Cape Peninsula University of Technology

INFLUENCE OF EMOJIS IN DIGITAL MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS ON CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT AND INTENTION TO PURCHASE AMONG GENERATION Z IN CAPE TOWN

By

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ABSTRACT

Over 3 500 emojis are available to consumers and social media marketers, but despite the popularity of emojis on digital media, marketing research on emojis is still limited. As digital technologies have advanced, digital communications have become an essential part of our daily lives, resulting in the development of new language forms such as emojis. The Generation Z cohort is known as mobile prodigies for a reason: they are attuned to the digital world and use it to express their values. Generation Z (members of Gen Z) cannot be targeted solely through traditional marketing communication appeals because they communicate about their ethnicity and culture in a variety of ways, including the visual language. Emojis are used by marketers to humanise brand voice and elicit emotional responses from intended audiences. However, little is known about how people perceive emojis and the reactions they elicit.

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 in Cape Town, South Africa. A primary objective of the study explored the effect that emojis have on Generation Z's engagement and intention to purchase. Secondary objectives sought to ascertain what influence demographic factors have on customer engagement and intention to purchase due to emojis. Furthermore, other secondary objectives established what influence usage factors have on customer engagement and intention to purchase due to the use of emojis.

Following the descriptive research approach, quantitative research was used in this study. This study employed a non-probability sampling strategy that combined purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. A questionnaire (self-administered) was utilised to test the effectiveness of using emojis to increase consumer engagement and intention to purchase. The questionnaire was distributed to respondents via a combination of online and hardcopy surveys. The former was done by sending out a Google Forms link via various digital platforms including email, and the latter by circulating the questionnaires at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) District Six campus and surrounding residences). Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software was used to capture and analyse data for this study. The CPUT Business and Management Sciences Faculty Ethics Committee granted permission to conduct the study and fieldwork, and prior to participating in the study, a total sample size of 1 000 respondents provided consent. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to measure and analyse the relationships between the abovementioned variables.

The primary research objective of this study was met when it was demonstrated that emojis in digital marketing communications have a positive influence on Generation Z's customer engagement and intention to purchase. The findings yielded positive relationships between the

variables, namely between involvement and the perceived ease of use; perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness; and perceived usefulness and customer engagement. Positive relationships ere also found between trust and involvement; trust and customer engagement; trust and intention to purchase; and customer engagement and intention to purchase to form a new TAM model in relation to emojis used in digital marketing communications. This enquiry revealed that the respondents who always and often used emojis, often and always engaged in brand messages that included emojis, spent a greater number of hours of online engagement, and had higher average online monthly digital spending, exhibited the most positive customer engagement and/or intention to purchase attitudes in terms of digital marketing communications among the members of Gen Z. The majority of survey respondents were from the Black, followed by Coloured, populations which also demonstrated the highest levels of customer engagement and intention to purchase thanks to emoji digital marketing communications. This study also demonstrates that the Coloured population group are quite likely to engage with emoji brand messages on digital platforms, and that using emojis in digital marketing communications also influences this population group's desire to make purchases.

This study adds to the growing field of emoji and digital marketing research by providing new insights and a better understanding of attitudes toward and usage of emojis, as well as the frequency with which these emojis are used in the context of digital marketing to the Generation Z consumers. The research further adds to the body of knowledge that young consumers are willing to spend more money on digital purchases as a result of marketing communications that use emojis. So, the current study significantly contributed to TAM theory in the field of advertising and Generation Z attitudes research.

KEYWORDS

Customer engagement

Digital marketing communications

Emojis

Emoticons

Generation Z

Intention to purchase

Involvement

Perceived ease of use

Perceived usefulness

Social media

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

Trust

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TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Customer engagement	This refers to an emotional condition caused by the customer's pursuit of higher psychological needs during the transaction process, which includes emotions such as recognition, respect, and self-realisation (Cao et al., 2022:1-13; Handayani & Sari, 2022:48-59).
Digital marketing communications	Digital marketing communication entails electronic communication used mostly by organisations to advertise their offerings to their consumer market (Bashirzadeh et al., 2022:58-76).
Emojis	These are visual symbols, images, characters that depict not only the expressions of faces, but also ideas and thoughts, including celebrations, climate, feelings, emotions, and many other factors – all are used in communication based on text (Li et al., 2019:1748-1763; Pfeifer et al., 2022:1-11).
Emoticons	Emoticons are depictions of facial expressions in message-based interaction where the communications network is incomplete in the distribution of words and punctuation (Ptaszynski et al., 2020:103-113; Gamage, 2021:26-31). An emoticon is created by combining punctuation marks, letters and numbers and used to represent various facial expressions (Persson, 2018).
Generation Z	Generation Z (Generation Fluid/Digital Natives/Generation Fluid) are people born between the years 1997 and 2015. Members of the Gen Z cohort is highly attuned to the use of communication and media technology such as the internet, text messaging and instant messaging, as well as the use of mobile phones and mobile applications (apps) (Lerm, 2022).
Intention to purchase	The intention to purchase reflects the probability that a user will buy a brand, which is influenced by the interplay of customer requirements, quality and brand attitude and behaviour (Chakraborty, 2019:142-161; Mladenović et al., 2022:1-18).
Involvement	Involvement is the degree to which the customer considers the product search, buying, and use are significant to their lives, and therefore acts as an antecedent or predictor of purchasing behaviours (O'Cass & Siahtiri, 2014:284-300; Mortimer et al., 2022:1494-1517).
Perceived ease of use	Perceived ease of use is the level to which an individual asserts that using a centralised device would be easy to use (Davis, 1989:319-340).

Perceived usefulness	Perceived usefulness is the individual view of users who believe that the use of specific innovations will enhance their work effectiveness (Davis, 1989:319-340).
Social media	These are social platforms where people from around the world can connect, which commonly include internet sites, social networking and apps that allow users create and communicate information or engage in social communication (Joshi et al., 2019:101-109; Creevey et al., 2022:99-129). Examples include Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, TikTok, Snapchat, WhatsApp and many others. Social media have become a modern channel for marketers to communicate and reach their clients, as well as a new intermediary linking to facilitate e-commerce (eMarketing Institute, 2018a).
Technology Acceptance Model	The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) helps describe the acknowledged effectiveness and purpose regarding the social impact and behavioural instrumental procedures of technology usage and acceptance (Davis, 1989:319-340). Stated in simple terms, TAM demonstrates how users arise to adopt and utilise technology. Venkatesh and Davis (2000:186-204) extended the model to add variables such as purchase intention
Trust	Trust is defined as whether users are prepared to accept the innovation presented after considering various characteristics such as security and convenience (Shaw, 2014:449-459)

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

1.1. Introduction

This chapter is divided into several sections, including the research study background. This, in turn includes literature on information surrounding the evolution of digital usage and emojis that are now used as part of the text and alone and still make sense to the receiver, and consumer attitudes toward the use of these emojis in digital marketing communications, particularly among Generation Z consumers. The research problem statement and research rationale are also thoroughly explained. This chapter includes the research objectives, research questions, and hypotheses for this study, which include four independent variables (involvement, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and trust) that were tested for linear relationships regarding customer engagement and intention to purchase. This chapter also includes sections on the literature that introduce digital marketing communications, emojis, emoji use in digital marketing communications, Generation Z, consumer attitudes, and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Lastly, this chapter discusses the design of the methodology and research, the dependability and validity of the research questionnaire and findings, ethical considerations, and the inquiry's significance regarding its contribution to the fundamental corpus of knowledge.

Although emojis are frequently used in digital marketing communications, little is known about how they affect customer engagement and intention to purchase among Generation Z customers in Cape Town. This gap in the literature will be filled in part by the current research. The results will subsequently provide insights for how marketers may communicate with and engage Generation Z consumers more effectively using emojis.

1.2 Background to research problem

1.2.1 Overview

Digital adoption (in the form of social media, instant messaging, blogs, video posting platforms, mobile phones and shopping apps) continues to increase, including features that encourage customer engagement and involvement in marketing communications. Emojis are digital pictures that symbolise 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 language (Bai et al., 2019:1-16; Joubert, 2021; Hand et al., 2022:1-12; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Emojis (the younger generation of emoticons) are popularly used in digital platforms to illustrate concepts and ideas. Mobile phones enable consumers to

engage in digital platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, email and many other digital media, which facilitate the sharing and transferring information via emojis. 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 (Coyle & Carmichael, 2019:181-189; Gawne & McCulloch, 2019:1-21; Jaeger et al., 2019:895-907; Jones et al., 2020:1-10; Ptaszynski et al., 2020:103-113; Robus et al., 2020:1-11; Gamage, 2021:26-31). Emoji usage has increased rapidly, paralleling a significant shift in how people communicate and how they want messages delivered to them.

Technology has made it easy for an organisation to communicate with its customers and clients by using digital channels and language. Bezirgan and Kaya (2019:556-569) and Ko et al. (2022:1-17) show that marketers are connecting with customers via digital language and are beginning to understand how to reach the younger generation. A number of studies have examined the use of emojis as a rapidly growing symbolic language (Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69; Guibon et al., 2016; Ljubesic & Fiser, 2016:82-89; Das et al., 2017:135-139; Montes-Mico et al., 2017:1-5; An et al., 2018:423-428; Bhattacharya et al., 2019:242-247; Jaeger et al., 2019:895-907; Shao et al., 2020:1-9; Smith & Rose, 2020:301-319; Hand et al., 2022:1-12). Hence, given the utility of emojis, their incorporation into digital marketing communications could result in positive customer attitudes toward brands, and increase brand followers and a strong customer base that could grow customer engagement and intention to purchase.

1.2.2 Research necessity

Little is known in South Africa about emojis and especially the influence that emoji usage has on the engagement and intention to purchase of consumers with regard to marketing communications (Li et al., 2018:1804-1820; Mwaba et al., 2017:13-20). Emojis are thought to shape one's personality or represent one's character (Huang et al., 2022:75-79). Naidu (2022:13-14) adds that even though South Africa has yet to hear a case involving the use and interpretation of an emoji, defamatory content is subject to laws and case law, and emojis can carry data messages that are admissible. In other words, everyone can quickly and directly understand what the emojis are trying to convey, and they can express emotions that words alone cannot express. Mwaba et al. (2017:13-20) and Casado-Molina et al. (2022:315-333) demonstrate that affect appears to have a positive relationship with a visual content preference on social media platforms when it comes to nonverbal communication and observed social networking site (SNS) trends like emojis. Studies conducted in South Africa examined the nature and the usage of emojis to convey meaning that included the younger generation amongst other cohorts and were conducted in the same country as the current study (Ndyave

& Kyobe, 2019:743-749; Katz et al., 2021:3955-3966). However, the focus of these studies was not on the usage of emojis in marketing, though they did consider various digital platforms.

Emojis have been used by a majority of the world's online population, and the number is growing (Messick, 2020; Buchholz, 2022; Ko et al., 2022:1-17). The use of emojis continues to proliferate even with the global outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, which delayed the release of certain emojis (Archibald-Powell, 2020; Hern, 2020). The Unicode Consortium attempts to obtain public suggestions for brand new emojis to be considered for inclusion in the standard, as well as plans for 2024 to involve extra new emojis as well as other character types (Constable, 2022). So far there up to 3 491 emojis have been released between 1995 and 2023 (Buchholz, 2022). This presents an opportunity for organisations to utilise emojis in order to communicate their message to their chosen target markets in order to improve customer engagement and trust; moreover, it helps organisations drive engagement on digital social media platforms like Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, and Instagram. Therefore, organisations need to be innovative if they are to attract the attention of the prospective customers and to build relationships with current young customers, especially technologically sophisticated ones. Priporas et al. (2017:374-381) and Priporas (2020:147-162) add that smart technologies have a major influence on the consumer experience of the members of Gen Z. This generation is also very active in terms of sharing content and engaging on the posts that resonate with them, hence they are referred to as emotional communicators. This young cohort uses emojis and interprets them to connect their personal background with their views and opinions. Lee and Hsieh (2019:849-963) agree that the use of branded emotions in engaging with the consumers leads to consumers' willingness to buy. Therefore, it is vital for brands and organisations to understand the use of emojis as part of the brand's marketing tactic and its influence on the customers' willingness to engage.

Emojis are digital pictograms that are widely used in social media, emails, text messages, and other digital conduits. They are commonly perceived as light-hearted (almost humorous forms of communication) and have become essential components of global digital communication (Ge & Gretzel, 2018:1272-1295; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Emojis have become a cultural phenomenon because they influence how people express themselves across cultures. Furthermore, users believe that emojis make conversations more enjoyable and people appear more approachable and cordial (Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69; Aranguiz, 2019; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Organisations are increasingly improving their methods of communicating with this group, and with the assistance of technology, they are able to initiate new and innovative ideas to better convey their brand messages, particularly emotionally. Posts that connect with consumers by incorporating marketing communications with emojis are being made available on digital platforms (Huang et al., 2022:75-79; Ko et al., 2022:1-17). De Lanerolle (2012) and

Dlodlo and Dhurup (2013:329-338) are of the opinion that even though Generation Z and Generation Y spend a similar amount of time on digital platforms, the Members of Gen Z cohort generally favours visual-priority platforms. Generation Z also make more use of emojis, which compels organisations to make use of these icons in their marketing communications, to create appeal and stimulate customer engagement and intention to purchase among the rapid increase in young mobile users. Furthermore, emojis provide organisations with the visual content to stimulate engagement that the younger generation prefers.

1.2.3 Research gaps

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, a number of studies were conducted on emoticons and emojis to convey meaning (Thompson & Filik, 2016:105-120; Das et al., 2017:135-139; Leung & Chan, 2017:76-95; Zareen et al., 2017:256-262; Daniel & Camp, 2018:208-213; Ge & Herring, 2018:1-62; Jaeger et al., 2019:895-907; Smith & Rose, 2020:301-319; Ptaszynski et al., 2020:103-113; Robus et al., 2020:1-11), which provided a basis for study of the origins of emoji communications. So, more research is needed on emoji interpretation and flexibility to provide greater understanding of this new form of communication. Some research was conducted on the nature and usage of emojis/emoticons (Wolf, 2000:827-833; Tossell et al., 2012:659-663; Thoresen & Anderson, 2013:1-95; Skovholt et al., 2014:780-797; Novak et al., 2015:1-22; Bliss-Carroll, 2016; Vidal et al., 2016:119-128; Chairunnisa & Benedictus, 2017:120-126; Rodrigues et al., 2018:392-405; Bai et al., 2019:1-16; Brito et al., 2020:1495-1517). There is a gap in understanding the use of emojis and how this new visual language influences attitudes in relation to brands and products. Other inquiries considered emojis in cultural terms (Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69; Li et al., 2019:1748-1763; Chui, 2020:108-118; Park & El Mimouni, 2020:1-17; Temelkova, 2022). However, this study does not address the role that emojis can play as a visual language for all generations, but does consider the youngest cohort, gender, and population group.

It is crucial for organisations to use emojis effectively for customer engagement, since if not effectively utilised, these icons may negatively affect the quality of online response due to divergent message interpretations. Several studies investigated emojis in terms of engagement (Arya et al., 2018:618-670; Ge & Gretzel, 2018:1272-1295; Lee & Hsieh, 2019:849-963; Coyle & Carmichael, 2019:181-189; Zhou et al., 2019:1-9; Baek et al., 2021:1-15; Pınarbaşı & Kırcova, 2021:90-103; Ko et al., 2022:1-17), while other research explored emojis in terms of purchase intention (Hill, 2016:1-78; Das et al., 2019:147-156; Dmitrieva, 2019; Liu et al., 2019:263-277; Lee et al., 2021:1-15; Distel et al., 2022:134-145; Mladenović et al., 2022:1-18). However, none of these studies considered the influence of emojis in digital marketing communications on customer engagement and intention to purchase among

Generation Z. Emojis and emoticons are imperative tools for marketing communications and maintaining relevance among young cohorts, however, more research is needed to determine how various emoji uses affect outcomes, as well as online behaviour. Further research using larger samples and various age groups is also necessary (Vangelov, 2017:131-149; Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55; Yakin & Eru, 2019:83-100; Smith & Rose, 2020:301-319; Bashirzadeh et al., 2022:58-76; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333; Distel et al., 2022:134-145), especially among Generation Z. Additional research on the effects of sender and responder of emojis across varying contexts, demographic groups and cultures is mandated (Coyle & Carmichael, 2019:181-189; Yakin & Eru, 2019:83-100; Jones et al., 2020:1-10; Smith & Rose, 2020:301-319; Umraliyeva et al., 2022; Vasquez Rodriguez, 2022; Liu, 2023:372). Nonetheless, there is insufficient research about engagement and intention to purchase in emoji digital marketing communications within the Cape Town region.

Some studies investigated the use of emojis as a way of enhancing communication on digital platforms, but these did investigate what businesses can learn about their customers, based on their personal use of emojis through various channels (Beattie, 2017; Luangrath et al., 2017:98-107; Hauthal et al., 2018:1-21; Gawne & McCulloch, 2019:1 -21; Hao, 2020; Park & El Mimouni, 2020:1-17; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Furthermore, various studies focused on the rise of the emoji/emoticon adoption and its use in marketing and advertising communications; however, more research is needed to determine whether different emoji types, numbers, positions, and sizes used by brands are perceived as appropriate across different brands and product categories (Pavalanathan & Eisenstein, 2016:1-4; Highfield & Leaver, 2016:47-62; Hill, 2016:1-78; Vangelov, 2017:131-149; Doiron, 2018:1-11; Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55; Das et al., 2019:147-156; Chan & Leung, 2019:1-18; Yakin & Eru, 2019:83-100; Liu et al., 2019:263-277; Moussa, 2019:211-225; Ray, 2020; Kostial, 2021; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333; Cavalheiro et al., 2022:1-8). Though other studies considered emojis and their usage on digital marketing communications for customer engagement, additional enquiry is needed to examine the impact of the kind of emojis used on brand communications and how these are used by brands on digital platforms and their followers and intention to purchase (Pınarbaşı & Kırcova, 2021:90-103; Raco, 2021; Smits, 2021; Yassin, 2021:326-334; Bashirzadeh et al., 2022:58-76; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333). There has been a gap in research on attitudes towards the use of indicators of customer response advertising to gain a greater understanding of how emoji alter the impression of advertising activities, as well as the customer reactions to emoji-based advertisements (Das et al., 2019:147-156; Dmitrieva, 2019; Huang et al., 2020:1-9; Pınarbaşı & Kırcova, 2021:90-103; Wang et al., 2023:1-14).

There is still a gap in testing a wider variety of features, the presence of content components, and analysis of the influence on consumer engagement, but content integrated with emojis in marketing communications results in greater responses, which will increase customer

engagement (Casado-Molina, 2022:315-333). Previous studies considered the effects of consumer traits (e.g., involvement, intention to buy and perceived responsiveness) on the attitudes towards new technology adoption and the constructs of the TAM (Balakrishnan & Manickavasagam, 2016:17-34; Busen et al., 2016:81-87; Coyle & Carmichael, 2019:181-189; Das et al., 2019:147-156; Liu et al., 2019:263-277; Huang et al., 2020:1-9; Srivastava & Roychoudhury, 2020:1-17). However, these studies did not investigate the attitudes towards emojis in marketing communications to enhance customer engagement and intention to purchase. Hence, this research will adopt and extend several TAM constructs (customer engagement, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, involvement, trust, and intention to purchase) concerning emojis in marketing communications and their influence on customer engagement.

Das et al. (2019:147-156) evaluated the effect of including emojis in advertising campaigns on the customers' buying intent, but further research is required to confirm the consequences of marketers' use of emojis in the broader communication context (Das et al., 2019:147-156; Li et al., 2019:1748-1763; Chui, 2020:108-118; Smith & Rose, 2020:301-319; Fakhry, 2021:49-60; Alcaraz et al., 2022:136-144; Cavalheiro et al., 2022:1-8). Various studies focused on specific social media platforms in brand marketing communication, which revealed a gap for additional research regarding different digital platforms and among different cohorts besides Generation Y (Beattie, 2017; Montes-Mico et al., 2017:1-5; An et al., 2018:423-428; Bosch & Revilla, 2018; Ge & Gretzel, 2018:1272-1295; Brito et al., 2020:1495-1517; Chui, 2020:108-118). Some studies focused on emojis, but there was a need for study to be done on larger samples and also to expand the research to other countries (Park et al., 2013:466-475; Andral & Larroque, 2016; Zareen et al., 2017:256-262; An et al., 2018:423-428; Arya et al., 2018:648-670; Rodrigues et al., 2018:392-405; Lee & Hsieh, 2019:849-963; Bhattacharya et al., 2019:242-247; Hsu & Chen, 2020:200-208; Pınarbaşı & Kırcova, 2021:90-103). Additionally, not much information was found about the individual differences of social media users and emojis usage or how and when emojis are effectively used (Beattie, 2017; Glikson et al., 2017:614-625; Tang & Hew, 2017:85-104; Daniel & Camp, 2018:208-213; Ge & Gretzel, 2018:1272-1295; Rodrigues et al., 2018:392-405; Troiano & Nante, 2018:528- 533; Lee & Hsieh, 2019:849-963; Li et al., 2019:1748-1763; Fakhry, 2021:49-60; Lee et al., 2021:1-15; Kostial, 2021; Bashirzadeh et al., 2022:58-76; Mladenović et al., 2022:1-18). Further research revealed the impact of marketing communications, but only in terms of the incorporation of emojis on customer engagement and intention to purchase among members of Gen Z (Chairunnisa & Benedictus 2017:120-126; Moussa, 2019:211-225; Coyle & Carmicheal, 2019:181-189; Zhou et al., 2019:1-9; Fakhry, 2021:49-60). There was a need for a study to consider the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications in different contexts and industries (Şener & Atar, 2016:229-237; Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55; Das et al., 2019:147-156; Lee et al., 2021:1-15; Cavalheiro et al., 2022:1-8; Distel et al., 2022:134-145; Wang et

al., 2023:1-14). Moreover, there was a need for more research in emoji usage in digital marketing communication in terms of culture (Garcia-Collart, 2020; Baek et al., 2021:1-15; Fakhry, 2021:49-60).

Balakrishnan and Manickavasagam (2016:17-34) and Duffett et al. (2019:1-13) found that several demographic and usage variables have an influence on a young consumer's cognitive attitudinal responses due to social media marketing communications. The theoretical significance of this study lies in the fact that there is a lack of knowledge about the influence of emoji usage on Generation Z consumer engagement and intention to purchase regarding marketing communications in Cape Town, South Africa. The current study adds to the customer-centric process by investigating a credible digital language when communicating with Generation Z. Emojis influence emotional reactions and perceived ambiguity, which in turn affect persuasion (such as the choice of a product) (Maiberger et al., 2023:1-21). Hence, the current study aims to investigate the influence of emoji marketing communications on customer engagement and intention to purchase across various digital platforms among Generation Z in Cape Town.

1.3 Problem statement

In today's marketing world, the social media revolution has changed communication, and also had a significant impact on marketing communication (Appel et al., 2020:79-95; Hand et al., 2022:1-12; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). The change has quickly altered the existing marketing, forming links between marketers and other consumers. The absence of distinct nonverbal cues in online-mediated marketing communication creates enormous challenges for marketers seeking to maintain customer relationships. This progression has created new opportunities and possibilities in trade and commerce to the point where it is altering how consumers respond to purchasing as a result of exposure (Appel et al., 2020:79-95; Casado-Molina, 2022:315-333). Emojis are often utilised to enrich the meaning conveyed in a message. It is a successful way to keep the conversation going and interest between two parties, which is essential for brands when adopting this strategy in their marketing communications. This study investigates emojis because younger consumers extensively use this digital language so emojis have huge potential for marketers to target the Gen Z cohort to stimulate engagement and intention to purchase.

Organisations use emojis in their marketing strategies for different reasons and goals. Gokalgler and Saatcioglu (2016:63-91); and Ko et al. (2022:1-17) suggest that the reason why brand managers and communication experts use emoji in their advertising should be investigated. In addition, various studies conducted research on the usage of emojis in their marketing communications for engagement (Baek et al., 2021:1-15; McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Nguyen & Sharkasi, 2021:63-73; Pınarbaşı & Kırcova, 2021:90-103; Raco, 2021; Smits,

2021; Yassin, 2021:326-334; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333; Distel et al., 2022:134-145; Zhang et al., 2022:616-630; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). It was found that more research is needed in terms of the emoji usage patterns in digital marketing communications, to accommodate the demographics and cultural backgrounds of target audiences across different digital platforms. The current study aims to represent the Gen Z cohort in terms of emoji usage in digital marketing communications across all digital platforms as a digital language understood by different cultural and population backgrounds. In the same way, research was conducted on the usage of emojis in digital marketing communication for the intention to purchase (Das et al., 2019:147-156; Dmitrieva, 2019; Huang et al., 2020:1-9; Lee et al., 2021:1-15; Ma & Wang, 2021:443-456; Mladenović et al., 2022:1-18). The above studies found that more research was needed to see if different emoji types, numbers, positions, and sizes have other effects on digital marketing communication. Naidu (2022:13-14) 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 (2020:1-105) suggests more research on whether the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications yields favourable outcomes. Cavalheiro et al. (2022:1-8) and Prada et al. (2022:1-10) also found that future research should expand the contexts in which emojis can be used, particularly for brands and organisations. 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.

Animals, plants, activities, gestures/body parts, and items are also used to represent a variety of emoji expressions in addition to face expressions, abstract ideas, thoughts and feelings, and things, which not only includes information regarding visual appearance like the eyes, but also conveys emotional information through the details of the eyes, mouth, and other parts of the face (Zhang et al., 2021:1-16). Huang et al. (2008:466–473) and Ko et al. (2022:1-17) report that using emoji in digital communication tends to help to show emotion, enhance the strength of messages and posts, and personalise interactions. However, there is a gap concerning whether emoticons can increase customer satisfaction through digital service relationships. Cavalheiro et al. (2022:1-8) found that there is a need for an investigation to comprehend how various brand communications may influence actual consumers' attitudes and behaviours toward a brand. 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 organisations' capabilities, there is no benefit from them in terms of customers' buying intention. However, a better understanding of the circumstances in which emoji have a negative impact and how it can change customer behaviour is still required. In contrast, it also is believed that people exposed to emoji

advertisements have greater buying intention than those exposed to non-emoji adverts (Das et al., 2019:147-156); and emoji advertisements also assist organisations to achieve their marketing objectives more efficiently (Dmitrieva, 2019; Ko et al., 2022:1-17; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Further, the study is required to determine whether different emoji types, numbers, positions, and sizes have effects and how these alter the perception of promotional messages. While this research topic has been touched by researchers, Casado-Molina et al. (2022:315-333) found that emojis are an important form of communication for brands, which still necessitates further research from scholars around the world.

Emojis are increasingly being used in digital marketing communications to engage with Generation Z consumers. However, there is a limited understanding of how emojis influence consumer attitudes and customer engagement among this demographic. This study aims to address this gap in the literature by investigating the impact of emojis on members of Gen Z's perceived ease of use, enjoyment, usefulness, trust, involvement, and intention to purchase.

1.4 Rationale and significance of the study

Communication has become more varied, so organisations are joining the online world and spending more of their resources to strengthen brand communications via versatility, uniqueness, and innovation (Vangelov, 2017:131-149; Florido-Benítez, 2022:1826-1856). Dmitrieva (2019) and Ko et al. (2022:1-17) further show that global digital advertising spending has increased significantly in recent years. More businesses are focusing on digital marketing strategies. In fact, digital media have surpassed traditional advertising channels in many countries. The presentation of emojis has caused an extreme change in the viability of the digital environment (Li et al., 2019:1748-1763; Leone, 2020:312-327; Lu et al., 2022:1-21). The importance of the current research is highlighted by the problems that today's marketers, advertisers, and organisations face due to advancing technology where creativity and elasticity are vital. Organisations are constantly developing products and or services, and accordingly, laws and regulations are developed to protect consumers against unfair and misleading advertising messages. Hence, innovative ways of targeting and appealing to the right audience, especially the younger generations, are necessary.

Organisations interact with images and symbols, and their dependence on smartphones has led to a lack of insight; this is Generation Z, a cohort of digital natives who should not be underestimated despite their youth (Digital School of Marketing, 2022). The Gen Z cohort is comfortable expressing themselves via an array of mobile devices, and marketing communications with emojis contribute to a new, uncommon, and more engaging way of catering to this targeted audience. Although Generation Z is perceived as a connected community with similar habits, technology has enabled the members of Gen Z members to engage with brands on their terms. Generation Z’s adaptability and speed in navigating media

platforms and apps may make them far more difficult to target (Digital School of Marketing, 2022). Hence, this study is expected to verify that emojis encourage customer engagement, primarily due to consumers' and organisations' rapid growth in emoji usage. Therefore, organisations are exploring how to attract the attention of the Members of Gen Z by targeting them in a simplified online language (Gamage, 2021:26-31).

Emojis are a modern communication concept, with up to 3 500 emojis expected before the end of 2023, and a growing number of online users are utilising emojis via a growing array of new symbols, which may become a separate language by 2023 (Buchholz, 2022). The primary purpose of this study is to examine the influence of emojis in marketing communication among Generation Z, highlighting various theoretical components that may have an immediate effect on customer engagement and intention to purchase. The results serve as a basis for organisations, marketers, and advertisers to help improve their competitiveness in the market by ensuring that customer preferences are fully understood and adapted to changing technology while developing marketing communication strategies.

1.5 Aim and objectives of the study

The main aim of this study is to investigate the influence of emojis on customer engagement among Generation Z.

The specific research objectives of the study are as follows:

1.5.1 Primary objective

- To determine the influence of perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, trust and involvement on customer engagement and intention to purchase due to emojis being used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z in Cape Town.

1.5.2 Secondary objectives

- To explore the influence of emojis in digital marketing communications on Generation Z's customer engagement and intention to purchase.
- To ascertain what influence demographical factors have on customer engagement and intention to purchase due to emojis being used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z.
- To establish what influence usage factors have on customer engagement and intention to purchase owing to the use of emojis in digital marketing communications among Generation Z.

1.6 Research questions/hypotheses

1.6.1 Research Questions

Primary question

- What influence do perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, trust and involvement have on customer engagement due to emojis being used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z in Cape Town?

Secondary questions

- What influence do emojis in digital marketing communications have on Generation Z's customer engagement and intention to purchase?
- What influence do demographical factors have on customer engagement and intention to purchase due to emojis being used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z?
- What influence do usage factors have customer engagement and intention to purchase owing to the use of emojis in digital marketing communications among Generation Z?

1.6.2 Hypotheses

Involvement is an entity's supposed significance to an individual based on fundamental needs, norms, and advantages (Zaichkowsky, 1985:341-352; Zhang et al., 2022:616-630). It is also proposed that user involvement influences perceived usefulness (Franz & Robey, 1986:329-356; Amoako-Gyampah, 2007:1232-1248). In an emoji/emoticon study, Jung et al. (2021:391-411) show that while using emoticons, perceived acceptance/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, emojis are frequently used by brands in marketing activities aimed at increasing customer involvement (Cavalheiro et al., 2022:1-8). This study demonstrates the use of emojis in digital marketing, taking into account digital platforms. The degree to which the object in question has personal relevance, emotional relevance, and substantial implications for the individual is referred to as innate involvement. According to participatory decision-making and organisational change theories, involving users in system development increases user commitment, acceptance, behavioural intention, usage, and satisfaction with the system (Amoako-Gyampah, 2007:1232-1248). Users who consider that a system has individual importance and appropriateness are more likely to perceive the system as useful in their work performance; therefore, inherent involvement is believed to be linked to perceived usefulness (Leso & Cortimiglia, 2022:215-23). Along the same lines, Chang and Hamid (2010:39-47)

contend that high involvement positively influences behavioural intentions. Perceived usefulness as a post-consumption anticipation is a significant belief that may affect future intention to do something, such as to engage (Kim, 2012:219-240). 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 (Dharma et al., 2022:13-20).

H1. Involvement has a positive effect on perceived usefulness due to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

Zaichkowsky (1985:341-352) and Zhang et al. (2022:616-630) interpret involvement as a person's assessment of the object's importance based on their inherent needs, values, and interests. Cheung et al. (2011:4-7), Chong et al. (2012:34-43), Kim and Hahn (2015:169-176), and Chan and Chong (2013:443-461) consider involvement in digital social platforms and m-commerce (mobile device commerce) as the amount of exhibited client enthusiasm and/or personal significance. Sawmong (2022:1-21) found that the willingness to use paid stickers in direct messages, like emoticons and emojis, is heavily influenced by perceptions of enjoyment and perceived ease of use. The above study is relevant to the current study because it was conducted in a developing country, and the quantitative research findings are comparable to the current study. Konrad et al. (2020:217-235) support the relevance of the abovementioned study by showing that even though emojis, stickers and emoticons are all graphicons, these have some differences. Emoticons are used to describe emotions like happiness and grief, whereas emojis are used to express a wide variety of activities and objects. Emojis are also more complex, expressive, and visually appealing than emoticons. Stickers are depictions or animations of figures that occasionally have text or phrases affixed to them. Stickers employ a wide range of behaviours, feelings, and moods to convey themselves, and are demonstrative rather than symbolic. The study by Amoako-Gyampah (2007:1232-1248) 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 of the users. In contrast, perceived usefulness impacts behavioural intention for low involvement (Chang & Hamid, 2010:39-47; Leso & Cortimiglia, 2022:215-23). In addition, involvement has interested researchers and has been found relevant to advertisements, products and even purchase intentions, which can be summed up as involving consumer needs, interest, and values in marketing communications (Zaichkowsky, 1985:341-352). However, this study seeks to reveal the effect an 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.

Perceived ease of use considers whether a person believes the technology is simple to use and useful to him/her, whereas perceived usefulness considers whether an individual perceives that making use of a particular technology will assist him/her perform better (Chang & Hamid, 2010:39-47). The perceived usefulness of the technology is thought to be influenced by its ease of use. Manganari et al. (2017:674-686), Ernungtyas (2018:218-224), Fan et al. (2020:444-445), and Raunio (2021) analyse the key factors that influence the intentions for using emoticons, emoji, and stickers in instant messaging (perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use). Kato et al. (2018:9-23) further show that the ease of transmitting emotions was the most frequently stated reason for the usefulness of emojis. The findings of the preceding studies are comparable to the current study, which considers emojis for messaging. The greater the ease of use of a technology, the greater the expected benefits in terms of performance enhancement (Davis, 1989:319-340; Amoako-Gyampah, 2007:1232-1248; Bonn et al., 2016:841-869). Similarly, Zhao et al. (2016:959-972) and Al-Gasawneh et al. (2022:439-448) found that in accord with TAM, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are important factors that can predict consumer service usage. Perceived usefulness is defined as the magnitude of belief that a specific system can improve an outcome (Jung et al., 2021:391-411). Some researchers investigated the relationship between perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness in e-commerce (Lee et al., 2012:819-827; Kanchanatanee et al., 2014:1-13; Moslehpour et al., 2018:234; Cho & Son, 2019:1-17; Keni, 2020:481-496; Mondol et al., 2021:368-586), in technology usage (Mohd Roslan et al., 2020:195-207; Zhao & Wang, 2020:1-21; Fan et al., 2021:1-12; Al-Gasawneh et al., 2022: 439-448; Widiar et al., 2023:1829-1844). Because the use of emojis in digital advertisements is still in its early stages in this country, it is critical to investigate whether perceived ease of use influences perceived usefulness because of emojis in digital advertisements.

H3. Perceived ease of use has a positive influence on perceived usefulness due to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

Perceived usefulness can be summed up as the use of a certain innovation, which might improve activities and have a constructive influence on the use of that specific method (Pandey & Srivastava, 2016:55-82; Cebeci et al., 2019:152-157; Widiar et al., 2023:1829-1844). The arguments advanced for changing a technology from the previous one is likely to influence perceptions of the technology's usefulness (Amoako-Gyampah, 2007:1232-1248). While using graphic-based emoticons, perceived acceptance/inclusion was found to have a positive influence on perceived usefulness of others (Jung et al., 2021:391-411). In addition,

Pavalanathan and Eisenstein (2016:1-4) proposed that graphic-based emoticons allow for more precise and faster communication while involving less effort than text-based emoticons. Huang et al. (2020:1-19) report that consumers' reactions to emoticon use were classified as perceived usefulness and personal engagement. The perceived usefulness of a specified technology device would then enhance the user's intention to express his/her emotions to the recipient via emoticons in a mobile text message, allowing the receiver to form a stronger bond with the sender. The recipient then responded to the message using similar emoticons. The preceding studies are consistent with the current study in that they examined the use of emojis/emoticons in digital platforms in digital marketing. Bravo et al. (2021:141-154) reveal that customers' perceptions of usefulness influence their attitudes toward social tourism websites and their subsequent engagement behaviours. Correspondingly, Ashraf et al. (2016:69-86) demonstrate that perceived usefulness and engagement are the underlying processes that moderate the impact of regulatory fit on visitors' views and purchase intentions. According to these findings, perceived usefulness does influence an intention of engagement (Yang et al., 2017:459-469; Prayogo & Sugianto, 2021:1-96; Arghashi & Yuksel, 2022:1-20; Ziarani et al., 2023:1-12). The use of emoticons in mobile phone and related communications would also improve their perceived usefulness (Lim et al., 2011:21-40). Consequently, the use of emojis leads to engagement (Li et al., 2020:417-426; McShane et al., 2021:96-110). As a result, the current study addresses the significance of emoji usage in digital marketing communications by investigating whether perceived usefulness influences customer engagement because of emojis used in digital adverts:

H4. Perceived usefulness has a positive influence on customer engagement owing to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

Perceived ease of use is the level where an individual feels it would be natural and easy to use a given system (Kim & Hahn, 2015:169-176; Cebeci et al., 2019:152-157). Shaw (2014:449-459) found that perceived ease of use has an impact on usage intention. Jung et al. (2021:391-411) state that the ease of communication is emphasised more than in typical Internet-based instant messages (IM). 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 & Hsieh, 2019:289-301). The preceding studies concentrated on the use of digital cues, as does the current study. Mpinganjira (2016:1-10), Eslami et al. (2022:1-13) and Ziarani et al. (2023:1-12) describe customer engagement as digital community tasks involving interest in posts on these platforms and giving recommendations in response to surveys posted on social sites. 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., 2023:1-14). When an emoji effectively represents a brand-related product or service, it is also directly related to the text and context of the marketing communication (Valenzuela-Galvez et al., 2022:1-16). The preceding studies looked into the use of emojis in digital marketing. Kang et al. (2020:76-92) 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 in mobile gaming are comparable. The current study seeks to reveal the effect that perceived ease of use has on customer engagement with regards to the use of emojis in digital advertising.

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

When a consumer makes a purchase in electronic commerce, trust is important because the decision must be made in the face of ambiguity (Hong, 2015:322-336) and involvement is revealed to play an important role in clarifying both trust formation and retaining customers (Teichert & Rost, 2003:621-639). Zhang et al. (2021:1-16) 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, 2023:77–95). Recently, researchers have conceptually acknowledged the relationship between trust and involvement in online purchasing (Sharma & Klein, 2020:1-11; Tzeng & Shiu, 2020:1-10; Wu & Kelly, 2020:444; Shulga et al., 2021:1-19; Wu et al., 2022:1-18). When a consumer makes a purchase, trust is important because the decision must be made in the face of uncertainty, and as a result, situational involvement may encourage the consumer to prevent negative outcomes associated with a product purchase (Hong, 2015:322-336). When there is involvement, emojis/emoticons increase the intention to use (Duan et al., 2018:53-58); additionally, emojis are likely to affect trust levels in social interactions because they effectively translate text expressions into emotional symbols, reducing the psychological distance between users. Thus, using emojis reduces not just cognitive dissonance between users but also tends to increase their possibility of trusting each other. Hence, the hypothesis considers whether the consumer is willing to be involved freely in digital marketing communications that uses emojis.

H6. Trust has a positive influence on involvement due to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

Trust is explained as whether users are willing to accept the technology presented, after taking into consideration various traits such as convenience and security (Mallat et al., 2008:57-65; Chong et al., 2012:34-43; Shaw, 2014:449-459; Bhattacharya et al., 2023:248-259; Widiar et

al., 2023:1829-1844). Yang (2023:77-95) 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 (engagement) that contain one emoji, and the effect grows stronger as the number of emojis increases (McShane et al., 2021:96-110). The studies show that emojis have a positive effect on customer trust and engagement, making these inquiries compatible with the current study. Trust and dedication are essential in establishing and maintaining supplier and customer engagement relationships (Li et al., 2015:1041-1066). Building customer trust is critical for new mobile services to gain acceptance and for mobile service extensions to succeed (Hsu et al., 2012:317-332; Yang et al., 2015:78-87; Widiar et al., 2023:1829-1844). Without trust and security, prospects for prosperity from any type of communication system are small, regardless of how consistent and widespread the network itself may be (Mallat et al., 2008:57-65; Mattila & Seppala, 2016:1-2). Islam and Rahman (2016:40-58) have proposed that immersive engagement-centred marketing stimuli beyond just simply exposing consumers to adverts increases the engagement in marketing and may instil trust in consumers. As a result, these authors hypothesise that facilitating consumers' online brand engagement on Instagram increases their intent to purchase online and their brand trust (Ziadkhani Ghasemi & Palmet, 2019). Studies found a positive relationship between trust and customer engagement (Bianchi et al., 2017:464-494; Costello & Biondi, 2020:1-18; Islam et al., 2020:1279-1303; Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020:543-556). Consumer engagement leads to customer trust, according to research by Islam and Rahman (2016:40-58). Gammoh (2021) indicates that emojis may increase communication engagement and trust. These findings are consistent with the current study because they demonstrate the impact emojis have when used correctly in digital marketing communications. Seeing that there are risks (including privacy risk) in the digital world, the hypothesis considers whether the consumer is willing to engage freely in digital marketing communications that uses emojis.

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

Trust is essential in internet-based consumer behaviour because understanding cannot be increased through face-to-face interaction in virtual networks (Wang et al., 2022:1-15). Zhang et al. (2021:1-16) show that emojis have no effect on interpersonal trust among acquaintances as objective variables. Digital trust, on the other hand, is a cyber-extension of interpersonal trust and is both fragile and intellectual. Further, according to Yang (2023:77-95), based on commercial discourses, investigating the various types and frequencies of emojis and their effectiveness in rebuilding trust, it was discovered that emojis would help rebuild customers' trust. Distel et al. (2022:134-145) reveal that the positive effect created by face emoji is

associated with higher intention. The preceding studies examine the use of emojis and attitudes toward their use in social media marketing; this approach connects the preceding studies to the current study. Consequently, the willingness to purchase, the intention to use, and the willingness to engage are all influenced by trust and distrust. As stated by Lee et al. (2018:1-9), trust and distrust of the mediator and supplier should be regarded as precursors to perceived risk and purchasing intention. Trust is also important in determining consumer purchasing intentions (Wang et al., 2022:1-15; Alkan & Ulas, 2023:1-14; Bhattacharya et al., 2023:248-259). This study hypothesises that digital platform advertising (including emojis) affect trust, which has an impact on engagement among Gen Z cohort because they use and enjoy emojis.

H8. Trust has a positive influence on intention to purchase due to emojis used in digital marketing communications.

Customers who engage in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication have higher purchase intentions (Yusuf et al.., 2018:493-504; Zolkepli et al., 2023:185-199). The main form of engagement is through likes, reviews, and emotional sharing (Dehouche, 2020:1-6; Fang et al., 2020:1-16; Rietveld et al., 2020:20-53; Eslami et al., 2022:1-13; Luzón, 2023:17-32; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Casado-Molina et al. (2022:315-333) 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. Purchase intent is an important indicator of purchasing behaviour (Pandey & Srivastava, 2016:55-82) and the greater the purchase intent, the greater the purchasing opportunity. Dmitrieva (2019) conducted research to investigate how the existence of emojis in social media advertising influences consumers' purchase intentions and 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 (Baek et al., 2021:1-15; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). The studies above show that emojis help explain how organisations 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; further, these studies focus on digital commerce and marketing. Customer engagement is something brands view as essential and has been studied by various researchers in terms of marketing strategies (Vanga & Yang, 2019; Yousaf et al., 2021:44-57; Wang, 2020:1-15; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Intention to buy occur when consumers want to incorporate a specific behavioural response and investigate the possibility of doing so (Ajzen, 1999:179-211; Chen et al., 2018:763-772). The use of pictographs in advertising improves the attitude of consumers, which has a major influence on intention to purchase (Liu et al., 2019:263-277). Furthermore, Zhou et al. (2019:1-9) found that emojis act as emotional stimuli

that attract consumers to advertisements. The use of emojis in advertising campaigns has influenced customers positively, resulting in significant engagement and possibly higher purchasing intentions (Das et al., 2019:147-156; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333). Husnain and Toor (2017:167-199) and Ziadkhani Ghasemi and Palmet (2019) found that there is a positive relationship between customer engagement and purchase intent, therefore it is hypothesised that:

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

Refer to the conceptual model and a full overview of the research hypotheses in Figure 1.

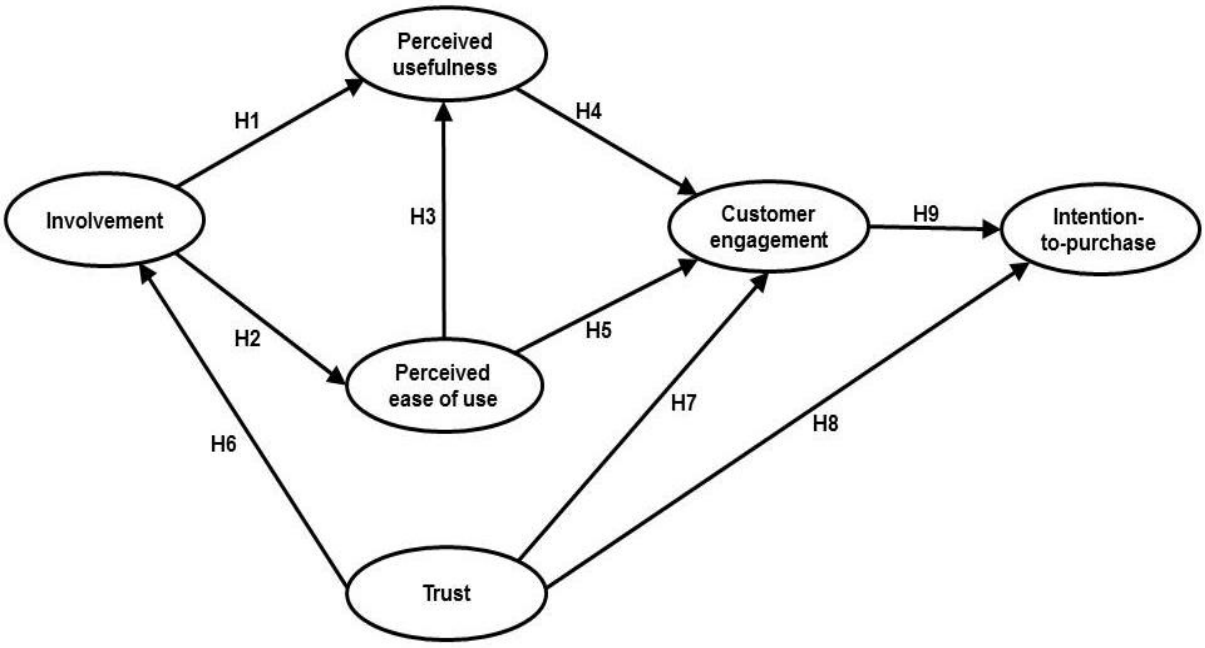

Figure 1.1: Conceptual model and research hypotheses

Adapted from: Davis (1989:319-340); Bere and Rambe (2016:172-198); Kim (2018:1-12); Vanga and Yang (2019)

1.7 Literature review

1.7.1 Digital marketing communications

The organisations that last are those ones that are relatable to the customers as a friend, the ones they summons home repeatedly (Pienaar, 2019; Gamage, 2021:26-31; Zhang et al., 2022:616-630). Customarily, consumers utilised the internet to solely disburse the content, through reading and watching, and used it to purchase commodities (Kietzmann et al., 2011:241-251; De Lanerolle, 2012; Silver et al., 2019; Camilleri & Kozak, 2022:1-11). Digital networking has gained significant momentum as a strong communication channel in such

modern times of computerised living, which significantly change the way customers engage with organisations (Balakrishnan & Manickavasagam, 2016:17-34; Dolan et al., 2016:261-277; Cision PR Newswire, 2016; Zareen et al., 2017:256-262; Pongpaew et al., 2017:262-281; Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55; Zhang et al., 2022:616-630). Kietzmann et al. (2011:241-251), Casado-Molina et al. (2022:315-333), Camilleri and Kozak (2022:1-11), and Zhang et al. (2022:616-630) report that consumers use digital networks to like, share content, view blogging sites, interact on SNSs, and construct and debate internet content by organisations and other consumers. Organisations are starting to see such innovations as powerful tools for communicating more with their consumers (Alalwan et al., 2017:1177-1199; Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55; Voorveld et al., 2018:38-54). Consequently, Balakrishnan and Manickavasagam (2016:17-34), Dwivedi et al. (2021:59:1-37), Gamage (2021:26-31), Ena et al. (2023:869–873), and Wang et al. (2023:1-14) are of the opinion that marketing accepts rapidly evolving innovations and the digital world to appeal to consumers. Therefore, the use of digital platforms yields positive results for the organisations; however, this solely depends on the content published. Cision PR Newswire (2016) and Wang et al. (2023:1-14) explain that these constructive outcomes depend on engaging and compelling content. This poses a challenge for the organisations to create a relevant content and to create a significant mobile experience, which interconnects with the behaviours of the younger generation. Leeflang et al. (2014:1-12) and Dwivedi et al. (2021:1-37) found that the most common digital channels are websites, emails, wireless, smartphones, search engines, weblogs, and text and social site messages, which have a huge number of young users. Organisations make use of these platforms to connect with the audience, to attract attention, to generate interest, to create desire and to lead to engagement, which is referred to as the digital marketing communication. Hence, emojis are a means of connecting with younger cohorts, so this study explores the influence the emojis have in digital marketing communication on Generation Z's customer engagement.

Digital social networks have progressively been implemented as an effective means that leads to the achievement of an organisation's objectives and policy, particularly throughout the regions of customer loyalty, client relationship strategic planning, interaction and the different characteristics of consumer preferences, which include knowledge, views, information development, behaviours and intentions to buy (Green, 2016:274-294). Arya et al. (2018:618-670) found that digital stores transform customers from dormant knowledge receivers into agents engaging in product phases. Accordingly, organisations that use SNSs to promote and market themselves have a much better chance of understanding their customers and delivering according to the needs of their audiences. Alalwan et al. (2017:1177-1199) prove that an increased comprehension of social networks trends will allow organisations to establish clear understanding of the perceptions and actions of future customers towards these

organisations, as well as their brand identity. People increasingly view social networking as an essential part of their everyday routine and are more likely to shift their relationships to virtual platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and Facebook. These digital platforms are viewed as a conversational source of knowledge, which is more adapted to the involvement of the fan with its live complexity (Kietzmann et al., 2011:241-251). As far as Murillo et al. (2016:436-456) are concerned, Twitter is also used by organisations as a marketing platform mainly for targeted advertising, where promoted posts are directed at certain users, and advertisers are charged according to the users' engagement. Hill (2016:1-78) shows that consumers energetically use their mobiles to search for information on the offerings of an organisation that they are considering for a purchase. This also enables the customers to see product reviews prior to purchase, which reduces post-purchase dissonance. Hill (2016:1-78) further reports that through mobile devices, customers can both compliment and criticise a brand. Members of Gen Z employ mobile apps and gadgets for product acquisition, pre-purchase research, and post-purchase commitments. They interact with organisations and friends on their smartphones, which improves in-store shopping understanding via input encouragement, suggestions, and peer appreciation. Hence, in this study, digital marketing communications are examined together with the features used to enhance the messages sent across amongst the Gen Z cohort.

1.7.2 Emojis

According to Shao et al. (2020:1-9), Zhang et al. (2021:1-16), Cavalheiro et al. (2022:1-8), Katsumata (2022), Zehra et al. (2022:99-118), and Yang (2023:77-95), the term "emoji," was originated in 1998 by Shigetaka Kurita on behalf of the Japanese mobile phone organisations, essentially referring to a pictograph. The emoticons, e.g., :-) and emojis, 😎, are visual symbols, pictures, and/or characters that depict not only facial expressions but also thoughts and ideas, including celebrations, weather, vehicles, structures, food, beverages, clothes, animals, plants, emotions, feelings and other activities which includes writing, sports and movies, and all users in a text-based communication (Li et al., 2019:1748-1763; Moussa, 2019:211-225; Lee & Hsieh, 2019:849-963; Da Costa, 2019; Gamage, 2021:26-31; Muhammad & Najim, 2023:218-263). Emoticons, which are now also known as emojis, were first introduced with the emergence of the internet. The emojis have evolved into the quickest form of nonverbal communication (Suresh, 2018:158-162). Initially, emoticons were used to differentiate between remarks and serious, important issues to convey meaning (Pardes, 2019; Fischer & Herbert, 2021:1-15; Gamage, 2021:26-31). However, the meaning of emoticons may be ambiguous, and result in misunderstandings due to difficulties in conveying meanings that are not adequately communicated with images alone (Ptaszynski et al., 2020:103-113; Częstochowska et al., 2022:1388-1392). As a result, emojis were developed

as an enhancement of emoticons. Brito et al. (2020:1495-1517), Cavalheiro et al. (2022:1-8), and Akadal and Söyük (2022:1-17) state that emojis are effortless and less sophisticated since they are emotionally straightforward. For example, :-O is a surprising emoticon, whereas 😯 is an emoji with the same meaning (Lotfinejad et al., 2020:1-6; Fischer & Herbert, 2021:1-15). Emojis may also be inserted separately and to create a thread (Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69). Chairunnisa and Benedictus (2017:120-126) and Gesselman and Garcia (2019:1-14) add that emojis have progressed into various shapes and colours.

Unicode Consortium declared that they had postponed the introduction of new emojis since the coronavirus outbreak. Nonetheless, young people look forward to non-binary emojis since ethnically diversified emojis and those representing diverse cultures help them express themselves (Chui, 2020; Hern, 2020; Park & El Mimouni, 2020:1-17; Gamage, 2021:26-31). Another 200 unique emojis to the Unicode Standard were recently released, including a yawning face, hearing assistance and waffles (Moodley, 2019). Archibald-Powell (2020) indicates that more emojis are being released, such as the gift to the populace of nearly 120 new emojis (e.g., pinched fingers, gender-neutral emojis and various food items. Statista reported that the addition of new emojis would bring the total number of emojis to nearly 3 500 by 2023 (Buchholz, 2022). Accordingly, this study investigates the influence of emojis when used in marketing communications by brands, which are aimed at gaining customer engagement and intention to purchase from their targeted market among the Gen Z cohort.

1.7.3 Use of emojis in digital marketing communications

Digital social networks have progressively been implemented as an effective means that leads to the achievement of an organisation's objectives and policy, particularly throughout the regions of customer loyalty, client relationship strategic planning, interaction, and the different characteristics of consumer preferences, which include knowledge, views, information development, behaviours and buy intentions (Green, 2016:274-294). The feelings that brands transmit and elicit in their customers are critical components of creating and communicating character. Individuals are more likely to communicate with people who have an emotional bond to them, which applies to both person-to-person and brand-to-person relationships (Gamage, 2021:26-31; Malysheva, 2022). Furthermore, in recent years, emojis have progressed from being regarded as immature to being regarded as a genuine method of establishing and nurturing relationships with customers. Emojis are progressively being used in a number of digital channels, such as blogs, social media, text messages, and in other forms of communications via digital conduits (Ko et al., 2022:1-17). Furthermore, by providing a communication medium in which customers feel comfortable and free to express their ideas, emojis can help businesses build mutual trust (Gamage, 2021:26-31). Customers who feel connected to a brand feel more at ease because the brand resonates with them, which leads

to customer loyalty and long-term relationships. Customers have a greater tendency to respond positively to recognisable visual objects, such as images with smiling faces that depict emotions they can easily relate to in their daily life (Gamage, 2021:26-31).

