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The Psychology of Transgressive Brand Behaviour on Social Media: A Comparative Analysis of Wendy's and Ryanair

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Abstract

This article analyzes the transgressive marketing strategies of Wendy's and Ryanair on social media, aiming to provide actionable considerations for Ryanair. The study employed a descriptive analysis of Twitter content, examining 119 tweets from Wendy's and 115 from Ryanair, categorizing transgressive messages as humorous or hard-edged. Findings indicate Wendy's successfully uses witty, balanced humor for brand building and engagement, while Ryanair's provocative approach, though attention-grabbing, risks alienating older customers and conflicting with its core values due to its higher incidence of hard-edged communication. The study suggests Ryanair should re-emphasize core values, refine its humor to be more positive, and integrate user-generated content to humanize its brand.

Keywords

transgressive message, social media, Ryanair, Wendy's

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จิตวิทยาพฤติกรรมแบรนด์ที่ล่วงละเมิดบนโซเชียลมีเดีย: การวิเคราะห์เชิงเปรียบเทียบระหว่างเวนดี้ส์และไรอันแอร์

ณัชชา ปภาพจน์
วิทยาลัยนานาชาติเพื่อการจัดการ มหาวิทยาลัยหอการค้าไทย

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้วิเคราะห์กลยุทธ์การตลาดที่ล่วงละเมิดของแบรนด์เวนดี้ส์และไรอันแอร์บนโซเชียลมีเดีย โดยมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อเสนอข้อพิจารณาที่เป็นประโยชน์สำหรับไรอันแอร์ การศึกษาใช้วิธีวิเคราะห์เชิงพรรณนาจากเนื้อหาบนทวิตเตอร์ โดยตรวจสอบทวีต 119 ข้อความจากเวนดี้ส์ และ 115 ข้อความจากไรอันแอร์ ซึ่งจัดประเภทข้อความที่ล่วงละเมิดว่าเป็นแบบตลกขบขันหรือแบบแข็งกร้าว ผลการวิจัยชี้ว่าเวนดี้ส์ประสบความสำเร็จในการใช้อารมณ์ขันที่เฉียบคมและสมดุลเพื่อสร้างแบรนด์และเพิ่มการมีส่วนร่วม ในขณะที่กลยุทธ์ที่ยั่วยุของไรอันแอร์แม้จะดึงดูดความสนใจได้ แต่ก็อาจเสี่ยงต่อการสร้างความไม่พอใจให้กับลูกค้าสูงอายุและขัดแย้งกับค่านิยมหลักของแบรนด์ เนื่องจากมีข้อความที่แข็งกร้าวในสัดส่วนที่สูงกว่า การศึกษาจึงแนะนำให้ไรอันแอร์กลับมาเน้นย้ำค่านิยมหลัก ปรับปรุงอารมณ์ขันให้เป็นเชิงบวกมากขึ้น และใช้เนื้อหาที่สร้างโดยผู้ใช้เพื่อสร้างภาพลักษณ์ความเป็นมนุษย์ให้กับแบรนด์

คำสำคัญ

ข้อความที่ล่วงละเมิด, โซเชียลมีเดีย, ไรอันแอร์, เวนดี้ส์

Introduction

In the fast-paced world of social media marketing, brands are increasingly adopting transgressive communication styles to capture audience attention and encourage interaction. Transgressive communication is a commercial messaging approach that deliberately challenges the boundaries of social, cultural, or ethical acceptability (Dahl et al., 2003). Its fundamental aim is to deviate from conventional communication styles and utilize controversial themes, provocative visuals, or unconventional communication to surprise or shock its audience (Dahl et al., 2003)

This approach deliberately challenges conventional social norms and expectations, often leveraging humor, provocation, or controversial themes. While such strategies can undeniably generate considerable buzz and engagement, they also pose inherent risks, including the potential to alienate certain consumer groups or harm a brand's reputation if not managed with careful consideration for audience sensitivities.

This article explores the strategic implementation of transgressive branding by two prominent entities: Wendy's, a leading fast-food chain known for its assertive presence on social media, and Ryanair, Europe's largest low-cost airline, recognized for its often blunt and provocative online interactions. Wendy's has successfully carved out a distinctive identity within the social media sphere through its sharp, witty, and frequently sarcastic tone. The brand's clever retorts and playful jabs aimed at competitors have not only entertained followers but have also solidified its image as a formidable force in digital communication. In May 2019, one influencer rapper posted on his Twitter account, hoping that Wendy’s would bring back their spicy nuggets. Wendy’s responded by stating that if their tweet received 2 million likes, they would bring back this menu. Eventually, the tweet gained a significant amount of engagement with over 2 million likes and over 300 thousand retweets. As promised, spicy nuggets officially returned to Wendy’s menu in August 2019. In this scenario, Wendy has exemplified a playful, norm-breaking interaction with consumers. Instead of the traditional

one-directional corporate tone, Wendy's adopts an informal, challenge-based exchange more typical of peer-to-peer communication. This violates the conventional expectation that brands stay formal, distant, and promotional. The humor lies in treating product return decisions as a social media dare, which reflects a benign violation—it challenges norms but remains harmless and fun. This approach not only increases Wendy's user participation but also reinforces Wendy's identity as culturally aware and witty, and strengthens the brand emotional engagement through shared humor.

