specific field, but simply well liked and appreciated in their respective media dimension or parasocial circles.

Moreover, according to Rathee & Milfeld (2024, p. 15-16) industries and product categories might play a role in source characteristics with them possibly offering a positive association to the marketed value, in their study, sustainability. This would suggest that certain industries might be perceived untruthful or be viewed with more criticism in their sustainability marketing. In the context of this study, low-cost carriers similarly might not benefit from marketing luxurious customer experience, since these companies might not be trusted by the public.

The effectiveness framework concludes with message design. Message design is defined as the structure and content of the message (Rathee & Milfeld, 2024, p. 16). For example, the actual wording of the message, tone of voice, visual choices and so forth. Rathee & Milfeld (2024, p. 16) introduce message appeal as one of the key elements of message design. They define message appeal as the framing of the message as well as the specific benefits it provides or what arguments it uses to appeal to viewers. Accordingly, a common message design is gain versus loss, which frames the message in a way that offers concrete benefits in gains to the viewer (p.16). Other message design factors such as delivery style also play a role in shaping the effectiveness of the ad, since delivery style particularly can change outcomes with adapting different styles such as narrative styles that rely on emotion or non-narrative styles that rely on reason (Rathee & Milfeld, 2024, p.17).

According to Brechman & Purvis (2015, p. 366-367) narrative communication can be separated from other types of communication since it does not rely on arguments to persuade, and in advertising the narrative provides brands with the possibility to create meaning in a way that engages and entertains consumers. This definition would imply that non-narrative advertising relies on support such as agreed basic facts, general

knowledge or scientific knowledge that then acts as a validation tool for the information the message is aiming to deliver. In narrative advertising, stories can be creative and imaginative without the restraints of having to rely on facts or logic, which can be more persuasive for some consumers, for example children might be more likely to respond positively to this type of message design whereas adults might be more likely to respond to non-narrative message designs. Moreover, on why narrative advertising might be effective, Brechman & Purvis (2015, p. 367) introduce the concept of transportation, in which a viewer is transported into a state where critical thinking declines due to the narrative nature of the message, and thus creates more positive attitudes that positively correlate with intentions to act or overall brand attitude.

In this chapter the different aspects of what makes advertising effective were investigated in the light of previous literature. In conclusion, advertising effectiveness is a multi-dimensional process in which consumers perceive advertising material in different contexts and have different reactions to the received messages. From previous literature the conclusion that ad effectiveness is shaped by how the ad message is processed cognitively and emotionally is an important factor in how effective the ad is. Other important factors include the context in which the ad appears, as well as source factors and the overall design of the message. This study will focus on these factors to understand humorous advertising and what emotions it might create in individual when they perceive the ads. Humour is one way in which message design can influence emotional response and shape attitudes to brands, and the following chapters will focus on humour mechanisms and types.

Supporting affective perspective, Eisend (2009) states in his works on humour in advertising that previous literature as well as the meta-analysis he conducted agree that humour in advertising impacts both consumer attention and positive affect. Furthermore, the meta-analysis found that in terms of effects that humour in advertising has, cognitive effects were weaker in comparison to affective mechanisms, suggesting that the response to humour in most cases is not related to cognitive processing such as

information processing or persuasion from source credibility (Eisend, 2009, p. 199). This would indicate that in the framework of advertising affects, emotional and cognitive affects might be separate, even if they precede any behavioral results as stated by Vakratsas & Ambler (1999). While this finding does not fully dismiss the possible impacts of rational and cognitive affects, it highlights the particular relevance of humour as an affective mechanism in advertising and builds a foundation for the further investigation of humour mechanisms and types.

## **2.2 Mechanisms of Humorous Advertising Appeals**

The previous chapter reviewed previous literature on advertising effectiveness. The chapter concluded with the notion that cognitive and emotional responses play an important role in advertising effectiveness and according to some studies, precede behavioural outcomes. This chapter aims to link the psychological component, specifically the emotional reaction to an ad, to humorous advertising appeals to understand the mechanisms that play into creating emotional effects.

In their study of humour appeals in advertising Hoang et al. (2023, p. 742) propose that there are three main types of humour appeals: incongruity resolution, tension relief, and self or other disparaging humour. The last one can be divided into two subtypes depending on in which direction the disparaging effect is aimed towards. They define incongruity resolution as an appeal in which a viewer's attention is attracted by a schema incongruity and thus generating humour through the process of discovering or understanding the incongruity (Hoang et al., 2023, p. 743). In other words, the viewer is presented content that deviates from their expectation, and thus resolving this mismatch creates a humorous effect. Tension relief is defined as an appeal that allows the viewer to use humour as a coping mechanism when faced with something mentally heavy (p. 743). Lastly, self and other disparaging humour appeal refers to humour that extracts humour from making fun of either oneself or others (p. 743). The third appeal type can be thought as a single type, but with subtypes that differ on at whose account the humour is created at the expense of.

Incongruity resolution is humorous appeal that makes viewers laugh via presenting something that differs from what they were expecting. Barry & Graça (2018, p. 161) provide more insight on this humorous appeal with the incongruity theory, according to which amusement requires a mental trigger that the individual has to process cognitively. This perspective together with the definition of Hoang et al. (2023) of incongruity resolution would suggest that in order for incongruity-based humour to work, the consumer must already hold an expectation that can be unmet to create amusement. Incongruity resolution theory also states that the expectation and the violation of is not enough on their own, to find amusement in the joke the perceiver also needs to resolve the unmet expectations and understand it on a cognitive level, or in other words “get” the joke (Speck, 1991, p. 7-8). Previous literature would indicate that incongruity humour appeal appears when there is a cognitive process in which the individual succeeds in identifying what in the joke is not aligning with the expectations, after which a positive emotional response is created from this understanding. In a situation where the cognitive process fails and the individual does not manage to resolve the incongruity, the positive emotional response is replaced with confusion (Speck, 1991, p. 8).

Tension relief refers to humour appeal that allows the viewer to feel at ease after mental strain from witnessing something unnerving or that evokes negative emotions, in this humour appeal the amusement is used as a coping mechanism to release possible negative emotions (Hoang et al., 2023, p. 743; 746). Gulas & Weinberger (2006, p.29) note that among sub-theories addressing tension relief, the literature agrees that in tension relief humour is used as a psychological mechanism that allows us to release uncomfortable feelings by laughing. It could be concluded that if a joke fails to offer release to the viewer, the remaining response is negative which might further increase the uncomfortable emotions that were the base of the joke to begin with.

Hoang et al. (2023, p. 745) propose that disparaging humour differs from the other types since it's grounded in violating social norms, whereas incongruity resolution consists of a mild cognitive violation and tension relief a mild physical or psychological safety violation. However, they emphasize that not all social norm violations are automatically disparaging humour. They further explain this difference by introducing two types of disparaging humour: Self and other disparaging. In self-disparaging humour the mockery is self-directed and in other-disparaging humour the target is another individual or a group (Hoang et al., 2023, p. 745). Disparaging humour has been linked to the theory of superiority, which emphasizes socio-emotional reactions that come from mockery directed towards a target perceived as deserving of it (Barry & Graça, 2018). This would suggest that people find amusement in situations where jokes make them feel socially superior, but only when the joke feels fair to the audience and the one making the joke. The distinction between violations of social norms being or not being disparaging is linked to the definition of disparaging humour, which as explained earlier, derives amusement from mocking a target seemed deserving, thus breaking a social norm in an acceptable way, creating amusement rather than discomfort.

### **2.3 Humour types, forms and functions**

The previous chapter introduced mechanisms behind amusement, in simpler terms how humour works on a psychological level, or, what makes us laugh. This chapter aims to explain humour types and forms from a more practical perspective. Humour types such as irony and sarcasm might be linked to specific psychological mechanisms, and may operate differently depending on the setting, context and objective that the advertiser has.

Humour in advertising has various forms and types, and the usage of humour is common particularly in social media marketing. These different types and forms appear in both non-commercial meme culture and in meme marketing conducted by companies. In their study, Taecharungroj & Nuengjamnong (2015, p. 300) found that the two most used

types of humour on Facebook were sarcasm and silliness. Sarcasm in memes refers to the creation of humour by making sarcastic remarks or ironic responses (Taecharungroj & Nuengjamnong, 2015, p. 297). Moreover, according to Gibbs (2000, p. 6-7) sarcasm is a subtype of irony that often includes criticism and can induce social bonding in groups with enforcing unspoken rules inside specific groups. Gibbs (2000, p. 12-13) defines sarcasm as a form of irony that seems positive but aims to deliver a negative message such as criticism. Moreover, Gibbs (2000, p.11) mentions that the level of criticism or humour value depends partly on which subtype is used in communication. In other words, viewers might find sarcasm more critical and less funny than jocular irony.

