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VISUAL COMMUNICATION AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR: EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE ON THE ROLE OF EMOJIS IN DIGITAL ADVERTISING

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Abstract: *Emojis have emerged as prominent visual-paralinguistic cues in computer-mediated communication, yet empirical evidence on their persuasive role in digital advertising remains limited. This study investigates how the presence of emojis in social media advertisements influences consumers' positive affect and purchase intention, and whether these effects vary across hedonic and utilitarian product framings. Drawing on affect-based persuasion and textual paralanguage theories, a 2 (emoji presence: present vs absent) × 2 (product framing: hedonic vs utilitarian) between-subjects experimental design was employed. Data were collected from 217 participants who were exposed to simulated YouTube advertisements and analysed using analysis of variance and mediation analysis. The results reveal that advertisements containing emojis generate significantly higher levels of positive affect and purchase intention than those without emojis. Mediation analysis further demonstrates that positive affect fully mediates the relationship between emoji presence and purchase intention, underscoring the central role of emotional mechanisms in emoji-based persuasion. Contrary to prior assumptions, product framing does not moderate these effects, indicating that emojis exert a robust persuasive influence across both hedonic and utilitarian advertising contexts. By providing causal evidence from a controlled experimental setting, this study extends emoji research from interpersonal communication to persuasive digital marketing contexts and highlights emojis as low-cost yet effective tools for enhancing emotional engagement and consumer response in social media advertising.*

Keywords: *Emojis, Digital Advertising, Positive Affect, Purchase Intention, Product Framing, Consumer Behaviour*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the rapid proliferation of social media platforms has significantly reshaped the global communication landscape (Edwards, 2011). These platforms have shifted human interaction from traditional, face-to-face encounters to digital environments, creating virtual communities and enabling cross-cultural dialogue (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). This evolution has amplified consumer-to-consumer communication, influencing how individuals process information, form opinions, and make purchase decisions (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Recognising this shift, firms have strategically increased investments in digital platforms, integrating social media as a critical component of their branding and marketing communication strategies. Interactive features, including social networking and blogging, have emerged as tools to enhance brand awareness, foster customer engagement, and drive online performance (Leeflang et al., 2014).

One notable development within this digital ecosystem is emojis marketing. Emoji pictographic symbols representing emotions, objects, and ideas have become integral to computer-mediated communication (CMC), compensating for the absence of non-verbal cues typically present in face-to-face interactions (Riordan & Kreuz, 2010; Aldunate & González-Ibáñez, 2017). Their widespread use on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram illustrates their communicative power, with billions of emojis shared daily (Emojispedia, 2018).

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By conveying emotions more vividly and reducing ambiguity, emojis strengthen message clarity and enhance the emotional tone of digital interactions (Derks et al., 2008b).

Marketers increasingly recognise the strategic value of emojis in promotional content. Brands such as Chevrolet, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and McDonald's have effectively integrated emojis into campaigns to create more engaging and memorable messages (Hsieh & Tseng, 2015). Research suggests that emojis usage can boost message persuasiveness, reduce perceived impersonality, and increase consumer engagement (Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Yakın & Eru, 2017). However, despite their growing prominence, academic exploration of the effectiveness of emojis in advertising remains limited. Existing studies largely focus on personal communication contexts (Lo, 2008; Riordan, 2017), emotional impact (Ganster et al., 2012), and message perception (Derks et al., 2008b). Only a few have examined emojis in marketing settings, noting their creative and persuasive potential (Yakın & Eru, 2017; Ghosh et al., 2019).

A critical gap persists in understanding how characteristics of emojis such as size, number, and placement affect consumer responses in digital advertising (Ghosh et al., 2019). Moreover, product framing appears to moderate emojis' effectiveness: emojis are more persuasive in hedonic product advertisements than in utilitarian contexts, where emotional cues align more naturally with product appeal. This contextual nuance suggests that marketers must carefully consider product type when deploying emojis-based strategies.

The present study aims to address these gaps by examining how emojis' use in social media advertising influences consumer purchase intention. Unlike previous research focusing on personal or print communication, this study situates its analysis within digital advertising environments. Specifically, it investigates whether the positive effects observed in prior studies persist when emojis are embedded within text rather than presented as standalone images. In addition, the study explores the moderating role of hedonic versus utilitarian product framing in shaping consumer responses.