Another example of Wendy's aggressive yet humorous transgressive message style was when they called out McDonald's, their competitor, for still using frozen beef in most of their burgers. "@McDonalds So you'll still use frozen beef in MOST of your burgers in ALL of your restaurants? Asking for a friend." This tweet was meant for provocation while also highlighting the fact that Wendy's uses fresh beef for all of their burgers. It also demonstrates a competitor-directed humorous violation. Wendy directly calling out McDonald's was something most brands avoid for fear of appearing unprofessional, and this constitutes a breach of the norm that corporate communication should avoid confrontation. Moreover, Wendy frames the confrontation sarcastically ("Asking for a friend"), which maintains a humorous tone that keeps the violation benign rather than aggressive. This sarcasm signals both confidence and personality, increasing shareability. It strengthens Wendy's brand image as bold, witty, and unafraid to mock industry norms, aligning with its "fresh beef" brand value and boosting audience engagement.

Conversely, Ryanair has attracted attention for its direct and at times confrontational online messages, frequently pushing the boundaries of traditional airline marketing with its straightforward and occasionally audacious demeanor. While the airline has achieved significant financial success based on its low-cost model, this has occurred despite persistent and severe negative brand sentiment, with the carrier being voted "Europe's least popular short-haul airline" by *Which?* readers in 2013 and being the subject of dedicated "I Hate Ryanair" sites. The perception of Ryanair is also one defined

by "hidden fees, bad customer service, and a somewhat aggressive approach" that risks treating customers more like cattle to be herded (French, n.d.).

The historical context and the confrontational tone of its online communication bring it dangerously close to what the Benign Violation Theory (BVT) categorizes as a malign violation, which risks alienating customers despite high revenue (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Even Ryanair's CEO, Michael O'Leary, recognized the effectiveness of a more considerate approach, admitting, "if I had realized that treating our customers better would yield such positive results, I would have started doing it long ago." Additionally, Richard Elsen from Byfield Consultancy pointed out the strategy's shortcomings, mentioning a "disconnect between customer expectations and the actual experience of flying Ryanair" (French, n.d.).

One of Ryanair's recent tweets was in response to a customer who posted a picture of himself sitting on the airplane. The customer said he always flies with Ryanair's business class and complained about how he did not get samples for the wine selection. However, Ryanair responded with the statement, "terrible shoes for business class." Ryanair's dismissive reply to a customer complaining about wine samples violates norms of customer-centric politeness and service empathy. Instead of addressing the complaint, the brand shifts the conversation to ridicule. This confrontational humor risks being perceived as disrespectful or unprofessional and pushes the violation closer to a malign zone. While it captures attention and may amuse younger audiences familiar with "roast culture," it can alienate older or more traditional customers, reinforcing Ryanair's reputation for brusqueness.

Another one of the more aggressive transgressive tweets from Ryanair was when they responded to a customer who claimed to be a Ryanair hater as, "That's called being unemployed Dan." The response directly challenged the user's financial status of being unemployed and was more aggressive than benign humorous behavior. Making jokes about a customer's financial status is an example of aggressive transgression, reflecting a violation of ethical and

interpersonal boundaries. It is not easily interpreted as playful, meaning it risks crossing from benign to malign violation. While it may create viral buzz, it also heightens perceptions of Ryanair as hostile, dismissive, or insensitive, potentially damaging trust and brand warmth.

The fundamental justification for comparing Wendy's and Ryanair, despite their distinct industry domains, lies in the rigorous methodological pursuit of theoretical generalizability (Yin, 2017). Effective transgressive communication, framed by the Benign Violation Theory, is a strategic phenomenon, and its validity is strengthened when it can successfully explain outcomes in diverse operational environments. By adopting a multiple-case design, the research intentionally shifts the analytical focus from industry-specific factors (e.g., fast-food versus aviation) to the core marketing strategy itself (transgressive messaging) (Yin, 2017). This approach treats the brands as different manifestations of the same strategic variable, allowing researchers to isolate the impact of behavioral variations specifically the differences between Wendy's witty, humorous transgression and Ryanair's direct, aggressive approach on audience engagement and brand perception. Comparing these two contrasting cases enables the inductive derivation of refined concepts, providing insight into which transgressive tactics are universally effective, and which are contingent upon the specific organizational personality or market context (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The need for this research stems from the risk management challenge inherent in Ryanair's current use of transgressive communication. While the airline's blunt and confrontational social media style generates attention, it sits precariously close to the boundary that risks causing alienation and reputation damage, which are the natural consequences of poorly managed transgression. For Ryanair, the problem is that its aggressive style risks producing a malign violation—content perceived as genuinely harmful or offensive—thereby diminishing positive brand perception. The research, therefore, is needed to compare Ryanair's current practices against the successfully humorous/benign transgression employed by Wendy's. This comparison will analytically determine how Ryanair can optimize its approach to ensure its boundary-pushing

content consistently falls within the BVT's "sweet spot," allowing it to maximize engagement without alienating its target demographic (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

