

**APG Creative Strategy Awards 2023**



**The Brains Behind the Brows**

# Executive summary



You've either seen it or had your LinkedIn feed spammed by it.

It was the campaign that made us all fancy a Big Mac without a Big Mac in sight.

The one that got the world wiggling its eyebrows, and industry wagging its tongue.

In the conversation that followed, the spotlight was rightly put on the creatives (and their new mate, Edgar Wright).

That suited us planners just fine - we don't mind working in the shadows.

But, given it's the APG awards, and we're amongst friends, we thought we'd make a humble exception. So now...

**This paper will reveal the pivotal contributions of Planning to Raise Your Arches.**

It's a story about Planning's role in creative step-change, and the hard yards and hard decisions required to pave the way for creative magic.

It's a story about how Planning's role isn't just to provide smart shifts and killer insights (don't worry, we've got a couple of those) - but also to be awkward, run at fires and admit to what we don't know.

And, ultimately, it's a story about how Planning helped to get McDonald's Brand Love advertising firing on all cylinders again.

This is the story of **The Brains Behind The Brows.**

Words: 203

# Setting the scene

**Over the last 15 years, McDonald's has been on quite the journey.**

Once a national disgrace, the brand is now a borderline national treasure. Whatever you call it - Maccas, Maccies, MacDEEZ – the Golden Arches are undeniably woven into our cultural fabric and considered as "British as fish and chips."<sup>1</sup>

Key to this turnaround has been our 'Love' advertising - brand building communications with one mission: to re-earn McDonald's place in the hearts of the nation, and never let it go. Over the last decade, it's done just that - growing Brand Love to new, intoxicating heights.<sup>2</sup>

**At its heart, a lovingly guarded formula.**

These communications all pivot around one enduring insight – *that despite our many differences, we all have McDonald's in common* - executed consistently with a trademark 'humbly confident' tone and sensitively observed, fabric-of-the-nation storytelling. Remember those ads with the insight-packed poetry, recited with the reassuring cockney tones of Dexter Fletcher? Yeah, that was us.



[Figure 1: Some of the classics: Just Passing By (2009), Parallel Lives (2013), Dave (2013) and Hunter Gatherer (2017)]

It's a formula that has produced advertising the British public has genuinely related to and felt something for. And as a result, it was dutifully protected by generations of McDonald's Planners for over a decade...

**Until it wasn't.**

In 2021, a new Love brief landed. The task was to find a new and emotive way into our beloved insight. On the surface there was no reason to change direction, our job had always been to protect the formula and stay the course.

*But then Planning made its first contribution...*

1. Guardian, 2022

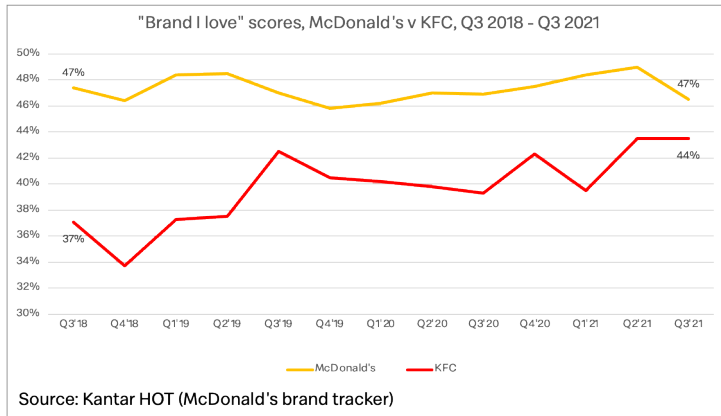
2. More of this in our 2021 APG paper, "15 years of McPlanning"