Stewart (2011, p. 205) defines self-deprecating humour as a type of humour that involves joking about one's faults or shortcomings to connect with the audience. The point of this type of humour asks the audience to laugh at one's own failure together, making light of the situation. On the contrary, other-deprecating humour, or differentiation humour attacks an outsider to connect with the audience, often a well-known or socially acceptable target of criticism or mockery (Meyer, 2000, p. 322). This definition of a humour type could be linked to the previously mentioned humour appeal, disparaging humour. It notes the connection factor, which may be linked to the socio-emotional mechanism mentioned in the previous chapter about disparaging humour appeal. Whether it be directed towards the person themselves or towards another individual, self- or other-deprecating humour aims towards connection with others.

This social or connection point is further highlighted by Meyer (2000) with the observation that humour does not happen in a vacuum, it happens in social contexts where the perceiver determines if there is humour value in what is being perceived from the message, symbols or interactions. Since humour happens in a social interaction where "getting" the joke determines if there is amusement in it, Meyer (2000) proposes that humour has both dividing and uniting function.

As discussed earlier, one of the humour appeals is tension relief that creates humour from relieving psychological discomfort and can be a coping mechanism for managing stressful emotions. One humour type that can be linked to this mechanism is dark humour, that often comes from traumatic situations or taboo topics and is used to cope with such situations at both individual and group level (Dynel & Poppi, 2018, p. 383-384).

Incongruity resolution as a mechanism can be linked to humour forms such as silliness and surprise, that refer to amusement arising from bizarre situations or from unexpected occurrences (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 291). In these cases, humour appears when what we perceive differs from what we anticipate, thus creating a mismatch between expectation and outcome. This mismatch then might create amusement once the unexpected element is processed cognitively and recognized.

In this chapter humour forms and types were linked to the mechanisms behind what in humorous ads creates engagement and amusement. From these findings this study concludes that disparaging humour appeal could be linked to sarcasm and irony, and the social dimension of this humour appeal was further established. Additionally, tension relief may be linked to dark humour, and incongruity resolution to humour types such as silliness and surprise.

## **2.4 Social media and meme marketing**

Bilecen & Özer Canarlan (2023, p. 1327-1328) compare viral marketing and meme marketing by pointing out that while both reach large audiences by being shared online, meme marketing has longer lifespan partly due to underlying messages or ideas and is adjusted with changes, thus engaging the audience more with participation. They explain, that while viral content mostly relies on being shared as a finished product, meme content spreads through “creative reinterpretation and modification of the original material”. Users actively participate by modifying captions, adding or removing some elements, or even adapting the memes to new contexts, which allows those memes to

remain relevant over longer periods of time. This enables meme marketing to foster deeper engagement when compared to more traditional viral marketing.

The authors highlight that viral marketing content is often short-lived and focused mainly on visibility rather than meaning. Viral content usually does not bring a more deeper message or suggest reflection from users, and once attention lessens, the content quickly loses relevance (Bilezen & Özer Canarlan, p. 1328). Memes can survive and go around for years, because they are continuously being reshaped and recontextualised by users (Bilczen & Özer Canarlan, 2023, pp. 1328-1329). This versatility makes memes particularly valuable in social media environments where trends change rapidly and continuously.

Social media platforms play an important role in enabling meme marketing, as they provide the infrastructure for fast sharing, adapting, and user interaction. According to Bilezen & Özer Canarlan (p. 1326-1327) meme culture has expanded alongside the widely spread use of social media, transforming memes into effective communication tools for brands looking to connect with their digital audiences. Through social media platforms like Instagram, brands can embed memes into everyday online conversations, making their communication present more humorous, natural, and culturally relevant.

The case of Ryanair illustrates in what way meme marketing can be strategically integrated into social media communications. Bilecen & Özen Canarlan (2023, p. 1330-1332) mention that Ryanair has broadly used humorous meme content on their Instagram account, which has resulted in high levels of visibility and audience engagement. Their findings present that a large percentage of Ryanair's social media posts consist of meme-based content, demonstrating a conscious shift away from more conventional advertising formats toward humour-driven and participatory communication (Bilecen & Özer Canarlan, 2023, p 1331-1332). Furthermore, the authors emphasize that Ryanair's meme-based marketing strategy clearly differentiates it from other low-cost carriers, which many of do not apply similar marketing approaches on social media (p. 1332). This can

suggest that meme marketing can function not only as an engagement tool, but also as a means of brand positioning within a competitive environment. By leveraging humour and meme culture, brands can increase relatability and constant interaction with their audiences.

Although humour is often used to increase attention and memorability, it can also present risks for brands. Warren, Carter, and McGraw (2019), show that humorous advertisements do not always improve brand attitudes and can even harm them when they bring up negative emotional reactions, such as offense, embarrassment, or disgust (p. 1025-1026). An advertisement can be perceived as funny, while simultaneously triggering negative emotions, since perceived humour and negative reactions are independent dimensions (Warren et al., 2019, p. 1027-1028).

The authors findings show that negative emotional reactions have a stronger impact on brand attitudes than humour itself, meaning that being humorous is not enough to ensure positive brand perceptions (Warren et al., 2019, p.1028-1029). As a result, humour that relies on, for example, provocative elements can backfire if it increases negative emotions within consumers. Thus, brands have to carefully balance humour with emotional sensitivity, as humorous marketing can either enhance or damage a brands image depending on how it affects consumers' emotional responses (Warren et al., 2019, p. 1036-1037).

## **2.5 Building brand image with humour**

Humour can contribute to building a brands image by shaping how consumers emotionally and evaluatively respond to brand communication. Eisend's (2009) meta-analysis demonstrates that humour in advertising consistently enhances attention, positive affect, and attitude toward the advertisement, which represent key communication effects in the process of building a brand (p. 191-192, 196). These effects are particularly important, since brand image is not formed only through rational evaluation, but through repeated emotional impressions that accumulate over time.

A central mechanism through which humour supports brand image is affective transfer. Eisend (2009) explains, that humorous advertisements awake positive emotional responses like enjoyment, amusement, and pleasure, which are then transferred from the advertisement to the brand itself (p. 194-195). This process can be compared to classical conditioning, where the brand becomes associated with the positive effect made by the humorous incentive. As a result brands using humour are more likely to be perceived as likeable and emotionally appealing, which strengthens their overall brand image.

Overall, humour can be a valuable strategic tool for building brand image, when it is used to create positive emotional associations and favourable brand attitudes over time. Rather than serving as a direct persuasive mechanism, humour supports brand image development by enhancing emotional engagement and reinforcing brand evaluations across repeated consumer interactions (Eisend, 2009).

## **2.6 Generational differences in humour**

Humour perception is not universal, it varies strongly across demographic groups, particularly by age. Meaney et al. (2022) demonstrate that responses to humour differ systematically between younger and older audiences, especially in how humour is evaluated relating to offense (p. 1-2). The authors analysis of online humour ratings shows that while people across age groups are equally capable of identifying if content is meant to be humorous, they differ noticeably in how funny or offensive they perceived that content to be (Meaney et al., 2022, pl-6-8).

The authors highlight that the negative relationship between humour and offense strengthens with age. Older people were more likely to rate humorous content as offensive and assign lower humour ratings when offense was perceived (Meaney et al., 2022, p. 6-7). In contrast, younger age groups showed a weaker link between humour and offense, showing a greater tolerance for humour that can be perceived as aggressive, ironic, or norm breaking. This suggests that humour styles found in contemporary digital culture

like memes – such as sarcasm or self-deprecating humour – may be received more positively by younger age groups compared to older ones. Another important factor is humour comprehension. According to Meaney et al. (2022), older age groups were more likely to not understand a joke and showed the highest rates of misunderstanding and offense. This suggests that humour relying on shared cultural references, self-deprecation or other irony may be less accessible to audiences who did not grow up within digital or social-media-driven humour cultures.

Meaney et al. (2022) imply that what is considered acceptable or effective humour in communication has shifted over time. Younger generations shaped by online platforms and particularly humour, appear more receptive to humour that includes irony, ambiguity, or mild offense, whereas older generations tend to respond more critically to such content (p. 10-11). As humour norms evolve with media environments, brands have to recognise that humour strategies effective in the social-media era may not translate uniformly across generations.

In addition to the aforementioned differences in humour-offense evaluation, research also shows that the type of humour preferred changes systematically across age groups. Tsai et al. (2021) indicate that an individual's humour style tendencies change across the lifespan, reflecting a shift in social roles, psychological needs, and emotional regulation (p. 2187-2188). The authors' study shows that while people of all ages tend to favor positive humour over negative humour, the dominant humour style differs by age.