For research methodology, a comparative study of Twitter communications from Wendy's (119 tweets, April 2nd - September 4th, 2025) and Ryanair (115 tweets, February 3rd - October 13th, 2025) was conducted to analyze transgressive behavior. The research sought to classify these behaviors as either humorous or aggressive, and subsequently, to determine their influence on brand perception and audience engagement. This investigation is particularly significant for its direct comparison of two brands utilizing transgressive marketing, offering practical advice for Ryanair to enhance its social media presence. For brands to effectively navigate social media and maximize engagement without alienating their target demographic, a deep comprehension of transgressive communication is vital.

This article draws upon existing academic literature to define the characteristics and potential consequences of transgressive commercial messages. It delves into the fundamental motivations that drive brands to adopt transgressive tactics, such as the potential for viral spread, the opportunity to achieve unique market differentiation in a crowded industry, and the cultivation of strong brand loyalty. Key theoretical frameworks, including the Benign Violation Theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010), are explored to establish a foundational understanding of the dynamic interplay between humor and transgression. Furthermore, the literature review considers various factors that influence the overall effectiveness of transgressive content, such as a brand's inherent personality and the specific characteristics of its target audience, alongside the inherent risks and rewards associated with implementing such marketing strategies. This comprehensive theoretical background underpins the subsequent comparative analysis of Wendy's and Ryanair's transgressive behavior on social media.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the characteristics, driving factors, and considerations for employing transgressive behaviour in brand marketing communications.
2. To analyze and compare the transgressive branding strategies employed by Wendy's Ryanair on social media platform.
3. To suggest actionable considerations for Ryanair to refine its social media approach to better align with its brand identity and audience expectations.

Literature Review

What makes a commercial message transgressive?

Transgressive messaging fundamentally aims to deviate from conventional communication and elicit strong emotional responses, ranging from amusement to discomfort. The "Benign Violation Theory" (McGraw & Warren, 2010) provides a framework for understanding such messages, positing that content becomes engaging and humorous when it simultaneously infringes upon a social norm while being perceived as harmless. The effectiveness of transgressive messages hinges on striking a delicate balance: content that is too benign may fail to capture attention, whereas overly severe content risks causing offense.

A commercial message is deemed transgressive when it deliberately challenges the boundaries of social, cultural, or ethical acceptability, thereby surprising or shocking its audience (Dahl et al., 2003). This often involves the use of controversial themes, provocative visuals, or unconventional communication styles that diverge from societal norms (Dahl et al., 2003)

For a violation to be perceived as benign, several critical factors must converge. First, the audience must consider the transgression to be minor or inconsequential. If the transgression is viewed as excessively severe or damaging, it is likely to evoke a negative reaction

rather than humor (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Recent research by El-tazy and Dinana (2018) supports this, indicating a negative correlation between perceived transgression severity and humor appreciation, while a sense of playfulness positively influences it. Essentially, overly harmful violations trigger negative emotions that overshadow potential humor. Conversely, a playful transgression such as a brand engaging in self-deprecating humor or subtly addressing a minor norm is more probable to be viewed as benign and humorous. El-tazy and Dinana (2018) work also underscores the importance of playfulness in mitigating the negative impacts of severity; a playful tone signals harmless intent, allowing humor to be appreciated even on sensitive subjects. Therefore, the success of transgressive humor fundamentally depends on its perceived harmlessness and an underlying playful quality.

Second, psychological distance the perceived separation an audience feels from the violation (whether temporal, social, or hypothetical) significantly influences how a transgression is received (McGraw & Warren, 2010). A violation is more likely to be benign if the audience perceives it as not directly relevant or as abstract/distant. McGraw et al. (2013) empirically demonstrated a positive correlation between psychological distance and humor perception; transgressive scenarios presented as temporally, socially, or hypothetically distant were more frequently perceived as benign and humorous.

Lastly, a violation can be deemed benign if an alternative norm or specific context provides justification (McGraw & Warren, 2010). For instance, in satire or parody, certain violations are anticipated and accepted as a form of social commentary, rather than genuinely offensive acts. This aligns with Riloff et al. (2018) findings regarding the critical role of context and perceived intent in humor. An audience's interpretation of a transgression is heavily influenced by their understanding of the context and the perceived purpose behind it. If the intent is positive (e.g., social critique, harmless fun), humor is more likely to be appreciated. For example, a satirical advertisement employing humor to critique consumerism might be considered clever, even if it playfully mocks certain behaviors.

Why might brands try to be transgressive?

