

Customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes of generation Z consumers toward emojis in digital marketing communications

Rodney Graeme Duffett and Mhlali Maraule

Abstract

Purpose – Emojis are quickly becoming a popular new language in social media and marketing. The capability to express emotions and make message understanding easier is one of the primary reasons for using emojis. The aim of this research was to determine the influence of perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, trust, and involvement on customer engagement due to emojis used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z (Gen Z) in South Africa.

Design/methodology/approach – Following the descriptive research approach, quantitative research was used in this study. A questionnaire (self-administered) was utilized to test the effectiveness of using emojis among 1,000 young consumers. Structural equation modeling was used to test the hypotheses.

Findings – The findings of the study yielded positive relationships between the variables, namely between trust and involvement; involvement and the perceived ease of use; involvement and perceived usefulness; perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness; trust and customer engagement; perceived usefulness and customer engagement; involvement and customer engagement; customer engagement and intention to purchase; trust and intention to purchase; and perceived usefulness and intention to purchase.

Practical implications – This study can help organizations in emerging markets use emojis in their digital marketing communications to engage customers and stimulate intention to purchase among young people, especially the Gen Z cohort, who seek organizations and brands that understand and connect with them.

Originality/value – By investigating the effects of emojis in digital marketing communications, this study contributes to the customer-centric process and the literature on emoji usage while also involving a credible digital language when communicating with members of Gen Z. By extending TAM, the findings of this study contribute to the TAM literature by demonstrating that emoji usage in digital marketing communications positively influences various attitudinal associations among Gen Z consumers.

Keywords Emojis, Digital marketing communications, Generation Z (gen Z) consumers, Technology acceptance model (TAM), Customer engagement, Intention to purchase, Emerging market

Paper type Research paper

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1. Introduction

Technology has made it easy for an organization to communicate with its customers and clients by using digital channels and language. Ko *et al.* (2022) show that marketers are connecting with customers via digital language and are beginning to understand how to reach the younger generation. Emojis are digital pictures that symbolize a word or a feeling in a message and can be combined to create a phrase with a complete interpretation. The vastly

increased use of emojis leads to the question of whether they can create a new language among technologically knowledgeable young people or devalue existing languages (Hand *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2023). Emojis (the younger generation of emoticons) are popularly used in digital platforms to illustrate concepts and ideas. Mobile phones enable young consumers to engage in digital platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, email, and many other digital media, which facilitate the sharing and transfer of information via emojis. Therefore, this current study seeks to expand research regarding young consumers' attitudes toward emojis across digital platforms. The rapid increase in use of these graphic symbols is often explained by emotions or expressions that are difficult to convey via words when writing without tone of voice and body language (Ptaszynski *et al.*, 2020; Robus *et al.*, 2020; Orazi *et al.*, 2023). Organizations make use of emojis to interact with their intended audience, reach their mobile devices, and also carry messages in stylishly modest ways (Wang, 2021). As a result, marketing campaigns that include emojis have rapidly grown, and organizations have received constructive results from marketing campaigns that involve emojis. Placing emojis in digital communications tends to increase engagement, simplify marketing messages, humanize brand voices, and increase purchase intentions (Li *et al.*, 2019; Lee *et al.*, 2021; Sawmong, 2022; Mladenović *et al.*, 2023; Orazi *et al.*, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2023). Accordingly, the research opined that it is important to further investigate the influence of emojis when used in marketing communications by brands, which are aimed at gaining customer engagement and the intention to purchase from their targeted market among young consumers, such as the Generation Z (Gen Z) cohort.

Castrén (2022), Duffett (2022), and Chetioui and El Bouzidi (2023), respectively, mention that members of Gen Z are people born between 1995 and 2012. Gen Z displays distinctive and similar values, traits, lifestyles, characteristics, and behaviors around the globe due to the constantly changing environment, which distinguishes this cohort from previous generations. The Gen Z cohort is maturing into adults, making purchasing decisions, and caring for themselves. This generation, including almost 27.5 million South Africans, overlaps with the born free audience, the generation born in South Africa after apartheid ended in 1994 (Lerm, 2022), so current marketers need to develop persuasive tactics to engage with the local members of Gen Z. This study further explores the influence the emojis have on digital marketing communication among Gen Z, which will provide organizations and their brands with additional insight on how to effectively reach this elusive young cohort with their advertising. Lerm (2022) states that members of Gen Z are dependent on innovation because they have grown up with digital technology, expect to be constantly connected, and expect seamless digital experiences. To post and engage on digital marketing platforms, Gen Z has adopted the digital language that they understand well, which includes emojis. Hence, emojis serve as a means of engaging with younger cohorts, and in this study, digital marketing communications are examined together with the features used to enhance the effectiveness of messages aimed at the Gen Z cohort.

Despite the years of emoji research, there are still gaps to fill in order to add to the emoji knowledge discourse. In a global perspective, several studies were conducted on the use of emoticons and emojis to convey meaning (Ptaszynski *et al.*, 2020; Smith and Rose, 2020), which provided a basis for the study of the origins of emoji communications. So, more research is needed on emoji interpretation to provide a greater understanding of this new form of communication. Some research was conducted on the nature and usage of emojis (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2018; Brito *et al.*, 2020). There is a gap in understanding the use of emojis and how this new visual language influences attitudes in relation to organizations, brands, and products, which will be examined and narrowed by this study. So, it is important for organizations to use emojis effectively for customer engagement and intention to purchase, since if not effectively utilized, these icons may negatively affect the quality of online response due to divergent message interpretations. A number of studies investigated emojis in terms of customer engagement (Zhou, 2019; Smits, 2021; Baek *et al.*, 2022; Ko *et al.*, 2022; Sawmong, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2023), while other research explored emojis in

terms of purchase intention (Das *et al.*, 2019; Lee *et al.*, 2021; Distel *et al.*, 2022; Sawmong, 2022; Mladenović *et al.*, 2023; Sindhu and Bharti, 2023). Accordingly, this study establishes if various antecedents positively influence customers' engagement and intention to purchase owing to the utilization of these emojis in digital marketing communications among young consumers.