From a managerial perspective, this research offers practical insights into optimising digital campaigns through strategic emojis integration. By understanding the interaction between emojis' usage and product framing, marketers can craft more emotionally resonant, persuasive messages that enhance engagement and purchasing behaviour. This study contributes to the limited but growing body of literature on emojis marketing, advancing theoretical understanding and providing actionable implications for digital brand communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rise of Digital Marketing

The last two decades have witnessed a fundamental transformation in global communication patterns due to the integration of digital technologies and the proliferation of web-based platforms (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). The advent of Web 2.0 enabled users to transition from passive information recipients to active content creators, fostering peer-to-peer communication and collective media spaces (Ghosh et al., 2019; Ashley & Tuten, 2015). This shift compelled firms to adapt their marketing strategies by incorporating digital channels alongside traditional methods (Chaffey, 2006).

Digital marketing has been defined as "the use of digital technologies to create integrated, targeted, and measurable communication that acquires and retains customers while deepening relationships" (Smith et al., 2007), as cited in (Laing & Royle, 2013, p. 1). It encompasses tools such as email marketing, search engine optimisation (SEO), social media platforms, and interactive television (Chaffey, 2006). Its primary goals are to build brand awareness, attract and retain customers, and stimulate sales (Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019). Global advertising expenditure patterns reveal a steady shift towards digital channels, making them dominant across many markets.

Digital marketing channels can be broadly classified into one-way and two-way communication tools (Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019). Websites, email marketing, SEO, and search engine advertising (SEA) primarily represent one-way communication, offering firms high message control but limited interaction. Conversely, social media functions as a two-way channel, enabling interactive, community-based engagement between firms and consumers (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014; Royle & Laing, 2014). Prior research consistently demonstrates that emojis and related visual-paralinguistic cues play a significant role in shaping affective and behavioural outcomes in digital communication and marketing contexts. Early studies conceptualise emoticons and emojis as paralinguistic signals that enrich textual communication by conveying emotional tone and reducing ambiguity, thereby facilitating more positive social and evaluative responses in online interactions. Extending this view, research in psychology and communication highlights emojis as symbolic, emotion-eliciting stimuli that activate affective processing mechanisms similar to nonverbal cues in face-to-face interactions. Within marketing contexts, emojis have been shown to function as elements of textual paralanguage that enhance message vividness, warmth,

and perceived friendliness, leading to stronger emotional engagement with brand communications. Empirical evidence further suggests that the inclusion of emojis in service and brand-related digital interactions increases positive affect, trust, and relational outcomes, which in turn influence consumer evaluations. In social media marketing, emotionally expressive content has been found to generate higher levels of engagement and favourable consumer responses, underscoring the strategic importance of affective cues in digital advertising effectiveness (De Vries et al., 2012; Peters et al., 2013). More directly, studies examining emoji use in branded content report that emojis positively influence attitudes towards advertisements and brands, as well as purchase intentions, primarily through affective pathways rather than cognitive elaboration (Das et al., 2019). Supporting this mechanism, consumer behaviour research consistently demonstrates that positive affect serves as a critical mediator between emotional stimuli and purchase-related outcomes, reinforcing the centrality of emotional responses in persuasion processes (Aaker et al., 2008). Collectively, this body of literature establishes emojis as influential affective cues in digital marketing communication, yet also reveals a need for controlled experimental research examining their emotional and behavioural effects across different advertising contexts, which the present study seeks to address.