Organisations are increasingly incorporating impressive visual design features into digital communication, such as animations and pictographs. Although both elements can be useful in conversations with customers, trying to combine them may have a negative impact on communication efficacy. Graphics and pictographs improve digital communication by increasing perceptions of enrichment, but they also can increase perceptions of confusion. Processing each of these different visual design aspects calls for a different set of cognitive abilities because they enrich a message in unique ways, so that when merged, perceptions of clutter dominating the recipient's beliefs and expectations, thus cancelling out their beneficial impacts (Bashirzadeh et al., 2022:58-76). Emojis can be regarded as one of the latest innovations to be used as a digital marketing communication tool (Yakin & Eru, 2019:83-100; Kostial, 2021; McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Bashirzadeh et al., 2022:58-76); Valenzuela-Galvez et al., 2022:1-16). Their success means that there has been a substantial rise in the adoption of emojis by the public, and there is a greater number of campaigns using emojis in promotional strategies (Shao et al., 2020:1-9; Cavalheiro et al., 2022:1-8).

The fast upsurge of advertisements shared every day on digital platforms proves the adaptableness of digital platforms. Organisations make use of these platforms to connect with the audience, to attract attention, to generate interest, to create desire and to lead to engagement, which is referred to as digital marketing communication. Hence, emojis are a means of connecting with young cohorts, so this study explores the influence the emojis have in digital marketing communication on Generation Z's customer engagement. Additionally, as consumers spend increasing amounts of time on their mobile devices, marketers are launching innovative campaigns to construct their appearance and engage customers efficiently (Grennan, 2016; Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55; Smits, 2021). Emojis that are developed by brands are also sometimes available as stickers (Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55). Advertising, as part of a marketing communication, is the costliest form of advertising communications (Vangelov, 2017:131-149; Gamage, 2021:26-31). Therefore, marketers' function in a world of narrow word-counts, and emojis are an influential tool for the transmission of much information without words (eCmetrics, 2015; Yakin & Eru, 2019:83-100; Hand et al., 2022-1-12).

Mathews and Lee (2018:46-55) state that emojis are aimed at illustrating and in some cases, replacing words sent digitally, and they provide automated signals and express the warmth of face-to-face communication, while adding profundity to the message. Emojis can enhance and improve awareness of the message and improve communications in the digital context (Chan

& Leung, 2019:1-18; Boutet et al., 2021:1-2013; Muhammad & Najim (2023:218-263; Yang, 2023:77-95). The popularity of emojis and the high engagement tendencies have motivated brands to include them in their marketing message (Grover, 2020.). Organisations make use of emojis to interact with their intended audience, to reach their mobile devices, and also to carry messages in stylishly modest ways (eCmetrics, 2015; Kostial, 2021; Wang, 2021:1-9). As a result, marketing campaigns that include emojis have rapidly grown and organisations have received constructive results from marketing campaigns that involve emojis. Placing emojis in digital communications tends to increase engagement and brands use emojis in their email subject lines (Fisher, 2019; Messick, 2020). Additionally, emojis can simplify marketing messages and humanise brand voices (Grover, 2020; Gamage, 2021:26-31). This study establishes if usage factors positively influence customers' engagement and intention to purchase owing to the utilisation of these emojis in digital marketing communications among the Generation Z.

1.7.4 Generation Z

Cision PR Newswire (2016) states that Generation Z (Generation Fluid) have been named mobile prodigies, while the Millennials (Gen Y) are driving the app ecosystem. The Gen Z cohort is categorised by some people as the "silent generation" referring to their communication with machines rather than with individuals (Dorsey, 2021). Castrén (2022) and Meola (2023) state that Members of Gen Z are people born between 1997 and 2012. Despite being referred to as digital natives, African Gen Z cohort differ significantly from global Generation Z, particularly those from developed countries, in South Africa and around the world (Axcell & Ellis, 2023:1-19). These main distinctions include large inequities in education, unemployment, size of population, disposable income, and social class divides (Duffett, 2017a:19-39). Nonetheless, the South African Gen Z cohort is maturing into adults, making purchasing decisions and caring for themselves. This generation, including almost 27.5 million South Africans, overlaps 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. The Gen Z cohort makes use of mobile devices for product discovery, pre-purchase study, buying and post-purchase commitments (Cision PR Newswire, 2016; Cagnin & Nicolas, 2022). Lerm (2022) states that members of Gen Z are dependent on innovation, because Generation Z has grown up with digital technology; they expect to be constantly connected and expect seamless digital experiences. Being born in a digital world with vast information readily available at their disposal, the Gen Z cohort is portrayed as being especially vocal when their values are in jeopardy (Goret & Lifvergren, 2022). In addition, Generation Z cannot be targeted using only traditional marketing communication appeals since they are diversified in terms of communication about their ethnicity and culture (Parmelee, 2022). To post and engage on digital platforms, Generation

Z has adopted the digital language that they understand well, which includes emojis. This reinforces the reality that marketers face challenges and are forced to create compact and innovative content in order to use the seconds that this generation devote to marketing communications. The members of Gen Z require modified experiences that distinguish them as distinctive beings, which provide them with innovative apps and videos that are appealing, entertaining, and delivering contextually related adverts (Cision PR Newswire, 2016; Lerm, 2022). Accordingly, this research assesses whether usage and demographical factors positively influence customer engagement and intention to purchase owing to the use of emojis in digital marketing communications among Gen Z cohort.

1.7.5 Consumer attitudes

Schiffman and Wisenblit (2015) define an attitude as an acquired susceptibility to act in a positive and/or negative manner towards a presented item, which motivates consumers to either buy or not to buy a specific product or brand. Attitudes were long recognised as a cause of intent (Suki & Suki, 2011:1-7; Cebeci et al., 2019:152-157). Attitudes comprise the beliefs, feelings and behavioural intentions towards objects (Kapoor & Madichie, 2012:87; Busen et al., 2016:81-87; Jhangiani & Tarry 2022). Furthermore, customer attitudes differ tremendously by country and are influenced by the country's level of development, the extent of development, and other factors and media exposure. Attitudes are learned through direct product experience, advertising, access to media and other forms of knowledge that customers are exposed to (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015; Kurdi et al., 2022:1135-1146). Since attitudes can either be positive or negative, marketers should be constantly seeking new information that will help them interpret customer behaviour. The same applies to the current study, when it comes to the members of Gen Z's emoji usage, since they can understand the message conveyed, which leads to satisfaction through perceived ease of use, usefulness and enjoyment derived from emojis. This benefit can only be attained if the use of emojis in marketing communications is implemented effectively. Brands embedding products and product images in emojis enable visual attention to be manipulated by users, which can generate favourable brand attitudes, as well as retain brand-customer connections, thus influencing customer behaviour (Liu et al., 2019:263-277). In this research, attitudes, namely perceived ease of use, enjoyment, usefulness, trust, and involvement, are considered to have an influence on customer engagement and intention to purchase in terms of the use of emojis in digital marketing communications.

1.7.6 Technology Acceptance Model

One of the models that was used to test the hypotheses is referred to as TAM, which mainly identifies the influences on the consumer’s behaviour and attitudes. Technology dominates almost every corner of the social system (Scherer et al., 2019:13-35). Venkatesh and Davis

(2000:186-204) comment that TAM characterises perceived usefulness in the context of public influence and conceptual instrumental procedures and users' intent. Davis (1898:319-340) created TAM with the goal of explaining the basic predictors of accepting innovation that leads to an explanation of the behaviour of users through a wide range of end-user computing technologies. The model has been used to describe the acceptance and persistent intention of using new technologies, products, or services in their initial stages (Zhong et al., 2021:1-10). TAM claims that the special effects of external factors on the purpose to use are promoted by perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, since they are posited to influence an individual's attitude (Suki &Suki, 2011:1-7). TAM has been used and adjusted to fit technology acceptance studies; additional variables were introduced to help enhance its predictive power (Holden & Karsh, 2010:159-172; Nikou & Economides, 2015:167-171). As a result, this study extended TAM and introduced involvement, trust, customer engagement and intention to purchase to form part of the TAM variables (perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use) to examine the adoption of the emoji use.

1.8 Research methodology

1.8.1 Paradigm/philosophy

Saunders et al. (2007), Newman (2014), Rahi (2017:1-5), Rehman and Alharthi (2016:51-59), and Saunders et al. (2019) define a paradigm as fundamental belief system and common establishing substructure for theory and research that contains simple assumptions, key issues, models of quality research, and procedures to look for answers. A post-positivist approach focuses on the idea that truth is subjective; it is context-affected; and can be influenced by several factors and is the product of those interested in experience (Crossan, 2003:46-55; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016:51-59). This study employs a post-positivist philosophy, which focuses on recognising and interpreting the satisfaction evaluation process, rather than predicting or regulating.

1.8.2 Research approach

This study employs quantitative research because it entails gathering and generalising numerical data from a group of people (Babbie, 2010), because the study's goal is to assess the perceptions and behaviour of the Generation Z cohort. Quantitative research entails the collection and analysis of numerical data for the purpose of describing, explaining, predicting, or controlling an interesting topic (Brynard & Hanekom, 2006; Rahi, 2017:1-5). The deductive approach may include developing a hypothesis that is amenable to extensive testing (Saunders et al., 2007; Rahi, 2017:1-5). Hence, data was collected to test the influence of emojis in digital marketing communications on the effect of perceived usefulness, perceived

ease of use, trust, and involvement on customer engagement and intention to purchase among Generation Z.

1.8.3 Research design/strategy

Griffee (2012) states that the research design is characterised as an effective framework or research study model that represents intrinsic logic and methodological limitations, and that specifies the measures of the research study, how it is arranged, and how it works. For this study, a descriptive research design was used. Bhattacherjee (2012), Aden et al. (2014), Newman (2014), and Haydam and Mostert (2018) mention that the main purpose is to show using words or figures, and to present a profile, category of types, or highlight the steps used to respond to questions, for example, “who”, “where”, “what” and “how”. Saunders et al. (2007) and Atmowardoyo (2018:197-204) explain that descriptive analysis is a methodology used only to describe (as closely as possible) the actual hypotheses. This design is applicable for this study because it allows the researcher to describe respondents by different demographic variables like age, gender, and ethnicity and to make various judgments about the topic chosen, which ascertains whether the usage and demographical factors have an influence on customer engagement and intention to purchase due to emojis used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z.

1.8.4 Sampling

1.8.4.1 Population

The working population from which the sampling frame or list of potential respondents was derived is referred to as the research population (Griffee, 2012; Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015; Rahi, 2017:1-5). Brynard and Hanekom (2006) confirm the population as a group in the universe with specific characteristics. The study's population includes all members of Cape Town's Generation Z cohort. As a result, the sample frame also includes CPUT students from the Faculty of Business and Management Science (FBMS), which served as the data collection's starting point. The sample unit included emoji users, and the sample element of this study refers to the emoji Gen Z cohort users (born between 1997 and 2015), which is the group of people that were surveyed.

1.8.4.2 Sample method/technique and sample size

Non-probability sampling is used for this study because it is easier, faster, and less expensive to select sample units; however, it does not protect against bias (Saunders et al., 1997; Bhattacherjee, 2012; Griffee, 2012; Lopez & Whitehead, 2013; Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015; Rahi, 2017:1-5). Purposive sampling (also known as judgemental 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 and meet the objectives (Saunders et al., 2007; Griffee 2012; Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). Hence, members of the Generation Z cohort, and only those who use digital platforms which include emojis, were purposively selected at CPUT in the FBMS (District Six Campus) as the first stage of sampling. Samples with the target features are difficult to access when using the snowballing sampling technique (Naderifar et al., 2017:1-6). Due to COVID-19, public events were halted, and face-to-face interaction with respondents was often impossible. The snowball sampling technique is aimed at testing groups that are difficult to access or reach (Baltar & Brunet, 2012:57-72; Naderifar et al., 2017:1-6), which gives researchers access to responsive populations. Hence, the Generation Z respondents, who were purposively selected at CPUT, were requested to provide details of their contacts who could serve as other possible respondents and were subsequently sent the self-administered questionnaire electronically, as the second stage of sampling.

1.8.5 Data collection instruments

According to Bhattacherjee (2012) and Griffee (2012), a questionnaire is a useful tool because a large amount of information can be obtained from a sample of respondents in a relatively short period of time. Because the research examined the effectiveness of using emojis to increase consumer engagement and purchase intent, a questionnaire based on consumer attitudes was created. The self-administered questionnaire, mainly adopted from Bliss-Carroll (2016) and Zareen et al. (2016:256-262), consists of the screening question, digital platforms usage and demographic factors (in the form of closed-ended multiple-choice questions). The Likert scale questions measured the consumer attitudes and level of engagement of the emoji integrated communications, which comprised a five-point Likert scale. The various consumer attitude constructs were adapted from several studies, namely customer engagement (Islam & Rahman, 2016:40-58; Sahoo & Pillai, 2017:1115-1132); perceived ease of use (Mallat et al., 2008:57-65; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000:186-204); perceived usefulness (Mallat et al., 2008:57-65; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000:186-204); trust (Mallat et al., 2008:57-65; Islam & Rahman, 2016:40-58); involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1985:341-352, Kim & Hahn, 2015:169-176); and intention to purchase (Duffett, 2015a:498-526; Starr, 2021).

1.8.6 Data collection/fieldwork

Haydam and Mostert (2018) indicate that in data collection, descriptive research forms part of the primary data collection strategies. The first data collection stage was conducted by the researcher who physically distributed the self-administered survey at CPUT in the FBMS on the District Six campus. These respondents were asked for the contact details of other potential respondents, who were later sent the self-administered questionnaire electronically. Hence, a second self-administered questionnaire was created by means of Google Forms, which was used to reach the recommended potential respondents. This 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 sample of 1 000 respondents from the Generation Z cohort.

1.8.7 Data coding and analysis

In addition to a generalised linear model (GLM), Wald Chi-Square distribution, and Bonferroni adjustment pairwise post hoc testing, SPSS was used to calculate frequencies, means, and standard deviations. The validity and reliability of measurement models were assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Through the use of Cronbach's Alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR) measurement values, the constructs' reliability was assessed. The average variance extracted (AVE) and factor loadings were used to assess convergent validity. By comparing the square root of AVE values for each antecedent/construct, which should be greater than the correlation values, discriminatory validity was determined (Fornell & Larcker, 1981:39-50). Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to test the hypotheses.

1.8.8 Ethical consideration

Saunders et al. (1997:153) and Leedy and Ormrod (2014) provide instances of the three ethical factors that the researcher must take into account: the respondents were informed about the research project, allowed to decline answering certain question(s), and/or the respondents were able to withdraw from the survey whenever they felt it was taking too long, placed in a situation they did not agree with, or for any other reason. This right of informed consent gave the researcher permission to use the data gathered from the respondents. The questionnaire was either ignored completely or used in part where respondents used the option to withdraw or return it unfinished. The researcher made sure that respondents were not coerced and that their right to privacy was respected by keeping respondents' responses and identities private. Since the respondents were surveyed voluntarily, it was anticipated that the study would not raise any ethical issues. The FBMS Research Ethics Committee's approval for the experiment was requested and obtained. The researcher acted with integrity and professionalism throughout the research.

1.9 Demarcation/delimitation of study

The current study was generally limited to the geographic parameters of Cape Town. This study was further restricted to Generation Z emoji users or digital marketing communication consumers, which is the desired group suitable for the current study. Any other group and all other respondents who fall out of the above-mentioned categories and parameters were not considered to participate in the current study. The findings of the current study do not represent the overall group of emoji users or consumers of digital marketing communications in the whole country, namely South Africa. Schiffman and Wisenblit (2015) state that for

quantitative research, data analysis involves a researcher using a variety of statistical methods of analysis and estimates the extent, but non-conformity with this results in poor quality of the results. However, if done in the correct way, the scope of analysis delivers meaningful relationships and trends from the data obtained. Therefore, this study was limited to quantitative research and did not make use of qualitative research.

1.10 Outline of the dissertation

Chapter 1: Introduction and background to the research

The chapter provides an overview of the study and includes the following: background to the inquiry which contains literature relating to information surrounding the digital usage and emojis growth and consumer attitudes toward the use of these emojis in digital marketing communications, particularly among Generation Z consumers. The research problem statement which shows the necessity for the research and research rationale is explained clearly. This chapter includes the research objectives as well as the research questions that this research aims to address and answer, as well as its hypotheses and conceptual framework. Furthermore, this chapter also includes literature review sections that introduce digital marketing communications, emojis, the use of emojis in digital marketing communications, Generation Z, consumer attitudes, and the TAM. This chapter also provides details of the methodology and research design, reliability and validity of the investigation's questionnaire and findings, ethical factors, the importance of the inquiry with regard to of its potential contribution to the corpus current information.

Chapter 2: Digital marketing, emojis and marketing communications

This chapter provides a detailed theoretical framework for the study and includes past and current research. This chapter presents an overview of the digital marketing industry, digital marketing, and the categories of digital marketing. The growing usage rate of digital marketing, statistics, security and privacy, and the effectiveness of digital marketing communication are discussed. Furthermore, this chapter considers the history, definition, evolution, and usage growth of emoji, and relevant statistics. Emojis are also examined as a language and as non-verbal communication; lastly, the chapter discusses the use of emojis in digital marketing communications, effectiveness, benefits, and challenges.

Chapter 3: Generation Z and theoretical framework

The first section of this chapter gives an overview of Generation Z, the period and the background of this cohort, the characteristics of Generation Z, the Generation Z of South Africa, Gen Z cohort and technology, the Generation Z cohort as a consumer, their disposable income, advertising to Generation Z, and Generation Z and emojis. The following section

examines the literature on the factors that influence customer engagement in digital communications, including social content, and branded factors.

Chapter 4: Research model and research methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the main research design, methods and strategy, and includes the following sections: research paradigm, research approach, research design, sampling, data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations.

Chapter 5: Summary of findings

This chapter presents the findings that were derived from the survey data via statistical analysis, which were mainly depicted in graphical and tabular format.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This chapter analyses, interprets and discusses the main findings of the study in relation to past and current research.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and recommendations

The chapter draws conclusions from the main findings; ascertains the theoretical contributions; describes the main practical implications; outlines the limitations and make recommendations for future research.

1.11 Limitations of the research

The research is limited to the above-mentioned attitudinal constructs, but it does not examine emotional expression in electronic communication, though it is very applicable, as mentioned by Tang and Hew (2017:85-104). Although there are representatives of Generation Z everywhere across the world, this study is limited to Cape Town members of Gen Z, which limits the vast information that can potentially be reached to determine attitudinal responses regarding the use of emojis. The current study has some other limitations, especially since it involves the Generations Z cohort, who might be reluctant to participate because of time constraints. Some questionnaires were discarded because of mistakes upon completion, which made the data invalid. The demographic sections were deemed be sensitive by a couple of respondents, such as age, population group and education level. In response to this, the researcher discussed the current study and explained questions received from respondents. The researcher emphasised the importance of their contribution to the research, while ensuring their privacy and that the questionnaires remained confidential. The fieldworker was also transparent about the questions posed about the questionnaire.

1.12 Summary

The chapter focused mainly on the research problem statement, which clarified the subject matter of interest and the necessity to justify the research, as well as the research rationale and objectives, which were described to examine the effect on various attitudinal factors arising from overall emoji usage in digital marketing communication. The research questions and hypotheses were highlighted and discussed to validate the relationship between the variables and the use of emojis in digital marketing communication for engagement and intention to purchase. In this section, the research study was presented, including literature on facts surrounding the growth of digital usage and emojis that are now used as a component of the text and separately and still give meaning to the recipient, as well as consumer attitudes toward the use of these emojis in digital marketing communications, particularly among Generation Z consumers, who are the study's target group. This chapter also covered the literature on digital marketing communications, emojis, emoji use in digital marketing communications, Generation Z, consumer attitudes, and the TAM. This chapter provided a description of the design of research, sample, data collecting, design of the questionnaire, and data coding analysis procedures was provided in the research design and methodology. Ethical considerations and demarcation/delimitation of study in terms of the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications were also outlined.

CHAPTER 2

DIGITAL MARKETING, EMOJIS, AND MARKETING COMMUNICATION

2.1 Introduction

One of the most significant disadvantages of written digital communication is the lack of visual cues. The absence of hand and body gestures and facial expressions, which are essential in face-to-face communication, makes online interactions more difficult in emotional situations. One solution many users have adopted to overcome this communication barrier is to include graphics such as emojis in online utterances (Harn, 2017; Beattie et al., 2020:409-427; Kaye et al., 2022:1-8). While recent studies on emojis have focused on their usage, sentiment, interpretation, and challenges (Vangelov, 2017:131-149; Andrade et al., 2020:24-33; Hewage et al., 2020:219-230; McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Kim & Jun 2020:1-14), there is a lack of examination of these emojis and their impact on consumer responses. Brands are struggling to develop effective digital media consumer engagement strategies to call for a reaction to a product or service effectively. Emojis have been identified as a powerful tool for increasing customer engagement (Kostial, 2021; Smits, 2021; Valenzuela-Galvez et al., 2022:1-16; McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Ko et al., 2022:1-17). This research addresses this challenge by examining the influence of emojis in digital marketing communications on consumer engagement and intention to purchase across various digital platforms among Generation Z members in Cape Town. It closely examines emoji use in digital marketing communications and their effect on customer engagement and intention to purchase amongst the Gen Z cohort. This chapter will consist of an overview of the digital marketing industry, digital marketing, and the categories of digital marketing. The growing use rate of digital marketing, statistics, security and privacy, and the effectiveness of digital marketing communication are also discussed. Furthermore, this chapter considers emojis, and their history, definition, evolution, usage growth and statistics. Emojis are also examined as a language and as non-verbal communication; lastly, the chapter discusses the use of emojis in digital marketing communications, effectiveness, benefits, and challenges.

2.2 Digital marketing industry

Digital marketing is the flow and expansion of digital or online business or commerce (Pollard, 2019). eMarketing Institute (20018b) further defines digital or online marketing as marketing items and services on digital platforms. The online world communicates messages that a business or a brand drafts for its current and potential customers. Additionally, Marthinusen (2020) and Kostial (2021) understand digital marketing as a form of marketing that is used by brands to sell through digital media and to connect with customers for awareness, entertainment, and engagement. Successful marketing produces a cohort of engaging,

satisfied, and happy customers who return and bring their friends with them (Pollard, 2019; Srivastava & Sivaramakrishnan, 2021:469-484). But digital marketing, also known as online marketing, uses digital space to reach customers. It involves drawing in current and potential customers through various platforms, including websites, email, content marketing, mobile apps, social media, and search engines, using content that allows for entertainment and engagement, which leads to purchasing intent.

2.2.1 Overview of the marketing function

While the marketing industry may date back to ancient civilisations, the term marketing used today to describe commercial activities linked with the promotion of products and services only became popular in the nineteenth century, making it a relatively new subject (Kostial, 2021). Marketers have adopted this approach as a convenient and effective way to interact with customers; marketers use digital platforms to stand out in the digital space as the digital marketing industry grows and more competition joins in. As the concept is a crucial problem for academic and industrial marketing research, social media play an essential role in understanding the market environment with sub-components such as brands, consumers, and industry trends. Digital marketing is now the most common means of communication between brands and customers (McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Kurdi et al., 2022:1175-1186; Piranda et al., 2022:1-8). In recent years, the position of digital media platforms on variables such as the time consumers and brands spend on it, the daily data produced by the market, and the ease of communication between customers and sellers that such platforms afford, has impacted marketing decision-making (Pınarbaşı & Kircova, 2021:90-103).

2.2.2 Growth rate of the marketing function

While digital advertising has been increasing dramatically recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has quickened this cycle. Digital shopping has been demonstrated to have numerous advantages, like comfort and convenience. Nonetheless, with the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become the most secure approach to spending money. Customers have become familiar with this way of living, and more significantly, the most significant customer experience yet, digital business will continue to escalate. Since 2020, global digital shopping has been growing as customers and organisations migrate to the digital environment (Ash, 2020; Koetsier, 2020; Shingwenyana, 2020). Cramer-Flood (2022) reported that e-commerce sales worldwide were expected to surpass $5 trillion for the first time, accounting for more than half of all retail sales. Despite slower growth, total digital spending was expected to exceed $7 trillion by 2025. Stojanovic (2022) added that 2021 showed a 20% decrease in global revenue from offline commerce channels. In addition, research by Lund (2023) shows that 35% of business executives claim that digital transformation helps them to better meet customer expectations and improve operational efficiency (40%), and 38% of executives plan to invest more in

technology to make it their competitive advantage. The statistics above indicate steady growth in the digital marketing industry, influenced by the recent worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.

With a reported boom in mobile usage, access to digital space more affordable, an expanding educated young population, and a sizable rising push within the involvement of the audience and users in rural areas on social media in 2018, the future of digital advertising and marketing in South Africa is extraordinarily good and motivating (Digital Marketing PTA, 2018). Many brands in South Africa are still using digital channels for brand awareness and have yet to work out how to monetise and track the success of their digital strategy (Cloete, 2022). Nonetheless, according to reports, digital marketing is the most popular and effective way for South African organisations to advertise (Broad Media, 2022). Additionally, the digital marketing industry in South Africa is expected to reach 3.24 billion USD by 2023 as a result of factors such as an increase in the number of advertising organisations, increased corporate advertising spending, and growth in digital and mobile advertising (Statista Research Department, 2022). In South Africa, there are 41.19 million active internet users. In the same research, it was found that 28 million internet users in the nation, roughly 46% of the entire population, used social media (Galal, 2023). With everyone online, digital marketing has quickly become the savviest and most cost-effective approach to reaching one's target market, removing time and place from the equation (Marthinusen, 2020). With so much emphasis on digital advertising options and digital platforms available for marketers, a brand can quickly connect with prospective and existing customers no matter where they are. In this research, digital marketing is considered a growing approach used by marketers and brands for long-term customer engagement and intention to purchase. The growth means that brands stand a better chance of reaching their customers through mobile phones, with customised content that includes digital cues to appeal emotionally to young customers for more engagement and intention to purchase.

2.3 Overview of digital marketing

Not only has digitalisation transformed customer advertising and marketing, but it has also transformed commercial advertising. Yasmin et al. (2015:69-80), Kostial (2021), Akgün and Arslan (2022:15-30), and Pasquali (2023) show that worldwide internet and mobile users and e-commerce revenues are increasing, shipping and payment methods have been simplified, and extensive global organisations are expanding into foreign markets. Wold (2020) notes that individuals are not simply connecting through digital media to share and engage with updates, but they also read the news while shopping. While digital commerce may not be the only way to reach customers, it is the most critical way.

The digital world is an essential information source for young consumers that provides means to search for items and organisations by breaking geographic limits. No longer does a

customer need to be present in a physical place to utilise the items sold by a business. Consumers can even choose when what kind and how much content they want to see at any time. Customers are already motivated to engage with brands, implying that digitalisation provides numerous opportunities for brands to connect, engage, and build strong relationships that can lead to favourable consumption outcomes (Garcia-Collart, 2020; Kurdi et al., 2022:1175-1186). One of the most significant advantages of digital marketing is the ability to tap into more current markets.

Digital marketing, also described as online marketing by eMarketing Institute (2018b), has become a compulsory part of a brand's marketing strategy. No brand's campaign is ever complete without it being on digital platforms. Not using the digital space as a brand means discarding customers to competitors. The actual foundation of digital advertising lies in discovering more current approaches to acquire customers and markets that may have an interest in what a business has to offer. Digital marketing and advertising are marketing with the assistance of digital media platforms and advanced media. Since traditional media such as newspapers, print, and television have been tried numerous times, a brand new and inventive digital marketing idea is the opportunity that organisations so desperately require. In digital networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, marketers can disperse all kinds of content to create engagement with their customers and potential customers (Andrade et al., 2020:24-33; Kostial, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022:616-630). Using Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp, Google, and other digital platforms opens new avenues for digital marketers to attract customers. Emojis draw attention with their vibrancy and colour. Members of Gen Z customers completely understand them, so brands use these cues to create enjoyment and exciting content in digital marketing to reach out to younger consumers. Bala and Verma (2018:321-339) state that behaviour awareness is essential because it allows for a better understanding of what motivates users to create content about a brand or store. Digital marketing is relatively inexpensive and has a significant commercial impact on businesses. Word-of-mouth (WOM) is associated with new member acquisition and increased website clicks, which expands advertising exposure. The current study investigated the usage of digital marketing and emojis in digital marketing to improve the content shared with the Gen Z cohort.

2.4 Categories in digital marketing and emojis

2.4.1 Content marketing

Content is the concept, information, or experience a brand publishes online to present to its audience. It is anything a brand makes and writes. The content style can be text, graphical, video or audio (eMarketing Institute, 2018c). It includes creating and sharing valuable, informative, and entertaining pieces to drive conversions, connection, and engagement for an

intention to purchase (Dodson, 2016; eMarketing Institute, 2018c). As a result, digital marketers in different niche markets, consisting of messaging apps, social networking websites, content marketers, and more have extended their options and integrated emoji advertising and marketing into their marketing strategy (Clement, 2020; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Emojis have grown in popularity over the years; they are outstanding in that brands use them because they help enrich conversations. They share these emojis with the target market by using them in their messages. A brand can assert more with fewer words. Creating compelling content and distributing it on digital platforms that customers frequently visit allows an organisation to reach out to and engage with its audience because digital media connect a brand directly to its targeted market.

Content marketing has been the means of communication on digital platforms since digital marketing was adopted. Shingwenyana (2020) reports that more brands and organisations need to accomplish more and improved content marketing to quicken their advertising efforts and communication very much through packaged content. The key goals of marketing campaigns are to raise brand awareness, increase sales, and increase engagement and intention to purchase. Additionally, a content-based copyright method includes a digital celebrity. The audience will also contribute and interact with content, creating a platform for mutual information communication (Geng et al., 2020:464-485). Content marketing is similar to influencer marketing celebrity endorsements on digital media. Celebrities use enjoyable digital cues such as emojis to create engaging content for younger consumers. IAB South Africa (2022) reveal that content is still pre-eminent, but content marketing has always been a long-term commitment for creatives, brands, marketing teams, and consumers. Content starts a conversation between a brand and its customers, drives the discussion, moves audiences to action, and ultimately sells a product. According to statistics, customers are eager to share branded video content, with 74% doing so (Schaffer, 2022). Furthermore, in a recent survey, up to 91% of customers want to see more online video content from organisations (Wyzowl, 2023).

Emojis have become an essential, critical management and marketing tool as they have permeated every aspect of daily life (Zou & Jiang, 2022:106-119). Individuals and businesses are increasingly using them to increase audience engagement. Ko et al. (2022:1-17) found that the impact of emojis on consumer engagement differs based on the post type. Content and commerce are blurred on the kind of platform. Influencers, or content creators frequently engage with users while selling to them (Yang et al., 2021:565-583). Kim et al. (2020:1-20) note that utilising a variety of characteristics in the context of marketing communication, as part of a sustainable marketing strategy, to meet the needs of consumers. Hence, emojis may be one of the easiest and most straightforward strategies. Emojis can help practitioners accomplish the broader goal of sustainable marketing by grabbing consumers' attention by

adding distinctive characteristics that allow marketing content get noticed (Lee et al., 2021:1-15). Emojis are an available digital jargon that the members of Gen Z group understand, so brands use these emojis in content marketing as a strategy to encourage engagement and intention to purchase. In this study, emojis are used in content marketing to engage customers, which leads to purchase intent among the Gen Z cohort.

2.4.2 Social media marketing

Emojis have fascinated marketing professionals and academics as they became a standard part of business-to-user and user-to-user marketing communication on digital conduits like Facebook and Instagram (Akgün & Arslan, 2022:15-30; Distel et al., 2022:134-145; Zolkepli et al., 2023:185-199). Social media marketing refers to marketing a brand on social media platforms, like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, LinkedIn and Twitter, to name a few. In other words, if a business has set up a page with all its details and products on social media sites, it seeks to encourage attention and traffic to it (eMarketing Institute, 2018b; Akgün & Arslan, 2022:15-30). Social media marketing has opened doors for businesses and organisations to connect with millions of people about products and services and has generated unprecedented new marketing opportunities, thanks to the vast potential audience across multiple digital media platforms (Yasmin et al., 2015:69-80; Kostial, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022:616-630). Social media marketing aims to introduce a brand through social media and use it to deliver a message and content to current and potential customers. Although the primary goal is advertising, businesses and individuals can benefit from social media marketing in a variety of ways (Dodson, 2016; eMarketing Institute, 2018a; Kostial, 2021; Wang et al., 2023:1-14; Zolkepli et al., 2023:185-199). Using emojis in social media marketing can be of great benefit to brands by creating a connection with the target audience and speaking the same language as they do (Mikesell, 2021). Social media is perhaps the best approach to expand engagement and build relationships; this is done when a brand establishes a language that resonates with the audience; as found by Andrade et al. (2020:24-33), about 92% of social media users use emojis in their online communications. Emojis have been shown to increase engagement in digital marketing communications when used correctly. Emojis in email subject lines, Instagram and Facebook captions, tweets, and direct messages are all excellent ways to capture the attention of the targeted audience (Mikesell, 2021). Additionally, using verbal and nonverbal text (emoticons) to express emotions and determine the meaning of the senders in social media conversations improves communication effectiveness. Emojis, on the other hand, are used by social media users not only as a visual language for expressing thoughts and emotions, but also as syntax (Arafah & Hasyim, 2019:494-504).

Social media has had a transformative impact on marketing and advertising. While it provides brands numerous ways to reach consumers, the most astute marketers keep a close eye on

new trends emerging on various social platforms to work out how to leverage them in their digital marketing before others. As per the statistics, due to social media's power, the number of monthly online social media users is estimated to reach 3.43 billion by 2023, representing approximately one-third of the global total (Statista Research Department, 2021).

As reported by Schaffer (2022), customers who have experienced positive social media engagements with brands strongly suggest the brand to 71% of their social contacts. This means that social media is a powerful tool for brands to reach and influence their target audiences. By creating and sharing engaging content, brands can build relationships with customers and drive sales. Furthermore, children are developing social media accounts at a young age. 44% of children aged 8 to 11 use at least one social media channel, and this figure jumps dramatically in the 12–15 age group, where 87% use it. This trend is important for brands to be aware of, as it means that they need to start thinking about how to target and engage with younger consumers on social media.

In addition, Facebook was the most popular social media platform among marketers worldwide. According to a global survey, 90% of social media marketers used the platform to promote their brand, with another 79% using Instagram (Dencheva, 2023). Galal (2022) further adds that there were up to 30 million social network users in 2019, and the number is expected to increase to 41 million active users by 2026. Kemp (2023) reveals that in January 2023, there were 25.8 million social media users in South Africa, with users between the ages of 18 and 24 making up 10.6% of the total. 13 to 17-year-old female teenagers made up 8.9% of South Africa's social media users. These reports open doors widely for marketers looking to contact customers for engagement and intention to purchase. Appel et al. (2020:79-95) found that businesses must effectively deliver their messages to consumers on various social media platforms where communication is primarily through text and images. Effective social media marketing helps a brand become visible and helps with exposure. Because social media has evolved into a culturally significant form of communication and expression, researchers must improve understanding of it. Emojis in social media posts can boost shares and engagements by making brands more relatable, adding context to their messaging, and appealing to the emotions of younger consumers on a deeper level. As a result, social media have become the most widely used digital system for marketing communication. Sharma et al. (2020:9450-9467) indicated that young consumers' perceptions of the use of emojis in social media marketing are generally good. They find it amusing, funny, individualised, simple to understand, and persuasive in nature. For brands to stand out they must be creative; emojis help attract attention and keep the conversation going. Emoji use is a strategy for effective

marketing activity to drive customer engagement and intention to purchase among the Generation Z cohort.

2.4.2.1 Video posting platforms

The short video, which can last from a few seconds to a few minutes, has emerged as a common way for people to learn and share creative skills like drawing, photography, and crafting. Short videos on social media sites change how individuals learn creative skills by combining visually rich educational content with communication features that allow them to challenge and give feedback on those materials (Zhou, 2019). Short videos offer organisations a free and simple way to reach out to potential customers online (Zhao & Wang, 2020:1-21. The integration of emojis in these videos draws the attention of young consumers, providing marketers with more time to convey their message and spark engagement.

Increased customer involvement, the advancement of online streaming innovations and popular social video-sharing sites such as YouTube, Twitch, Snapchat, and Instagram have all contributed to the current surge in social video content popularity (Törhönen et al., 2019:165-190). Additionally, brands are taking notice of Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, Google, LinkedIn, and Pinterest, which are all expanding their short-form selections (Bretous, 2021) and Zhou (2019). In addition, the majority of short video platforms are mobile apps that allow users to create, edit, share, and watch short videos. Because videos provide a more appealing presentation than traditional textual web pages or tweets, Zhao and Wang (2020:1-21) reveal that the number of users on short video social network platforms has recently increased dramatically. As a result, businesses must create short video advertising systems and departments in order to advance advertisements on short video social network platforms. Furthermore, the length of the videos is uniform, ranging from a few seconds to a few minutes (Zhou, 2019). Images elicit a more positive response from customers, especially images that are familiar to them, for example images of smiling faces depict emotions which can easily be related to daily lives (Gamage, 2021:26-31). Emojis tell a story more clearly than text, which is why this always-busy generation enjoys them so much since they are straightforward (even if when used in videos or as captions to the videos).

Brands now use social media influencer accounts to advertise their products through influencer marketing. Yang et al. (2021:565-583) found that product sellers frequently pay influencers to include their products in their videos, and users can consider purchasing without exiting the app. TikTok is one of the major platforms at the forefront of this transformation. Its main feature of short video sharing has gained a large following. Seeing a celebrity or a role model using a specific product on a YouTube or TikTok short influences followers to use that

product because they trust the person who shared that content, so it is credible. Brands rely on an influencer to creatively trigger engagement and intention to purchase from younger customers. Furthermore, many sellers of products on TikTok select an engaging influencer and trust the influencer to create an advertisement (Yang et al., 2021:565-583). On the social media app TikTok, users communicate with one another and with content creators via the video comment section, using emojis in addition to written text (Kröll, 2022).

Nowadays, digital communication allows people to communicate with a large number of people quickly and easily (Izotova et al., 2021:198-206). Any video posting platform, such as YouTube, TikTok, and Daily Motion, allows users to create and post enjoyable and relatable content, which presents a challenge to brands as they must be innovative and create similar content. Emojis are used to spark user conversations and engagements; brands and influencers use emojis to make a video more enjoyable; and members of Gen Z responds positively to these because they use platforms like YouTube and TikTok daily. Zhao and Wang (2020:1-21) comment that the acceptance of adverts refers to purchase intent, which means that users will hear or see short video adverts, share adverts with others, or even click on the product URL incorporated in adverts to make purchases. According to this study, whether emojis are used in the caption, the comments, or the video itself, the younger audience is influenced by this type of content. This study aims to demonstrate brand acceptance of these emojis in digital marketing platforms, specifically engagement and intention to purchase.

2.4.2.2 Blogging and websites

The internet is now the primary source of product information for many consumer goods due to the proliferation of consumer reviews based on blogging. A blog is a specific type of website. On the other hand, blogs are frequently updated with new content, whereas websites are typically static and not updated as frequently (Edmondson, 2019; Alkan & Ulas, 2023:1-14). Various studies underlined the potential benefits of adding emojis in microblogs, both in private communication and in corporate microblogs (Zhang et al., 2022:616-630). Website blogging plays a vital role in advertising various products and services. Website content is the primary source of communicating and sharing the necessary information with targeted customers for greater understanding and enhanced knowledge management, with the latest updated discussions and suggestions (Sadiq et al., 2020:677-696). Blogs are sometimes integrated into larger websites. To keep customers updated on brand developments, digital brands frequently have blogs (Edmondson, 2019; Zhang et al., 2022:616-630). Blogging is a digital activity in which bloggers can easily share contact details, ideas, video files, text images, and links to additional websites, information sources, and videos (Sadiq et al., 2020:677-696; Alkan & Ulas, 2023:1-14). In addition, Uribe et al. (2016:4403-4410) argue that blogs are

websites with a solid personal nature. Blogs have captured the attention of internet users worldwide and offer numerous opportunities for both individuals and organisations. Compared to traditional advertising, blog messages are usually perceived as reliable and independent sources of information. On blogging websites, content could include videos, text, sounds, images, animations, or customer or user experiences (Dholakia & Rego, 1998:724-736; Zhang et al., 2022:616-630). Emojis can be used to add visual impact to any online text or communication, including websites and blogs (Bai et al. (2019:1-16; Zhang et al., 2022:616-630). Casado-Molina et al. (2022:315-333) and Liu (2023:372) that how emojis are used will affect how they behave in different situations. Emojis appear to be especially helpful in three situations: in positive contexts, in posts on customer care and service, and when used to emphasise points.

Websites work hand in hand with blogs. Edmondson (2019), Akgün and Arslan (2022:15-30), and Alkan and Ulas (2023:1-14) further note that a blog is always a website, but a website is not always a blog. Blogs provide a platform for customers to search for and discover new brands, compare alternatives, and read customer comments and reviews. Even though blogging has become a part of daily life for internet users, it is still considered a relatively new form of marketing. Blogs remain essential to a constantly evolving and innovating social media marketing strategy. Celebrity, expert, and consumer blogs expand product and service knowledge and brand awareness. Businesses use various types of blogs for advertising purposes depending on their target audience, with varying degrees of success (Greenalgh, 2020; Akgün & Arslan, 2022:15-30; Zhang et al., 2022:616-630). In addition, emojis have become such a feature that brands are now incorporating them into their marketing messages when communicating with younger generations.

With the help of blogging, anyone can discuss and provide information on topics of interest to visitors and target customers, which is why bloggers and marketers are always concerned about their visitors or customers. They want to discover effective ways to increase their customers' loyalty to their website so they will keep coming back (Sadiq et al., 2020:677-696). It is now essential for brands to update the page content of their websites to attract target customers or blog readers by providing them with current, engaging, and valuable information. Alsaleh (2017:23-40) adds that building an interactive website to serve as a common umbrella for their many brands can result in a successful customer experience that leads to trust and satisfaction. Consumers who share the same enthusiasm and interests as the bloggers are more likely to trust the authors' opinions because they regard the bloggers as credible and trustworthy. Businesses can be more effective in marketing their products because consumers consider the content more credible and authentic (Van Esch et al., 2018:778-793). Buildwith's (2023) report on blog usage distribution in South Africa indicates that the top four blog

technologies used by websites are WordPress, Blogger, Tumblr and Ghost, with WordPress currently the most popular blog technology on various websites (see Fig. 2.1 below). Brands use blogging and websites and incorporate emojis to ensure enjoyable, exciting, and engaging information. Bloggers use various types of emoticons in posts describing everyday experiences, family gatherings, seasonal events, and so on, to make blogs more visually appealing and to reinforce identities that they expect readers to recognise and interpret (Nishimura, 2015:1-17). The ability of emojis to create more visually appealing content to attract the attention of young customers has gained acceptance, and the Generation Z is always willing to engage when presented with a recognisable symbol. Emojis give information that the Gen Z cohort regard as credible to help them to make informed decisions when deciding to purchase a product, as consumers have become more sceptical and distrustful of advertisements.

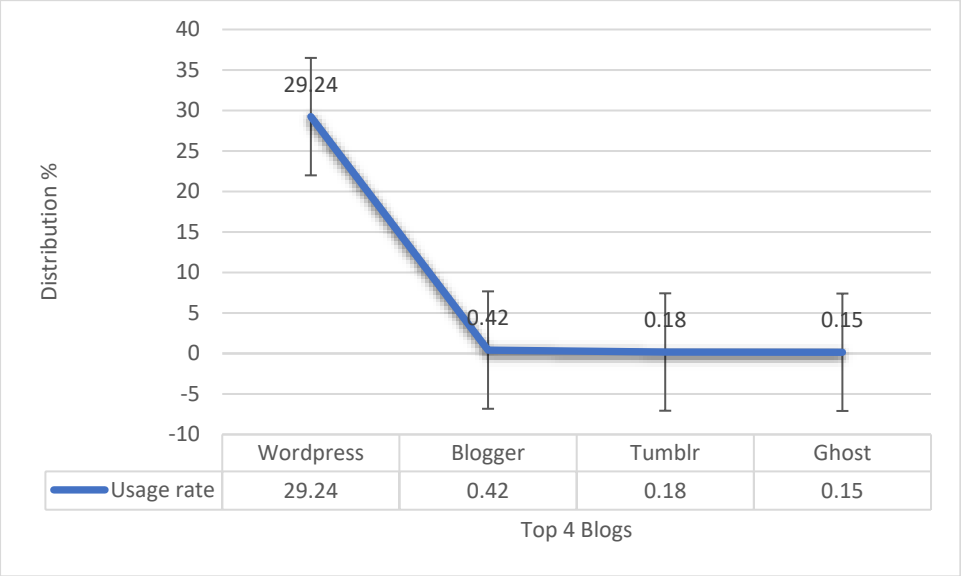

Figure 2.1: Statistics for websites using Blog technologies
Source: Buildwith (2023)

2.4.3 Email marketing

It is evident that selecting an appropriate subject line, the length of an email, customisation of the email, and other characteristics significantly impact an email's metrics (Savino, 2021:24-25). Email can be used for marketing through sending advertising and promotional content. eMarketing Institute (2018b), Stein (2019), and Akgün and Arslan (2022:15-30) define email marketing as an internet-based strategy; it is used to develop a bridge between businesses and the public. Email marketing is now an important and growing component of digital marketing (Yasmin et al., 2015:69-80; Kapoor & Kapoor, 2021:199-213; Nguyen, 2021). By emailing customers, brands can create personalised content that is simple to share; this

strategy should elicit interactive and engaged attitudes among customers (Valenzuela-Galvez et al., 2022:1-16). It is a relatively new technique because it came into being after the advent of the internet. Email marketing can be used for delivering advertisements, organisational promotions, newsletters, and other promotional materials, targeting an existing client database or acquiring new customers (Kostial, 2021; Nguyen, 2021; Akgün & Arslan, 2022:15-30). In a text-heavy environment, such as email, effective communication is even more critical (Kapoor & Kapoor, 2021:199-213). Effective communication can be seen through customer engagement and intention to purchase as emails stimulate intention to purchase, which generally calls for action.

Integrating emojis into email marketing campaigns has also increased engagement (Marmer, 2018; Stein, 2019; Aboulhosn, 2020). Following the preceding, Valenzuela-Galvez et al. (2022:1-16) report that emojis affect how customers interact and can also initiate engaging behavioural patterns and resulting increase customer engagement even in less interactive channels. Emojis can enhance the likelihood of email being opened, how many times it is viewed, and the click-through rate to access additional content. Words alone are insufficient, as they do not represent customers' non-verbal language and gestures. Despite the growth and prominence of messaging platforms and apps, emails are necessary for daily online life. Hence, digital marketing communications that include emojis in email are also investigated by this study.

2.4.4 Influencer marketing

A perfect way to boost engagement and audience is to acquire an individual with followers to help a brand with an endorsement, known as an influencer. This form of marketing has been used regularly outside of digital circles, with sports stars endorsing brands, artists, and well-known public figures (Akgün & Arslan, 2022:15-30; Geyser, 2022). Usually, brands get famous people to support them on digital platforms, creating a bridge between their followers and encouraging them to explore the brand's items and services more (Zovitsky, 2020; Alkan & Ulas, 2023:1-14). Influencer marketers can be viewed as a form of eWOM by famous individuals with a large customer base and many thousands of followers. These people are frequently considered credible experts on the topics they post about, encouraging others to look at their work and engage with them (Grafström et al., 2018; Akgün & Arslan, 2022:15-30; Zolkepli et al., 2023:185-199). Given the potential reach and engagement influencers command, organisations have either begun embracing influencers on digital media or planning to increase their efforts in this arena (Appel et al., 2020:79-95). While social media influencer marketing is not new, it has experienced much growth in the digital age as an industry. Greenalgh (2020) and Alkan and Ulas (2023:1-14) report that in recent years, influencers have

amassed enormous power, and their scope and influence continue to grow. Figure 2.2 below shows a South African actress, Garnier's brand ambassador, using her Instagram platform to advertise the brand, incorporating an emoji in the post. The younger generation understands emojis, and when their favourite celebrities or influencers use them, brand credibility increases as do engagement and purchase intentions.

Figure 2.2: Natasha Thahane Instagram Post
Source: Thahane (2020)

2.4.5 Search engine marketing and search engine optimisation

Search engine marketing and search engine optimisation (SEO) are two of the most fundamental processes of search engine marketers. Search engine marketing is the technique of selling your business, website, or content by using both paid strategies, free methods, and a combination of linking both the process of the SEO (eMarketing Institute, 2018b; Delante, 2020; Akgün & Arslan, 2022:15-30). SEO is essential in setting up an organisation's website visibility on significant search engines like Google, which feature along the lines of non-price, natural search results. With the progression of time, search engines such as Google have become increasingly sensitive and emotionally aware regarding the quality and relevance of the information provided (eMarketing Institute, 2018b; eMarketing Institute, 2018c).

Marmer (2018) notes that these pictograms have the potential to increase click-through rates (CTR) due to Google's new move to support emojis online, as well as the fact that they have become an increasingly popular trend that will only continue to CTR. It is reported that emojis appear in snippets when Google believes it is "relevant, beneficial, and fun" (Schwartz, 2017;

Schwartz, 2020). Emojis are extremely easy to feature in search results. Google allows individuals to use emojis to search for something online, be it a book, food, clothes or even restaurants near them, and emojis seem to cover all of them. Schwartz (2020) reports that in 2019, Google started allowing the use of emojis in paid search. Setting up an emoji as the keyword makes it more likely for the brand to be clicked on. Young consumers regard emojis as appropriate, simple, and straightforward to understand; influencers use them to connect with this cohort, which leads to engagement and intention to purchase as they are influenced by their idols to use the product.

2.4.6 Mobile marketing

The mobile marketing era and future have arrived. Marrs (2020) and Wu and Ma (2022:1-13) describe mobile marketing as a marketing strategy to appeal to customers through their mobile devices. When executed well, mobile marketing may give current and potential purchasers customised, time- and geographically sensitive information so they can get what they need when they need it, regardless of whether they are in a hurry. Mobile marketing comprises email campaigns, websites, paid searches, social media, SMS), and mobile apps. Over half of website traffic in South Africa comes explicitly from smartphones, affecting a significant number of South Africans for whom this is the only way they can access the web.

2.4.6.1 Mobile applications

Over the past decade, app stores like Google Play and the Apple AppStore have grown to host millions of apps, giving users virtually limitless options (Ebrahimi et al., 2021:1-30). Apps are becoming increasingly popular as mobile technology advances, and the number of mobile users grows. As a result, numerous apps that can support platforms have recently emerged, offering a new way to develop, download, and update software applications on advanced mobile platforms (Petsas et al., 2013:277-290). COVID-19 has accelerated many online activities, including mobile applications; brands now have their own mobile apps, and people can log in and shop through mobile apps instead of previously restricted physical contact. Emojis have been developed to add interest and nonverbal cues to online communication, which are now found in nearly every popular application. This includes not only social applications, but also various mobile apps such as financial, delivery services, e-hailing services, and other similar services. A report published by TMO Contributor (2023) notes that it is expected that mobile wallet usage will increase to 4.8 billion mobile wallets by the end of 2025, coinciding with consumers' steadily increasing concern with safety and adaptiveness as they become dissatisfied with conventional banking and prestige financial systems, a prediction which encompasses the expansion of e-payments, which has driven the growth of online shopping. This indicates that implementing mobile services is advantageous both for

brands and consumers. Emojis can be found everywhere, including in the process of helping users get started with a newly downloaded app, empty states, coach marks, dialogues, and even push notifications (Kovalevich, 2019). Emojis and strategies are used to make these apps more appealing to users and are responsible for a significant part of the money that social media applications spend (Suresh, 2018:158-162). Furthermore, emojis are common in IM, and they play an important role in business and everyday communication. Despite the fact that they are intended to improve language and text, they transform some all-encompassing feelings through symbols and icons, but no guidelines exist to guide people on how to accurately outline the emotions behind them (Chui, 2020:108-118).

2.4.6.2 Different categories of applications

The following types of mobile applications have successfully reached users list the different types of mobile apps (Chawla, 2018; Ebrahimi et al., 2021:1-30; TMO Contributor, 2023).

2.4.6.2.1 Business applications

Productivity apps are the most popular among users. Numerous business apps are available for everything from buying and selling to billing, tracking work progress, and emailing. These apps are designed for business-to-business (B2B) or business-to-consumer (B2C) transactions. The ultimate goal of these apps is to increase business productivity while decreasing costs. Simultaneously, they aim to provide maximum convenience while broadening the market's audience pool. Many different types of apps can be used by businesses to increase their market presence and reach customers on a global scale (Puzas, 2022). South African media company apps record an average of 80.45 thousand downloads, more than the average of all apps (42Matters, 2022). Apps from various brands have grown in popularity in South Africa, with brands vying for relevance and market presence among younger consumers. Emojis are already a part of our everyday communication, not just on social media and in chat rooms. Emojis allow an organisation to humanise its brand, refine its concept, and identify with its audience by communicating in their language with emojis that people use every day in business apps.

2.4.6.2.2 Educational applications

Educational apps are intended to entertain children while they learn new concepts and methodologies. Some educational apps can also assist teachers in the classroom. Emojis are universal, regardless of where one is or what language one speaks (ZoomInfo, 2020). Marketers targeting the members of Gen Z can share emoji-infused content between study breaks for the younger consumer. Emojis are progressively becoming part of the vocabulary

and paving the way for the growth of visual information (Doiron, 2018:1-11). They have been identified as something that can be used to encourage the younger generation to understand and be interested in educational apps.

2.4.6.2.3 Entertainment applications

Examples of entertainment app uses are watching videos online, searching for nearby events, chatting, posting photos on social media sites, and other similar activities. Such apps are highly engaging, and the overall experience is hugely refreshing for users, thanks to the inclusion of enjoyable and interactive elements. Emojis can be included in text, email, Twitter, Facebook, and other digital applications to send a message or an emotion, as advocated by Pavalanathan and Eisenstein (2016:1-4), Andrade et al. (2020:24-33), and Ptaszynski et al. (59:103-113). Entertainment apps primarily target Generation Z and using emojis in one or more of these platforms for mobile marketing campaigns can be highly beneficial for a brand targeting a younger consumer.

2.4.6.3 Messaging platforms

People will no longer accept one-way communication or outdated numbers regarding customer service. They anticipate that brands will use convenient channels, such as social messaging apps (Smith, 2022). Duffett (2016:1-21) defines instant messaging as electronic communication in which two or more people can communicate in real time digitally (via computers) and mobile devices. Emojis are images that can be combined naturally with plain text to form a new language; this practise has spread to computers, mobile devices, and social media platforms including WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. Despite their assumed universality, emoji meanings can vary depending on language and culture. Understanding the context of emoji meaning is critical for systems that index, retrieve, or extract content from multimedia information (Barbieri et al., 2016:3967-3972). Consumers expect to be able to direct message, voice chat, or video call a brand when they are in need. Social media messaging apps enable a brand to meet the new communication expectations of consumers while supporting business objectives. The degree of message management and chatbot automation varies between platforms. Emojis are part of the automation that improves the messages sent across digital messaging platforms. No matter the size of the business, the messaging apps like WhatsApp, Telegram and Slack, can now be used to connect with customers and internal teams in new and dynamic ways (Twilio, 2022). According to a systematic review of emojis, emoji use can be influenced by user characteristics, culture, and platform usage. Marketers can use social messaging apps to communicate with people one-on-one by creating impactful, personalised touchpoints. These channels are accessible to consumers, social media managers, and customer service representatives (Smith, 2022). Emojis can also drive content and increase conversion rates for communication channels such

as email, text, and social media (Puri, 2022). Brands use messaging apps to connect with their young customers; this is a convenient method because these apps are embedded in mobile phones, and others can be freely downloaded and used. As reported by Mehner (2022), the most popular messaging apps are WhatsApp, Messenger by Meta (formerly Facebook Messenger), Instagram, and WeChat. These have over seven billion active monthly users combined. Twilio (2022) reported on the instant messaging platforms that marketers use, which are discussed below.

