# The effect of emoji on purchase intentions in digital advertising

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## Abstract

Over the past decades, the way people interact with each other has transformed significantly. With the advances in digital technologies, computer-mediated communications have become an essential part of our daily lives, which led to the creation of new language forms such as emoji. The main reasons for emoji usage are their abilities to convey emotions and to ease the message interpretation. Many marketers have started implementing emoji not only in online communications with consumers, but also in advertising. The goal of this research was to investigate how emoji presence in social media advertising influences consumers' purchase intentions. The study explored the direct effect of emoji on positive affect and purchase intentions, as well as the mediating role of the affect. In addition, product framing was included as a contextual variable to investigate how emoji effects vary for utilitarian and hedonic products.

An online experiment with 2 (emoji being present vs. absent) x 2 (product framing: hedonic vs utilitarian) between-subjects design was conducted. Facebook advertisements either for hedonic or utilitarian product type, with or without emoji incorporated in the text were presented to the participants ($N = 217$), depending on the condition they were in.

The results suggest that emoji presence has a positive impact on the affect and purchase intentions. Moreover, the findings reveal that emoji effect on purchase intentions is mediated by their effect on the positive affect. However, there are no significant association found between the emoji effects and the advertised product framing (utilitarian or hedonic).

By exploring the emoji effects in the new setting, such as digital advertising, this research contributes to the growing field of emoji literature. The findings are particularly relevant to the fields of marketing and consumer behavior.


Keywords: emoji, advertising, purchase intentions, affect, product framing.

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Abstract and keywords

# 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the communication landscape experienced significant changes due to the spread of social media (Edwards, 2011). The proliferation of Internet-based platforms shifted the real-life conversation online, which substantially transformed the nature of human interactions and behavior. The digital environment encouraged the creation of online communities, knowledge sharing, new forms of entertainment and promotion of conversation between culturally diverse groups of people (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014). Social networking websites enabled people to freely exchange opinions with hundreds of others, resulting in an increase of influence of the consumer-to-consumer communications in the marketplace. The widespread use of computer-mediated messages transmitted through social media has transformed consumer behavior in a way of information processing, forming opinion and attitudes, and purchase behavior (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), creating new opportunities and challenges for the companies.

In response to these changes, companies realized the need for modifying their marketing communications and started to invest more resources in ensuring a prominent digital presence (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2014). In fact, nowadays, social media is considered to be an essential tool for companies' marketing communication and branding. Social media enabled companies to interact with consumers more efficiently, developing unique customer relationship and advanced buying behaviors (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014 as cited in Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi & Algharabat, 2017). Firms started to utilize Facebook as a mean to increase brand awareness and to engage with their customers, while blogging is thought to be an effective tool for building a relationship with the audiences (Malhotra et al., 2013, Cho & Huh, 2010, as cited in Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2014). Companies tend to employ interactivity as a tool to attract consumers' attention and to build stronger relationships resulting in the improvements in companies' online performance (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2014). Realizing the importance of interactivity, companies have been developing and implementing new interactive practices to reach marketing goals (Leeflang, Verhoef, Dahlström & Freundt, 2014, as cited in Alalwan et al., 2017). One of the recent developments is emoji marketing. Marketers have started implementing emojis in their marketing communications to attract the consumer's attention and create certain brand awareness by connecting with their audience in a more creative way (Huang, Yen & Zhang, 2008).

Emoji is a popular form of computer-mediated communications (CMC) that are widely used in text messaging, social networking websites and marketing (Aldunate & Gonzalez-

Ibanez, 2017). Since computer-mediated communication (CMC) is essentially text-based, it lacks the nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, that are usually presented in face-to-face communication – the fact that sometimes results in the ambiguity in messages (Riordan & Kreuz, 2010). To make up for the lack of nonverbal cues and the uncertainty of meanings in online messages, the compensatory tools were created (Kaya, Malone & Wall, 2017). One example of such developments are emoticons and emoji.

Emoji is a more elaborated version of emoticons, graphic symbols that illustrate facial expressions, objects, actions and ideas (Riordan, 2017). With the widespread use of smartphones and text messaging, emoji have become increasingly popular. The average number of emoji sent daily on Facebook is 5 billion, while half of the comments on Instagram contains an emoji (Emojipedia, 2018). Emoji are used as a tool for conveying emotions and strengthening the message (Derks, Fisher and Bos, 2008). They enabled people to express their feelings more clearly in the digital environment (Aldunate & Gonzalez-Ibanez, 2017), which led to a decrease in the misinterpretation of messages.

Realizing the potential of emoji as a marketing tool that makes a message more interactive and conveys positive emotions, many companies have started incorporating emoji in their marketing campaigns (Vangelov, 2017). For example, one of Chevrolet's press releases was made in a form of a riddle that was written entirely in emoji, WWF used emoji as the key concept for their twitter campaign for endangered species and McDonald's created promotional posters telling different stories by using only emojis (Middlemas & Lonergan, 2015). As it can be observed, emoji enabled companies to create more attractive messages that also helped to connect with the audience in a fun, creative and emotional way (Huang et al., 2008). In addition, companies use emoji to boost customer engagement because of their ability to substitute verbal cues and decrease impersonality (Lee, Hosanagar, & Nair, 2014, as sited in Ge & Gretzel, 2018). Finally, using emoji in the promotional campaigns increases the persuasiveness of the message (Yakin & Eru, 2017), that help companies to achieve their marketing goals more efficiently.

Despite the rising popularity of emoji in marketing campaigns, little research has addressed how consumers feel about emoji presence in promotional messages and what effects emoji has on the consumer behavior. Most of the previous researches paid close attention to how the presence of emoji alters the perception of a message (Lo, 2008; Riordan, 2017) and influences the recipient's emotions (Luor, Wu, Lu &Tao, 2010; Ganster, Eimler & Kramer, 2012) in the context of personal communications. It was found that presence of emoji can disambiguate the message and strengthen the intensity of it (Derks et al., 2008; Riordan, 2017), by conveying the

sender's emotions more clearly (Aldunate & Gonzalez-Ibanez, 2017). Only few studies explored the influence of emoji in marketing communication. Yakin and Eru (2017) found that emoji-containing advertisement is perceived as more creative and has more persuasive potential, while Das, Wiener and Kareklas (2019) tested the influence of emoji presence in the advertisement on purchase intention. Nevertheless, scholars addressed the issue of insufficiency of marketing literature regarding determinants of the emoji effectiveness (Yakin & Eru, 2017) and the need for more research to test emoji effects in different settings and contexts (Das et al., 2019).

In the light of the gaps in the literature explained above, a number of scholars have suggested that research in this field should further investigate how emoji effects differ based on emoji's size, number and placement in the advertisement. Particularly, Das et al., (2019) expressed the necessity to examine whether emoji positive effects on consumers will be the same if the emoji used in the advertisement are of the same size as the text.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to contribute to the growing field of emoji research by investigating the potential effects of emoji on consumer's purchase intention in social media advertising. Firstly, within the framework of this research, the effect of emoji will be studied in the context of digital advertisement, rather than personal communications or print advertising, which remains an unexplored area in the marketing literature. Secondly, emoji used in the advertisement will be incorporated in the text to see whether same positive results as in Das et al. (2019) research can be found when emoji are not used as large images.

From the managerial point of view, the results of this research can provide new insights on how marketers can modify their online advertising campaigns to influence consumers' purchasing intention by including emoji in a more effective way.

In addition, in the recent study by Das et al. (2019), who was a pioneer in exploring emoji effect in the context of advertisements, product framing was used as a moderator. Since the appropriateness of emoji usage is one of the main determinants for its positive outcomes, the scholars found that the presence of emoji leads to higher positive affect and higher purchase intention when used in an advertisement for hedonic products rather than for utilitarian, as emoji is a better fit for the hedonic type of product. The result of their experiment shows that product framing is a crucial contextual variable when it comes to determining the effectiveness of an emoji-containing advertisement. Similarly, the current research also explores whether the same effect of emoji presence holds for hedonic and utilitarian product groups in the context of digital advertisements.