Technology dominates almost every corner of the social system. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) helps describe the acknowledged effectiveness and purpose regarding the social impact and behavioral instrumental procedures of technology usage and acceptance (Davis, 1989). Venkatesh and Davis (2000) extended the model to incorporate variables such as intention to use. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) has been used to describe the acceptance and persistent intention of using new technologies, products, or services in their initial stages (Scherer *et al.*, 2019; Zhang *et al.*, 2021). The TAM has been adapted to fit a wide variety of technology acceptance studies; additional variables were introduced to help enhance its predictive power (Purwanto *et al.*, 2020; Ngubelanga and Duffett, 2021; Al-Gasawneh *et al.*, 2022; Leso and Cortimiglia, 2022). However, few studies consider the influence of emojis in digital marketing communications on customer engagement and intention to purchase among Gen Z from a TAM perspective (Al-Marroof *et al.*, 2019; Jung *et al.*, 2021; Kang *et al.*, 2022; Sawmong, 2022).

Naidu (2022) investigated how emojis used on social media platforms and in other kinds of electronic communication may involve actionable false and misleading content, and together with Hao (2020), they suggest more research on whether the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications yields favorable outcomes. Cavalheiro *et al.* (2022) and Prada *et al.* (2022) also found that future research should expand the contexts in which emojis can be used, particularly for brands and organizations. Emojis are typically successful when employed by a brand to connect with a younger audience, like the Gen Z cohort. Brands must understand the contexts that work well for their target market to create bonds and be relatable for increased customer engagement and intention to purchase. Cavalheiro *et al.* (2022) found that there is a need for investigation to comprehend how various brand communications may influence actual consumers' attitudes and behaviors toward a brand. Therefore, this study endeavors to fulfill this mandate for further research by assessing the Gen Z cohort's attitudes owing to the use of emojis in digital marketing communications. Moreover, as indicated by Malysheva and Vander Elst (2022), despite the impact of emoji on brands' perceived warmth, while using emoji in advertising has no adverse influence on the perception of organizations' capabilities, there is no benefit from them in terms of customers' buying intentions. However, a better understanding of the circumstances in which emoji have a negative impact and how they can change customer behavior is still required. In contrast, it is also believed that people exposed to emoji advertisements have greater buying intentions than those exposed to non-emoji advertisements, and emoji advertisements also assist organizations in achieving their marketing objectives more efficiently (Das *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2019; Ko *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2023). Hence, based on the need for additional inquiry both from a theoretical and practical or managerial viewpoint, the current study examines the influence of emojis in digital marketing communications on Gen Z's attitudes, namely trust, involvement, perceived ease of use, usefulness, customer engagement, and intention to purchase, from a TAM perspective.

The rest of this inquiry is structured in the following way: The second section elaborates on the literature and development of the hypotheses; the third section provides a detailed overview of methodology; the fourth and fifth sections illustrate the main findings and corresponding discussion and conclusions; and the sixth section shows the main theoretical and managerial implications, and limitations and future research of the study.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1 Technology acceptance model (TAM)

The model that was used to test the hypotheses in this study is referred to as TAM, which mainly identifies the influences on the consumer behavior and attitudes. [Davis \(1989\)](#) created TAM with the goal of explaining the basic predictors of accepting innovation, which leads to an explanation of the behavior of users through a wide range of end-user computing technologies. [Venkatesh and Davis \(2000\)](#) note that TAM characterizes perceived usefulness and ease of use in the context of public influence, conceptual instrumental procedures, and users' intent. TAM claims that the special effects of external factors on the purpose of use are promoted by perceived usefulness and ease of use, since these are posited to influence an individual's attitude and behavior ([Suki and Suki, 2011](#)). A number of studies have examined various aspects of emojis and intention to purchase using different theories and models, for example, textual paralinguistic and text-based nonverbal communication theory ([Das et al., 2019](#)), advertising value model and text-based nonverbal communication theory ([Dmitrieva, 2019](#)), customer satisfaction theory ([Ma and Wang, 2021](#)), psychological reactance and social information theory ([Lee et al., 2021](#)), affect information, elaboration likelihood and Foote, Cone, and Belding Grid models ([Starr, 2021](#)), construal level theory ([Huang et al., 2022](#)), emotional contagion concept and dual coding theory ([Mladenović et al., 2023](#)), and commitment-trust and social presence theory ([Sindhu and Bharti, 2023](#)) but there remains a dearth of TAM research that investigates emojis, especially in terms of intention to purchase ([Jung et al., 2021](#); [Sawmong, 2022](#)). As a result, this study sought to extend TAM and introduced involvement, trust, customer engagement, and intention to purchase as part of the TAM variables (perceived usefulness and ease of use) to examine the adoption of emoji use in the context of digital marketing communications.