According to Tsai et al. (2021), younger individuals, especially adolescents and college students, tend to use affiliative humour more frequently, which focuses on strengthening interpersonal relationships and social bonding (p. 2187-2188). As individuals move into adulthood, humour style preferences begin to change. Adults show a more balanced use of affiliative and self-enhancing humour, indicating a transition from socially oriented humour toward humour used for personal emotional regulation (Tsai et al., 2021, p. 2188-2189).

Older adults show a distinct humour profile, that is characterized by a strong preference for self-enhancing humour and a clear avoidance of aggressive humour (Tsai et al., 2021, p. 2188-2190). Self-enhancing humour is a self-focused and adaptive humour style that helps individuals maintain a positive outlook and cope with life challenges. The authors link this pattern to the well-documented positivity bias in older adulthood, where individuals growingly prioritise emotional well-being and emotion regulation over social comparison or norm-breaking humour (p-2189-2191).

Additionally, the authors show that negative humour styles like aggressive and self-deprecating humour follow an inverted U-shaped pattern across age groups. These styles peak during adolescence and then decline significantly in later adulthood (Tsai et al., 2021, p. 2192-2193). This decline suggests that as individuals age, they become more cautious in their humour use and become less willing to engage in humour that may harm others or themselves.

In conclusion, the aforementioned shows that generational differences in humour are not only reflected in offense sensitivity and comprehension, but also in the underlying humour styles that individuals prefer and use. As humour preferences evolve and change with age, what is perceived as appropriate, relatable or effective humour, also changes. This further reinforces the idea that humour strategies, especially those that rely on irony, self-deprecation, or norm-breaking, are more likely to resonate with younger audiences than with older ones, whose humour preferences emphasise emotional regulation and positivity.

## **2.7 Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is built on the previous literature about advertising effectiveness and humour mechanisms that lead consumer perceptions of humorous advertisement. In this framework, the advertising effects are thought to occur through cognitive and affective processes before reaching behavioural implications. In

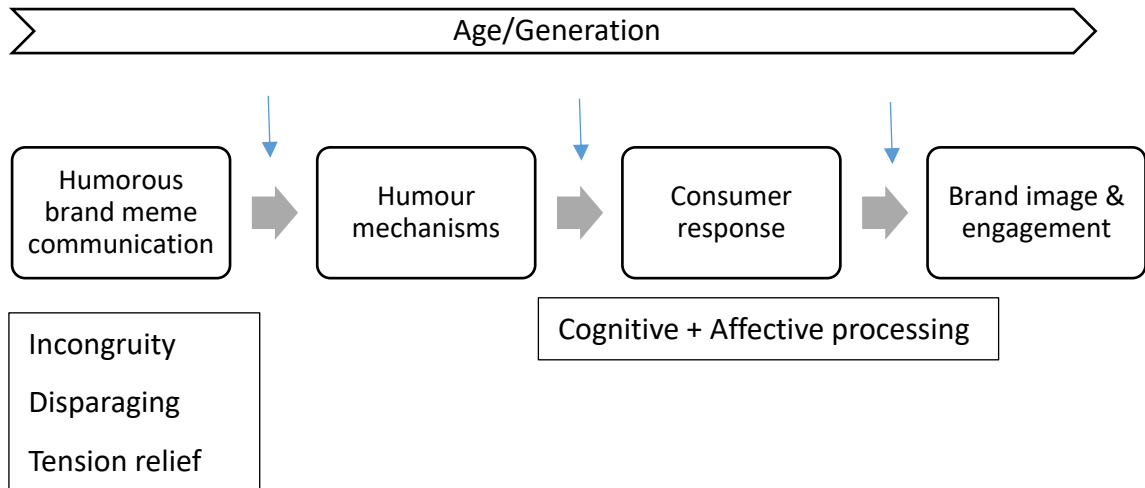
practice, the idea suggests that consumers think first and feel in response to a humorous ad, and these reactions shape their attitudes towards the brand and thus effect their possible behavioural outcomes.

In this framework, the first step is the stimulus that the consumer acquires from coming across a humorous ad. This leads to the next step in the process, where consumers understand the message and processes the humour through specific mechanisms: incongruity resolution, tension relief and disparaging humour. These mechanisms explain how humour is created in one's perception and how audiences process it.

After processing the message, the consumer responds on two levels: cognitive and affective. In cognitive responses the consumer understands and interprets the joke, whereas in affective responses consumers react emotionally in response to the stimulus.

In the last stage of the process, these responses contribute to the brand image and engagement both emotional and behavioural outcomes. We theorize that the process thus far either creates more engagement and better image within certain target groups, whereas in some, it can lead to increasingly negative brand images and engagement. We suspect that positive emotional reactions and successful humour understanding may increase positive brand attitudes and brand-liking.

Moreover, in this framework the consumers age or generation is considered a moderating factor. Previous research suggests that humour comprehension, preferred humour styles and tolerance for mocking as a humour type varies across age groups. Therefore, one message that uses other-disparaging humour may lead to different outcomes depending on the audience's age.



**Figure 1. Theoretical Framework**

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Research approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, since the aim is to understand how individuals understand and perceive humorous brand communication. According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2016, p. 4) qualitative research aims to understand phenomena, while keeping in mind the individual context of the studied subject in order to form a well-rounded understanding of the issue. In this study, the aim is to understand humour in advertising, specifically disparaging humour, thus a qualitative research approach is appropriate for this study. Moreover, this study follows a hermeneutic approach, which emphasizes the need for understanding during the research process and where the researcher's interpretation is needed to understand human actions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 21). Since humour is a human behaviour and something that is created from individual thoughts and actions and arises in the interpretation of stimuli, hermeneutic approach allows this study to explore how humour is understood and what meanings it creates for individuals between different demographics such as age groups.

According to Seale & Gobo (2004, p. 377-388) the quality of research refers to how transparent the research process is and credibility to how valid the findings are determined to be. Moreover, they state that qualitative research has been critiqued for both factors. As stated previously, qualitative research focuses on phenomenon's and understanding human experience in a comprehensive way, not solely to measure or to find statistical significance. This leads to the researcher being the research instrument, in which the researcher interprets the data and thus makes conclusions about the data and the previous literature and the possible connections between the two. This study adopts a qualitative research approach, which causes implications for the credibility of the study as well as the reliability of the study. To improve the credibility, this study considered these two factors in data collection method selection, stimulus exposure during the interviews and multiple age groups in sampling. Moreover, the overall transparency of the process was supported by going over in more detail on the details of the data collection and

interview structure. However, some limitations to the credibility of this study can be recognized. Firstly, the transferability is low since this study focuses on only one case company and only a specific social media platform (TikTok). The results may be applicable to similar contexts, but transferability to larger industries or marketing platforms may be limited. Moreover, the results of this study may be considered as context-dependent, since the interpretation of humour may be influenced by cultural contexts, and the data sampling was done in one place geographically, so cultural effects and local media trends might have influenced the results.

### **3.1.1 AI Statement**

OpenAI's ChatGPT 5.3 was used in this thesis as a supporting tool during the writing process. The ChatGPT model was used to enhance grammar, spelling, and the overall clarity and readability of the text. It was also utilised in order to suggest structural enhancements and help in refining the thesis' academic language. The AI tool was used to support the development of the thesis and polish the text written by the authors. All content generated by the AI tool were critically considered and reviewed.

The use of AI in the thesis follows the University of Vaasa's guidelines for responsible and ethical use, and the authors are fully responsible for the content and conclusions of the thesis.

## **3.2 Data collection**

For the data collection in this study, semi-structured group interviews were chosen as the collection method. Eriksson & Kovalainen (2016, p.94) state, that in semi-structured interviews, pre-designed outlines can be applied as topics or themes while allowing the interviewees to lead the conversation and explain their views freely. In this study, these semi-structured interviews will be used so that already chosen themes and guidelines can be used while still following the natural flow of the conversation, with the interviewees being the leaders. During the interview, we will be focusing on what meanings and ideas the individuals have towards Ryanair's advertising, if they "get" the humour used

in the ads and what kind of emotions these ads might provoke. Moreover, the interest is in what meanings these ads create for the individuals, and if the age groups find different meanings in them.