Research Problem

Despite growing evidence that emojis function as powerful visual-paralinguistic cues capable of enhancing emotional engagement, trust, and consumer evaluations in digital communication, existing research remains fragmented and contextually limited. Much of the prior literature has examined emoji use in interpersonal communication, customer service interactions, or general social media engagement, with comparatively fewer studies focusing on their persuasive role within controlled digital advertising environments. Moreover, while positive affect has been identified as a key psychological mechanism linking emotional stimuli to consumer responses, empirical research explicitly testing the mediating role of positive affect in the relationship between emoji presence and purchase intention in advertising contexts remains scarce. In addition, the boundary conditions under which emojis operate such as whether their effectiveness varies across different product framings have not been sufficiently explored using rigorous experimental designs. As a result, there is limited causal evidence explaining how and why emojis influence consumer purchase-related outcomes in digital advertising.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to advance understanding of emoji-based persuasion in digital marketing by empirically examining how emojis embedded in online advertisements influence consumer emotions and purchase intentions. By employing a controlled experimental design, the study aims to identify positive affect as a key psychological mechanism underlying the persuasive impact of emojis and to evaluate whether this effect is contingent upon product framing. In doing so, the research seeks to extend existing literature on emojis beyond interpersonal and service communication, offering robust causal insights into their role as affective cues in digital advertising and providing actionable implications for marketers seeking to enhance emotional engagement and advertising effectiveness in social media environments.

Research Objectives

- To examine the effect of emoji presence in digital advertising on consumers' positive affect.
- To investigate the direct influence of emoji presence on consumers' purchase intention in online advertising contexts.
- To test the mediating role of positive affect in the relationship between emoji presence and purchase intention.
- To assess whether product framing (hedonic versus utilitarian) moderates the effect of emoji presence on positive affect and purchase intention.
- To provide experimental evidence on the emotional and behavioural mechanisms through which emojis shape consumer responses in social media advertising.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Emojis: Concept and Motives for Usage

The expansion of CMC has introduced emojis as visual-paralinguistic cues that compensate for the absence of nonverbal signals in text-based interaction (Herring & Dainas, 2017). Emojis are standardised unicode symbols used to express emotions, objects, and ideas, enabling users to enrich meaning beyond written language (Kralj Novak et al., 2015). Prior research identifies two dominant motives for emoji use: emotional expression and message clarification. By intensifying emotional tone without

replacing verbal content, both facial and non-facial emojis shape message interpretation and enhance communicative clarity. These characteristics position emojis as effective symbolic cues with growing relevance for persuasive digital communication.

Affect and Advertising Effectiveness

Advertising effectiveness is increasingly understood as affect-driven, with emotional responses playing a decisive role alongside cognitive evaluations in shaping attitudes and behavioural intentions (Batra & Ray, 1986). Positive affect enhances message acceptance, strengthens brand evaluations, and increases purchase intention, particularly in digital and social media contexts. Perceived entertainment, informativeness, and credibility further influence attitudes towards online advertising. Consistent with affect-based persuasion models, emotionally engaging content generates stronger affective reactions that translate into favourable consumer responses, highlighting the strategic importance of emotional cues such as emojis in digital advertising.

Emojis in Marketing Communication

Emojis have emerged as powerful marketing tools that enhance media richness (Daft et al., 1986; Moussa, 2018). By increasing cues, linguistic variety, and emotional clarity, emojis enrich digital messages, making them more engaging (Huang et al., 2008). They also increase perceived playfulness and enjoyment, which positively influence consumer behaviour (Hsieh & Tseng, 2017; Chen et al., 2019; Ghosh et al., 2019). However, contextual appropriateness is critical: emojis are more effective in informal and socio-emotional contexts, but may reduce perceived professionalism in formal settings (Derks et al., 2008a; Glikson et al., 2018).

H1: The presence (vs absence) of emojis in social media advertising leads to higher positive affect.

Emojis, Positive Affect, and Purchase Intention

Purchase intention defined as a consumer's willingness to purchase a product (Dodds et al., 1991) is strongly influenced by emotional states (Sherman et al., 1997). Positive affect generated through emotional appeals enhances ad perception and strengthens intention to buy (Herjanto et al., 2020) . Empirical studies confirm that emojis increase positive affect, which in turn raises purchase intention (Ghosh et al., 2019).

H2: Emojis' presence in digital ads increases purchase intentions.

H3: Positive affect mediates the relationship between emojis' presence and purchase intention.