2.2 Development of hypotheses

2.2.1 Trust → involvement. When a consumer makes a purchase in electronic commerce, trust is important because the decision must be made in the face of ambiguity ([Hong, 2015](#)), and involvement is revealed to play an important role in clarifying both trust formation and retaining customers ([Teichert and Rost, 2003](#)). [Zhang et al. \(2021\)](#) state that emojis are likely to influence trust levels in social interactions and reduce the psychological distance between users. Furthermore, when combined with apology strategies, emojis play an important role in restoring trust ([Yang, 2023](#)). Research has conceptually acknowledged the relationship between trust and involvement in online platforms and purchasing ([Sharma and Klein, 2020](#)). Hence, the hypothesis is as follows:

H1. Trust has a positive influence on involvement due to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

2.2.2 Involvement → perceived ease of use. [Kim and Hahn \(2015\)](#) consider involvement in digital platforms as the amount of exhibited client enthusiasm and/or personal significance. [Amoako-Gyampah \(2007\)](#) indicates that the relationship between involvement and perceived ease of use is associated with perceived usefulness, level of intrinsic involvement, and intention to use the technology by the users. In contrast, perceived usefulness impacts behavioral intention for low involvement information systems ([Leso and Cortimiglia, 2022](#)). However, this study seeks to reveal the effect that involvement has on perceived ease of use with regards to the use of emojis in digital advertising:

H2. Involvement has a positive effect on perceived ease of use due to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

2.2.3 Involvement → perceived usefulness. Involvement is an entity's supposed significance to an individual based on fundamental needs, norms, and advantages ([Zhang et al., 2022](#)).

In an emoticon study, [Jung et al. \(2021\)](#) show that while using emoticons, perceived acceptance or inclusion was found to have a positive influence on the perceived usefulness of others. This is relevant to the current study because it considers nonverbal cues for purchase intention among young adults and students. Furthermore, emoji are frequently used by brands in marketing activities aimed at increasing customer involvement ([Cavalheiro et al., 2022](#)). This study surmises that digital platform advertising that includes emojis affects the level of involvement, which has an influence on perceived usefulness among the members of Gen Z since they are involved and enjoy emojis:

H3. Involvement has a positive effect on perceived usefulness due to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

2.2.4 Perceived ease of use → perceived usefulness. [Davis \(1989\)](#) suggests that the greater the ease of use of a technology, the greater the expected benefits in terms of system performance enhancement. [Al-Gasawneh et al. \(2022\)](#) found that, in accordance with TAM, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are important factors that can predict consumer service usage. [Kato et al. \(2018\)](#) suggest that the ease of transmitting emotions is the most frequently stated reason for the usefulness of emojis. Because the use of emojis in digital advertisements is still in its early stages in this country, it is important to investigate whether perceived ease of use influences perceived usefulness because of emojis in digital advertisements:

H4. Perceived ease of use has a positive influence on perceived usefulness due to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

2.2.5 Perceived ease of use → customer engagement. Graphic emoticons are intended to be more easily adopted in a mobile communication environment than text-based emoticons. As a result, using an emoticon in a near-synchronous mode in mobile instant messaging is likely to increase the emoticon's perceived ease of use ([Tseng and Hsieh, 2019](#)). Emotional emojis boost consumer engagement by evoking more emotional responses for aesthetic experience content, whereas semantic emojis boost consumer engagement by generating more credibility for advertisement content ([Wang et al., 2023](#)). [Kang et al. \(2020\)](#) proposed that perceived ease of use is related to customer engagement and discovered that the effects of perceived ease of use and offline social contact on consumer engagement on digital platforms are comparable. So, it is hypothesized:

H5. Perceived ease of use has a positive influence on customer engagement owing to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

2.2.6 Trust → customer engagement. [Yang \(2023\)](#) states that emojis can help to rebuild customer trust, but more research on the various types of emojis and their varying levels of effectiveness in rebuilding trust is needed. Similarly, emojis encourage customers to like and share more tweets that contain one emoji (engagement), and the effect grows stronger as the number of emojis increases ([McShane et al., 2021](#)). [Islam and Rahman \(2016\)](#) propose that immersive engagement-centered marketing stimuli beyond simply exposing consumers to advertisements increase engagement in marketing and may instill trust in consumers. These findings are consistent with the current study because they demonstrate the impact digital stimuli have when used correctly in digital marketing communications. Accordingly, it is hypothesized:

H6. Trust has a positive influence on customer engagement owing to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

2.2.7 Perceived usefulness → customer engagement. The arguments advanced for changing a technology from the previous one is likely to influence perceptions of the technology's usefulness ([Amoako-Gyampah, 2007](#)). While using graphic-based emoticons, perceived acceptance and inclusion were found to have a positive influence on the perceived usefulness of others ([Jung et al., 2021](#)). In addition, [Pavalanathan and Eisenstein](#)

(2016) proposed that graphic-based emoticons allow for more precise and faster communication while requiring less effort than text-based emoticons. The use of emoticons in digital and mobile communications improves their perceived usefulness (Lim *et al.*, 2011), so the use of emojis leads to engagement (McShane *et al.*, 2021), which leads to the following hypothesis:

H7. Perceived usefulness has a positive influence on customer engagement owing to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

2.2.8 Involvement → customer engagement. Sharma and Klein (2020) demonstrate that the intention of consumers to engage in online shopping can be explained by their involvement. Leso and Cortimiglia (2022) reveal that consumer involvement has a favorable impact on behavioral intentions due to engagement with online information systems. Wang *et al.* (2023) discovered that while semantic emoticons used in marketing communication promotional content influence customer engagement through being credible, emotional emojis utilized in marketing communication content enhance consumer engagement. Cavalheiro *et al.* (2022) reveal that emojis are commonly used in marketing communications that aim to improve consumer engagement and increase consumer involvement. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H8. Involvement has a positive influence on customer engagement owing to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

2.2.9 Customer engagement → intention to purchase. Casado-Molina *et al.* (2022) discovered that customer service and care emoji communications, as well as those used in positive contexts and for emphasis, were associated with higher user engagement. Dmitrieva (2019) found that the presence of emojis has a positive effect on emotion and purchase intention. As a result, emojis have been linked to increased user engagement (Casado-Molina *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2023). The studies above show that emojis help explain how organizations can convey messages to their targeted markets by using digital media marketing as a tool to increase customer engagement and purchasing intention, which is consistent with the current study's hypothesis:

H9. Customer engagement has a positive effect on intention to purchase due to emojis in digital marketing communications.