2.4.6.3.1 WhatsApp

With 36.8 percent of South Africans using WhatsApp, this app was clearly the most popular social media platform in the country in 2022. WhatsApp is the most popular communication app, with over 1.5 billion active users (Mehner, 2022; Twilio, 2022). Customers are already using it to text, group chat, voice call, video call, and share files because it comes preinstalled on many smartphones. A brand can set up a public organisation profile, personalise quick responses, and automate away messages. WhatsApp provides live chat, contact and conversation labelling, promotional messaging, and delivery reports. It has an advantage over SMSs because it connects directly to a business profile and a single phone number (rather than a string of random digits), allowing customers to save the business's contact information and receive real-time communications. Brands now have WhatsApp accounts to stay in touch with and close to their target market. Mehner (2022) studied the continued rise in popularity of WhatsApp among various age groups, beginning at 16 years of age. In this study, it was found that WhatsApp can be used anytime, making younger consumers feel more at ease with a brand, as they can use emojis to express their feelings and emotions (Kamel Boulos et al., 2016:1-14; Twilio, 2022).

2.4.6.3.2 Telegram

With over 550 million active monthly users, Telegram is another well-known consumer app. During the pandemic, its popularity among businesses skyrocketed due to the secure end-to-end encryption on all messages (Vaziripour et al., 2018:1-20; Davies, 2022). The organisations can use Telegram to create organisation-wide super groups with up to 100 000 users or external channels to market to thousands of customers. Users can create private internal chat rooms, make voice and video calls, and send files up to 1.5 GB in size. Chatbots can also manage channels and incoming messages, making automation possible (Twilio, 2022). Custom stickers can be uploaded and assigned to specific emojis in Telegram. Stickers can be assigned an emoji to serve as an emoji tooltip (The Telegram Team, 2022). Brands can use Telegram to communicate with younger consumers, giving these members of Gen Z a sense of privacy while engaging with brands and the content shared.

2.4.6.3.3 Facebook Messenger

With over 1.3 billion users, Facebook Messenger has spread across almost every country. While it is not only for keeping in touch with friends and family, 61% of users have used the app to make business contacts (Mehner, 2022; Twilio, 2022). This application allows users to enable Messenger automation, which means that if the organisations have a Facebook page, automation ensures no communication is missed. Businesses can also use a live-chat plugin to generate leads, Messenger campaigns to generate leads, scannable codes to initiate conversations, and a chatbot to automate responses (Beveridge, 2022). Messenger enables marketers to build trust and relationships with younger consumers by quickly responding to their queries, concerns, and comments. It also allows this generation to feel seen by a brand. This platform provides free e-stickers for users to download and use during online chats, as well as a large selection of emojis for reactions (Umnico, 2022). Now organisations can send customised messages directly to targeted markets; emojis are available on Facebook Messenger and using these attracts users' attention to read, respond and engage with the brand (Meta, 2018).

Due to messaging apps, the way people communicate with each other has undergone a significant transformation. Given how effortless and natural these apps are, users have readily opened their thoughts and personal message channels to corporate engagements (Koyen, 2022). Even one-to-one contacts are not necessary. Emojis allow brands to communicate with their target audience because they have a higher emotional appeal, which aids in forming a bond between a brand and a young consumer (Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333). Customers seek a deep connection with a product, and this is where brand activism can foster strong associations and consumer loyalty (Vilakazi, 2023). Emojis are a new way of communicating among the members of Gen Z; it is the digital language they prefer on these messaging platforms, and it can help forge organic customer engagement and purchase intention.

Emojis are already a part of our everyday communication, not just in social media platforms and chat rooms. As a result, emojis are being used in an increasing number of applications. Even LinkedIn, a strictly business product, succumbed to emojis and launched emoji reactions in April 2019 (Kovalevich, 2019). Younger consumers consume more online media; apps make it simple for them to access digital content and use emojis in these (Sharma et al., 2020:9450-9467), emojis in digital apps help younger consumers engage with a brand (Ko et al., 2023:1-17), and purchase intention (Das et al., 2019:147-156).

In Africa, industries such as mobile commerce will continue to grow exponentially through 2022 as more consumers, particularly previously technologically averse shoppers, become more familiar with shopping online via mobile applications (Junowicz, 2022). Consequently,

as smartphones are still widely known and used in the country and across the continent, the overall number of portable connections seems to be much higher, with over 90 million. Beginning in 2023, there were 112.7 million active mobile phone connections in South Africa, which is the approximate to 187.4% of the country's total population (Kemp, 2023). As digital usage increases, new and improved mobile devices are developed to accommodate the changes in technology and digital language. A report from Statista by Taylor (2023) shows that in South Africa, Samsung is currently the leading mobile phone vendor. Huawei, and Apple also have a strong presence in the South African market with a share of more than 15% each. The number of smartphone consumers will likely increase by more than five million by 2023 (Taylor, 2023). Emojis play a crucial role in simplifying mobile messages while keeping them interested. Brands are utilising emojis to speak with the target group, reach their mobile devices, exhibit that they are on top of the most recent communication trends, and convey messages in richly basic ways. Emojis are an excellent way to communicate, significantly when mobile devices are involved; owing to the proliferation of mobile phones, so these small digital images have elicited a wide range of responses from senders and recipients (Gamage, 2021:26-31; Hamza, 2022). Given that the majority of young customers already own smartphones, it is simpler for brands to gain access to them and create emoji-infused content that will increase engagement and purchase intention.

2.5 Digital marketing usage rate and statistics

Mobile usage is still on the rise. A mobile phone is always with an owner, and more people prefer a mobile over a desktop website when it comes to content since one can use it anywhere, so it makes sense (Cameron, 2021). Since digital marketing is growing and evolving, marketers must do the same. Brands are shifting their use of interactive marketing away from product- and company-based marketing and toward experience- and interaction-focused marketing in order to generate more active customer connection, engagement, participation, and interactions (Valenzuela-Galvez et al., 2022:1-16). The digital approach is the most popular and effective way for brands to connect, engage, and interact with their target audiences (Alexander, 2022). Before making a purchase, 93% of potential buyers read online reviews. Consumers can spend up to 5 times longer on a website after interacting with negative thoughts (Faizan, 2018). In addition, Google controls 91% of the global search engine market. 45% of shoppers purchase online and pick up in-store (Faizan, 2018). In their investigation, Salman (2023) reveals that 82% of marketers are using content marketing actively. The statistics imply that client encounters will preferably be as balanced as expected, with emotion and enjoyment at the forefront. The global online marketing and advertising markets are expected to increase from $350 billion in 2020 to $786.2 billion by 2026 (Research and Markets, 2022). Furthermore, according to Statista's report, South Africa's digital marketing market is expected to account for 25% of the total advertising market by 2023, with

a value of more than 580 million USD (Navarro, 2023). These figures demonstrate the significance of mobile and digital platforms in the South African advertising industry's future. Digital marketing is on the rise and has benefited most brands. They can track and monitor young consumers' activities and preferences to help customise appropriate content for them. Emojis' most important role in marketing communications is their directness and clarity. The use of emojis in advertising is supported by research which highlights the complex effects of emoji advertising on consumers (Alattar, 2021:1-19; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333). Emojis are now standard on mobile devices, and younger consumers and brands can engage using emojis on various platforms for intention to purchase.

2.6 Security and privacy in digital marketing platforms

The world is rapidly becoming digital. Most services on digital platforms will be accessed by citizens and consumers from both the private and public sectors using digital devices. The COVID-19 global epidemic exacerbated the country's social and economic problems (UNDP, 2020), but digitalization provided a solution. Digital media, mobile, and digital contexts have proven to be ideal digital spaces for brands to interact with existing customers as well as acquire new ones. Data-driven marketing remains the key for customer experience activities; however, those efforts are being formed and restricted by customer security concerns (Fisher, 2019). eMarketer reported that in 2018, most people were worried about their privacy regarding digital space (Fisher, 2019; TMO Contributor, 2023). Privacy worries result from the fact that during an interaction with customers, sensitive information about the customers is frequently asked. Marketers are urged to know their businesses' and customers' security and protection risks. Every digital platform a marketer employs can be a vector for hacker attacks and fraudulent activity. This security alertness requests acknowledging and knowing these threats. As reported by Fisher (2019), Pollard (2019), and Davies (2022), these threats include the following:

- Email marketing risks
- Social media disruption
- Cookie logging and cookie jacking
- Threats to financial transactions
- Invasion by non-human bots

As mentioned above, privacy laws have been enacted to protect online users from the threats discussed above. The Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), which builds on existing privacy laws, applies to organisations operating in South Africa and businesses that hold personal information about South African citizens (Brown, 2021; TMO Contributor,

2023). IMM Graduate School (2020) and Brown (2021) further elaborate that this act primarily affects email marketing. The most used data in email marketing will be subject to the regulations of POPIA, requiring businesses, as marketers, to pay close attention to how this data is processed. When considering how many personalised emails marketers send out every day, it is easy to see why the POPIA significantly impacts email marketing. Consent is easy to obtain from the Gen Z cohort as they are digital citizens, but marketers are entrusted with the obligation of protecting their customers' information. Privacy concerns arise in this study because emojis are based on customer information and usage patterns. The literature above demonstrates that marketers must obtain consent before obtaining information on the members of Gen Z to customise content for them in digital marketing communications.

2.7 Effectiveness of digital marketing communications

If used and implemented correctly, digital marketing communication is an essential tool for the growth of industrial organisations. Among the most common reasons for customers switching to competitors is a lack of effective communication with them (Dwivedi et al., 2021:59:1-37; Zhao et al., 2023:1-22). Because digital media is pervasive, consumers can get information whenever and wherever they want. Messages about specific products or services were sent to people who were only told what the organisations wanted them to know (Yasmin et al., 2015:69-80). Customers' purchasing habits have changed as a result of rapid technological advancements. Psychometric expectations of digital platform subscribers are becoming increasingly popular, and are evident on digital platforms, where people regularly express their interests by following, supporting, and sharing specific, one-of-a-kind content and where digital media organisations want to profile their audience (Marmer, 2018; Rosales & Fernandez-Ardevol, 2020:1074-1087). Digital communication, which has developed into a primary method of communication in present society, is limited in terms of non-verbal expression and context concerning traditional and human contact.

2.7.1 Advantages of digital marketing communications

To date, many brands have used digital platforms to provide customer service, answer specific inquiries from customers, and address disputes (Appel et al., 2020:79-95). Brands can get closer to their customers by using digital marketing communications that are more customised and personalised. Customers can also engage with businesses at any time and from any location. Forecasting approaches will make solutions to their problems more accessible, immediate, and even predictive (Appel et al., 2020:79-95). Brands want to make it even easier for customers to reach out to them whenever and wherever they need it. Yasmin et al. (2015:69-80) explain the advantages of digital marketing as follows:

- Digital marketing technologies enable customers to stay up to date on organisational information.
- Consumers can participate in an organisation's various activities.
- Digital marketing provides consumers with clear information about products or services.
- Simple comparisons with others and sharing of product or service content is much easier.

The digital channel in marketing has become an essential component of many organisations and brands' strategies, large and small. Because nearly all internet users use emojis on a daily basis, they are becoming increasingly popular in marketing communications (Gamage, 2021:26-31). As a result, new emojis are created regularly. Employing digital marketing to demonstrate the effectiveness of emojis in digital marketing communication by brands for customer engagement and purchase intent is a good strategy for brands whose target market is Generation Z.

2.7.2 Consequences of digital marketing communications

Consequences of using digital marketing communications can also include goals like WOM, specific suggestions, and thus rely on the specific goal of the digital communication (Bashirzadeh et al., 2022:58-76). Unnava and Aravindakshan (2021:864-881) state that brands use digital platforms to improve brand awareness, drive traffic to owned media, and potentially increase sales. According to several studies, using digital marketing gives rise to purchase intentions (Das et al., 2019; Dastane, 2020:142-158, Alwan & Alshurideh, 2022:837–848; Hien & Nhu, 2022:1-24). Furthermore, various studies have shown that using digital marketing leads to increased customer engagement (Hamzah et al., 2021:336-358; McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Unnava & Aravindakshan, 2021:864-881). The consequences of using digital marketing may incorporate additional specific goals like WOM suggestions and/or the updating of a newer version, depending on the actual objective of the digital interactive marketing communication (Bashirzadeh et al., 2022:58-76). The findings above show that brands' use of digital marketing has resulted in positive outcomes such as reaching the targeted market and positive customer attitudes toward advertisements. Alwan and Alshurideh (2022:837–848) comment that digital marketing promotes a diverse range of products as well as the best product purchasing practises via e-commerce and eWOM. Second, users agree that digital marketing enables the exchange of opinions and discussion of a product's negative or positive attributes, allowing consumers to form a clear picture of a product before purchasing it. Finally, eWOM plays a crucial role in allowing customers to share their actual experiences with a specific brand, and this technique takes into account more

efficient and engaging tools to allow customers to clearly evaluate the brands or products (Alwan & Alshurideh, 2022:837-848; Zolkepli et al., 2023:185-199). Since the beginning of the global pandemic, digital marketing has been rapidly increasing and proliferating; brands have worked diligently to incorporate features in digital media to make communication more enjoyable (Shingwenyana, 2020).

Emojis and other nonverbal digital cues are commonly used by the members of Gen Z cohort to ensure the effectiveness of digital marketing communication. The importance of emojis in modern digital communication cannot be overstated. Emojis are essential in today's interpersonal computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Sung, 2020; Svoboda, 2022).

2.7.3 Content that captures attention

Marketers are increasingly incorporating more complex visual design elements into their digital communication, owing to technological advancements that enable richer communication. This type of communication frequently employs animations such as Graphics Interchange Format (GIF) images and pictographs such as emojis (Bashirzadeh et al., 2022:58-76). In order to ensure the effectiveness of digital marketing communication, this has become the most effective way to appeal to and attract the attention of the target audience. Although many emotions have been reported to influence Millennial and Generation Z consumer attention to digital advertisements, humour appears to have a significant influence on their purchasing behaviour (Gamage, 2021:26-31). Consequently, Munsch (2021:10-29) discovered that a digital advertisement that evokes a feeling is more likely to inspire them to pay close attention towards it, and that younger generation interest in digital marketing communication is more probable if the message is conveyed by a person they admire and respect. The content conveyed determines how consumer responses are measured (Shankar et al., 2021:541-565). Understanding consumer behaviour in digital adverts helps marketers to more effectively market to their target market. Hence, advanced digital platforms now allow for a unique feature for communicating, where users can express their emotions while texting; the information richness in the communication process mentioned above is reflected in text messages (Andrade et al., 2020:24-33). Since these tiny picture emojis were first presented, a library of emojis has developed and advanced and now incorporates creatures, food, faces and different images. There have been more emoji alternatives than smiley faces; emoji users might have the option to consolidate them into the text. Enterprises are now required to communicate regularly with prospective and current clients (Tarik & Adnan, 2018:45-57). Emojis fill the void left by the absence of emotional cues in digital communication, and they are used to ensure that writers express emotions with appropriate quality and appeal (Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69; Li et al., 2019:1748-1763). Digital media are primarily used to target the younger generation

and including cues such as emojis in digital marketing communication ensures its effectiveness, engagement and intent-to-purchase.

2.8 Emojis

While emojis began as something individuals utilised in their lives, now they have undoubtedly made the prosperous journey from the customer to the commercial realm (Willott, 2019; Muhammad & Najim, 2023:218-263). Emojis are symbols in daily digital communication (Nexø & Strandell, 2020:1-12; Katsumata, 2022:1-43; Ko et al., 2022:1-17; Częstochowska et al., 2022: 1388-1392). In addition, according to Ahanin et al. (2022:1-20), emojis are graphic symbols that are thought to be the next generation of emoticons and an effective way of communicating feelings and emotions in digital media. Emojis are frequently confused and used interchangeably with emoticons, another digital symbolic form. Nonetheless, some distinctions exist (Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69). These are punctuation-derived images consolidated to form pictures, such as :) while emojis are small pictures, such as 😊. Brito et al. (2020:1495-1517) state that emojis are effortless and unsophisticated since they are emotionally straightforward. As a result, emojis were developed as an enhancement of emoticons. For example, :-O is an emoticon expressing surprise, whereas 😲 is an emoji with the same meaning (Guibon et al., 2016; Lotfinejad et al., 2020:1-6; Haugland, 2021; Svoboda, 2022). Emojis may also be inserted separately to create a thread (Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69). Chairunnisa and Benedictus (2017:120-126) add that emojis have progressed into various shapes and colours.

Ljubesic and Fiser (2016:82-89), Hand et al. (2022:1-12), and Ko et al. (2022:1-17) observe that emojis are experiencing fast diffusion and still under-researched, which is rarely given attention in the regular press but lacks the scientific examination it deserves. Bliss-Carroll (2016), Chen et al. (2018:763-772) and Casado-Molina et al. (2022:315-333) state that emojis give consumers a chance to focus on the significance of their posts. Emojis add more profundity and authenticity to the emoticons that preceded them. Prominently, emojis range from a slice of pizza to kissy faces to planes, and that is only the beginning. The range of emojis has been expanded to include an assortment of skin tones, hair tones, and surfaces (Aboulhosn, 2020; Ko et al., 2022:1-17). Kostial (2021), Hand et al. (2022:1-12), and Zhang et al. (2022:616-630) indicate that emojis have become a standard in digital communication. Their use may even feel obligatory among the younger generation. Emojis enable empathetic contact between people. As a result, they may play a significant role in the business sector and benefit the development of connections with the target audience. Digital communication was reflected to be vague because of the absence of non-verbal cues that help prevent potential misunderstandings compared to face-to-face communication.

Emojis help digital communicators, enabling them to express their emotional state and convey the context of a message. Emojis additionally help beat the vagueness of instant information and see their use may be seen as a strategy to upgrade and improve the quality of communication (Holthoff, 2020:1-10; Kim & Jun, 2020:1-14; Muhammad & Najim, 2023:218-263).

Bai et al. (2019:1-16), Zheng (2022), Ko et al. (2022:1-17), and Muhammad and Najim, (2023:218-263) indicate that text manipulation can help reduce miscommunication by clarifying the intention behind using emojis to manipulate text. Further, in support of the use of emojis, Yus (2014:511-529) suggested an emoji function taxonomy to emphasise the utility of emojis. These uses include:

- To indicate the propositional attitude that underpins the statement, which is difficult to discern without using an emoticon/emoji.
- To convey a more intense version of a propositional attitude that has already been verbally coded.
- To convey a more intense version of a propositional attitude that has already been verbally expressed.
- To counter the utterance's explicit content (humour).
- To add a feeling or emotion to an utterance's intended meaning (affective attitude toward the phrase).
- To infuse the overall communicating act with an emotion or sentiment (feeling or emotion in parallel to the communicative action).
- To express the intensity of a linguistically coded sensation or emotion.

For marketers, images and iconography always have been essential to marketing communication campaigns. Emojis can be used to create more visually attractive content in order to capture the attention of customers (Gamage, 2021:26-31; Ko et al., 2022:1-17). Emojis enable brands to make content attractive and straightforward and still maintain quality. Emojis can be referred to as a language taking over digital communication for this enquiry. This study looks at how emojis are used in digital marketing communications among the younger generation.

2.8.1 History

Previously in digital communication, emoticons were used as a non-verbal code, which was a sequence of characters which currently coexists with what are known as emojis, and their use has become popular in digital communication (Andrade et al., 2020:24-33; Skager, 2020; Ko et al., 2022:1-17, Muhammad & Najim, 2023:218-263). Developed in Japan in the 1990s by

Shigetaka Kurita, the term emoji means a pictograph (Das et al., 2017:135-139; Ge & Gretzel, 2018:1272-1295; Yakin & Eru, 2019:83-100; Chui, 2020:108-118; Shao et al., 2020:1-9; Suntwal et al., 2021:6400-6409; Sung, 2020; Muhammad & Najim, 2023:218-263). Emojis, which literally translate to "picture character" in Japanese, first appeared at the end of the twentieth century to facilitate digital communication (Das et al., 2017:135-139). They are defined as replacements for the non-verbal signs needed in advertising connections in contrast to direct interaction (Walther & D'Addario, 2001:324-347; Derks et al., 2008:766-785; Gesselman & Garcia, 2019:1-14). Emojis are regularly utilised in digital communications and marketing campaigns. Be that as it may, it is less known what the usage of these emojis may mean for customer reactions (Hewage et al., 2020:219–230).

Emojis gained popularity over time, and several significant events occurred in 2015 that appeared to push them into the mainstream (Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333; Svoboda, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022:616-630). The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 contributed to making these emojis into the mainstream, and there are some emojis used during this time for awareness 🙄 🤫. From traditional face-to-face communication to fully migrating to digital space, it is evident that customers need a human touch. Emoticons attempted to fill that gap until emojis emerged. It is conspicuous that emojis are here to stay if digital communication remains. Emojis have become an essential part of modern culture, particularly among younger consumers. Brands use emojis in digital marketing communications to interact with the members of Gen Z to increase engagement and purchase intent. Therefore, as a consequence of this of the history and significant growth of emojis, it is critical to conduct additional research on young consumers' perceptions of emoji usage in digital marketing communications by organisations**.**

2.8.2 Delineation of emojis

An emoji is a diagrammatic image an ideogram that represents the outward appearances of a human, as well as ideas and concepts, like climate, celebrations, vehicles and structures, food and drink, creatures and plants, or feelings, sentiments, and exercises (Novak et al., 2015:1-22; Joubert, 2021; Orazi et al., 2023:1-28; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Emojis can indicate liveliness, mockery or pressures contained in the communication, and their meanings are easy to interpret, including new definitions produced by and between users (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2018:1-22). Ljubesic and Fiser (2016:82-89), Suresh (2018:158-162), and Wang et al. (2023:1-14) reveal a distinction between smiley faces and emojis; emoticons mainly convey emotions, whereas emojis cover a wide range of ideas like creatures, crops, climate, sporting events and groceries. Since emojis are now commonly used and can be found on badges, cushions, handbags, key rings, stickers, as well as other objects, it is crucial to consider how

the message will be understood. Emojis compliment written language and can create some finer distinctions (Suresh, 2018:158-162). When facial gestures and expressions are unavailable, emojis serve as visual cues in digital communication (Harn, 2017; Sharma et al., 2020:9450-9467; Orazi et al., 2023:1-28). Nicoletti (2019) highlights that using these emojis help to identify the state of mind or the mood a person may have been in a while posting. Emojis are an element of our digital age's language, adding emotional meaning, affection, irritation, delight, and irony to our online exchanges in ways that words alone cannot (Bai et al., 2019:1-16). Emojis are appealing because they simplify expressions and add a personal touch to content, making the advertised item more memorable and distinguishable. This study focuses on the use of emojis as digital cues to explore their effectiveness in digital marketing communication.

2.8.3 Evolution of emojis and emotions

Emojis are a relatively recent feature that have changed how people communicate online (Muhammad & Najim, 2023:218-263). The rise of the smiley face and sad face as a type of digital communication occurred in 1982 on a message board as a response. These pictograms were accepted as a new avenue for digital communication, leading to other emoticons and then advancing to emojis. The number of emojis that different carriers can use has grown. When a set of emojis was incorporated into Unicode, it became a global standard. Emojis are now a widely used nonverbal communication tool for conveying emotions (Tomihira et al., 2020:265-280; Ko et al., 2022:1-17; Muhammad & Najim, 2023:218-263). In communication created in interpersonal organisations, the fundamental non-verbal code generally utilised was that of emoticons, a series of characters. For instance, punctuation marks are deciphered as pictures and not as linguistic code; the arrangement :) is interpreted not as a colon and a bracket but as a happy face. Presently, the performance of characters coincides with what is known as emoji, which in translation means "letter image" (Bai et al., 2019:1-16; Andrade et al., 2020:24-33). Emojis and emoticons are not the same; emoticons are the predecessors of emojis. Emoticons can be created using symbols available on the keyboard. Emojis are pictographic articulations, as animated characters, which are commonly combined with texts, generating a new form of written communication with nonverbal gestures to enhance the text. Emojis are replacing emoticons in digital communications because they are more engaging, positive, meaningful, and imaginative than emoticons (Lath, 2019**;** Kim & Jun 2020:1-14; Pfeifer et al., 2022:1-11; Luzón, 2023:17-32). Initially, emoticons were used to differentiate between remarks and serious, important issues to convey meaning (Da Costa, 2019; Pardes, 2018). However, the meaning expressed might be ambiguous, resulting in misunderstandings due to difficulties in obtaining purposes. Ljubesic and Fiser (2016:82-89) show that emojis are

a step forward from emoticons. These two concepts are sometimes misunderstood; emoticons are graphic symbols that typically represent emotion or feelings expressed through punctuation marks and hence have a restricted range and use. Emojis are pictographs of faces, artefacts, and icons, and as stated above, the name "emoji" literally means "image character." They may be described as a single image that serves as a text character (Kotlyarenko, 2022; Luzón, 2023:17-32). Accordingly, emojis have become prevalent for clarifying digital communication, and their effectiveness differs from using emoticons, which is less often done. Moving further into the development of expressions and less complex language, the rise of emojis is evident.

Regardless of linguistic differences, emojis provide customers with broadening lexical items with which to express their emotions, allowing organisations to gain a better understanding of which kinds of content are much more impactful (Gamage, 2021:26-31). Emojis can help brands build trust with younger customers by providing a communication platform where they can freely express their ideas and feelings. Emojis are used for everything by the Gen Z cohort, from searching on Google to ordering something online, and emojis have evolved to accommodate all these activities. Emojis can be used to engage by younger consumers) this includes indicating the product of choice or if the product is worth spending money on) in digital marketing communications shared on their timelines.

2.8.4 Usage growth of emojis

Emojis have been in existence since the 1990s; they have seen their first billboard advert, content, movie, and even song. Emojis with various skin tones have been accessible since 2015 (Buchholz, 2022). Emojis are the newest and shortest method of communication, having evolved from letters, calls, emails, and text messages in the past few years. They are changing how people live and communicate with one another (Suresh, 2018:158-162). Statistics by Data Reportal show that the number of mobile connections in South Africa increased by 4.0 million between 2022 and 2023 (Kemp, 2023). This means that emojis can be used in text since they are integrated into the keyboard of mobile devices. Further, many digital platforms, including Google, presently uphold searching using emojis. Emojis are a relatively new form of communication that has exploded in popularity (Yahoo Finance, 2016).

Since the 1990s, when the Unicode Consortium adopted the first 76 pictograms, the Consortium oversees which emojis emerge on computers and phones and social media accounts (Buchholz, 2022). Emoji usage has grown in recent years and the organisation responsible for encoding, Unicode Standard, constantly adds and improves emojis according to daily human activities. There were over three thousand emojis released on version 12.1 available on the Unicode Standard. Another 200 unique emojis to the Unicode Standard were

released in 2019, including a yawning face, hearing assistance and waffles (Moodley, 2019). The Unicode Emoji 13.0 and 13.1 upgrades produced 334 new emojis in 2020, with 207 from the latter edition spread out during 2021. Shah (2021) noted on Twitter that in 2022, the new update would include 37 new emojis, including a troll and a melting face. Users can add emojis like bubble tea, placards, and the transgender flag to their communications, as well as the flaming heart, and the bearded woman. Consequently, the dating app Tinder has been reported to lead a proposal to the non-profit Unicode Consortium to create interracial couple emojis, including the addition of 21 new sequences with various skin tones, as well as same sex married people (Molina, 2018). The proliferation of emojis is not just in the digital environment but also prevalent in our daily lives. The use of emojis has grown since the Coronavirus outbreak; Joubert (2021) reported that five emojis were associated with either the word “COVID-19" or “Coronavirus".

Emojis enable organisations to make more visually striking content in order to attract the younger generation, a critical component of marketing communication campaigns on digital platforms such as Instagram (Gamage, 2021:26-31). Therefore, it is essential to examine customer attitudes towards emojis used in digital marketing communications so that emojis are used correctly for a better positive response.

2.8.5 Statistics

Emojis have become somewhat of a communal language in the 21st century, mainly because Generation Z has entered the workforce, and digital media have become an increasingly crucial e-commerce instrument. Emojis are inclusive regardless of where one is from or what language one speaks (ZoomInfo, 2020). There has been an increase in emojis amid COVID-19; this has been because individuals and brands used them to spread awareness about the Coronavirus. Digital Information World (2021) reported an 87.2% rise in emoji usage in 2021, and it almost became a staple of COVID-related conversations on Twitter. Statistics also show that the across the world, face-wearing-a-mask emoji was used 36% of the time while the microbe emoji was used 42% since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Digital Information World, 2021).

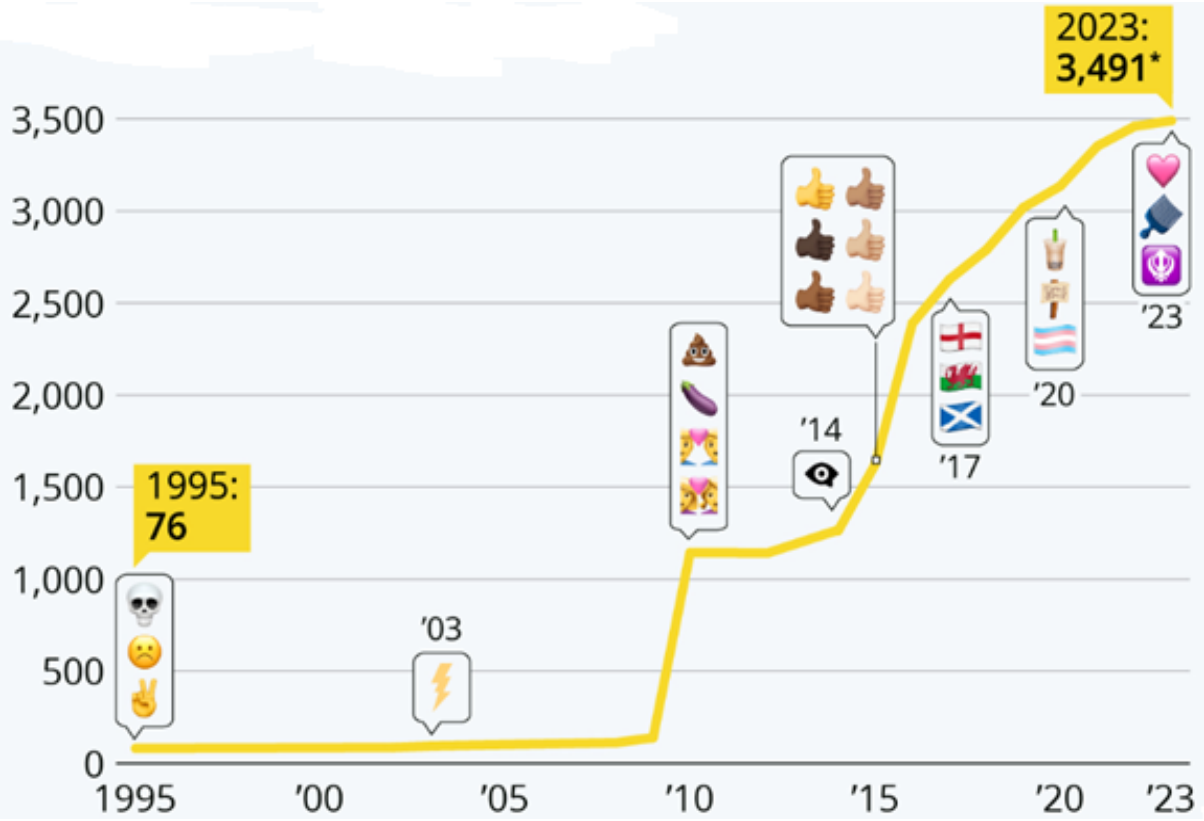

Figure 2.3: Number of emojis from 1995 to 2023

Source: Buchholz (2022)

This graph shows the quantity of emojis from their development and usage from 1995 up to 2023. Organisations and brands have adopted emojis to customise their content to appeal to their targeted members of Gen Z market.

2.9 Emojis and language

Emojis, which began as tiny pictograms, have evolved into a digital language that most people understand (Summa Linguae, 2021). Languages evolve over time to accommodate people's changing requirements and the environment in which they are used (Muhammad & Najim, 2023:218-263). Joubert (2021), Hand et al. (2022:1-12), and Muhammad and Najim (2023:218-263) report that language and communication have moved past verbal or written letters, and emoji are now part of it. The increasing use of emojis, digital images that can address a phrase or emotions in content or email, and the ease with which they can be arranged together to form a simple and complete sentence, raises the possibility that they are forming a new language among the technologically sophisticated Gen Z cohort (Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333; Częstochowska et al., 2022:1388-1392). Consequently, researchers accept that emojis are like a language (Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69; Chui, 2020:108-118; Joubert, 2021). There is a more profound significance to emoji use as a language, and it is argued that emojis could be introduced as a language in a more primitive

form of human communication. Barbieri et al. (2016:3967-3972) suggest that despite differences in emoji usage and the overall semantics of the most common emojis are similar throughout the languages studied. Emojis are the future of the digital language and lexicon.

2.9.1 Emojis as lexical and semantic signs

Sung (2020) states that in CMC, emojis express paralinguistics that cannot be described in the text, such as facial expressions or gestures. Alshenqeeti (2016:56-69) notes that emojis, hieroglyphs, and cuneiform have similarities, indicating the distinctiveness of visual communication forms as opposed to communicated alphabetised vocabulary. Emojis, in other words, have evolved into a new form of communication. Emojis have become a staple in our everyday interactions in recent times, representing various emotion sentiments regardless of age, gender, social status, or culture (Temelkova, 2022; Liu, 2023:372). Bliss-Carroll (2016) maintains that, unlike comics, emojis have animation, sensory, and expressive elements, some of which include items or parts of unrealistic symbols that assist them in expressing a theme or concept. Scheffler et al. (2022:1-11), Luzón (2023:17-32), and Muhammad and Najim (2023:218-263) demonstrate that emojis sometimes communicate the entire lexical entry, including the phonetic worth of the related word, along with the graphically encoded notion. Emojis that have the target word's homophonous noun, such as "palm (of a tree)" for "palm (of a hand)" can be understood appropriately in context.

Emojis are increasingly becoming more mainstream in our day-by-day life. They continually appear in individuals' communication in the digital world, for example, emails, social media, and IM (Chui, 2020:108-118). Naidu (2022:13-14) report that emojis are not explicitly branded or defined under South African law, but an emoji sent electronically constitutes a "data message" under the Electronic Communications and Transactions Act (25 of 2002) (ECTA, 2002). Data messages are actionable under SA law, and emojis contained in them may serve as evidence before a court to make clear the underlying intent of content exchanged digitally, whether on a social media platform or in other digital communication. They communicate ideas and paradigms independent of the specific language and can easily express multifaceted thoughts or emotions through simple pictures (eCmetrics, 2015; Hauthal et al., 2018:1-21; Bai et al., 2019:1-16; Lotfinejad et al., 2020:1-6; Wang et al., 2023:1-14).

Emojis are used to select and order products and provide feedback on the service provided, and customers communicate with friends and family (Doiron, 2018:1-11). Emojis used in digital rooms may depend on society, sex, and age (Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69; Bliss-Carroll, 2016; Bai et al., 2019:1-16). They might have become a digital language as they allow users to understand the tone of the conversation, such as mood, sarcasm, level of interest within the conversation and attitude (Marmer, 2018; Das et al., 2019:147-156; Orazi et al., 2023:1-28). It

can be concluded that emoji pictograms have become a language and second nature in human communication. Emojis have become firmly ingrained in youth culture and are available for use in private messaging, collaborative digital media interrelations, and interconnections. Emojis are a digital communication language that the members of Gen Z understand, so it is vital to investigate their attitudes toward the use of emojis in digital marketing communications. This study examines emojis as a lexicon used by the Gen Z cohort and how this knowledge can be utilised by brands who want to connect with this generation to create a bond and a long-term trusting relationship.

2.9.2 Interlingual communication

In 2016, Oxford Dictionary named “emoji” the “Word of the Year.” This alone demonstrates the globalisation of the emoji culture. As far as Chui (2020:108-118), Togans et al. (2021:277-288), and Svoboda (2022) are concerned, emojis may be decoded differently by users from different cultural backgrounds, and this has frequently resulted in misinterpretation and miscommunication among various user groups. However, emoji usage has prolifically exceeded the reach of the most popular culture worldwide, showing its international usability and functionality. Hence, these little icons have formed the basis for societal acceptance and authentication on digital communication platforms, such as texting, social networks, and emails. Alshenqeeti (2016:56-69) states that the justification behind this feature is that emojis are the most frequently used signs. They modify how phrases are considered in virtual communication (Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55). Evaluators look at how emojis have evolved and how they do not represent an innovative language accepted by the younger population of technology experts, but rather an advancement of older visual linguistic systems which use digital methods to construct more excellent layers and dynamics in adaptive communications (Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69; Li et al., 2019:1748-1763). The emoji language incorporates traditional ideas, which means it has the potential to foster greater understanding among diverse cultures. Researchers accept that emojis are like languages (Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69; Chui, 2020:108-118, Joubert, 2021). However, many people are unaware that emojis are now being utilised to communicate across languages, cultures, and boundaries (Temelkova, 2022). The use of emoji as a language has a deeper meaning, implying that they are indeed returning syntax to a previous point in human interactions. This study investigates the use of emoji as a language to determine their effectiveness in breaking down linguistic and cultural barriers among the world's younger consumers.

2.10 Emojis as non-verbal communication

In today's digital communication, visual language can combine text and emojis (Harn, 2017; Luzón, 2023:17-32). Moreover, Zheng (2022) reports that emojis have grown in popularity as

a way for people to express their emotions, feelings, ideas, activities, and thoughts. It ought likewise to be perceived that as non-verbal gestures exist for spoken communication, so emojis do for written communication. They supplement the written mode by filling gaps in the message imparted through a grin, a smile, or some other feeling. As digital communication becomes predominant, individuals have different alternatives to convey their thoughts and feelings. Emojis are excellent for digital communication because they can depict outward appearances and gestures similar to those used in face-to-face communication (Beattie et al., 2020:409-427; Kim & Jun 2020:1-14; Wang et al., 2023:1-14).

In addition, World Emoji Day was created to spread emoji culture and increase its acceptance worldwide (Tomihira et al., 2020:265-280). There has been a Unicode Consortium for emoji development, an Emojipedia, and customisation apps since the release of the original emojis in 2010 (Harn, 2017). Emojis are rapidly becoming part of the language and daily communication. A message with text and one with text and emojis have different impacts on the reader. Emojis can elucidate the right intent and mood, which might not be apparent in a text message alone (Joubert, 2021; Luzón, 2023:17-32). In addition, Bai et al. (2019:1-16) state that because emojis, like tweets, postings, and texts, are becoming a more ubiquitous and essential component of how people communicate online, they are showing up more frequently. Emoji can be used to add context, clarify meaning, or even completely change the purpose of a message by simply adding a winking or smiling face to express irony or joking to a severe remark (Muhammad & Najim, 2023:218-263). In a time of global-human contact, digital social interactions have dominated; emojis have shown that they can convey emotions, visually represent empathy, and are visually engaging (Suresh, 2018:158-162; Luzón, 2023:17-32). Digital communication and emojis are used as a form of nonverbal communication and this study examines the members of Gen Z attitudes toward emojis in digital marketing communications. Brands' use of the digital space without nonverbal cues to communicate with the younger consumer is challenging because it is now difficult to know or understand the feeling. Emojis assist brands in capturing emotions, allowing them to receive feedback and responses from their target audience.

2.11 Use of emojis in digital marketing communications

Emojis are preserves of immediate messaging. As each great advertiser knows, if customers change their behaviour, a marketer needs to adapt and adjust. Emoji usage is also spreading out of the place of work; organisations can now employ them to engage with customers throughout any customer interaction (Willott, 2019; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333). Bashirzadeh et al. (2022:58-76) agree that because technological advancements enable richer communication, marketers are increasingly incorporating more intricate visual design

elements into their digital communication. Organisations are now incorporating emojis in their platforms for internal or external communication. At the same time, people continue to use them to convey or respond to a message, even on the go. Emoji are used in marketing activities to improve interaction and increase consumer willingness to purchase (Bai et al., 2019:1-16; Jeon, 2022:1180-1195). Brands create custom emojis to provide a sense of differentiation among their customers. Mathews and Lee (2018:46-55) indicate that when creating sticker emojis to promote a product or a sale, brand marketers should also choose an appropriate method of expressing emotions to the public. Brands directly communicate and engage with customers via digital communications, which frequently include emojis. Recent empirical studies have begun investigating the impact of emojis in marketing contexts (Yakin & Eru, 2017:231-2240; Arya et al., 2018:468-670; Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55; Hao, 2020:1-105; Raco, 2021; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333; Ko et al., 2022:1-17; Wang et al., 2023:1-14).

2.11.1 Effectiveness of emojis

The function of emojis is not well understood in assisting brands to build stronger connections with their customers, customer engagement and intention to purchase. Emojis can say a lot more in a message than one can type, and some claim that this is contributing to a fall in the use of words and language. Emojis instantaneously convey the feeling that one wants to convey to the other person (Suresh 2018:158-162). People often become too uninterested in reading as a result, so they start using the shortest form of texting, which only takes a minimal number of clicks. To stand out in a crowded digital environment, marketing managers may feel compelled to also include numerous visual cues in their digital communication. Emojis' most important role in marketing communications is their directness and clarity. The use of emojis in advertising is supported by research which highlights the complex effects of emoji advertising on consumers (Alattar, 2021:1-19). Das et al. (2019:147-156) investigated how consumers reacted to emojis in advertising and found that when they are presented with emojis in advertisements, they have a higher positive effect and purchasing intentions.

Furthermore, emojis influence customer engagement through perceived playfulness, indicating a potential long-term effect of emoji use on customer engagement (Mcshane et al., 2021:96-110; Smits, 2021). Further, Yakin and Eru (2017:231-2240) and Valenzuela-Galvez et al. (2022:1-16) show that emojis are equally effective in social marketing campaigns. As a form of marketing communication, advertising is a costly practice. With that, Vangelov (2017:131-149), McShane et al. (2021:96-110), and Missirian (2021:147-154) clarify that as digital advertising communications develop, one should consistently think about new, fascinating, and concise types of expression, and this is where emojis come to assume a

significant part. Organisations have been utilising these as means of communication for quite a while (Bashirzadeh et al., 2022:58-76). Jeon (2022:1180-1195) demonstrates the importance of identifying the interpretation elements of emojis that influence the process by which consumers generate purchase intentions in order to optimize marketing effects to remain relevant and practical. The results are always fascinating when the right audience is reached. Griessel (2021) states that digital media organisations hope to gauge emoji use to evaluate emotional states and gain valuable data about their audience, marketing, and customer feedback.

Because of the prevalence of these digital images, many messaging/mobile applications have created stickers, which are small images that people can buy and use, like emojis. Emojis and stickers are frequently used interchangeably by brands, but emojis encourage interaction between the brand and its audience (Oetting, 2015; Holthoff, 2020:1-10; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333).

Consumers no longer equate emojis with fake happiness because emojis have transformed the way people think. They make it possible to personalise content and reach a diverse audience. Emojis make otherwise uninteresting communications more effective and colourful (Suresh, 2018:158-162; Liu, 2023:372). Many cultures, languages, and material things reflect their influence. The popularity of emojis and the engagement they garner has motivated brands to incorporate them into their marketing communications (Skager, 2020; Raco, 2021; Ko et al., 2022:1-17; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). There is progressive communication and engagement between organisations and their consumers using emojis. Willott (2019) and Casado-Molina et al. (2022:315-333) state that emojis can increase engagement through chats, social media, or capturing customers. According to social media marketing organisations, emojis have significantly impacted brand engagement and mobile usage. Furthermore, brands strategically use symbolic languages such as emojis to communicate through digital platforms such as social media and messaging (Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333) because these visual stimuli have a strong ability to capture people's attention and vision (Kaye et al., 2017:66-68). Emojis are an effective way to communicate and are extremely popular among the younger generation, who tend to use them habitually. Organisations have begun to use emojis as a method of communication to an increasing extent to reach more youthful audiences (Vangelov, 2017:131-149). When the audience confides in the brand, they are bound to recommend the brand to other people and become long-time allies.

As a result of the subsequent increase in emoji use in advertising, society's exposure to emojis grows, particularly the Generation Z cohort, the digital influencers, who have accepted these

cues as part of their language, which has interested marketers and brands as a new way of appealing to this group. Consequently, in a study on how appropriately younger participants were using emojis by brands, the findings indicated that perceptions of the use of emojis by brands also depending on the situation (Cavalheiro et al., 2022:1-8). Naidu (2022:13-14) further found that emojis are often open to different interpretations, especially on a cultural and global scale, which can lead to ambiguity and make it difficult to determine an individual's intentions. Again, context is critical in determining the intent of the relevant emoji use. Using emojis in marketing communications can add character and relatability to the brand's image. Emojis allow an organisation to humanise the brand, refine the idea and identify with its audience by communicating in their language using emojis that people utilise daily. There are custom emojis that brands create to allow a sense of differentiation to their customers. Mathews and Lee (2018:46-55) suggest that brand marketers who create sticker emojis, whether to promote a type of product or a sale, should additionally choose the correct technique of applying emotions to the public.

Emojis' burgeoning popularity has become overwhelming, and younger consumers are using them because it is the only way to understand each other. Emojis have gained acceptance in digital marketing communications, as evidenced by the above literature, which means brands may use them if part of their marketing strategy is to engage consumers and stand out without risking the quality of the content.

Table 2.1: Emoji usage in digital marketing communications

Authors and year	Purpose/aims/objectives	Research methodology	Main findings
Şener and Atar (2016:229-237)	The study investigates the effects of using emojis as a tool for advertising in the press on consumers.	Turkey. Experimental approach. Students.	It was discovered that ads with emojis received more positive feedback; their message was perceived to be more precise and more convincing
Gokalgler and Saatcioglu (2016:63-91)	This research considers how emoji usage in advertisements affects advertising attitudes.	Quantitative data. Internet users.	Positive attitudes toward emoji advertisements are increasing as emoji usage grows. As the popularity of emojis grows, so does interest in emoji advertisements.
Leung and Chan (2017:76-95)	The purpose of this paper is to look into how marketers have used emojis to improve message content while avoiding unintended meaning interpretation.	Tweets from organisations between September 2015 and August 2016.	According to the findings of the content analysis, emojis can be correctly understood in an informative context. Because of their syntactic and semantic roles, emojis in commercial tweets can be used pragmatically to express additional meaning in text-based messages, reducing the possibility of multiple interpretations.
Vangelov (2017:131-149)	This research paper considers the use of emojis in marketing communications through a simple and visual lens.	Semiotic analysis. Organisation's tweets.	Using emojis in marketing communications gives businesses a new, unconventional, and more engaging way of approaching their target audience.
Hsu and Chen (2020:200-208)	This study looks at how hotel videos with a smiling face emoji embedded as a subliminal message affect consumer hotel selection, with brain activity measured and collected while the videos are being watched.	16 participants. 20 years of age. Experimental approach.	The subliminal stimuli of a smiling face emoji, according to the findings, would significantly influence participants' hotel selection.
Kahar and Habil (2020:27-87	This study investigates the effect of emoji arousal level on consumers' buy intentions for a product promoted by an influencer, as well as its relationship with their chronic temporal orientation. To identify and describe the emoji used by Malaysian small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and their Turkish counterparts in WhatsApp business interactions.	Data collection was gathered through social media posting. Turkish, Malaysian participants.	When it came to emojis, the findings indicated that the Malaysian participant was more technologically sophisticated than his Turkish business counterparts. As a result, the WhatsApp emoji represents nonverbal communication and other business functions. Emojis allow entrepreneurs and customers to control and maintain the level of conversation.
Shao et al. (2020:1-9)	An experiment in China was used in this study to investigate the effect of emoji design quality, communication medium, and familiarity with	China. Young people. Students. Experimental approach.	Emoji design quality has a substantial and beneficial influence on a place's cognitive and emotive impression. Emojis from a user-generated channel (e.g., social media) improve individuals' perceived

	locations on visitor impressions of destination pictures.		mental destination image. Emojis from an official channel are more impactful for those unfamiliar with the goal. From a practical standpoint, destination management organisations might utilise emojis to advertise destinations effectively.
Fakhry (2021:49-60)	This study examines the role of emojis in advertising communication and the feasibility of using them in social media awareness campaigns as a novel advertising technique.	Analytical study. Egyptian awareness campaigns.	According to the study, emojis have many essential, inventive, and current elements which contribute to their success and create a modern image of the marketer or business. The use of emojis in societal concerns also provides many words, recommendations, and directions with recognisable symbols that aid in communicating the message in a novel, inventive, and quick manner.
Alcaraz et al. (2022:136-144)	The primary goal of this study is to interpret how customers provide feedback to micro-businesses through text and emojis.	Quantitative method. Micro-businesses in Balanga City. Facebook.	Customers' emotions expressed through text and emojis can be used to create a new micro-business brand promotion strategy. Feedback marketing and online advertising These emotions in customer feedback can also help micro-businesses improve customer satisfaction, brand image, and decision-making.
Cavalheiro et al. (2022:1-8)	The study examined how appropriate participants thought brand use of emoji was in five different contexts of brand-consumer communication.	540 participants (70.4% women). From 18 years. Students.	Respondents noted that, depending on the context, emojis was more fitting for brands to employ when promoting on social media and less suitable when calling back damaged goods. The results also showed that younger respondents were those who utilised emojis regularly, and those who thought using emojis was more beneficial and formal had more favourable impressions of these things.
Orazi et al. (2022:1-28)	The objective of the study was to investigate how non-face emojis are employed in digital marketing messaging to supplement or replace words, as well as their impacts, methods, and dependencies.	Data obtained from AirBnB listings. US cities (New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington DC).	On average, non-face emoji presences increase eWOM volume compared to text-only.
Prada et al. (2022:1-10)	Researchers considered whether using emojis to respond brand perceptions were influenced by responses to client requests (restaurant reservations) or internet reviews (hotel stays).	Adult individuals. Age range: 18-58 years.	Emojis, according to the findings, can influence how customers perceive brands and services, as well as how they interact with brands.

Lai (2023:115-120)	Emojis in advertising are used as the research subject in this paper with the goal of examining how this multimodal resource in advertising aids in helping the audience understand the communicative objectives of the marketer and achieve the highest level of relevance.	Online analysis. Emoji advertising posters of 2022. Juhuasuan 55 marketing activity were used China.	Emojis serve as a tool of credible communication, expressing the message with an assumption of significance; they assist consumers in creating new cognitive context; they are complementary to other modalities, which increase the extent of information and save cognitive effort; and they help audiences find the most relevant path.
Maiberger et al. (2023:1-21)	This research shows that facial emojis influence persuasion (such as product choice) via changing emotional arousal and perceived ambiguity, in line with the emotions as social information (EASI) theory.	132 college students. Facebook. Germany.	This study shows that the use of facial emojis shapes persuasion through two mechanisms: perceived ambiguity and emotional arousal. The impact of emotional arousal is typically positive, but the impact of perceived ambiguity depends on how the emojis are used in eWOM: replacing facial emojis increases ambiguity and thereby weakens persuasion, whereas repeating facial emojis reduces ambiguity and thereby strengthens persuasion. The net persuasive effect is determined by both the emotional arousal and the ambiguity pathways.

The initial studies concentrated on the effects of emojis in digital marketing communications and advertising, which is consistent with the current research. There were some similarities between the previous findings and the present study because several studies included young consumers, specifically young adults (Şener & Atar, 2016:229-237; Hsu & Chen, 2020:200-208; Shao et al., 2020:1-9; Cavalheiro et al., 2022:1-8; Prada et al., 2022:1-10; Maiberger et al., 2023:1-21). The current study, on the other hand, focused on a much younger generation of consumers, namely Generation Z, in terms of emojis and their use in digital marketing communications. The abovementioned studies also considered emojis among various digital cues on digital platforms (Orazi et al., 2022:1-28; Prada et al., 2022:1-10; Maiberger et al., 2023:1-20), and many in developing countries (Leung et al., 2017:76-95; Fakhry, 2021:49-60; Kahar & Habil, 2020:27-87; Shao et al., 2020:1-9; Alcaraz et al., 2022:136-144; Lai, 2023:115-120). This inquiry was carried out in a developing nation and focused on the influence of emoji usage in digital marketing communication among the Generation Z target group in South Africa.

2.11.2 Effectiveness and benefits of using emojis in marketing communication

Emoji are extensively used on mobile devices, so it can be assumed that incorporating them into new marketing and advertising language will be an excellent method to convey the message to the intended audience. A substantial amount of digital marketing literature focuses on the efficacy of emoji in marketing, branding, and digital marketing initiatives, reinforcing how the use of emoji can increase customer engagement, achieve increased purchasing intentions, and provide consumers with a better experience (Arya et al., 2018:2018:468-670; Mathews & Lee, 2018; Bai et al., 2019:1-16; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333; Jeon, 2022:1180-1195; Ko et al., 2022:1-17; Orazi et al., 2022:1-28; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Ease and clarity in business communications, combined with an appropriate level of cultural understanding, are critical components of doing business in a diverse and ever-changing world.

2.11.2.1 Evolution of digital language

As modes of communication advance in technological sophistication, they enable brands and corporate entities to communicate with their clients in a more relatable, casual manner, similar to that of a lifelong friend (Battman, 2021). There has been much debate about whether emojis could become their own language. Furthermore, some research suggests that emojis constitute a separate language (Bai et al., 2019:1-16; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Emojis are a widely used part of human communication on digital platforms. Emojis humanise and add tone to digital communications. In the same way that a question market or an exclamation mark can be used to change the style of the message communicated; they can convey emotions

that one cannot do with text only (Suresh, 2018:158-162; Bai et al., 2019:1-16; Ko et al., 2022:1-17; Luzón, 2023:17-32). Brands have noticed this and begun using emojis in their advertising (Skager, 2020; Prada et al., 2022:1-10; Mladenović et al., 2022:1-18). Emojis are enjoyable and engaging, and when used correctly, they can significantly increase brand engagement across all digital platforms. Emojis used in conversations help brands reveal their sentiment and build awareness of their product offering while appearing enjoyable and easy to contact. Most importantly, emoji marketing allows brands to express emotion to their target audience in an enjoyable way (Aboulhosn, 2020; Skager, 2020; McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Smits, 2021; Mladenović et al., 2022:1-18). Willott (2019) explains that the key is ensuring that an organisation matches the correct symbols and small images that support the tone and content. Something about emojis makes customers need to connect with them; they stand apart among text posts and have an agreeable, enjoyable, and easy-going appearance (Willott, 2019; Aboulhosn, 2020; Skager, 2020). They effectively communicate the right emotion in an emotionless and bland text. Valenzuela-Galvez et al. (2022:1-16) found that email had a more positive and significant impact from a car company that was aimed at a young consumer segment and offered informal communication, with emojis being closely related to the brand and message.