In this study, the interviews will be conducted as group interviews, with individuals in similar age groups. Using group interviews allows to find possible shared meanings upon seeing Ryanair's ads in the specific group seeing them and thus allowing further inspection in if different groups formed similar or different perceptions of the humour. The final groups consisted of 2-3 people from different generations, and altogether there were 6 groups in this study. The interviews were categorized as group interviews, since there were groups that consisted of 3 people. In the final sampling the groups conducted of 2 groups of generations Z (approximately 14-28 years), 2 groups of Millennials (approximately 30-45 years) and 2 groups of Gen X (approximately 46-61 years). Each discussion lasted for about one hour. Interviews were conducted by Zoom and in real life, during February-March of 2026.

During the interviews, we will first focus on general understanding of Ryanair as a LCC and a brand to see what kind of feelings and thoughts the individuals had about Ryanair. Then we moved on to show the individuals a collected examples of Ryanair's humorous advertising where specifically disparaging humour was used. Five official TikTok videos published by Ryanair were chosen as the material shown to the participants, and the selection was made by investigating virality and popularity in terms of number of views. All groups were shown two of these five videos. Participants were then asked about their thoughts on the ads, how they interpreted the ad and the message behind it, and if and how it influenced their views of the brand. The aim was also to explore possible negative views on the used humour and if the participants agreed it was appropriate.

### **3.3 Case context: Ryanair**

Low-cost airlines (LCA) have disrupted the traditional airline market by providing low-cost travel options made possible with a business model based on cutting costs and

intensive use of both planes and labour thus allowing cheaper ticket prices (Dobruszkes, 2013, p. 75-76). According to O'Connel & Williams (2005, p. 260) low-cost carriers (LCC) differ from full service carriers in many product features, such as brand, fares, product amount and inflight features. For example, inflight features refer to services or amenities provided on board such as carry-on luggage, seat selection, which in LCC's are not included in the ticket price, but with full-service providers are complimentary (O'Connel & Williams, p.260). Low-cost carriers offer a simpler service where the main value of the service may simply be the cheap price, which comes with the cost of no extra services since the model operates on a cutting-down-costs mindset.

In their study O'Connel & Williams (2005, p. 270-272) found, that in airline selection, individuals who chose LCC's usually based their selection on ticket prices and stated that for them it is the most important factor in choosing an LCC. In comparison, they also found that for individuals who chose full-service provider carriers, important factors in the decision making were for example service reliability and quality, comfort and company policy (p. 270). This would indicate that the LCC's tend to cater towards consumers who prioritize cheap fares over comfort and quality service, which are attributes related to full-service carriers. Individuals who prioritize quality and comfort are ready to pay more for better service and experience (O'Connel & Williams, 2005, p. 271).

According to Han et al. (2019, p. 1592) the quality of inflight services such as crew behaviour and kindness, seat space at availability influence brand image and attitudes towards airline brands. Since LCC's focus on volume and cost-effectiveness this could explain some of the negative stigma around them. Especially poor service experience that could be explained with reduced service could lead to negative attitudes, as well as having to pay for extra amenities such as carry-on luggage. Moreover, Lin & Lu (2012) link brand reputation to customers perceived value when using low-cost carriers. In their study on low-cost carriers, they note that LCC's performance in punctuation is perceived negatively in comparison to full-service carriers, and these carriers scored lower in other dimensions such as service quality, contact and overall reputation. Kim & Lee (2011)

propose that in the airline market, perceived service quality consists of five dimensions, and reliability is one of these core dimensions. They also note that when the value is lower due to unmet quality factors within the service quality framework, this can lead to negative outcomes such as complaints and lower repurchase intention.

Founded in 1984, Ryanair established itself in the market as a budget friendly airline during first year of operations with prices half less in comparison to competitor prices, ultimately leading to price competition between other low-cost carriers (Peters, 2024). Diaconu (2012, p. 345-346) describes the evolution of Ryanair, stating that Ryanair succeeded in becoming a dominant company in the European airline industry via the aggressive expansion strategy, that allowed it to become the largest European low-cost operator. According to Diaconu (2012, p. 345) Ryanair has adopted an aggressive cost reduction strategy, that has six main dimensions: aircrafts, elimination of free of charge services, sub-contracting, airport charges, flight policies, staff spending and advertising. Rodriguez-Garcia et al. (2020) show that Ryanairs business model has enabled strong market growth but has generated challenges related to ones LCC's often face due to prioritizing cost-effectiveness, such as complaint handling and brand reputation. They also point out that service processes that LCC's such as Ryanairs are linked to negative customer perceptions.

Based on previous literature it could be concluded that LCC's gain competitive advantage from utilising high volume that is possible due to simplified service model and low fares that are the main value point offered to consumers. It can be stated that even with negative perceptions about brand reputation among LCC's and low service quality, passengers continue to choose to fly with these airlines due to the cheap fare prices.

### **3.3.1 Ryanair's social media strategy**

In their study, Bilecen & Özer Canarlan (2023, p. 1330-1333) demonstrate successful meme marketing by investigating Ryanair's marketing strategy, namely meme marketing. They conducted a qualitative content analysis on Ryanair's social media posts,

concluding that Ryanair has successfully leveraged meme marketing with participating in meme culture by adding their own contribution to well-known memes and sharing them on their own social media platforms. They measured success by addressing the increasing follower count on the dates when memes were shared from their account.

Building on these findings, Bilecen & Özer Canarslan (2023) show, that Ryanair's meme marketing is not limited to occasional posts, but creates a consistent social media communication style. The authors indicate that Ryanair frequently integrates humour and memes into its regular posting activity, making meme-based communication and content a recurring element, rather than a one-off marketing tactic (p. 1330-1332). Bilecen & Özer Canarslan note that Ryanair's approach differs from more traditional airline marketing by adopting an informal and humorous tone, that aligns with the participatory nature of social media platforms. By engaging with popular meme formats and trends, and adapting them to airline-related situations, Ryanair positions itself as culturally aware and relatable within online communities (Bilecen & Özer Canarslan, 2023, p. 1331). This strategy supports audience engagement by encouraging users to recognise, share and interact with familiar humorous content.

Additionally, Bilecen & Özer Canarslan (2023) note, that Ryanair's extensive use of meme marketing distinguishes it from other low-cost airlines, which tend to rely on more conventional promotional content on social media (p. 1332). The authors suggest that this differentiation contributes to Ryanair's strong social media presence and sustained follower growth. It also reinforces meme marketing as an effective long-term part of the airline's social media strategy, rather than a short-lived trend (p. 1332-1333).

Ryanair's extensive use of meme-based content can be further understood through research on how brand posts with memes influence consumer engagement on social media. Sewak, Lee, and Haderlie (2025), demonstrate that brand posts and content including memes are consistently viewed as more humorous than posts without memes, and that this perceived humour plays a central role in driving consumer engagement, like

likes and shares (p. 1-2). The authors show, that humour functions as a key cue through that consumers evaluate and interact with brander content online. According to Sewak et al., memes operate as visual and textual signalling cues that help brands capture attention in crowded social media environments (2025, p. 2-3). Because social media users often rely on such cues to understand a brand's messages, humour included in memes becomes a powerful mechanism for encouraging interaction. When brand posts are perceived as humorous, consumers are more likely to engage with them by liking or sharing, thus growing its reach (Sewak et al., 2025, p.3-4).

When applied to Ryanair's social media strategy, these findings help in explaining why meme marketing acts effectively as a long-term engagement tool for the airline. Ryanair's meme-based posts predominantly focus on brand-related themes like travel experiences, pricing, and airline-specific situations, rather than on serious societal issues, for example. As a result, the airline's use of humour aligns with the conditions under which memes are most likely to create positive engagement (Sewak et al., 2025, p.5-6).

To conclude, Ryanair's social media strategy is shaped by its consistent use of humour and meme-based content as a natural part of its brand communication and marketing. Instead of relying on occasional viral content, the airline has developed an informal and recognisable tone that encourages constant interaction with its audience. This approach helps Ryanair fit seamlessly into the culture of social media platforms while maintaining a strong and distinctive online presence. Building on this broader strategy, the next chapter looks more closely at Ryanair's use of memes and TikTok, where visual humour and short-form content play a particularly important role.

### **3.3.2 Ryanair's memes and TikTok use**

TikTok is a short-form and highly visual social media platform, and it places a strong emphasis on trends, humour, and fast-paced content. TikTok's communication style often relies on irony, exaggeration, and meme based formats, which aligns well with Ryanair's informal brand voice and meme marketing strategy, as mentioned above. As a result,

TikTok can be seen as a natural extension of Ryanair's existing approach to humorous social media communication, especially when targeting younger audiences.