Product Framing as a Moderator

The effect of emojis is not uniform across product categories. Research indicates that hedonic products, that is those associated with pleasure and experience, elicit stronger affective responses than utilitarian products, which emphasise functionality and rationality (Voss et al., 2003; Adaval, 2001). Emojis are perceived as more appropriate and persuasive in hedonic advertising, leading to greater emotional impact and higher purchase intention (Ghosh et al., 2019; Kronrod & Danziger, 2013; Albers-Miller & Royne Stafford, 1999).

H4: Emojis' presence generates stronger positive affect for hedonic than utilitarian products.

H5: Emojis' presence leads to higher purchase intentions for hedonic products but has no significant effect for utilitarian products.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate how the presence of emojis in social media advertising influences consumers' purchase intentions and how this relationship varies between hedonic and utilitarian products; a quantitative experimental approach was adopted. Quantitative methods are particularly suitable for testing relationships between variables and identifying causal effects (Newman, 2014). An experimental design enables researchers to systematically manipulate independent variables and observe differences in participants' attitudinal and behavioural responses, offering high internal validity.

Research Design

This study employed a 2 (emojis: present vs absent) × 2 (product framing: hedonic vs utilitarian) between-subjects experimental design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

- Experimental groups were exposed to digital advertisements containing emojis embedded within the product description text.
- Control groups viewed the same advertisements without any emojis.

Each participant was exposed to a single advertisement to avoid carryover or comparison effects. Two promotional messages were created in the form of YouTube advertisements, both featuring the same product image but differing in textual framing. Emojis were carefully incorporated into the ad copy, not as replacements for words but as affective enhancers to visually emphasise key message points. To maintain message clarity and avoid cognitive overload, the number of emojis was limited. The experiment focused exclusively on positive, non-face emojis associated with feelings or actions to align with typical advertising practices.

This design enabled precise comparison of consumers' attitudinal responses particularly purchase intention towards hedonic versus utilitarian product promotions under different emojis conditions.

Sample Selection

Given that the use of emojis is widespread across age groups (Grabowski, 2016), no strict demographic restrictions were imposed. A minimum of 35 participants per condition was targeted, resulting in a total sample of 140 participants.

Experimental Materials and Stimuli

The experimental stimuli consisted of YouTube advertisements created for a fictional brand ('Myntra'). YouTube was selected due to its dominant position as the leading global social media platform and a major channel for paid digital advertising (Tseng & Hsieh, 2019; Enberg, 2019; Clark-Gordon et al., 2018). Using a YouTube ad mock-up generator, the research team designed advertisements that closely resembled actual paid campaigns, including a brand name, headline, product image, description, and a 'Shop Now' call-to-action button. The fictional brand ensured participants had no prior brand familiarity that could bias their judgments.

To manipulate product framing, two distinct textual descriptions were developed:

Utilitarian Framing emphasised functional and performance-oriented attributes (e.g., delivery mechanism, extensive product range, authenticity and originality) to reflect the rational appeal typical of utilitarian products (Voss et al., 2003).

Hedonic Framing highlighted emotional and experiential benefits (e.g., unboxing and ownership experience, social recognition & status, trendy & lifestyle alignment), aligning with the pleasure and enjoyment typically associated with hedonic consumption (Voss et al., 2003).

Experimental Conditions

The only difference between control and experimental conditions was the presence or absence of emojis. In the control condition, text descriptions contained no emojis. In the experimental condition, up to six emojis were strategically inserted to complement the ad copy. The selection included emojis representing relevant positive emotions and activity-related symbols, reinforcing the product message without distracting from it.

Table 1: Experimental Conditions Based on Product Type and Emoji Usage

Product Type	Emojis Condition	Emojis Use	Description
Hedonic	Present	Positive, non-face emojis	Emotionally expressive, pleasure-oriented message
Hedonic	Absent	No emojis	Same message without emojis
Utilitarian	Present	Positive, non-face emojis	Functionally framed message with emotional cues
Utilitarian	Absent	No emojis	Functionally framed message without emojis

This factorial design allowed for the examination of both main effects (emojis presence and product type) and interaction effects between these factors on consumers' purchase intention.