2.11.2.2 Emojis as a paralanguage

Emojis have evolved from representations of artificial facial emotions to non-emotional images of things, meals, and locations (Riordan, 2017:75-86). Many people believe that emojis are a step backward (Temelkova, 2022). In contrast, emotional facial features are nonverbal cues that elicit affective, inferential, and cultural reactions during face-to-face interaction shifts from face-to-face to digital contexts (Erle et al., 2022:1529–1543). Emojis allow users to express emotions and understand the meaning of a text, but they also introduce ambiguity in communication understanding, resulting in decreased effectiveness (Bai et al., 2019:1-16; Ko et al., 2022:1-17; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Researchers are interested in the emoji word sense disambiguation task due to the diversity and similarity of emoji semantics. Emoji have more semantic meaning than plain text (Pfeifer et al., 2022:1-11; Hand et al., 2022:1-12). Khandekar et al. (2019:450-458) created a social media app to investigate the possibility of "emoji-first" communication, demonstrating that emoji can be used in communication without the need for text. Furthermore, while emojis are numerous, because they are not infinite, some creative interpretation of emoji meaning must occur between the recipient and a sender of a message (Riordan, 2017:75-86). Emoji polysemy, on the other hand, makes determining emoji similarity and emoji sense disambiguation more difficult (Wijeratne, 2018). Emoji usage has been studied as text-related, which means that they can be combined with text to form a complete meaning (Kelly, 2015; Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69; Prada et al., 2022:1-10; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). In practise, users typically use emoji as a supplement to text (Vidal et al., 2016:119-128;

Riordan, 2017:75-86; Ge-Stadnyk, 2021:369-387; Ko et al., 2022:1-17). Several researchers stipulate that many emojis are used as paralinguistic devices, conveying intonation and sentence intention with far greater range than any previous punctuation (Tantawi, 2019; Ciabuiri, 2020; Orazi et al., 2023:1-28). Emojis on digital platforms are primarily used by younger consumers to add meaning to what they say and to convey emotion. This study aims to demonstrate that the Gen Z cohort uses emojis in digital communication not only to supplement what they say but also to show how they say it. Emojis can convey emotions, feelings, and directions such as "bye": 👋.

2.11.2.3 Emoji functions

The use and presence of emojis in digital marketing communications impact attention and cognition, primarily when the emojis are used to relate to the item or product advertised on digital platforms. Emojis enable content to profoundly appeal to the audience's emotions (Aboulhosn, 2020; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). On digital media with little character count or space, like Twitter, emojis can improve the message's context, content, and emotion (Aboulhosn, 2020). In addition, Hewage et al. (2020:219-230) suggest that consumers are more likely to display positive attitudes toward emojis of certain facial expressions, as they see them as bearing more prominent similarity to human articulations and, in this manner, are more viable in passing on emotions. As a result, the marketing industry and academics must closely monitor the consequences of emoji popularity and be aware that the changes are intensifying (Shao et al., 2020:1-9; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Emojis in marketing assist in adding emotional context to messages. The current study investigates the use of emojis in digital marketing communications directed at younger consumers on digital platforms.

2.11.3 Challenges in the usage of emojis in marketing communication

Emojis are widely used, if not required, as a form of communication (Missirian, 2021:147-154). Using emojis in digital media marketing is more fundamental than at any other time. There are disadvantages of using them, especially if a brand is unfamiliar with how to use them naturally (Aboulhosn, 2020). While emojis can be an extraordinary method to humanise a brand, trying too hard or using emojis that do not speak to a brand's target audience can likewise estrange them when the appropriate research is not done. Harn (2017) demonstrates that variation in visual presentation is an important consideration when using emojis.

2.11.3.1 Inefficiency of emojis

Emojis can help customers express feelings and comprehend the meaning of a text, but their use can also lead to interaction, confusion and ineffectiveness (Suresh, 2018:158-162; Bai et al., 2019:1-16; Pfeifer et al., 2022:1-11). Similarly, to Generation Z, emoji interpretation varies depending on what is trending at the time, and the meaning varies depending on the speaker's

identity. In this case, both parties struggle to understand each other, reducing communication efficiency. In addition, Tigwell and Flatla (2016:859-866) argue that users must share the same understanding of what each emoji represents, or communication will break down. Before adding emojis to the advertising strategy, marketers ought to inquire whether it lines up with the tone of the brand and image. Additionally, it must be ensured that the implications of various emojis are considered before using them. As a brand, it is imperative to comprehend who the target audience is, and to know how they will react to emoji advertising. Since various brands utilise emojis, it does not imply that a similar strategy may work for another brand. Lastly, brands are advised to find out where the relevant crowd is dynamic and how they relate to the brand's current posts (Aboulhosn, 2020). There are numerous potential commotion sources, from inconsistencies in visual portrayals to various cultural understandings. The dubiousness causes miscommunication when the sender's expectation and the beneficiary's experience are not predictable (Derks et al., 2008). Emojis are used everywhere in this world by individuals and organisations to send a message on mobile apps and digital media platforms. Nevertheless, emojis as a visual language, as different languages, are not all-inclusive and may shift from one culture to another or even inside a local area (Harn, 2017; Togans et al., 2021:277-288; Svoboda, 2022; Liu, 2023:372).

2.11.3.2 Geography and cultural diversity

Emoji interpretation is influenced by cultural background, technical differences, and their own aesthetic aspects, despite their visual features (Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69; Temelkova, 2022). Emojis are a part of and can be used to represent all national flags, regional symbols, holidays, and cultural icons, which promotes cultural harmony and integration amongst various people from various backgrounds (Suresh, 2018:158-162; Bai et al., 2019:1-16). The effectiveness of emojis has caused a rise in the number of new ones being added to mobile applications. Users are thus being impacted by a society that will depend more on emojis for communication as well as for lifestyle and culture (Suresh, 2018:158-162; Orazi et al., 2022:1-28). Emoji interpretations by users may differ from official definitions, resulting in multiple interpretations of the same emoji (Park et al., 2013:466-475). As more of the world has become digitally connected and more of the world's population become online shoppers, the culture of the digital world will only become more diverse. Acknowledging how to create an effective emoji platform can benefit all parties involved. Accepting how users interpret and create visual language ambiguities is becoming extremely relevant (Harn, 2017; Aboulhosn, 2020; Bai et al., 2019:1-16). An incorrect interpretation of emojis may result in miscommunication of information or, in more severe cases, unintentional offence (Harn, 2017). Brands must be as precise and straightforward as possible when using an emoji-based approach in marketing efforts, as misinterpretation may lead to confusion and loss of interest from the target market.

Different email formats may show emojis differently, and even though it improves the message or content, it is significant not to depend on emojis only to make the communication (Aboulhosn, 2020). Depending too intensely on emojis may lead to the message being lost in interpretation. The difference in how emojis are understood leads to communication inefficiency, disruptions in discourse, and the destruction of interpersonal relationships (Tigwell & Flatla, 2016:859-866). The correct usage of emojis in digital marketing communication for effective marketing is imperative, as the attention of a targeted group depends on the unambiguousness of the message conveyed with emojis. As a result, additional research is required, particularly among young cohorts, to determine whether they have favourable perceptions of emojis in digital marketing communications.

2.12 Summary

Elements of digital marketing were outlined in relation to the definition and categories, and usage rate and statistics, security and privacy in digital marketing were outlined. Security concerns are significant for anyone whose data goes through the digital realm. The speed at which brands have moved to digital platforms to communicate and contact their audience has grown. The growth of digital marketing within the context of South Africa was considered. The use of emojis in digital marketing communication section was discussed, along with its effectiveness and challenges. The chapter commenced with a brief description of digital marketing as an industry, its usage growth, and usage statistics, including the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter described digital marketing and illustrated the different types of digital marketing, its functionality, and statistics. It looked at detailed digital marketing forms such as content marketing, social media marketing, email marketing, influencer marketing, search engine marketing and SEO, and mobile marketing. Emojis were explored, a detailed definition and history were conducted, and the evolution of these emojis and emoticons, the usage growth, and the usage statistics of these emojis were outlined.

Further, the use of emojis as a language was explored together with the use of emojis as non-verbal communication. The chapter ended with a brief discussion of the use, the effectiveness and benefits, and the challenges of using emojis in digital marketing. The following chapter looks at the Generation Z cohort and the suitable theoretical framework for the study.

CHAPTER 3

GENERATION Z AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

Emojis are rapidly becoming a standard component of everyday communication, yet little is known about how they are interpreted emotionally. On the other hand, Generation Z is a group of young people who are rapidly influencing the world of commerce – these young consumers use emojis in everything they do digitally, which is where they spend the most time. The first section of this chapter will give an overview of Generation Z, the period and the background of this cohort, the characteristics of Generation Z, the Generation Z of South Africa, Generation Z and technology, Generation Z cohort as consumers, their disposable income, advertising to the Generation Z and, Generation Z and emojis.

The second section will examine the literature on the factors that influence customer engagement in digital communications, including social media, digital content, and branded factors.

The third section elaborates on the different models used in this analysis. The current and previous research studies on attitudes toward emoji usage in digital communication and the theoretical model (TAM) are outlined. Finally, the following are discussed: literature on consumer attitudes under investigation, namely customer engagement, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, trust, and intention to purchase, as well as the usage characteristics (digital platforms categories, digital platforms, emoji usage, emoji marketing communications engagement frequency, usage hours) and demographics (gender, age, highest education level, population group).

3.2 Generation Z

3.2.1 Generation Z background and period

Generation Z (also referred to as members of Gen Z, Generation Fluid, iGen, post-millennials, centennials, or Gen Z cohort) are people born between 1997 and 2012 (Castrén, 2022; Cele, 2023; Meola, 2023; Statista Research Department, 2023). This cohort is referred to as the “silent generation,” due to their communicating with mobile phones and machines more than other generations (Dorsey, 2021; Mchavu et al., 2022:1-9; Alaql et al., 2023). Generation Z is sometimes stereotyped as addicted to an anti-social, digital world because they grew up surrounded by technology, the digital world, and media platforms (Parker & Igielnik, 2020;

Wahyuni et al., 2023:27-34). This generation was raised on digital media. The oldest is now graduating from college and looking for work (Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Apptus.com, 2023). Generation Z is defined as anyone born after 1996. The first generation of individuals born in the new digital world is known as Generation Z, and they are significant because they have been exposed to greater amounts of data and technology (Kahawandala et al., 2020:155-160). It is assumed that with so much information at their disposal, the Gen Z cohort understands everything about a given topic. Still, this cohort tends to rush from one piece of data to another or only focus on the latest technologies (Rammopo, 2016; Alaql et al., 2023).

Consumers, employees, and trendsetters bring a new set of priorities, expectations, and norms that will shape their shared future. Older members of Generation Z have a different impact, primarily economic, than those still in high school or college (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Even before the pandemic, the members of Gen Z had a significant impact on industries ranging from banking to automotive, retail, and entertainment. Accordingly, the study defines the Generation Z cohort as the subsequent decision-makers and consumers in digital platforms. This research is essential among this generation as they are the new customers in this industry. Brands need to stand out to attract their attention and establish if they have favourable perceptions of emojis in digital marketing communications.

3.2.2 Other characteristics of Generation Z

Generation Z is the first generation born into an entirely technological environment in which being connected to a digital environment, and possessing mobile devices is the norm. As a result, they are more advanced in seeking information and attempting to solve problems independently (Deloitte, 2021). As its older members enter early adulthood, Generation Z is emerging as a population worthy of greater attention. Whilst also they start sharing many characteristics with Millennials, they grew up in a very different world, resulting in significant differences in their behaviours and tendencies (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021; Alaql et al., 2023). Technology comes naturally to Generation Z. Unlike Millennials, who grew up during the technological and digital media, the members of Gen Z were born into a world of maximum average technical advancement, with information readily available and social media becoming increasingly prevalent (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021; Mchavu et al., 2022:1-9).

By far the most racially and culturally broad and diverse generation in human history, the members of Gen Z values diversity and inclusion more than any previous generation (Meola, 2023). One of the most distinct features of the Gen Z cohort is their global perspective; they frequently see themselves as global citizens (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021; Pradhan et

al., 2023:27-47). Because they are more connected to the world than any previous generation, Gen Z cohort is concerned about what is happening. The environment considerably influences Generation Z, and according to Kahawandala et al. (2020:155-160) and Mchavu et al. (2022:1-9), Generation Z are more educated, conscious, and responsible with their money. Kahawandala et al. (2020:155-160), Cele (2023), and Student Village (2023) note that Generation Z respondents are more informed, deliberate, and reliable with their money and seeking information and are highly technologically sophisticated. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z did not need to adjust to the new digital era and is more at ease with the internet.

Further, Generation Z have unprecedented access to the information, enabling them to greatly expand their knowledge and participate more actively. This socially responsible mindset motivates Generation Z to strive for inclusivity (Facebook IQ, 2019), and the members of Gen Z is not easily trusting. Excessive time on screen, in contrast hand, can intensify feelings of loneliness and lead to a lack of interpersonal skills (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). Moreover, a report by Bizcommunity indicates how the Generation Z is beginning to prioritise their mental health and are emotionally open to discussing mental health issues in general (Alaql et al., 2023; Student Village, 2023). Comparing members of Gen Z with the Millennials, Jordaan (2019) states that Gen Y is technologically sophisticated, and Generation Z is tech innate. They have always had access to information on anything and cannot imagine life without it. When it comes to reaching Generation Z, interaction is essential. As a result, when brands develop digital marketing communications for this cohort, they include emojis to maintain conversation and transmit the message; thus, this study aimed to test the effectiveness of these emojis directed at this technologically sophisticated generation.

3.2.3 South African Generation Z

In South Africa, Generation Z accounts for nearly 27.5 million people. This generation overlaps with South Africans born after apartheid ended in 1994. It is difficult to connect with Generation Z but understanding them is critical because they will be critical to South African brand growth in the future (Lerm, 2022).

3.2.3.1 Opportunity brands have with Generation Z

South Africa has a high youth unemployment rate and a generation of young people burdened with the "Black tax," and Generation Z, as part of the youth, is making different choices about their work life (Mailula, 2022). Having entered the workplace, these young consumers must distribute their earnings above and beyond their financial obligations to assist their families, who have historically struggled with financial stability (i.e., “Black tax”). In South Africa, as in other countries, Generation Z is the first digitally native generation that expects a consistent

user experience in all aspects of their lives, including credit access, use, and management. Local flavours, textures, experiences, and brands are increasingly appealing to Generation Z (Lerm, 2022). Regardless of the responsibilities this generation bears, from independence to being the sole breadwinners in most households, according to TransUnion (2020), as Generation Z ages, they are starting to accept credit opportunities so that they can begin building their financial track records as soon as possible. This expansion creates a massive opportunity for local adverts that authentically use vernacular languages, as these better represent who SA Generation Z are and what they care about (Lerm, 2022). Given the obligation of the Black tax, the notion that Generation Z is shifting toward freelance work and entrepreneurship rather than remaining in dead-end jobs has created some tensions in the discourse (Mailula, 2022; Alaql et al., 2023). Also, members of Gen Z in South Africa are dealing with extreme financial stress, so side businesses are one way that Gen Z cohort use to cope. Their businesses and side jobs are being paid to sign up friends and family for services like ridesharing and bank accounts (Student Village, 2023).

South African Generation Z is an entrepreneurial generation that understands that politicians and private sector businesses will not solve their problems and will have to fix things for themselves, primarily by themselves (Dolphin Bay, 2022). Brands have a clear chance to communicate with this generation of customers who are looking for relatable products and messages, as well as experiences that reflect who they are and the context in which they live (Diagne, 2021). South African Generation Z is more optimistic than its global counterparts. This is most likely because they had lower expectations before Covid-19. The much more valuable brands in such times are those that see and understand where this generation is going, providing life experiences which align with their aspirations (Williams, 2021; Dolphin Bay, 2022; Alaql et al., 2023).

Several South African organisations, however, mix Generation Z and Millennials in effective communication which is risky because each cohort has distinct characteristics and traits. They are also less active and devote more time in front of a desktop than previous generations, but they are more worried about the world's societal issues. Generation Z members are more technologically sophisticated, share wisely, are active volunteers, are mixed (gender and race), believe in togetherness, are mature, transmit with images, create things, have humility, are future-focused, realists, want to work for success, and have a collective consciousness, creating an opportunity for brands (Bizcommunity, 2015; Pradhan et al., 2023:27-47). This study aims to assist marketers in getting to know the South African Generation Z as a target group in terms of emojis in digital marketing communications, since there has not been much literature on this topic.

3.2.3.2 Statistics of the South African Generation Z

This young cohort makes up almost 27.5 million in the South African population and commands over forty billion rands in expenditure, so current marketers need to develop persuasive tactics to engage with members of Gen Z (MTA, 2019; Lerm, 2022). GWI (2021) reports that electronic devices are the most popular online purchases in South Africa and the rest of the world that accounts for 26% in South Africa and 32% globally.

WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube are the most popular social platforms in South Africa. In the rest of the world, WhatsApp is less popular, with only 71% of consumers having an account, compared to 95% in South Africa (GWI, 2021; Yadav & Rai, 2017:110-116). South Africans primarily use digital media to keep themselves informed on news and to find humour. 30% of these customers liked/followed a brand through social media, 20% clicked on a paid ad, and only 17% shared the brand's posts on a social media platform (GWI, 2021). This socially responsible mindset also motivates Generation Z to strive for inclusivity. This means that this generation is growing to become the household decision-makers and consumers that brands will need to create appealing marketing content.

Duffett (2017a:19-39) recommends that businesses track how South African Generation Z needs to spend their time and money online. Watching them will help to send them effective, relevant information and content. When it comes to the levels of consumer confidence in Africa, in SA, with 77% expressing significant optimism in their future and reigniting the great spirit of hope, Generation Z remains the most hopeful cohort in the country (Ndeye, 2021). The financial burden that the Gen Z cohort is experiencing is being mitigated since 34% of respondents work a second job or pursue further education. 79% of Generation Z is inclined to join loyalty programmes, which when combined with good value, make them more likely to sign up. Members of Gen Z are also looking to brands to give them better value, discounts, and less expensive options (Student Village, 2023). There is, however, not much literature on the use of emojis by South African Gen Z cohort. This study aims to use South African Generation Z as the cohort to assess emojis in digital marketing communications as innovative and authentic content that can increase consumer engagement and intention to purchase.

3.2.4 Generation Z and technology

Users of digital technology have near-immediate access to information and the ability to generate, process, and store massive amounts of information. Users of digital technology and media platforms can constantly interact and connect (Hoehe & Thibaut, 2022:93-97; Cele, 2023). However, brands do not appear to find easy acceptance with Gen Z cohort simply by "being digital." Being digital means engaging and meeting Generation Z where they are

(Fisher, 2022; Student Village, 2023). Gen Z cohort is not only more experienced with the internet than their parents, but they are also better at it. The difference between members of Gen Z and Millennials is that they were born into a digital environment. They see the internet as an extension of their bodies, as something that has always been there, while Generation Y had to learn to live in a digital world and now considers it second nature. It represents everything to them (Gen Z cohort) regarding entertainment, education, and communication (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021; Wahyuni et al., 2023:27-34). They are the first generation to have grown up with smartphones and social media readily available to them, earning them the term "iGeneration".

3.2.4.1 Generation Z and the internet

Members of Gen Z is raised in an industrialised world with so much information readily available about everything. They interact through digital media, text messages, and spend as much time on their devices as Generation Y did watching television. As stated by GWI (2021), Cele (2023), and Wahyuni et al. (2023:27-34), digital natives who grew up with mobile phones, the internet, and digital media, are more likely to purchase from brands with clear values, inclusiveness, and a robust digital forum. As a result, many Generation Z members prefers online streaming to traditional cable TV and have access to shareable content on their digital devices (Petrocelli, 2020). Therefore, they are available to communicate and exchange information while also allowing organisations to promote and sell their products using digital media as an e-commerce platform. Brands and retailers have spent the last several years attempting to catch up to Millennials' interests and habits, so staying ahead of Generation Z's proclivity to be always online, and meeting this generation's digital standards, is critical (Fromm, 2022). Gen Z cohort is interested in exploring and experiencing the online social community, which they do through social networking platforms. What they post about themselves online and what others post and evaluate about them shapes their character. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Tumblr, Instagram, and Twitter can help with identification, image formation, maintenance, and increasing shape the social assets of young members (Yadav & Rai, 2017:110-116; Wahyuni et al., 2023:27-34).

3.2.4.2 Generation Z technology usage

Generation Z now has access to digital technology for information and communication (ICT) platforms that allow them to interact with one another and the world as a whole in real-time and without interruption, thanks to the widespread availability of digital media platforms. Generation Z is more interested than previous generations in using emerging technologies to make the best economic decisions, from finding the best prices for goods before purchasing them to incorporating technology into more areas of daily life, engaging, and staying active for

a course. Consequently, Cision PR Newswire (2016) and Wahyuni et al. (2023:27-34) found that the members of Gen Z use mobile devices for product discovery, pre-purchase study, and buy and post-purchase commitments. Furthermore, smartphones have become a way of life and will be the first point of contact with Generation Z (Martin, 2022). Because they are digitally sophisticated, they value interaction and engagement, have limited attention spans, and are among the most vocal and active generations in terms of social justice and driving change, brands must comprehend the difficulties of marketing to this generation (Lerm, 2022).

Younger buyers are using their smartphones and social media to shop. It is also very likely that a significant number of an app's most loyal users will be from Generation Z, whether it is buying everything online, even groceries, or using technology to book trip lodgings, check flights, and locate good offers (Cele, 2023). COVID-19 has accelerated the use of technology even among brands, making it easier for those with Gen Z cohort as a target audience. This generation spends time online for information, engagement, and intention to purchase, which allows marketers to advance with technology and use emojis to connect with the members of Gen Z.

3.2.5 The Generation Z consumer

Brands and marketers have dug deeper into the impact of the digital revolution. They had to return to the drawing board and recalibrate just as they had come to grips with the Millennials at the forefront. Generation Z has been dubbed the most critical consumer group to date, with a different perspective on shopping and consumption than previous generations. Members of Gen Z use completely unique ways to communicate, work, and shop, which explains why organisations must constantly modify their marketing strategies to successfully engage this group. Further, many Generation Z consumers believe that organisations' marketing messages tend to mix them all together, while they prefer tailored experiences based on their unique interests (Statista Research Department, 2023). And because Generation Z does not automatically trust organisations' intentions, brands must earn their trust (Griffin, 2022; Mchavu et al., 2022:1-9; Student Village, 2023). Cele (2023) reports that 72% of Generation Z are more likely to purchase from an organisation that supports social causes, and they are likely to place more emphasis on sustainability, ethics, inclusivity, and responsible travel because they were raised with an awareness of climate change and the need to protect the environment.

3.2.5.1 Generation Z and spending

Members of Gen Z members are the most recent entrants into the workforce and have significant purchasing power. Brands must earn their place in the wallets of Generation Z by

increasing their demand for higher-quality items and closely monitoring their spending (Apptus.com, 2023). Generation Z customers are projected to embrace new technologies, like the most recent intelligent devices, as they join the workforce and gain more disposable income (Fromm, 2022). The growth in the use of mobile devices enabled the members of Gen Z cohort to join most digital platforms to connect, communicate and engage with various parties, including organisations, marketers, and brands. This change is not only local but global too. The first digital native generation, Generation Z, has come to expect a seamless consumer experience in all aspects of their lives, including credit access, use, and management. As young adults, they may be more aware than previous generations of the importance of establishing and maintaining good credit to assist them in navigating the modern economy (TransUnion, 2020). As the first new digital generation and as consumers, their values are reflected by their behaviour. They prefer digital communication to avoid face-to-face interaction because they are more challenging to reach and tend to focus on the genuineness within a brand (Deloitte (2021; Mtshali, 2022). Organisations that market to Generation Z have a challenge and are compelled to create concise and original content to make the most of the literal seconds that the Gen Z cohort devote to marketing communications.

Many Generation Z members will have strong buying power by 2026, making them the most influential generation for the future of retail (Fromm, 2022; Apptus.com, 2023). Retailers and brands must begin establishing relationships with the members of Gen Z to capture a piece of this growing cohort. However, unlike previous generations, Generation Z is the first generation of consumers to have grown up entirely in the digital age (Mtshali, 2022; Cele, 2023; Wahyuni et al. (2023:27-34). This new generation is still switching between apps and social media platforms (Mtshali, 2022). When Generation Z decides to move from Instagram to TikTok or another digital channel, it is a brand or organisation's duty to stay current and informed (Student Village, 2023). An organisation’s digital media activities should represent its ability to reach out to people from around the globe.

As the fear of COVID-19 rose in 2020, several e-commerce organisations started developing personalised content to counter the pandemic (OECD, 2020). If brands do not meet Generation Z's expectations, they will happily shop elsewhere. Given what is known about members of Gen Z and their digital needs, it is no surprise that they are more likely to switch brands (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). To make informed buying decisions, Members of Gen Z can rely on their technological sophistication and extensive social networks (Mtshali, 2022; Cele, 2023). Because of their forethought, they investigate and assess a wide range of choices before settling on a product.

Furthermore, they are more likely to be swayed by real-life user recommendations and celebrities (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021; Nguyen, 2021; Apptus.com, 2023). The Generation Z requires modified experiences that distinguish them as distinctive beings, providing them with attractive, enjoyable, and engaging apps and delivering contextually related adverts (Cision PR Newswire, 2016). Similarly, to how Gen Z cohort use social media to build their brand, they see their purchasing decisions as confirmation of their standards and values (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021; Nguyen, 2021; Mchavu et al., 2022:1-9). They are often willing to pay a premium for environmentally friendly products and brands, for example. Accordingly, this research will assess and establish whether the usage factors positively influence customer engagement owing to the use of emojis in digital marketing communications among members of Gen Z.

3.2.5.2 Statistics on Generation Z consumer

According to the statistics, 60% of Generation Z said their brand loyalty has shifted since the pandemic began (Fisher, 2022). Even though the pandemic increased overall consumer comfort with social media shopping, the members of Gen Z was already leading the charge for social-first experiences well before 2020. Major platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and others now provide social commerce tools like the in-app point of purchase (Martin, 2022). Duffett (2017a:19-39) adds that their behaviour is influenced by the world they live in as well as the media. Generation Z respondents were willing to pay more to find products faster (60%), learn something new (54%), and receive personalised recommendations (53%), according to Coveo's E-commerce Relevance Report 2022. Approximately 70-79% of the Generation Z cohort try to buy from organisations they believe are ethical (Coveo, 2022; Cele, 2023). 97% say social media are their favourite way to research shopping options (Martin, 2022). 56-61% are more likely to try a product or service if it is suggested by a famous digital influencer or media personality (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021; Student Village, 2023). This study aims to use the Gen Z cohort, as this generation not only accounts for a large part of the market, but its market influence will also be felt since they are entering the workplace and making decisions and are the biggest influencers in households.

3.2.6 Generation Z disposable income

Understanding the customer and their needs necessitates market segmentation. One popular method is to divide markets into generations (Pillay, 2020; Nguyen, 2021). The economic influence of Generation Z was the fastest growing among all generational cohorts. Generation Z represents the most recent generation of consumers with disposable income. Their expertise with e-commerce offers businesses exciting new marketing prospects (Statista Research Department, 2023). As Generation Z enters adulthood, they are taking advantage of credit

possibilities to start building their financial track records as soon as possible. This generation has a strong desire for credit (TransUnion, 2020; Mchavu et al., 2022:1-9). Furthermore, Generation Z's active internet use is a clear indicator of their financial behaviour, as they are willing to manage credit electronically (Kastenholz, 2021; Kaabachi et al., 2022:219-231). They are technologically sophisticated and prioritise mobile devices, and they have high expectations for how they spend their online time (Fromm, 2022; Statista Research Department, 2023).

COVID-19 has decimated employment, careers, investments, and small businesses, and Generation Z has grown up watching their parents and older siblings suffer through the Great Recession. Generation Z is more concerned with investing and having the highest value for their money than wasteful spending (Dorsey, 2021). Before the outbreak, Generation Z was planning far ahead of schedule, opening emergency savings accounts on their favourite money-sharing app, and planning how to graduate from university with the least amount of debt possible. As a result, before the pandemic, they were comparing prices and driving significant growth at thrift stores (Dorsey, 2021). As shown by the US statistics, personal bank loans, home loans, retail revolving, and vehicle loans are the fastest-growing products among credit-active Gen Z cohort consumers, despite a low starting point. Although the majority of credit-active Generation Z consumers have subprime or near-prime risk scores, nearly one-third have prime or good risk scores. When asked about income inequality in a survey by Deloitte (2021), 66% of Generation Z feel wealth and income are unequally distributed and, as a result, believe that government action will be required to promote change. As stated by McKeever (2020), as the members of Gen Z enter the workforce, by 2030, this generation's salary is estimated to increase by more than fivefold to $33 trillion, accounting for more than a quarter of global income and exceeding that of Generation Y by 2031. Generation Z consumers base their purchasing decisions on personal, social, and environmental principles (Williams, 2021; Statista Research Department, 2023; Student Village, 2023). Marketers tailor digital marketing communications with emojis for Gen Z members because their engaging and purchasing decisions are always guided by what they understand and the availability of current information. Hence, this study also considers the average per month using digital platforms of Gen Z cohort as the target group and purchasing decision-makers.

3.2.7 Advertising to Generation Z

3.2.7.1 Generation Z and content

More than just internet advertising is required for Generation Z. MTA state that genuine, personalised, and experiential content and interactions are essential to a deliberate

engagement with these young consumers (MTA, 2019; Statista Research Department, 2023). Kastenholz (2021) and Student Village (2023) add that consumer e-commerce is fuelled by value, including price and convenience. Members of Gen Z not only influences marketers' critical strategies for digital communication but establishes a potential for how digital advertising can progress and create new relations between the natural and digital realms. Organisations must consider Generation Z's economic, personal, and professional concerns in addition to selecting the appropriate channels to appeal to the Members of Gen Z (Statista Research Department, 2023). Further studies found that Generation Z tends to purchase in accordance with personal values (Celel, 2023; Statista Research Department, 2023; Student Village, 2023). Younger customers therefore hold businesses responsible for their actual social impact, highlighting why brand loyalty among Generation Z can fluctuate (Pradhan et al., 2023:27-47). Also, the Gen Z cohort is the most diverse cohort of consumers to date, and they prefer to be catered to as such (Statista Research Department, 2023). Generation Z depends on innovation, which means they want to experience new adventures and not just buy goods, especially since they are less loyal to brands (Gomez et al., 2001; Mtshali, 2022; Cele, 2023; Statista Research Department, 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2023:27-34). In addition, members of Gen Z cannot be targeted only using traditional marketing appeals since they are diversified in communication about their ethnicity and culture (Deloitte, 2021; Peters, 2022). They prefer content with actual people, realistic shapes, and diverse cultures. A marketer needs to be more specific when targeting this group. Members of Gen Z consumers require unique experiences in terms of content since they need to connect, and they are using many different platforms for various purposes (MTA, 2019). Ormesher (2022) found that most Generation Z members want advertisements to be more diverse.

Generation Z consumers desire as much information as possible in as little time and as concisely as possible. Because of their limited attention spans, the content shared must immediately pique their interest. Furthermore, Generation Z consumers value and respond more strongly to content and brands that are directly related to their needs (Pillay, 2020). Because they frequently use digital media, Generation Z values interaction and engagement. They value building relationships with both people and brands. Digital marketing is an excellent way to reach a younger audience and connect with a new type of consumer: one who values bold personalities and seeks community. Thomas (2020) indicates that because Generation Z has a short attention span, marketing to the Gen Z cohort requires more than just promoting a product. This generation, born between 1997 and 2012, values authenticity and people gravitate toward brands that "keep things real."

3.2.7.2 Statistics on advertising to Generation Z

The members of the Gen Z generation are knowledgeable on how to save money; a report by Henderson (2023) finds that 63% of this group, more than any other generation, said they aim to save more money over the next three months. In fact, 72% of Generation Z is protective of their work-life boundaries, and 55% say they receive advice from their bank on effective techniques for budgeting and adopt better spending habits. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2021) reports the highest rate of Generation Z's advertising recall and willingness to pay more for products tailored to their specific personalities. They will frequently find a product on TikTok before searching for reviews on Google, all while watching unboxing videos on YouTube (Fisher, 2022). Authenticity and a sense of community are essential to Generation Z. With this generation using digital media to learn about brands and products, marketers must stay on top of emerging trends if their brands are to capture the attention of the members of Gen Z (Peters, 2022).

In addition, the world pandemic, COVID-19, changed everything for Generation Z. Still, their beliefs and desires have remained unchanged because authenticity resonates strongly with Generation Z, and the cause supported by the brand should be consistent with their brand message (Snow, 2020). Marketers can understand what motivates the Generation Z and how to connect with these digital natives by focusing on today's trendsetters and tomorrow's shoppers. Shopping is an expression of values for Generation Z. Given that 29% of the US population will be the Gen Z cohort by 2025, it is critical to understand Generation Z consumer behaviour to gain this demographic's trust. Emojis have been shown to increase the effectiveness of hedonic product marketing campaigns and have a significant impact on the return on advertising spend (Mladenović et al., 2022:1-18). Advertising to the members of Generation Z using emojis is a popular way to communicate with audiences today, particularly the younger generations, but excessive use may appear patronising, which may cause emoji fatigue (Yassin, 2021:326-334). Emojis play an active role in reaching consumers, who are now exposed to various marketing activities via smartphones (Bezirgan & Kaya, 2019:556-569).

Additionally, emojis are widely used in advertising by major brands and corporations. Brands are now creating emojis to differentiate themselves (Şener & Atar, 2016:229-237). Given that emojis have become the dominant language of digital communication, particularly among young people, this study focuses on advertising to the Gen Z cohort, as this generation, which regularly communicates using emojis as an alphabet, is recognised as sparking the new trend of emoji marketing.

3.2.8 Generation Z and emojis

3.2.8.1 Emoji meaning among the Generation Z

Emojis can complement or replace text (Danesi, 2022:323-344; Muhammad & Najim, 2023:218-263) and they are extremely popular among Generation Z because they prefer communicating via mobile devices rather than desktop computers. Emoji function buttons are available in advanced personal computers and mobile devices. The digital marketing world can confirm that emojis have gradually evolved, but for Generation Z, emoji use is just messier, more ironic, and subtler (Sanjay, 2020). It all starts with one group starting a pattern that other groups pick it up on, and when it is picked by the media or someone who has a massive following, it spreads further and more quickly. On social media platforms, emoji meanings have evolved; the emotional significance of an emoji can be ambiguous and is not always ubiquitous across age categories (Boutet et al., 2023:1-13; Częstochowska et al., 2022:1388-1392). Although the Unicode Consortium has meanings for every emoji they develop and release, the members of Generation Z is so creative that they frequently give most of these emojis new meanings (Muhammad & Najim, 2023:218-263). Sometimes the Generation Z will reconstruct something in verbal language or practically replicate spoken slang, such as for the adjective “lit”. According to anecdotal evidence, older generations take emojis literally, whereas younger generations are far more creative (Alshenqeeti, 2016:56-69). The emoji has become a popular replacement for conveying laughter for many members of Gen Z; it represents another way of saying someone is dying of laughter because the emoji is the visual version of "death” (Yurieff, 2021). As Sanjay (2020) reports, irony and sarcasm are important components of any and all communication, particularly digital communication. Still, because the reader does not know the writer's intent, it has always been difficult to identify anything as dramatic irony when writing online. Written communication can be easily misinterpreted only if the target market has not been thoroughly researched and understood. Marketers can use these emojis in digital marketing communications with younger consumers, but the usage and context must be well understood.

3.2.8.2 Emojis as a Generation Z language

Fresneda et al. (2022:105-112) note that emojis can supplement or highlight ideas or feelings, particularly among young consumers. The Gen Z cohort is a creative group that is more interested in more information while also receiving engagement and entertainment, and their internet slang is heavily influenced by online culture (Aboulhosn, 2020, Sanjay, 2020; Casado-Molina, 2022:315-333; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Emojis are becoming more popular, but they are also becoming more specialised. Slang and other new forms of language frequently originate in this demographic, after which they are picked up across generations, because

language and communication innovations occur most intensely in this demographic. Everyone was cooped up inside during the pandemic, spending the entire day online; a massive increase in internet use happened during that time, and it changed how we wrote and communicated (Sanjay, 2020). There is a significant difference in emoji usage by age, but these differences are influenced by geography and familiarity.

Further, Cavalheiro et al. (2022:194-199) and Rodrigues et al. (2022:1-10) found that emoji use seems to depend on the relationship between interlocutors. This finding assumes that high emoji usage is currently a feature of the young (Missirian, 2021:147-154). Chen (2020) and Muhammad and Najim (2023:218-263) demonstrate the importance of considering emoji gender traits and potential associations to avoid unintended misunderstandings or misrepresentations of products or brands.

3.2.8.3 Emoji usage in digital marketing communications for Generation Z

Emojis are not a passing trend in neuromarketing (the field that focuses on how marketing affects our understanding of knowledge and emotional interactions in human behaviour), instead they are a tool that works better with cognitive processes than words (Halkiopoulos et al., 2022:679-697). Human brains have a much more complex relationship with words than they do with visuals; words take longer to understand and can even pass by a thought undetected (Şener & Atar, 2016:229-237). Pictures convey more information and have a more substantial emotional impact. Emojis in digital marketing communications have an immediate effect and leave a more profound impression on people. Marketers face a challenge in this case because, as previously stated, this generation enjoys assigning their meanings to emojis, which then spreads to others in their cohort, often via digital media platforms. Organisations have begun to use emojis in communication to reach out to more youthful crowds, namely the members of Gen Z (Vangelov, 2017:131-149; Dmitrieva, 2019; Kostial, 2021). Furthermore, as the world's concern for sustainability grows, both the private and public sectors are increasingly using emojis in environmental campaigns to elicit a response (Baek et al., 2021:988-1002). Marketers and organisations need not overuse emojis when communicating with this generation. A wink at the end of a serious text, for example, can act as a buffer, removing the tension it would otherwise generate (Krause, 2023). To capture Generation Z's attention, brands must provide them with compelling, hyper-relevant information and content (Gamage, 2021:26-31; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Living in a fast-paced world has taught Generation Z to dismiss anything that appears remotely irrelevant (Lerm, 2022). This study agrees, adding that brands must carefully incorporate these emojis when targeting the Gen Z cohort, as using emojis in digital marketing communications could affect their attitudes toward the product. Emoji language can be a risky tool that brands should consider carefully before

incorporating into their advertising campaigns. They may work, but advertisers should use these sparingly, in the right places, and in the right way. They should be used clearly, leaving no room for misunderstanding (Yassin, 2021:326-334). Understanding Generation Z will allow a brand to incorporate these emojis in a respectful, engaging manner for the younger consumer.

3.3 Technology Acceptance Model

The TAM primarily identifies factors influencing consumer behaviour and attitudes toward novel technology adoption. Venkatesh and Davis (2000:186-204) argue that the TAM characterises perceived usefulness in the context of public influence, conceptual instrumental procedures, and user intent. Davis (1989:319-340) created the TAM to explain the fundamental predictors of accepting innovation that led to an explanation of the behaviour of users through a wide range of end-user computing technologies. The model has been used to describe the acceptance and persistent intention to use new technologies, products, or services in their initial stages (Kim, 2018:1-12). The TAM claims that the special effects of external factors on purpose use are promoted by perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use since they are posited to influence an individual's attitude (Suki & Suki, 2011:1-7). Many studies have revised the TAM to fit the specific context of the technology under consideration (Jan et al., 2019:202-210; Wang & Genç, 2019:55-80; Kaur et al., 2022:1-24; Wang et al., 2022:1-15). The addition of social influence processes to the TAM has been well-received adjustment and significant in predicting a new technology's usage behaviour by its users (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000:186-204). The TAM model has been widely adopted in many existing studies, demonstrating its applicability to online marketing (Yang & Zhou, 2011:85–98; Riantini & Vional, 2018:1-6; Choe et al., 2021:16-30; Cho et al., 2022:500-518). The conceptual model of this investigation was derived from Davis's (1989:319-340) and Venkatesh and Davis's (2000:186-204) original TAM, and revised TAM frameworks (Singh and Srivastava, 2019:43-61; Lin et al., 2020:1-15).

The TAM has been used in many social media studies to investigate the acceptance factors of online and social media advertising (Lin & Kim, 2016:710-718; Zhao & Wang 2020:1-21; Ngubelanga & Duffett, 2021:1-29). The research scope of this paper, i.e., emojis in digital marketing communications, has characteristics of both online media and social media, so the TAM is a reasonable choice. Second, the TAM's essential factors, namely perceived usefulness, and perceived ease of use, are appropriate for distinguishing the effectiveness of emojis in digital advertising and the impact of these digital cues in new and advanced

technologies, as well as how this affects customer attitudes towards marketing communications that include emojis.

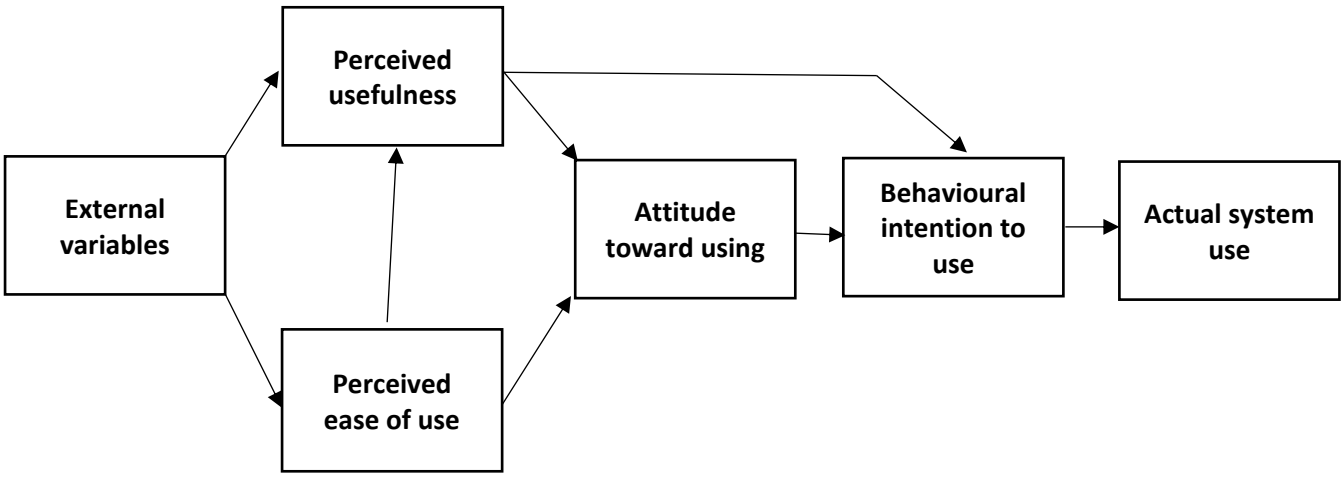

Figure 3.1: Technology Acceptance Model

Source: Davis (1989:319-340)

In response to COVID-19, new ways of deploying emojis emerged (Sharma et al., 2020:9450-9467). Organisations, brands, and managers all worked hard to raise awareness of the Coronavirus pandemic: microbe, thermometer, sneezing, medical mask, sanitising bottle, soap, health worker, hospital, and ambulance emojis were recorded to have been used more than any other emojis since the outbreak in 2020. Engagement was evoked by posting, "*How is everyone doing? Leave an emoji in the comments*." Emojis are useful because too many words can fail or cause confusion; emojis are simple. As shown by the TAM, perceived usefulness is affected by the perceived ease of use attitude; hence the more specific the device, and emojis are easy to utilise, the greater the effectiveness (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000:186-204; Lin & Kim, 2016:710-718; Scherer et al., 2019:13-35). The TAM predicts that behaviour is decided by the intention to utilise an innovation, which is driven by the system's perceived value and perceived ease of use (Al-Suqri, 2014:276-294; Scherer et al., 2019:13-35). Chong et al. (2012:34-43) found trust influences customer choices to adopt a technology. The TAM has been used and adjusted to fit technology acceptance studies; additional variables were introduced to help enhance its predictive power (Nikou & Economides, 2015:167-171). As a result, this study extended the TAM and presented involvement, trust, and consumer engagement to form part of the TAM variables (i.e., perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and intention to purchase) to examine the adoption of emoji use in digital marketing communications.

3.4 Factors influencing customer engagement in digital communication

In the new e-commerce period, interactivity is a critical engagement element. Customer engagement arose as a subset of the word “engagement” that described a customer's behaviour and feelings when communicating with brands and organisations (Busalim et al., 2019:1-14; Luzón, 2023:17-32). This refers to the extent of a customer's cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagement in a digital brand community. It implies that engaged consumers may influence brand perceptions and provide organisations with knowledge about new products and services. Krowinska (2017), Busalim et al. (2018:1-14), and Sari and Alversia (2019:268-273) identified and summarised the factors that affect customer engagement in the e-commerce world. These factors follows.

3.4.1 Social factors

Another driver of customer engagement behaviours (CEBs) that emerged from the primary data was the participants' willingness to participate in the event or culture. Anyone has someone influencing their purchasing decisions. Social factors have a significant impact on customer behaviour. Sari and Alversia (2019:268-273), Casado-Molina et al. (2022:315-333), and Luzón (2023:17-32) explain that customers usually engage because they are included in the experience or belong to a community even when they are not physically present but have a connection with a brand. An example is that customers will go so far as to like brand pages to see and stay consistent with what is going on with their favourite brands; this helps satisfy the need for connectedness and wanting to be a part of the experience.

Every customer is unique, but they all belong to a community. These categories influence consumers' self-image and behaviour, which provide them with reference points for their behaviour, lifestyle, family, close friends, and, in most cases, an online community from these communities (OER Services, 2020). This is where the members of Gen Z learn to shape their personality, beliefs, and what is sensitive to them. Krowinska (2017) mentions that product and brand selection often reflect social roles and status. This usually refers to the individual's social level, which is determined by money, wealth, education, and employment. Consumers go online for various reasons, but it can also be mentioned that they may seek advice from their social community when making purchasing choices. Busalim et al. (2018:1-14) explain social presence as the degree to which customers in the e-commerce community can develop a personal and pleasant relationship with each other. Social presence is considered a good thing amongst online members as they meet different people who share the same preferences, the same likes, and tastes, and follow the same brands. This makes them feel welcome, as though they belong. Organisations use the opportunity to grow quality in the

relationship with the users and interact with the Generation Z to gain trust and commitment while satisfying their needs and entertaining them in the process.

Users engage, support, and share knowledge in the online brand community in exchange for certain benefits. These benefits include achieving a social identity within the community, which relates to how an individual feels about themselves, and maintaining social relations among consumers, which enables them to connect to solve problems, make sense, or be involved in product/brand conversations (Busalim et al. 2018:1-14). Customers and influencers can be summarised and defined as leading to customer engagement. This study examines social factors influencing customer engagement in digital communications to increase customer engagement and intention to purchase when emojis are used in digital marketing platforms.

3.4.2 Content-related factors

Participants regard content as one of the most potent factors influencing customer interaction behaviours (Busalim et al. 2018:1-14). The type of content the users are exposed to, with how enjoyable, entertaining, and how triggering it is determining their communication behaviour. One of the essential factors added is the quality of the information for the success of information systems, specifically e-commerce systems. The more informative, entertaining, and reliable details given, the more likely the customer will remember and engage (Busalim et al., 2018:1-14; Sari and Alversia, 2019:268-273). Additionally, Krowinska (2017), Sari and Alversia (2019:268-273), and Wang et al. (2023:1-14) state that to improve customer engagement with a brand, the organisation should emphasise the design and information quality features, as these contribute to a higher level of positive consumer affection for the app. Information quality leads to more favourable consumer affection and engagement towards a communique. Krowinska (2017) states that consumers are often interested in the material or content that they find interesting, particularly:

- Educational information that is centred on offering valuable ideas and tips to the audience that are related to advertised goods or services.
- Visual and picture-based content, which may also provide them with some emotional meaning.
- Entertaining content which interacts with branded content because it offers entertainment value – participants interact with content that entertains them while still being connected to the brand's product or service.
- Emotive content brands that use humour in their digital platforms and networks that can effectively increase user engagement and improve brand recall.

Since members of Gen Z spends so much time online and is exposed to so much information and marketing communications, it is important for to brands to be creative to be noticed (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). Emojis' ability to generate visually attractive content that captures customers' attention makes them more critical for marketing communications (Gamage, 2021:26-31). Emojis can be a powerful tool for creating more relatable, passionate, friendly, entertaining, and relevant content for the audiences, especially on social media (Zhang et al., 2022:616-630; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Because the attention span of younger consumers is less than a minute, this study posits that emojis in the content shared on digital platforms may positively influence customer engagement and intention to purchase.

3.4.3. Brand-related factors

Branded content can be summed up as the most vital part of a brand's marketing communications. It has been found by Krowinska (2017) that branded content demonstrates how an organisation promotes its owner's brand values and encourages consumers to interact with the brand through a pull logic based on its entertainment, knowledge and education value, which all comes back to the brand personality. Sharing content that resonates with a brand's personality can effectively stimulate CEBs on digital platforms. Sharing content that resonates with that personality is essential in driving consumer engagement.

A brand that acts like a human on digital media will become more engaging. Brands that use their personality to behave like humans on Facebook and have an active voice representing their personalities are considered more engaging (Krowinska (2017). Furthermore, brand loyalty and a brand spirit are strongly linked to consumers' prior positive post-purchase evaluations of branded products or services. It can be viewed as a factor that affects consumer behavioural expressions against a brand. Mpinganjira (2016:1-10) identifies these objects as products, services, brands, advertisements, or internet applications. These answer the question "what is engaging?" for marketers. Emojis in marketing communications provide a novel, unconventional, and engaging way for businesses to communicate with their target audience. Understanding the role of emojis in marketing communications and how they appear in marketing communications is critical for any organisations looking to engage in more creative and emotional communications with their customers (Gamage, 2021:26-31). Younger consumers prefer brands that are easy to engage and identify with and using emojis in marketing communication campaigns allows an organisation to form an emotional bond with its customers. Emojis can be used to promote a call to action, capture the attention of Generation Z and allow businesses to more effectively engage with their customers.

3.5 Attitudes towards emoji usage in digital marketing communications

With the advancement of information and communication technologies, emojis have become a new non-verbal route for expressing emotions. Schiffman and Wisenblit (2015) describe an attitude as an acquired susceptibility to act positively or negatively towards a presented item, which motivates consumers to either buy or not buy a specific product or brand. Attitudes were long recognised as a cause of intent (Suki & Suki, 2011:1-7; Cebeci et al., 2019:152-157). Attitudes comprise the beliefs towards feelings and behavioural intentions towards objects (Kapoor & Madichie, 2012:87; Busen et al., 2016:81-87). Additionally, Al-Debei et al. (2015:707-733) define attitudes as a comprehensive analysis of a person's concept. There are two kinds of attitudes: attitudes towards objects, and to behaviours. Consumers who express a favourable attitude towards advertising reveal that they are heavily involved in advertising (Suki & Suki, 2011:1-7; Ting & de Run, 2015:84-96).

Furthermore, customer attitudes differ significantly by country and are influenced by development status, scope, and media exposure. Attitudes are learned through direct product experience, advertising, access to media and other forms of knowledge that customers are exposed to (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015). Hoyer and McInnis (2010) and Busen et al. (2016:81-87) further clarify that consumer attitudes towards online message appeals have both positives and negatives, influencing the customer's intention to purchase. This study measured customer attitudes in terms of the use of emojis in digital marketing communications.

The popularity of emojis suggests that there has been a considerable increase in public acceptance of emojis, and more campaigns are producing and utilising emojis for brand marketing (Shao et al., 2020:1-9). Attitudes towards the behaviour seem acceptable in this research, because they suggest a favourable or negative evaluation or analysis of the behaviour, which is dependent on how one feels about using emojis. Since attitudes can be positive or negative, marketers should constantly seek new information to help them interpret customer behaviour. The same applies to the current study when it comes to Generation Z's emoji usage, since they can understand the message conveyed, which leads to satisfaction through perceived ease of use, usefulness and enjoyment derived from emojis. This benefit can only be attained if emojis in marketing communications are implemented effectively. Hoyer and McInnis (2010) show that attitudes primarily focus on behaviour, hence perceptions may be shaped by beliefs and thoughts about the information received. Brands embedding products and product images in emojis enable visual attention to be manipulated by users, which can generate favourable brand attitudes and retain brand-customer connections, thus influencing customer behaviour (Liu et al., 2019:263-277). Attitudes are related directly to

behavioural intent (Dickinger et al., 2008:4-11). Emojis, like human communications, are used by people to clarify and enhance the emotional content of textual messages; as a result, they are thought to improve views of anthropomorphism. As a result, they are used to convey emotions in digital communications, giving the impression that the brand has feelings, agency, and intentions (Garcia-Collart, 2020). In this research, attitudes are considered an influencer of engagement towards emojis in digital marketing communications. Consumers worldwide go through different stages when receiving an advertisement or marketing communication**.** Because consumers go through numerous stages on their way to purchasing behaviour, it is critical to establish effective messages that affect their responses (Duffett, 2017b:1-12). Smits (2021) reveals that emojis are an essential part of marketing messaging and that researchers should continue to pay attention to them. This enquiry seeks to determine involvement, trust, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, consumer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes of Generation Z towards emojis in digital marketing communications.

3.5.1 Customer engagement

The core success of every business lies in the hands of its customers. Prayogo and Sugianto (2021:1-96) investigate whether perceived usefulness and ease of use influence a brand's engagement intention and attitude. According to their data analysis, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, perceived social influence, and perceived enjoyment influence engagement intention and brand attitude. This study shows that attitudes towards technology usage positively influence customer engagement. Li et al. (2020:417-426) investigated the role of emotional responses and app engagement in mediating the relationship between app feature perception and brand loyalty. They found that the relationship between usefulness, aesthetics, perception of gamification features, and app engagement was mediated by emotional responses. Emotional responses of users appeared to be an important factor influencing experiential branded app engagement and brand loyalty.

Yang et al. (2017:459-469) examined the influence of gamification on consumers' willingness to participate in the process of gamification as well as their brand attitudes. The results offer solid evidence for the notion that perceptions of enjoyment and usefulness function as indicators of brand attitudes and engagement intention via a quantitative methodology. However, perceived ease of use had no relationship with people's intention to participate in the gamification process or their brand attitude. Furthermore, people's perceptions of social influence were related to their brand attitude rather than their intention to engage. This study demonstrates that brand use of technology influences customer attitudes. Lim et al. (2011:21-40) studied using emoticons, their perceived usefulness, enjoyment, engagement, and information richness. The findings demonstrate connections between emoticon use,

enjoyment, interaction, perceived usefulness, and information richness; however, emoticon enjoyment did not affect the perceived usefulness of communications, including only emoticons. The findings show that emoticons have different emotional impacts on emotions in mobile and Messenger contexts. Bravo et al. (2021:141-154) considered the impact of technology acceptance variables on customer attitudes and CEBs regarding social tourism websites (STWs). A 346-customer empirical study was conducted. Customers' perceptions of enjoyment, ease of use, usefulness, and trustworthiness, according to the findings, positively influence their attitude toward STWs and subsequent engagement behaviours (purchases, WOM, and referrals). This study demonstrates that attitudes toward technology positively influence technology usage and may lead to purchase intent and WOM. The primary goal of Hussein and Hassan's (2017:1006-1028) study was to examine the factors that influence customers' attitudes toward social media, with the goal of increasing customer engagement. The data collection process yielded 388 questionnaires that could be used. According to the findings of this study, perceived connectedness and enjoyment, two of the three proposed factors extending the TAM, had a significant effect on attitudes toward social media use. Level of use was found to have a significant effect on attitude toward social media use, as well as level of use on continuation intention. The study's findings show that the level of usage influenced the attitude toward social media usage; in the current study, the level of emoji usage by the Gen Z cohort influences attitudes toward the use of emojis in digital marketing communications.

Kang et al. (2020:76-92) investigated the influences of individual motivators and environmental antecedents on customer engagement by comparing the effects of playing multiplayer online battle arena games on personal computers versus mobile phones to compare the relative effects, and to investigate the effects that individual motivators and environmental antecedents have on customer engagement and game-playing intention. 531 questionnaires were collected from players of multiplayer online battle arenas. According to the findings, flow experience had a greater influence on customer engagement in personal computer gaming than in mobile gaming. The effects of perceived ease of use and offline social interaction on customer engagement in mobile gaming, on the other hand, were comparatively greater.

The above studies have shown a correlation with the current study regarding emoji usage and the attitudes towards using these. There were some similarities the above findings have with the current study: the target group included young adults (Hussein & Hassan, 2017:1006-1028; Yang et al., 2017:459-469; Li et al., 2020:417-426), some of these studies were conducted in developing countries (Lim et al., 2011:21-40; Yang et al., 2017:459-469; Li et al., 2020:417-426; Kang et al., 2020:76-92; Prayogo & Sugianto., 2021:1-96) and a quantitative

research approach was used (Hussein & Hassan, 2017:1006-1028; Kang et al., 2020:76-92; Bravo et al., 2021:141-154; Prayogo & Sugianto, 2021:1-96). However, these studies were not conducted in South Africa and did not consider using emojis in digital marketing communications.