2.2.10 Trust → intention to purchase. Yang (2023) investigated the various types and frequencies of emojis and their effectiveness in rebuilding trust based on commercial discourse; it was discovered that emojis would help rebuild customers' trust. Distel *et al.* (2022) reveal that the positive effect created by face emojis is associated with higher purchase intentions. Several other studies show that trust is also important in determining consumer purchasing intentions (Alkan *et al.*, 2021; Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2023). This study hypothesizes that digital platform advertising (including emojis) affects trust, which has an impact on engagement among the Gen Z cohort because they use and enjoy emojis:

H10. Trust has a positive influence on intention to purchase due to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

2.2.11 Perceived ease of use → intention to purchase. Kang *et al.* (2022) and Sawmong (2022) indicate that stickers, which consist of emojis and emoticons, can be used as effective marketing communication tools. Both of these studies confirm that purchase or behavioral intentions were positively influenced by perceived ease of use due to the use of emojis and emoticons (in the form of stickers). Some researchers found positive direct or indirect relationships between perceived ease of use and behavioral and/or purchase intentions in e-commerce and technology usage (Purwanto *et al.*, 2020; Al-Gasawneh *et al.*, 2022). Since emoji use in digital marketing communication is still relatively new in this developing nation, it is critical to examine whether young consumers' intention to purchase is influenced by the perceived ease of use of emojis in this form of digital advertising:

H11. Perceived ease of use has a positive influence on intention to purchase owing to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

2.2.12 *Perceived usefulness → intention to purchase.* Jung *et al.* (2021) ascertain that emoticons do not have a significant influence on the perceived usefulness and purchase intention relationship among young consumers. Sawmong (2022) also did not find a significant relationship between perceived usefulness and behavioral intentions due to the use of emojis and emoticons (in the form of paid stickers). However, Al-Marroof *et al.* (2019) and Kang *et al.* (2022) verify that perceived usefulness favorably impacted behavioral or purchase intentions due to stickers (emojis and emoticons). Other studies relating to online purchases and digital usage also suggested positive direct or indirect associations between perceived usefulness and purchase and/or behavioral intentions (Bravo *et al.*, 2021; Al-Gasawneh *et al.*, 2022; Leso and Cortimiglia, 2022), which leads to the following hypothesis:

H12. Perceived usefulness has a positive influence on intention to purchase owing to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

3. Methodology

This study employs quantitative research because it entails gathering and generalizing numerical data from a group of people, and the study's goal is to assess the perceptions and behaviors of the Gen Z cohort. Saunders *et al.* (2007) explain that descriptive analysis is a methodology used only to describe (as closely as possible) the actual hypotheses, so this design was applied to this study. The study's population includes all members of the Gen Z cohort in South Africa. Purposive sampling (also known as judgmental sampling) allows the researcher to use his or her discretion in selecting respondents who will best be able to answer the study's research questions. Hence, members of the Gen Z cohort and only those who use digital platforms that include emojis were purposively selected at the first stage of sampling. The snowball sampling technique is aimed at testing groups that are difficult to access or reach (Saunders *et al.*, 2007), for example, members of Gen Z. Hence, the Gen Z respondents, who were purposively selected at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, were requested to pass on the electronic questionnaire link (Google Forms) to their contacts in South Africa who could serve as other possible respondents as the second stage of sampling. Consequently, the sample included high school learners, young working professionals, unemployed young adults, and young people from varying socio-economic status communities to ensure a diverse sample that was not only limited to students.

The self-administered electronic questionnaire format was largely adopted from Bliss-Carroll (2016) and Zareen *et al.* (2017), which consisted of the screening question, digital platform usage, and demographic factors (in the form of closed-ended multiple-choice questions). The Likert scale questions measured consumer attitudes and level of engagement with the emoji-integrated communications, which comprised a five-point Likert scale. The various consumer attitude constructs were adapted from several studies, namely trust (Mallat *et al.*, 2008; Islam and Rahman, 2016); involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1985; Kim and Hahn, 2015); perceived ease of use (Venkatesh and Davis, 2000; Mallat *et al.*, 2008); perceived usefulness (Venkatesh and Davis, 2000; Mallat *et al.*, 2008); customer engagement (Islam and Rahman, 2016; Sahoo and Pillai, 2017); and intention to purchase (Duffett, 2015; Starr, 2021). The Google Form was sent out in the form of a link, which was forwarded on various digital platforms that included WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, SMS (Short Message Service), and email (snowball sampling). The survey achieved a usable sample of 1,000 respondent questionnaires from the South African Gen Z cohort. SPSS was used to conduct confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) as well as to assess the reliability and validity measures, which are outlined in the subsequent section. Gaskin's (2022) procedure was followed to develop the casual model using AMOS, and structural equation modeling

(SEM) was employed to evaluate the hypothesized emoji digital marketing communication associations among the Gen Z cohort.