Considering all the literature input mentioned above, the aim of this research is to address the literature gap by answering the following question:

*How does the use of emoji in social media advertising influence the consumer's purchase intentions and how is this relationship influenced by the promotion of hedonic and utilitarian products?*

# 2. Theoretical background

This chapter will present an overview of digital marketing evolution and address the concept of emoji and motives for their usage in digital communications to give a better understanding of how emoji operate and to uncover their role in advertising. The importance of creating a positive perception of the advertisement and its impact on purchase intention are also discussed in this chapter. After the main concepts relevant to this study are presented, the chapter is concluded by the statement of the main hypotheses.

## 2.1 Rise of digital marketing

Over the last two decades, the way the world communicates has transformed significantly. The integration of new digital technologies and a remarkable increase in the use of Web-based platforms affected the way people interact with each other (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014). The creation of Web 2.0 led to the collective media where consumers gained more power, which resulted in the rapid growth of consumer-generated content (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, Shapiro, 2012, as sited in Alalwan et al., 2017). Consumers' use of Web 2.0 and the development of communication technologies have created a shift from mass communication to peer-to-peer communication, where users got a chance to be not just passive recipients of the information but active creators (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

The evolution of the Internet and the advancement of digital technologies have radically changed companies' way of marketing (Chaffey, Ellis-Chandwick, Johnston & Mayer, 2006). The transformation of communication channels has made companies recognize the necessity to modify their traditional communication channels by introducing digital media in marketing strategies. According to The Digital Marketing Institute (DMI), the notion of digital marketing refers to "the use of digital technologies to create an integrated, targeted and measurable communication which helps to acquire and retain customers while building deeper relationships with them" (Smith, 2007, as cited in Royle & Laing, 2013, p.1). Digital marketing includes e-mail, social media, interactive TV and digital data about consumers (Chaffey et al., 2006). The main objective of digital marketing is to increase the brand awareness, stimulate sales (Felix, Rauschnabel & Hinsch, 2016), as well as to attract new customers and retain the existing ones (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2014).

Marketers recognized the great value of digital marketing and started to allocate more financial resources towards its implementation (Herhold, 2018). Over the last years, a significant growth took place in the digital advertisement spending worldwide. More companies have started to focus on digital marketing strategies. In fact, digital media has become the predominant advertisement channel in many countries. The experts forecast that the growth in

digital will only continue to increase in upcoming years, as marketers will try to develop strategies to employ the combination of traditional and digital media in the most effective way (Enberg, 2019).

Digital marketing channels are very vast - that is why there are several approaches to classify them. One way of channels classification is based on who is in charge of communication, making communication either one-way or two-way (Taiminen et al., 2014). The common one-way communication channels that the company has high control of are websites and emails. A website can work as a platform to sell and promote products and services but also it provides information and develops an online experience that helps brands to build a relationship with users (Chaffey et al., 2006). E-mail as a digital marketing tool has multiple functions that include distribution of information, promotional activities, attracting attention to the website and maintaining the relationships (Simmons,2007, as sited in Taiminen et al., 2014). Initially e-mail was considered to be a two-way communication channel, however, in the context of digital marketing, companies tend to use e-mails as a one-way channel to provide information to their customers. Another digital marketing tool that belongs in this group is search engine optimization (SEO) that aims to put company's website higher in the search engine results in order to attract more visitors (Chaffey et al., 2016), and search engine advertising (SEA) that display paid advertisements in certain search engine's results page (Taiminen et al., 2014). These tools help to improve the company's visibility in the network and keep customers up to date.

The primary two-way channel of digital marketing is social media that allows users to engage in a dialog with companies (Taiminen et al., 2014). The widespread of social media platforms had a revolutionary impact on human social behavior as it has changed significantly the way people communicate. Human interaction moved to the digital world where the users can unite in various community and express their opinion and knowledge freely (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014). For organizations, this has created a need to integrate web 2.0 technologies in order to build a mutually beneficial long-term relationship with their stakeholders (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014). The extensive integration of digital marketing tools along with social media had a significant impact on the relationship between companies and consumers (Royle & Laing, 2013). While consumers gained more power as they started to produce user-generated content and share their opinion more freely, companies realized the importance of engaging with their consumers in a two-way communication. Marketers no longer use media just to broadcast their message, but also to interact with consumers by creating online communities and enabling participation.

*2.2 Social media marketing*

The concept of social media marketing can be understood as "the utilization of social media technologies, channels and software to create, communicate, deliver and exchange offerings that have value for an organization's stakeholders" (Tuten & Solomon, 2015, p.21). Social media has become an important part of the company's communication and marketing strategy, as it includes different channels with various goals and characteristics (Taiminen et al., 2014). For example, Facebook can be viewed as a channel to engage with customers and increase brand awareness, while blogging can be used for public relations and content creation (Taiminen et al., 2014). Social media presents many opportunities for companies, especially in terms of brand building and creating strong customer relationships. The role of social media is to be the medium that facilitates communication between companies and their stakeholders and allows consumers engage with each other as a new format of traditional word-of-mouth (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). However, the study conducted by Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2014) showed that there is a contradiction between theory and practice, as some firms view social media not as a two-way communication tool but as a mean to increase sales. Moreover, the survey showed that half of the interviewed organizations used social media with the primary objective to post new information rather than engage in dialogical communication with the customers. The authors linked these findings with the practitioners' lack of knowledge and the company size as the predictor of active social media usage.

Nevertheless, in order for social media to be used to its full potential and result in the achievement of marketing goals such as the increase in sales, it has to be integrated into the company's overall marketing strategy and to constantly be modified (Duffet, 2015). Implementing social media as a part of a promotional campaign could help to archive many marketing objectives such as building brand awareness, maintaining the customer relationship and managing buying behaviors (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Duffett, 2015). Social media presents marketers with various options on how to promote the brand (Tuten & Solomon, 2013). Development of creative strategies is the key driver for positive advertising outcomes, as they have a direct impact on consumer's motivation and information processing (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

Considering the interactive nature of social media, where consumers have become active participants, psychological engagement plays a crucial role (Schmitt, 2012, as cited in Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Marketers have been putting a lot of emphasis on the engagement, as it enables consumers to share information among each other, thus allowing brands to establish stronger relationships with consumers and communities by interactively collaborating with them (Sashi,

2012). However, customer engagement is the result of emotional attachment and trust that consumer develops towards the brand (Sashi, 2012). That is why the creation of an emotional link between sellers and buyers has become an import aspect for many marketers. According to Gobe (2001), the uprise of a new marketing approach known as "emotional branding" presents a substitute for a conventional marketing and advertising approaches that focused primarily on products unique selling features (as cited in Schmitt, 2012). Various emotional stimuli presented in the advertisement, for example, words, images colors influence consumers by evoking certain emotions and developing the attitude towards the displayed product (Herjanto, Gaur & Yao, 2015). This proves the importance of developing and implementing innovative communication techniques in the digital domain that would create emotional bound and generate profitable consumer response (Ge & Ulrike Gretzel, 2018).

*2.3 The concept of emoji*

The proliferation of social media that facilitates computer-mediated communications (CMC) led to the creation of new language forms (Herring & Dainas, 2017, as cited in Ge & Ulrike Gretzel, 2018). Since computer-mediated communications lack nonverbal cues, users, adapting to the new digital environment, came up with the alternative forms of language that covers for shortcomings of CMC (Kaye et al., 2017). The example of such alternatives is the creation of emoticons and emoji. Emoticons are the subsequence of keyboard symbols that resemble different facial expression. Later on, emoticons were translated into Unicode characters that lead to the creation of emoji - a graphical element with detailed facial expressions and objects (Riordan, 2017). Both emoticons and emoji appear as a part of a textual paralanguage (TPL) cues that are described as "written manifestations of nonverbal audible, tactile, and visual elements that supplement or replace written language and that can be expressed through words, symbols, images, punctuation, demarcations, or any combination of these elements." (Luangrath, Peck, & Barger, 2017). Novak et al. (2015, p.2) define emoji as "graphic symbols, ideograms, that present not only facial expression but also concepts and ideas". Emoji first appeared in Japan in the 1990s to facilitate computer-mediated communication. A number of Japanese companies implemented emoji in their own creative way with incompatible coding schemes. In 2010, for the first time, Unicode Consortium standardized emoji in Unicode Version 6.0 that consisted of 722 characters. However, it was due to Apple's support that included emoji in keyboards, this mean of communication gained the popularity worldwide (Novak et al., 2015). In 2015, Oxford Dictionaries declared emoji as the word of the year. Different companies have started to create their own custom emoji and incorporate in their marketing communications (Vangelov, 2017).