Ryanair's TikTok content is characterized by a humour-driven and self-aware style, that builds on the airline's broader meme marketing strategy. Rather than using polished promotional videos, Ryanair's posts often exaggerate familiar airline experiences and incorporate self-deprecating humour, openly joking about its low-cost model and common customer complaints. This approach allows the brand to appear culturally aware and relatable while maintaining a consistent informal tone (Bilecen & Özer Canarlan, 2023).

Visually, the content is simple and recognisable, frequently featuring the aircraft itself, short captions, and trending audio. A trending TikTok audio can be understood as a sound that gains widespread use and visibility through creators reusing it and algorithms. It functions as a central element of content discovery and participation on TikTok (Benaoun, 2025). These elements function as clear visual and textual cues, that support fast interpretation and engagement in TikTok's fast-paced environment. Research shows that such meme-based brand content is perceived as more humorous and more likely to encourage interaction through likes and shares (Sewak et al., 2025).



**Figure 2 Screenshot of Ryanair's TikTok (@ryanair)**

Image 1, a screenshot from Ryanair's TikTok video in November 2025, illustrates the airline's effective use of irony and self-deprecating humour in meme-marketing. The caption "the L in Ryanair stands for luxury" directly contradicts Ryanair's well-known low-cost positioning, creating humour through clear inconsistency. This type of humour aligns with Ryanair's broader approach to meme marketing, where the brand openly plays with its reputation rather than attempting to reframe it through traditional promotional messaging (Bilecen & Özer Canarlan, 2023).

By positioning itself as the target of the joke, Ryanair uses self-deprecating humour to appear self-aware and culturally fluent. Such an approach reflects findings by Stewart (2011), who notes that self-deprecating humour can reduce social distance and increase perceived approachability by signaling confidence and authenticity. In the context of Ryanair's social media presence, this approach allows the airline to turn commonly criticized aspects of its brand into a source of humour and engagement.

The effectiveness of Image 1 is further supported by research showing that brand posts featuring memes are perceived as more humorous and generate higher engagement on social media platforms (Sewak et al., 2025). The attached video has over 1.2 million views on Ryanair's TikTok account. The combination of a simple visual and a short, ironic caption fits TikTok's fast-paced environment, making the content easy to understand and share. Image 1 illustrates how Ryanair's meme marketing strategy leverages humour as a signaling cue to encourage interaction while maintaining consistent brand identity across platforms.



**Figure 3 Screenshot of Ryanair's TikTok (@ryanair)**

Image 2 illustrates Ryanair's use of platform-native meme formats and trending audio as part of its TikTok communication. The screenshot shows a Ryanair aircraft edited with exaggerated facial features, with the caption "When you literally fly them to another country for €10 but they still ✨complain✨". The humour is based on exaggeration and irony, drawing attention to the contrast between extremely low ticket prices and customer dissatisfaction. The video has over 5.5 million views on Ryanair's TikTok account.

This content also reflects Ryanair's meme marketing strategy with the airline actively engaging with internet culture by adapting popular formats and trends to airline-specific situations (Bilecen & Özer Canarslan, 2023). The use of a trending TikTok audio further signals platform awareness and reinforces the impression that Ryanair communicated within TikTok's cultural norms rather than using the platform only for traditional advertising. This meme also relies on self-deprecating humour, as Ryanair implicitly acknowledges frequent customer complaints while reframing them humorously. By positioning itself as the subject of the joke, the airline appears self-aware and approachable, which, again, helps reduce brand-consumer distance (Stewart, 2011). Overall, image 2 demonstrates how Ryanair combines trending audio, visual exaggeration, and irony to transform common service-related criticism into engaging TikTok content.

Ryanair's TikTok content aligns closely with generational differences in humour perception discussed earlier. Younger audiences have been shown to respond more positively to irony, exaggeration, and norm-breaking humour, while older audiences are more likely to associate humour with offense or report lower humour comprehension (Meaney et al., 2022). TikTok's humour-driven and trend-based communication style therefore fits particularly well with younger, meme-literate users.

General audience reception of Ryanair's TikTok content can be understood through existing research on meme-based brand communication and engagement. Bilecen and Özer Canarslan (2023), show that Ryanair's meme marketing strategy is associated with increased follower growth and sustained interaction, suggesting positive audience response to humorous content. Ryanair's TikTok content encourages participatory audience behavior, with users engaging through comments, shares, and recognition of familiar memes or airline-related situations. This kind of interaction reflects the platform's participatory nature and supports the idea that Ryanair's humor-driven TikTok strategy resonates particularly well with meme-literate audiences. Rather than evaluating the airline solely on service quality, users are invited to engage with the brand on a cultural and humorous level, reinforcing engagement and brand visibility.

<b>Group</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>Generation</b>
1	2	Gen Z
2	3	Gen Z
3	2	Millennials
4	2	Millennials
5	2	Gen X
6	3	Gen X

**Table 1. Interview groups and generations**

## 4 Results

### 4.1 General impression

During the interviews the general impression of Ryanair as a brand and its marketing communications were focused on ticket pricing, extra costs, LCC image and lower quality services in comparison to other carrier service providers. Most interviewees mentioned that they see Ryanair as a brand that offers affordable flights to European destinations, and some Gen Z participants even questioned if Ryanair could be seen as a brand when asked what comes to mind when they hear the brand Ryanair. Across generations price was a recurring theme, most participants noted that the first thing they thought when hearing Ryanair was cheap fares. *“halvat lennot nyt pääasias ja paljo kaikkii lisämaksui”, “halpalentoyhtiö, halvalla jonnekki eurooppaan”*. This perception was also strongly reflected in Gen X responses, where Ryanair was described primarily through associations like *“cheap flights”* and *“bad or no customer service”* which reinforces the consistency of these brand associations across all age groups.

Another recurring theme across generations was the knowledge of possible extra fees related to any extra service. The service was seen as minimal and simplified and without any quality comforts that other service providers offer as a part of the fare price. Most participants noted that using Ryanair is a cheap but low-quality service experience. *“ne kassit maksaa ain ekstra”, “halpa ja huono palvelu”*. Similarly Gen X participants highlighted affordability but combined it with expectations of poor service quality, further supporting the idea that a low cost is linked to bad service standards.

In terms of Ryanair's reputation many noted that they are aware of Ryanair's reputation as a service provider that has low prices, but whose service quality is rather low. With knowing the reputation Ryanair has most younger participants said that they have and that they will continue to use Ryanair as a service provider since they base their decisions on ticket prices rather than company reputation or service quality. Older participants noted that they usually opt for higher quality rather than cheap prices but that they

understand why people continue to use Ryanair even with bad experiences. *“ei ees haittaa ku makso kuitenkin kybän lennost”*. Gen X participants also described the brand reputation as negative, some saying they had *“heard about quite bad experiences with the company”*. Some noted very limited personal experience with Ryanair, that suggests that reputation is formed not only through direct use with them but also through word-of-mouth.

The aforementioned perceptions were also reflected in the interviews with millennial participants, where Ryanair was described as *“very cheap”* but at the same time associated with delays and bad service quality. For example *“very cheap, very late”*. Millennials also stated their perception of the brand reputation as *“bad and cheap”*, which reinforces the idea that a low price is closely tied to expectations or worse quality. Ryanair was also seen as a cost-effective option, particularly well-suited for younger or budget-conscious consumer, with one interview participant noting ties to *“marketing for young people”* and talking about their personal experience with the brand as a *“broke student”*.

For social media the younger generations (Gen Z) stated that they are aware and frequently come across Ryanair’s social media posts. When showing the prompts some had already seen the videos. Even among older participants the messages of the videos were understood well *“tajus kyl heti” “selkeää itseironiaa”*, most stated that the message of the videos were sarcasm and to mock Ryanair’s policies that consumers often complain about. In terms of preferences in humour types, answers such as sarcasm, dark humour and quick-witted humour came up. Two of the videos showed to groups had material made with AI, and younger generations understood instantly that the video was made with AI.

Millennial participants further emphasized that humour in marketing is seen as *“hit or miss”* and potentially quite risky. They described it as tricky and stating that it can either be a success or completely *“miss the point”* if it is not aligned with the brand and its audience. When it comes to millennials humour preferences, they stated they enjoy

sarcasm and dark humour which is consistent with similar humour preferences identified with gen Z participants as well. Gen X participants expressed similar thoughts, saying that humour in advertising can sometimes “*miss the mark*” or be difficult to understand. They also thought that not all brands should use humour, because some need to “*keep a more professional tone*”. Still, Gen X participants also stated to enjoy sarcasm and irony as humour styles, supporting that these humour types are recognized and appreciated across generations, even if their perceived appropriateness varies.