Brands are increasingly adopting transgressive marketing strategies for several compelling reasons. A primary motivation is the heightened potential for shareability of transgressive content. A study by Berger and Milkman (2012) analyzing *The New York Times* articles revealed that content eliciting strong emotional arousal (both positive and negative) was more likely to be widely shared. This suggests that content pushing boundaries, when perceived as harmless, can go viral due to its ability to generate intense emotions, thereby prompting individuals to disseminate it (Berger & Milkman, 2012). For example, a humorous brand advertisement subtly challenging social norms can have a dual effect: some viewers might find it mildly offensive, while others find it highly amusing, leading to extensive social media discussion and expanded brand reach. A study of 3,000 brand tweets confirmed that those incorporating transgressive humor were significantly more likely to be shared (Warren et al., 2019). Additionally, Keshari and Jain (2016) indicated that transgressive advertising can boost brand recall and purchase intention, particularly among younger consumers who tend to prefer edgy content. These studies collectively suggest that carefully executed transgressive marketing is a potent tool for extending brand reach and fostering engagement.

Secondly, brand differentiation serves as a key driver for adopting transgressive strategies. In today's saturated marketplace, where numerous brands offer comparable products or services, achieving genuine differentiation is paramount for success. Transgressive marketing, by its very nature, disrupts conventional approaches and positions a brand as innovative, bold, or irreverent (Aaker et al., 2004). This resonates strongly with consumers who value nonconformity and seek brands that embody similar characteristics. Aaker et al. (2004) highlighted how brands like Diesel and Benetton historically used transgressive advertising to cultivate edgy, unconventional images, successfully attracting specific consumer segments. This strategy remains relevant; Nobi et al. (2021) found that brands with a rebellious identity can leverage transgressive content to reinforce their brand image and build a dedicated following. Beyond simply

attracting attention, transgressive branding creates a unique, memorable identity that distinguishes the brand in competitive markets. It appeals to desires for individuality and authenticity, especially among younger consumers who often reject conformity (Kim et al., 2016). By challenging norms and showcasing a distinct personality, transgressive marketing can set a brand apart, potentially increasing recognition, strengthening consumer connections, and cultivating a more loyal and engaged customer base.

Finally, when implemented thoughtfully, transgressive marketing can be highly effective in fostering brand loyalty, particularly among younger, often rebellious demographics. This audience segment, frequently characterized by their appreciation for individuality and nonconformity, is more inclined to be drawn to brands that challenge norms and project a distinct personality (Kim et al., 2016). Research by Gil-Or et al. (2015) highlights the link between social media behavior and identity expression, suggesting that individuals exhibiting a "false self" online are more prone to sharing transgressive content. This implies that transgressive marketing can resonate with those seeking to express a bolder online identity, fostering a deeper connection with brands that align with similar values. Further evidence comes from Guèvremont and Grohmann (2012), whose study found that playful transgression (e.g., brand-to-brand teasing, edgy humor) can build stronger emotional bonds with consumers who identify with the brand. This aligns with brand identification, where consumers form attachments to brands that reflect their self-concept (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Nor et al. (2025) also indicate that younger demographics are more likely to appreciate and engage with transgressive content, especially when it aligns with their personal values and social identities, often leading to increased brand loyalty through a deeper connection to the brand's worldview.

In essence, brands may adopt transgressive strategies to capture attention, differentiate themselves, and strengthen loyalty among specific consumer segments. By evoking strong emotions, challenging norms, and aligning with rebellious audiences, transgressive content can be a powerful marketing tool. However, brands must carefully navigate the risks of transgression, ensuring

content resonates with their audience without causing backlash or alienation. Thoughtful execution of transgressive branding can enhance a brand's visibility, uniqueness, and audience connection, contributing to its long-term success.

Should all brands use transgressive behaviour on social media?

The decision for a brand to employ transgressive behavior on social media is multifaceted, requiring a thorough evaluation of potential risks and benefits, coupled with a consideration of several key factors.

Firstly, brand personality significantly influences how consumers will react to transgressive content. Béal and Grégoire (2021) demonstrated that consumer responses to transgressive humor, particularly humorous brand responses to complaints, were significantly shaped by perceptions of the brand's personality. This aligns with Guèvremont and Grohmann (2012) research, which showed brand personality influences responses to transgressive advertising humor. Brands with playful, irreverent, or edgy personalities may find transgressive humor aligns well with their image and audience (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Conversely, for brands with a serious, traditional, or conservative image, transgressive humor can be risky and potentially alienating (Eisend & Küster, 2011). Eisend and Küster (2011) found consumers are more likely to be offended by transgressive humor from brands perceived as sincere or serious. Therefore, brands must assess if their personality fits this humor style before incorporating it (Nobi et al., 2021)

Secondly, the online behavior of the target audience is a critical consideration for successful transgressive marketing. Individuals exhibiting a strong "false self" on social media—where their online persona differs from their true self—are more likely to share transgressive content (Gil-Or et al., 2015). Nor et al. (2025) further confirmed this link between a strong "false self" and a higher propensity to engage with transgressive content. This implies that brands must thoroughly understand their audience's online behavior before adopting a transgressive approach. Research suggests younger demographics, prone to experimenting with online identities, are more

receptive to transgressive content than older ones who prefer traditional content (Carpenter & de Charon, 2014; Eisend & Küster, 2011). Conversely, if a brand's target audience favors edgier content, transgressive tactics can be effective (Kuipers & Zijp, 2024). Studies show dark humor can successfully capture niche audiences, boosting engagement and word-of-mouth.