Table 2: Research Conditions

Conditions Presence	Emojis	Product Framing
Condition 1	Yes	Utilitarian
Condition 2	No	Utilitarian
Condition 3	Yes	Hedonic
Condition 4	No	Hedonic

Pretest Procedure

Prior to developing the main advertisements for the experiment, a pretest was conducted to identify a product that could be perceived as either hedonic or utilitarian, depending on how it was described. Four product categories – sports shoe, fitness bands, Bluetooth speakers, and perfumes – were selected for this stage, based on insights from prior research (Voss et al., 2003). For each of these products, two promotional messages were prepared: one emphasising hedonic attribute (e.g., enjoyment, pleasure, and emotional appeal) and the other focusing on utilitarian attributes (e.g., functionality, practicality, and usefulness).

The pretest followed a within-subjects design, allowing each participant to evaluate all product descriptions across both framing conditions. Participants were recruited through social media platforms, and a total of 21 respondents (N = 21) completed the survey. They were informed that the purpose of the study was to assess consumer perceptions of promotional messages for different products. Each participant reviewed eight product descriptions (four products × two framing conditions) and then rated their perceptions on hedonic (exciting, fun, delightful, thrilling, enjoyable) and utilitarian (effective, helpful, functional, necessary, practical) dimensions. A five-point Likert scale adapted from Voss et al. (2003) was used to capture these evaluations.

Pretest Results

The reliability analysis demonstrated that the measurement scales for both hedonic and utilitarian evaluations were internally consistent. Although the acceptable minimum value of Cronbach's alpha can vary across studies, α values above 0.70 are generally considered satisfactory for research purposes (Hair & Anderson, 1998).

Table 3 presents the Cronbach's alpha values for the two dimensions, confirming that the scales were appropriate for use in the main experiment.

Table 3: Reliability Test Results for Product Framing

Product	Framing	Cronbach's Alpha for Utilitarian Scale	Cronbach's Alpha for Hedonic Scale
Sports shoe	Utilitarian	.87	.93
Sports shoe	Hedonic	.93	.92
Perfume	Utilitarian	.91	.96
Perfume	Hedonic	.89	.92
Headphones	Utilitarian	.89	.92
Headphones	Hedonic	.87	.90
Fitness band	Utilitarian	.87	.90
Fitness band	Hedonic	.88	.90

In order to analyse how hedonic or utilitarian participants perceived each product in both framings, a paired t-test was conducted. Each product was compared between two framings based on utilitarian and hedonic scales separately, resulting in eight pairs. The results of a paired t-test are presented in Table 4. The analysis revealed that there were two products within one pair that showed a significant difference such as utilitarian shower gel and utilitarian headphones. However, no pair of the products showed a significant difference between the extent to which the product was perceived as being both hedonic or utilitarian. Therefore, there is no definite choice of product that could be picked with the absolute certainty that it would be perceived as hedonic and utilitarian, depending on the description. Considering that the number of participants in the pretest was relatively small, it is expected that the results of the field experiment might differ, meaning that the advertised product will be perceived differently based on their framings. Thus, smartwatch was chosen for the main study.

Table 4: Paired T-Test Results Comparing Product Framings

Product Pairs	Framing Scale	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	df	p
1.Utilitarian band	Utilitarian	3.69	.64	.41	20	.686
Hedonic band		3.61	.57			
2.Hedonic band	Hedonic	3.36	.78	2.00	20	.059
Utilitarian band		3.01	.72			

Product Pairs	Framing Scale	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	df	p
3.Utilitarian shoe	Utilitarian	3.53	.72	1.41	20	.173
Hedonic shoe		3.24	.82			
4.Hedonic shoe	Hedonic	3.18	.91	.77	20	.448
Utilitarian perfume		3.03	.99			
5.Utilitarian perfume	Utilitarian	3.74	.79	2.82	20	.010
Hedonic perfume		3.13	.86			
6.Hedonic perfume	Hedonic	3.00	1.03	.56	20	.582
Utilitarian perfume		2.89	1.03			
7.Utilitarian speakers	Utilitarian	3.91	.58	6.83	20	.000
Hedonic speakers		3.05	.68			
8.Hedonic speakers	Hedonic	3.36	.78	1.34	20	.194
Utilitarian speakers		3.12	.80			