*2.3.1 Motives for using emoji*

In order to understand how emoji could be used in the promotional campaigns, it is important to understand what functions they have. This subchapter will discuss roles that emoji play in communications and benefits of their presence in the messages.

In the past decade, a number of researchers paid close attention to the issue related to emoji presence in computer-mediated communication. It was identified that emoji have two primary purposes: to convey emotions and to disambiguate the message (Derks et al., 2008; Riordan, 2007; Walter & D'Addario, 2001). Various studies explored the emoji ability to change the perception and the interpretation of the message. For example, in an experiment, Lo (2008) showed participants an emotional ambiguous message with positive or negative emoji. The results showed that people perceive the message more positively if it was followed by smiley emoji and more negatively if the message contained the frown facial expression. The research revealed that the reader's perception can be significantly altered by the presence of emoji in an ambiguous message. Thus, concluding that emoji convey affective information. Similarly, Luor et al. (2010) argued that neutral message can create more positive or negative emotions depending on emoticon that is included. Ganster et al. (2012) showed participants a dialog with several messages containing either smiley or frown emoji and asked them to evaluate the messages. The results showed nonverbal cues such as emoji can alter the reader perception and the message interpretation. It was found that message containing emoji had an impact on the reader's mood depending on the emoji valence.

Trying to investigate how powerful emoji are in changing the message interpretation, Derks et al. (2008) tested the correlation between the valence of the emoji and the valence of a message. The finding showed that emoji are able to strengthen the intensity of a message, as a positive message containing the positive emoji scored higher in positivity in comparison to the message without emoji. This suggests that the valence is perceived in the same direction, however, the presence of emoji helps to intensify the valence. In cases when valence of the emoji contradicted with the message valence (for example, negative message with a positive emoji), the effect was closer to the neutral but did not change the valence of the message itself, meaning that emoji toned down the negativity of the message, but did not change the interpretation of the message to the positive. This indicates that the verbal part of the message has more impact on the affect of the message, and emoji do not have enough strength to change the valence.

When it comes to non-face emoji, which usually represent activities and objects and not just facial expressions, scholars confirm that these type of emoji also contribute to intensifying

the affect of the message, as they still communicate emotions and can be used for communicative purposes (Riordan, 2017; Novak et al, 2015). Similarly to Derks et al. (2008) and Riordan (2017) tested the ability of the non-face emoji and came to the conclusion that the affect of the message primarily depends on the verbal content, while emoji only alter the intensity of that affect.

In contrast, Walter and D'Addario (2001) argued that the fundamental role of emoticons is to clarify the textual message rather than to convey emotions as, according to their study, emoji are unable to enhance messages. The authors concluded that emoji can only change the affect of the written content if the message is ambiguous. In line with this, Riordan (2017) concluded that two primary roles of emoji – communication of the affect and disambiguation of a message - are interconnected with each other, which leads to the fact that emoji ability to convey affect is dependent on the content ambiguity.

Despite the divergence of opinions on how exactly emoji influence readers' perception, it is clear that emoji help to convey emotions, which helps with message ambiguity, resulting in better message interpretation. Therefore, emoji presence in a message creates a better understanding of the narrative and intensify the emotional affect that helps to establish a better connection between the writer and the reader, which can be used in marketing campaigns.

*2.4 Role of affect in the advertising effectiveness*

Before investigating emoji influence on purchase intentions, it is important to explore emoji ability to convey affective information in the context of advertising and what outcomes it may create. This subchapter will address the importance of creating favorable perception of the promotional messages and what role emotions play in advertising effectiveness.

When it comes to advertising effectiveness, researchers have been debating on the determinants of advertising outcomes thoughts or feelings. For a long period of time, cognition was considered to be the main topic of the research while affective responses were neglected (Forgas, 2008). However, with time researches have recognized the importance of affect and got more interested in finding the link between rational and emotional aspects of perception formation. Although scholars differ in specific definition of affect, Batra and Ray (1986) concluded that generally affect refers to feelings, mood and emotions. It was found that feelings evoked by the advertisement have as much influence on advertising effectiveness as cognitive judgments have (Edell & Burke, 1987). The studies suggest that affective responses have an impact on how the advertised message is evaluated and remembered (Batra & Ray, 1986). Consumers are more likely to accept the message while experiencing the positive affect,

resulting in more positive attitude towards advertisement and overall brand perception (Batra & Ray, 1986; Edell & Burke, 1987).

Creating favorable advertising judgments is essential for marketers, as advertising effectiveness highly depends on how consumers perceive and develop their attitude towards it. This, in turn, has a direct impact on the overall attitude towards brand and influence purchase intention (Duffett, 2015; Mir, 2012; Mehta 2000). Scholars have different views concerning how consumer's beliefs and attitudes towards advertising are correlated. Ones look at consumer's beliefs and attitude as "interchangeable constructs both conceptually and operationally'', while others view consumer's beliefs and attitude as "distinct psychological factors" (Mir, 2012, p.268). Following the second line of thought, beliefs present certain statements that describe the attributes of an object, while attitudes present objects' collective evaluations that operate on cognitive levels (Wang & Sun, 2010). Since beliefs are the predictors of the attitudes, both beliefs and attitudes are interconnected in a way they influence consumer's perception of the advertisement. In the context of digital advertising, attitudes can be described as "the aggregation of evaluation of perceived attributed and benefits of online advertising" (Wang & Sun, 2010, p.334).

Previous researches have shown that consumer's beliefs about advertising are a multidimensional concept as attitudes are formed based on beliefs. Bauer and Greyser (1968, as cited in Mir, 2012) distinguished economic and social consumer's beliefs. Thereafter, Pollay and Mittal (1993) presented a model that consisted of seven beliefs classified in two groups. The first group was labeled as personal use and includes such factors as information, social role, image and pleasure. The second group was called social affect and consists of value corruption, materialism, good for economy and falsity/no sense. Ducoffe (1996) identified three values of advertising that consumers use to assess it: informativeness, irritation and entertainment. Building on Ducoffe's (1996) research, Wang and Sun (2010) found in their study that entertainment, credibility, economy, information and value corruption are antecedents of attitudes towards the online advertising. The belief in the credibility of the advertisement and its positive influence on the economy were found to be the strongest, followed by information and entertainment. Since the provision of information is one of the main advertising functions, many scholars identified information as a major belief about advertising. Consumers that find advertisement to be informative have a more positive attitude towards it (Wang & Sun, 2010), which is consistent with Ducoffe's (1996) findings about a strong relationship between Internet advertised value and informativeness. Entertainment was found to have an impact on advertising effectiveness by creating an emotional link between

consumers and the company's message. Wang and Sun (2010) highlight the importance of advertisement being creative and enjoyable especially in modern time, when people are exposed to an enormous amount of advertisements on a daily basis. In the research conducted by Lee and Hong (2015), authors conclude that informativeness and creativity are the two main predictors of positive attitude towards social media advertising. When a company's message is both creative and provides the needed information that satisfies functional needs, consumers have higher chances of developing a more favorable attitude, which can result in advertisement sharing between users and increased brand awareness.

Therefore, creating a favorable perception of the advertisement is vital for its effectiveness. Stimulating affective responses can result in more favorable advertising judgments and increase the persuasion effect (Batra & Ray, 1986). Providing consumers with a feeling of enjoyment derived from the advertisement has a direct impact on the overall attitude towards it (Schavitt,1998, as sited in Ducoffe, 1996), which increases the chances of brand recognition and have an impact on the purchase intention (Duffet, 2015). Moreover, in the context of digital advertising, favorable attitude also has an effect on users clicking behavior that in turn leads to a change in online buying behavior (Mir, 2012; Wang & Sun, 2010).