Emotional emojis are linked to greater consumer involvement levels in commercial posts than in general posts. As a result, this investigation will investigate the impact of perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and trust on customer engagement because of emojis used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z in Cape Town.

3.5.2 Perceived ease of use

In a paper by Chocarro et al. (2023:295-313), the TAM aspects (perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use), its conversational design (use of social language and proactiveness), and the instructors' age and digital skills were used to investigate the elements that determine teachers' adoption of chatbots. To collect data, a pre-test and an online survey with four chatbots were used. The researchers investigated 225 responses from elementary and secondary school teachers. According to the findings, perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness both contribute to chatbot adoption. The perceived ease of use and usefulness of technology influenced positive acceptance or adoption of the product.

Al-Maroof et al. (2019:370-381) used self-administered research on college students at the University of Fujairah to determine the social and cognitive factors that influence the use of stickers on WhatsApp in the UAE; the proposed model was experimentally validated using data from a 372-person online survey, which was evaluated using SEM. The findings show that perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, cognitive, hedonic, and integrative social factors influenced college students' desire to use stickers. This study is also related to the current study because both examine how the perceived ease of use and usefulness of nonverbal cues in digital platforms influence users’ positive attitudes.

Fan et al. (2020:444-445) looked into the factors that influence the use of emoticons, emojis, and stickers in instant messaging (perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use). Emojis, emojis, and stickers, according to the findings, can help users establish an emotional tone, reduce semantic ambiguity, and improve context appropriateness. This study aimed to examine how human characteristics in chatbots influence attitudes toward using them, with a focus on visual (human/robot/logo) and conversational style (formal/informal). To investigate the perspectives of users (N=339), an online experimental 3x2 between-subjects design was used, followed by a questionnaire. In addition, 12 semi-structured interviews were carried out. According to the findings of the online experiment, human appearance or conversational style

had no effect on perceived ease of use, usefulness, helpfulness, competence, trust in chatbots, or attitude toward future use of chatbots (Raunio, 2021:1-87). This study relates to the current study as it investigates how human features in digital platforms influence attitudes towards using them. The current study examines emojis, cues that represent human nonverbal cues and their influence when used in digital marketing communications.

A study by Chang and Hamid (2010:39-47) investigated the effect of involvement using TAM on the use of Internet banking by Taiwanese bank customers. According to the findings, perceived ease of use is closely related to low involvement. While the primary research focused on technological adoption, Chang and Hamid (2010:39-47) findings are like those of this current study since a positive relationship exists when adopting a technology and human characteristics are visible. Kato et al. (2018:9-23) surveyed 300 Japanese youth to investigate the perceived usefulness of emoticons, emojis, and stickers among young Japanese adults. The authors also looked into the effects of gender and text-messaging dependency on these graphical symbols' perceived usefulness ratings. Using stickers, according to their findings, makes it simple to convey emotions.

The investigations were carried out in developed nations and considered various digital platforms in e-commerce. They are consistent with the current inquiry; they used a quantitative method (Chang & Hamid, 2010:39-47; Kato et al., 2018:9-23; Al-Maroof et al., 2019:370-381; Raunio, 2021:1-87). However, some of these studies did not consider emojis or emoticons (Chang & Hamid, 2010:39-47; Chocarro et al., 2023:295-313) but also found favourable involvement in technology adoption when it comes to e-commerce and younger consumers. Hence, this enquiry will investigate the impact of perceived ease of use on customer engagement due to emojis used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z in Cape Town.

3.5.3 Perceived usefulness

Lim et al. (2011:21-40) conducted a study, and the findings demonstrate connections between emoticon use, enjoyment, interaction, perceived usefulness, and information richness; however, emoticon enjoyment did not affect the perceived usefulness of communications, including only emoticons. The findings show that emoticons have different emotional impacts in mobile settings. The goal of the research by Bischoff and Palea (2019:59-71) was to highlight the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that led to the widespread use and popularity of emojis, as well as the communicational consequences of this phenomenon. It was discovered that the inherent qualities of an emoji (aesthetic appeal, enjoyment, and information richness) are linked to its extrinsic qualities (perceived usefulness). In terms of perceived usefulness, the common conclusion is that emojis' primary function is to add meaning to written

communication rather than to replace it, as well as to make engagement more enjoyable and simpler. The previous study is related to the current study because both show that using emojis adds meaning to communication.

The purpose of a study by Lee and Hsieh (2019:849-863) was to examine how cuteness in branded emoticon design effects perceived enjoyment in mobile instant messaging (MIM) interaction and the establishment of brand engagement in self-concept. An online study was conducted on consumers who used branded emoticons in MIM applications. To examine the data, partial least squares SEM was employed. The findings indicated that kindchenschema cuteness and whimsical cuteness, two facets of cuteness, can project a positive social image to consumers, facilitating playfulness in social interaction and enhancing brand engagement in self-concept, which leads to their willingness to purchase the brand and stickiness to the MIM apps.

Amoako-Gyampah (2007:1232-1248) examined the impact of perceived usefulness, user involvement, a change argument, prior usage, and ease of use on behavioural intention to use an ERP system. In an organisation that was implementing an ERP system, a mail survey was used to collect data. There were 571 responses in total. The findings indicate that users' perceived usefulness, ease of use of the technology, and level of intrinsic involvement all influence their intention to use the technology. The study above shows that the relevance of technology for a user influences their attitudes toward it, which correlates with the current study because emojis are relevant to users in the current study, which positively influences their attitudes toward emoji usage. Furthermore, Mondol et al. (2021:368-586) investigate the factors influencing Generation Z's intention to buy online via a platform. A survey of 315 Kuala Lumpur residents was conducted. The researchers investigated the relationship between perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, prior online purchase experience, and intention to purchase online. After that, the researchers looked into the role of attitude in mediating the relationship between perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, prior online purchase experience, and purchase intention. The data confirms a positive and statistically significant relationship between perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and purchase intent. Furthermore, there is no positive or significant relationship between prior online purchase experience and online purchase intention. The latter study looked at Generation Z's intention to buy online, and the current study looks at how these members of Gen Z use digital platforms to engage and buy online.

Al-Maroof et al. (2020:370–381) found that ease of use, perceived usefulness, cognition, hedonic and integrative social factors significantly impacted college students' intention to use stickers. This study is also related to the current research since both investigate how perceived

ease of use and usefulness of nonverbal cues in digital platforms influence users' positive attitudes. While the studies above focused on the use of emojis for interacting with and communicating with current and potential customers, there were some similarities with the current research in developing countries (Lim et al., 2011:21-40; Lee & Hsieh, 2019:849-863; Mondol et al., 2021:368-586), the usage of the digital nonverbal language (Lim et al., 2011:21-40; Bischoff & Palea, 2019:59-71; Lee & Hsieh, 2019:849-863; Al-Maroof et al., 2020:370–381) and some were conducted among the members of Gen Z cohort (Bischoff & Palea, 2019:59-71; Lee & Hsieh, 2019:849-863; Al-Maroof et al., 2020:370–381; Mondol et al., 2021:368-586).Hence, this enquiry will consider the influence of perceived usefulness on customer engagement due to emojis used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z in Cape Town.

3.5.4 Trust

A paper by Babin (2020:1-14) reports the outcomes of a text-messaging and emoji experiment in laboratory trust games played on mobile devices. When emojis are added to single games, trust rises, and reciprocation increases only slightly. This study also demonstrated using emoticons and valence to develop confidence, assess hacker reputation, and detect harmful behaviour. Jung and Bae (2016:311-325) investigate the impact of MIM system trust and attitude toward emoticon use on purchase intention for emotions in MIM. The results of this study's SEM analysis revealed that perceived benefits and perceived risk to MIM both significantly impacted trust in the MIM system. It was also discovered that the perceived usefulness of emoticons in MIM and the flow experience positively influenced attitudes toward emoticon use. Finally, confidence in the MIM system and attitude toward using emoticons favoured the emoticon intention to buy in MIM. This is relevant to the current study because it considers nonverbal cues that indicate a positive attitude and influence purchase intent.

Through three studies, Zhang et al. (2021:1-16) examined the impact of emojis on college students' online interpersonal trust. Experiment 1 gathered a group of 62 college students. Positive emojis increased trustors' level of trust in the trust game, according to the findings. Nonetheless, the control group had no effect on college students' initial level of online trust. Experiment 2 enlisted the help of 74 university students. The data revealed no significant differences between the experiment and control groups in terms of the effect of emojis expressing negative emotions on early online trust. Experiment 3 enlisted 111 people to look into the effect of emojis on online trust among acquaintances. Individual trust proclivity had little effect on the association between emojis and online trust among acquaintances,

according to the findings. Emojis affected interpersonal trust among acquaintances only if the amount of trust bias was low.

Gefen et al. (2003:51-90) used a field study technique to investigate the effects of trust and TAM on purchase intentions from a website. Experienced online shoppers were asked to rate the most recent online book or CD. The data showed that professional consumers' preferences to transact with the most recent e-vendor from whom they purchased were influenced by the trust and the two TAM-identified beliefs, perceived usefulness, and perceived ease of use. In the context of a robot service restaurant, a study by Seo and Lee (2021:1-16) incorporated the well-known TAM original constructs of trust, perceived risk, and satisfaction (perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and acceptance). A scenario-based online survey was given to 338 people. Trust in a service robot increased perceived usefulness and ease of use, and trust in robot service reduced perceived risk while increasing satisfaction. Furthermore, perceived risk reduced satisfaction and return intent. This study looked at online shoppers, similar to the current study, which looks at the attitudes of online or digital users.

The purpose of a study by Nisa and Solekah (2022:35-50) was to investigate the TAM in terms of security and social influence toward intention to use an e-wallet, with trust and attitudes as prevailing factors. The study employed a quantitative approach combined with a survey approach. The sample size was 150 people. The findings indicated that perceived usefulness, social influence, and security had no influence on intention to use e-wallets and that only perceived ease of use had a direct influence on Intention to use e-wallets. Attitude could not mediate perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use on Intention to use e-wallets, but trust could fully mediate security against intention to use. This study showed that when a technology is trustworthy, users are more likely to respond positively to it. The current study uses emojis and Generation Z's trust in these cues.

The studies previously mentioned examined the usage of emojis and emoticons by digital users and consumers concerning trust (Jung & Bae, 2016:311-325; Babin, 2020:1-14; Zhang et al., 2021:1-16), among the younger generation and university students (Babin, 2020:1-14; Zhang et al., 2021:1-16; Nisa & Solekah, 2022:35-50). Even though these studies investigated the same attitude, the research was done in developed countries (Babin, 2020:1-14; Nisa & Solekah, 2022:35-50) but found favourable trust and intention to purchase relationships.

This investigation will investigate the impact of trust on involvement, customer engagement and purchase intent due to the use of emojis in digital marketing communications among Generation Z in Cape Town.

3.5.5 Involvement

A study by Honkanen and Muller (2021:611-630) investigates the use of interjections and emojis in Nigerian online communication in Nigerian and English. An automated emotion analysis and a language detection measurement were applied to an 840-million-word web forum corpus to test the influence of these and other variables on the choice of a surprise item. Nigerian interjections are more likely in messages with Nigerian Pidgin, informal orthographically lengthened words, and positive emotion, according to the findings. The shocked emoji, on the other hand, appeared in negative contexts, messages from established forum members, and messages with other emojis. The sad emoji, on the other hand, was preferred in English-language interjections, as in high arousal. The study is relevant to the current study because it demonstrates that when half of the words in a message contain some emotion, this plays an important role in any highly interactive communication form in which participants demonstrate intense emotional involvement.

A study by Ray and Merle (2021:1867-1878) investigated how discrete emotions (such as disgust) communicated via pictorial cues (emojis) influenced consumers' processing of inspection reports. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions in a 3 (emoji: smiling vs disgusted vs none) x 2 (violation level: low vs high) between-subjects design. Following that, the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire about their perceptions and cognitive processing of the message. When compared to text, the disgusting face emoji increased risk perceptions and avoidance behaviour. In terms of emotion, participants felt more of the emotions associated with the smiling face emoji; additionally, participation moderated the relationship between the numbers. Participants in a study by Baek et al. (2021:1066-2243) indicated increased social media involvement and behavioural intentions to recycle worn jeans when aggressive Twitter tweets included the smiley-face emoji. Participants showed more social media behavioural intent and engagement to support a petition to reduce pollution of plastic if non-aggressive Facebook messages that lacked the use of emojis.

Additionally, Ngubelanga and Duffett (2021:1-29) explored customer satisfaction antecedents as a result of South African Millennial consumers' use of mobile commerce (m-commerce) applications (MCA). Self-administered questionnaires were used to collect data from a sample of South African Millennial MCA consumers for the study. From a large sample of almost 5 500 participants, the data was analysed using structural equations and generalised linear modelling. Perceived usefulness was positively influenced by involvement, mobility, trust,

perceived enjoyment, innovativeness, and social influence were favourably influenced by perceived ease of use; and perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness were favourable predictors of customer satisfaction. Because of the use of technology, involvement has a positive impact on attitudes, according to the findings. Smith et al. (2013:328-335) used the TAM to investigate the role of culture in influencing online purchasing behaviour in three countries: Germany, Norway, and the United States Also investigated were the roles of cognitive and affective involvement in driving technology perceptions and usage. The purpose of this study was to discover how consumer involvement and service quality in the TAM influenced consumer adoption of self-service technologies (SSTs). The data was examined using SEM after 441 valid questionnaires were received. According to the findings, consumer involvement significantly positively affects attitudes toward SSTs. The findings of the study show that consumer involvement and technology have a positive impact on attitudes due to its use.

The examinations above showed similarities with the current study, and digital platforms were used as a basis of the research (Baek et al., 2021:1066-2243; Honkanen & Muller, 2021:611-630; Ngubelanga & Duffett, 2021:1-29; Ray & Merle, 2021:1867-1878; Smith et al., 2013:328-335). The following studies were conducted amongst university and college students (Smith et al., 2013:328-335; Ngubelanga & Duffett, 2021:1-29), in developing countries (Honkanen & Muller, 2021:611-630; Ngubelanga & Duffett, 2021:1-29) and using the same quantitative research approach (Smith et al., 2013:328-335; Baek et al., 2021:1066-2243; Ngubelanga & Duffett, 2021:1-29); Ray & Merle, 2021:1867-1878), but other studies did not consider developing countries (Baek et al., 2021:1066-2243; Smith et al., 2013:328-335; Ray & Merle, 2021:1867-1878). However, because the targeted groups in these studies did not include the members of Gen Z, they found positive digital audience involvement in e-commerce. However, this enquiry will consider the influence of involvement on perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use due to emojis used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z in Cape Town.

3.5.6 Intention to purchase

Customers are more likely to complete a purchase if they believe the service provider is competent and trustworthy; as a result, the concept of sustainable marketing can be approached. A study by Jung and Bae (2016:311-325) found that intention to purchase emoticons in KakaoTalk messages were positively impacted by platform trust. The findings relate to the current study as this considers the nonverbal cues that positively impact the

intention to purchase. Harrigan et al. (2021:1279-1312) conducted a study to better understand the social media factors that influence the intention to buy fashion-related products, with a particular emphasis on the critical role of trust This study is unique in that it investigates the interaction between a fashion brand's social media perceived usefulness and peer communication on its social media in driving trust and, ultimately, purchase intention. The findings show that perceived usefulness and level of trust in both the fashion brand and its social media channels are influenced by peer communication. In a survey of 150 Europeans, trust in the brand but not its social media channels influenced purchase intention. According to the study, if customers trust the brand, it influences their purchase intention.

Lee et al. (2020:138-154) investigated the effects of Facebook reaction icons and user comments on brand attitude, trust, information seeking, purchase intention, and eWOM intention towards a health brand, as well as the potential moderating effects of SNS use. Positive Facebook reaction icons significantly influenced brand attitude, trust, purchase intention, and eWOM intention, according to the findings of a three-subject experiment. In contrast, neutral comments had a significant impact on brand attitude and trust. The preceding research shows that positive digital language influences purchase intention in digital marketing communications, among other things.

The prior studies shared some similarities with the current study, and the attitudes were tested by using emojis and emoticons on digital platforms (Jung & Bae, 2016:311-325; Lee et al., 2020:138-154). However, these studies did not consider developing countries (Lee et al., 2020:138-154; Harrigan et al., 2021:1279-1312) but did show positive attitudes when digital nonverbal cues are applied in digital communication concerning intention to purchase. However, the abovementioned studies adopted the TAM, used its concepts, and extended it to consider the influence of customer engagement and intention to purchase, whereas the current study seeks to prove that customer engagement and trust lead to an intention to purchase due to emoji usage in digital marketing communications.

Table 3.1: Summary of emoji usage in digital marketing communications attitudinal literature

Authors and year	Purpose/aims/objectives	Research methodology	Main findings relating to research topic
Andral and Larroque (2016)	The study aims to find out how consumers feel about businesses that use emojis in their online communication strategy. The goal is also to determine how much money businesses can make using emoticons and how much value they can add to their image.	Quantitative survey Sample 382 young women Sweden	According to the survey results, women aged 15 to 25 are the most responsive to organisations that use emojis. Furthermore, while using emojis is an excellent way to improve brand image, businesses must tailor their strategy to the target audience. Although most respondents positively perceived emojis, this does not indicate that it influences their preference for one brand over another.
Hill (2016)	This study focuses on the influence of these paralinguistic cues on customers' perceptions of the organisation's quality of response to an online customer review, brand connection, and buy intent.	Quantitative study (online survey) Undergraduates at a South-eastern State University Florida	The findings show that the valence of the review had the most significant impact on consumers' perceptions of the organisation's quality of response to an online consumer review, brand relationship, and purchase intent, with the inclusion of an emoji, the findings show that the valence of the review had the most significant impact.
Manganari et al. (2017:674-686)	The study investigates the effect of emoticon use in online consumer reviews (OCRs) on consumer booking intentions and the moderating effect of personal consumer characteristics.	Questionnaire survey Total of 280 respondents USA	The results show that the interaction of review valence and emoticons influences booking intention. Consumers who have no prior experience are primarily influenced by cognitive aspects of the booking process. In contrast, experiential aspects of the booking process primarily influence experienced consumers. Customers who rely on OCRs are affected by emoticons, whereas customers who do not rely on reviews are only affected by positive reviews.
Arya et al. (2018:648-670)	This article aims to investigate the relationship between consumers' social media activity and brand attachment behaviour in the presence of brand communication as a mediator. Furthermore, the use of emojis as significant moderators in this mediation was investigated.	252 respondents from India Online survey forms and physical questionnaires.	The availability of emojis for a brand during a conversation or in digital marketing campaigns on SNSs acts as a moderator, significantly impacting consumers' brand attachment behaviour via brand communication.

Mathews and Lee (2018:46-55)	This exploratory study sought to learn more about how businesses use emojis in their marketing campaigns.	Online survey 604 A content analysis was carried out using Google News as a search engine to find stories about the use of emojis by organisations USA	According to the study, many marketers have used emojis in their brand marketing tactics. Emojis have been used in marketing by the entertainment, service, and food/drink industries to improve customer interaction. Most of these emoji marketing strategies were implemented online or digitally, whether via SNS, smartphone apps, or any other type of computer-based marketing.
Das et al. (2019:147-156)	This paper investigates the effect of including emojis in commercials on customers' purchase intentions.	Laboratory experiment and an online study) 37 adult participants, US residents	The presence of emojis makes consumers happier, which leads to increased purchase intentions.
Dmitrieva (2019)	The purpose of this study was to see how the presence of emoji in social media advertising influences consumers' purchase intentions.	217 participants for the study ranged between 18 and 66 years old Online experiment Netherlands	The findings suggest that the presence of emoji has a positive impact on affect and purchase intentions. Furthermore, the results show that their effect on positive affect mediates the emoji effect on purchase intentions. However, no statistically significant relationship was discovered between the emoji effects and the advertised product framing.
Yakin and Eru (2019:83-100)	The purpose of this study is to investigate the views of young customers regarding emojis in emotional and rational advertising messages utilized in social media advertising campaigns, as well as their perceived advantages.	Survey 580 respondents Social Media users (students) between 18-25 years Turkey	According to a survey of 580 students, emojis were more successful than traditional approaches when utilised at the right moment and with the right audience. Participants feel that using emojis in advertising campaigns is acceptable for social marketing and that using emojis in advertising campaigns successfully describes the project, as indicated by the findings.
Hao (2020)	It proposes a preliminary test of the boundary condition when product involvement can have a moderating effect to investigate the efficacy of emojis in digital targeting.	Online survey- 112 Undergraduate students University of Amsterdam Netherlands	For low-involvement products, emojis have been shown to increase open email rates by up to 8%, conversion rates by 11%, and purchase intent by 18%. Messages with an emoji are opened at a much higher rate: up to 36% higher than regular messages. Emojis, on the other hand, may reduce the open rate and conversion

			rate for high-involvement products by 3% and 9%, respectively.
Moussa (2019:211-225)	This article aims to present and evaluate a new emoji-based measure that can be used to track people's feelings towards organisations on social media.	720 consumer tweets were randomly retrieved from the official Twitter Tunisia	Consumers use more (vs fewer) positive emojis when expressing their sentiments for Coca-Cola (vs Taco Bell), according to the findings of this study.
Garcia-Collart (2020)	Emojis, it is believed, improve online brand communications by improving the consumer-brand relationship, resulting in increased downstream consumption. Emojis are perceived as more human in digital communications, allowing for better consumer-brand relationships.	80 undergraduate university students USA	According to the findings, stronger consumer-brand relationships help brands achieve positive consumption outcomes such as increased WOM, willingness to pay, purchase behaviours, click-through rates, and brand attitudes.
Huang et al. (2020:1-9)	The goal of this study is to look into the effect of emoji arousal levels and their relationship with consumers' chronic temporal orientation on their purchase intentions for a product promoted by an influencer.	37 female college students South-eastern University USA	When watching an ad with emojis in a low (vs. high) arousal state, present-oriented consumers showed stronger purchase intentions. According to the findings of this study, consumers may not always assign equal weight to various arousal level emojis. Instead, their purchasing intentions for marketed goods with varying levels of arousal can vary depending on customer characteristics such as temporal orientation. The emoji impact of high arousal was discovered to be only useful for the present-oriented consumer group.
Ray (2020)	This study looks at how discrete emotions (like disgust) are conveyed through how pictorial cues (i.e., emojis) influence how consumers process inspection reports.	Randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions Questionnaires 336 participants Consumers Age between 18–76	When compared to text, disgusted face emojis increased risk perceptions and avoidance behaviour. Furthermore, the valence of the violation influenced risk perceptions and behavioural intent. In terms of emotion, the smiling face emoji prompted participants to express their feelings about sanitation.
Baek et al. (2021:1-15	To boost participation and collaboration in environmental efforts, the authors want to find out how emojis and assertiveness interact in social media posts.	Experiments 114 adults for experiment 1 192 adults for experiment 2	According to study 1, people have better behavioural intents and social media engagement and to recycle worn jeans when aggressive Twitter tweets contain the smiley-face emoji. In study 2, when (non) aggressive

		USA	Facebook messages (do not) use emojis, individuals exhibit more behavioural intentions and social media engagement and to sign a petition to limit plastic pollution.
Gammoh (2021)	This study aims to improve the accurate transmission of emotions and cues in business communication by proposing and developing an emoji syntax that establishes rules and guidelines for using emojis at work.	Qualitative data Exploratory interviews Five managers and employees of an organisation Switzerland	The main findings of this study indicate that the clearer the emojis, the more influential the communication. Similarly, the more clan culture an organisation has, the more open communication occurs. As a result, when emojis are used correctly, they can increase communication engagement, reduce misunderstanding, and increase trust in organisations.
Kostial (2021)	The thesis examines the use of emojis in advertising text and their impact on advertising performance, with an emphasis on the Facebook and Instagram advertising platforms, to evaluate how emoji usage in commercial content impacts the advertisement's efficacy.	Online survey	According to the study's findings, emojis may work better when combined with desired products that provide the customer with joy and satisfaction because of purchasing the product. Furthermore, the character of the advertising content may be a significant factor, and emojis may work better with more emotional and emotion-focused material than with text that focuses on the logical side, quality, and features of the promoted product or service.
Lee et al. (2021:1-15	This research aims to investigate purchase intents in the context of sponsored adverts on Facebook news feeds, their perceived intrusiveness, and how the addition of emoji presence may further influence customer perception to provide a roadmap for developing long-term marketing strategies. The study looks at how emojis affect consumers and how ad personalisation can reduce intrusiveness to the point where purchase intentions can be influenced.	Online study 400 Korean respondents Active users of Facebook Korea	First, the use of emojis in sponsored adverts on the news feed was not perceived as intrusive by users. Second, the use of emojis decreased purchasing intentions. Third, perceived intrusiveness did not affect the relationship between emoji presence (vs. absence) and purchase intentions. Finally, when consumers perceived advertising to be less personalised, the use of emojis reduced perceived intrusiveness and increased purchasing intentions.
McShane et al. (2021:96–110)	This study investigates whether and how these pictographs affect brand interaction on Twitter (i.e., likes & retweets).	Datasets generated by analysing the tweets of the most famous	Emojis' impact on brand engagement varies according to the nature of the interaction between emojis and text and the impact of this interaction on perceived enjoyment.

		celebrity and popular corporate brands Canada	
Nguyen and Sharkasi (2021:63-73	To investigate potential relationships between the components of the latent dependent variable, individual intention to engage on Facebook, and the elements of the latent independent variables, crowd engagement, cognitive and affective trust components, and order-related risk factors, using a five-point anchored scale of the intention to purchase as a measurement tool.	Quantitative approach. A self-administered questionnaire-via Google Forms Targeting international students residing in Japan 17–30 years Japan	The crowd's engagement behaviour is positively associated with the intention to follow a brand's Facebook page. In contrast, financial risk is negatively associated with the intention to share or like a brand's Facebook content. The findings also suggested that avoiding symbols and emoji in the primary text of an advertisement could be a good practise, and that trusted Facebook friends' engagement behaviour is positively related to the intention to comment, making it a suitable candidate for harbouring eWOM.
Pınarbaşı and Kırcova (2021:90-103)	This study aims to investigate how emojis can be viewed through the lens of consumer engagement.	Turkey Exploratory approach 25 134 tweets from 5 industries/25 brands	The findings indicate that emojis are used appropriately for communication and can be interpreted as such. Furthermore, when it comes to sentiment categorisation, positive sentiment emojis stand out for the food and beverage, wellness and sport, and shopping industries.
Raco (2021)	This study aimed to investigate the effects of emojis as a function of customer engagement by looking at two different explanations. On the one hand, the emotional pathway has been investigated by looking into the impact of emojis on the positive affect consumer involvement. On the other hand, the associative method has been studied by looking at the effect of emoji on consumer engagement via perceived extraversion.	Quantitative experimental design 165 respondents aged between 16 years and 67 years Netherlands	The emoji type 'expressive motions' indirectly affects customer engagement. Emojis have a positive effect on perceived extraversion, which in turn has a positive impact on positive emotion, which in turn has a positive effect on customer engagement.

Smits (2021)	The goal of the study was to compare two different ways in which this relationship could work: on the one hand, an emotional route, in which the effect of emoji on customer engagement through positive affect was evaluated; and on the other hand, a rational route, in which the impact of emoji on customer engagement through negative affect was assessed. Further, an associative approach was used to analyse the effects of emoji on customer engagement via perceived playfulness.	Survey via Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and Instagram. 162 Dutch respondents Facebook users Netherlands	The use of directive speech act-oriented emoji influences customer engagement through perceived playfulness, proving that emoji use can have a long-term impact on consumer engagement. Furthermore, it was found that positive affect, which is supposed to be focused on short-term results, has a role in building a long-term effect.
Starr (2021)	In study 1, researchers examined the effect of three implicit eWOM kinds (emoticon, emoji, and GIF) on the intention to buy two products in comparison to a text-only control group. Study 2 examined how three implicit eWOM types (emoticons, emojis, and GIFs) affected consumers' intentions to buy three different products.	Online study: Facebook 240 participants Facebook users over 18 years old US	Purchase intention was higher for the text-only review than for the study that included a paralinguistic cue in two comparisons between text only and 1) text plus emoticon and 2) text plus emoji.
Ma and Wang (2021:443-456)	This enquiry looks at how emoticon type affects customer happiness and repurchase intent and the function of perceived sincerity and readiness to forgive as sequential mediators.	Online experiments 162 sports enthusiast participants for Study 1 245 participants who were Chinese residents for Study 2 China	The use of a negative emoticons in a response leads to a higher degree of customer satisfaction and repurchase intention than answers with a good emoji. The results also show that consumers believe that a reaction with a negative emoticon is more honest and creates a higher level of forgiveness than one with a positive emoticon, but only when the cooperative relationship is prominent in the customer's consciousness.

Yassin (2021:326-334)	This paper aims to investigate emojis as the world's fastest-growing form of visual communication, primarily as a new visual advertising language in the digital information age, and how it contributes to engaging and persuading target audiences, particularly Generation Z.	-Descriptive method (an analytical examination of international creative emoji inspired campaigns)	Finding that emojis are the new visual language of the advertising age, they are effective visual tools in the new era of advertising communication when used in conjunction with prior research on the target audience's cultural differences. The use of emojis increases audience engagement with the advertisement because consumers respond positively to familiar images and make them easily remembered.
Bashirzadeh et al. (2022:58-76)	In digital communication, animations and pictographs are used, but while both components are useful in customer interactions, combining these is thought to reduce communication efficacy.	Data from 10 701 customers Email data collection France	When compared to using these components individually, combining animations (GIFs) and pictographs (emojis) had a negative impact on message outcomes (increased subscriptions) and downstream consequences (reduced in-app time).
Casado-Molina et al. (2022:315-333)	This study shows that emojis are a critical component of brand communications, which researchers should investigate further. It describes the use of emojis by four Spanish beer organisations with the largest Twitter followings.	Twitter communications of four Spanish beer breweries Spain	Emojis were discovered to be more than just an occasional resource within a message and a differentiating factor for brand positioning. Customer service and care emoji communications and those used in positive contexts and for emphasis were associated with higher user engagement.
Ko et al. (2022:1-17)	Emoji impact and contextual factors (like texts) are the main topics of our study of brand-related user-generated content (UGC). using extensive Instagram brand-related social media posts	Instagram 86 brands were randomly selected	Emoji and text interaction effects show that emotional emojis only positively and significantly link to consumer engagement when the text in brand-related UGC is oriented towards positive sentiments. Conversely, in a comparable setting, informational emojis have a negative correlation with consumer engagement.
Luzón (2023:17-32)	The purpose of this study is to examine how research groups' Twitter accounts represent their positions and level of engagement through the use of multimodal semiotic resources.	Data obtained from 300 Twitter accounts PhD students	The analysis uncovers a large and broad array of stance and engagement resources that assist research organisations with disseminating their findings, becoming more prominent, building personal connections with a range of audiences, and persuading these audiences to do certain activities. Emojis, a digital medium, are used in

			these tweets to communicate positions and levels of engagement.
Mladenović et al. (2022:1-18)	The purpose of this study is to see if exposure to emojis increases purchase intent and if using them increases revenue generation and marketing effectiveness.	1 272 randomly selected respondents Students (Generation Z) Czech Republic	The findings show that using emojis had a negative effect on purchase intention; however, when mediated by positive affect, it had a positive effect. Emojis significantly improved the effectiveness of hedonic product marketing efforts and the return on ad spend. However, the effect was minor for utilitarian items.
Distel et al. (2022:134-145)	The purpose of this study is to determine which emoji types influence consumer behaviour, purchase intention, and user interaction in tourism-related Instagram posts.	A quantitative approach Instagram users Adult participants over 18 years old	The findings help tourism managers use emoji for social media marketing campaigns on Instagram by demonstrating that (positive) face emoji elicit more positive emotions than non-face emoji.
Zhang et al. (2022:616-630)	The study analysed how communication tactics, emoji usage, and prior firm involvement affected how well Western and Chinese people engaged online.	University students University of Twente (Netherlands), Zunyi Normal University	Chinese people were more engaged and appreciative online than Western users. The impacts of the message features were not as anticipated. Microblogs with an emphasis on action or community received less appreciation. Emojis have little impact on appreciation or online engagement

Sindhu and Bhart (2023:1-21)	The study investigated how customers' intention to purchase on online purchase platforms is affected by verbal (inspirational appeals) and nonverbal (ingratiation) cues provided by chatbots.	Online survey Residents in India between the ages of 18-34 years	While double-tap ingratiation offered by chatbots does not significantly affect purchase intent, inspirational appeals do positively influence consumers' purchase intention.
Wang et al. (2023:1-14)	This research examines how emoji and digital media content interact to affect how consumers engage with travel businesses' digital communications.	Twitter data Online experiment Students (18 to 30 years)	Emotional emoji generate higher levels of consumer engagement than semantic emoji for text about the aesthetic experience. Also, emotional emoji boosts customer engagement by evoking stronger emotional reactions for content on the aesthetic experience, whereas semantic emoji boosts consumer engagement by creating more credibility for promotion-related content.

The studies above focused on using emojis in digital marketing communications/advertising, which aligns with the current research. Using emojis in digital marketing communications has led to a positive relationship between customer engagement and intention to purchase. There were some similarities between the above findings and the current study since several of the studies also included young consumers, namely young adults and students (Generation Y), as the target group (sample) (Hao, 2020; Huang et al., 2020:1-9; Bashirzadeh et al., 2022:58-76; Mladenović et al., 2022:1-18; Nguyen & Sharkasi, 2021:63-73; Distel et al., 2022:134-145; Zhang et al., 2022:616-630). However, the current study focused on an even younger generation of consumers, namely Generation Z, regarding their attitudinal responses towards emojis in digital marketing communications.

The abovementioned studies also considered emojis among various digital platforms (Lee et al., 2012:819-827; Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333; Moussa, 2019:211-225; Hao, 2020; Bashirzadeh et al., 2022:58-76; McShane et al., 2021:96–110; Nguyen & Sharkasi, 2021:63-73; Pınarbaşı & Kırcova, 2021:90-103; Starr, 2021; Smits, 2021; Yassin, 2021:326-334; Distel et al., 2022:134-145; Ko et al., 2022:1-17; Luzón, 2023:17-32; Zhang et al., 2022:616-630; Sindhu & Bhart, 2023:1-21; Wang et al., 2023:1-14), but most were primarily conducted in developing countries, whereas this study was conducted in a developing country. Even though other studies have investigated several of the constructs, not all these constructs have previously been investigated in a single study, especially not in terms of the Gen Z cohort. The current research will focus on the impact of perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and trust on customer engagement and intention to purchase as the primary constructs of the study to understand the effect emojis usage has on the Gen Z cohort.

3.6 Usage characteristics

3.6.1 Digital platform categories

Graham (2019:377-400) investigates how participants use semiotic images to orient themselves toward digital gaming practice communities and to assert their identities within digital gaming groups. It also looks into how the gender of the streamer influences emoji usage. Participants in the man's stream, according to the analysis, differ from those in the woman's stream in how they use emojis to claim community membership and as phatic devices. Bliss-Carroll (2016) researched the value of emojis in digital platforms and suggested additional ways emojis complement previous media forms and improve personal technical communication practises. The value of emojis in non-interpersonal computer-mediated communications (CMC) (for example, advertising practises) was also evaluated. Data on future or past interpersonal communication shifts since the invention and widespread use of emojis was provided. In digital spaces, emojis serve as personal identity mediators and surrogates.

Derks et al. (2008:99-101) conducted a study that included an online questionnaire regarding the social motivations for emoticon use and an experimental component in which 1 251 participants were required to reply to short digital media platform chats. In these conversations, both the interaction partner (friend vs stranger) and the context valence (positive vs negative) were altered. The findings indicated that emoticons were most commonly used on digital platforms to portray emotion, reinforce a message, and express humour. Furthermore, more emoticons were used when communicating with friends than when communicating with strangers, and more emoticons were used in a positive context than in a negative context. Bosch and Revilla (2021:39-61) used data from an online fieldwork company's (Netquest) survey of 1 614 Millennials in Spain and Mexico were polled to determine how emojis could be used in mobile web surveys and open-ended questions, as well as how their use affected data quality, completion time, and survey evaluation. Overall, the findings showed that Millennials wanted to use emojis in surveys (both stated and actual use), and that encouraging Millennials to use emojis in open-ended questions improved the amount of information conveyed, completion time, and survey enjoyment.

A study by Seitz et al. (2017:10-20) investigated whether and how emojis were appropriate in the following context with 40 participants. Users were told to create passwords with both alphanumeric and emoji characters. According to the findings, the primary selection strategy of users was to establish meaningful relationships between the emoji and the rest of the password. Furthermore, if the object represented by the emoji was distinct enough, platform-specific emoji renderings did not necessarily reduce usability. Because websites already allow emojis in passwords, this step must be carefully considered. Aliannejadi et al. (2020:1-6) described a collaborative design exercise in which primary school children were asked to examine interfaces with different emoji combinations to help them assess the usefulness of results in Search Engine Result Pages, a critical factor in determining relevance for the classroom. This activity engaged child experts in the design process while also allowing the authors to collect their opinions better to understand the user requirements for this age group. The main design issues that emerged from the analysis of children's preferences, the reasoning behind them, comments and concerns raised, and alternative proposals sketched by children were discussed.

The purpose of a paper by Dhar and Bose (2022:1-12) was to determine whether the star rating of mobile payment apps adequately captured the appropriate customer perception reflected in the app's OCR textual content. A three-dimensional analysis of 146 914 reviews from two popular mobile payment apps revealed the sentiment and emotions captured in the review text as well as the reactions captured in the emojis. The consolidated sentiment and happiness emotion obtained from the mobile payment app OCR had a greater influence on star ratings, according to the findings than other emotions embedded in the text and reactions in the emojis (Dhar & Bose, 2022:1-12).

Further, Hussain et al. (2018:13-18) evaluated the Amila Pregnancy app, a mobile assistive app for pregnant women and expectant mothers. The study evaluated five usability qualities, according to Jakob Nielsen's usability principles: effectiveness, efficiency, learnability, memorability, and satisfaction. The result demonstrates how difficult it was for mobile users to understand the displayed icon, locate the provided information, reposition it, and navigate through the mobile app. This paper presents the first study on the impact of personality (as measured by the BFI-2) on emoji comprehension in concrete mobile messaging contexts: four recipients (parents, friend, colleague, and partner) and four situations (information, arrangement, salutary, romantic). In an online survey (N=646) by Völkel et al. (2019:1-12), short text chat scenarios were presented, and participants were requested to add appropriate emojis. The findings suggest that emoji selection is influenced by personality traits. In another open task, participants compared emojis identified as semantically similar by related work. Participants provided rich and varied emoji interpretations even in limited contexts. Zhang et al. (2021:247-271) investigated the nuances of emoji usage on Chinese social media. The study looked into the use of emojis in comments on Guokr's official WeChat account, which was chosen to represent an open forum for public communication. The data set included 2 552 comments from the account’s 90 shared articles. Emojis have been discovered to be used in social media to perform and reinforce a sense of playfulness, but this playfulness is accompanied by a discursive conformity to real-life social norms.

The current study will investigate the impact of emojis on various digital platforms, such as search engines, social media, video posting platforms, blogs, websites, mobile, messaging platforms, and other digital platforms. Hence, this enquiry will consider the influence of emojis across several digital platform categories, namely, search engines, social media, video posting platforms, blogs, websites, mobile, and other digital platforms.

3.6.2 Digital platforms

Kalsoom and Kalsoom (2019:127-137) using interpretive and qualitative research, investigated how gender is semiotically represented in Google female emojis. The study looked at stereotypical and professional (newly introduced) Google emojis for females and attempted to identify liberal feminist movement tenets using the Grammar of Visual Design model developed by Kress and Leeuwen (2006). Google's redesign of the emoji foreshadows the thriving global liberal feminist movement, with the hope that "this will empower young women and better reflect the pivotal roles women play in the world." Gender roles are now recognised as social constructs, which is a victory for the liberal feminist movement. Women are stepping out of stereotypical female roles and into previously male-dominated professions in the new emojis. Valenzuela-Galvez et al. (2022) aim to investigate how certain characteristics, such as emoji type or presentation (repetition and position), moderate their effectiveness. To collect data, email marketing campaigns with two types of brands were used. Emojis have an impact on customer

engagement and can elicit engaging behaviours and increase customer engagement even in less interactive channels. Emojis boost the likelihood that the email will be opened, how often it will be opened, and how many times people will click to get more content. In a study by Lekshmi and Anoop (2022:1-10), to study people's responses to videos on COVID-19 that were uploaded to various online platforms such as YouTube, Dailymotion, and Vimeo, the paper proposed a sentiment analysis approach to people's responses to such videos, using text mining and machine learning. Tauch et al. (2016:1560-1565) collected data from phone notifications in order to shed light on how emojis function in phone notifications. The study looked into how emojis interacted with other online communication apps like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter. The most popular emojis in one social app were not as popular in others, according to the findings. Emoji sentimental polarity was high on Twitter, and the overall number of emojis was lower than on Facebook.

Digital platforms are increasingly being used in marketing and advertising, and more research on the subject is being conducted. Arafah and Hasyim (2020:558-574) looked into how emojis are used in WhatsApp conversations. The semiotic method of Barthes and Morris was used in this article. To collect data, online questionnaires were used, as well as screenshots of conversations involving emojis on WA social media. Emojis, according to the study, are grammatical parts of language when communicating on social media. Kahar and Habil (2020:27-37) carried out a study to determine how emojis were used in WhatsApp marketing communication and to explain the various emojis used by Malaysian SMEs and their Turkish counterparts; the emoji identified in conversational exchanges between entrepreneurs during business dealings were interpreted using content analysis. The Malaysian participant, according to the findings, was more technologically aware of emojis than his Turkish business competitors. As a result, the WhatsApp emoji is representative of nonverbal communication as well as other commercial activities.

Thomas et al. (2021:30-51) chose five tourism departments from 12 with active Facebook pages for this study, which investigated how tourism brands use Facebook marketing to manage promotional branding. The purpose of this study was to elucidate the underlying mechanisms of tourism brand social media marketing on Facebook, one of India's major digital platforms with the highest number of active users. 1 095 Facebook posts from five tourism brand pages were examined to answer three research questions about message characteristics, popularity and engagement, and message appeals. Sampietro et al. (2022:183-208) examined the use of seven different kissing emojis in three different corpora of WhatsApp chats: one from Spain (where cheek kisses are common in many situations), one from Germany (where kisses are occasionally given), and one from the German-speaking part of Switzerland (where cheek kisses are a common greeting between relatives and friends). To accomplish this, researchers categorised and compared the use of a sample of these emojis on WhatsApp. The use of kissing emojis varied across the three corpora. The emoji "face throwing a kiss" appears frequently in closing messages

in the Spanish and Swiss-German corporates, but not at the end of a conversation in the Federal German corpus; using these emojis in openings was also uncommon in the Federal German corpus. Gomes and Casais (2018:591–607) examine the emotions elicited by threat appeals on two social media platforms, Facebook and YouTube. Two methods were used to conduct a sentiment analysis of forty non-governmental campaigns about anorexia nervosa awareness. First, researchers analysed the content of user comments using text analysis; second, they coded and quantified the emojis expressing feelings from the same campaigns. The findings suggest that anorexia nervosa threat appeals on social media could elicit both positive and negative emotions, with a high expression of fear, sadness, and empathy, lending credence to the ambiguous findings. The above studies investigated the different types of digital platforms and the usage of emojis in these, for example, YouTube, Dailymotion, and Vimeo, as well as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and websites. As a result, this study considers digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Google, TikTok, and WhatsApp, to name a few, because these are frequently used as channels of communication for emoji digital marketing communications.

3.6.3 Emoji usage

Mathews and Lee (2019:319-332) investigated how fashion businesses used emojis on their Twitter accounts. A content analysis was done on tweets posted by the top 10 fashion brands. When the effectiveness of emojis on Twitter was attended to, it was discovered that their use was linked to more replies, retweets, and likes. Emoji usage is the same depending on the type of message. Su and Chen (2021:171-174) investigated how college students interacted in their social networks using QQ emojis. According to the chatting records gathered, QQ (a social networking platform run by Chinese company Tencent) emojis performed prominent appeal and courtesy functions in push, notice, and questionnaire requests, and the intensity of the expression correlated with the frequency of use. However, Liu (2023:372) mentions that the intensity and type of expression may differ, even if emojis are used at the same frequency. The current study will examine how frequently digital media platforms and emojis were used to determine if this variable influenced customer engagement and purchase intent.

Cavalheiro et al. (2022:1-8) investigated how appropriate brand use of emoji was perceived by participants in five contexts of brand-consumer communication. Participants thought it was more appropriate for brands to use emojis when publicising on social media and less appropriate when making call-backs for defective products, depending on the context. The findings also revealed that younger participants who used emojis more frequently, and those who believed emoji use was more useful and formal had more favourable perceptions. Garcia et al. (2022:1-12) used an online rating task: researchers investigated the effect of the winking face emoji on the interpretation and perception of message intent for sarcastic or literal criticism or praise. In comparison to their younger counterparts, older adults performed poorly in interpreting and

perceiving sarcastic intent, according to the findings. Robertson et al. (2018:680-683) presented a quantitative analysis of the use of skin tone modifiers on Twitter emoji, demonstrating that users with darker skin tones use them more frequently than users with lighter skin tones, and that the vast majority of skin tone usage matches the colour of a user's profile photo, indicating that tones represent the self rather than the other. There was no evidence of negative racial sentiment in the few cases where users did use opposite-toned emoji. A web-based survey was used in the first section of the paper by Jaeger et al. (2018:397-410) to assess differences in the interpretation of 33 facial emoji using a check-all-that-apply (CATA) questionnaire. While emoji age and frequency of use in CMCs had little effect on emoji interpretation, these variables did in the case of a few emojis. The second section of the paper compared how emoji questionnaires were completed in four studies that evaluated written stimuli and tasted food samples to measure product-elicited emotional associations. More frequent users used significantly more emoji to describe their motivations than less frequent users, and there was a trend toward greater discrimination. Nonetheless, the differences were minor and had little impact on less frequent emoji/emoticon users' ability to complete the research task.

Vidal et al. (2016:119-128) added to this activity by generating new insights into consumers' spontaneous expressions of food-related emotional experiences. The descriptive method was used, with an emphasis on capturing the frequency and variety of emoticon and emoji usage. Customers expressed a range of negative and positive emotions, and emoticons and emojis were tailored to the content of the tweets. Emojis were more commonly used than emoticons to express feelings. While using more than one emoticon or emoji in a tweet was uncommon, they were always used in addition to the tweet's other content. When asking various health-related questions, Fadhil et al. (2018:378-383) compared user feedback when interacting with chatbot applications that used different dialogue styles, such as plain text or text with emojis. Participants in the study were asked to rate their interactions with a chatbot that asked personal questions about their mental health. They rated emoji-based interaction as more enjoyable, positive, and confident. When asked about their physical well-being, participants rated an emoji-based chatbot lower than a plain-text conversation.

The previous studies investigated the frequency of emoji usage on digital platforms; emojis are used in expressing emotions and conveying a message, so the current study examines how frequently the younger generation uses emojis on digital media, and if there was a difference regarding consumer engagement and intention to purchase due to emojis used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z.

3.6.4 Emoji marketing communications engagement frequency

Mathews and Lee (2018:44-55) found that emojis are used in marketing practices, and their primary goal for using emojis was to increase consumer engagement. Lee et al. (2021:1-15)

investigated emoji customer behaviour, the ability of advertisement personalisation to lessen intrusiveness to the point of affecting buy intentions, and a method for developing sustainable marketing tactics online. Garcia-Collart (2020) found that stronger consumer-brand connections help brands achieve positive downstream consumption consequences such as increased WOM, willingness to pay, purchase behaviours, CTRs, and brand attitudes. A quantitative method was utilised to gather data via a questionnaire by Sharma et al. (2020:9450-9467) to investigate young consumers' perceptions of emojis in social media marketing, as well as to assess the effect of gender and internet usage pattern on emoji use. According to the findings, young consumers had a positive overall perception of emojis in social media marketing. They found it amusing, humorous, personalised, simple to understand, and convincing.

Leung et al. (2017:76-95) investigated how marketers used emojis to enhance message content while avoiding unintended meaning interpretation. The study investigated the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic functions of emojis in marketing tweets from various businesses. Due to their syntactic and semantic roles, the findings suggest that when emojis in commercial tweets are used pragmatically to express additional meaning in text-based messages, the possibility of multiple interpretations may be reduced. Although studies on the effectiveness of emotional appeals in social marketing have been conducted, there is no evidence that they are widely used in social advertisements. Casais and Pereira (2021:282-294) investigated the prevalence of emotional and rational appeals in social advertising campaigns. Video adverts selected for the study were extracted from the YouTube channels of Portuguese governmental and non-governmental organisations. The authors classified twenty-five social advertisements as rational, eight as emotional, and seven as a combination of both; the study's findings suggest that social marketers prefer to use a rational tone in social advertising campaigns.

Using Facebook UGC, Grigsby and Mellema (2020:61-78) conducted a study to investigate the efficacy of using storytelling in a native advertising context on social media with emojis to build customer trust and relationships. According to the findings, native adverts that communicate their advertising nature via cues are more effective. A thesis by Kostial (2021) focused on the role of emoji in advertising copy and the influence of emoji on advertising performance, with a focus on the Facebook and Instagram advertising platforms. According to the findings, the emoji-included version had a higher link click-through rate. Gesselman (2019:1-14) considered attitudes toward and frequency of emoji use in two studies, as well as whether the signalling effect of emoji use correlates with increased romantic and sexual options. It was found that using emojis with potential partners is linked to extending a relationship beyond the first date and having more romantic and sexual encounters the following year. McShane et al. (2021:96-110) demonstrated that emojis increased tweet engagement, with more emojis resulting in more likes and retweets. Depending on the nature of the interaction between emojis and text, emojis have varying effects on brand engagement. Li (2022:1-11) investigated the impact of influencer posts on follower engagement Emojis, campaign hashtags, frequency, and sponsored tags all significantly impact

follower engagement. Gamage (2021:26-31) found that the ability of emojis to create more visually appealing content that is both straightforward and appealing to customers without sacrificing quality is what makes them more important for marketing communications.

Previous studies investigated the frequency of engagement with brand messages using emojis on digital platforms. Therefore, this study will establish if emoji marketing communications engagement frequency influenced the attitudes of the members of Gen Z due to emojis used in digital marketing communications to customer engagement and intention to purchase.

3.6.5 Usage hours

In a study by Kumah (2017), a dataset was collected at Vaasa University of Applied Sciences using purposive and convenience sampling techniques. The findings indicated that social media were used daily, and that awareness was high, resulting in lower operating costs for organisations in establishing and maintaining customer relationships. A correlational, quantitative study was conducted by Parrella et al. (2021:1-14) to see if students' perceptions of media writing are influenced by their time spent using digital media (text messaging and social media). They found that the more students' texted, the more they used social networks, and conversely. This current study sought to establish if the digital media platform usage hours influence customer engagement and intention to purchase by Generation Z.

In Southgate (2017:227-235), Generation Z attitudes and behaviours toward traditional and digital advertising formats were compared to Generations Y and X. According to the research, Generation Z members were spending more significant amounts of time online. In an emoji study, however, Yakin and Eru (2017:231-240) found that most participants spent 3-4 hours daily in social media marketing. The latter study is related to the current study as it considers emojis in digital marketing communication as the current study.

Roselina et al. (2021:1-7) studied how Generation Z used the internet, particularly social media, to find health information during the pandemic. Social media and news websites accounted for most time spent online, and it took less than an hour to get information. Poturak and Softic (2019:17-43) conducted an empirical investigation into the impact of social media communication on brand equity and purchase intent. They found that 54.3% of people spent more than two hours on the internet, 38.7% spent one to two hours per day, and 6% spent less than one hour per day. In addition, Voramontri and Klieb (2019:209-233) investigated whether the online medium or the online activity is more important in excessive internet use. It was found that students spent more than 20 hours per week on the Internet. Curana et al. (2022:494-509) investigated the impact of social media advertising and brand image on new product purchase decisions by consumers. According to the findings, respondents who actively use social media spent an average of 3 hours and 26 minutes daily.

Additionally, Huang et al. (2022:665-682) investigated how the construal level modifies the effects of emoji emotional intensity on consumer purchase intentions in social media advertising, either as an individual temporal orientation or as a temporal distance of advertising. 80.5% of participants of the study indicated they spend at least five hours per week on Instagram.

The previous studies have investigated the usage hours spent on digital platforms, revealing that people spend a significant amount of time accessing information online, purchasing or learning more about products they intend to purchase, which corroborates with the current study, which seeks to determine if usage hours and the usage of emojis in digital platforms influence Generation Z's customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes.

3.6.6 Digital spending

Khwaja et al. (2020:1-12) conducted a study to uncover the factors that lead to information adoption, which in turn motivates customers to spend purchasing products and services. As a result, the online shopping sphere has increased because most of the population in Pakistan are adults. In an emoticon study, however, Esposito et al. (2017:1-15) investigated and evaluated the effectiveness of nudges designed to discourage the purchase of 'incompatible' digital products. The use of emoticons in the emotive message (now replaced by emojis) may have appealed more to the younger generation, who are more accustomed to them. However, senior citizens may misinterpret these symbols. The current study's goal is to report on digital spending and the use of emojis and emoticons in communication.

Kantar (2021) found that the Generation Z is the fastest-growing cohort of local online shoppers. These younger buyers shop through their mobile phones and digital media. A study by Dabija and Lung (2019:1-8) highlights differences in online shopping behaviour among Millennials and members of Gen Z in an emerging market. According to the findings, the Gen Z cohort prefers to order online via their smartphones. Pienaar (2022) demonstrated that the level of value in online shopping reached levels that no one would have expected to see by 2025 or later if Covid-19 was not present; online spending increased because people were spending so much time at home, spending emotionally, with an emphasis on comfort and luxury. Zatz et al. (2021:471-479) described the grocery shopping habits of people who shopped both online and in-store, and determined whether online shoppers bought fewer unhealthy, impulse-buying items. Secondary analysis was performed on 44 weeks of grocery transaction data from two Maine supermarkets for fruit and vegetable incentive trials. Online shoppers spent 44% more on average per transaction and bought 44% more items. Online shopping was associated with lower spending when compared to in-store shopping.

The preceding studies investigated the average spend on digital platforms, including online shopping, corroborating the current research. This study sought to determine how much money the Generation Z spends per month on various digital media and whether this differed in terms of

consumer engagement and intention to purchase due to emojis used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z.

3.7 Demographics

3.7.1 Gender

An investigation by Kato et al. (2018:9-23) found that gender and text-messaging dependency effects on symbol usefulness judgments were also validated. Sharma et al. (2020:9450-9467) discovered that young customers' perceptions are influenced by gender: emojis are more appealing to women than they are to males. Jamil et al. (2021:104-113) investigated young customers' perceptions of emojis in social media marketing and the impact of gender and internet usage patterns on emoji usage. Most participants were Malay males between 18 and 25, familiar with Instagram and used it frequently. No gender differences in the perceived usefulness of social media were found. Chen (2020) surveyed 209 participants, who were shown various advertising email topic options, including those with and without emojis. They were asked to share their thoughts on brand familiarity, brand favourability, quality of products, and price of the product, as well as emotions communicated in the email, perceptions of the gender of the tweet sender and the target audience, and thoughts on brand familiarity, brand favourability, product quality, and product value. The findings show that emoji gender congruence or incongruence with product gender was not a deciding factor in consumers' actions or perceptions of the email's emotions after seeing an email that includes emojis. However, in some cases, emoji gender-to-product gender congruence or incongruence may affect how communications are interpreted. The gender of the participants has no bearing on the findings.