Finally, brands must meticulously weigh the risks and rewards of transgressive social media behavior. While transgressive marketing offers potential for virality and engagement, it also carries the risk of offending audiences or damaging brand image (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Some studies, like Vredenburg et al. (2020), found that moderately transgressive advertising increased brand recall and positive brand attitudes compared to non-transgressive ads. However, other research highlights potential backlash and negative brand associations if the transgression is perceived as offensive (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). Chung and Zhao (2011) analyzed social media reactions to a controversial ad, noting it generated buzz but also significant negative sentiment and boycott calls. Furthermore, Dahl et al. (2003) suggest transgressive ad effectiveness varies by individual disgust sensitivity; those with higher sensitivity were more offended and less positive towards the brand. Transgressive content is a risky strategy: it can generate buzz but also backfire if not executed thoughtfully. Brands must balance attention gains against the risk of alienating audiences. This requires assessing risk tolerance and ensuring transgressive elements align with brand personality and target audience. Mild humor may be acceptable, but explicit language or imagery could be damaging.

Comparing the two distinctive brands: Wendy's and Ryanair

The choice to compare a fast-food chain (Wendy's) and a low-cost airline (Ryanair) is methodologically deliberate, as the industry context significantly moderates the effect and acceptance of transgressive messaging, thereby providing a robust test for the generalizability of the Benign Violation Theory (BVT).

Both the Fast-Food and Low-Cost Airline sectors are characterized by high-volume, low-margin transactions, making social media a vital, cost-effective tool for driving brand awareness and immediate consumer action (Han et al., 2019; Jayathunga et al., 2024). However, they operate under fundamentally different reputational constraints. The fast-food industry is often the subject of public scrutiny related to health and lifestyle, necessitating transparency and high customer interactivity to cultivate loyalty among demographics like Millennials and Gen Z (Janssen et al., 2018).

Wendy's, with its witty and sarcastic transgression, leverages social media to build an image of authenticity and personality that resonates with this consumer need (Cao et al., 2023). Conversely, the low-cost airline sector, exemplified by Ryanair, prioritizes cost minimization to the extent that it risks alienating customers through fees and perceived poor service (Saleh, 2021). Transgressive communication in this context often serves a dual purpose: it reinforces the "no-frills, maverick" brand identity, but it must carefully manage the inherent consumer dissatisfaction linked to service quality (Ryanair's historical challenges) to prevent malign violations that result in severe reputational damage (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

By contrasting these two high-traffic, low-affinity service industries, the study can empirically determine how industry norms and established brand personality dictate the acceptable boundaries of transgressive humor and aggression, offering refined, context-aware managerial implications.

Research Methodology

This study on transgressive brand behavior on social media employs an analytic case study approach, utilizing descriptive analysis to examine the Twitter communications of Wendy's and Ryanair as primary data. Over the observed period (Wendy's: April 2nd to September 4th, 2025, totaling 119 tweets; Ryanair: February 3rd to October 13th, 2025, totaling 115 tweets), distinct communication patterns emerged.

The disparity in the data collection periods—six months for Wendy's versus nine months for Ryanair was a deliberate methodological choice to ensure statistical power and comparative rigor, directly addressing the expert's concern regarding validity. The research objective was not to compare activity over identical timeframes, but to obtain a sufficient and comparable volume of transgressive content (Wendy's N=58 transgressive tweets; Ryanair N=112 transgressive tweets) necessary to perform robust inferential testing on the two brands' intrinsic communication styles. Initial scoping indicated that the frequency of qualifying transgressive content varies significantly between the two companies. Forcing a shorter, identical period would have resulted in an unacceptably small sample size for one of the brands, compromising the statistical power of the analysis (Cohen, 2013).

The validity and comparability are maintained because the analysis focuses on proportional relationships (i.e., the percentage of Hard-Edge content within each brand's unique pool) and utilizes inferential statistics such as the Chi-Square test. These methods, designed to draw conclusions about the underlying communication stream, are not reliant on equal raw tweet counts or perfectly synchronized calendar periods, thereby effectively minimizing the impact of the differing collection durations on the final conclusion (Yin, 2017).

The analysis also categorizes these tweets into humorous and hard-edged content to understand the specific manifestations of transgressive behavior employed by each brand. Secondary data, including theses, research reports, and articles, provide context and

theoretical frameworks for interpreting these observed behaviors and their implications for the brands' respective social media strategies.

Data Extraction and Filtering

The primary data (119 tweets from Wendy's and 115 from Ryanair) were extracted and filtered manually to ensure strict adherence to the comparative scope and exclusion criteria.

The standard Twitter/X web interface was used for data extraction. The researcher navigated to each brand's official handle (@Wendys and @Ryanair). For each brand, the researcher used the advanced search function within the platform to restrict results to the specified date ranges (April 2 – September 4, 2025 for Wendy's; February 3 – October 13, 2025 for Ryanair) and filtered by tweets and replies from the official account.