Experiment Procedure

A structured online survey was employed to assess participants' perceptions and responses to the experimental stimuli. Although participants were exposed to different advertisement conditions depending on their assigned group, they all received an identical set of questions. The survey was created using Qualtrics, which automatically randomised treatments, and was distributed via Google form. Upon consent, respondents completed demographic questions (age, gender, location, and social media usage) before viewing the YouTube advertisement with or without emojis. They then rated their responses on a five-point Likert scale measuring affect, purchase intention, and product framing perception. A manipulation check followed to confirm whether the advertisement contained emojis. Incorrect responses were removed during data cleaning. Affect was measured using a four-item PANAS scale (Watson et al., 1998) assessing emotions such as happiness, delight, excitement, and enthusiasm (Ghosh et al., 2019). Purchase intention was evaluated using a three-item scale (Steinhart et al., 2014), while product framing (hedonic vs utilitarian) was measured using a five-item scale adapted from Voss et al. (2003). Reliability analysis confirmed the internal consistency of all scales (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.70$), and the final data were analysed using SPSS.

Table 5: Results of the Reliability Test for Measurements

Measurements	Cronbach's Alpha
Utilitarian framing	.78
Hedonic framing	.91
Affect	.94
Purchase intentions	.92

Results

This section presents the results of the statistical analyses conducted to address the research question and test the proposed hypotheses. The analyses examined how emojis' presence in social media advertisements influences positive affect and purchase intention, considering product framing (hedonic vs utilitarian).

Respondents

A total of 325 individuals participated in the survey. After excluding incomplete responses and those who failed the manipulation check, 217 valid responses remained. The final sample consisted of 107 females and 109 males, with a mean age of 33.78 years (SD = 10.81). Most participants were from the United States (59%) and India (31%). Educational levels ranged from high school (10%) to bachelor's (56%) and master's degrees (14%). Social media usage was high (95%), with 90% having a YouTube account and 66% using it daily. A paired t-test assessed whether participants perceived the product framing as intended. For the utilitarian frame, the watch was rated slightly more utilitarian ($M = 3.34$) than hedonic ($M = 3.06$), $t(105) = 4.15$, $p < .001$. However, in the hedonic frame, participants did not perceive it as more hedonic ($M = 3.24$) than utilitarian ($M = 3.41$), $t(110) = 2.71$, $p = .008$, indicating weak manipulation.

Positive Affect

A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant main effect of emojis presence, $F(1, 213) = 9.25$, $p = .003$. Advertisements with emojis ($M = 3.28$) generated higher positive affect than those without ($M = 2.81$). No

significant main effect of product framing, F (1, 213) = 0.47, p = .58, or interaction effect, F (1, 213) = 1.05, p = .305, was observed. Thus, H1 is supported, while the effect of product framing (H4) is not confirmed.

Table 6: Results of the Two-Way ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Emojis presence	11.63	1	11.64	9.25	.003
Product framing	.38	1	.38	.30	.583
Emojis presence*	1.33	1	1.33	1.06	.305
Product framing					
Error	267.43	213	1.258		
Total	2293.44	217			

Purchase Intention

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the impact of emojis' presence and product framing on purchase intention (H2). The results indicated a significant main effect for emojis' inclusion in the advertisement, F (1, 213) = 11.92, p = .001. Participants exposed to the emojis condition (M = 3.06) reported higher purchase intentions compared with those in the non-emojis condition (M = 2.53). Accordingly, H2 is supported, suggesting that the integration of emojis enhances consumers' willingness to purchase. In contrast, no significant main effect was observed for product framing, F (1, 213) = 0.47, p = .49, indicating that framing the product as hedonic or utilitarian did not influence purchase intention. In addition, the interaction effect between emojis' presence and product framing was non-significant, F (1, 213) = 0.08, p = .801. Consequently, H5 is rejected, implying that the effect of emojis on purchase intention does not differ between hedonic and utilitarian product framings.