Kwarteng and Pilik (2016:90-103) focused on demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and education to examine consumers' propensity to engage in online transactions. They found that customers were hesitant to order online because of delivery delays, bad internet connections, and privacy and security concerns. Bosch and Revilla (2018:1-25) found that emojis were primarily used in dialectical contexts by Millennials, with increased use in IM. They also used emojis more frequently when communicating with people their own or similar age. Finally, this cohort had cross-cultural and gender differences, with Mexican Millennials using more emojis and women using them to express emotions to a bigger degree. The studies above included the younger generation in their research, and emojis and digital marketing platforms for communication were considered. The present study focuses on the members of Gen Z cohort's adoption of these emojis in digital marketing communications.

Andral and Larroque (2016:1-56) examined consumers' perceptions of brands that use emojis in their online communication strategy. The goal was also to discover how much money businesses can make by employing emoticons and how they can improve brand image. A quantitative survey was designed, and a questionnaire was employed with non-random sampling for convenience.

Over 380 respondents were surveyed to determine the importance of emojis in the minds of consumers. According to the survey results, women aged 15 to 25 were the most positively responsive group to organisations that use emojis. Furthermore, while emojis are an excellent approach to promoting brand image, businesses must change their strategy according to the target audience. Emojis' effectiveness for emotional responses, specific emoji expectations, and mood swings caused by emoji use or non-use revealed a significant relationship to gender, as discussed by Zareen et al. (2016:257-262). The study investigated emojis and their impact on digital users by assessing the "potential psycho-emotional impacts of digital emojis on instant messaging app users in association with gender." The survey included 97 people who were chosen at random from Rawalpindi Islamabad's workplaces and educational institutions. An et al. (2018:423-428) investigated how age and gender might influence the frequency, type, and sentiment of emoji usage in communications. The researchers discovered that people between the ages of 26 and 35 had the lowest frequency of emoji usage; younger and older groups showed different sentiment levels for the same emojis; and people chose emoji types based on relationships after analysing 6 821 WeChat chatting messages from 158 participants. These findings shed light on how people communicate with emojis.

Nicoletti (2019) conducted a quantitative investigation on the disparities in emoji usage on Twitter by gender and by race. The findings show that the emoji used by women differed from those used by men; similarly, the population varied significantly across racial groups. Gantiva et al. (2021:1-6) conducted research attending to emotional responses to emoji faces using physiological and self-report measures and evaluating potential differences between men and women. The results show that the participants' emotional experiences were consistent with the emoji faces' emotions. There were no gender differences discovered. Kalsoom and Kalsoom (2019:127-137) state that men and women use emojis differently in terms of frequency and variety.

The new emojis depict women breaking out of stereotypical female roles and entering male-dominated professions previously. Using Twitter emojis, Al-Rawi et al. (2020:1-11) investigated how people of all genders (e.g., men, women, and sex and gender minorities) were discussed in relation to COVID-19. A hybrid technique was used to extract three data sets, including tweets about men, women, and sexual and gender minorities. Then the researchers examined how emojis were used in each gender group. The majority of emojis were predominantly positive across genders, according to the data. However, sexual and gender minorities, as well as women to a lesser extent, were addressed more negatively than males. Bulut et al. (2019:435-438) mentioned that the goal was to use machine learning text categorisation techniques to predict the gender of a Turkish language texter because they were an important part of text messaging. Gender prediction accuracy rates using text-only, emoji-only, and text-plus-emoji characteristics were 67%, 74%, and 69%, respectively. Barbier and Camacho-Collados (2018:101-106) examined how emojis were used in social media by gender and skin tone. According to the

findings, these modifiers reflected some prejudices about skin colour and gender. Simultaneously, the vector corresponding to the male modifier appeared semantically related to emojis about business or technology. In contrast, the vector corresponding to the female modifier appeared semantically related to emojis about love or makeup.

In a study by Du Plessis (2020), a random sample of employees from various backgrounds (age, gender, race, industry of employment, and hierarchical level) who worked at various organisations was used in an exploratory research approach. The study discovered that not only were emoji interpretation disparities visible, but they also occurred for each of the factors studied. As a result, emoji interpretation differed across platforms, age groups, genders, racial groups, work industries, and hierarchy levels. Zheng (2022:1-27) found that male and female users exhibited different behaviours when using emojis, according to the different usage patterns of emojis across genders. Further, Cavalheiro et al. (2022:1-8) found that women (as opposed to men) reported using emojis more frequently, and they perceived emojis to be more useful, enjoyable, and simple to use. Gender can also influence how people exchange and use digital media information to make decisions. The findings above apply to the present study's assumption that emoji usage and responses differ between genders, which was also methodologically implemented in the current study. The current study seeks to determine if there was a significant difference regarding consumer engagement and intention to purchase among gender due to emojis used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z.

3.7.2 Age

Makhitha and Ngobeni (2021:1-9) determined what risk factors influenced South African consumers' attitudes toward online shopping. Furthermore, the study sought to determine whether demographic characteristics influenced the risk factors influencing South African customers' attitudes toward online commerce. In South Africa, a survey of internet shoppers was conducted at two Gauteng retail centres. To reach the respondents, a convenience sampling method was used. The relationship between product, security, privacy risks and attitude toward online shopping was found to be moderated by age, but not the relationship between product risk and attitude toward online shopping. Alkan et al. (2021:95-105) identified the socio-demographic and economic factors influencing people's use of e-commerce in Turkey. They found that the survey year and age influence online purchasing. In a study by Van Deursen et al. (2011:125-144), three large-scale performance tests were used to determine the effects of gender, age, educational attainment, internet experience, and amount of internet use on both media- and content-related internet skills. The findings indicate that age is a significant contributor to communication abilities such as operational and formal internet skills, with a positive contribution to the level of content-related skills.

Penard et al. (2015:71-80) identified the factors that encouraged or discouraged Africans from using the internet. According to the findings, young and educated people in Cameroon were more likely to use the internet. Males, as well as English-speaking and computer-wise individuals, were more likely to use the internet. Internet users were also more likely to have relatives living in other countries. It was also discovered that internet usage patterns differed depending on gender, age, and educational level. The goal of research by Ahmad and Hadi (2020:13-33) was to respond to a new question: what role does digitalisation play in consumer purchasing behaviour when combined with demographic factors? The hypothesis tests revealed that digitisation influenced consumer purchasing behaviour directly and in conjunction with consumer demographic factors, implying that demographic factors, such as consumer age, play a direct and interactive role in the relationship between digitisation and consumer purchasing behaviour. In a sample of 86 702 Facebook members (aged 16 to 60, 59% female), Oleszkiewicz et al. (2017:289-295) investigated the use of emoticons. The total number and types of emoticons posted to public Facebook feeds in relation to a user's gender, age, and Big Five personality traits were examined. Age and gender were also significant predictors of emoticon usage, accounting for 16% of the variance, with user personality traits accounting for 2%.

Du Plessis (2020) found that emoji interpretation varied across platforms, age groups, genders, racial groups, industries of work, and hierarchy levels. Southgate (2017:227-235) discovered that Generation Z (aged 16-19 years) spent more time on mobile devices than television, radio, or print media. Hysa et al. (2021:1-27) investigated the frequency with which different generations used social media. The study was conducted in Poland with 397 respondents from the Baby Boomer (BB) generation and Generations X, Y, and Z. They found that the frequency with which people use social media decreased with age. Andral and Larroque (2016) showed that women between the ages of 15 and 25 were the most receptive to brands that use emojis. An et al. (2018:423-428) found that people aged 26 to 35 had the lowest emoji usage frequency; younger and older groups showed different sentiment levels for the same emojis.

The studies discussed above considered the age of the younger generation that engaged with and used emojis while using digital platforms for communication, engagement, or digital shopping. As a result, the prior studies are consistent with the current study, which also investigated the effect of age on customer attitudes toward digital marketing communications. In the present study, age is used to establish if it affects the usage of emojis and digital platforms by members of Gen Z in terms of consumer engagement and intention to purchase.

3.7.3 Highest education level

Veytia-Bucheli et al. (2020:1-17) conducted a study to determine the frequency of emoji use via WhatsApp among Mexican graduate students and to analyse the benefits and drawbacks of their use This study used a hybrid approach, with a nonexperimental, descriptive, and transversal

design. It sampled postgraduate university students to see how emojis were used and valued by people with a solid university academic career. The findings confirmed an increase in the use of emojis in WhatsApp conversations between students. It was determined that they favoured the development of a pleasant environment, confidence, and empathy, as well as expressing emotions, feelings, and reactions, as positive elements. Emojis, on the other hand, are misunderstood because their meaning is not universal, and they divert attention away from a central idea. As a result of three studies, Zhang et al. (2021:1-16) found that the type of emoji had an effect on college students' online trust. Van Deursen et al. (2011:125-144) discovered that education is necessary for both medium and content-related internet skills. Penard et al. (2015:71-80) found that young and educated people in Cameroon were more likely to use technology. Croes and Bartels (2021:1-10) investigated why young people bought products promoted by social media influencers. The first goal of this study was to discover why young adults followed social influencers. The second goal was to look into social identification as a possible underlying mechanism in the relationship between these motivations and the online advertisement clicking and purchasing behaviour of young adults. An online questionnaire was completed by 415 people between the ages of 16 and 25. The importance of motivations for following influencers varied by age, gender, and educational background.

Kwarteng and Pilik (2016:90-103), showed that customers were hesitant to order online because of delivery delays, poor internet connections, and privacy and security concerns. Further, a study by Dominici et al. (2021:1-9) investigated the factors that influence people's willingness to buy food online. The researchers examine the effects of socio-demographics and situational factors on a sample of 34 488 respondents from the Italian National Institute of Statistics multipurpose survey 'Aspects of Italian Daily Life' using a logit model. According to the findings, the food-online consumer is a young, well-educated female who lives in a small family and has a very good or adequate overall economic situation. Alkan et al. (2021:95-105) demonstrated that educational level and other parameters influence online purchasing. People with higher levels of education, younger ages, and living in more developed areas were more likely to shop online. Yaokumah et al. (2017:44-65) looked into how customers' age, gender, and educational level affected their perceptions of security, ICT literacy, customer satisfaction, and e-payment system use. Customers with a higher level of education felt less secure using the services, but there were no significant differences in happiness or use of online payments. Ayob (2021:1-11) provided empirical evidence by integrating individual and country-level characteristics to profile ASEAN member countries' e-commerce users Researchers discovered that female, younger, more educated, employed, and higher-income users were more likely to use e-commerce by analysing multi-source data from 5 870 people in six countries in 2017.

In addition, Misra et al. (2022:11-30) used survey data from 2 917 Californians aged 55 and up to investigate (1) how older adults who currently ride-hailed booked their trips and (2) what

personal characteristics, such as attitudes toward technology, were associated with booking trips online versus over the phone or with assistance. A college education was discovered to be associated with a higher likelihood of booking through apps. Further, to better understand consumer perceptions of digital payment, Singh and Rana (2017:1-14) used a structured questionnaire as a research tool, with 150 Delhi residents providing primary data. The findings indicate that education has a significant impact on digital payment adoption.

Several previous studies have examined the impact of education level on customer attitudes toward digital marketing communications, which is consistent with the current study. The present research looks at the education level to see if it influences Generation Z gender usage of emojis and digital platforms and their level of engagement and intention to purchase because of using emojis in digital marketing communications.

3.7.4 Population group

Emojis, as evidenced by their continued popularity and widespread use, have become essential to any digital communication. Li et al. (2019:1748-1763) discovered the preferential use of emojis to be consistent with Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Model, which states that different representations of demographics and culture within countries use emojis to transmit emotions in dramatically different ways. Chui (2020:108-118) compares US and Chinese user sentiments by asking them to rate their feelings for the top 15 most used emojis on a positive to negative scale. The survey was distributed in the United States and China, and 402 people responded. The study weighted the scores of both user groups to investigate the causes of the misalignment, such as emoji structure and local cultural context. More than 60% of the 15 emojis tested had major or minor interpretation differences between US and Chinese users, with only 40% matching. The conclusion was that the user's sentiment conveyed through an emoji may not be received as well as intended by audiences in the United States and China. Nicoletti (2019) showed that the emoji used by women differed from those used by men; similarly, the population varied significantly across racial groups. Kadry (2021:106-113) assessed how emojis could help engage and influence Generation Z to communicate in their native language. They were helpful visual tools in the new era of commercial communication when used in conjunction with prior research on the target audience's cultural differences. Bischoff and Palea (2019:59-71) found that teenagers liked emojis because they allowed them to send IM and focus on the speed advantage over typing.

In Kejriwal et al. (2021:1-23), a quantitative analysis was carried out to better understand emoji usage in terms of linguistic and country correlates. The study included 30 languages and countries and was based on tens of millions of tweets collected from 10% of all Twitter traffic over a month. According to the findings, which were based on statistical metrics and information theory, emoji usage has significant dependencies at both the language and country levels, and that some languages and countries have much more limited emoji usage diversity than others. Park et al.

(2013:466-475) investigated the semantic, cultural, and social aspects of emoticon usage on Twitter. It demonstrated that emoticons are socio-cultural norms whose meaning varies depending on the speaker's identity. From 2006 to 2009, a corpus of Twitter data was used, containing information on 54 million users and all their public posts. Because the researchers were interested in studying cultural differences, they attempted to include eastern and western countries with significant Twitter populations. According to the findings, people from different cultures perceive and use facial expressions differently, with easterners smiling and frowning with their eyes and westerners frowning with their mouths. In short, the followers' cultural backgrounds in communicating effectively in online social networks were considered.

Murthy et al. (2020:1-18) sought to determine whether emoji usage in mobile payments is hedonic or utilitarian. Over 325 million public transactions on the US payment site Venmo were examined by the researchers. They looked at how race was represented in Venmo emojis using tone-modified emojis, which are a subset of emojis that allow users to specify their skin tone. While emojis were more commonly used for hedonic rather than utilitarian purposes, darker tone-modified emojis had a higher proportion of hedonic consumption and a higher representation of utilitarian categories in transactions than lighter tone-modified emojis. Darker tone-modified emojis had more lexical variety and were used in more playful ways in mobile payments.

Svoboda (2022) conducted research intending to investigate nonverbal communication characteristics from a cross-cultural standpoint. A systematic review of twenty studies published between 2006 and 2021 was used. The findings show that emoji and emoticon usage patterns differed across dozens of cultural units. While emoticons were used and understood differently in the East and West, emojis appeared more universally used. Zheng (2022:1-27) discovered that users' cultural groups significantly impacted how emojis were used.

The prior studies examined the use of emojis and digital platforms among various populations worldwide to find and determine whether emojis conveyed the same meaning and message across all populations; the initial studies are related to the current research. For this study, the population group variable is used to establish if it affects the usage of emojis and digital platforms by the members of Gen Z respondents in term of consumer engagement and intention to purchase.

3.8 Summary

This chapter discussed the study's target response group, Generation Z, and the theoretical framework. Understanding Generation Z's background and period; characteristics of Generation Z, South African Generation Z, and technology; Generation Z as a consumer, and its disposable income; advertising to Generation Z, and the use of emojis by Generation Z were all covered in the first section. For the second section of this chapter, the literature on the factors influencing

customer engagement in digital communication was reviewed. The last part of this chapter examined the TAM being the basis of the research; the factors that influence customer engagement in digital communication were discussed, and the attitudes towards emoji usage in digital marketing communication were reviewed in current and previous research studies related to attitudes toward emoji usage in digital communication. Further, a summary of emoji usage in digital marketing communication attitudinal literature was presented through. Emoji usage characteristics were discussed, as well as the demographics of Generation Z using emojis in digital marketing communications.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH MODEL AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter gives a thorough description of the research methods that were used in this inquiry; firstly, the research was deductive, which generates ideas evaluated by empirical observation to test hypotheses. A post-positivist perspective emphasises that truth is subjective, context-dependent, and impacted by a number of variables, and results from individuals interested in the experience survey technique were used. For this study, the descriptive research approach was used. The research design and a suitable research technique used to address the study's hypotheses are thoroughly outlined. A pilot study was conducted to evaluate the research processes and confirm that the research instrument was appropriately constructed. Generation Z digital platform users in Cape Town were surveyed in this investigation to determine their attitudes towards emojis in digital marketing communication. Consumer engagement and intention to purchase were evaluated as antecedents of emoji use in digital marketing communications. The study gathered quantitative data from surveys and questionnaires, and also from secondary sources like journal papers and other theses. The selection of the respondents (sampling process), questionnaire design, validity and reliability, data collection, analysis of data, and ethical issues are also outlined in this chapter.

4.2 Nature of enquiry

This study was carried out to ascertain the impact of emoji usage among the Gen Z cohort when these emojis are used in digital marketing communications. The data was collected using self-administered questionnaires, making this an empirical study.

4.3 Paradigmatic approach

A paradigm is defined as a fundamental worldview and a shared conceptual framework for theory and research that includes fundamental questions, simple premises, and standards for high-quality research (Saunders et al., 2007; Newman, 2014; Rahi, 2017:1-5; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016:51-59; Saunders et al., 2019).

4.3.1 Research philosophy

The post-positivist philosophy emphasises understanding and interpreting rather than foreseeing or regulating the satisfaction evaluation process. A post-positivist perspective stresses the notion that truth is arbitrary, context-dependent, subject to a variety of influences, and the result of experience-seekers (Crossan, 2003:46-55; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016:51-59). As implied by Crossan (2003:46-55), Bhattacherjee (2012), and Liu (2023:372), among all the different factors which influence the construction of reality, the most significant of these are gender and cultural

beliefs, which consider the complex link between human behaviour, attitudes, social structures, and socio-cultural issues. Bhattacherjee (2012) demonstrates how post-positivism modifies positivism by claiming that it is difficult to verify the truth even though false beliefs can be rejected. It does, however, retain the positivist concept of objective reality and its reliance on the scientific method. Greener (2008) notes that post-positivism produces knowledge through our senses. Hence, this study has adopted the post-positivist approach. Hicks (2018:1276-1278) indicated that this type of research implies that humans can know objects that exist apart from individual or social perceptions of reality. Thus, this investigation investigates the use of emojis in digital marketing communications. The respondents are emoji users who respond according to their experience, which is limited to one's mental content. The younger generation primarily uses emojis (Huang et al., 2022:75-79), which is the focus of this study, since the Generation Z cohort has a comprehensive understanding of the use of emojis. Hence, emoji usage in digital marketing communications is thought to lead to engagement and purchase intent by this generation.

4.3.2 Research logic

Deductive research generates ideas, which are then evaluated through empirical observation, a set of techniques for analysing and assessing the validity of theories in the real world (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016:51-59). This study investigates hypotheses that the use of emojis in digital marketing communications influences consumer attitudes. The deductive method could involve creating a hypothesis that can be thoroughly tested (Saunders et al., 2007; Rahi, 2017:1-5). Newman (2014) and Saunders et al. (2019) describe deductive reasoning as requiring the creation of a hypothesis that is then put to a rigorous test through a series of proposals. Hypotheses were developed and tested to better understand the effect of emojis on appealing to the Generation Z cohort.

4.3.3 Research choice

Quantitative research was used in this study because it involves collecting and generalising numerical data across a group of people (Babbie, 2010). The purpose of the study is to evaluate the attitudes and actions of the Generation Z cohort when emojis are used in marketing communications. Quantitative research involves gathering and analysing numerical data in order to define, explain, anticipate, or take control of a fascinating matter (Brynard & Hanekom, 2006; Rahi, 2017:1-5). Babbie (2010), Bhattacherjee (2012), Newman (2014), and Aden et al. (2014) explain that quantitative approaches rely on objective measurement and statistical analysis of data obtained by surveys. Hence, the study used a structured questionnaire to collect primary quantitative data. Atmowardoyo (2018:197-204) describes a quantitative strategy to study design requiring deductive knowledge to show theories that, in effect, endorse or deny a hypothesis. Therefore, quantitative data was collected to test and evaluate the propositions of this study. The influence of emojis in digital marketing communications was tested to establish perceived

usefulness, perceived ease of use, trust, involvement influence on customer engagement and intention to purchase among the members of Gen Z cohort.

4.4 Research design

Griffee (2012) defines the research design as a practical framework or research study model that represents intrinsic logic and methodological limitations, which specify the measures of the research study, how it is arranged and how it works. In addition, in an empirical research endeavour, the research design is a thorough plan for data collection. It is a blueprint for empirical research that must define at least three procedures to answer specific research questions or test distinct hypotheses: (1) the data-collecting process, (2) the instrument creation process, and (3) the sampling procedure, all steps in the data collection process (Bhattacherjee, 2012). Cooper and Schindler (2007) and Atmowardoyo (2018:197-204) further describe research design as a type of analysis that defines the attributes of the same population under study. The approach generally emphasises too much about the study's "what" instead of the study subject's "why". This study's design is appropriate since it enables the researcher to categorise respondents according to numerous demographic factors, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, and to reach diverse conclusions regarding the chosen topic, which aims at ascertaining whether the usage and demographic factors influence customer engagement and intention to purchase due to emojis used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z.

4.4.1 Time horizon

A cross-sectional research design was used in this study to collect data from a population at a specific point in time using self-administered questionnaires. The study conducted this type of research because the sample group chosen represents Generation Z in Cape Town in terms of attitudinal changes of this group when emojis are employed in digital marketing communications.

4.4.2 Research strategy

A descriptive design was employed for this study. Atmowardoyo (2018:197-204) defines this design as a research method used to describe the existing phenomena as precisely as possible, whereby a researcher collects information using research instruments (such as a survey or a questionnaire) to describe a question under study systematically. Descriptive analysis presents a picture of the precise details of a scenario, social setting, or relationship. It is directed at carefully surveying and detailing documentation of an object of interest (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Atmowardoyo, 2018:197-204). This study seeks to answer questions about real-life scenarios, such as how marketers strive to stand out and attract the younger generation's attention. It also investigates the impact of emoji usage in digital marketing communications among the Gen Z cohort, which has already adopted this digital language. The main goal is to demonstrate using words or figures and to offer a profile, category of types, or emphasis of processes to address

queries such as "who," "where," "what," and "how," as stated by Bhattacherjee (2012), Aden et al. (2014), Newman (2014), and Haydam and Mostert (2018). Further, a descriptive analysis is described as an approach used only to convey (as accurately as feasible) the real assumptions, as defined by Saunders et al. (2007) and Atmowardoyo (2018:197-204).

4.5 Sample design

Sampling is the statistical process of selecting a subset of a population of interest (referred to as a "sample") to make observations and statistical inferences about that population (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020:180-193). Samples with the target features cannot be accessed quickly when snowball sampling (Naderifar et al., 2017:1-6). In a time of turmoil and public gatherings suspended because of COVID-19, meeting face-to-face with respondents was not feasible. The researcher encountered a hurdle as it was challenging to carry out a survey with little to no human touch. There was a concern that since trust is harder to establish online than it is in person, response rates would decrease as a result. The researcher was able to get a high response rate from the respondents by using a snowball sampling technique. The goal of the snowball sampling technique is to test hard-to-reach or access groups, by providing access to populations that are more receptive to research (Baltar & Brunet, 2012:57-74; Naderifar et al., 2017:1-6). Snowball samples come through one individual through a chain of reference towards the next (Streeton et al., 2004:35-47). The study used various digital platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, SMS, and email to disperse the questionnaire that was primarily done through the use of Google Forms to ensure that it was straightforward and could be easily understood by different levels (age and education) amongst the Gen Z cohort. Streeton et al. (2004:35-47) and Benfield and Szlemko (2006:1-15) add that snowball sampling does not only give users access to the relatively inaccessible populace but can also extend sample size, study scope, and minimise costs and time.

4.5.1 Research population

The working population from which a sampling frame or list of potential respondents is derived is referred to as the research population (Griffee, 2012; Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015; Rahi, 2017:1-5). Brynard and Hanekom (2006) affirm that the population as a group in the universe has specific characteristics. The study's population includes all Generation Z digital platform users in Cape Town.

4.5.2 Sample frame

The sampling frame of any probability sample is a comprehensive list of all the cases in the population from which the sample will be drawn (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020:180-193; Rahman et al., 2022:42-51). A sample frame, according to Churchill (2010), is a list of elements that make up the population from where the sample is taken. Institutions, people, geographic locations, and other

units may be included in the list. This target population segment is easily accessible (typically in the form of a list with contact information) and can be sampled. To collect data for this research, the sample started among emoji users at CPUT in Cape Town, who use various digital platforms to purchase online and internet users who interact with brands on these platforms due to the content with emojis shared on digital platforms in Cape Town.

4.5.3 Sample unit

The elements of the target population are included in a sample unit, which is the most basic level of research (Casteel & Bridier, 2021:339-362; Haydam & Mostert, 2013). Furthermore, the selected respondents are perceived to have the specified status or expertise and demonstrate the necessary understanding to produce the desired information. This study used purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which participants are selected based on specific criteria. In this case, the participants were chosen based on their age, which determined they were part of the Generation Z cohort, and their use of digital platforms and emojis. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are recruited through referrals from other participants. Hence, members of the Generation Z cohort who use digital platforms and emojis were used for this study.

4.5.4 Sample element

A single unit (item or person) chosen from the population to be measured is referred to as a sample element (Cooper & Schindler, 2007). The sample element is the analysis units, which can be a person, a group or an organisation. The Generation Z emoji users (born between 1997 and 2012) who were surveyed are referred to as the study sample.

4.5.5 Sampling method

Non-probability sampling is a set of sampling methods that aids researchers in selecting units from a population to study (Saunders et al., 1997; Bhattacherjee, 2012; Griffee, 2012; Lopez & Whitehead, 2013; Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015; Rahi, 2017:1-5). This sampling technique is used for this study because selecting inclusion units in a sample is easier, faster, and less expensive, but it does not protect against bias. The sampling techniques used in this study were purposeful sampling and snowballing sampling.

4.5.6 Sampling method motivation

Bhattacherjee (2012) states that when the researcher begins gathering data from one or many individuals and then depends on these individuals to put the researcher in touch with others who may be associates and other significant contacts, this is known as snowball sampling. This sampling method is suitable for this study, Duffett et al. (2019:1-13) state that snowball sampling

will help to aid low response rates of online studies, which will help reach a larger sample. Purposive sampling, also known as judgement sampling, is the deliberate selection of a participant based on the participants' qualities. It is a non-random technique that does not necessitate underlying theories or a predetermined number of participants (Etikan et al., 2016:1-4).

As a result, this method was employed to choose students; respondents from Generation Z attended CPUT. The Gen Z cohort, aged 16 to 25, exposed to emojis and their use in digital marketing communications, was chosen based on specific characteristics that the researcher wishes to study. This group was also requested to provide details of their contact people who could serve as other possible respondents. They could then be sent the self-administered questionnaire electronically as the second sampling stage. Hence, the current study adopted both sampling techniques as the relative time and cost needed to perform both the purposive and snowball sampling techniques was insignificant compared to the likelihood of involvement of all respondents invited to participate in the research. The researcher was required to carry out study in convenient settings with potential sample components representing a broad, more comprehensive geographic range could be easily contacted (Haydam & Mostert, 2013). The purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were used concurrently. Combining the two methods allowed many respondents to be interviewed while remaining cost-effective, simple, and cost-effective.

4.5.7 Sample size

Bhattacherjee (2012) states that a sample is described as a segment of the target population that is accessible (typically a list with contact information) and from which a sample can be drawn. The confidence level also governs the choice of a sample size you need to have in the data (Saunders et al., 2007); that is, the study's sample size is determined by the degree of certainty that the characteristics of the data collected will reflect the characteristics of the total population. The study aimed to reach members of Gen Z emoji users in Cape Town, who also use digital space to purchase items. According to Williams (2021), this consumer market, which represents nearly 27.5 million South Africans, is significant in terms of current and future consumer spending, and brands must understand it. This generation overlaps with the born-free audience, who were born in South Africa following the end of apartheid in 1994 (Lerm, 2022). This study used a large sample size due to the non-probability sampling techniques. The sample size for this study was 1 000. The study's target demographic was Cape Town-based Generation Z emoji users who also make purchases digitally. It was crucial to make sure the sample size was significant to be representative of the target demographic because this is a sizable and diverse community. The 1000 sample size goal was attained by the researcher with a precision of 5% at a 95% confidence level.

4.5.8 Sample errors

Error occurs when a sample of the population is used rather than the entire population. In other words, it is the difference between the statistic that is measured and the parameter that would be found if a population census was taken. Sample errors are inevitably in every study conducted and are described as errors that result from chance variation. The selection method can produce both sampling and non-sampling errors (Brynard & Hanekom, 2006; Wiid & Diggines, 2015:113-114). The sampling error found in this study is the sampling bias error. According to Gupta and Gupta (2022), sampling bias error occurs due to a researcher's bias or prejudice in selecting a sample, which appears when the survey is self-selected or when only participants who are interested in the survey respond to the questions (CFI Team, 2022). This study sample was initially chosen purposely and thus failed to represent the attitudes of the entire Cape Town Generation Z population. It only reached those who are online, and systematically excluded people with limited or no data from completing the questionnaire. To address this, the sample size can be increased to represent more of the population, and the number of participants in the sample can be increased to try to overcome selection errors. The selection process for this study was designed to recruit a sample of Generation Z CPUT students who are familiar with and exposed to emojis and their use and interaction with brands in digital marketing communications.

4.6 Questionnaire design, data collection and research methods

4.6.1 Questionnaire design

Because the study's goal is to investigate consumer attitudes, a questionnaire was created to test the effectiveness of the use of emojis to enhance consumer engagement and intention to purchase. Bhattacherjee (2012) and Griffee (2012) state that a questionnaire is a valuable tool because a large amount of information can be obtained from a relatively small sample of respondents. The research instrument may also seek demographic information, usage factor opinion or factual answers from the respondents, which are often used to conduct cross-analysis versus the dependent variables (i.e., the attitudes) of the respondents.

4.6.2 Research tactics and measurement

The self-administered questionnaire included the screening question, which asked the respondents, “Do you use any digital platforms that include emojis?” which helped to qualify the respondents for the rest of the survey. Survey screening questions are used by marketing researchers to identify people who have certain behavioural, attitudinal, or demographic characteristics (Glassman & Glassman, 1998:27-31). Digital platform usage factors (in the form of closed-ended multiple-choice questions), According to Gupta (2020), closed-ended multiple-choice questions are those in which respondents are given a list of pre-defined answers and then

asked to choose one of them. A 'yes/no' option, a collection of multiple options, or a rating scale can be used as the limited option. Respondents are presented with a set of pre-defined answers and must select one of them. The current study used these closed-ended questions to allow a respondent to select a single or more than one option from the multiple answer options from the emoji usage-related variables, giving the respondent flexibility to choose from a set of answers while also assisting the researcher in obtaining data that was clean and easy to analyse and effective in determining respondents' primary preference among a set of choices (Gupta, 2020). These usage variables included: the digital platform categories used by a respondent; the digital platforms a respondent engaged with; how often the respondent used emojis; the frequency a respondent engaged with messages shared by brands; the hours spent by a respondent online engaging per occasion; and the average amount spent using digital platforms. Okros (2020:33-51) posits that the Gen Z cohort is distinguished by its association with the pervasiveness of technology; they have grown attached to their electronic devices as technology has become their primary channel for creativity and for developing relationships with the world around them. The above study shows that the Gen Z cohort shares the same qualities (in other words they are digital natives) and the current study aimed to determine if there are differences within the cohort in terms of usage variables, so a cross-tabulation with consumer engagement and intention to purchase was performed to determine the emoji usage variable of the younger generation.

The following section gathered information on several demographical factors: age, gender, education level and ethnicity. Generational theory holds that people of similar ages share formative experiences that can result in significant and widespread similarities in personality traits. There will undoubtedly be some meaningful differentiation between age groups (Okros, 2020:33-51; Wahyuni et al., 2023:27-34). According to the cohort analysis theory, as defined above, everyone is similar (Thangavel et al., 2021:2157-2177), but this study seeks to establish if there are differences within the cohort regarding demographic variables. Therefore, a cross-tabulation with consumer engagement and intention to purchase was done. While members of the Gen Z cohort vary in age, they share some distinct characteristics within the defined age groups. In the case of this study, these included technological awareness and the use of emojis.

The 5-point Likert scale is a type of psychometric response scale in which respondents rate their level of agreement with a statement on a scale of one to five: (1) strongly disagree; (2) strongly disagree; (3) neither agree nor disagree; (4) agree; and (5) strongly agree (Watson & Preedy, 2010). Cooper and Schindler (2007) and Rahi (2017:1-5) add that the Likert scale is a heavily used and reliable rating scale that requires participants to state a level of understanding for each object’s statements. This investigation used a five-point measurement scale to ensure consistency and to make the points more distinct. This scale for the current research assumed that the strength of an attitude toward the use of emojis in digital marketing communications was

straightforward and thus had a numerical value that was measured using degrees reflected in the terms agree, strongly agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree (McLeod, 2019).

Table 4.1: Construct measurements, terms, and sources

Constructs	**Measurement indicator**	**Construct term**	**Source**
Customer engagement	I can engage with brands that use emojis anytime. I always respond to advertisements, which include emojis. Emojis effectively influence my level of online engagement with brands. Emojis are engaging when used by brands and products.	Engagement 1 Engagement 2 Engagement 3 Engagement 4	Islam and Rahman (2016:40-58) Sahoo and Pillai (2017:1115-1132)
Perceived ease of use (PEOU)	Emojis in digital platforms are easy to use. The use of emojis in brand digital platforms is easy to interpret. Brands can easily use/include emojis every time they text and/or post. Viewing emojis that are used by brands requires minimal effort.	PEOU 1 PEOU 2 PEOU 3 PEOU 4	Mallat et al. (2008:57-65) Venkatesh and Davis (2000:186-204)
Perceived usefulness (PU)	Emojis improve the meaning of the message from brands and products. Emojis in advertisements are convenient. Emojis in advertisements improve efficiency. Advertisements with emojis provide relevant information.	PU 1 PU 2 PU 3 PU 4	Mallat et al. (2008:57-65) Venkatesh and Davis (2000:186-204)
Trust	Advertisements with emojis are credible. Advertisements with emojis are trustworthy and secure.	Trust 1 Trust 2 Trust 3 Trust 4	Mallat et al. (2008:57-65) Islam and Rahman (2016:40-58)

	I can trust brands that use emojis. Emojis are reliable when used by brands and products.		
Involvement	Advertisements with emojis are interesting to me. My level of interest with brands and products which include emojis is high. I am very involved in the use of emojis to convey meaning by brands.	Involvement 1 Involvement 2 Involvement 3	Zaichkowsky (1985:341-352) Kim and Hahn (2015:169-176)
Intention to purchase	Advertisements emojis increase purchase intent of featured products. Emojis usage by brands and products have a positive impact on purchase decisions. I will use advertisements with emojis to purchase featured products. I will use advertisements with emojis to buy online.	Intention to purchase 1 Intention to purchase 2 Intention to purchase 3 Intention to purchase 4	Duffett (2015a:498-526) Starr (2021)

4.7 Data collection and research methods

Haydam and Mostert (2018) state that one of the main methods for gathering data is through descriptive research, which entails gathering information through descriptive activity. For this study, a structured questionnaire was used. Data was obtained using purposive and snowball sampling techniques that limited participation to Generation Z respondents (born between 1997 and 2012), who voluntarily agreed to answer survey questions, and who had used emojis in digital marketing platforms. The researcher physically distributed self-administered questionnaires to students at CPUT in the FBMS on the District Six campus as part of the first round of data collection. These respondents were asked for the contact details of other potential respondents to be sent the self-administered questionnaire electronically. The COVID-19 crisis severely limited face-to-face activities, which led to a shift in the data collection method for the current study. Hence, a second self-administered questionnaire was created employing Google Forms, which was used to reach the recommended potential respondents and other CPUT students and other Generation Z respondents in Cape Town who met the requirements. The digital platforms were chosen because the target group of this study does everything on these digital platforms (Vițelar, 2019:257-268; Wang et al., 2019:6-19; Giunta, 2020:63-75). The researcher used different digital platforms to disseminate the Google Forms questionnaires.

Additionally, the emojis used in digital marketing communications, as analysed in the questionnaire, are used by the members of the Gen Z cohort as gestures every day (Hsu & Chen, 2020:200-208; Shao et al., 2020:1-9; Gamage, 2021:26-31). The questions were made clear, and no changes were made to the final version of the questionnaire. Following that, all potential participants were sent a link via various digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, SMS, and email (snowball sampling). Everyone was informed about the study's purpose and the estimated time required to complete survey questions. The survey received a minimum of 1 000 replies from the questionnaires, all of which were from the Generation Z cohort. The survey was introduced as a study concerning the use of emojis in digital marketing communications for engagement and intention to purchase. Participants were given information regarding the survey's anonymity and an estimate of how long it would take them to complete it. When the responses were received, a small percentage of respondents returned and submitted incomplete questionnaires. The questionnaires were redistributed, and the online survey was repeated to reach over 1 000 respondents.

4.8 Coding and data analysis

Data coding implies methodically reorganising raw information into a format which is simple to examine by utilising relevant computer programs (Newman, 2014). Data analysis is a set of techniques and strategies used to garner knowledge from the information. Additionally, analysis involves breaking data into patterns, connections, and patterns. Descriptive statistics describe numerical data and display features of the location, spread, and form of information selection (Cooper & Schindler, 2007; Newman, 2014). Descriptive statistics are insights usually associated with frequencies that assist in outlining the data displayed in a recurrence format. The analysis process usually begins with descriptive insights, which depict the information numerically and graphically. The instrument used for this study's data capturing and analysis method is SPSS software. It is a virtual appliance for statistical processing that is used by various types of scholars to examine complex statistical information, compile, and analyse statistical data, and to extract textual data so that they can make better use of it, and it includes many ways to manipulate quantitative data (Newman, 2014; Foley, 2018; Noels, 2018).

4.8.1 Data manipulation

This study's techniques included the use of frequencies to describe the various constructs and usage and demographic variables to determine if these influenced customer engagement and intention to purchase due to the use of emojis in digital marketing communications, as well as the standard deviations and means, which were computed for both the overall constructs and individual construct items. To evaluate the data obtained to determine how it responded to the research objectives, the Bonferroni correction pairwise post hoc tests and Wald chi-square distribution derived from the GLM were used (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000:186-204; Aden et al.,

2014). Even though it is one of the few tests created specifically for categorical data use, the GLM analyses data using a chi-square test distribution, and it may additionally be utilised if a variable's values are ordered (Dobson & Barnett, 2018). The GLM was used to test if emoji usage and demographical variables have an influence on customer engagement and intention to purchase in digital marketing communications among Generation Z.

4.8.2 The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test evaluates how well the data is suited for factor analysis. The test evaluates the model's overall sampling efficiency as well as the sampling efficiency for each variable. The statistic is a representation of how much of the variance among variables common variance may be (Williams et al., 2010:1-13; Shrestha 2021:4-11). The more suitable the data for factor analysis, the lower the ratio. To evaluate the appropriateness of the sampling and the acceptability of the respondent data for factor analysis, the KMO measure was used in the current study.

4.8.3 Bartlett’s Measure of Sphericity

The correlation matrix is tested for the null hypothesis that it is an identity matrix using Bartlett's Measure of Sphericity. If the variables have an identity correlation matrix, they are considered unrelated and not suitable for factor analysis (Shrestha 2021:4-11). In the current study, the factorability of the correlation matrix was evaluated using Bartlett's Measure of Sphericity.

4.8.4 Confirmatory factor analysis

CFA is a multivariate statistical procedure used to determine how well-measured variables represent the number of constructs. Researchers can use CFA to test the hypothesis that there is a link between observed variables and their underlying latent constructs (Suhr, 2006; Alsafadi & Altahat, 2021:519-529). The CFA was used in this study to assess how well the conceptual model fits the data and to determine the factor loadings of the attitude scales and the study's conceptual model to obtain reliable conclusions about the use of emojis in digital marketing communications.

4.8.5 Cronbach's Alpha

Cronbach's α is a measure of reliability associated with the variation accounted for by the accurate score of the underlying construct. In addition, Cronbach's α is a popular reliability metric that quantifies the amount of random measurement error in a sum score, or average produced by a multi-item measurement scale (Hayes & Coutts, 2020:1-24; Raharjanti et al., 2022:1-5). Cronbach’s α and CR measurement values were used in this study to assess the constructs' reliability.

4.8.6 Convergent validity

Convergent validity is the assessment to measure the level of correlation of multiple indicators of the same construct that agree. To establish convergent validity, the factor loading of the indicator, CR and the AVE must be considered (Kim, 2012:219-240; Alarcón et al., 2015:1-39). The AVE and factor loadings were utilised to consider convergent validity.

4.8.7 Discriminatory validity

Discriminatory validity refers to how much the constructs differ empirically. It also assesses the degree to which the overlapping constructs differ (Hubley, 2014:1664–1667). The discriminatory validity of each antecedent/construct was evaluated by comparing the square root of AVE values, which should be greater than correlation values (Fornell & Larcker, 1981:39-50).

4.8.8 Structural equation modelling

Standard error of the mean (SEM) is a collection of statistical techniques used to measure and analyse the relationships between observed and latent variables. It investigates linear causal relationships between variables while controlling for measurement error, making it more potent than regression analyses. Furthermore, SEM is a statistical technique for testing and estimating causal relationships based on statistical data and qualitative causal hypotheses (Urbach & Ahlemann, 2010:5-40). This study used the SEM model to determine the relationships between perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, trust, and involvement on customer engagement and intention to purchase due to emojis used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z in Cape Town.

4.9 Ethical considerations

Participants of the study were not compensated in any way. Respondents were asked if they accepted having their responses saved in order to conduct this experiment ethically. The respondents had the right to freely give informed consent for their participation, which authorised the researcher to use the information gathered from the respondents. They were informed of the research project; were given the option to refuse to answer any particular question(s); and/or they were free to leave the survey at any time if they thought it was taking too long, were confronted with an issue they disagreed with, or for any other reason. Lastly, the respondents had the right to ignore the questionnaire completely and had the option to log out or return it unfinished. The researcher protected respondents' right to privacy and made sure they were not misled: responses and respondents were kept private and the identities of the responders were not disclosed (Saunders et al., 1997:153 & Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). Since the respondents were surveyed willingly, it was assumed that the study would not generate any ethical issues. The FBMS Research Ethics Committee's approval for the experiment was requested and obtained. The researcher acted with integrity and professionalism throughout the research. The full page

including the study's introduction is provided in Appendix A and the ethics clearance certificate is listed as Appendix C.

4.10 Summary

This chapter focused on applying and describing the theories of methodology in this inquiry. The chapter investigated the hypotheses and the conceptual model utilised to examine customer engagement and intention to purchase when digital emojis are used in digital marketing communications. The chapter further examined the knowledge base and the nature of the enquiry, the paradigmatic approach, and the research philosophy employed in this study. The research design, which was the descriptive research design, was also defined as the study aimed to observe and describe the behaviour and attitudes of the chosen population group, with the time horizon and research strategy included as part of the research design. This methodology chapter also described the sample design, which entailed the research population, sample frame, sample unit, sample element, sampling method, sampling method motivation, sample size and the sampling error in this research. This inquiry utilised a non-probability sampling technique (with a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling techniques), and a quantitative data approach was also adopted. The chapter also presented the questionnaire design and data collection and research methods section, where a questionnaire design, the self-administered questionnaire, was utilised to collect the primary data, as well as the research tactics and measurements. Further, the section covered data collection and research methods and lastly, coding and data analysis was covered, including data manipulation and ethical considerations to make sure that the proper ethical standards were upheld. In this chapter, the statistical and data analysis techniques used in the study to describe, assess, and validate the findings were also examined.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

The empirical research findings are a crucial part of this study, as set out in the research objectives since it provides the outcomes of the research. This first section describes the emoji usage and demographic factors of the sample through the illustration of bar graphs and pie charts. A principal component analysis (PCA), Cronbach's α, CR, AVE, and a variable correlation matrix was employed to test the model's validity and reliability. This chapter also outlines the analysis of the SEM that was used to assess the hypotheses. The Bonferroni post hoc adjustment measures and Wald's Chi-Square, via the GLM, were utilised to analyse the influence of the emoji usage and demographic factors on the Generation Z respondents' customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudinal responses.

5.2 Digital platform categories

This question was asked to establish the different digital platform categories used by the Generation Z respondents.

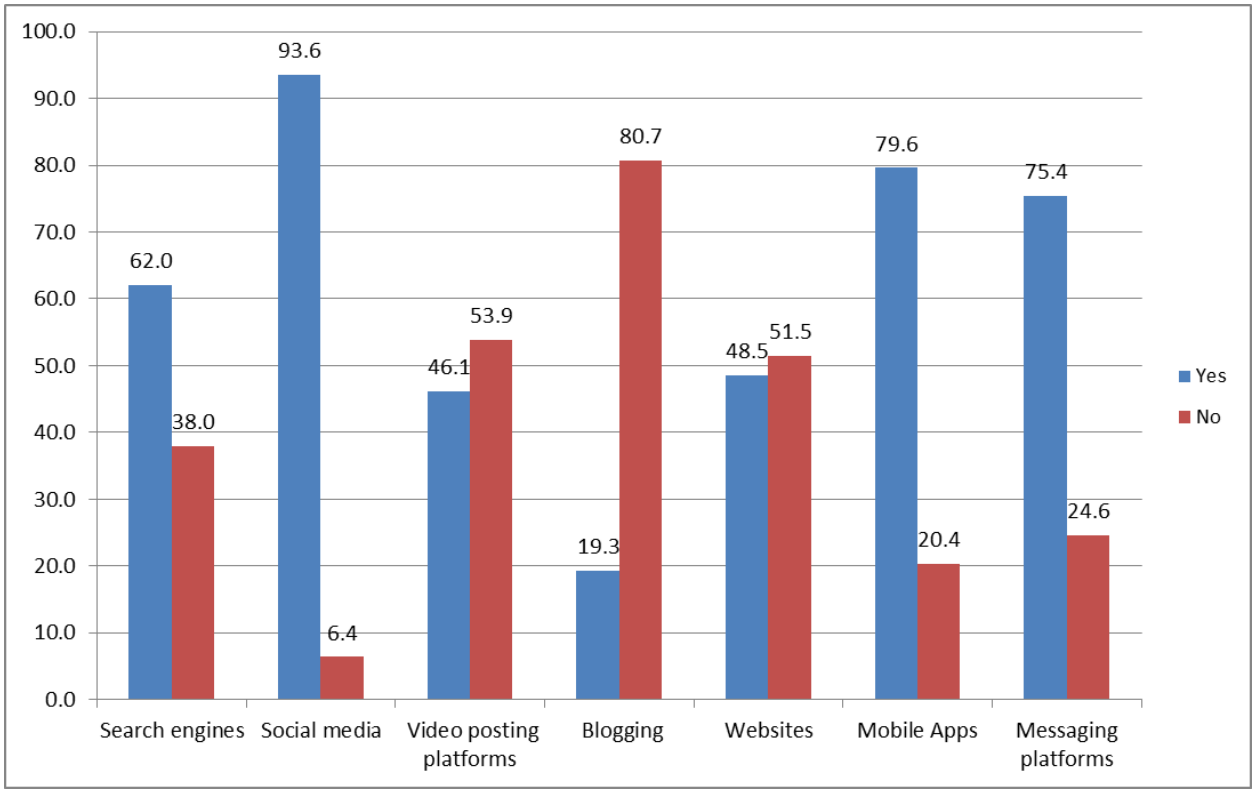

Figure 5.1: Digital platform categories frequency

An overwhelming majority (93.6%) of the respondents noted that they used social media, and a significant majority used mobile apps (79.6%), messaging platforms (75.4%), and search engines

(62%). Less than half the respondents used websites (48.5%), video posting platforms (46.1%), and blogging (19.3%).

5.3 Digital platforms

The research sought to ascertain which digital platforms were used by Generation Z respondents.

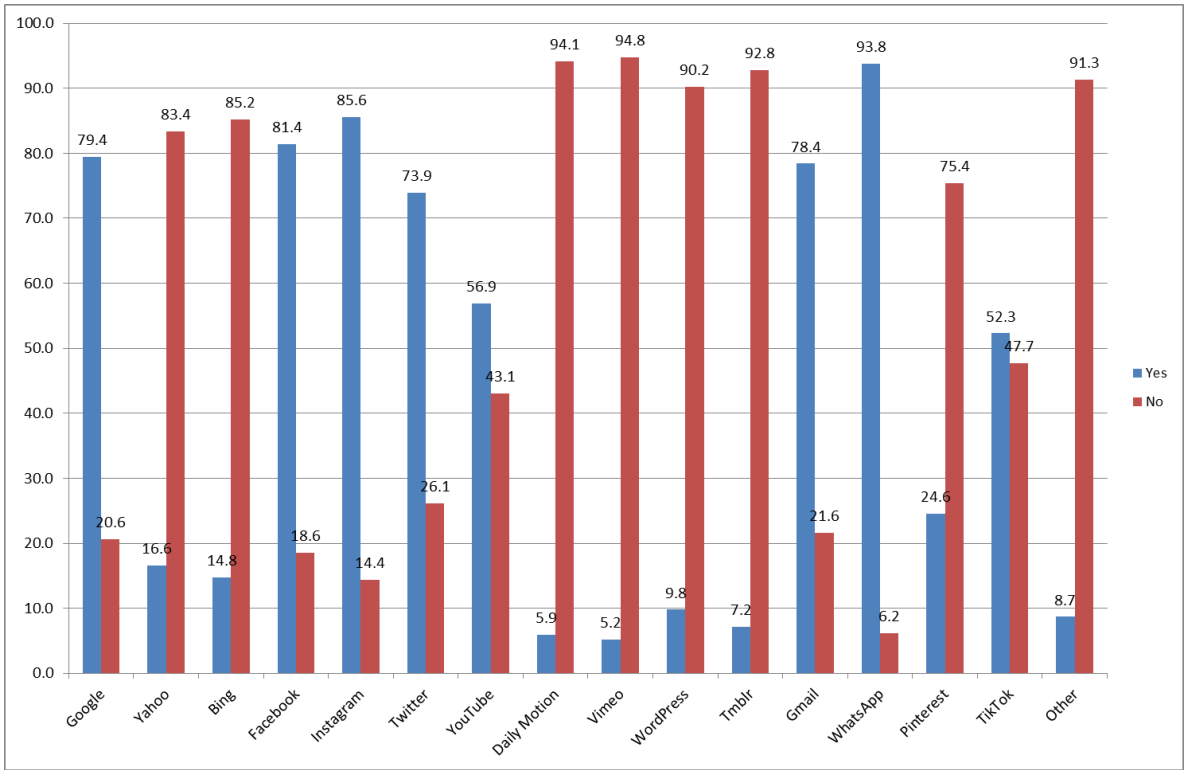

Figure 5.2: Digital platform incidence

WhatsApp (93.8%), Instagram (85.6%), and Facebook (81.4%) were the most popular digital platforms, whereas Vimeo (5.2%), Daily Motion (5.9%), and WordPress (9.8%) were the least popular digital platforms.

5.4 Emoji usage factors

5.4.1 Emoji usage

This enquiry indicates how often respondents used emojis. Emoji usage was used to conduct cross-tabulation regarding the different consumer attitudes to determine if there was a significant difference in terms of emoji digital marketing communications regarding customer engagement and intention to purchase.

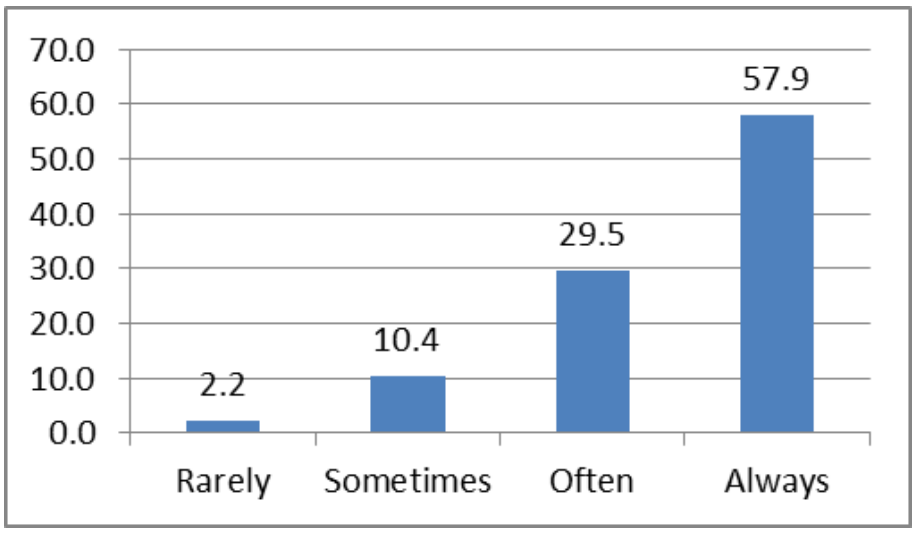

Figure 5.3: Emoji usage rate

A majority always used emojis (57.9%), followed by those who used emojis often (29.5%), sometimes (10.4%), and rarely (2.2%).

5.4.2 Emoji brand message engagement

This inquiry aims to investigate how often respondents engage with brand messages. This was used to conduct cross-tabulation regarding the different consumer attitudes to determine if there was a significant difference in the frequency that respondents' engagement and intention to purchase to brand messages.

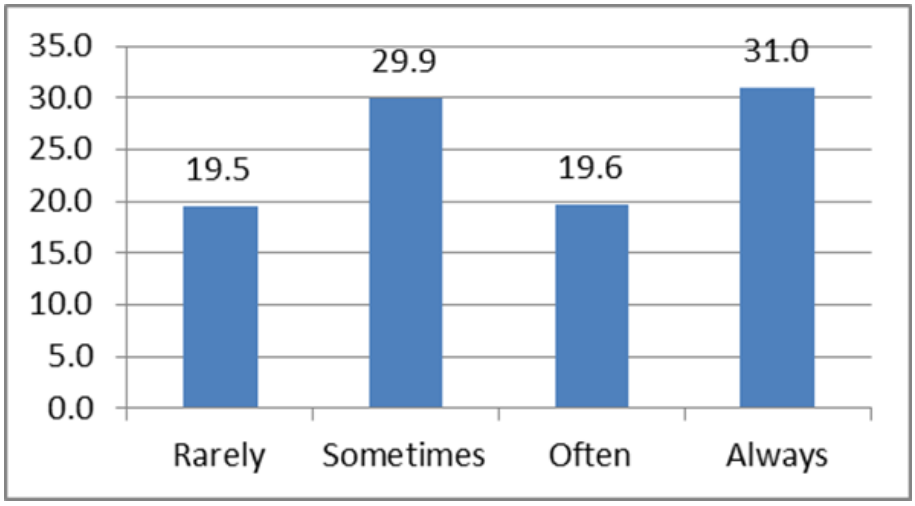

Figure 5.4: Emoji brand message engagement frequency

The findings show that 31% of the respondents engaged always with emoji brand messages, 29.9% engaged sometimes, 19.6% engaged often and 19.5% of the respondents rarely engaged with emoji brand messages.

5.4.3 Online usage hours

This study endeavoured to discover the number of hours spent by respondents engaging online. This was investigated to indicate whether the respondent's usage hours were significantly

different in terms of using emojis in communications for customer engagement and intention to purchase.

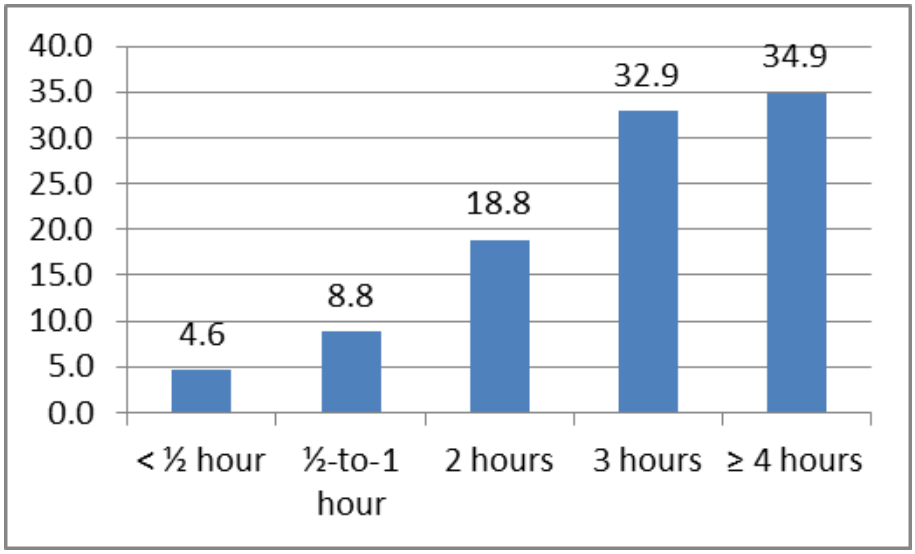

Figure 5.5: Online usage hours rate

The usage hours of ≥ 4 hours (34.9%) were the most popular, followed by 3 hours (32.9%), and 2 hours (18.8%) whereas ½-to-1 (8.8%) and <1/2 hour (4.6%) were the least popular usage hours.