Considering the importance of providing both credible information and appealing to consumers emotions in order to create an effective advertisement, companies seek new ways of communication with their consumers. In the context of social media, usage of new online language forms such as emoji is highly interconnected with the users' behavior online (Ge & Ulrike Gretzel, 2018). Taking into account emoji ability to convey emotions and influence message interpretation, implementation of these new language forms in marketing communications can help companies to trigger consumer favorable responses and archive desirable goals.

### 2.5 Emoji in marketing communications

The following paragraph will focus on the role emoji play in marketing from the point of the media richness theory. The issue of emoji appropriateness will be also addressed in this part, followed by the formulation of the hypotheses.

Based on the above-mentioned literature, one of the most important characteristics of emoji is their ability to convey emotions from writers to readers. Since visual images are considered to have a greater emotional effect than solely words, using emoji in promotional messages can be very beneficial (Yakin & Eru, 2017). Moreover, emoji are considered to play an important role in social media communication due to their ability to intensify the persuasive appeals that are meant to generate customer engagement (Ge & Ulrike Gretzel, 2018). In addition, emoji

have a positive impact on both communicators, by creating a positive overtone in the message (Kaya et al., 2016), and communication outcomes, by enriching information (Huang et al., 2008). According to the media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) that presents a framework for explaining the ability of different communication mediums to reproduce the information that is sent over between communicators, each medium has different information richness. In order to make communication more efficient, it is advised to use richer medium, such as face-to-face communication, for more ambiguous tasks and leaner medium, such as computer-mediated communication, for less uncertain tasks. The information richness is refereeing to "the ability of information to change understanding within a time travel'' (Daft & Lengel, 1986, p. 560). Scholars claimed that media richness is based on four factors: the capacity for immediate feedback, number of cues, language variety and personal focus. Moussa (2018) applied media richness theory to emoji and argued that emoji enhanced computer-mediated communication based on MRT's criteria for estimating media richness. The author concluded that emoji improved the feedback criterion by making non-verbal messages easier for interpretation. Due to the vast variety of emoji, they manage to transmit multiple cues in messages and increase linguistic variety that allows to communicate broader ideas. Finally, emoji enhance personal focus capacity enabling communicators to express emotion more directly.

Though emoji undoubtedly have many advantages and characteristics that can be utilized to create a more persuasive and eye-catching promotional message, context plays a crucial role in determining the success of emoji influence. Previous studies have shown that people use more textual paralanguage (TPL) in a socio-emotional task rather than in task-oriented settings (Derks, Bos et al., 2008). Several experimental studies showed that using emoji in business correspondence makes people look less competent, as it is considered inappropriate to use emoji for professional-based communications (Glikson et al., 2017). This means that emoji can create a more friendly perception of the message, but can also call into question the sender. It seems that the presence of emoji creates positive outcomes if they are considered to be appropriate and leads to negative consequences if the context is considered to be improper for the emoji presence.

### 2.5.1 The emoji impact on positive affect

Despite the fact that the perception of emoji highly depends on the context and on their appropriability in each particular setting, emoji still convey and evoke certain emotions. Emoji help to express feelings and strengthen a message (Derks et al., 2008). They are generally used to create a lighter mood of the message, thus promoting more positive interactions (Kaya et al., 2016). Also, Hsieh and Tseng (2017) in their research concluded that the presence of emoji

increases the information richness and transmit perceived playfulness. In the digital world, playfulness is known to evoke the feeling of enjoyment that is an important motivator for consumer behavior (Chen & Lin, 2019). Huang et al. (2008) empirically proved that emoji affect enjoyment that in turn has an impact on personal interactions. Moreover, the study by Das et al. (2019) showed that the presence of emoji in promotional materials leads to higher positive affect. Thus, it is anticipated that in the context of social media advertising, emoji will also increase the positive affect. Therefore, the following hypothesis is stated:

$H_1$: The presence (vs absence) of emoji in social media advertisement will lead to a higher positive affect.

*2.5.2 The emoji influence on purchase intention*

Purchase intention is usually understood as "consumer's willingness to purchase a product" (Dodds et al., 1991, as cited in Chen, Lin, 2019, p.24). Many studies have explored the factors that have an influence on consumers' intentions to purchase a product. One of the perspectives on this issue suggests that there is a link between the consumer's emotional state and purchase intentions (Sherman, Mathur & Smith, 1997). The previous studies mainly distinguish cognitive evaluations of the product as a primary determinant for predicting intentions, however, an emotional response, also known as affective response, can be an influential antecedent for consumer's intentions (Morris, Woo & Geason, 2002). Moreover, in the context of advertising, creating positive emotional appeals in the promotional messages triggers pleasant emotions that improve the perception of the advertisement (Herjanto, Gaur & Yao, 2015). From the marketing literature, it is also known that a positive attitude towards advertisement has a direct impact on purchase intentions (Duffet, 2015), which also holds true for online purchasing behavior (Mir, 2012). In line with this, the study by Das et al. (2019) showed that the presence of emoji in promotional materials increases the positive affect, which leads to higher purchase intention.

Therefore, since affective response is also known to have an effect on consumer behavior by creating a more positive perception of the advertisement that in turn influences purchasing behavior, it can be anticipated that using emoji in a digital advertisement can create a more positive affect that can lead to higher purchase intention if the context of the advertisement is appropriate for that. This leads to the following hypotheses of the current research study:

$H_2$: The presence (vs absence) of emoji in social media advertisement will lead to higher purchase intentions.

$H_3$: Increased positive affect will mediate the effect of the emoji presence (vs. absence) on the increased purchase intentions.

*2.5.3 The role of product framing*

Considering the fact that emoji positive effects highly depend on whether emoji presence seems to be appropriate or no, there is a need to take context into account, when examining the influence of emoji. Previous research by Das et al. (2019) argued that the product framing moderates the effect of emoji presence on the consumer perception. They found that the advertisement containing emoji for the hedonic product has higher positive affect than the advertisement for the utilitarian product. Their findings indicate that the emoji effect on people emotions does not fully depend on emotional contagion but within which context it is presented, meaning that emoji create a positive affect when it is considered to be appropriate. This correlation can be explained by the fact that utilitarian products are usually aimed at the satisfaction of the functional needs and the choice for such products is made based on rational decision, considering such factors as credibility, convenience, expertise, whereas choice for hedonic product is usually based on emotions as they aim to provide pleasure and fun (Voss, Spangenberg & Grohman, 2003). This also links to the research conducted by Kronrod and Danziger (2013), who revealed that consumers tend to have a more positive perception of hedonic products than utilitarian products when figurative language is used to describe them. Finally, in the study by Lee et al. (2016) authors found that emotional appeal is not the primary key driver for creating a positive user attitude towards empathy expression for a social media advertising. They linked this finding to the fact that the advertisement that was used in the experiment was more utilitarian. In that case, emotional appeal played a secondary role while rational aspects were more important in forming user attitude. This experiment suggests that product framing can be a moderator for the relationship between the emotional appeal and consumer perception. Furthermore, earlier studies on consumer judgment also stated that when product evaluations are based more on hedonic and feeling-related criteria, affect has more influence rather than when evaluations are based on the utilitarian criteria (Adaval, 2001).

Thus, it is anticipated that inclusion of emoji will lead to higher positive affect for hedonic products, however, this effect will be attenuated for the utilitarian framed products.

$H_4$: The presence (vs absence) of emoji in social media advertisement will lead to the higher positive affect for the hedonic products, but will have no effect for the utilitarian products.

What is more, emoji contextual appropriateness can also influence purchase intentions. It is important to consider that there is the difference between emotional and rational appeals in the advertising and that their correct implementation is what drives purchase preferences (Zhang, Sun, Liu and Knight, 2014). Previous studies on how advertisement appeals differ for the

utilitarian and experiential services show that product category plays an essential role as it affects the advertising effectiveness (Shao, Grace & Ross, 2015). In the same vein, the study by Alberts-Miller and Stafford (1999) showed that rational appeals are more effective in the promotion of the utilitarian services while emotional appeals are more compelling for the experiential services advertisements. Thus, similarly to Das et al. (2019) research, it can be expected that emoji effect on the purchase intention will be higher for hedonic products since they are usually evaluated based on affective reactions (Adaval, 2001).