Table 7: Results of the Two-Way ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Emojis presence	15.14	1	15.14	11.92	.001
Product framing	.60	1	.60	.47	.492
Emojis presence*	.08	1	.08	.06	.801
Product framing					
Error	270.53	213	1.270		
Total	1978.89	217			

Mediation Effect of Positive Affect on Purchase Intentions

A mediation analysis was performed to examine whether positive affect mediates the relationship between emojis' presence and purchase intention (H3). Using PROCESS Model 4 in SPSS (Hayes, 2013) with 10,000 bootstrap samples, emojis' presence (vs absence) was entered as the independent variable, purchase intention as the dependent variable, and positive affect as the mediator. The analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of emojis' presence on purchase intention through positive affect (b = –0.39, 95% CI [–0.64, –0.14]). When positive affect was included in the model, the direct effect of emojis' presence on purchase intention was no longer significant (b = –0.14, 95% CI [–0.32, 0.03]), indicating full mediation.

Therefore, H3 is supported, demonstrating that emojis influence purchase intentions indirectly through their positive emotional impact. However, since the product framing manipulation was unsuccessful both advertisements were perceived as more utilitarian it was not possible to test whether positive affect mediated the interaction between product framing and emojis' presence. The results are presented in Fig. 1.

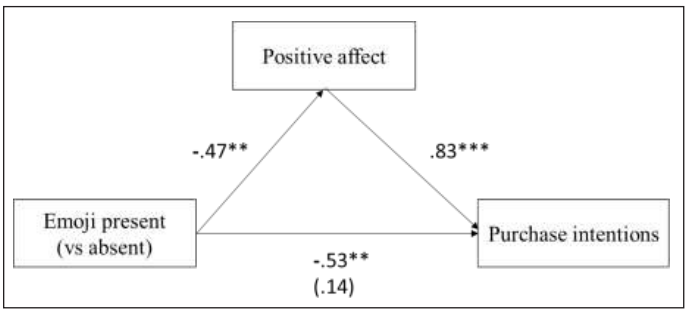

Fig. 1: Mediation by Positive Affect

Unstandardised betas are reported: *significant at the .05 level; **significant at the .01 level; *** significant at the .001 level.

DISCUSSION AND MAJOR FINDINGS

- Emojis' presence significantly enhances positive affect. Advertisements containing emojis generated higher levels of positive affect compared with ads without emojis, confirming that emojis function as effective emotional cues in digital advertising environments.
- Emojis' presence positively influences purchase intention. Consumers exposed to emoji-embedded advertisements demonstrated stronger purchase intentions, indicating that emojis increase persuasive effectiveness in online advertising.
- Positive affect fully mediates the emoji–purchase intention relationship. The impact of emojis on purchase intention operates entirely through positive affect, suggesting that emojis influence behavioural outcomes primarily via emotional responses rather than direct cognitive evaluation.
- Absence of positive affect weakens emojis' effectiveness. When positive affect is not elicited, the persuasive influence of emojis on purchase intention diminishes substantially, underscoring affect as the core psychological mechanism driving emoji effectiveness.
- Product framing does not moderate emojis' effectiveness. Contrary to expectations, no significant difference was observed in the impact of emojis between hedonic and utilitarian product framings, indicating that emojis' effectiveness is not contingent on product type.
- Emojis generate emotional responses even in utilitarian contexts. Despite utilitarian framing, emoji-based advertisements still evoked positive affect and increased purchase intention, challenging the assumption that emojis are primarily effective only in hedonic contexts.
- Platform context enhances emojis' effectiveness. The informal and socially expressive nature of social media platforms appears to amplify the emotional impact of emojis, reducing the importance of contextual congruence between product type and emoji use.
- Emojis' effects are robust across advertising context. Overall, emojis emerge as a consistent and versatile persuasive cue in digital advertising, capable of enhancing emotional engagement and driving purchase intentions irrespective of product framing.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