4. Findings

The main results of Gen Z's online and emoji usage factors were: an overwhelming majority always or often used emojis (87.4%), a slight majority always or often engaged with emoji brand messages (50.6%), a vast majority spent more than 3 hours per day (67.8%), and a vast majority's digital spending was ZAR 251–ZAR 1,000 per month. The main demographic factors of the sample were: gender was relatively evenly distributed (male 50.8% and female 49.2%), a vast majority were aged 21–25 years (73.1%), and 26.9% were 16–20 years, and population group (Black 56.8%, Mixed Ancestry 29.0%, and White 10.5%).

The CFA resulted in six factors (components) with eigenvalues greater than one and an explained variance of 14.838%, 1.996%, 1.453%, 1.238%, 1.108%, and 1.010%, respectively. The total sum of the factors explained 83.246% of the variance, which indicates a very high and satisfactory level of correlation in the factor analysis. The factor loadings and AVE values derived from the CFA were above 0.7, thereby exceeding the threshold of 0.5, and so reflect convergent reliability (see Table 1). This research study's Cronbach's α and CR values ranged from 0.928 to 0.957 and 0.925 to 0.954, respectively, indicating strong internal consistency since the values exceeded the threshold of 0.7 (see Table 1). The construct mean values were all above 3.80, which indicated a general positive sentiment toward emoji marketing communications across the Generation Z attitude responses.

Table 2 shows the square root value of each attitudinal AVE and the standard value of correlations between the scales. Discriminant validity was evident since the square root AVE values for each construct were found to be greater than the correlations of the constructs.

The heterotrait-monotrait ratio values were less than 0.85 (see Table 3), which reflects discriminant validity (Henseler *et al.*, 2015).

The constrained-unconstrained common method factor (CMF) models were evaluated using a common method bias (CMB) measure. A chi-square difference of $p < 0.001$ was found, indicating a considerable shared variance between the constrained and unconstrained CMF models. As a result, the unconstrained CMF model was inferred and employed for statistical analysis. The goodness-of-fit measures revealed a satisfactory SEM model fit, which was verified by Khan *et al.*'s (2019) acceptable threshold measures: $\chi^2/df = 1.943$; RMSEA = 0.031; NFI = 0.988; TLI/NNFI = 0.991; CFI = 0.994; GFI = 0.974; and SRMR = 0.014. The constrained-unconstrained common method factor (CMF) models were evaluated using a common method bias (CMB) measure.

Table 4 and Figure 1 show that standardized path β coefficients exhibited a positive relationship in terms of trust $\rightarrow$ involvement ($\beta = 0.755$, $p < 0.001$), involvement $\rightarrow$ perceived ease of use ($\beta = 0.644$, $p < 0.001$), and involvement $\rightarrow$ perceived usefulness ($\beta = 0.408$, $p < 0.001$), so H1–H3 were supported. A positive relationship was shown by perceived ease of use $\rightarrow$ perceived usefulness ($\beta = 0.468$, $p < 0.001$), so H4 was supported. The standardized path β coefficients exhibited positive relationships in terms of perceived ease of use $\rightarrow$ customer engagement ($\beta = 0.570$, $p < 0.001$), trust $\rightarrow$ customer engagement ($\beta = 0.269$, $p < 0.001$), perceived usefulness $\rightarrow$ customer engagement ($\beta = 0.067$, $p < 0.05$), so H5–H7 were supported and confirmed. Positive relationships were also displayed by involvement $\rightarrow$ customer engagement ($\beta = 0.172$, $p < 0.001$), customer engagement $\rightarrow$ intention to purchase ($\beta = 0.225$, $p < 0.001$), and trust $\rightarrow$ intention to purchase ($\beta = 0.515$, $p < 0.001$), so H8–H10 were supported. A negative relationship was shown by perceived ease of use $\rightarrow$ intention to purchase ($\beta = 0.468$, $p < 0.001$), so H11 was rejected. Lastly, a positive relationship was shown by perceived usefulness $\rightarrow$ intention to purchase ($\beta = 0.219$, $p < 0.001$), so H12 was supported.

Table 1 Reliability and validity constructs							
Constructs	Items	FL	M	SD	AVE	CR	Cronbach's α
Trust (TR) Mallat <i>et al.</i> (2008), Islam and Rahman (2016)	Marketing communications with emojis are credible	0.815	3.88	1.023	0.823	0.949	0.951
	Marketing communications with emojis are trustworthy and secure	0.950					
	I can trust brands that use emojis	0.922					
Involvement (INV) Zaichkowsky (1985), Kim and Hahn (2015)	Emojis are reliable when used by brands and products	0.894					
	Marketing communications with emojis are interesting to me	0.921	3.86	1.037	0.837	0.939	0.938
	My level of interest with brands and products is high, which include emojis	0.906					
Perceived ease of use (PEOU) Venkatesh and Davis (2000), Mallat <i>et al.</i> (2008)	I am very involved with the use of emojis to convey meaning by brands	0.895					
	Emojis in digital platforms are easy to use	0.805	4.05	0.914	0.756	0.925	0.928
	The use of emojis in brand digital platforms are easy to interpret	0.809					
	Brands can easily use/include emojis every time they text and/or post	0.813					
	Viewing emojis that are used by brands requires minimal effort	0.801					
Perceived usefulness (PU) Venkatesh and Davis (2000), Mallat <i>et al.</i> (2008)	Emojis improve the meaning of the message from brands and products	0.864	3.99	0.944	0.769	0.930	0.933
	Emojis in marketing communications are convenient	0.849					
	Emojis in marketing communications improve efficiency	0.817					
	Marketing communications with emojis provide relevant information	0.736					
	I can engage with brands that use emojis anytime	0.773	3.95	1.014	0.781	0.935	0.938
Customer engagement (CE) engagement Islam and Rahman (2016), Sahoo and Pillai (2017)	I always respond to the marketing communications, which include emojis	0.809					
	Emojis effectively influence my level of online engagement with brands	0.796					
	Emojis are engaging when used by brands and products	0.803					
Intention to purchase (ITP) Duffett (2015), Starr (2021)	Marketing communications with emojis increase purchase intent of featured products	0.874	3.81	1.040	0.838	0.954	0.957
	Emojis usage by brands and products have a positive impact on my purchase decisions	0.953					
	I will use marketing communications with emojis to purchase a featured product	0.971					
	I will use marketing communications with emojis to buy online	0.967					
Source: Authors own work							