# 1. Keeping It Real

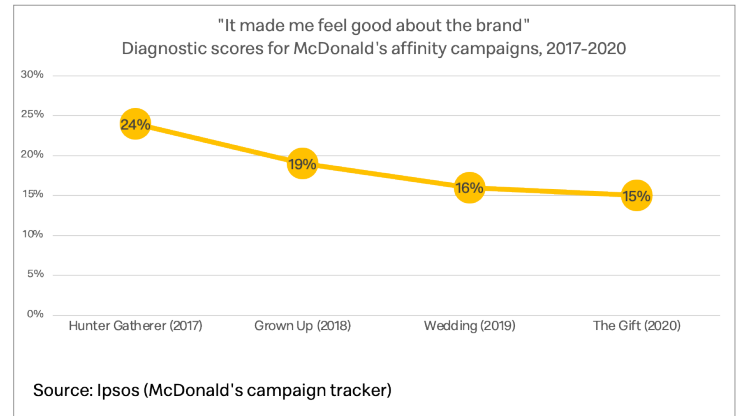
## There were worrying signs in the data.

'Brand Love' was flatlining for the first time in a decade, with KFC rapidly closing the gap (Fig. 2). It was no surprise; operational and supply chain issues were starting to bite. Wait times and reduced menus had become a "joke".<sup>3</sup>

That wasn't all, campaign diagnostics revealed that the nation's relationship with our Love advertising had lost its spark; each campaign was getting less emotional (Fig. 3).



[Figure 2: Love scores plateauing]



[Figure 3: Emotional resonance declining since 2017]

## The old moves weren't working anymore.

### Our style had become everyone's style.

Once unique, well-observed stories with surprising rug-pulls had become commonplace. And poems... don't get us started on poems.

### Our tone had become everyone's tone.

Once radical, the idea of celebrating what people loved And didn't love about the brand (like gherkins...) had become routine.

### Our insight had become everyone's insight.

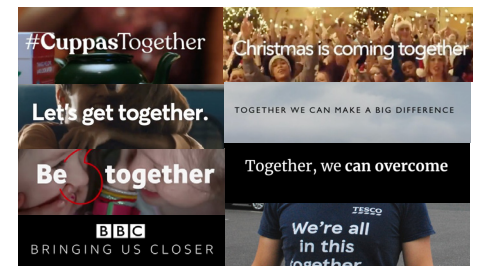
Once a source of deep relatability and emotion, it had become painfully familiar following the 'togetherness-fest' of Covid.



[Figure 4. Work from Branston, Diary Milk, Comic Relief, and (the now very busy) George The Poet]



[Figure 5. Work from Burger King and KFC]



[Figure 6. The 'togetherness-fest' of Covid]

## It was up to Planning to keep it real.

In this gig, we're trained to be positive. But we knew that the kindest thing we could do in the long-run, was to keep it real in the short-run.

We gathered everyone for "the chat". It was awkward. And if we're honest, it wasn't settled in the room. But we'd made the intervention, and the stage was set to reinvent McDonald's Love advertising for the decade ahead.

3. McDonald's proprietary quant research - McChat 2021



## 2. Running Towards Fire

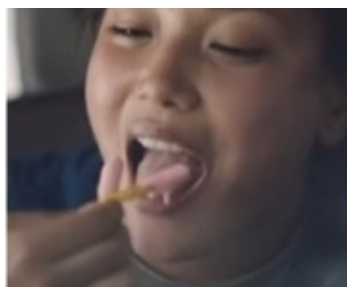
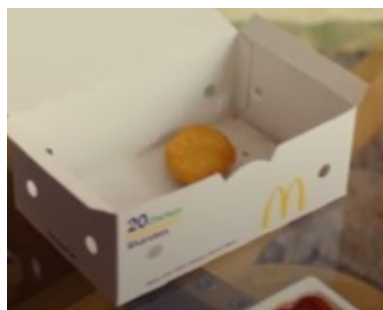
### Planners talk a lot about good ‘insight’ and less about good ‘foresight’

Building a killer platform for today is one thing, but building one for the long-term requires a different muscle all together. It means keeping one eye on what’s ahead and, for us, that eye was on one thing in particular...*HFSS*.