Therefore, since affective response is also known to have an effect on the consumer behavior by creating a more positive perception of the advertisement that in turn influences purchasing behavior, it can be anticipated that using emoji in a digital advertisement can create a more positive affect, that can lead to higher purchase intention if the context of the advertisement is appropriate for that. However, the effect of emoji inclusion will differ for hedonic and utilitarian products. It is expected that the presence of emoji in an advertisement for a hedonic product will lead to stronger affect, which will lead to higher purchasing intention than for utilitarian products. Thus, the following hypotheses are tested in the current empirical study:

H$_5$: The presence (vs. absence) of emoji in a social media advertisement for hedonic products (vs. utilitarian) will lead to higher purchase intentions, but will have no effect for the utilitarian products.

# 3. Methods

In order to answer the research question and explore how the presence of emoji in online advertisement influence consumer's purchase intention, the quantitative method was used. This method was chosen as it aims to determine the relationship between variables. An experimental design enabled to compare the participants' reaction more precisely as it allows to create different manipulation for participant groups (Newman, 2014), thus providing more insight into the difference of the attitudes that people have towards emoji presence in promotions of hedonic and utilitarian products.

*3.1 Research design*

The study had 2 (including emoji vs. excluding) x 2 (product framing: hedonic vs. utilitarian) between-subjects design. Experimental groups were exposed to the advertisement containing emoji in the text of one of the product types, while the participants in control groups had the same promotional post without any emoji. Each participant was exposed to one treatment, in this case, only one digital advertisement. Two advertisements were created in the form of a promotional Facebook post with the same picture of the product, with different text description depending on the product framing. Emoji were incorporated in a text and it is worth mentioning that emoji used in advertisements were not intended to replace words, but to intensify the affect of the message and visually highlight the key points. In this regard, the number of emoji was limited to prevent the readers' confusion and not to cause distractions. As it was mentioned before, this research only focused on positive emoji as they are more prevalent in the advertisements. The advertisements contained emoji representing positive feelings and actions (non-face emoji) related to the context of the advertisement.

*3.2 Sample selection*

Considering the fact that the aim of this research is to investigate the effect that emoji presence (vs absence) in social media advertising has on purchase intention, the sampling plan did not have any specific restrictions due to the fact the age groups of frequent emoji users are almost equally wide (Grabowski, 2016), meaning that any age group will be applicable for this study.

The aim of the sample plan was to collect minimum of 35 participants per condition, resulting in a total number of 140 participants for the study. The responses were collected via Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online platform that operates as the micro-tasks market where researchers can post their tasks that are completed by users for minimal compensation. The platform allows researchers to choose special requirements for their participants. This study was restricted to those who had a satisfactory level of previously completed tasks above 95 per

cent, thus excluding unreliable participants. Participants were invited to participate in the survey for minimal compensation of 0.15 American dollars.

*3.3 Experiment materials*

The stimuli for this study was presented in the form of a Facebook advertisement of a fictional brand. Facebook was chosen as it is considered to be the leading social media platform with the highest number of active users (Clement, 2019). It is also considered to be the most used social media platform for marketing and advertising purposes. Facebook is one of the largest digital advertising seller (Enberg, 2019), with 72 per cent of marketers using Facebook on a regular basis as a platform for paid digital advertising (Clark, 2018).

The advertisement used in the experiment was posted on behalf of a fictional brand named "K&C". The reason for using a fictional brand is to ensure that participants had no prior associations with the brand and that the familiarity with the brand would have no influence on the participants' judgment and answers. The advertisements were created by using an online Facebook advertisement mockup generator that created advertisements identical to a real paid promotional campaign on Facebook. Each advertisement contained the brand name, a headline, a product description and a photo. As a "call to action" button that is usually a part of Facebook advertisement it was chosen to use "shop now" option, as the aim of this study is to investigate the consumer's purchase intention. The texts of the advertisements were created based on real brands product descriptions. To ensure the texts differ between hedonic and utilitarian characteristics, each advertisement had a different description of the product. The utilitarian product description was focused more on the quality and usefulness of the product, considering that utilitarian products are designed to satisfy functional needs (Voss et al., 2003). Thus, in the utilitarian condition, such words as "sensor technology", "waterproof materials" and "water resistance" were used.  The hedonic product framing focused more on emotional aspects since hedonic products are aimed to provide joy and pleasure (Voss et al., 2003). For the hedonic condition such words as "improves mood", "comfortable", "looks good" were used.

The advertisements for control and experimental groups were identical except for the emoji presence. In the control groups, for each product type emoji were not presented. In the experimental conditions, up to six emoji were incorporated in the text. For both product types emoji included in the advertisement represented related to the product description activities such as "👟", "🧴" and positive facial expressions such as "😍", "😄". The conditions of the experiment are presented in Table 1 below.

*Table 1: The research conditions*

| Conditions | Emoji presence | Product framing |
|---|---|---|
| **Condition 1** | Yes | Utilitarian |
| **Condition 2** | No | Utilitarian |
| **Condition 3** | Yes | Hedonic |
| **Condition 4** | No | Hedonic |

### *3.3.1 Pretest*

Before creating the advertisement for the experiment, a pretest was conducted. The aim of the pretest was to examine the texts of the advertisements to choose a product that is perceived both as utilitarian and hedonic depending on the description. Four products were selected for the pretest, based on the literature and previous related studies (Voss et al., 2003; Klein & Melnyk, 2014). The selected products included: sneakers, shower gel, headphones and smartwatch. For each product, two texts were created, with the predominance of hedonic or utilitarian characteristics.

The pretest had a within-subject design, as each participant evaluated all four products in two different frames (hedonic and utilitarian). Participants were approached via social media platforms. A total number of 21 participants ($N$=21) completed the survey. Participants were told that the aim of the survey is to test the perception of the promotional message for different products. They were presented with 8 product descriptions. After each product description, participants were asked to rate the hedonic (exciting, fun, delightful, thrilling, and enjoyable) and utilitarian (effective, helpful, functional, necessary and practical) products on a five-point scale, adapted from Voss et al. (2003).

### *3.3.2 Pretest results*

The results of the pretest showed that the scales for evaluating hedonic and utilitarian products are reliable. Although scholars vary in their opinions about the minimal acceptable limit of Cronbach's alpha, α values higher than 0.7 are commonly acceptable (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1998). The results of reliability test are presented below in table 2.

*Table 2. Reliability test results for product framing*

| Product | Framing | Cronbach's alpha for utilitarian scale | Cronbach's alpha for hedonic scale |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Sneakers** | Utilitarian | .87 | .93 |
| **Sneakers** | Hedonic | .93 | .92 |
| **Shower gel** | Utilitarian | .91 | .96 |
| **Shower gel** | Hedonic | .89 | .92 |
| **Headphones** | Utilitarian | .89 | .92 |
| **Headphones** | Hedonic | .87 | .90 |
| **Smartwatch** | Utilitarian | .87 | .90 |
| **Smartwatch** | Hedonic | .88 | .90 |

In order to analyze 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 8 pairs. The results of a paired t-test are presented in the Table 3 below. 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 3. Paired t-test results comparing product framings*

| Product pairs | Framing scale | Mean | Standard deviation | $t$ | $df$ | $p$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.Utilitarian watch | Utilitarian | 3.69 | .64 | .41 | 20 | .686 |
| Hedonic watch | | 3.61 | .57 | | | |
| 2.Hedonic watch | Hedonic | 3.36 | .78 | 2.00 | 20 | .059 |
| Utilitarian watch | | 3.01 | .72 | | | |
| 3.Utilitarian sneakers | Utilitarian | 3.53 | .72 | 1.41 | 20 | .173 |
| Hedonic sneakers | | 3.24 | .82 | | | |
| 4.Hedonic sneakers | Hedonic | 3.18 | .91 | .77 | 20 | .448 |
| Utilitarian sneakers | | 3.03 | .99 | | | |
| 5.Utilitarian gel | Utilitarian | 3.74 | .79 | 2.82 | 20 | .010 |
| Hedonic gel | | 3.13 | .86 | | | |
| 6.Hedonic gel | Hedonic | 3.00 | 1.03 | .56 | 20 | .582 |
| Utilitarian gel | | 2.89 | 1.03 | | | |
| 7.Utilitarian headphones | Utilitarian | 3.91 | .58 | 6.83 | 20 | .000 |
| Hedonic headphones | | 3.05 | .68 | | | |
| 8.Hedonic headphones | Hedonic | 3.36 | .78 | 1.34 | 20 | .194 |
| Utilitarian headphones | | 3.12 | .80 | | | |

*3.4 Experiment procedure*

A survey is a tool that allows to evaluate people's attitudes and perceptions by presenting participants with the same questions and gathering answers (Corbetta, 2003). Since the experiment presents a between-subject design, the participants received different manipulations, in this case advertisements, depending on the condition that they got, but were asked the same questions. The survey was created by the use of Qualtrics software, which allowed all treatments to be automatically randomized for different groups. After the survey had been created, it was posted on Amazon Mechanical Turk.