5.4.4 Digital spending

The enquiry ascertained how much respondents spent monthly on digital platforms. The digital platform spending was used to conduct a cross-evaluation regarding customer engagement and intention to purchase.

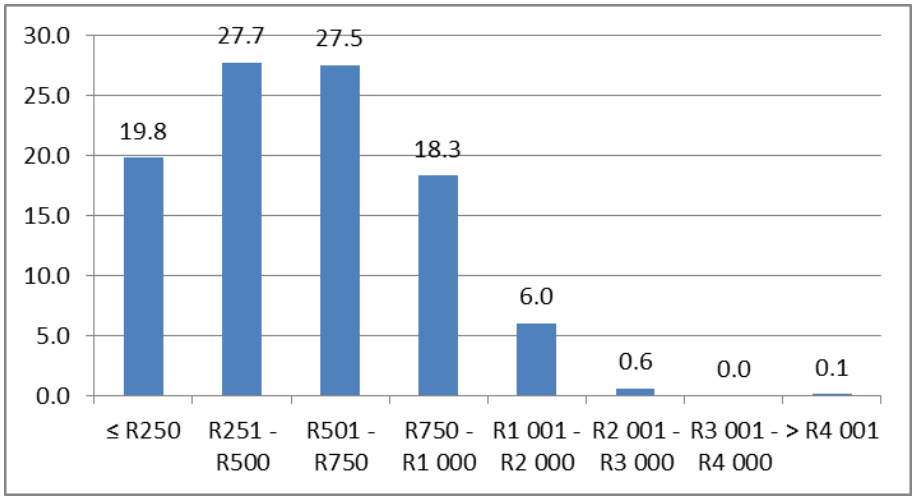

Figure 5.6: Digital spending prevalence

It is worth noting that the majority of respondents, 55.2% (27.7% and 27.5%) spent R251 - R750 per month on digital platforms. This suggests that digital platforms are generally affordable for most people.

5.5 Demographic factors

5.5.1 Gender

It was imperative to indicate the respondents' gender since a cross tabulation was employed to establish whether gender had an influence on the customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudinal responses regarding emoji digital marketing communications.

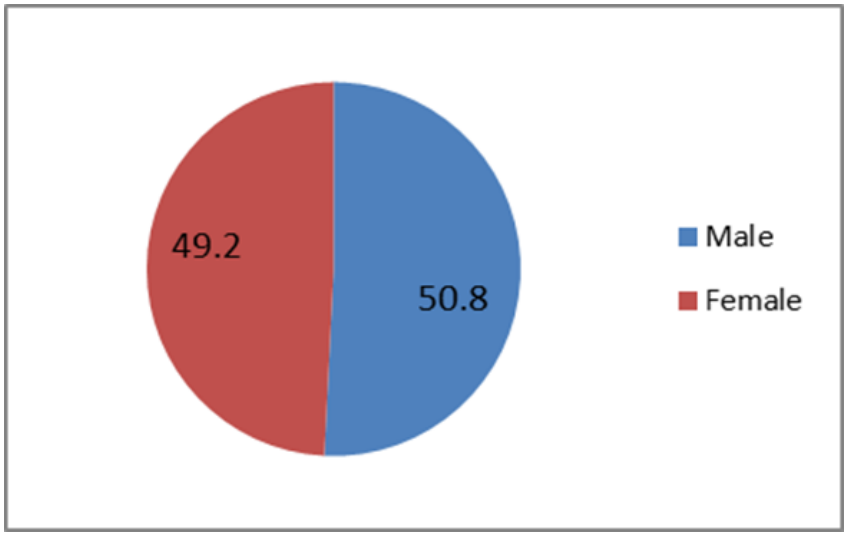

Figure 5.7: Gender prevalence

The respondents' gender was relatively evenly distributed: 50.8% were male and 49.2% were female.

5.5.2 Age

It was necessary to confirm the respondents' age since a cross analysis was implemented to establish if age influenced the customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudinal responses in terms of emoji digital marketing communications.

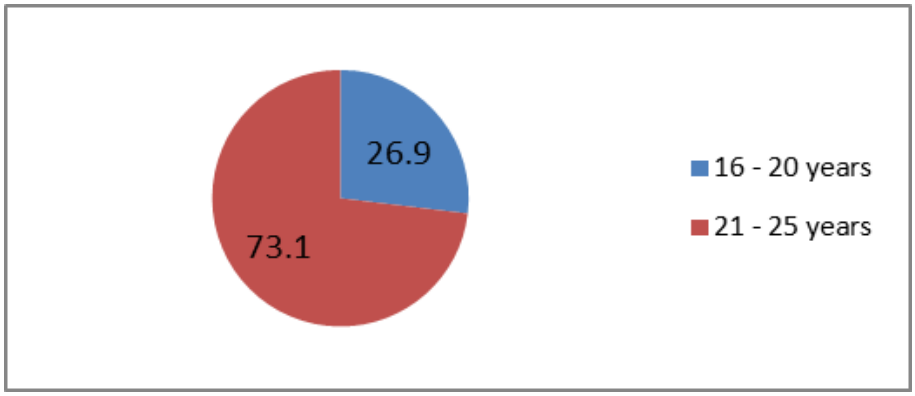

Figure 5.8: Age incidence

A vast majority of the respondents were aged 21 – 25 years (73.1%) and 26.9% were 16 – 20 years.

5.5.3 Highest education level

The respondents' highest education level was asked to determine if this demographic factor influenced customer engagement and intention to purchase.

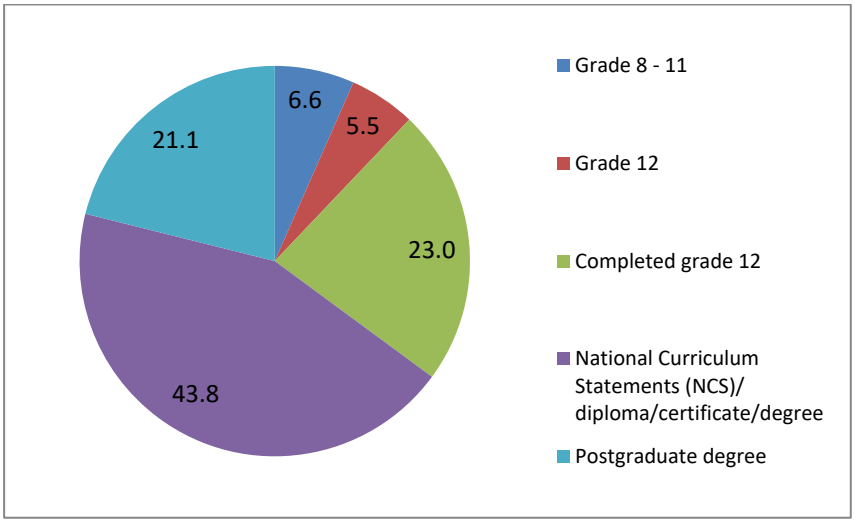

Figure 5.9: Highest education level rate

A large group of respondents had completed a National Curriculum Statements (NCS)/diploma/certificate/degree (43.8%), followed by those who have completed grade 12 (29.2%), postgraduate degree (21.1%), grade 8 - 11 (8.8%), and those who are currently in grade 12 (5.5%).

5.5.4 Population group

The population group of respondents was essential for cross-analysis with customer engagement and intention to purchase.

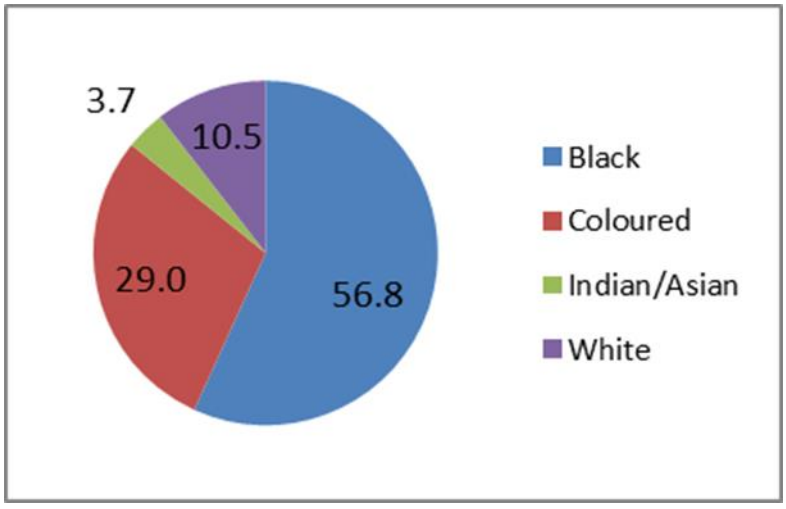

Figure 5.10: Population group incidence

Most respondents were from the Black population group (56.8%), and a number were also from the Coloured population group (29.0%), White population group (10.5%), and Indian/Asian population group (3.7%).

5.6 Consumer attitudes

The standard deviations and mean values of the emoji digital marketing communications are shown in Table 5.1, while the constructs' the weighted averages are graphically portrayed via bar charts.

Table 5.1: Emoji marketing communications construct attitude scales (means, standard deviations)

Constructs	M	SD
Customer engagement	3.95	1.014
Perceived ease of use	4.05	0.914
Perceived usefulness	3.99	0.944
Trust	3.88	1.023
Involvement	3.86	1.037
Intention to purchase	3.81	1.040

The mean values (across the Generation Z attitude responses) were all above 3.80, and the maximum value was 4.05, which indicated a general positive sentiment toward emoji marketing communications.

5.6.1 Customer engagement

Four Likert scale questions were used to consider the customer engagement construct by calculating the weighted average.

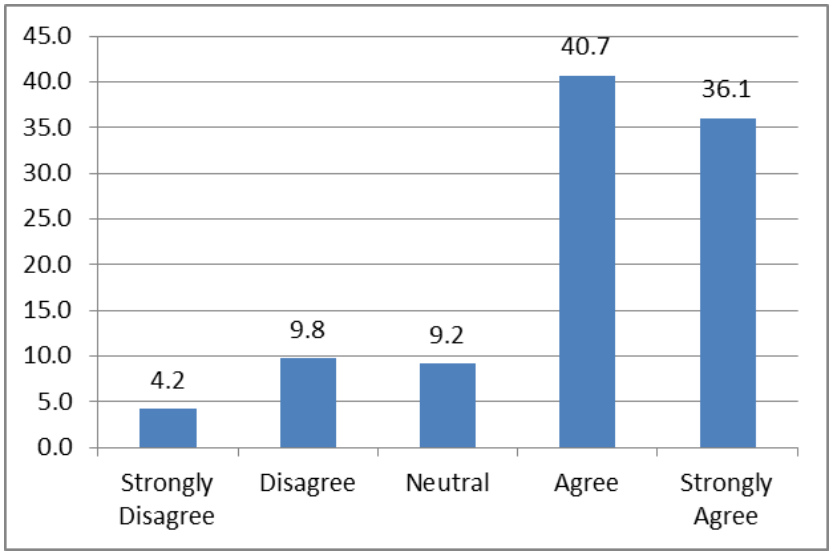

Figure 5.11: Customer engagement frequency

A vast majority of respondents (76.8%) agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) and 14.0% disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) that emoji digital marketing communications resulted in customer engagement.

5.6.2 Perceived ease of use

The perceived ease of use measure included four Likert scale statements that were used to analyse the weighted average of this scale.

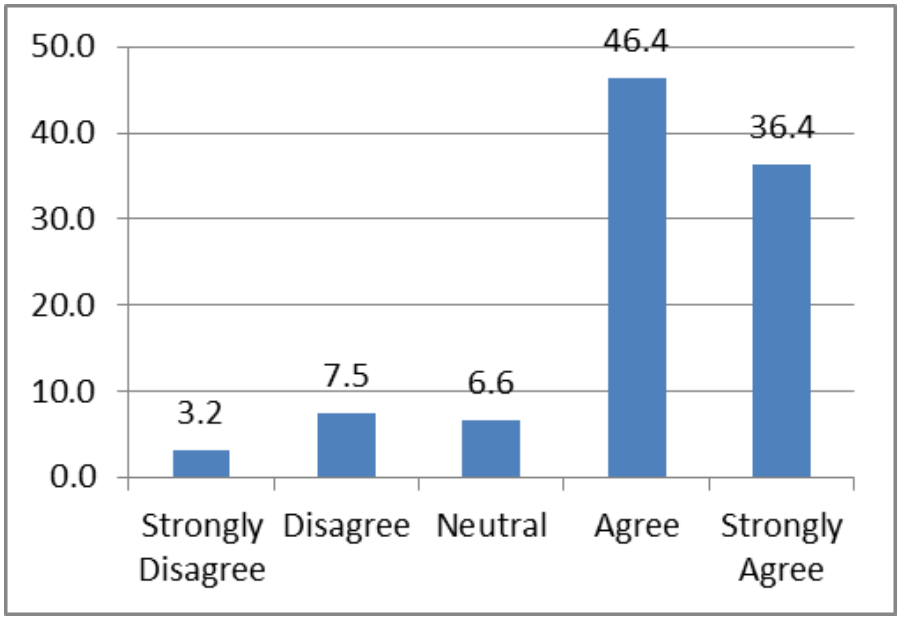

Figure 5.12: Perceived ease of use frequency

An overwhelming majority of respondents (82.8%) agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) and 10.7% disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) that emoji digital marketing communications were perceived as easy to use.

5.6.3 Perceived usefulness

Four Likert scale questions were used to establish the perceived usefulness of emojis in digital platforms by computing the weighted average for the construct.

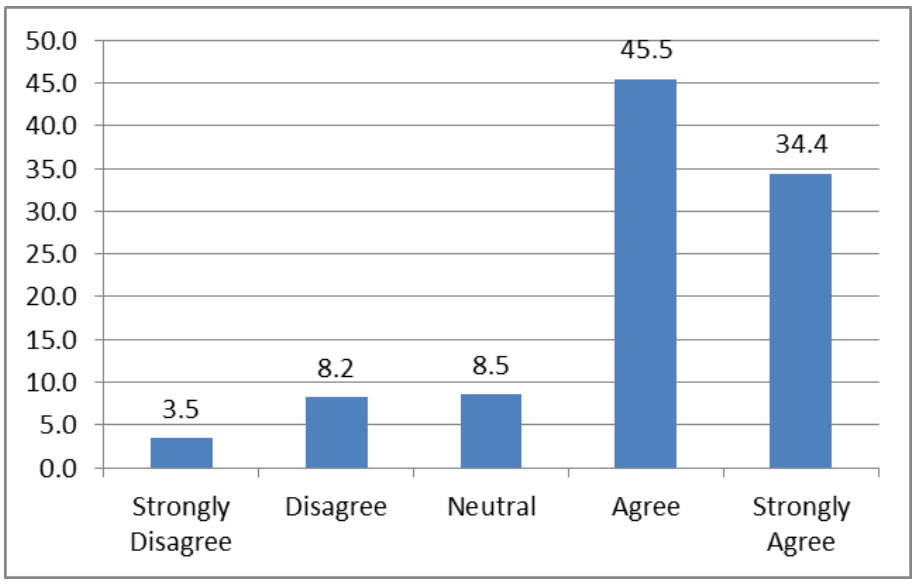

Figure 5.13: Perceived usefulness frequency

An overwhelming majority of respondents (79.9%) agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) that emojis in digital platforms were perceived as useful, compared to 11.7% who disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed).

5.6.4 Trust

The trust scale comprised four Likert scale statements, which were used to determine the weighted average of this construct.

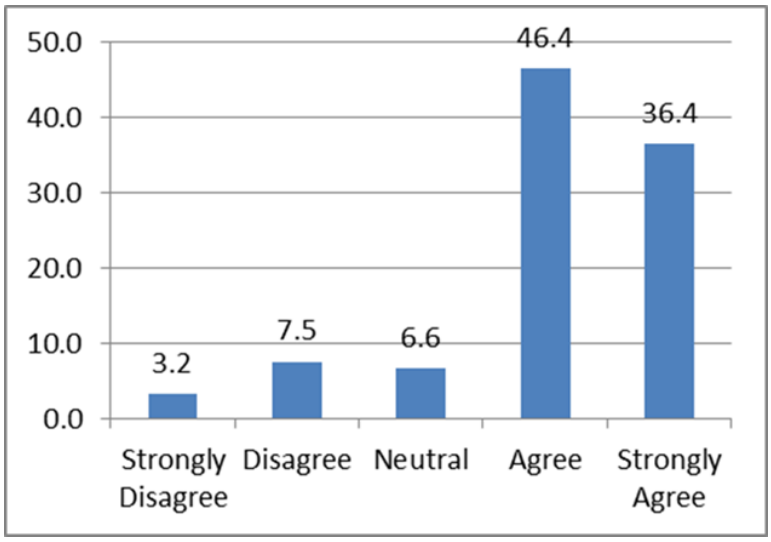

Figure 5.14: Trust frequency

An extensive majority of respondent (82.8%) of respondents agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) that the use of emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in trust, whereas 10.7% disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed).

5.6.5 Involvement

Three Likert scale statements were used to ascertain the involvement scale by calculating the weighted average.

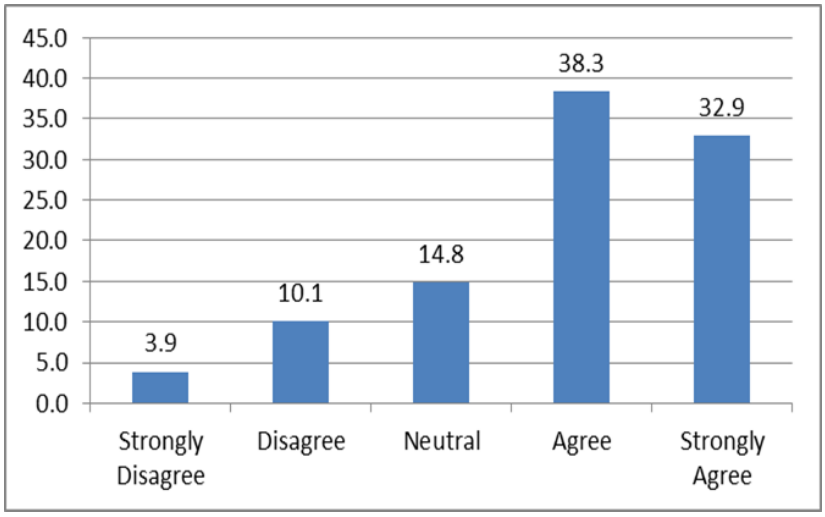

Figure 5.15: Involvement frequency

A vast majority of respondents (71.2%) agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) that their usage of emojis increase their involvement in the brand, to convey meaning by brands, whereas 14% disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed).

5.6.6 Intention to purchase

The intention to purchase measure consisted of four Likert scale statements that were used to calculate the weighted average of this scale.

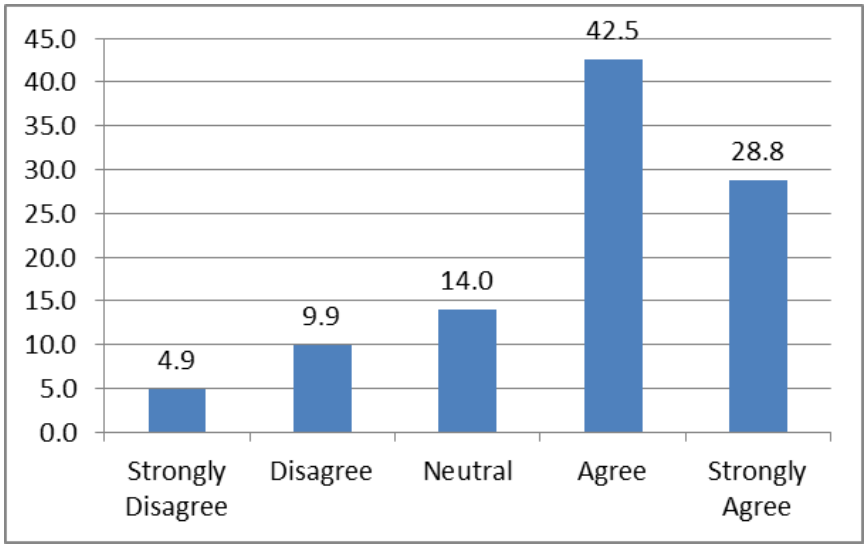

Figure 5.16: Intention to purchase frequency

A majority (71.3%) of the respondents agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) that emojis in digital platforms increased their intention to purchase, compared to 14.8% who disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed).

5.7 Factor analysis

SPSS is useful because it helps to better understand data, allows for the testing of hypotheses that were previously too difficult to consider, and it can save time and reduce the likelihood of making errors in data analyses (DeCoster, 2004; Arkkelin, 2014). SPSS was utilised to conduct a PCA to assess various emoji digital marketing communications construct items. The KMO measure was utilised to assess the adequacy of sampling, which yielded an excellent value of 0.953 (Field, 2009; Zanuddin & Shaid, 2021:61-72). Bartlett's Measure of Sphericity was implemented to gauge the correlation matrix factorability, which yielded a significant result at $p < 0.001$, so the correlations were deemed to be sufficient between the construct items (Field, 2009; Pallant, 2010; Williams et al., 2010:1-13). These two statistical values (KMO measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity) represent the minimum that should be found when performing a factor analysis (Modh Matore et al., 2020:248-250).

5.7.1 Eigenvalues and Scree plot

A PCA was utilised to ascertain the number of factors through the total explained variance and eigenvalues.

Table 5.2: Total explained variance and eigenvalues

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	14.838	57.071	57.071	14.838
2	1.996	7.678	64.749	1.996
3	1.453	5.588	70.337	1.453
4	1.238	4.763	75.100	1.238
5	1.108	4.261	79.361	1.108
6	1.010	3.885	83.246	1.010
7	0.773	2.674	85.920	
8	0.406	2.262	88.182	
9	0.314	1.507	89.689	
10	0.279	1.474	91.163	
11	0.256	0.943	92.106	
12	0.241	0.977	93.083	
13	0.227	0.871	93.954	
14	0.198	0.760	94.714	
15	0.192	0.740	95.455	
16	0.176	0.675	96.130	
17	0.173	0.665	96.795	
18	0.162	0.623	97.418	
19	0.152	0.584	98.002	
20	0.145	0.558	98.560	
21	0.131	0.506	99.066	
22	0.129	0.497	99.563	
23	0.114	0.437	100.000	

The PCA resulted in six factors (components) with eigenvalues of 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 (refer to Table 5.2)

5.7.2 Scree plot

Another method of determining factors is via the use of a scree plot (Zanuddin & Shaid, 2021:61-72). The scree plot was utilised to establish which components should be retained due to the PCA.

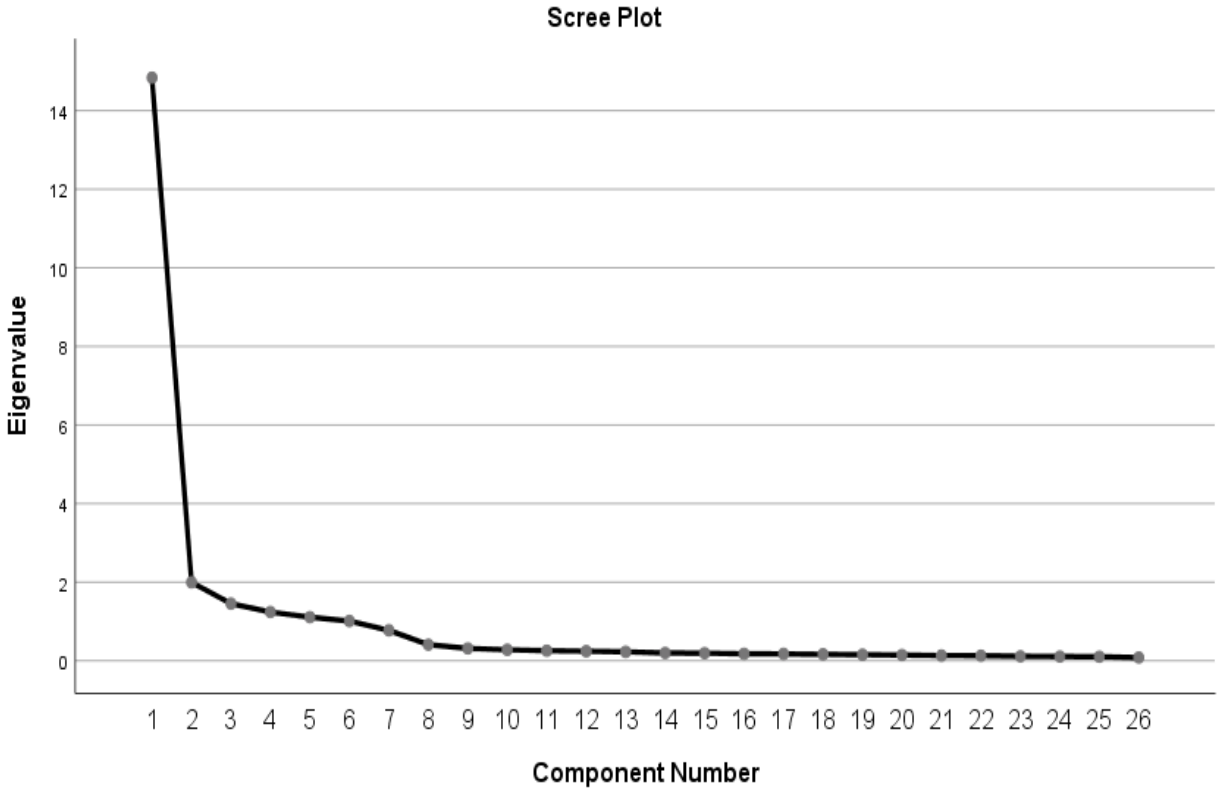

Figure 5.17: Scree plot

The scree plot showed a distinct point of inflection between components six and seven, so the components before this point were retained, which incorporated six components (refer to Figure 5.17).

5.7.3 Pattern matrix (factor loadings)

The pattern matrix specified six different components with more than two factors each and factor loadings of more than 0.5, therefore they were all kept (Pallant, 2010). Refer to Table 5.3.

Table 5.3: Pattern matrix

Likert scale items	Component					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Emojis influence on engagement						
I can engage with brands that use emojis anytime.	-0.001	0.773	0.142	-0.041	0.015	0.112
I always respond to the advertisements, which include emojis.	0.038	0.809	0.027	0.142	-0.092	0.077
Emojis effectively influence my level of online engagement with brands.	0.082	0.796	0.096	-0.002	-0.045	0.098
Emojis are engaging when used by brands and products.	0.090	0.803	0.115	0.004	-0.097	0.068
Emojis ease of use as a promotional tool						
Emojis in digital platforms are easy to use.	-0.055	0.226	0.805	-0.154	0.150	-0.080
The use of emojis in brand digital platforms is easy to interpret.	-0.113	0.199	0.809	-0.031	0.146	-0.086
Brands can easily use/include emojis every time they text and/or post.	-0.049	0.203	0.813	0.044	0.090	-0.174
Viewing emojis that are used by brands requires	-0.064	0.156	0.801	0.099	0.041	-0.146

minimal effort.						
Use of emojis						
Emojis improve the meaning of the message from brands and products.	0.073	-0.073	0.160	-0.138	0.864	0.055
Emojis in advertisements are convenient.	0.052	-0.027	-0.003	0.092	0.849	0.007
Emojis in advertisements improve efficiency.	0.053	-0.025	0.026	0.037	0.817	0.086
Advertisements with emojis provides relevant information.	-0.040	-0.103	0.070	0.192	0.736	0.078
Emojis credibility						
Advertisements with emojis are credible.	-0.008	0.045	0.039	0.815	0.053	0.034
Advertisements with emojis are trustworthy and secure.	-0.027	0.043	-0.039	0.950	0.030	-0.006
I can trust brands that use emojis.	0.021	-0.010	0.014	0.922	0.013	-0.010
Emojis are reliable when used by brands and products.	0.023	0.029	0.009	0.894	0.018	-0.024
Emojis and customer involvement						
Advertisements with emojis are interesting to me.	-0.084	0.118	-0.043	-0.077	0.111	0.921
My level of interest with brands and products is high, which include emojis.	-0.034	0.139	-0.126	0.005	0.091	0.906
I am very involved with the use of emojis to convey meaning by brands.	-0.062	0.180	-0.156	0.051	0.055	0.895
Emojis influence purchase						
Advertisements with emojis increase purchase intent of featured products.	0.874	0.072	-0.076	-0.067	0.128	0.035
Emojis usage by brands and products have a positive impact on my purchase decisions.	0.953	0.025	-0.046	-0.038	0.091	-0.023
I will use advertisements with emojis to purchase a featured product.	0.971	0.050	-0.009	0.024	-0.007	-0.069
I will use advertisements with emojis to buy online.	0.967	0.050	-0.022	0.065	-0.050	-0.080

5.7.4 Reliability and validity

It is crucial to validate and test the variables used to create the customer engagement and intention to purchase a model for emoji digital marketing communications. In this paradigm, reliability and validity represent the trustworthiness, rigor, and quality of the data collected (Golafshani, 2003:597:607; Bakti et al., 2020:3365-3379). The PCA and matrix of component correlation were used to assess the reliability, convergence, and discriminant validity of the measuring model for this study. Table 5.4 and Table 5.5 demonstrate the reliability and validity indicators.

Table 5.4: Emoji digital marketing communications constructs CFA (means, standard deviations, and factor loadings, AVE, CR and Cronbach's α)

Emoji marketing communications constructs	**M**	**SD**	**Fact. load.**	**AVE**	**CR**	**Cronb. α**
Customer engagement						
I can engage with brands that use emojis anytime.	3.98	1.114	0.773	0.781	0.935	0.938
I always respond to the advertisements, which include emojis.	3.86	1.156	0.809			
Emojis effectively influence my level of online engagement with brands.	3.96	1.082	0.796			
Emojis are engaging when used by brands and products.	3.98	1.065	0.803			

Perceived ease of use						
Emojis in digital platforms are easy to use.	4.11	1.003	0.805	0.756	0.925	0.928
The use of emojis in brand digital platforms is easy to interpret.	4.06	1.001	0.809			
Brands can easily use/include emojis every time they text and/or post.	4.02	1.011	0.813			
Viewing emojis that are used by brands requires minimal effort.	4.02	1.014	0.801			
Perceived usefulness						
Emojis improve the meaning of the message from brands and products.	4.00	1.031	0.864	0.769	0.930	0.933
Emojis in advertisements are convenient.	3.99	1.030	0.849			
Emojis in advertisements improve efficiency.	3.98	1.043	0.817			
Advertisements with emojis provide relevant information.	3.99	1.030	0.736			
Trust						
Advertisements with emojis are credible.	3.85	1.094	0.815	0.823	0.949	0.951
Advertisements with emojis are trustworthy and secure.	3.84	1.111	0.950			
I can trust brands that use emojis.	3.92	1.082	0.922			
Emojis are reliable when used by brands and products.	3.92	1.098	0.894			
Involvement						
Advertisements with emojis are interesting to me.	3.88	1.098	0.921	0.837	0.939	0.938
My level of interest with brands and products is high, which include emojis.	3.86	1.089	0.906			
I am very involved with the use of emojis to convey meaning by brands.	3.85	1.113	0.895			
Intention to purchase						
Advertisements with emojis increase purchase intent of featured products.	3.81	1.095	0.874	0.838	0.954	0.957
Emoji usage by brands and products has a positive impact on my purchase decisions.	3.81	1.072	0.953			
I will use advertisements with emojis to purchase a featured product.	3.80	1.111	0.971			
I will use advertisements with emojis to buy online.	3.80	1.145	0.967			

The Cronbach's α and CR tests are used to confirm the constructs' reliability. Sullivan (2011:119–120) states that Cronbach's α calculates the correlation between all variables in all combinations; a high reliability estimate should be as close to 1 as possible. The acceptable values of Cronbach's α and CR start at 0.70 (Gliem & Gliem, 2003:82-88; Gopinath & Litt, 2020:13999-14011; Sarmah et al., 2021:1755-4195). This research study's Cronbach's α values ranged from 0.928 to 0.957, indicating a strong internal consistency (refer to Table 5.4). The CR values extended from 0.925 to 0.954 which reflected a reasonable coefficient of reliability. These results are considered to represent excellent reliability levels (Hair et al., 2011:139-152; Hair et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2019:407-429)

In research, validity refers to how well a study answers the study question or the strength of the study conclusions. The accuracy of measurement is referred to as validity for outcome measures such as surveys or tests (Sullivan, 2011:119–120). There are a few tools for determining the convergent validity of the model, namely AVE and factor loadings (Gopinath & Litt, 2020:13999-

14011). The AVE rates were between 0.756 to 0.838 and the factor loading rates ranged from 0.736 to 0.967, which confirmed the legitimacy of convergent validity, as all the values exceeded 0.5 (refer to Table 5.4) (Farrell et al., 2009:1-9; Hair et al., 2017:2-34).

Table 5.5: Component correlation matrix

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**

Table 5.5 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 (Farrell et al., 2009:1-9; Farrell, 2010:324-327).

5.8 SEM analysis

The goodness-of-fit measures revealed a satisfactory SEM model fit as also indicated by Khan et al. (2019:407-429), Gopinath and Litt (2020:13999-14011), and Sarmah et al.'s (2021:1755-4195) acceptable threshold measures: χ^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. 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.

Table 5.6: Multi-collinearity statistics

	Tolerance	**VIF**
Customer engagement	0.331	3.018
Perceived ease of use	0.293	3.411
Perceived usefulness	0.295	3.394
Trust	0.244	4.100
Involvement	0.384	2.604

The SEM emoji digital marketing communications constructs were assessed through multi-collinearity measures to establish if the constructs were not exceedingly correlated to one another, since this could negatively impact the reliability of regression coefficients (Ramaya & Lee, 2012:196-206; Sarmah et al., 2021:1755-4195). The variation inflation factors (VIF) method identifies correlated predictor variables that, when considered together, may not show a significant effect, but show their true significance when considered alone (Guisan et al., 2002:89-

100; Vatcheva et al., 2016:2-29). The emoji digital marketing communications constructs tolerance ranged from 0.244 to 0.384 (greater than 0.1) and the VIF ranged from 2.604 to 4.100 (less than 10), which shows that the emoji digital marketing communications attitude constructs were not exceedingly correlated to one another (refer to Table 5.6).

SEM was utilised to consider the hypothesised 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 62.6% of the customer engagement variance; trust and customer engagement explained 45.1% of the perceived intention to purchase variance. The significance, standardised path beta coefficients (β), and total explained variance are exhibited in Figure 5.18.

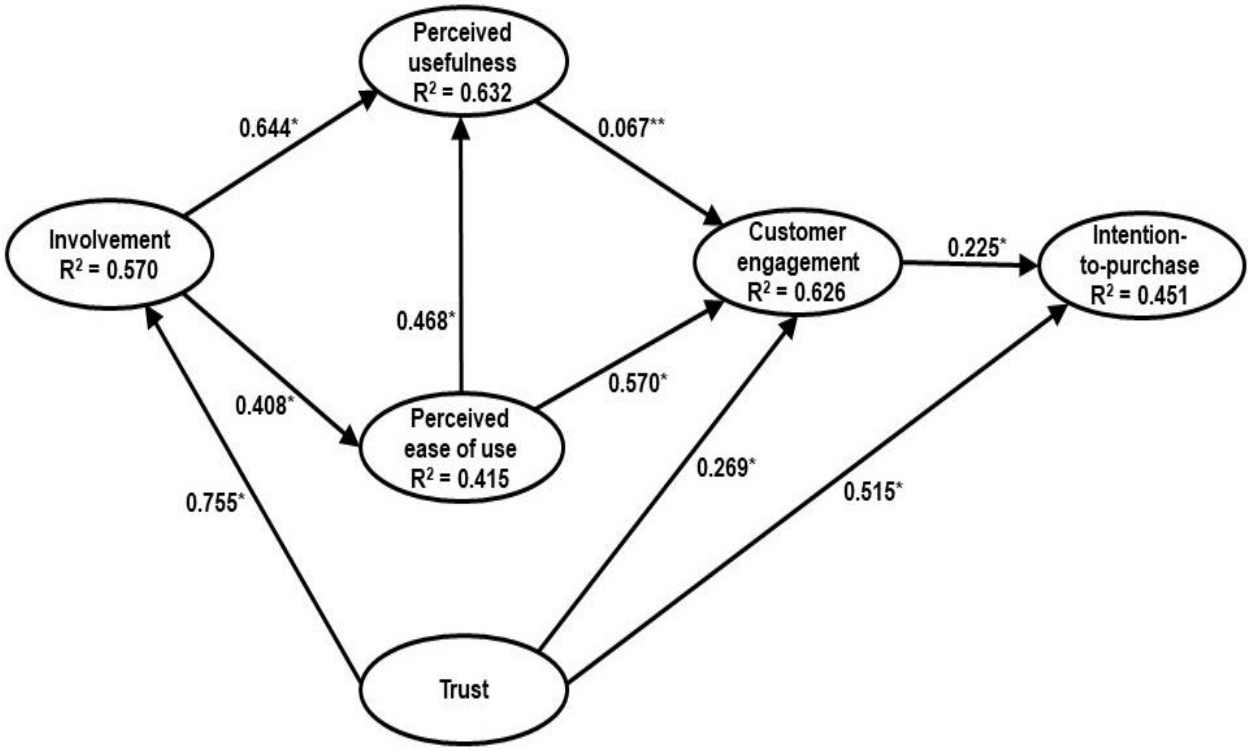

Figure 5.18: SEM analysis
*$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.05$

5.9 Hypothesis testing

H1: Involvement → perceived usefulness

The standardised path β coefficients exhibited a positive relationship that was significant in terms of involvement → perceived usefulness (β = 0.408, $p < 0.001$), so H1 was confirmed (refer to Figure 5.18 and Table 5.7).

H2: Involvement → perceived ease of use

The standardised path β coefficients exhibited a positive relationship that was significant in terms of involvement → perceived ease of use (β = 0.644, $p < 0.001$), so H2 was confirmed (refer to Figure 5.18 and Table 5.7).

H3: Perceived ease of use → perceived usefulness

The standardised path β coefficients exhibited a positive relationship that was significant in terms of perceived ease of use → perceived usefulness (β = 0.468, $p < 0.001$), so H3 was confirmed (refer to Figure 5.18 and Table 5.7).

H4: Perceived usefulness → customer engagement

The standardised path β coefficients exhibited a positive relationship that was significant in terms of perceived usefulness → customer engagement (β = 0.067, $p < 0.05$), so H4 was confirmed (refer to Figure 5.18 and Table 5.7).

H5: Perceived ease of use → customer engagement

The standardised path β coefficients exhibited a positive relationship that was significant in terms of perceived ease of use → customer engagement (β = 0.570, $p < 0.001$), so H5 was confirmed (refer to Figure 5.18 and Table 5.7).

H6: Trust → involvement

The standardised path β coefficients exhibited a positive relationship that was significant in terms of trust → involvement (β = 0.755, $p < 0.001$), so H6 was confirmed (refer to Figure 5.18 and Table 5.7).

H7: Trust → customer engagement

The standardised path β coefficients exhibited a positive relationship that was significant in terms of trust → customer engagement (β = 0.269, $p < 0.001$), so H7 was confirmed (refer to Figure 5.18 and Table 5.7).

H8: Trust → intention to purchase

The standardised path β coefficients exhibited a positive relationship that was significant in terms of trust → intention to purchase (β = 0.515, $p < 0.001$), so H8 was confirmed (refer to Figure 5.18 and Table 5.7).

H9: Customer engagement → intention to purchase

The standardised path β coefficients exhibited a positive relationship that was significant in terms of customer engagement → intention to purchase (β = 0.225, $p < 0.001$), so H9 was confirmed (refer to Figure 5.18 and Table 5.7).

Table 5.7: Hypotheses

Hypotheses	Significance	Support
H1	$p < 0.001$	Yes
H2	$p < 0.001$	Yes
H3	$p < 0.001$	Yes
H4	$p < 0.05$	Yes
H5	$p < 0.001$	Yes
H6	$p < 0.001$	Yes
H7	$p < 0.001$	Yes
H8	$p < 0.001$	Yes
H9	$p < 0.001$	Yes

5.10 Generalised linear models

The Bonferroni correction pairwise post hoc tests and Wald's Chi-Square were used to establish if there were significant differences between the Generation Z respondents' emoji usage and demographic factors, and customer engagement and intention to purchase constructs owing to emoji digital marketing communications (because of emoji digital marketing communications) via a GLM (refer to Table 5.8). The Wald chi-square test showed a significant difference at $p < 0.001$ for the customer engagement (M = 3.95, SD = 1.014) and intention to purchase (M = 3.78, SD = 0.763) constructs.

Table 5.8: Emoji usage and demographic factors influence on customer and intention to purchase

	Customer engagement	Intention to purchase
Emoji usage	0.009**	0.003**
Emoji brand message engagement	0.000*	0.028**
Online usage hours	0.000*	0.015**
Digital spending	0.009**	0.115
Gender	0.422	0.089
Age	0.401	0.275
Education level	0.167	0.327
Population group	0.028**	0.050**

* Wald Chi-Square test showed a significant difference at $p < 0.001$
** Wald Chi-Square test showed a significant difference at $p < 0.05$

Emoji usage - customer engagement ($p < 0.05$): Respondents who sometimes (M = 3.25, SE = 0.184), often (M = 3.35, SE = 0.169), and always (M = 3.15, SE = 0.164) used emojis exhibited

greater positive customer engagement attitudes in comparison to those who rarely (M = 2.80, SE = 0.264) used emojis.

Emoji usage - intention to purchase ($p < 0.05$): Respondents who often (M = 3.33, SE = 0.176) and always (M = 3.20, SE = 0.171) used emojis displayed higher positive intention to purchase attitudes than those who rarely (M = 2.56, SE = 0.275) used emojis.

Emoji brand message engagement - customer engagement ($p < 0.001$): Generation Z respondents who often (M = 3.12, SE = 0.182) and always (M = 3.38, SE = 0.176) engaged in brand messages that included emojis showed higher positive customer engagement attitudes than those who had rarely (M = 2.98, SE = 0.175) done so.

Emoji brand message engagement - intention to purchase ($p < 0.05$) Generation Z respondents who always (M = 3.15, SE = 0.183) engaged in brand messages that included emojis exhibited more favourable intention to purchase attitudes compared to those who had rarely (M = 2.50, SE = 0.182) done so.

Online usage hours - customer engagement ($p < 0.001$): Respondents who spent less than half an hour online (M = 2.69, SE = 0.218) showed less positive customer engagement attitudes in terms of emoji digital marketing communications compared to those who spent two hours (M = 3.23, SE = 0.176), three hours (M = 3.46, SE = 0.177), and four or more hours online (M = 3.30, SE = 0.177).

Online usage hours - intention to purchase ($p < 0.05$): Respondents who spent half to one hour online (M = 2.82, SE = 0.203) showed less favourable intention to purchase attitudes regarding emoji digital marketing communications than those who spent four hours or more online (M = 3.24, SE = 0.185).

Digital spending - customer engagement ($p < 0.001$): Generation Z respondents whose average online monthly digital spending was R750 - R1 000 (M = 3.76, SE = 0.106) showed more positive customer engagement attitudes due to emoji digital marketing communications compared to those respondents whose average online monthly digital spend was R251 - R500 (M = 3.57, SE = 0.092).

Population group - customer engagement ($p < 0.05$): Respondents who were of Coloured (M = 3.29, SE = 0.172) ethnicity showed the more positive customer engagement attitudes due to emoji digital marketing communications compared to the White (M = 2.96, SE = 0.186) population group.

Population group - intention to purchase ($p < 0.05$): Respondents from the Coloured (M = 3.16, SE = 0.180) population group displayed the more favourable intention to purchase attitudes

owing to emoji digital marketing communications in comparison to those of White (M = 2.86, SE = 0.194) ethnicity.

5.11 Summary

This chapter focused on summarising the findings of this inquiry. The validity and reliability of the research measurement tool were included as well as the description of each of the study's usage characteristics and demographic factors. For exploratory purposes, the PCA analysis was performed to ascertain the data's factorability, using the statistical measures including Cronbach's α, CR, AVE, and factor loadings. The descriptive statistics like the mean, standard deviation and standard error reporting were also derived from the analysis. To consider the hypothesised emoji digital marketing communication attitudinal relationships, the SEM was employed. Moreover, involvement, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use and trust were proven to have a positive impact on customer engagement and intention to purchase. To establish if there were significant differences between the members of Gen Z respondents' emoji usage and demographic factors, and customer engagement and intention to purchase constructs owing to emoji digital marketing communications, a GLM was conducted using a Wald's chi-square test. The Bonferroni correction pairwise post hoc measures were utilised to indicate where the significant differences in independent variables were discernible. Due to the use of emojis in marketing communications, there were significant differences indicated between emoji usage, emoji brand message engagement, online usage hours and digital spending. The demographic factors also reflected significant differences – these factors include gender, age, education level and the population group.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

Emojis are a relatively new form of communication that has exploded in popularity over the last few years. They are often mentioned in the mainstream media, although there is little scientific research on them when it comes to digital media. Kostial (2021) notes that emojis have grown commonplace in digital communication, and their use among the younger generation may even appear mandatory. Emojis encourage people to communicate empathically with one another, and as a result, they may play a big role in the business sector and have a positive influence on the formation of relationships with the target audience. Emojis are a multifaceted language that may express more meaning than words alone, as well as sentiments that might otherwise go unheard. Due to the inability to identify nonverbal cues, digital social communication can be regarded as a lean and incomplete form of communication, even though it appears to give rapid satisfaction. Finding the appropriate item and the proper technique to communicate and advertise to the younger market has produced great economic value through e-commerce.

This chapter will yield a better knowledge of Generation Z emoji users as well as consumer attitudes. Various conceptual notions such as consumer engagement, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, trust, involvement, and intention to purchase were used in this investigation and analysed via a SEM. In addition, a detailed discussion is presented, which includes statistical results, literature associations, and the researcher's own insight. The TAM model's outcomes will be reviewed together with relevant literature based on the results of each antecedent. The influence of usage and demographic components on consumer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes results will be discussed in conjunction with relevant literature and the researcher's viewpoints.

6.2 Consumer attitudes

The initial goal of the study was to see whether the hypothetical test model's antecedents might predict engagement and intent-to-purchase when emojis were employed in digital marketing communications. Numerous studies (Franz & Robey, 1986:329-356; Subramanian, 1994:863-874; Ramayah & Ignatius, 2005:36-51; Amoako-Gyampah, 2007:1232-1248; Huang et al., 2008:466-473; Jahangir & Bagum 2008:32-40; Sanchez-Franco, 2009:247-258; Chang & Hamid, 2010:39-47; Lee et al., 2012:819-827; Kanchanatanee et al., 2014:1-13; Hong, 2015:322-336; Li et al., 2015:1041-1066; Ashraf et al., 2016:69-86; Bonn et al., 2016:841-869; Hussein & Hassan, 2016:1006-1023; Islam & Rahman, 2016:40-58; Yang et al., 2017:459-469; Ma et al., 2017:1-20; Ge & Gretzel, 2018:1272-1295; Lee et al., 2018:1-9; Moslehpour et al., 2018:234; Cho & Son, 2019:1-17; Dmitrieva, 2019; Schutte, 2019:1-53; Al-Dmour et al., 2019:35-60; Arghashi & Yuksel,

2020:1-20; Costello & Biondi, 2020:1-18; Islam et al., 2020:1279-1303; Kang et al., 2020:76-92; Keni, 2020:481-496; Li et al., 2020:417-426; Mohd Roslan et al., 2020:195-207; Ray, 2020; Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020:543-556; Zhao & Wang, 2020:1-21; Bravo et al., 2021:141-154; Deng et al., 2021:1-15; Harrigan et al., 2021:1297-1312; Jeon et al., 2021:1-14; Liebeskind et al., 2021:272-279; Mondol et al., 2021:368-586; Prayogo & Sugianto; 2021:1-96; McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Shulga et al., 2021:1-15; Huang et al., 2022:665-682) investigating the hypothesised constructs and the findings of these inquiries were associated with the results of the current investigation.

6.2.1 Involvement → perceived usefulness

Emoji use resulted in digital marketing messages indicating that there was a positive relationship that was significant in terms of involvement and perceived usefulness. Amoako-Gyampah (2007:1232-1248) suggests that the arguments for change and intrinsic involvement are both substantially associated with perceived usefulness. The current study focuses on the usage of nonverbal cues which result in the constructive relationship between involvement and perceived usefulness.

Amoako-Gyampah (2007:1232-1248) investigated the impact of perceived usefulness, user involvement, change argument, past usage, and ease of use on behavioural intention to use an enterprise resource planning system. The findings show that user' perceptions of perceived usefulness and level of intrinsic involvement all influence their desire to utilise the technology, which agrees with the results of the current study. Chang and Hamid (2010:39-47) investigate the influence of involvement on usefulness in anticipating behavioural intent using the TAM. As per the results, involvement has a significant impact on perceived usefulness. In an emoticons study, Jung et al. (2021:391-411) show how a user's sense of belonging influences graphic-based emoticon usage incentives and purchase intentions. Perceived acceptance/inclusion was found to have a favourable influence on the perceived usefulness of others while using graphic-based emoticons. This relates to the current study as this considers the nonverbal cues for intention to purchase.

Considering the relationship between perceived usefulness and involvement, Franz and Robey (1986:329-356) looked at the organisational elements that influence user involvement in information system development and perceived system usefulness. Results show that organisational characteristics either influenced perceived usefulness directly or attenuated the relationship between involvement and usefulness. In addition, Bonn et al. (2016:841-869) investigated the impacts of perceived usefulness and involvement on online wine purchases. The findings show that there is a connection between the perceived usefulness of online wine sites and characteristics impacted by social groups. In an emoji study, Kato et al. (2018:9-23) examine the characteristics of emoticons and emojis in terms of perceived usefulness. The effects of

gender and text-messaging reliance on symbol usefulness evaluations were also validated in the investigation. The research also highlights the notion that involvement has a moderating effect on the relationship between social influence and perceived usefulness. When it comes to technology acceptance, Raunio (2021:1-87) investigates how human features in chatbots impact attitudes about utilising chatbots, with a focus on visual (human/robot/logo) and conversational style. The findings of the online experiment indicate that human appearance or conversational style has no influence on perceived usefulness in chatbots or attitude toward using chatbots in the future. The study considered perceived usefulness as an attitude when technology is utilised to better communication, whereas this study also considers the usefulness attitude.

The studies above focused on digital space and showed the relationship between involvement and perceived usefulness in other online settings, which is in alignment with the current study. Perceived usefulness has been identified as having a substantial impact on user technology acceptance and use (Sun & Zhang, 2006:53-78). The use of emojis in digital marketing communications has been found to lead to a positive relationship between involvement and perceived usefulness. The above studies have some similarities with the current study, in that the target group included young adults and students who were customers (Chang & Hamid, 2010:39-47; Kato et al., 2018:9-23; Jung et al., 2021:391-411; Raunio, 2021:1-87) and the attitudes also considered emojis and emoticons (Kato et al., 2018:9-23; Jung et al., 2021:391-411; Raunio, 2021:1-87). However, many of the above-mentioned studies investigated other digital platforms and did not specifically consider emojis (Franz & Robey, 1986:329-356; Amoako-Gyampah, 2007:1232-1248; Chang & Hamid, 2010:39-47; Bonn et al., 2016:841-869), but also showed positive involvement and perceived usefulness associations.

6.2.2 Involvement → perceived ease of use

Emoji use in digital marketing communications resulted in a positive perception of the ease-of-use relationship, which was a significant difference between the respondents. Perceived ease of use is strongly connected to both the argument for change and intrinsic involvement (Amoako-Gyampah, 2007:1232-1248).

Bonn et al. (2016:841-869) conducted a study to investigate the impacts of perceived ease of use and level of involvement on online wine purchasing. The research highlights the notion that involvement has a moderating effect on the relationship between social influence and perceived usefulness. Further, Amoako-Gyampah (2007:1232-1248) show that users' perceptions of perceived ease of use of the technology and level of intrinsic involvement all influence their desire to utilise the technology, which agrees with the results of the current study. In a study of emoji by Raunio (2021:1-87), an online experiment indicated that human appearance or conversational styles did not influence perceived ease of use in chatbots, or attitude toward using chatbots in the future. The previous study was related to the current study since it investigated attitudes toward

the use of emojis, including the perceived ease of use. In addition, this study investigated the usage of digital platforms.

Liebeskind et al. (2021:272-279) examine generic live streaming conversations on YouTube. Although they did not disclose exactly what was stated in the video that prompted the chat participants to interact, researchers were able to demonstrate that sarcasm elicits involvement using a topic model. The inferential statistic revealed a strong positive relationship between the use of instant messaging for academic reasons and perceived ease of use. Cho and Son (2019:1-17) demonstrate that social connectedness affects social media users' views of perceived ease of use, which in turn influences their attitudes and intentions about using social commerce in garment buying. One of the positive determinants of favourable attitudes toward the use of something is perceived ease of use. A new product, like new technology, must have perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness to the target consumer (Ma et al., 2017:1-20). These findings agree with Chang and Hamid (2010:39-47) who investigated the influence of involvement using the TAM. The impact of involvement on perceived ease of use was explored in anticipating behavioural intent. As per the results, low involvement is significantly linked to perceived ease of use. While the preceding research focused on technological adoption, their findings are similarly comparable to those of this current study, since there is an obvious relationship between involvement and perceived ease of use.

These investigations were carried out in developing nations and considered various digital platforms in e-commerce. Though they analysed divergent generational cohorts, their research approaches are consistent with the current study (Chang & Hamid, 2010:39-47; Ma et al., 2017:1-20; Raunio, 2021:1-87). The following studies considered emojis among other digital cues on digital platforms (Liebeskind et al., 2021:272-279; Raunio, 2021:1-87). However, some of these studies did not consider emojis or emoticons (Chang and Hamid, 2010:39-47; Bonn et al., 2016:841-869; Ma et al., 2017:1-20; Liebeskind et al., 2021:272-279) and none considered a developing country, but also revealed favourable involvement and perceived ease of use relationships.

6.2.3 Perceived ease of use → perceived usefulness

There was a notable difference between the participants of the current study, in that emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in a positive relationship in terms of perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. Davis (1989:319-340) and Widiar et al. (2023:1829-1844) found that the perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness work together to determine attitude. Although most studies reviewed have indicated that perceived usefulness is closely related to usage, some studies have found that perceived usefulness does not affect usage (Subramanian, 1994:863-874). Fan et al. (2020:444-445) investigate the critical factors that influence the perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of emoticons, emoji, and stickers in instant

messaging. The findings indicate that emoticons, emoji, and stickers can assist users in establishing an emotional tone, reducing semantic ambiguity, and improving context appropriateness. Also, in addition to an emoji related study, Raunio (2021:1-87) found that human appearance or conversational style had no influence on perceived ease of use or perceived usefulness with regard to using chatbots in the future. Furthermore, emojis are valued for their ability to create a good atmosphere, but the chatbots do not differ considerably in terms of perceived ease of use and usefulness, as shown by Raunio's online experiment.