### In an industry full of dodgy acronyms, this one stood apart.

For years, the UK government had proposed legislation that, if finally approved, would forbid the promotion of HFSS (‘High in Fat, Salt and Sugar’) products online or on TV before 9pm.

This posed obvious problems for McDonald’s and our Love advertising - which had always had our iconic products and the truths that surrounded them at its beating heart.



[Figure 7: from pinching fries, to dipping them in milkshakes (yep, it's a thing).]

### It was tempting to kick the can down the road.

We could’ve held out for the legislation to be delayed, rinsing our iconic products for every drop of emotion while we still could. We could’ve handed the problem down to the next Planner. Instead, we decided to do something they and the McDonald’s business would thank us for.

### Planning convinced everyone to run towards the fire, not cower from it.

By facing into HFSS early, we could learn how to live with it. And put the fire out before it grew into something far more dangerous. Not gonna lie, it made our lives ten-times more difficult. Our products had always been powerful shortcuts to the heart of the brand, but now we’d have to make do without them.

**We set out to find a new emotional role for the brand in British life beyond the food.**

# 3. Topping Up Our Intuition

## Intuition is vital for a planner.

This is particularly true of McDonald's planners. Our partnership with the brand is one of the longest-standing in the industry. After 16 years of brand building, 680 campaigns and over 10k executions, it's fair to say we've developed a 'gut feel' understanding of the brand, its audience and the role it plays in British culture. We've come to call this "having ketchup in your veins."

## But this inherited wisdom was now working against us.

The world had changed. The long-accepted truths about our audience and its relationship with the brand were now out-of-date and out-of-touch. The muscle memory that had been painstakingly formed over many years was now only serving to misguide us.

## Planning swapped 16 years of hard-earned intuition for 8 months of observation.

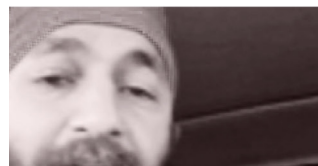
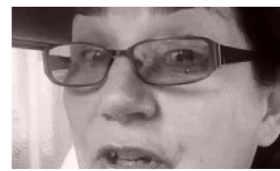
It wasn't a popular decision. We had been expected to just go away, have a ponder, then come back and brief.

Instead, we partnered with BAMB and The Outsiders, embarking on almost a year of nation-wide ethnographic studies, with the sole aim of replenishing the understanding and compassion that had fuelled our intuition thus far.

So, we immersed ourselves in the lives of our customers - their homes, offices, bus routes, and even diaries. In the end, we went so deep that:

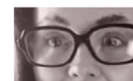
**Our total 'observation' hours  
outstripped our total 'planning' hours.**

**711**  
'Observation' hours



**VS**

RELATIONSHIPS  
↓  
Boyfriend of 6 years  
↓  
} marriage?  
↓  
Parents / in laws  
↓



**696**  
'Planning' hours

[Figure 8: Timesheets revealed we'd collectively spent more hours 'observing' in field than 'planning' at our desks (source: timesheets of BAMB, Outsiders and Leo Burnett) All photos from field.]

# 4. Seeing What Others Hadn't

## Finding a new McDonald's Brand Love insight is no picnic.

Quite frankly, it can be hard to imagine there's much more to say. Not only that, there's a whole checklist of constraints it must work within; it has to be universal but ownable, timeless but timely, and big but not boring. It's enough to give any Planner the willies. Come to think of it, it's probably why we'd only managed one in 10 years.

[ Figure 9: Quotes, diary-entries and memes shared by respondents in research ]

## Ethnography gave us a fresh perspective.

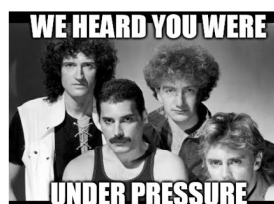
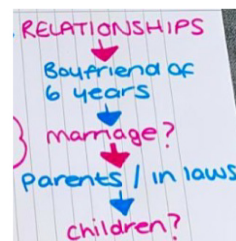
In looking to understand the feelings of our customers, a common theme emerged... **Pressure**. The pressure to make the right money, eat the right stuff, post the right #angles. It'd always been there but, in 2021, as restrictions lifted and people returned to normality, it'd been cranked up to 11.