Table 2 Component correlation matrix

Constructs	CE	PEOU	PU	TR	INV	ITB
Customer engagement	0.884					
Perceived ease of use	0.411	0.869				
Perceived usefulness	0.545	0.538	0.877			
Trust	0.584	0.523	0.627	0.907		
Involvement	0.478	0.533	0.601	0.593	0.915	
Intention to purchase	0.646	0.433	0.635	0.643	0.556	0.915

Note: The diagonals show square root of AVE and the other data signify the correlations

Source: Authors own work

Table 3 Heterotrait-monotrait ratio

Constructs	CE	PEOU	PU	TR	INV	ITB
Customer engagement						
Perceived ease of use	0.630					
Perceived usefulness	0.627	0.735				
Trust	0.685	0.628	0.709			
Involvement	0.692	0.660	0.673	0.711		
Intention to purchase	0.641	0.562	0.510	0.587	0.624	

Note: Discriminant validity is affirmed when the heterotrait-monotrait ratio is < 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015)

Source: Authors own work

Table 4 Hypotheses results

Hypotheses	Relationships	β	<i>p</i> -values	T-statistics	Results
H1	Trust → involvement	0.755	< 0.001**	36.413	Supported
H2	Involvement → perceived ease of use	0.644	< 0.001**	26.604	Supported
H3	Involvement → perceived usefulness	0.408	< 0.001**	16.287	Supported
H4	Perceived ease of use → perceived usefulness	0.468	< 0.001**	18.683	Supported
H5	Perceived ease of use → customer engagement	0.570	< 0.001**	19.822	Supported
H6	Trust → customer engagement	0.269	< 0.001**	11.596	Supported
H7	Perceived usefulness → customer engagement	0.067	< 0.05*	2.264	Supported
H8	Involvement → customer engagement	0.172	< 0.001**	4.936	Supported
H9	Customer engagement → intention to purchase	0.225	< 0.001**	7.807	Supported
H10	Trust → intention to purchase	0.515	< 0.001**	17.841	Supported
H11	Perceived ease of use → intention to purchase	-0.194	< 0.001**	-4.756	Rejected
H12	Perceived usefulness → intention to purchase	0.219	< 0.001**	6.155	Supported

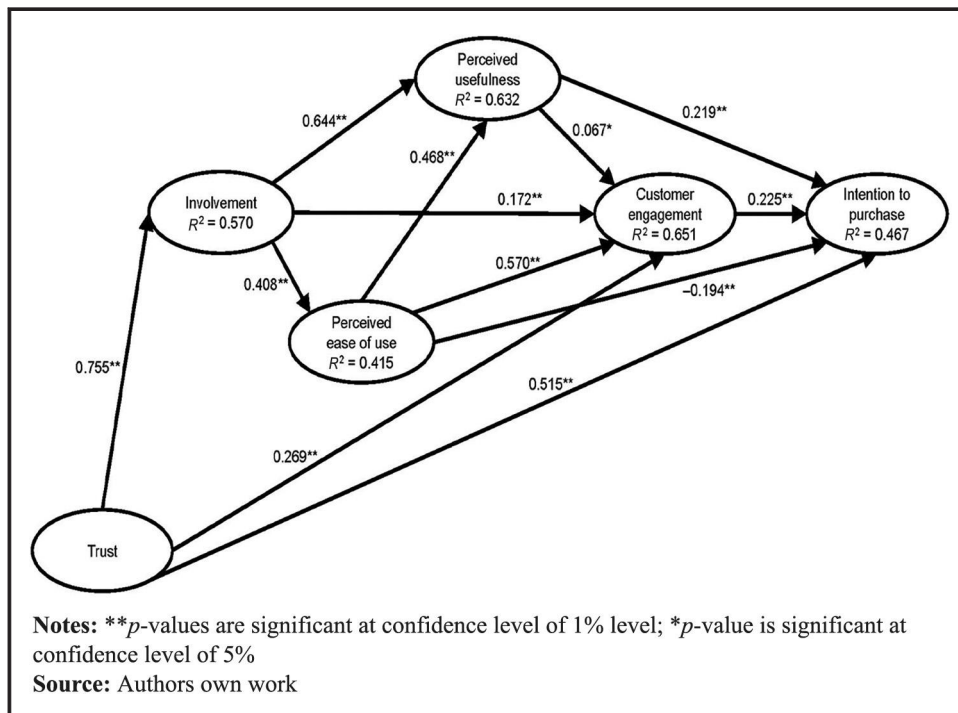
Notes: ***p*-values are significant at confidence level of 1% level; **p*-value is significant at confidence level of 5%

Source: Authors own work

SEM was utilized to consider the hypothesized emoji digital marketing communication attitudinal relationships. Trust explained 57.0% of the involvement variance; involvement explained 41.5% of the perceived ease of use variance; involvement and perceived ease of use explained 63.2% of the perceived usefulness variance; perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and trust explained 65.1% of the customer engagement variance; trust and customer engagement explained 46.7% of the perceived intention to purchase variance. The significance, standardized path beta (β) coefficients, and total explained variance are exhibited in Figure 1.