## 4.2 Reactions to meme examples

During the interviews the group were shown 2 different videos as a prompt before asking questions of what they thought about the videos. In the interviews most participants in each group understood the message immediately despite generational differences. An interesting finding was that interviewees belonging to older age groups (Gen X) also understood the messages and the sarcasm used in the videos, and most participants thought that the message or the point of the videos was self-irony or sarcasm prompted that Ryanair’s self-awareness of the critique they receive from their customers “*selkeetä itseironiaa*” “*heittää läppää siitä mite ryanairil maksaa kaikki ekstra lisää*” “*tässähän ne tavallaan tekee pilaa siitä omasta maineestaan*”. Millennial participants similarly identified the humour as self-aware and sarcastic and described how Ryanair is “*kind of mocking themselves about their pricing*” and highlighting that the message highlights how customers “*don’t really get anything with the ticket prices, except the bare necessities*”. This strengthens the interpretation that the humour is built around acknowledging and exaggerating well-known customer complaints. However, Gen X participants had more variation in their answers, with some recognising that the videos were “*maybe making fun of the extra fees*” and recognising signs of self-awareness, with others expressing that they were not sure if they understood the humour. This finding would suggest that sarcasm and self-deprecating humour is understood across generations even if its not found appropriate, or the trend being understood.

In terms of emotional reactions younger generations found the videos funny or amusing, whereas the older participants in groups found the videos either neutral or annoying. *“no kylhän se nauratti” “vähä ärsyttävä” “aika neutraali mulle”*. This would suggest that there might be some differences in how humorous advertisements are received by different audiences depending on generation. In terms of social media trends such as AI usage, the younger people in groups understood immediately if the videos shown were made with AI *“toi video on hauska just ton AI käytön takii” “Ryanair lähtee mukaa know ball trendii”* whereas some older generations both millennials and Gen X participants did not mention trends at all. Millennial responses further highlighted mixed emotional reactions with some interviewees describing the content as *“amusing”* due to understanding the context, but others reacted more neutral or negative and describing it as *“boring, don’t really get the point”*, or simply *“meh”*. It was also noted that without knowing the trends in the videos, they could feel confusing or boring. Additionally, one participant pointed out that such humour *“could make some customers feel bad”* showing potential risks in using self-deprecating humour. Gen X reinforced this by describing their reactions *“neutral”* with some saying they *“can’t keep up with these internet trends”* and therefore found the content at the same time *“amusing”* and *“weird or confusing”*, showing how a lack of contextual understanding can impact the emotional response.

Across generations the participants thought that using humour in marketing is appropriate depending on the company specifically, many noted that they would not see all airlines using humour appropriate *“ku ei toi oo mikää Finnair kuitenkin nii on ookoo”* and many thought that old-fashioned brands and prestigious companies would not benefit from using humour in marketing. Slight differences in responses were seen across demographics but overall, the majority of participants thought that low-cost carriers could use humour whereas companies such as banks should not. Millennials reinforced this by saying that this type of humour is suitable for Ryanair, but not for higher-end airlines for example, one stated they *“wouldn’t expect that from Finnair or Emirates”*. In addition, Millennials and Gen X both noted that while this kind of humour may make the brand seem slightly more relatable, it did not significantly change their perception of Ryanair

or their willingness to fly with them. Gen X participants also questioned the appropriateness of this type of humour stating that it is “not targeted to everyone” and highlighting that only younger audiences may enjoy it.

### 4.3 Differences by demographics

From the interviews it seems that the biggest difference on how humour is interpreted and received across generations is the understanding of the context (social media trends), AI usage, and amusement level. Across generations the usage of self-irony or self-deprecating humour was processed on a cognitive level and even older generations understood the message, but they more rarely expressed amusement or found the humour funny. The younger generations (Gen Z) found the prompts amusing and understood both the message and the trend or the context that surrounds the content, this was seen from multiple different videos shown to the audiences. Gen Z participants also stated that they had already seen some of the videos whereas older generations were seeing the videos for the first time.

There was little to no variation among answers in Gen Z participants, most followed the same patterns: understood the message, were aware of the context and the possible trends, and found the videos funny. The most variation was found in Millennial respondents, they understood the message but did not find the videos funny, rather they stated that they felt annoyed after seeing the videos: “*vähä ärsyttävä*”. In comparison to the oldest generation, Gen X, Millennials showed more annoyance towards the videos, especially the ones made with AI. Gen X participants felt mostly neutral towards the videos, stating that they understood the sarcasm but did not find it very amusing, some noted that they would expect more serious communication from airlines. This suggests that humorous message itself was understood generally across demographics, but that the emotional reaction may vary depending on viewer age group.

#### 4.4 Key findings

During the interviews, price was a theme that commonly was referred to by the interview participants. Across demographics most participants referred to the cheap fare prices when talking about their general impressions of Ryanair. The general impression of Ryanair was that it's a low-cost carrier that operates within Europe, that offers simplified services and that is well known for the affordable prices. Additionally, most participants also were aware of Ryanair's model that charges extra fees for all extra services, which was something many individuals stated other airlines offer as a part of the ticket price, such as carry-on luggage. Poor service quality was also a well-known and frequently mentioned element of Ryanair.

When showing the participants videos as prompts to see if the humour would be processed and understood differently depending on generation, we found that all the participants regardless of generation did process the humour cognitively to some degree. All younger participants recognized both AI usage, participation in current trends, and the humour type as self- or other-deprecating humour, whereas older participants mostly stated that they think the message of the video is to be funny by mocking oneself or others, not pointing to trends or other message design elements. Across groups the individuals linked the humour type to Ryanair's prices and general reputation.

No significant differences were found between groups cognitively processing the humour, however, majority of the Gen Z participants stated that they found the videos amusing, whereas older participants did not. Thus, emotional responses varied between age groups, from amusement to neutrality to annoyance. Interestingly, the most annoyance as an emotional response came from Millennials rather than Gen X that was the oldest age group participating. Moreover, they were not aware of the current trends and did not point out AI usage in the videos.

Lastly, most groups and participants did think using humour as a tool in marketing was appropriate for Ryanair specifically. Across each group many stated they thought that lower-cost service providers could even benefit from this type of marketing

communication. However, many also pointed out that for more traditional companies and airlines, humour would not be appropriate. Brand identity was mentioned as a factor when discussing when humour is appropriate or not.

These findings suggest that cognitive processing happens regardless of age group even if the viewer is not fully aware of the context, for example if the content is taking a part in a current social-media trend. The interviews indicate that humour type is recognized, but emotional reactions vary depending on viewer age: younger generations might find it amusing but older generations may react more neutrally or even critique it. Moreover, context of the humour appears to be particularly important for the younger generations when using memes in advertisement. Brand image impacts are more limited in older generations but for younger audiences' humour might enhance brand perception.

	<b>Gen Z</b>	<b>Millennials</b>	<b>Gen X</b>
<b>Humor Type</b>	Sarcasm + irony strongly recognized, self-deprecating humor entertaining and relatable, appreciation for dark humor.	Sarcasm + irony recognized, self-depr. humor understood but not all appreciated, mixed attitudes towards dark humor.	Sarcasm + irony recognized but less engagement, self-depr. humor understood, but also seen as less appropriate. Preferring less aggressive humor.
<b>Mechanisms of humor</b>	Incongruity understood clearly, tension relief through humor, positive attitude for disparaging humor.	Incongruity understood, disparaging humor recognized but a few viewed as repetitive or ineffective	Incongruity needed more effort for a few to process, disparaging humor understood but less emotional reactions
<b>Evaluative experience</b>	Cognitive: strong understanding of trends, humor, use of AI) Affective: positive	Cognitive: good understanding of message Affective: mixed (amusing, neutral, annoying)	Cognitive: general understanding of message, limited awareness of e.g. trends Affective: neutral to light negative
<b>Consumer brand response</b>	Image: Ryanair seen as relatable, self-aware, core image not changed Engagement: high	Image: slight increase in relatability, no strong change Engagement: moderate, depends on execution	Image: Unchanged, Engagement: low, limited interaction or interest

**Table 2 Summary of findings and interpretations across generations**

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Linking results to theory

This study aimed to understand how consumers process humorous advertisements emotionally and how and if it affects brand image of the brand using humour. Specifically, this study focused on self-deprecating humour, which in the theoretical section was described as humour that involves the one making the joke aiming to amuse others by pointing out their own shortcomings or faults. Moreover, in the theoretical part it was established that this type of humour generates amusement via a process where the individual cognitively understands the joke and thus the emotional reaction is an outcome of the cognitive process. Moreover, the theoretical part concluded that age is a factor that might have an impact on different outcomes in the context of finding amusement in different humour types, even if individuals are able to cognitively process and “get” humour regardless of age. Specifically, humour types such as sarcasm, irony and breaking social norms were types that might offend older viewers whereas younger audiences are more likely to accept this type of humour.