Moreover, the brand had adopted a clear role...

## McDonald's wasn't a restaurant, it was a pressure valve.

For millions, Maccys wasn't just a delicious bite to eat, it was an excuse to put the pressures of life to one side, let yourself off the hook and just enjoy. In the words of Margaret and Sue - two women in their 50's we found at a Drive Thru in Woolwich, giggling like a pair of kids – McDonald's was a moment to say...

**“ I feel like I've got to make up for lost time. ”**



# “F\*\*\*K IT”

(A phrase we later softened to the more client-friendly “Sod It”)

Thanks to Margaret and Sue, Planning had done the impossible and unlocked a new McDonald's Brand Love insight:

**In the pressure cooker of modern life, McDonald's offers a much-needed moment to say 'Sod it' and just enjoy**

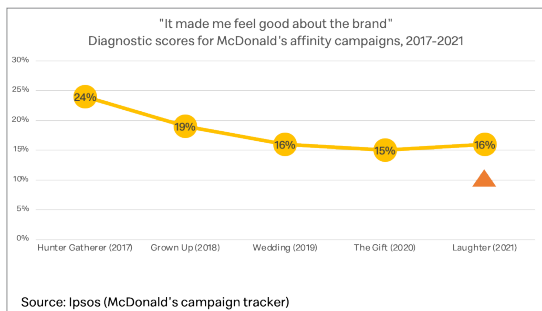


[ Figure 10: Laughter, 2021 ]

## Into teams it went...

The campaign that followed brought to life the release of eating a McDonald's, through the metaphor of involuntary laughter. It was a refreshing new creative direction with a new style and focus beyond the food.

# 5. Finding The Feeling



[Figure 11: Laughter delivered a modest+1% increase in emotional connection]

## Something wasn't clicking.

Our new insight had delivered a creative step change, but not an emotional step change. Campaign diagnostics suggested that whilst our audience "got it", they just weren't *feeling* it (Fig. 10).

## Planning had a decision to make.

We could have put the responsibility on creative shoulders, encouraging teams to keep pushing the execution. Instead, we elected to keep pushing our insight - looking for a new understanding that could unlock the emotion in it. So, much to the delight of our Business Director, we jumped back into 4 more months of research...

## To truly understand the "Sod It Moment", we had to observe it in action.

We recorded "Sod It Stories" – hundreds of real accounts of the McDonald's pressure release. It was only after listening to these unfold, and paying close attention to the common patterns in people's emotions, that two unexpected truths emerged...

# 1.

### THE SUGGESTION WAS MORE EMOTIONAL THAN THE CONSUMPTION

We'd assumed the product was the pressure release. It wasn't. The emotional peak happened before the food – at the moment of suggestion. The invitation to grab a Maccy's triggered widening eyes, mischievous smiles, irrepressible bursts of excitement...

## “

**YAAAAAAAAY!  
from the kids in the back.  
Her eyes tripled in size.  
Cheeky! Go on then!**

# 2.

### IT WAS SO UNIVERSALLY UNDERSTOOD, IT WAS RARELY SPOKEN

It was only after watching back the many hours of raw footage that it clicked. We noticed what triggered the emotional fireworks was not what people said, but what they didn't. There was a whole world of unspoken language being used to extend the invitation...