- *Extension of emoji research from interpersonal to persuasive marketing contexts:* The study advances emoji literature by empirically demonstrating the effectiveness of emojis within digital advertising, thereby moving beyond the dominant focus on interpersonal and service communication.
- *Validation of Emojis as Affective Triggers Embedded Within Textual Advertising Content:* Findings show that emojis influence consumer responses not only as standalone visual elements but also when integrated directly into promotional text, expanding the conceptualisation of emojis as versatile paralinguistic cues.
- *Establishment of Positive Affect as the Central Psychological Mechanism:* By confirming full mediation, the study positions positive affect as the primary pathway through which emojis influence purchase intention, strengthening affect-based persuasion theories in digital marketing.
- *Contribution to Human Affectivity and Emotional Contagion Theory:* Emojis are shown to function as a quasi-universal emotional language, capable of triggering emotional contagion and fostering affective bonds between consumers and brands across advertising contexts.
- *Challenge to Context-Dependence Assumptions in Emotional Advertising:* Contrary to prior findings, emojis are found to be effective even in utilitarian product contexts, questioning the prevailing assumption that emoji effectiveness is contingent primarily on hedonic fit.
- *Repositioning Product Context as a Secondary Moderator:* The results suggest that emotional contagion effects may override contextual congruence, with product framing acting as a secondary rather than dominant determinant of emoji effectiveness.
- *Strengthening Theories of Emotional Advertising Effectiveness:* The study reinforces the role of affective responses in shaping ad evaluations and brand attitudes, extending classical advertising models into contemporary social media environments.
- *Strategic Value of Emojis as Low-Cost Engagement Tools:* From a managerial perspective, emojis emerge as cost-efficient instruments for enhancing emotional resonance, consumer engagement, and persuasive impact in social media advertising.

- *Implications for Social Media Campaign Design:* Emojis can be strategically deployed to make promotional content more interactive, enjoyable, and emotionally expressive, thereby improving consumer–brand relationships and engagement metrics.
- *Sales and Performance Implications for Digital Marketing:* Given the strong link between positive affect and purchase intention, emoji integration in sales-oriented posts can potentially improve conversion outcomes, sales performance, and profitability.
- *Guidance for Emoji Use in Utilitarian Advertising Contexts:* The findings suggest that emojis can be effectively used even in functional product advertising, provided their tone and context are carefully aligned, offering greater flexibility in creative strategy.
- *Agenda for Future Emoji and Advertising Research:* The study highlights the need to further explore emotional mechanisms, contextual fit, and platform-specific effects, contributing to the development of more refined theoretical frameworks in digital advertising research.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

- *Product Framing Manipulation was Not Fully Effective:* Although the study intended to differentiate between hedonic and utilitarian product framings, participants largely perceived both advertisements as utilitarian, limiting the ability to test framing-based differences in emoji effectiveness.
- *Restricted Measurement Scope:* The study employed established unidimensional scales to measure positive affect and purchase intention; however, the use of more multidimensional or context-specific measures could have captured richer and more nuanced consumer responses.
- *Single-Platform Stimulus Context:* The experiment was conducted exclusively using YouTube advertisements, which may restrict the generalisability of findings across other social media platforms with different engagement norms and content formats.
- *Sampling Limitations:* Data were collected through Google Forms, resulting in a convenience sample that may not fully represent broader demographic and cultural populations, thereby limiting external validity.
- *Focus on Positive Emojis Only:* The study examined only positive emojis, excluding negative or mixed-emotion emojis that may produce different affective and behavioural responses.

Directions for Future Research

- *Use Validated Product Framing Stimuli:* Future studies should employ advertisements previously validated as hedonic or utilitarian or conduct rigorous pretesting with larger samples to ensure accurate framing perceptions.
- *Adopt Multidimensional Affect Measures:* Incorporating richer emotional scales or physiological and behavioural measures could enhance construct validity and deepen understanding of affective mechanisms.
- *Examine Multiple Digital Platforms:* Future research should test emoji effects across platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok to account for platform-specific norms and user interactions.
- *Expand Cultural and Demographic Diversity:* Cross-cultural and multidemographic samples could reveal variations in emoji interpretation and effectiveness across different consumer groups.
- *Explore Diverse Emoji Types and Valence:* Investigating negative, neutral, or mixed-emotion emojis and their interaction with product type and advertising context would offer a more comprehensive understanding of emoji-based persuasion.

Informed Consent and Ethical Compliance

The study adhered to established ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and no personally identifiable information was collected. Completion and submission of the questionnaire were considered as implied consent to participate in the research.

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