After choosing to participate in the survey, participants were presented with the consent form explaining that the research is performed for the master thesis and mainly concerns the perception of digital advertisement and that the anonymity of the respondents was guaranteed.

Participants were automatically allocated to one of the groups. Firstly, respondents were asked demographic questions about their age, gender, country of residence and usage of social media websites, followed by the Facebook advertisement. They were asked to carefully read the advertisement and answer the following questions. All the subsequent questions were presented as five-point Likert scale with the goal to measure the affect, purchase intention and perception of the product framing. Afterwards, the manipulation check was presented asking respondents if

the advertisement that they saw contained any emoji. At the end of the survey respondents were thanked for their participation and was given the randomized ID that they put in Amazon Mechanical Turk for receiving the monetary compensation.

*3.5 Measurement*

All respondents were provided with the same set of questions that appeared in the same order for all the groups. After filling the questions about demographic characteristics, participants were exposed to the Facebook advertisement with or without emoji, depending on the group they were in.

The stimuli followed by the questions about the affect, purchase intention and the manipulation check. In order to measure the affective state of the participants after being exposed to the advertisement, the four-item, five-point scale was used adapted from the PANAS (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988) that is widely used to measure mood and emotion. Four items include several emotions such as happiness, delight, excitement and enthusiasm, as they were used by Das et al. (2019) in the similar research, and was measured on the five-point Likert scale by asking the question: "While exposed to the advertisement, how did you feel?". The PANAS was designed to evaluate the affect and emotional responses in a different context (Trav, 2013). The use of this scale allowed to investigate the difference between participants' responses to the advertisement, including or excluding emoji.

Further, participants were asked to indicate their purchase intentions by using a three-item scale adapted from Steinhart, Kamins, Mazursky and Noy (2014). Each item was measured on a five-item Likert scale, ranging from 1= "Not at all" to 5= "Extremely", to measure how likely participants ~~are~~ were to buy the advertised product. After reporting the affect of the advertisement and inclination to buy or recommend the product, participants were asked to answer the product framing manipulation check, to evaluate how hedonic or utilitarian they perceived the product to be (Das et al, 2019). Each factor was rated on a five-item scale adapted from Voss et al. (2003), by asking participants to evaluate ~~the~~ certain characteristics of the promoted product, which are usually attributed to the hedonic or utilitarian type. Finally, in order to test whether the experimental manipulation had the desired effect and whether the participants paid attention to the emoji in the condition with the advertisement containing graphical symbols, participants were asked if the advertisement they saw contained any emoji (Das et al,2019). The inclusion of a manipulation check was intended to define whether the experiment was successful. In the cases where the participant failed to answer the manipulation check correctly (state the presence of emoji in experimental groups and the absence of it in

control groups), the response was removed during the data cleaning. After the data was collected and cleaned, it was analyzed with the use of SPSS software.

To ensure the validity of the study, meaning that scales measure the variable that they were intended to measure (Price, Jhangiani & Chiang, 2015), the scales were adopted from the previous research by Das et al. (2019). Moreover, as previous researchers stated, putting only one feeling in a scale is not sufficient for measuring the emotional response to the advertisement, since the meaning of a certain feeling can vary among people (Edell & Burke, 1987). Therefore, to ensure the reliability of the study, each scale included several items. In order to measure the internal consistency for the measurements of the positive affect, purchase intention and product framing, the reliability test was carried out. For all variables, Cronbach's alpha exceeded the minimum acceptable value ($\alpha > 0.7$), meaning that no questions had to be removed. The results are presented in Table 4 below.

*Table 4. The results of the reliability test for measurements*

| Measurements | Cronbach's alpha |
|---|---|
| Utilitarian framing | .78 |
| Hedonic framing | .91 |
| Affect | .94 |
| Purchase intentions | .92 |

# 4. Results

This chapter presents the results of the analysis that was conducted to interpret the gathered data. The issue of validity is also addressed in this section. The tests performed were aimed to answer the research question by examining the influence of emoji on creating positive affect and purchase intention depending on the product framing in the social media advertisement. Thus, the hypotheses are tested in this chapter.

*4.1 Respondents*

A total number of 325 (*N*=325) filled out the survey. Afterwards, the data was checked to ensure the reliability of the answers. Participants who took too little time to complete the survey (less than a minute) and did not answer the manipulation check correctly were removed from the data set. After data cleaning, a total number of 217 (*N*=217) respondents was collected via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Concerning the sample demographics, 107 females (*N*=107) and 109 (*N*=109) males participated in the study. The majority of the participants was American (59%) and Indian (31%). The age of the participants ranged between 18 and 66 years old, with the mean age of 33.78 (*SD*=10.81). Out of all participants, 10 per cent graduated high school, 56 per cent had a bachelors' degree and 14 per cent had a masters' degree. Most of the respondents had social media accounts (95 per cent). A Facebook account had 90 per cent of the participants, with 66 per cent using it at least once a day.

*4.2 Manipulation check*

A paired t-test was performed in order to evaluate how hedonic or utilitarian the advertised watch was perceived by participants. The aim of the manipulation check was to assess whether there was a difference between hedonic and utilitarian advertisements, more precisely if the utilitarian product was perceived to be utilitarian and the same for the hedonic product. Participants that were exposed to the utilitarian framed advertisement found the watch to be slightly more utilitarian ($M = 3.34$) than hedonic ($M = 3.06$), $t(105) = 4.15$, $p < 0.001$. However, the participants who saw the hedonic version of the advertisement, did not see the watch as more hedonic ($M = 3.24$) than utilitarian ($M = 3.41$), $t(110) = 2.705$, $p = 0.008$. The fact that the hedonic and utilitarian advertisements were both perceived as more utilitarian indicates that the manipulation was not successful, as respondents did not distinguish the difference between the two framings.

*4.3 Positive affect*

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to test the effect of emoji presence (vs. absence) and the product framing (utilitarian vs hedonic) on positive affect ($H_1$). As expected, there was a significant main effect of the emoji presence in the advertisement $M_{\text{Emoji}} = 3.28$, $M_{\text{NoEmoji}} = 2.81$;

$F(1, 213) = 9.25$, $p = 0.003$, meaning that the respondents that were exposed to the Facebook advertisement with emoji experienced more positive emotions. Therefore, there is enough evidence to accept $H_1$ and thus, it is confirmed that the presence of emoji in the social media promotional message creates more positive affect. However, there was no significant effect on whether the watch was portrayed as hedonic or utilitarian, $F(1, 213) = 0.47$, $p = 0.58$, which means that participants did not have higher positive affect after being exposed to one particular framing. There was also no significant interaction effect found between the presence of emoji and product framing, $F(1, 213) = 1.05$, $p = 0.305$). Since there was no difference in how the respondents felt after being exposed to the hedonic advertisement in comparison to utilitarian, $H_4$ is rejected.