**The knowing look  
The head point  
The emoji  
The eyebrow raise...**

## Planning had found what could release the feeling in our insight.

We'd simply direct creative teams to:

**Bring the "Sod It" moment to life through the Unsaid Suggestion**

*But, as we'd learned, just explaining this to them wouldn't be enough...*



# 6. Getting Teams To Feel It

**It was less of a briefing, more of an immersion.**

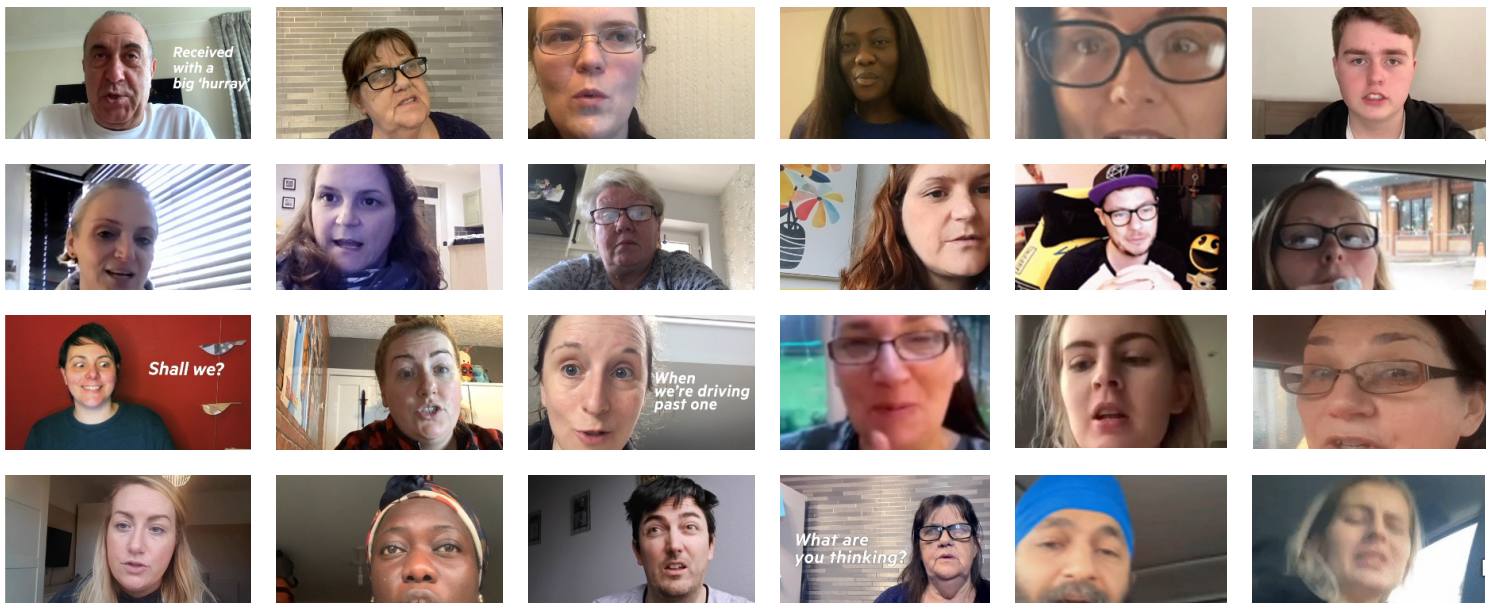
This time we wanted to get creative teams to feel the insight for themselves.

So, instead of writing a brief we edited a film - painstakingly slicing and dicing 100+ hours of footage down to a 6-minute video. We stood up, said a few words, and then just pressed play...

**Planning let our customers take over.**

Our research respondents filled the room, bringing the unsaid suggestion to life in all its glory.

The creative teams were transfixed.



[Figure 12: Screenshots from the briefing film]

As they began to leave, we handed out a few parting words of advice (see Fig. 13).

We didn't know it at the time, but a seed had already been sown. One creative in particular – a dashing Welshman by the name of 'Butters' - had spotted something in our customers' suggestions.

He'd noticed that, whilst nothing verbal might be happening, something physical invariably was - there was a common gesture.

A gesture that bore a striking resemblance to our iconic Golden Arches...