5. Discussion and conclusions

There was a significant difference between the respondents in that emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in a positive trust and involvement relationship.

Figure 1 Emojis in digital marketing communications estimated model

Research has established parallel interactions between trust and involvement among the Gen Z cohort (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Customers who trust a brand are more likely to be involved with the brand's emoji-based digital marketing communications. Emojis make a message easier to interpret and can be useful as an effective marketing technique to develop a strong young customer base. The above-mentioned findings found a positive relationship between involvement and perceived ease of use and therefore substantiate that emoji usage in digital marketing communications led to positive attitudes. Research confirms the findings of the current study, in other words, that involvement is related to perceived ease of use in digital marketing communications (Liebeskind *et al.*, 2021). Hence, it can be concluded that emoji digital marketing communications are understood and favorably perceived by Gen Z consumers. The study found a positive relationship that was significant between involvement and perceived usefulness due to emoji digital marketing communications. The Gen Z cohort is accustomed to the use of emojis, and they prefer emojis to words since emojis express content variety in a straightforward way, which enhances their involvement and perceived usefulness among the cohort. Jung *et al.* (2021) reveal that involvement has an association with perceived usefulness. Emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in a positive relationship between perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. Cavaleiro *et al.* (2022) found that participants who reported that they used emoji frequently also thought emojis were useful and easy to use.

There was a positive relationship that was significant in terms of perceived ease of use and customer engagement among the Gen Z cohort when emojis were used in digital marketing communications. Other research agreed that perceived usefulness was related to customer engagement (Kang *et al.*, 2020; McShane *et al.*, 2021). Emojis in digital marketing communications are useful because they evoke consumer emotions and encourage consumers to express themselves; further, it has been found that emojis convey that the transmitted messages of campaigns are informative and effective, making them attractive, creative, and innovative (Ko *et al.*, 2022), which was corroborated by this study. The use of emojis in digital

marketing communications resulted in a positive relationship that was significant in terms of trust and customer engagement. Research corroborates the findings of the current study (Casado-Molina *et al.*, 2022). Emojis are recognized as a vital, easy-to-implement tool that managers can strategically use in this ever-changing technology. Hence, it is critical that brands pay close attention to how they can use emojis to attract customers and engage them while building trust. The use of emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in a positive perceived usefulness and customer engagement association. Research showed that perceived usefulness is related to customer engagement (McShane *et al.*, 2021). Emojis can be misinterpreted sometimes, but with the correct usage and in the right context, they may lead to customer engagement due to the perceived usefulness of the marketing communications, which was confirmed by this study.

The research showed a positive relationship that was significant between involvement and customer engagement due to emoji digital marketing communications. Cavaleiro *et al.* (2022) confirm that emojis are frequently utilized in marketing communications with the goal of enhancing consumer involvement and boosting customer engagement. Hence, the incorporation of emojis in various digital promotional contexts stimulates more positive emotions and creates positive attitudes towards digital marketing communications in terms of increased customer engagement and intention to purchase, which is substantiated by this study's results and Sawmong's (2022) research. Emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in a positive relationship in terms of trust and intention to purchase. Young consumers are more likely to buy a product if the advertisement contains emoji, since the more positive the perception of the advertisement, the greater its influence on consumers (Dmitrieva, 2019). Several investigations found comparable relationships between trust and intention to purchase in emoji digital marketing communications (Ma and Wang, 2021; Starr, 2021). This study concluded that the use of emojis in brand communication on digital media can increase customer trust and intention to purchase among young customers.

A significant negative association was shown between perceived ease of use and intention to purchase among the Gen Z cohort when emojis were used in digital marketing communications, which is divergent from the results of other studies. Emojis and emoticons found in stickers can be used as powerful marketing communication tools and were to positively influence the perceived ease of use and behavioral intentions or purchase intentions relationships (Kang *et al.*, 2022; Sawmong, 2022). The divergent result could possibly be explained by the fact that the aforementioned studies considered multiple cohorts (and did not specifically target Gen Z); eastern countries (South Korea and Thailand, respectively) versus an African nation viewpoint; and mainly focused on personality traits (as opposed to explicitly digital marketing communications). The study yielded a significant positive relationship between perceived usefulness and intention to purchase due to emoji digital marketing communications, which is confirmed by several other studies that investigated the relationship in terms of emoji and emoticon stickers (Al-Marroof *et al.*, 2019; Kang *et al.*, 2022). This study provides significant theoretical and practical implications, which contribute to the knowledge of the extended TAM, digital marketing, and the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications in South Africa, which will be detailed in the ensuing section.

6. Theoretical and managerial implications

6.1 Theoretical implications

From a scientific point of view, this study contributes to the developing field of emoji and digital marketing research by providing new insights and a better understanding of the attitudes towards and usage of emojis in the context of digital marketing among young consumers. First, in parallel with prior research, the findings of this study show that the use of emojis in digital marketing communications led to customer engagement and intention to purchase (Dmitrieva, 2019; Baek *et al.*, 2022; Cavaleiro *et al.*, 2022). This means that the

use of emojis in digital media platforms by brands positively influences customer engagement and intention to purchase.