*Table 5. Results of the two-way analysis of variance*

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

*4.4 Purchase Intention*

Similarly, two-way ANOVA was performed to test the effect of the emoji presence and the product framing on the purchase intentions ($H_2$). The analysis of variance revealed that there is a significant main effect for the presence of emoji, $M_{Emoji} = 3.06$, $M_{NoEmoji} = 2.53$; $F(1, 213) = 11.92$, $p = 0.001$, meaning that respondents were more inclined to purchase the watch when exposed to the advertisement containing emoji. Therefore, $H_2$ is not rejected, as emoji incorporation in the advertisement creates higher purchase intentions. However, there was no effect on whether the watch was presented as hedonic or utilitarian, $F(1, 213) = 0.47$, $p = 0.49$, which means that the respondents did not have higher purchase intentions for hedonic or utilitarian products. There was no significant interaction effect for the emoji presence and of the product framing, $F(1, 213) = 0.08$, $p = 0.801$. Thus, $H_5$ is rejected and hence, emoji presence in the advertisement for hedonic products is not found to be associated with higher purchase intentions in comparison to the utilitarian framed advertisement.

*Table 6. Results of the two-way analysis of variance*

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

### 4.5 Mediation effect of positive affect on purchase intentions

It was also anticipated that the positive affect could mediate the influence of the emoji presence on the purchase intention ($H_3$). The mediation analysis was conducted with the help of SPSS PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2013), with 10,000 bootstrap samples to examine the prediction. The presence versus absence of emoji was used as the independent variable, purchase intentions as the dependent variable and positive affect as the mediator. The test revealed a significant indirect effect of the emoji presence having a positive relationship with the purchase intentions through increased positive affect ($b = -0.39$, 95% CI [-0.64, -0.14]). There is no significant direct effect found of emoji presence on the purchase intention, with the confidence interval including zero ($b = -.14$, 95% CI [-0.32, 0.03]) when positive affect is added to the model. This indicates that when positive affect is included to the model, it fully mediates the emoji influence on the purchase intention. Therefore, based on the results of the mediation analysis, there is no evidence to reject $H_3$, meaning that the emoji presence has an impact on the purchase intentions through their effect on the positive affect. Due to the fact that the manipulation for product framing was not successful (i.e. both advertisements were perceived as more utilitarian), it is impossible to test whether positive affect mediates the effect of the product framing by emoji influence on the purchase intentions in the current experiment. The results are presented in Figure 1 below.

*Figure 1. Mediation by positive affect*
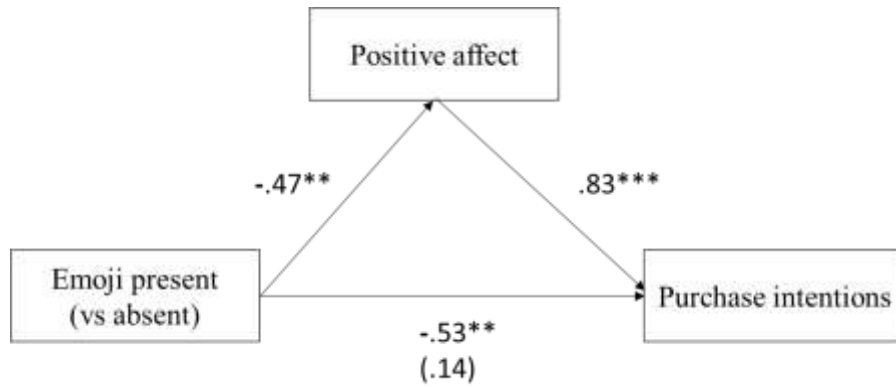


Unstandardized betas are reported: *significant at the .05 level; **significant at the .01 level; *** significant at the .001 level

# 5. Discussion

Over the last decade, the use of emoji in online communication has increased significantly (Vangelov, 2017). The rising popularity of emoji led to their spread in other spheres besides personal text-messaging, as big brands have started implementing emoji in their marketing communication. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore how emoji presence in online advertisements influences the consumer's perception. More specifically, it intended to test how the incorporation of emoji for different product framings in online promotional posts influences consumers' purchase intentions. This chapter presents the main findings based on empirical testing and literature, followed by theoretical and managerial implications. The limitations of the study are also addressed in this section.

*5.1 Main findings*

First of all, the results of the research show that the presence of emoji in online advertisement leads to a higher positive affect, thus supporting $H_1$. The results are in accordance with the previous research by Das et al. (2009), who argued that emoji's ability to evoke various emotions have an influence on advertisement affective response. This signifies that the incorporation of emoji in the promotional texts stimulates more pleasant emotions and create a more positive perception of the advertisement

Secondly, the findings show that the incorporation of emoji in the digital advertisement leads to higher purchase intention, hence confirming $H_2$. People tend to purchase the product if the advertisement contains emoji. Moreover, it was found that the effect of the emoji presence on the purchase intention is mediated by their influence on the positive affect ($H_3$). According to the literature, the more positive perception of the advertisement is created, the stronger is its influence on consumers. A positive affective response created by the advertisement has a direct impact on the advertisement perception and, more specifically, on the message acceptance and attitudes towards the brand (Ray & Batra, 1983). A more favorable attitude towards advertising is also known to influence purchase intentions (Duffet, 2015; Mir, 2012). This indicates that emoji influence consumers' purchase intentions by creating an affecting response, however, if consumers do not experience a positive affect from reading the advertisement with emoji presence, there will be no influence on their purchase intentions. These findings are consistent with the previous research by Das et al. (2019)— the evidence in support for $H_2$ and $H_3$.

Finally, when it comes to the emotional advertising, many scholars and marketers believe that the product type plays an important role in determining the effectiveness of promotional campaigns. More specifically, there is a belief that emotional advertising appeals are more likely to create more positive responses for hedonic rather than utilitarian products (Adaval,

2001). Therefore, to investigate this empirically, product framing was used as a contextual variable to examine how emoji's effects differ for hedonic and utilitarian products. It was proposed that the use of emoji has a positive relationship with the positive affect ($H_4$) and purchase intention ($H_5$) when the advertised product is hedonic. However, there was no significant evidence found to support these statements for the given test sample. Even though this study did not confirm the findings of Das et al. (2019), who argued that emoji lead to higher positive affect and increased purchase intentions when presented in the hedonic advertisement as they are considered more appropriate in the hedonic product context, it does not mean that context is not important.

Considering that within the framework of this experiment both types of advertisements were perceived as more utilitarian, significant relationship was found between the emoji's ability to increase positive affect and purchase intentions, which suggests that emoji can stimulate positive affective responses, even when they are present in the advertisement for the utilitarian type of product framing. This cast the doubt on the idea presented by Das et al. (2019), who suggested that emoji effects primarily depend on their appropriateness for the context. In fact, this contradiction shows that emoji's ability to influence people's feelings through emotional contagion might be equally important with their appropriateness to the context. Furthermore, the settings of where the advertisement is placed might also be the reason for the difference in the findings. More specifically, this study used online advertisement, and since social media environment is less formal than print advertisement, this means that emoji effects depend not only on the context where they are used, but also on the form in which it is presented.

*5.2 Theoretical implications*

From the scientific point of view, this study contributes to the developing field of emoji research by providing new insights and a better understanding of emoji effects in the context of digital advertising. The following part will discuss the insights uncovered in the empirical testing and their implications for the theory.

To begin with, the research shows that the emoji presence in social media advertisement creates a more positive affect, which is related to the higher purchase intention. Until the current day, the researches in the field of emoji primarily focused on the emoji's effects in the text messaging (Lo, 2008; Derks et al., 2008; Luor et al., 2010) and paid little attention to the role of emoji in marketing communications. To bridge this gap in knowledge, this study was mainly based on the research by Das et al. (2019), who were the first ones to examine the emoji effects on the positive affect and purchase intention in the context of advertising. The present

study tested emoji effects in the new settings and with different placement, since advertisement used for the experiment was social media promotional post with various emoji incorporated in the text. The fact that the findings of the current research are in line with the previous study's results indicates that both non-face emoji and emoji with facial expressions can alter consumer perception and behaviors not only when used as an image in the advertisement, but also as a part of the text. These findings add to the growing body of literature on the emoji effects in marketing communications.