[Figure 13: the leave behind]

# 7. Helping The Idea Spread

**One week later, Raise Your Arches was born.**

The idea was simple: turn the eyebrow raise that so often accompanied the unsaid suggestion into a sticky branded behaviour that could only mean one thing – “Fancy A McDonalds?”.

**Now it was Planning’s job to help it spread.**

And so, we did what Planning does best - create a highly alliterative comms framework. One that would guide the idea and help it take root in culture...

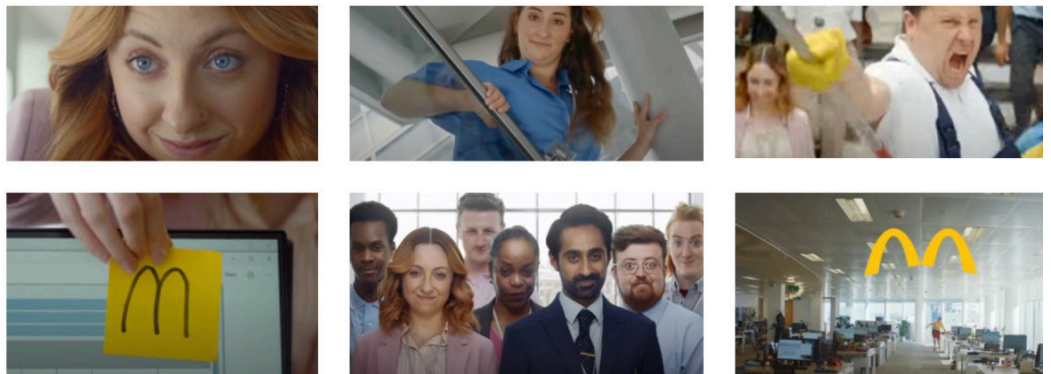


## i. SEED THE BROWS

We sparked mass hysteria ahead of launch by wapping the iconic Golden Arches for a new set of 'Golden Eyebrows' across owned channels.

## ii. SCALE THE BROWS

We then got the nation talking with a blockbuster launch film (by Edgar Wright, no biggie) and disruptive OOH - flooding UK streets with eyebrows.