The researcher manually reviewed each post. Only tweets meeting the following criteria were included:

- Original tweets or replies sent directly by the brand's official account.
- Content demonstrating transgressive behavior (i.e., challenging a social norm, competitor, or customer in a provocative, humorous, or aggressive manner).

Exclusion: Purely promotional announcements, routine customer service responses, and non-interactive image posts were excluded to focus solely on the transgressive communication style.

Identifying Humorous and Hard-Edged Content

Content was classified based on established definitions from the literature, primarily the Benign Violation Theory (BVT), before the comparative analysis:

- **Humorous (Benign Violation):** Content characterized by sarcasm, witty competitive "jabs" (e.g., Wendy's attacking competitor product quality), self-deprecation, clever pop-culture references, or the skillful use of memes. The intent is to generate amusement.
- **Hard-Edged/Aggressive:** Content characterized by direct, blunt dismissal of valid complaints, confrontation, or highly controversial statements. The intent risks causing genuine offense and reinforcing a negative brand stereotype.

The table summarizes the distribution of transgressive communication styles used by Wendy's and Ryanair across the observed period

Table 1: Summary of transgressive tweet

Content Type	Wendy's (N= 58)	Ryanair (N=112)	Total
Humorous	51 (87.9%)	77 (68.8%)	128
Hard-Edge	7 (12.1%)	35 (31.3%)	42
Total Transgressive	58	112	170

Chi-Square Analysis

The Chi-Square Test of Independence (χ^2) was employed to statistically analyze the relationship between two categorical variables: brand (Wendy's versus Ryanair) and the kind of transgressive content (Humorous versus Hard-Edge).

This non-parametric technique is suitable for frequency data and was employed to evaluate if the distribution of communication styles is affected by the particular brand, enabling the acceptance or rejection of the null hypothesis (H_0) (Cohen, 2013). The analysis compares the actual occurrences of each content type for every brand with the expected frequencies under the assumption that both variables are completely independent (i.e., if a brand's identity has no impact on its communication style). A statistically significant finding indicates that the difference in transgressive behavior between Wendy's and Ryanair is probably not a result of random chance, providing empirical support for the study's claims related to risk management and the coordination of communication strategies (Yin, 2017).

The core comparative element of this research is governed by two hypotheses regarding the distribution of transgressive communication styles (Humorous vs. Hard-Edge) across the brands. The Null Hypothesis (H_0) establishes the baseline assumption for the statistical test, positing that the distribution of these communication styles is independent of the brand (Wendy's or Ryanair), meaning any observed differences in the proportion of humorous content are merely due to random chance. Conversely, the Alternative Hypothesis (H1) asserts that the communication style is dependent on the brand, specifically predicting that Wendy's will exhibit a significantly higher proportion of Humorous (Benign) content than Ryanair. This alternative hypothesis drives the empirical test, seeking to confirm the theoretical alignment of Wendy's with the low-risk "sweet spot" of effective transgression.

Table 2: Hypotheses for Chi-square test

Hypothesis	Statement
Null Hypothesis (H0)	The distribution of transgressive communication styles (Humorous vs. Hard-Edge) is independent of the brand
Alternative Hypothesis (H1)	The distribution of transgressive communication styles (Humorous vs. Hard-Edge) is dependent on the brand. Wendy's will exhibit a significantly higher proportion of Humorous (Benign) content than Ryanair.

Results of the study

Over the observed period, Wendy's and Ryanair demonstrated contrasting Twitter communication strategies. Wendy's, with 119 tweets (April 2nd to September 4th, 2025), achieved a higher posting frequency and engagement rate compared to Ryanair's, which exhibited lower engagement with 115 tweets over a more extended three-month period (February 3rd to October 13th, 2025).

Despite both brands employing transgressive behavior to connect with their audiences, their approaches and potential impacts differed considerably. Wendy's has successfully established a transgressive online persona, particularly on Twitter, using witty, sarcastic, and often humorous replies to other brands and users, which aligns with their bold, irreverent, and playful brand personality (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Out of 119 Wendy's tweets over the observed six-month period, 58 of them appeared to be transgressive. Approximately 87.9% (51 out of 58) of Wendy's transgressive tweets showcased this humorous style, often displaying cultural relevance, as seen in their playful take on Katy Perry's return from space, "I kissed the ground and I liked it," which generated significant user interaction. Their sharp and sarcastic wit was also evident in responses to critical customers, such as, "Who responds to tweets of

a restaurant they don't even eat?" This example challenges traditional expectations of polite customer engagement. Instead of offering a neutral or apologetic response, Wendy's adopts a sarcastic, teasing tone**,** typically inappropriate for customer service. Yet the humor softens the violation into a benign one, creating entertainment value for spectators. This strengthens the parasocial relationship between brand and audience and reinforces Wendy's reputation for sharp-edged but humorous communication that drives high engagement without alienating most followers.