Moreover, in this research evidence was found that the effect of emoji on the purchase intentions is mediated by their effect on the positive affect. This adds value to the knowledge on the process of how emoji influence the purchase intentions. These findings support the emoji's ability to evoke certain emotions and influence consumer's behavior (Derks et al., 2008) in the digital environment. The literature on human affectivity states that individuals vary in their reactions to different stimulus, depending on their situational and personal experiences (Forgas, 2008). Considering the wide use of emoji and their ability to influence the reader's emotions, it can be concluded that emoji operate as a universal form of language that can influence the perception of the advertisement by creating an emotional link and a more favorable attitude towards the advertised product or brand. These observations contribute to the human affectivity literature by proving the emoji's ability to trigger consumer affective responses.

Next, a previous study by Das et al. (2019) explored the role of emoji fit by comparing emoji effect for hedonic and utilitarian products and found that the use of emoji leads to higher positive affect when the advertised product is hedonic. However, this study did not find the difference between emoji effect for utilitarian and hedonic advertisements and cannot support the idea of emoji being more suitable for hedonic products. In contrast, since both advertisements were perceived as more utilitarian in the current experiment, it can be concluded that emoji were effective when the advertised product was utilitarian. This contradiction with the findings of Das et al. (2019) does not mean that the emoji's contextual appropriateness is not important for the emoji's positive effects. However, it supports the idea that emoji have a more significant impact on affective dimensions (Ganster et al., 2011), meaning that they primarily impact recipients' emotions through emotional contagion, and the context might come second. These findings highlight the need for further research that would test both the emotional aspect of emoji and their appropriateness in the context of advertising.

*5.3 Managerial implications*

The current study offers several valuable practical implications concerning emoji usage in digital marketing communications. First of all, the results show that the presence of emoji leads

to higher positive affect, which is known to have favorable outcomes such as more positive judgment of the promotional message, better attitude towards advertisement and brand (Ray and Batra, 1982). Considering the emoji's ability to intensify the emotional expression of the sender (Derks et al.,2008) and provide more enjoyment (Huang et al., 2008), companies could implement more emoji in their online advertising across different social media platforms, in order to create an emotional link with consumers. This can be beneficial for the brand and the relationships with the consumers. Secondly, since the findings show that the positive affect created by emoji is associated with higher purchase intention, organizations should consider adding emoji to the posts that are aimed to stimulate sales. By adding emoji to promotional posts, marketers could create more interactive and appealing content. This could result in better economic performance and increased profitability.

Besides, previous studies have shown that emoji effects can differ depending on their fit. For example, Derks et al. (2007) concluded that emoji are considered more relevant to the social-emotional rather than task-oriented context, and Das et al. (2019) found that the emoji's presence in the advertisement leads to an increase in the positive affect only in advertisements for hedonic products. Although this study did not find any significant effect of emoji for different product framings, and this finding contradicts with the research by Das et al. (2019), it shows that emoji can create a positive affect and lead to purchase intention even for the utilitarian product. Therefore, companies should be aware of the importance of emoji being appropriate to the context. Overall, this research suggests that it is very beneficial for marketers to include emoji in their online promotional activities such as social media posts and digital advertising, given that the context of the message is appropriate for that

*5.4 Limitations and future research*

The current study has a number of limitations that could have had an impact on the research results. By underlining those limitations and providing suggestions on how the research can be improved, it is possible to avoid similar inaccuracies and improve the reliability of future studies.

The first limitation refers to the fact that advertisements which were intended to picture one product as utilitarian and the other one as hedonic, were both perceived as more utilitarian, thus creating restrictions for testing the difference between the emoji's effects on the product framings. Future studies can also use advertisements that have already been successfully used in product framing studies or conduct a bigger pretest to ensure that the chosen set of advertisements portrays products more accurately, according to their framings. In addition to this, even though this study used already proved scales from the previous researches, it can be advisable to use more multidimensional scales to increase the validity of the study and to ensure

that the concepts such as product framing are measured more accurately. Moreover, the respondents were approached by using the online platform called Mechanical Turk, which is why the majority of the respondents were American. Thus, future studies could consider other means of sample gathering to increase the generalizability and improve validity of the research.

Secondly, the literature on the emoji presence on the advertising is very scarce. This study heavily relied on one particular research by Das et al. (2019). Considering that there are some discrepancies between this and the previous study, future research should investigate more the influence of emoji in the promotional context with different variables. Since scholars differ in their opinions about how exactly emoji influence the reader's perception and responses, it is recommended to test other factors besides the product types. For example, consumer behavior researches believe that individuals respond differently to advertising appeals based on their processing styles (Ruiz & Sicilia, 2004). Therefore, testing how people with cognitive and affective processing style react to emoji presence in promotional context might bring new insights into how emoji influence consumer's responses and advertising effectiveness.

Furthermore, the present study has focused on investigating the effect of emoji on the purchase intention. However, based on the knowledge that more positive attitude towards the advertisement leads to various favorable outcomes that result in higher advertising effectiveness, future researches can include the mediating role of the attitude towards advertising to the model, to gain a better understanding of how emoji alter the perception of the promotional messages.

Finally, this research used the advertisement made in a form of Facebook promotional posts with up to five emoji incorporated in the texts. However, it is necessary to investigate more how different settings, placements and numbers of emoji influence the effects they produce. For example, future research can use other social media platforms to see whether the same effects hold true or investigate how excessive numbers of emoji in promotional texts influence consumers' perception of the advertisement.

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# Appendix A

Survey

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey. The survey will mainly concern your personal perception of a digital advertisement. It should take about 5 minutes to complete. Please be assured that all answers are confidential and will be kept anonymous. Your participation is voluntary and you have the right to stop at any point of the survey. By clicking "Next" you give your concent to participate in this survey. In case you have any questions about the survey or its outcomes, please send an email to 495223ad@eur.nl. Click "Next" to begin.

1. What is your gender?
   - o   Male  (1)
   - o   Female  (2)
   - o   Other   (3)

2. What is your age?

   _____

3. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
   - o   Less than high school degree  (1)
   - o   High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED)  (2)
   - o   Some college but no degree  (3)
   - o   Associate degree in college (2-year)  (4)
   - o   Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)  (5)
   - o   Master's degree  (6)
   - o   Doctoral degree  (7)
   - o   Professional degree (JD, MD)  (8)

4. In which country do you currently reside?

   _____

5. Do you have any social media accounts? (For example, Facebook or Instagram)
   - o   Yes  (1)
   - o   No  (2)

6. Do you use Facebook?

- o Yes  (1)
- o No  (2)

7. How frequently do you use Facebook (checking the feed, posting and etc.)?

- o Every day  (1)
- o Once or twice a week  (2)
- o Once or twice a month  (3)
- o Once or twice in 3 months  (4)
- o Once or twice in 6 months  (5)
- o I do not use Facebook  (6)

8. Please take a look at this online advertisement and answer the following questions. (picture of the advertisement depending on the condition)

9. While exposed to the advertisement, how did you feel? I feel...

|  | Not at all (1) | Slightly (2) | Moderately (3) | Very (4) | Extremely (5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Happy (1) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Delighted (2) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Excited (3) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Enthusiastic (4) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

10. Please indicate your purchase intentions of the advertised product with the following statements.

| | Not at all (1) | Slightly (2) | Moderately (3) | Very (4) | Extremely (5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How likely would you be to buy the advertised smartwatch? (1) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| How inclined are you to buy the advertised smartwatch? (2) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| How willing are you to buy the advertised smartwatch? (3) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

11. Please indicate the extent to which you believe that the described product is ...

| | Not at all (1) | Slightly (2) | Moderately (3) | Very (4) | Extremely (5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Effective (1) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Helpful (2) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Functional (3) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Necessary (4) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Practical (5) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Fun (6) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Exciting (7) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Delightful (8) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Thrilling (9) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Enjoyable (10) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

12. Did the advertisement you saw contain any emoji?

○ Yes (1)

○ No(2)

Thank you for your participation!

# Appendix B

Advertisements per conditions

Condition 1: Emoji - Utilitarian product      Condition 2: No emoji – Utilitarian product

Condition 3: Emoji – Hedonic product          Condition 4: No emoji – Hedonic product