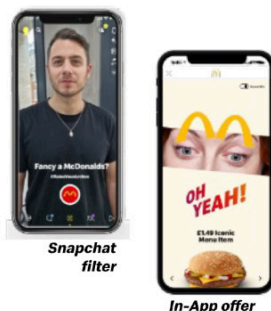
Launch film



Various OOH formats



Social creator + Influencer activity



Snapchat filter

In-App offer

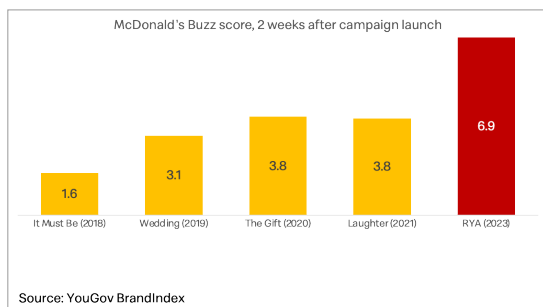
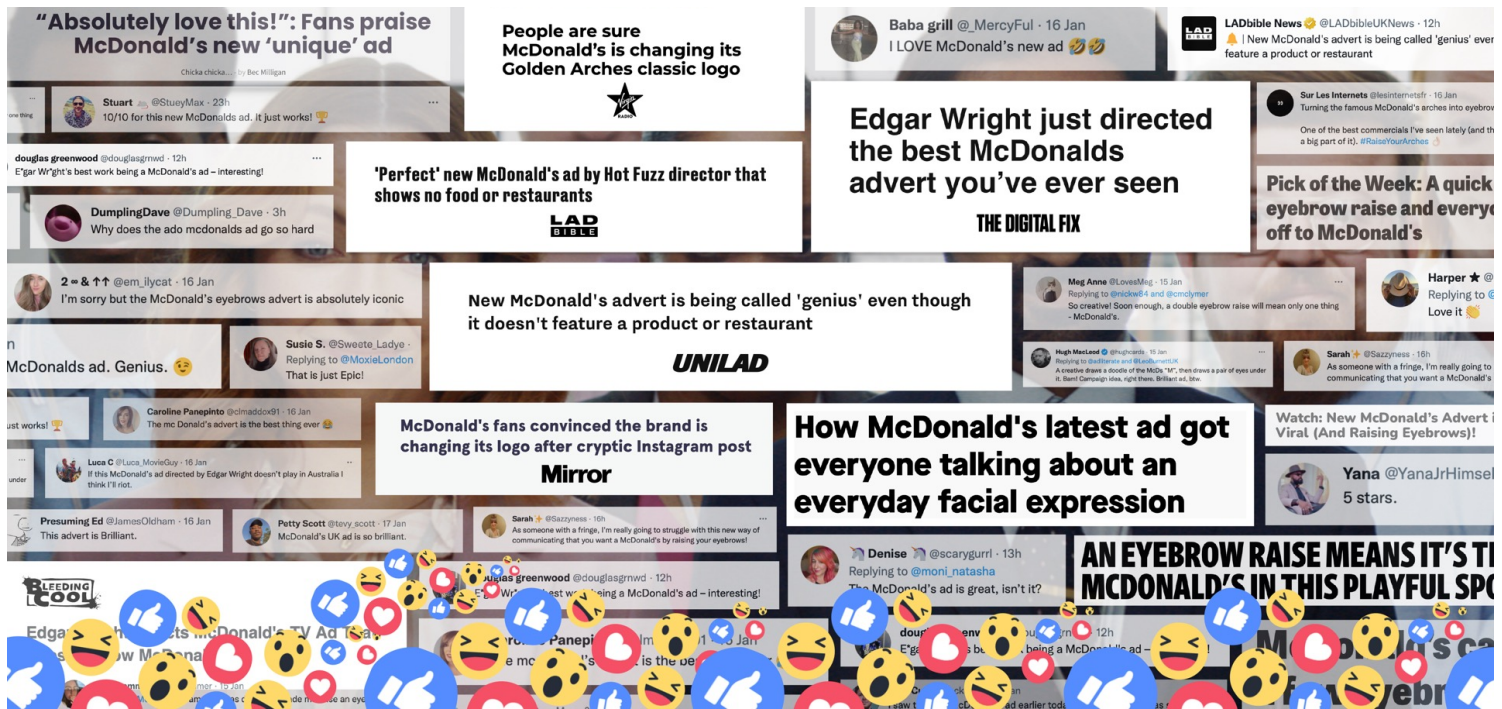
## iii. SPREAD THE BROWS

Finally, we invited participation in social channels – creating a groundswell of eyebrows from a small army of creators and influencers. Then helping people to join in with fun filters and tasty offers.

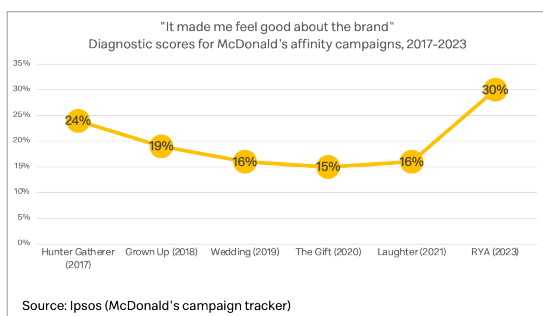
**...But did it work?**



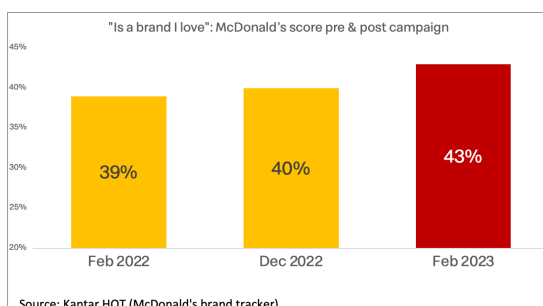
# Oh Yeah!