Wendy's rarely employed hard-edged tweets, with only about 12.1% (7 out of 58) identified. These instances, like their somewhat aggressive response to the user "Smorg," "Let's send you to space and leave you there, Smorg," were rare and still maintained a tone of internet banter. This strategy of using humor to target competitors and reinforce brand positioning, as suggested by Nobi et al. (2021), leverages the benign violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010) by being direct yet harmless. This approach enhances shareability and memorability, consistent with research on authentic and distinctive social media branding (Jung Park, 2017) and the positive influence of appropriate humor on brand engagement (Eisend & Küster, 2011).

On the other hand, Ryanair's transgressive Twitter activity, observed over nine months and encompassing 115 tweets, garnered a more varied reception. Over 112 of Ryanair's tweets were considered transgressive. Humor was a significant element, appearing in roughly 68.8% of their posts (77 out of 112). Their humor frequently took the form of blunt self-awareness and observational comedy centered on the flying experience. An example of this is their tweet, "good morning to passengers who said they'd never fly Ryanair again, but did." This approach can be understood through the lens of the benign violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010), as it acknowledges a potentially negative aspect of their service (passengers vowing not to return) in a lighthearted way, creating a violation that is ultimately perceived as harmless and even humorous by some.

However, Ryanair's deployment of more aggressive communication stood in stark contrast to Wendy's approach. Approximately 31.3% of their tweets (35 out of 112) over the nine months adopted sarcastic, provocative, controversial, or unapologetic tones, particularly when addressing customer grievances. For instance, their dismissive "nobody cares" in response to a seating complaint, and the digitally altered image of a blurred-face customer captioned "fixed it" illustrate a more unapologetic and, at times, confrontational stance in their online interactions. These examples violate norms of professionalism by trivializing customer concerns or using humor at a customer's expense. Such dismissiveness contrasts sharply with expectations that service brands should listen, empathize, and resolve issues.

These tweets amplify Ryanair's existing brand stereotype of low-cost, no-frills, unapologetic, and can reinforce negative sentiment, particularly among demographics who are less accustomed to abrasive humor. While they may appeal to younger audiences drawn to irreverent communication, they risk long-term reputation erosion and alienation of older or higher-value customer segments. This inclination towards potentially abrasive content resonates with Dahl et al. (2003) findings regarding the possible negative outcomes of such provocative material. Furthermore, it may generate cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) with their core budget airline image, as customers seeking affordable travel might not expect or appreciate such dismissive communication.

The comparative analysis focused on the distribution of transgressive communication styles between Wendy's and Ryanair, a relationship directly tested by the Chi-Square ($\chi 2$) analysis. The Null Hypothesis (H0) posited that the distribution of transgressive communication styles (Humorous vs. Hard-Edge) is independent of the brand, suggesting that any observed difference in content proportions was merely due to chance. Conversely, the Alternative Hypothesis (H1) asserted that the style is dependent on the brand, specifically predicting that Wendy's would exhibit a significantly higher proportion of Humorous (Benign) content than Ryanair. This hypothesis was grounded in the academic rationale of

the Benign Violation Theory (BVT) (McGraw & Warren, 2010), which posits that successful, low-risk transgression—the "sweet spot"—should align with the humorous, benign approach, an alignment Wendy's was theoretically expected to demonstrate more strongly than the confrontational Ryanair brand.

The statistical test yielded a calculated $\chi 2$ value of 6.56 with degrees of freedom, resulting in a p-value of 0.0104. Since this p-value is less than the standard significance threshold ($\alpha = 0.05$), the findings are statistically significant. This result allows for the rejection of the null hypothesis, demonstrating that the distribution of transgressive content styles is dependent on the brand (Cohen, 2013).

This conclusion provides strong empirical support for the core research hypothesis (H1). The analysis reveals that Wendy's successfully operationalizes the Benign Violation Theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010) by ensuring its violation of social norms remains safely humorous, minimizing the risk of alienation. In contrast, Ryanair's communication style is statistically distinct and significantly more prone to the Hard-Edge (Malign) transgression. This outcome validates the necessity of the study's final objective, which is to provide Ryanair with actionable, empirically supported recommendations for refining its social media strategy to mitigate reputational risk and move toward the more sustainable, high-engagement model demonstrated by Wendy's (Yin, 2017).

Furthermore, considering that Ryanair's customer demographic extends up to 40 years old, a segment of their older customer base may be less receptive to their more aggressive style of humor. This aligns with Fournier and Avery's (2011) point about the risk of alienating audiences, as communication perceived as disrespectful or overly confrontational might not resonate well with individuals in this age range who may have different expectations for brand interactions. The potential for negative brand associations (Gil-Or et al., 2015) is amplified within this demographic, as they might view such tactics as unprofessional or even offensive, further underscoring the risks associated with Ryanair's hard-edged social media strategy.

In summary, while both brands utilized humor as a key component of their Twitter strategies, Wendy's leaned towards witty and culturally engaged humor with a low incidence of overtly aggressive communication. Ryanair, despite a lower overall tweet volume, employed humor more frequently but also demonstrated a significantly higher tendency for hard-edged responses that could be perceived as sarcastic, provocative, or dismissive of customer concerns.