During the qualitative research part, group interviews were conducted to assess how different participants from different age groups process and emotionally react to humorous advertisement done by Ryanair, a low-cost airline that utilizes humour in their marketing. The results of this study are aligned with the literature, they indicate that participants of the study did process the humour and understand the message behind it, but older participants did not find it as funny as the younger ones. Three different age groups participated in the interviews: Gen Z being the youngest, Millennials and Gen X, being the oldest. Gen Z participants found the self-deprecating humour amusing whereas the older two groups leaned more towards neutral or annoyed emotional reactions.

The theoretical part also concluded that younger generations understand meme culture, and it has impacted on their sense of humour, thus making this age group a prime target for humour that uses self-deprecation, irony and absurdity. This is another element that

came up during the interviews. While older participants seldomly noticed AI-usage on the video prompts and did not mention anything about Ryanair participating in the current meme trends on social media, Gen Z participants independently mentioned different trend names and noticed AI usage which could suggest that they indeed like both absurdity and are aware of meme trends circulating online. Moreover, some Gen Z participants did point out that they had already seen the videos and immediately understood the message and recalled a time when they had engaged with the videos by sending them to their peers.

In comparison to the youngest generation, the literature suggests that older generations prefer more positive humour types. Additionally, it was found that older generations might even avoid aggressive and self-deprecating humour. This aligns with the results of the study, that indicate that older interviewees had more neutral emotional reactions to the video prompts, the videos were not found particularly funny or amusing and they stated that using humour might be unprofessional depending on the company using it. However, no strong negative reactions were found in Gen X participants, annoyance as an emotional outcome was found in Millennial participants.

As stated, older generations might avoid aggressive humour and self-deprecating humour or find it unprofessional or offensive. The theory suggested that the negative emotions provoked by this type of humour might have decreasing outcomes for brand image. This would suggest that a company that uses self-deprecating or aggressive humour might harm their brand image by doing so, depending on their target audience and if this humour type fits the usual target audience preferences. Similarly, positive emotional reactions might improve brand image in consumers' minds.

The findings of this study are aligned with the previous research on humour in marketing and generational differences in how individuals perceive humour. According to Meaney et al. (2022) older generations might perceive humour that uses irony and self-deprecation less appropriate than the younger generations, which is consistent with the findings

of this study. The findings are also consistent with the findings of Eisend (2009) that suggest that humour can be cognitively understood while emotional responses might differ between individuals. Moreover, the emotional responses might be either positive or negative depending on the receiving audience (Warren et al., 2019).

## **5.2 The role of self-deprecating humour in brand image**

Self-deprecating humour refers to humour where the brand makes fun of its own weaknesses or negative aspects (Stewart, 2011). In the theoretical framework this was discussed as a form of disparaging humour, where the target of the joke is the brand itself, instead of others (Hoang et al., 2023). Previous research suggests that this type of humour can aid in creating a sense of relatability and connection with the brand appearing more self-aware and honest (Meyer, 2000). At the same time, humour is always dependent on the audience, and it only works if the message is understood correctly by the audience.

Based on the findings of this study self-deprecating humour plays a complex role in Ryanair's brand image. On the one hand, people from age groups understand that Ryanair is making jokes about its own flaws, like cheap prices, extra fees, and bad service. Many people think the humour is self-aware, saying things like the brand is "making fun of its own reputation". This backs up the idea that humour can bring people together, as the audience gets the joke and shares it with the brand. Overall, the use of self-deprecating humour by Ryanair is a clever way to show that the brand is aware of its flaws and is willing to poke fun at itself.

The study's findings also reveal that this kind of humour does not really alter how people view the brand. Even after being exposed to the humorous content, participants still described Ryanair as a cheap but low-quality airline, and these perceptions stuck. This implies that instead of boosting the brand's image, self-deprecating humour may actually strengthen existing negative associations. This idea is supported by the concept that disparaging humour works because the audience is already aware of the negative trait (Barry & Graça, 2018). In this case, Ryanair's humour seems to rely on the fact that

people already expect low prices and lower service quality. This approach can be seen as a way to acknowledge the negative perceptions and make light of them rather than trying to fight them.

The study's results show that using self-deprecating humour has an impact on how people see the brand's personality, but not necessarily how they evaluate it. Some interviewees in the study said that the humour made Ryanair seem more down-to earth and aware of its own flaws, but this did not make them more likely to want to engage with the brand or choose it as their airline. This is in line with research that found that humour in advertisements often influences emotions rather than what they do (Eisend, 2009).

When it comes to Ryanair, using self-deprecating humour seems to help in softening their negative image, but it does not fix the main concerns with their service quality. Instead it can make these weaknesses more accepted or more expected by the audience. How well this works, also depends on the audience itself, younger people are more likely to get the humour and appreciate it, but older generations might not react the same way. This difference in audience reaction is important to consider.

### **5.3 Demographic differences**

The findings of this study reveal clear differences in how people in different age groups react to Ryanair's humour and brand. To break it down, these differences can be examined by comparing younger consumers (Gen Z), middle group consumers (Millennials), and older consumers (Gen X), and linking the results from the different age groups to generational differences in humour perception discussed in chapter 2.7.

Gen Z participants generally enjoyed Ryanair's humorous content. They were used to the way it was presented with sarcasm, self-deprecation, and using social media trends like AI-generated content and memes. Most of Gen Z got the humour right away and though the videos were generally funny or amusing. This backs up what was discussed in chapter

2.7, that younger generations enjoy more fast-paced, ironic, and trendy online communication, which makes Ryanair's content generally work better for them.

In contrast, Millennials showed a different take. They mostly got the joke in question, and picked up on the brand's self-awareness, but their emotional responses varied from amusement to neutrality or even annoyance. A few mentioned that the humour felt like it was repeating itself, especially if they had come across similar content before already. This shows that even though Millennials are familiar with online content and trends, they might be more critical on brands attempting to follow these trends, which could affect their response to it and the perceived effectiveness.

Participants belonging to Gen X tended to have the most mixed or negative reactions. Even though many of them could understand the idea of what was supposed to be humorous, they sometimes found the content confusing or unclear. Some of them said they do not keep up with social media trends, which made it harder for them to understand the context of the videos. This aligns with earlier discussion in the study, where it was suggested that humour effectiveness relies on shared cultural references and social media habits, which can differ strongly from one generation to the next.

In terms of appropriateness, all interviewed age groups agreed to a certain extent that using humour is not appropriate with all brand's advertising. Still, younger participants were more open to humour in brand communication, while older people highlighted the importance of staying professional. Millennials, on the other hand, seem to be somewhere in between, recognising both the benefits and risks of using humour. This shows how people understand and perceive humour can vary strongly depending on their generation, and this affects what they think is appropriate or not.

Overall, the study's findings suggest that generational humour preferences play an important part in how Ryanair's marketing and content is received and understood. Younger people tend to enjoy and accept humour in advertising that is ironic or makes fun of itself, but older generations may find it confusing or less appropriate. This highlights that brands should consider demographic differences in their audience when using

humour in their marketing, especially on social media where trends for example change quickly. By doing this, companies can make their marketing more effective and avoid turning off certain age groups in their audiences.

#### **5.4 Practical implications for companies**

Companies using humour could benefit from the findings of this study from the viewpoint of using self-deprecatory humour type in their marketing. Firstly, the results indicate that self-deprecatory humour might work as a tool when looking for engagement within younger audiences such as Gen Z audiences, particularly in social media marketing. Younger participants of the study responded positively to the content shown to them during the interviews, which could indicate that companies that are targeting Gen Z consumers in social media spaces might benefit from using this type of humour in their marketing, particularly with partaking in meme culture. Within the younger audience using this type of humour might also enhance brand image via positive emotional reactions. Thus, companies could consider incorporating humorous advertisement into their marketing strategy in situations where their target audience consists of younger individuals that are aware of current social media trends and are more open to this type of humour usage in advertisement.

However, the results also suggest that companies should be aware of humour perception varying across demographics. Older audiences might find offense in self-deprecating humour or find it unprofessional. These negative emotional reactions may lead to negative brand perceptions and harm brand reputation. These findings highlight the importance of thorough market research and target consumer profiling as well as brand identity alignment with the type of humour used.