Second, this study also extends prior research on the TAM, which was developed as an instrument to determine information technology acceptance, to explain young consumers' voluntary usage of emojis in digital marketing platforms (Purwanto *et al.*, 2020; Kang *et al.*, 2022; Sawmong, 2022). Unlike the traditional TAM, this study considered emoji usage in digital marketing communications by integrating involvement, trust, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, customer engagement, and intention to purchase, thus extending the TAM. The study results produced various positive associations between the above-mentioned variables, viz. trust and involvement; involvement and the perceived ease of use; involvement and perceived usefulness; perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness; trust and customer engagement; perceived usefulness and customer engagement; involvement and customer engagement; customer engagement and intention to purchase; trust and intention to purchase; and perceived usefulness and intention to purchase, respectively, to form a new TAM in relation to emojis used in digital marketing communications. The one exception was a negative relationship between perceived ease of use and intention to purchase. These results highlight the fact that involving emojis in digital marketing communications is useful as they can be interesting and involve young consumers, as well as changing their perceptions and attitudes towards digital marketing communications. The findings add to our knowledge of the customer buying process; emojis are safe to use, and they stimulate interest in marketing communications. These findings contribute to the growing literature on the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications and their ability to increase efficiency. Emojis play an important role in attracting attention, stimulating interactions, and improving the consumer experience as well as intent to purchase (Das *et al.*, 2019; Cavaleiro *et al.*, 2022). It is possible to increase customer engagement and intention to purchase by including emoji in brand communications on digital media because doing so makes organizations appear more playful, which leads to increased customer engagement and intention to purchase (Dmitrieva, 2019; Smits, 2021). Hence, the current study provided a significant addition to the TAM theory in the field of advertising and Gen Z cohort research that emoji usage in digital marketing communications positively influences various associations between trust, involvement, perceived ease of use, and perceived usefulness, which ultimately has a favorable influence on customer engagement and intention to purchase among Gen Z consumers.

6.2 Managerial implications

Organizations and brands should take this digital language seriously because the use of emojis in digital media marketing communications has numerous advantages for advertisers. First, emojis appeal to the emotional side and trust of the consumer, creating a safe space for a consumer to engage with what they relate to. Thus, brands should focus on using more emojis in their digital marketing communications to create emotional connections with younger consumers, as this is important for a brand message to reflect their brand image. Emojis may influence this brand image in a positive way in the long run, and they are beneficial for building trust, involvement, and forging lasting relationships with younger consumers. Second, emojis allow brands to personalize the message they want to convey to their target audience. According to the findings of this study, Gen Z uses emojis every time they go online because they are used to them. With their short attention span, emojis help hold that attention while communicating a message before their next scroll. By adding emojis to digital marketing communications, brands could create appealing and involving content, which could result in an increase in customer engagement and intention to purchase. Third, emojis are useful, easy to use, involving, and considered trustworthy (Das *et al.*, 2019; McShane *et al.*, 2021), as corroborated by the findings of this study. Given the ability of emojis to attract attention, stimulate interest, and intensify a brand's emotional

expression, organizations should use them, but keep in mind that emoji effects can vary depending on their fit (Wang *et al.*, 2023).

The current study found some significant results that brands should take note of when targeting younger consumers (members of Gen Z) on digital platforms to enhance customer engagement and intention to purchase. When utilizing emojis in digital marketing communications, brands should ensure that they are easy to use and interpret and can be used at any time with minimal effort (perceived ease of use). These can be used by brands in emails to add a bit of color or personality; emojis can intensify a message, improve efficiency, and provide relevant information; and they are perceived as credible, trustworthy, and secure (trust). Emojis humanize a brand, which may make younger customers feel more connected to the brand and as if they are interacting with a person their own age. Emojis are interesting to a younger customer regarding the message and products offered on digital platforms (involvement), especially when brands share content using emojis that invite younger customers to share their thoughts, which will facilitate favorable customer engagement and intention to purchase. Brands should also ensure that emojis lead young customers to react, share, and respond to the brand message (customer engagement). Brands could increase engagement by inviting younger customers to interact with a brand's posts in creative and entertaining ways by using emojis, which could have a positive impact on younger customers' purchase decisions. Brands could create customized emojis that can be used to purchase products by the younger generation, which could facilitate sustainable relationships, customer satisfaction, customer engagement, and increased purchase intentions and sales.

6.3 Limitations and future research

This research includes several limitations. First, this study specifically measured engagement and intention to purchase attitudes. However, it is possible that customer reactions may differ, and there are differences in what respondents report when completing a survey, which limits their responses. A qualitative study could be conducted to allow respondents to respond more extensively, and researchers could investigate a broader range of variables that can influence young consumers' perceptions of the use of emojis in digital media marketing. Second, the research sample included the Gen Z cohort but only focused on those aged 16–25 years, whereas future research should focus on the younger Gen Z (10–15 years) cohort members and different cohorts. This may aid in determining the impact of emoji marketing on the group that is not yet legally permitted to handle their own digital purchases. Third, this study is an initial attempt at conducting an empirical study of consumer engagement and intention to purchase in response to marketing communications that used emojis on various digital platforms. Future research directions could include testing emoji use in various advertising contexts, such as electronic word-of-mouth and influencer marketing, to determine whether customers engage because of the person who shared the content or because of the emoji usage. Lastly, the study sampled South African Gen Z respondents whose attitudes and behaviors may differ from those of global Gen Z members, particularly those from developed countries and also from other developing countries (Axcell and Ellis, 2023). These main distinctions could include inequities in education, unemployment, size of population, disposable income, and social class divides (Duffett, 2017). Therefore, future research might focus on other parts of the world to gain a broader geographical and cultural perspective on emoji usage and adoption from an international perspective.

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