Conclusion

Ryanair's current transgressive social media strategy, while capturing attention from its budget-conscious and spontaneous traveler base, may benefit from a more nuanced approach that considers the specific dynamics of cutting humor. As the literature suggests (McGraw & Warren, 2010), the effectiveness of such humor often hinges on brand personality. Ryanair operates in a budget-focused industry where passenger discomfort is sometimes tolerated for lower fares, which might explain a bolder approach to their social media.

However, given that Ryanair's customer demographic extends up to 44 years old, a segment of their older audience may be less receptive to overtly aggressive humor. Béal and Grégoire's (2021) research highlights the significant influence of perceived brand personality on reactions to transgressive humor, suggesting that a style incongruent with customer expectations can lead to negative reactions. Therefore, while completely abandoning their attention-grabbing tactics might not be necessary, Ryanair could explore a slightly less extreme style of humor. A potential avenue lies in incorporating more self-deprecating humor, playfully acknowledging the sometimes less-than-glamorous aspects of budget air travel that customers willingly endure for lower fares (Sabri & Hana, 2021). Making fun of the lengths passengers go to save money on flights could resonate with their core audience's shared experience.

Discussion

The significant chi-square provides the bridge from descriptive frequencies to theory-driven conclusions under the Benign Violation Theory: Wendy's operates nearer the BVT "sweet spot," while Ryanair more frequently approaches malign territory. Managerially, adjusting style mix toward benign transgression (e.g., self-deprecating humor, empathetic tone) is a testable lever to improve engagement and brand warmth.

Read together with Table 1, these inferential results support our interpretation: Wendy's higher proportion of humorous (benign) transgressions aligns with a more positive brand image and higher engagement, whereas Ryanair's greater share of hard-edged content aligns with heightened risk of negative associations and alienation among certain segments. Moreover, the chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 6.56$, $p = 0.0104$) demonstrates a statistically significant association between brand (Wendy's vs. Ryanair) and transgressive style (Humorous vs. Hard-Edge). This allows rejection of H0 and confirms the stylistic split is unlikely to be due to chance.

Weinberger and Gulas's (1992) work on humor in advertising also emphasizes the importance of a positive and engaging tone for building customer relationships. While direct and blunt humor has been part of Ryanair's strategy, a shift towards humor that fosters a sense of shared understanding and even pokes fun at the universal quirks of air travel might be more effective in building long-term loyalty (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). To make effective use of humor on social media, Ryanair could explore developing a comedic style that focuses on developing a comedic style that complements its brand values and resonates with its target audience. This could involve humor to emphasize the advantages of budget travel, highlight the thrill of discovering new destinations, or even poke fun at themselves in a self-deprecating manner (Sabri & Hana, 2021). Moreover, responding to queries and complaints with empathy and a touch of humor demonstrates genuine care and a willingness to go above and beyond for customer satisfaction (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000).

This approach has the potential to foster increased customer loyalty and advocacy, further strengthening the airline's overall brand image.

Ultimately, to optimize their social media engagement, Ryanair would benefit from pre-testing any significant shifts in their humor strategy with their target demographic (Eisend & Küster, 2011). This would allow them to gauge whether a more self-deprecating and relatable style truly resonates with their diverse customer base and effectively balances edginess with maintaining a positive brand image, ultimately aiming to increase booking likelihood rather than solely generating fleeting attention. This aligns with established principles in marketing communication and consumer behavior (Jung Park, 2017). The importance of understanding target audience preferences before implementing potentially risky strategies is underscored by research on audience reception of humor (Eisend & Küster, 2011) and the impact of brand personality on consumer responses (Béal & Grégoire, 2021). Pre-testing allows brands to mitigate the risk of alienating their customer base, as suggested by findings that incongruent humor can lead to negative brand associations (Gil-Or et al., 2015).

The potential benefits of self-deprecating humor for a brand like Ryanair, which operates in a price-sensitive market, resonate with research on building rapport and relatability with consumers. Such humor can humanize a brand (Schivinski et al., 2016) and foster a sense of shared experience, particularly when acknowledging the trade-offs inherent in budget travel (Sabri & Hana, 2021). This approach can potentially enhance customer relationships (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000) and build stronger emotional connections (Sang et al., 2024) by demonstrating an understanding of the customer's perspective.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is the inherent lack of access to internal market research conducted by Wendy's and Ryanair. Consequently, the analysis is unable to ascertain the extent to which these companies internally test their marketing strategies, including those employing transgressive elements. It is possible that internal testing reveals a more favorable reception than what might be inferred from public online reactions. Furthermore, the study acknowledges the potential discrepancy between stated preferences and actual behavior. While direct questioning about transgressive marketing might elicit negative responses or express disapproval, consumer behavior, such as increased engagement or booking rates, could paradoxically indicate a different outcome in practice. This disconnect between reported attitudes and actual behavior introduces a degree of uncertainty in predicting the true impact of these marketing approaches on consumer actions and brand loyalty.

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