## **5.5 Limitations of the study**

The limitations of this study involve sample size, data collection as well as case company choice. The sample size used in this study consisted of a relatively small group of people from the same nationality and country, which could lead to possible cultural implications on humour perception and understanding. Further research could involve a large sample size as well as a broader geographic area where the data is collected to gain more insight on if cultural context impacts humour perceptions. Moreover, the research method was qualitative research, in which the analysis includes subjective interpretation instead of statistical generalization which could impact the results. The data was collected through group interviews, which could impact individual responses since some participants might change their answers based on other participants responses. Lastly, the study only investigated one case study company, Ryanair, which limits the possibility of applying the results to other brands in the same industry or in other industries.

## **5.6 Suggestions for further research**

For future research we propose using a larger sample size to gain a broader perspective on humour impacts on brand image and emotional reactions as well as cognitive processing across demographics. Additionally, future research could utilize mixed methods as research method to gain both deeper understanding of the phenomena as well as statistical correlations between subject answers. Mixed-methodology study could offer more applicable results that can be statistically generalized and thus applied to a broader range of companies and industries.

Additionally, future studies could examine different types of humour such as absurd humour that was only briefly mentioned in this study. This could offer the possibility to compare the reactions and implications of different humour types on consumers. Moreover, current companies from different industries that are using humour in their marketing could be investigated as case companies to provide cross-industrial insights.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview Structure

#### 1. Warm-up: General Perceptions

Purpose: To establish context and baseline perceptions of the brand

Main questions:

- What comes to mind when you hear the brand Ryanair?
- How would you describe Ryanair as a brand?
- What kind of reputation do you think Ryanair has?

Probes / follow-ups:

- Affordable? Reliable? Humorous? Controversial?
- Have you ever flown with Ryanair?

#### 2. General Perceptions of Humour in Advertising

Purpose: To understand participants' attitudes toward humour

Main questions:

- How do you generally feel about humour in advertising?
- Do you think humour is suitable for all brands? Why or why not?
- What type of humour do you personally enjoy?

Probes / follow-ups:

- Sarcasm? Self-deprecating humour? Dark humour?

#### 3a. Meme Stimulus: Cognitive Understanding

Purpose: To assess interpretation of the stimulus

Main questions:

- What do you think is happening in this video?
- What do you perceive as the main joke or message?
- Did you understand the humour immediately?

Probes / follow-ups:

- Was anything unclear or confusing?

- What makes it funny or not funny?

### **3b. Meme Stimulus: Emotional Reaction**

Purpose: To explore affective responses

Main questions:

- How did this content make you feel?
- Did you find it amusing, annoying, offensive, or something else?
- Would you describe your reaction as positive or negative?

Probes / follow-ups:

- Did anyone have a different reaction?

### **3c. Meme Stimulus: Appropriateness**

Purpose: To evaluate perceived fit

Main questions:

- Do you think this type of humour is appropriate for an airline brand?
- Do you think this type of humour is suitable for all age groups?

## **4. Brand Impact**

Purpose: To examine effects on brand perception and engagement

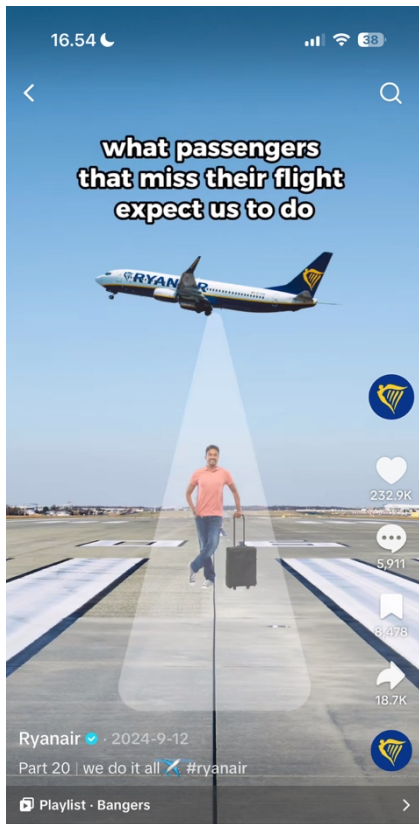
Main questions:

- Did this advertisement influence how you perceive Ryanair? If so, how?
- Does this type of humour make the brand feel more relatable?
- Would this type of content make you more likely to engage with the brand (e.g., like, share, or comment)?

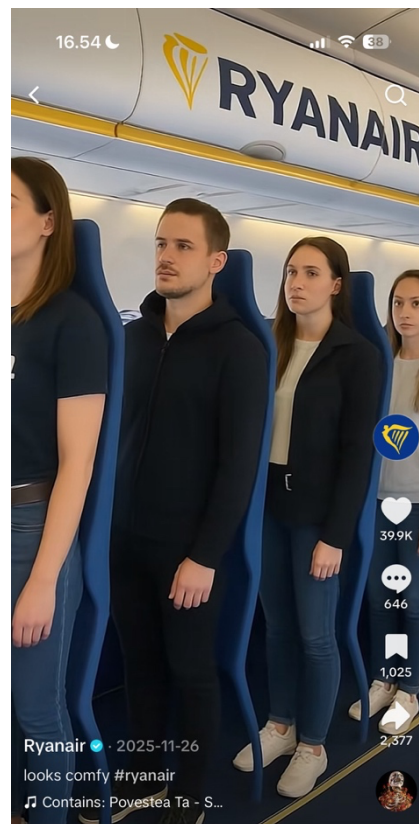
Probes / follow-ups:

- Would it influence your willingness to fly with Ryanair?

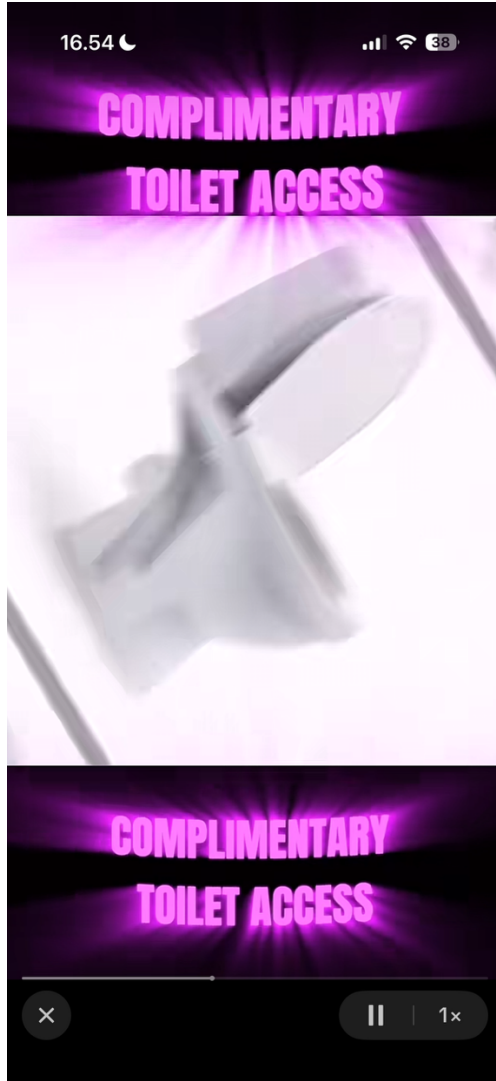
## Appendix 2. Meme stimulus materials



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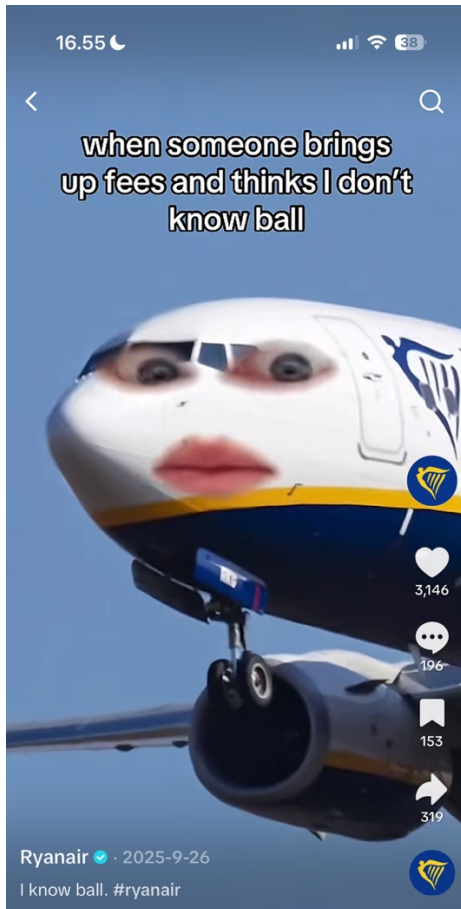


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<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNR9m7Kje/>





<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNR9m5GS7/>