[Figure 14. Higher levels of buzz than any previous Love campaign]



[Figure 15. New record score on campaign emotional resonance]



[Figure 16. Brand love on the rise again - jumping to 43% (+3) in February]

**It was our most talked about campaign, ever.**

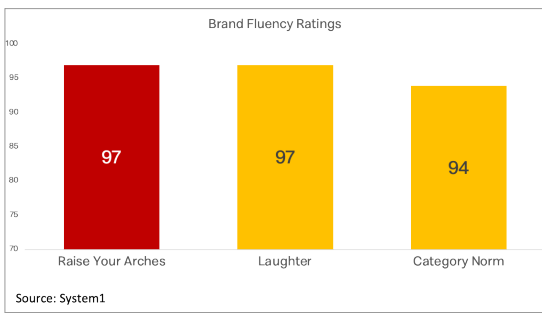
Beyond the frenzied conversation in our industry the buzz also extended into culture.

**It took our advertising to new emotional heights.**

It was the most emotional Love campaign since tracking began. It was also far more emotional than the category norm – with an 'emotional intensity' score of 1.65 vs a norm of 1.26. (System 1).

**It got Brand Love back to growth.**

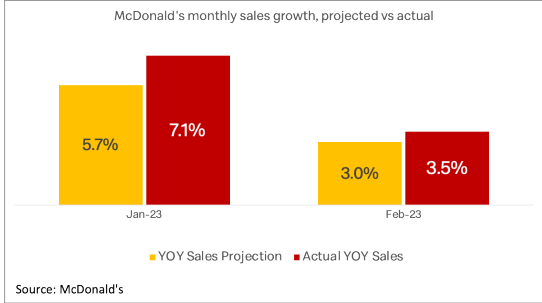
Having previously stagnated, 'Brand Love' scores are now back in growth as a result of the campaign.



[Figure 17. Brand fluency score beating category norm]

**It got the brand HFSS-ready.**

Despite no food or restaurants, the campaign was unmistakably McDonald's.



[Figure 18. Sales outstripping projection after campaign launch]

**...and early signs suggest it paid back in spades.**

While there are many factors driving sales performance, the campaign helped to smash projections in January and February.

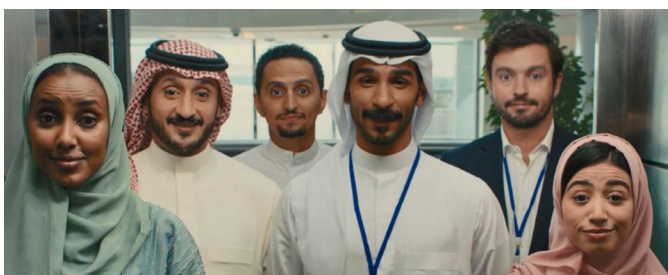
There hasn't been time for a full econometric analysis, but interim results confirm that the campaign has delivered a total ROI of £6.77. Which means the total incremental revenue generated is likely to be:

**£45.4m.<sup>5</sup>**

All without a burger in sight.

**It's worked so well, in fact, the whole world wants a piece of it...**

Raise Your Arches has unintentionally become the biggest McDonald's global campaign that's ever existed, with 119 local markets (nearly half of McDonald's world) either running or planning to run it. Therefore demonstrating the power of the unsaid suggestion in transcending language, culture, and borders.



[Figure 19. Raise Your Arches in the Middle East, Hong Kong and Israel]



**So, there you have it.**

This has been the untold Planning story behind Raise Your Arches.

It has shone a spotlight on the essential role of Planning's awkwardness, nosiness and, even, occasional courageousness, in driving true creative step-change.

It's probably a role that deserves the spotlight more often. However uncomfortable that makes us.

Words: 1999