The above inquiries are consistent with the current investigation as they consider emojis and emoticons in communication on digital platforms. Perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use were evaluated predictors of instant messaging in the study by Mohd Roslan et al. (2020:195-207). The results confirmed the significant positive relationship between perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, as well as the use of instant messaging for academic purposes. Cho and Son (2019:1-17) show that social connectedness affects social media users' views of perceived ease of use and usefulness, which in turn influences their attitudes and intentions about using social commerce in garment buying. Moslehpour et al. (2018:234) combine personality traits and TAM attributes to investigate the effects of personality traits and technology perception (perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use) on e-purchase intention. Results show that perceived usefulness, and perceived ease of use to experience are all significantly influenced by consciousness. Lee et al. (2012:819-827) further examine the literature on social media marketing and emphasises the emotional aspect of social media applications. The emotions displayed by users on a Facebook event page have a significant impact on the perceived usefulness and ease of use of such social media marketing. The above research considered the relationship between perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness on e-commerce, showing consistency with the current study.

Kanchanatanee et al. (2014:1-13) determine the effect of attitude toward perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use on the intention to use e-marketing. According to the findings, the most influential factor on intention to use e-marketing is an attitude toward using e-marketing. In addition, Zhao and Wang (2020:1-21) include two mediator variables: perceived usefulness and attitude in a technology acceptance study. The findings demonstrate that perceived usefulness is influenced by perceived ease of use. Mondol et al. (2021:368-586) investigate the elements that impact Generation Z's decision to shop online on a platform. The data shows that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use have a positive and substantial relationship with purchase intent. To identify and validate the factors influencing emoji use in social service networks, a study by Fan et al. (2021:1-12) indicates that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use have a positive effect on usage intention. In an emoticon study, Manganari et al. (2017:674-686) show that the appearance of emoticons in negative reviews increases the review's legitimacy and perceived usefulness while decreasing consumers' attitude toward the hotel and their intention to

book. Moreover, some studies examine the effect of using emoticons, and the results show a favourable influence on perceived usefulness while using these emoticons (Huang et al., 2008:466-473; Jung et al., 2021:391-411), which are congruent with the current study, as attitudes (including perceived usefulness) towards using nonverbal cues are investigated.

Keni (2020:481-496) performed a search to establish if perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use influenced buyers' intention to repurchase. According to the findings, perceived usefulness, and perceived ease of use both play a significant role in influencing consumers' intention to repurchase. Additionally, Ramayah and Ignatius (2005:36-51) and Widiar et al. (2023:1829-1844) explore the connection between perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. The results show that perceived ease of use is a significant predictor of perceived usefulness. The perceived usefulness and ease-of-use concept of the Technological Acceptance Model regarding user comments on instant messaging applications were applied in this emoji study. Findings show that when emojis are used, the perceived usefulness of the user sphere does not match that of the expert sphere (Ernungtyas, 2018:218-224). The previous study is related to the current study since it investigated attitudes toward the use of emojis, including the perceived ease of use. Furthermore, Jahangir and Bagum (2008:32-40) put theoretical theories to the test to determine if perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use can encourage consumer adaption. As per the preliminary findings of the study, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are significantly and positively related to customer adaptation. The above-mentioned study summaries make a correlation between perceived ease of use and usefulness as consumer sentiments. The use of nonverbal cues on digital platforms as a type of communication strategy was shown in the study, which is similar to the current study.

In the context of internet apps, perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness are related to customers' methods of experiencing online activities; and together, perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness influence behavioural intentions (Davis, 1989:319-340; Moslehpour et al., 2018:234; Widiar et al., 2023:1829-1844). In the case of this enquiry, the perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use influence an individual's intention to use, buy and engage while using an emoji. The studies above have some similarities with the current study which verified that there is a link between perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness, where different digital platforms were used (Ramayah & Ignatius 2005:36-51; Jahangir & Bagum 2008:32-40; Lee et al., 2012:819-827; Kanchanatanee et al., 2014:1-13; Manganari et al., 2017:674-686; Moslehpour et al., 2018:234; Cho & Son, 2019:1-17; Mohd Roslan et al., 2020:195-207; Zhao & Wang, 2020:1-21; Fan et al., 2021:1-12; Mondol et al., 2021:368-586; Raunio, 2021:1-87) amongst members of Gen Z and in developing countries (Moslehpour et al., 2018:234; Mohd Roslan et al., 2020:195-207; Zhao & Wang, 2020:1-21; Mondol et al., 2021:368-586). Though the following studies showed consistency with this study, they did not consider emojis and usage of these on digital marketing platforms (Subramanian, 1994:863-874; Ramayah & Ignatius, 2005:36-51; Jahangir &

Bagum 2008:32-40; Huang et al., 2008:466-473; Lee et al., 2012:819-827; Kanchanatanee et al., 2014:1-13; Moslehpour et al., 2018:234; Cho & Son, 2019:1-17; Keni, 2020:481-496; Mohd Roslan et al., 2020:195-207; Zhao & Wang, 2020:1-21; Mondol et al., 2021:368-586), but showed positive perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness associations.

6.2.4 Perceived usefulness → customer engagement

There was a notable difference between the participants, in that emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in a favourable perceived usefulness customer engagement relationship. Perceived usefulness is a major variable identified in the TAM as one of the most important factors of technological acceptance.

The findings of McLean and Wilson (2019:210-224) further support the positive effect of augmented reality (AR) technology's vividness and engagement, as well as the novelty of the AR content, on the perceived usefulness of the technology. Furthermore, Lim et al. (2011:21-40) demonstrate that there are connections between emoticon use and perceived usefulness. Huang et al. (2008:466-473) support that emoticons had a favourable effect on some variables, including perceived usefulness.

These studies are consistent with the current study as they enquire about the effect of using emoticons on perceived usefulness. Bravo et al. (2021:141-154) add to that by investigating the impact of technological acceptance factors on consumer attitude and customer engagement behaviours when using social tourism websites. Customers' attitudes are favourably influenced by their perceptions of usefulness. Ashraf et al. (2016:1006-1023) show that perceived usefulness and engagement are the underlying processes that mediate the influence of regulatory fit on visitors' views and purchase intentions. A search conducted by Prayogo and Sugianto (2021:1-96) investigates whether perceived usefulness influences engagement intention. According to the findings, perceived usefulness does influence an intention of engagement. The goal of research by Arghashi and Yuksel (2020:1-20) was to investigate how AR apps impact customer engagement. The findings show that although perceived usefulness boosts the influence of consumers' views about AR on engagement, it has no moderating effect on the association between trust in AR and engagement (Arghashi & Yuksel, 2020:1-20). An emoji study by McShane et al. (2021:96-110) shows that emoji presence enhances tweet engagement, with more emojis leading to more likes and retweets. It was discovered that the impact of emojis on brand engagement differs according to the nature of the interaction between emoticons and text. A study by Li et al. (2020:417-426) shows that the use of emojis leads to engagement, which is also the aim of the current study. Emotional responses moderated the relationship between perceived usefulness and app engagement. In addition, Yang et al. (2017:459-469) investigate the impact of gamification on consumers' intention to engage in the gamification process as well as their attitudes about the brand. The findings offer empirical evidence for perceived usefulness

as a predictor of the intention of engagement. The findings of the abovementioned studies corroborate the hypothesis of usefulness vs engagement consumer attitudes, which was also applied in the current study.

The above findings show some similarities with the current study. These included studies focused on digital platforms (Lim et al., 2011:21-40; Ashraf et al., 2016:69-86; Yang et al., 2017:459-469; Arghashi & Yuksel, 2020:1-20; Li et al., 2020:417-426; McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Prayogo & Sugianto, 2021:1-96); some of these were conducted in developing countries (Yang et al., 2017:459-469); among college and university young adults as the target group (Lim et al., 2011:21-40; Ashraf et al., 2016:69-86; Yang et al., 2017:459-469); and the attitudes also considered emojis and emoticons (Huang et al., 2008:466-473; Manganari et al., 2017:674-686; Kato et al., 2018:9-23; McShane et al., 2021:96-110). Though these findings were consistent with the current study, they did not consider emojis and their use on digital marketing platforms (Ashraf et al., 2016:69-86; Yang et al., 2017:459-469; Arghashi & Yuksel, 2020:1-20; Li et al., 2020:417-426; Prayogo & Sugianto; 2021:1-96) but revealed favourable perceived usefulness and customer engagement relationships.

6.2.5 Perceived ease of use → customer engagement

There was a positive relationship that was significant in terms of perceived ease of use and customer engagement. Ashraf et al. (2016:69-86) show that perceived ease of use and engagement are the underlying processes that mediate the influence of regulatory fit on visitors' views and purchase intentions.

Kang et al. (2020:76-92) explore the influences that individual motivators and environmental antecedents have on customer engagement as well as compare the effects of playing multiplayer online battle arena games on personal computers versus mobile phones. They found that the effects of perceived ease of use and offline social contact on consumer engagement in mobile gaming are comparably high. However, in emoji studies, the research analyses depict and identify social media influencers' persuasive attempts to induce engagement with emojis. The resultant taxonomy shows that social media influencers' usage of emoji is sophisticated and intentional, serving numerous persuasive and communicative aims (Ge & Gretzel, 2018:1272-1295). McShane et al. (2021:96-110) show that emoji presence enhances tweet engagement, with more emojis leading to more likes and retweets. It was discovered that the impact of emojis on brand engagement differs according to the nature of the interaction between emoticons and text. The current study examines the usage of these emojis in digital platforms for engagement, thus the emoji studies above are consistent with this study. Bravo et al. (2021:141-154) found that customers' attitudes to social tourism websites and subsequent engagement behaviours/ purchases are favourably influenced by perceived ease of use. McLean and Wilson (2019:210-224) demonstrate that the perceived ease of use of AR technology is influenced by engagement.

The summary of the studies above shows consistency with the current study as they considered perceived ease of use and customer engagement and the usage of emojis other digital language elements in digital platforms to improve communication.

Ashraf et al. (2016:69-86) show that perceived ease of use and engagement are the underlying processes that mediate the influence of regulatory fit on visitors' views and purchase intentions. Deng et al. (2021:1-15) add to the understanding of B2B social media communication by demonstrating the importance of brand language in promoting brand engagement and offering linguistics as a key conceptual lens for enhancing the advantages of B2B marketing content on social media. Findings obtained by Yang et al. (2017:459-469) show that perceived ease of use was unrelated to people's intention to engage with the gamification process and their brand attitude. Prayogo and Sugianto (2021:1-96) found that perceived ease of use influences the intention of engagement. The results of the research above are consistent with the current study, while perceived ease of use was subsequently tied to customer engagement as these studies considered the relationship.

While the preceding research focused on the usage of digital platforms for interacting with and primarily communicating with current and potential consumers, there were similarities shared with the current study. These include studies that focused on digital marketing (Ge & Gretzel, 2018:1272-1295; Deng et al., 2021:1-15), in developing countries (Kang et al., 2020:76-92; Yang et al., 2017:459-469), the usage of emojis (Ge & Gretzel, 2018:1272-1295; McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Deng et al., 2021:1-15; Raunio, 2021:1-87), and various digital platforms (Ashraf et al., 2016:69-86; Yang et al., 2017:459-469; Ge & Gretzel, 2018:1272-1295; Kang et al., 2020:76-92; Deng et al., 2021:1-15; McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Prayogo & Sugianto, 2021:1-96). The target group of these studies did not include the Gen Z cohort (Ge & Gretzel, 2018:1272-1295; Kang et al., 2020:76-92; Bravo et al., 2021:141-154; Deng et al., 2021:1-15; McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Prayogo & Sugianto, 2021:1-96), but showed positive perceived ease of use and customer engagement associations.

6.2.6 Trust → involvement

There was a significant difference between the respondents in the following two studies, in that emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in a constructive trust involvement relationship. The emotive components of involvement are principally responsible for the creation of the trust, but the cognitive components have separate impacts (Teichert & Rost, 2003:621-639; Tzeng & Shiu, 2020:1-10).

The following study examines the effects of situational involvement and trust expectation on the consumer's decision to purchase from an online merchant. It was also discovered that situational involvement was unrelated to consumer trust expectation (Hong, 2015:322-336). However, a study by Wu et al. (2022:1-18) found that third-party involvement moderated the association

between trust repair and WOM. Further, a study conducted by Teichert and Rost (2003:621-639) assesses the impacts of trust and involvement on customer retention under the assumption of overall customer satisfaction. The findings show that involvement plays a significant role in explaining trust formation. Shulga et al. (2021:1-19) looked at consumer-generated advertising observers, who were aware and attentive viewers of value co-creation processes but did not directly engage in them. The findings showed that involvement positively influenced trust. Zhang et al. (2021:1-10) examined the impact of emojis on college students' online interpersonal trust. The findings indicated that positive emojis increased trust. The preceding study is consistent with the current study in that it examined attitudes toward using digital nonverbal cues and trust, all of which are examined in the current study. Correspondingly, Wu and Kelly (2020:444) looked at how perceived involvement of artificial intelligence (AI) in online dating affects perceptions of trust. It was discovered that while AI's perceived participation did not affect attractiveness, it did result in a substantial drop in the profile author's trustworthiness. The purpose of the study by Islam and Rahman (2016:40-58) is to look at the direct relationship between customer involvement and trust. The findings point to a direct beneficial relationship between customer involvement and trust. This study found that emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in a constructive trust involvement relationship.

The goal of a study by Li et al. (2015:1041-1066) is to look at the relationships between supplier trust and consumer involvement in the framework of relational governance mechanisms and social exchange theory. Switching costs has a negative moderating effect on the relationship between supplier trust and customer involvement but has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between supplier commitment and customer involvement. An experiment on emojis by Ray (2020) studied how discrete emotions provided by visual signals (i.e., emojis) affected consumers' processing of inspection reports. Participants were recruited from Amazon's MTurk. Involvement predicted elaboration, with participants who were heavily involved in inspection reports elaborating more than those who were less active; further, involvement also affected the association between emojis and elaboration. In addition, Duan et al. (2018:53-58) studied the relationships between emoticons in advisory communications and advice use. Because emoticons transmit emotional information, their impact on advice use may be stronger when the listener is less ready or able to analyse the message more thoroughly. Emoticons enhanced the intention to use guidance, but only when there was a modest level of involvement. The studies above (Duan et al., 2018:53-58; Ray, 2020), were conducted on emojis and emoticons; they examined involvement as a construct, which makes them related to the current study.

Sanchez-Franco (2009:247-258) investigated the interaction effects of consumer involvement on the evaluation of e-banking services. Customer trust, on the other hand, had a higher influence on commitment for consumers with high buy involvement and a weaker effect for those with high ego involvement. Thus, the interactive role of customer involvement provided a fuller perspective

of the satisfaction–trust–commitment model. Sharma and Klein (2020:1–11) took a closer look at customer intentions to take part in online group buying using consumer perceptions of interpersonal influence. The findings demonstrate that customer involvement is crucial in determining whether consumers will engage in online group buying. Perceived trust showed a significant relationship with consumer involvement. Furthermore, the study explored how customer involvement might be turned into trust. Purchase involvement had a detrimental influence on trust according to the findings, but product involvement had a favourable impact (Tzeng & Shiu, 2020:1-10). In the case of emojis, however, Babin (2020:1-14) describes the findings of a study that used text messaging and emojis in laboratory trust games played on mobile devices. Both light and dark complexion players had reduced trust when they received a dark skin tone emoji that suggested statistical prejudice. These studies examined the trust and involvement relationship on e-commerce, which makes it consistent with the current study.

The research above showed similarities with the current inquiry, in that digital platforms were used as a basis of the research (Sanchez-Franco, 2009:247-258; Islam & Rahman, 2016:40-58; Duan et al., 2018:53-58; Wu & Kelly, 2020:444; Babin, 2020:1-14; Shulga et al., 2021:1-19); the following studies were conducted amongst university and college students (Islam & Rahman, 2016:40-58; Duan et al., 2018:53-58; Babin, 2020:1-14; Sharma & Klein, 2020:1-11; Zhang et al., 2021:1-10); the research approach was online (Sanchez-Franco, 2009:247-258; Babin, 2020:1-14; Ray, 2020; Tzeng & Shiu, 2020:1-10; Sharma & Klein, 2020:1-11; Wu & Kelly, 2020:444); and attitudes were tested towards the use of emojis (Duan et al., 2018:53-58; Babin, 2020:1-14; Ray, 2020). However, the following studies did not consider developing countries (Teichert & Rost, 2003:621-639; Sanchez-Franco, 2009:247-258; Sharma & Klein, 2020:1-11; Ray et al., 2020:1-15), and the targeted group did not include the members of Gen Z (Sanchez-Franco, 2009:247-258; Li et al., 2015:1041-1066; Ray, 2020; Shulga et al., 2021:1-19), but revealed favourable trust and involvement relationships.

6.2.7 Trust → customer engagement

The current study demonstrated that the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in a positive relationship that was significant in terms of trust customer engagement. Customer trust is essential for the development of relationships between organisations and customers.

A study by Gammoh (2021:1-131) proposed and created an emoji syntax that establishes rules and standards for utilising emojis at work. The findings of the study indicate that when emojis are used correctly, they may boost communication engagement, and increase trust. Further, Islam et al. (2020:1279-1303) investigated how banking websites may activate customer engagement (CE) and, as a result, increase customer trust. The findings show a relationship between CE and customer trust. In addition to this banking research, Al-Dmour et al. (2019:35-60) investigate how

customer engagement influences trust, in the context of mobile banking. According to the findings, customer engagement has a beneficial impact on customer trust. Ziadkhani Ghasemi and Palmet (2019:1-32) investigated the effectiveness of social commerce marketing stimuli and their effects on consumer behaviour on Instagram. The study found that all dimensions of social commerce marketing stimuli have a significant impact on online brand engagement on Instagram, which in turn positively influences brand trust. Furthermore, Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut (2020:543-556) provide a complete framework for examining the relationships between consumers' customer trust and engagement, according to literature in retailing, adoption behaviour, and digital commerce. Consumer engagement is demonstrated to be affected directly and indirectly by symbolic value via trust in sellers. Each of the preceding studies has a focus that is consistent with the trust and engagement relationship revealed by the current study.

A study of emojis by Casado-Molina et al. (2012:315-333) examined the relationship between how they were utilised, and the level of engagement created. In this regard, the researchers concluded that emoji-bearing messages oriented at customer service and care, as well as those employed in positive settings and for emphasis, were associated with better user engagement. The study is related to the current study as they both examine the usage of emojis for customer engagement. Islam and Rahman, 2016:40-58) found that consumer engagement results in customer trust. Bianchi et al. (2017:464-494) investigated the characteristics that impact consumers' intentions to engage in s-commerce (social media commerce) in four countries: the findings showed that trust in the brands' Facebook sites was part of the main drivers of s-commerce engagement. Additionally, Costello and Biondi (2020:1-18) determined whether poor consumer engagement and low authenticity ultimately lead to less trust. The aim was to give recommendations to influencers and those engaging in influencer marketing on how to minimise trust degradation by evaluating the link between engagement and trust under different situations of credibility. The focus of each of the above-mentioned studies is consistent with the trust and engagement relationship as found by the current study; these studies were focused on digital marketing in developing countries.

The prior research considered the use of emojis in digital marketing communications for engagement and trust. The following studies used an online survey approach (Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333; Islam et al., 2020:1279-1303; Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020:543-556;); in developing countries (Al-Dmour et al., 2019:35-60; Islam et al., 2020:1279-1303; Bianchi et al., 2017:464-494); and emojis in marketing communications (Raunio, 2021:1-87; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333). However, some of these enquiries focused on various digital platforms but did not consider the use of emojis on these platforms (Sanchez-Franco, 2009:247-258; Li et al., 2015:1041-1066; Ray, 2020; Shulga et al., 2021:1-19Hong, 2015:322-336; Islam & Rahman, 2016:40-58; Al-Dmour et al., 2019:35-60; Costello & Biondi, 2020:1-18; Islam et al., 2020:1279-

1303; Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020:543-556), but showed positive trust and intention to purchase associations.

6.2.8 Trust → intention to purchase

There was a notable difference between the participants, in that emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in a positive relationship in terms of trust intention to purchase. Trust is vital in e-commerce because customers perceive more risk in this sort of purchase than in traditional shopping. It is regarded as a multifaceted and difficult problem.

To gain a better understanding of the phenomenon and account for the social aspects of social commerce, Ziadkhani Ghasemi and Palmet (2019:1-32) found that all dimensions of social commerce marketing stimuli have a significant impact on online brand engagement on Instagram, which in turn positively influences brand trust and online purchase intention. The goal of the study is to look at the influence of trust on online purchase intention in emerging countries. According to the findings, trust has a favourable impact on online purchase intent (Ventre & Kolbe, 2020:287-299; Alkan & Ulas, 2023:1-14; Bhattacharya et al., 2023:248-259). The goal of the study by Lee et al. (2018:1-9) was to investigate the complex effects of trust on a consumer's purchase intentions. Results showed that a buyer's confidence in an intermediary influenced his or her faith in the seller, which in turn influenced purchase intention. In other words, it was discovered that trust transfers from an intermediary to its seller. In Ma and Wang (2021:443-456) research, however, the effect of emoticon type on repurchase intention was studied. The results suggest that using a negative emoticon in a response increases and repurchase intention more than using a positive emoji (Ma & Wang, 2021:443-456). l-Adwan and Kokash (2019:15-32) aimed to analyse the relationship between trust in social commerce and consumer purchase intentions. The findings show that trust in a SNS influences purchase intention positively, furthermore, trust promotes information searching, which boosts purchase intentions. Lăzăroiu et al. (2020:1-7) looked at the determining components of social commerce purchase intents and attitude consumer trust on online retailing platforms. The findings support the belief that the purchase intentions of social platform users can be determined by online trust. Harrigan et al. (2021:1297-1312) explore the precise social media characteristics that influence the intention to purchase fashion-related items, with an emphasis on the important role of trust. The findings demonstrate that purchase intent is influenced by trust in the brand. In an emoji study, Starr (2021:1-156) showed four separate groups that were presented product reviews that were text-only, text plus emoticon, text plus emoji, or text plus GIF. There was no significant increase in purchase intention because of implicit eWOM and purchase intention was greater for the text-only review. In addition, the goal of a study by Weisberg et al. (2011:82-96) was to look at the relationship between past online purchases and buying intention, using the concepts of social presence and trust to represent the social environment. The findings demonstrate that previous purchasing behaviour predicts future purchasing intentions, with trust and social presence acting as partial mediators.

Chen and Barnes (2007:21-36) investigate how online consumers form their initial trust and purchase intentions. The findings show that initial online trust and familiarity with online purchasing have a positive impact on purchase intention. When it comes to emojis, Nguyen and Sharkasi (2021:63-73) explored potential relationships between individual intention to engage on Facebook and affective trust. The findings suggested that avoiding symbols and emoji in the primary text of an advertisement could be a good practice, and that trusted Facebook friends' engagement behaviour was positively related to the intention to comment, making it a suitable candidate for harbouring eWOM. Additionally, the effects of Facebook reaction icons and user comments on trust and purchase intention towards a health brand were explored in a study by Lee et al. (2020:138-154). According to the findings, positive Facebook reaction icons had a significant influence on trust and purchase intention. Both preceding studies on nonverbal cues investigated the use of digital platforms by brands to communicate with customers, making them both relevant to the current study. Jeon et al. (2021:1-14) investigate the significance of trust transfer (from offline to online) and the moderating influence of consumers' neurotic characteristics in the framework of trust-satisfaction-repurchase intention in the e-commerce environment. The results show that offline-online trust transference happens in e-commerce and that the transmitted trust has a significant impact on customer satisfaction and repeat purchase intent. A study by Zhu et al. (2019) built a three-stage model to assess the influence of product cognition on purchase intention in cross-border e-commerce. It was found that purchase intention is influenced positively by trust perceptions (Zhu et al., 2019:320-330). The above studies were completed with a focus on the trust and intention to purchase relationships, making these enquiries compatible with the current study.

The studies previously mentioned examined trust and customer engagement relationships, while the following studies focused on digital platforms (Chen & Barnes, 2007:21-36; Weisberg et al., 2011:82-96; Al-Adwan & Kokash, 2019:15-32; Lăzăroiu et al., 2020:1-7; Harrigan et al., 2021:1297-1312; Jeon et al., 2021:1-14; Starr, 2021:1-15); and on digital platform users and customers (Al-Adwan & Kokash, 2019:15-32; Lăzăroiu et al., 2020:1-7; Ventre & Kolbe 2020:287-299; Jeon et al., 2021:1-14; Ma & Wang, 2021:443-456). In some studies, an online survey was used (Lăzăroiu et al., 2020:1-7; Ventre & Kolbe 2020:287-299; Harrigan et al., 2021:1297-1312; Starr, 2021:1-15); while the use of emojis was explored in digital marketing platforms (Ma & Wang, 2021:443-456; Starr, 2021:1-15). Even though these studies did not set their research in developing countries (Starr, 2021:1-15; Jeon et al., 2021:1-14; Harrigan et al., 2021:1297-1312; Lee et al., 2018:1-9), they revealed favourable trust and intention to purchase relationships.

6.2.9 Customer engagement → intention to purchase

McLean and Wilson (2019:210-224) found that emojis used in digital marketing communications resulted in a positive relationship in terms of customer engagement intention to purchase. Engagement with a brand entails a consumer's commitment to interact with a brand. Dmitrieva

(2019) reports that if the context of the campaign is acceptable, employing emojis in a digital advertisement can create a more favourable effect that can lead to higher purchase intention.

Hussein and Hassan (2016:1006-1023) examine whether antecedents determined by a hypothetical test model might predict consumer engagement and purchase intent when emojis were used in digital marketing communications. The findings show that level of use was found to have a significant effect on continuation intention. Ziadkhani Ghasemi and Palmet (2019:1-32) found that all dimensions of social commerce marketing stimuli have a significant impact on online brand engagement on Instagram, which in turn positively influences online purchase intention. Carolin et al. (2020:103-113) investigate the effect of customer engagement as represented by surveillance, social interaction, information sharing, attraction, and social influence on online travel agency (OTA) customer engagement in social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and its relationship to purchasing intention. According to the results of the study, OTAs are better if they focus on social influence, social interaction, and information sharing to increase customer engagement and, as a result, establish the intention to purchase for customers.

In addition, Husnain and Toor (2017:167-199) investigate the impact of social network marketing on consumer purchase intention and how it is influenced by consumer engagement as a moderator. They found that social network marketing is significantly related to consumer purchase intent. They also show that consumer engagement acts as a partial mediator in the impact of social network marketing on consumer purchase intention. With emojis, the study's goal is to determine how the construal level, either as a person's particular temporal orientation or as a promotion's temporal distance, affects how strongly customers' buy intentions are affected by emojis in advertising on social media. Emojis and assertiveness in social media posts are investigated by Baek et al. (2021:1–15) to boost social media interaction. Results indicate that participants in the study have higher social media engagement and behavioural intentions to recycle used jeans when assertive Twitter messages include the smiley face emoji, as well as higher social media engagement and behavioural intentions to sign a petition to reduce plastic pollution when (non) assertive Facebook messages do not include emojis. In addition, Huang et al. (2022:665-682) results suggest that when low (vs. high) emotionally intense emojis are integrated in a social media advertising, present-oriented participants reveal stronger buy intentions. Dmitrieva (2019) explored the direct influence of emoji on positive affect and purchasing intentions. The findings show that the presence of emojis has a favourable effect on emotion and purchasing intent. Furthermore, the effect of emojis on purchase intentions is mediated by their influence on positive affect.

These studies show consistency with the current study as they aim to inquire about the use of emojis and intention to purchase.

Additionally, Schutte (2019:1-53) describes the relationship between consumer engagement and purchase intention in the context of South Africa. The researcher found a positive and significant relationship between the affective dimension of consumer engagement and purchase intention. The above-mentioned results reveal that engagement leads to an intention to purchase which is the same as the current study's findings. The above study considered this relationship in digital platforms. In addition, while the preceding research focused on the use of emojis on digital platforms for interacting with and primarily communicating with current and potential consumers. there were similarities shared with the current study, in that the attitudes were tested on the usage of emojis and emoticons (Dmitrieva, 2019; Huang et al., 2022:665-682); the following studies utilised an online survey to conduct the research (Hussein & Hassan, 2016:1006-1023; Husnain & Toor, 2017:167-199; Schutte, 2019:1-53; Carolin et al., 2020:103-113; Huang et al., 2022:665-682); digital platforms were investigated (Hussein & Hassan, 2016:1006-1023; Husnain & Toor, 2017:167-199; Dmitrieva, 2019; Carolin et al., 2020:103-113; Huang et al., 2022:665-682). However, these studies did not consider developing countries (Hussein & Hassan, 2016:1006-1023; Dmitrieva, 2019; Schutte, 2019:1-53; Huang et al., 2022:665-682), but did show positive customer engagement and intention to purchase associations.

6.3 Usage factors influence on customer engagement and intention to purchase

This section will look at the results of previous studies to understand how different elements of usage might impact the overall conclusions of this research study. As a result, a secondary goal of the study was to see if use variables have an impact on emoji usage in digital marketing communications for engagement and intention to purchase.

6.3.1 Emoji usage

This enquiry revealed that the respondents who always and often use emojis result in more positive customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes when compared to the respondents who used emojis sometimes and rarely in digital marketing communications among the members of Gen Z in Cape Town. Dmitrieva (2019) observed that the main reasons for using emoji are their ability to convey emotions and to make message interpretation easier. Many marketers have begun to use emoji not only in online interactions with customers but also in advertising. The findings suggest that the presence of emoji has a positive effect on emotions and purchase intentions. The findings show that emoji effect on purchase intentions is mediated by their effect on positive emotions.

Baek et al. (2021:1-15) found that when assertive Twitter messages use the smiley-face emoji, study participants have higher social media engagement. In addition, Smits (2021) found that the use of the directive speech act-oriented emojis influence customer engagement through perceived playfulness, providing evidence for the possible long-term effect of emoji use on customer engagement. Kostial (2021) explored the function of emojis in product advertising,

especially their effect on positive emotion and purchase intention. The findings suggest that emojis may perform better in conjunction with items that are desired objects that provide the buyer with pleasure and happiness because of their purchase of the product. The above study has mentioned at least one of the constructs tested by the current study, which shows consistency with the current study. The current study found that the use of emojis resulted in more positive customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes.

The goal of the research by Atar and Sener (2016:229-237) investigate the effects of using emojis as a marketing tactic in the press on customers. Findings suggest that the advertisement that included emojis received more positive reviews; their message was thought to be clearer and more engaging. Mathews and Lee (2018:46-55) wanted to learn more about how firms use emojis in their marketing campaigns. The findings indicated that a wide range of firms used emojis as a marketing technique. The purpose of a study by Yakin and Eru (2017:231-240) was to assess attitudes regarding emoji usage in social marketing campaigns and to provide guidance to companies that plan to use emojis in future advertising initiatives. The results show that emoji use in marketing initiatives is appropriate for social media campaigns. Additionally, employing emojis in marketing campaigns effectively conveys the advertising initiatives. Participants also mentioned that the advertising campaigns were appealing, imaginative, and inventive. According to the findings by Kahar and Habil (2020:27-87), emojis are successful for social advertising campaigns. The goal of the study was to identify the usage of emojis in WhatsApp business communications and identify the types of emojis used by Malaysian SMEs and their Turkish counterparts. Results showed that consequently, the WhatsApp emojis signified nonverbal communication as well as other functions in business conversations. Andral and Larroque (2016:1-54) conducted research to determine how consumers feel about businesses that use emojis in their online communication strategy. According to the findings, women between the ages of 15 and 25 are the most responsive to companies that use emojis. Although most respondents had a favourable perception of emojis, this does not indicate that it impacts their propensity to consume one brand over another. Hao (2020:1-105) proposes an emoji mining strategy and tests its incremental impact on emoji usage in targeted messages at various levels of product participation. Emojis may raise email open rates, and messages with an emoji in the subject line are opened at a considerably greater rate than messages without an emoji. All the above studies considered the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications; this shows conformity with the current study, and it also shows that the usage of emojis has an impact.

Bosch and Revilla (2018:1-25) answer some of the most pressing issues about the use of emojis. Overall, Millennials use emojis mostly in dialectical contexts, with increased use in IM, and employ emojis more frequently with interlocutors of the same or similar age. The purpose of the study by Beattie et al. (2020:409-427) investigated the relationship between emoji use and observers' perceptions of interpersonal attractiveness, CMC expertise, and source trustworthiness, as well

as whether perceptions of human vs chatbot message sources differed. When compared to verbal-only message senders, people judged emoji-using chatbot message sources similarly to human message sources, and both humans and bots were much more socially appealing, CMC competent, and believable. The purpose of a study by Su and Chen (2021:171-174) is to describe how college students use QQ emojis to interact with their social networks. QQ emojis exhibited strong appeal and courtesy functions in push, notice, and questionnaire requests. Honkanen and Muller (2021:611-630) consider the use of Nigerian and English interjections and emojis in Nigerian internet communication to show surprise. The probability of Nigerian interjections is higher in messages containing Nigerian Pidgin, informal orthographically lengthened words, and positive emotions (Honkanen & Muller, 2021:611-630). The above research investigated emoji usage on digital platforms for communication purpose; the same goal has been achieved by the current study. This study considered emoji usage in various digital platforms for communication.

The research studies mentioned above all had the same goal in mind: to investigate the use of emojis, and revealed congruent findings; in other words, emojis make a positive attitudinal difference when used in digital marketing efforts (Andral & Larroque, 2016:1-54; Atar & Sener, 2016:229-237; Yakin & Eru, 2017:231-240; Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55; Dmitrieva, 2019; Hao, 2020:1-105; Kahar & Habil, 2020:27-87; Kostial, 2021; Smits, 2021); while some reflect the use of these emojis as a form of communication (Bosch & Revilla, 2018:1-25; Beattie et al., 2020:409-427; Baek et al., 2021:1-15; Honkanen & Muller 2021:611-630; Su & Chen, 2021:171-174). Some of these studies also considered digital platforms (Yakin & Eru, 2017:231-240; Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55; Dmitrieva, 2019; Kahar & Habil, 2020:27-87; Baek et al., 2021:1-15; Kostial, 2021; Smits, 2021; Su & Chen, 2021:171-174); but in fairness, these enquiries did not consider developing countries (Atar & Sener 2016:229-237; Bosch & Revilla, 2018:1-25; Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55; Baek et al., 2021:1-15; Kostial, 2021; Smits, 2021), nor Gen Z cohort as the target group (Bosch & Revilla, 2018:1-25; Dmitrieva, 2019). However, all these studies revealed favourable attitudes towards emoji digital marketing communications.

6.3.2 Emoji brand message engagement

This research established that respondents who always and sometimes engage in emoji brand messages showed more positive customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes in comparison to those who engaged rarely in emoji brand messages. The use of emojis in various forms of communication is becoming more acceptable in the digital and social networks, and businesses are very vigilant and quick to notice changes in this digital communication pattern, adapting their marketing campaigns to include more advanced features to attract more customers and keep their loyalty for a longer period. However, social media marketers are increasingly finding it difficult to approach creative brand posts in a way that increases consumer engagement (Dmitrieva, 2019; Aydin et al., 2021:768-790)

Mathews and Lee (2018:46-55) found that entertainment, service, and food/drink industries have predominantly utilised emojis in their marketing practices, and their primary purpose for using emojis was to increase consumer engagement. In addition, Casado-Molina et al. (2022:315-333) discovered that emojis used for customer service and care, as well as those used in positive settings and for emphasis, were related to better user engagement. In the presence of a mediator, brand communication, the goal of the article is to examine the relationship between consumers' activity on SNSs and their brand attachment behaviour. Brand communication was discovered to strongly moderate the association between consumer participation on brand attachment and SNSs. Emojis serve as a mediating moderator in conversations and digital marketing campaigns on SNSs for businesses, and they have a significant impact on how customers behave with regard to brand attachment through brand communication (Arya et al., 2018:468-670). The appearance of emoji in tweets enhances engagement, with more emoji leading to an increase in retweets and likes and r (McShane et al., 2021:96-110). Further, the impact of emojis on brand engagement vary according to the nature of the connection between emoticons and text, as well as the impact of this interaction on perceived playfulness. Smits (2021) found that the use of emojis promotes customer engagement through perceived playfulness, proving the long-term impact of emoji use on customer engagement (Smits, 2021).

The persuasive attempts of social media influencers to initiate engagement with emojis are dissected, depicted, and labelled in research by Ge and Gretzel (2018). The resulting taxonomy reveals that social media influencers' usage of emoji is sophisticated and deliberate and that they employ them for a variety of persuasive and communicative. The goal of a study by Raco (2021) was to compare the relative strength of emotional and associative routes to determine the effect of expressive move emojis on customer engagement. According to the findings, the emoji type 'expressive motions' has an indirect effect on customer engagement. The above-mentioned research has mentioned at least one of the constructs tested by the current study, because they test the same constructs when it comes to emoji usage as a brand communication for engagement and intention to purchase.

Yakin and Eru (2017:231-240) affirmed the effectiveness of the informational nature of the campaign's message with emojis; results further should the appealing, imagination, and inventiveness of emoji brand message campaigns. Leung and Chan (2017:76-95) reveal that emojis are employed pragmatically in commercial tweets to indicate additional meaning in text-based messages, the possibility of various readings is decreased due to their syntactic and semantic responsibilities. The above enquiries correlate with the current study as they test the usage and the effectiveness of emojis in marketing communication.

The preceding research focused on the use of emojis in brand message and engagement, and display similarities with the current study. The studies investigated the use of emojis by brands, using various digital platforms, and also considered the marketing and brand communication

(Leung & Chan, 2017:76-95; Arya et al., 2018:468-670; Ge & Gretzel, 2018:1272-1295; Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55; Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333; Baek et al., 2021:1-15; McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Smits, 2021). However, the above-mentioned analyses did not include the developing countries for this research (Mathews & Lee, 2018:46-55; Baek et al., 2021:1-15; Smits, 2021; Raco, 2021:1-50), and the Gen Z cohort was not the group targeted by several of these studies (Leung & Chan, 2017:76-95; Arya et al., 2018:468-670; Ge & Gretzel, 2018:1272-1295; Baek et al., 2021:1-15; Raco, 2021:1-50), though the latter studies also showed high engagement in emoji brand messages.

6.3.3 Online usage hours

Respondents who spent a greater number of hours engaging online showed more positive attitudes compared to those who spent fewer hours who showed the less positive attitudes towards using emojis in digital marketing communications for customer engagement and intention to purchase.

Southgate (2017:227-235) compares Generation Z's attitudes and behaviours toward traditional and digital advertising formats to those of Generation Y and Generation X. According to the research, more Generation Z members are spending significant amounts of time online. In emoji studies, however, Yakin and Eru (2017:231-240) found that most of the participants spent 3-4 hours every day while consuming social media marketing. In addition, Sharma et al. (2020:9450-9467), found a majority of 54.4 % to be spending less than an hour per day on social media. The studies above are related to the current study as they considered emojis in digital marketing communication as did the current study. Further, the goal of research by Roselina et al. (2021:1-7) was to discover how Generation Z uses the internet, particularly social media, to find health information during a pandemic. Social media and news websites provided the most information when it came to the time spent online, and the time it took searching for information was less than an hour. Poturak and Softic (2019:17-43) conducted an empirical analysis of the impact of social media communication on brand equity and purchase intent. According to the findings, 54.3% spend more than two hours per day online, 38.7% spent one to two hours per day, whereas 6% spent less than one hour per day. In addition, Shah and Tiwari (2021:31-50) investigated how the use of the online platform affected the way consumers buy goods and services. It was discovered that 22.5% of respondents used the internet for less than two hours per day, 37.5% used the internet for two to four hours per day and 15% used the internet for more than six hours per day. The goal of a study by Griffiths and Szabo (2014) was to learn more about whether the online medium or the online activity was more essential in terms of excessive internet use. Results show that students spent more than 20 hours per week on the Internet (Griffiths & Szabo, 2014:74-77). To determine the role of social media in consumers' decision-making process for complex purchases, a study (Voramontri & Klieb, 2019:209-233) discovered that most respondents spent 1–2 hours or 3–4 hours per day on the internet. Furthermore, Curana et al.

(2022:494-509) examined the effect of social media advertising and brand image on consumer purchasing decisions for new products. They reported that respondents who actively use social media spend 3 hours and 26 minutes on average. Additionally, a study on emojis investigated how the construal level, either as an individual temporal orientation or as a temporal distance of promotion, modifies the effects of emoji emotional intensity on consumer purchase intentions in social media advertising. According to the findings, 80.5% of participants spent at least five hours per week on Instagram (Huang et al., 2022:665-682). The study investigates the effect of emojis in digital marketing on purchase intent, which is what the current study seeks to uncover.

Considering prior research, the younger generation has significant attitudinal factors when it comes to digital platforms (Griffiths & Szabo, 2014:74-77; Yakin & Eru 2017:231-240; Voramontri & Klieb, 2019:209-233; Huang et al., 2022:665-682; Roselina et al., 2021:1-7). Some of these mentioned studies above were conducted amongst members of Gen Z and their use of the internet (Griffiths & Szabo, 2014:74-77; Southgate, 2017:227-235; Poturak & Softic, 2019:17-43; Huang et al., 2022:665-682; Roselina et al., 2021:1-7), and focused on emojis as a marketing tool (Yakin & Eru 2017:231-240; Huang et al., 2022:665-682). Even though the above research has shown consistency with the current study, the usage of emojis in these digital platforms was not considered by some studies (Griffiths & Szabo, 2014:74-77; Poturak & Softic, 2019:17-43; Roselina et al., 2021:1-7; Curana et al., 2022:494-509), but they do show that the younger cohorts are spending increasing amounts of time online, which made them more prone to digital marketing communications.

6.3.4 Digital spending

According to the current study, respondents who spent less money on digital platforms exhibited more favourable sentiments toward customer engagement compared to the respondents who spent higher amounts on digital platforms. The amount of money spent to access digital platforms and undertake activities on these platforms is referred to as digital spending in this study. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digital adoption across countries and industries, and it became one of the most suitable ways to reach people (Nanda et al., 2021:110-124).

Esposito et al. (2017:1-15) evaluated the efficacy of nudges designed to discourage the purchase of 'incompatible' digital products. The use of emoticons (now replaced by emojis) in the emotive messages appealed more to the younger generation, who were more accustomed to them. Elderly people, on the other hand, may misinterpret these signs. The study reports on digital spending and the use of emojis and emoticons in communication, which is the current study's goal. Uthman et al. (2021:1-71) investigate how the impact of COVID-19 has influenced online intentions to purchase. It was found that students (Generation Z) are more likely to save money and spend online more strategically. In an emoticon study, Bizcommunity (2021) state that Generation Z is the fastest-growing cohort of local online shoppers, using their mobile phones

and through digital media. A study by Dabija and Lung (2019:1-8) further highlights behavioural differences in online shopping by Millennials (Gen Y) and Generation Z in an emerging market. According to the findings, the members of Gen Z prefer to order online with their smartphones, while Gen Y shops online fairly frequently, and Gen Z cohort purchases services exclusively online. The Generation Z cohort is fuelling a new wave of the e-commerce boom, and apps such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have enabled this new generation of spenders to create an online shopping mall experience (Payfast, 2021; CM Group, 2022). Pienaar (2022) states that the value of online shopping today has reached levels we would have only expected to see by 2025 or beyond without the impact of COVID-19; online spending increased because people were spending so much time at home, spending emotionally, with an emphasis on comfort and luxury. The above-mentioned articles (Dabija & Lung, 2019:1-8; Bizcommunity, 2021; Payfast, 2021; Uthman et al., 2021:1-71; CM Group, 2022) not only focused on an increase of digital spending due to COVID-19 (Pienaar, 2022) but Generation Z was identified as the target demographic. Worldwide, digital shopping has a strong appeal among younger buyers.

Globally, social commerce has a strong appeal among younger buyers and locally, there is still a strong mall culture among older buyers, but the members of Gen Z are shifting to online shopping by supporting local brands through their digital media pages (Bizcommunity, 2021). The studies above indicate that the Gen Z cohort prefers online buying compared to the Gen Y. The articles relate to the current study as they reveal the increase in online spending by cohorts (Esposito et al., 2017:1-15; Dabija & Lung, 2019:1-8; Bizcommunity, 2021; Payfast, 2021; Pienaar, 2022; CM Group, 2022), and therefore are likely to be exposed to emoji marketing communications. These studies conducted their research in developing countries (Dabija & Lung, 2019:1-8; Bizcommunity, 2021; Payfast, 2021; Uthman et al., 2021:1-71; Pienaar, 2022) and considered the Generation Z (Esposito et al., 2017:1-15; Bizcommunity, 2021; Payfast, 2021; CM Group, 2022). However, these studies did not specifically consider the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications (Bizcommunity, 2021; Payfast, 2021; Pienaar, 2022; CM Group, 2022), but Esposito et al. (2017:1-15) indicates that younger cohorts are more susceptible to this form of digital marketing communications.

6.4 Demographic factor influence on customer engagement and intention to purchase - population group

This section on the effect of participant demographic variables is critical for understanding the secondary objectives of this study. Gender, age, and educational level were found to have no impact on customer engagement and intention to purchase, whereas the population group had a significant impact, as discussed below.

Generally, the Coloured population group showed more positive customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes due to emoji digital marketing communications in comparison to

the White population group. Duffett (2017a:19-39) investigate the impact of interactive social media marketing communications influence on South African teenagers' cognitive, affective, and behavioural attitude components. The findings indicate that teenagers who used social media belonging to the Coloured and Black population groups had the most favourable attitudes toward social media marketing communications. Additionally, Duffett (2015b:1-22) showed that compared to Black participants, Coloured and Indian/Asian participants showed less favourable affective attitudes towards instant messaging marketing communications. Du Plessis (2020) used an exploratory research approach on emojis, with a random sample of individuals from different backgrounds employed at a variety of organisations as the target audience. As a result, there were variances in emoji interpretation across racial groups. Duffett (2020:1-25) aimed to look at the impact of YouTube advertising on the non-traditional and traditional attitude relationships of response hierarchy models. Intention to purchase had a positive influence on purchase for White versus Black young consumers, according to the findings. Furthermore, when compared to White adolescents in South Africa, Black and Coloured South African teenagers exhibited the most positive cognitive, affective, and behavioural attitudes (2017b:1-22).

As noted in the study by Murthy et al. (2020:1-18), race is represented in Venmo emojis and emojis are often utilised for more hedonistic. However, darker tone-modified emojis show proportionally greater hedonistic consumption and a higher representation of practical categories in transactions than lighter tone-modified emojis. The preceding study considers emojis in customer-related digital activities, which is consistent with the current study. Mason et al. (2021:1-17) investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic affected consumers' social media marketing behaviours in the US population. It was suggested that the use of social media was almost certainly increase around the world, although cultural differences should be considered when developing social media strategies in other countries, as social media platform preferences vary. The findings above (Duffett, 2015b:1-22; Duffett, 2017a:19-39; 2017b:1-22; 2020:1-25) showed that Black and Coloured groups had positive attitudes amongst young adults when it came to the use of digital media for marketing communications and the usage of different digital platforms, and this makes these studies consistent with the current study.

The studies above share some similarities with the current study as these were conducted among the younger and conducted in developing countries (Duffett, 2015b:1-22; 2017a:19-39; 2017b:1-22; 2020:1-25; Schutte, 2019:1-53; Du Plessis, 2020). However, there were also differences, as some of the above studies did not include the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications (Duffett, 2015b:1-22; 2017a:19-39; 2017b:1-22; 2020:1-25; Schutte, 2019:1-53; Du Plessis, 2020; Murthy et al., 2020:1-18; Mason et al., 2021:1-17), but show the various forms of digital marketing communications have an influence on different population group attitudes.

6.5 Summary

This chapter has brought insight and understanding into the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications, consumer engagement, and intention to purchase amongst the members of

Gen Z. The study looked at a variety of conceptual and attitudinal variables including involvement, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, trust, customer engagement and intention to purchase, which were all found to have a positive influence on customer engagement and intention to purchase due to emojis used in digital marketing communications. The relevant literature and the researcher's own views were used to discuss usage factors that influenced customer engagement and intention to purchase, which included emoji usage, emoji brand message engagement, online usage hours and digital spending, as well as the population group demographic factor.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

Nowadays, brands recognise the power of emojis for their digital marketing campaigns. Brands use emojis to communicate with their target audience via audiences' mobile phones. Thus, they use emojis to express that they are using the latest communication trend, and they deliver their messages in a simple way (Yakin & Eru, 2017:320-240; Wang et al., 2023:1-14). Stickers are effective at expressing specific emotions because they let short graphics take the place of lengthy text. As sticker use grew, stickers were commercialised on a few platforms and experienced amazing growth as consumers purchased and utilized stickers featuring their preferred media, goods, or celebrities online. (Kang et al., 2022:1-19). Brands have adopted this norm and are now customising content that the Gen Z cohort will relate and to and understand, thereby driving engagement and an intention to purchase.

The rapid adoption of emojis in marketing communication is due to their pervasive usages. However, in response to an insufficient understanding of their influence in digital marketing communications, the objective of this study has been to investigate the effect of emojis used in digital marketing communications for engagement and intention to purchase amongst the Generation Z, and to gain a better understanding of these phenomena. This included consumer attitudes associations, usage factors influence, and demographics factors influences.

The previous chapter outlined and discussed the findings and differences from the comparisons made between the current study and prior studies, which related to the study by target group, country of origin, purpose, or the findings. This chapter will then present the conclusions drawn from the findings and discussion; suggest the contributions of the study; and highlight limitations and recommendations based on the conclusions of the study.

7.2 Consumer attitudes associations on emoji digital marketing communications

7.2.1 Involvement - perceived usefulness

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 the involvement and perceived usefulness among the Generation Z group. Accordingly, Kato et al. (2018:9-23) found that involvement has a moderating effect on the relationship between social influence and perceived usefulness. Several other studies show that involvement has an association with perceived usefulness (Jung et al., 2021:391-411; Raunio, 2021:1-87). Emojis make a message easier to interpret and can be used as an effective marketing technique to develop a strong and loyal young customer base. This

study confirms that emojis yield an analogous association between these attitudinal responses when used in marketing communication messages directed at the Gen Z cohort as the target group.

The findings of this study suggest that emojis can be used as an effective marketing technique to develop a strong and loyal young customer base. Emojis can make a message easier to interpret and can help increase engagement and perceived usefulness among Generation Z consumers. However, it is important to use emojis in a way that is authentic and relevant to the brand and target audience.

Recommendations

The favourable involvement and perceived usefulness association among the Gen Z cohort has implications for brands when using this form of marketing communication. This is an opportunity for brands that want to remain relevant and grow their engagement and intention to purchase, as emojis offer the personal touch and catch a customer's attention. Emojis form a part of digital language for the younger customers, who include them in daily conversations, chats and reactions to personal posts of their influencers, so can be an effective marketing approach to enhance involvement and perceived usefulness.

7.2.2 Involvement - perceived ease of use

The current study determined that the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in a significantly positive involvement and perceived ease-of-use relationship. 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., 2021:272-279; Raunio, 2021:1-87). The above-mentioned findings found a correlation between involvement and perceived ease of use, and therefore substantiate that emoji usage on digital marketing communications led to positive attitudes. Hence, it can be concluded that emoji digital marketing communications are understood and favourably perceived by the members of Gen Z consumers.

The findings of this study have important implications for the development of future marketing strategies. Generation Z consumers have become increasingly influential in the marketplace, so it is essential for marketers to understand their preferences and communication styles. The use of emojis in digital marketing communications is one way to reach Gen Z consumers and build positive relationships with them.

Recommendations

Marketers and brands should continually monitor the type of marketing communications that have a positive influence on Generation Z involvement and perceived ease of use predispositions. For example, emojis can be used to replace words because they are simple and eliminate the need to write words out in full. They add variety to language, are faster, and save time, which increases the involvement and perceived ease of use among the Generation Z cohort. Therefore, this

marketing communication approach has the potential to bring brands and young customers together via the use of personalised messages, which establish increases involvement and are easy to use to meet the young customers' needs.

7.2.3 Perceived ease of use - perceived usefulness

There was a notable significant difference between the participants, in that emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in a positive relationship in terms of perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. A couple of studies show that perceived ease of use favourably relates to perceived usefulness (Fan et al., 2020:444-445; Raunio, 2021:1-87). Purwanto et al. (2020:118-135) and Cavalheiro et al. (2022:1-8) found that participants who reported that they used emoji frequently thought emojis were useful and easy to use. This study verifies that using emojis in digital marketing platforms is deemed easy and useful.

The findings of this study suggest that emojis can be used as an effective marketing tool to create positive user experiences. When users perceive a digital marketing communication to be easy to use and useful, they are more likely to engage with it and have a positive attitude towards the brand. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that emojis can be a valuable tool for marketers who want to create effective digital marketing campaigns that resonate with their target audience.

Recommendations

Brands should constantly monitor the types of marketing communications that have a positive impact on Generation Z's perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. Emojis are meant to be enjoyable, light-hearted, and convey a broad range of emotions efficiently and in a way that words sometimes cannot, which increases the perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness among the Generation Z group. This type of marketing contributes positively toward a brand's marketing strategy and its effectiveness, as it makes the task less daunting and more entertaining for both the marketer and the customer. Emojis allow a brand to communicate with customers in their own language. Brands can create their own emojis to match what they want to communicate and so relate to their younger customers in ways that could elicit positive responses to increase the perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness.

7.2.4 Perceived usefulness - customer engagement

The emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in a positive perceived usefulness customer engagement relationship. Many other investigations showed that perceived usefulness is related to customer engagement (Arghashi & Yuksel, 2022:1-20; Li et al., 2020:417-426; Bravo et al., 2021:141-154; McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Prayogo & Sugianto, 2021:1-96). Yakin and Eru (2017:320-240) show that if an advertisement is relevant, informative, clear, understandable, and interesting to the consumer, and if the consumer believes in the advertisement's message, cognitive reasons trigger consumers to use positive language. 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.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that emojis can be a valuable tool for marketers who want to create effective digital marketing campaigns that resonate with their target audience and increase customer engagement.

Recommendations

The constructive perceived usefulness and customer engagement relationship among the Generation Z cohort has implications for marketers when using this form of marketing communications. Emojis make a message stand out and are easily interpreted by the receiver, which increases the perceived usefulness and customer engagement among the Generation Z group. Marketers could use these emojis in captions and subject lines (Walsh, 2020; Distel et al., 2022:134-145), as they have been proven to be effective in increasing perceived usefulness and engagement between young customers and brands.

7.2.5 Perceived ease of use - customer engagement

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. Research showed that perceived usefulness was related to customer engagement (Kang et al., 2020:76-92; Bravo et al., 2021:141-154; McShane et al., 2021:96-110). 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 campaign are informative and effective, making these attractive, creative, and innovative (Yakin & Eru, 2017:320-240; Ko et al., 2022:1-17). This research has also shown that emojis in digital communications led to increased perceived ease of use and customer engagement attitudinal effects among young consumers.

The findings of this study have important implications for the development of future marketing strategies. As Generation Z consumers become increasingly influential in the marketplace, it is essential for marketers to understand their preferences and communication styles. The use of emojis in digital marketing communications is one way to reach Generation Z consumers and build positive relationships with them.

Recommendations

Emojis influence customer attitudes and, when used correctly, lead to customer engagement. Marketers and brands are encouraged to use these emojis by adding context, appealing to the emotions of the audience on a deeper level so that their messages can be more relatable, understood, and easy to use or interpret. This can be as simple as asking the followers whether they agree or disagree with a statement by using the thumbs-up (👍) or thumbs-down (👎) emojis,

something that has been proven to increase customer engagement toward the use of emojis in digital marketing communications.

7.2.6 Trust - involvement

There was a significant difference between the respondents, in that emojis in digital marketing communications resulted in a positive trust and involvement relationship. Several studies established parallel interactions between trust and involvement among the Gen Z cohort (Wu & Kelly, 2020:444; Shulga et al., 2021:1-19; Zhang et al., 2021:1-10). As reported by Yassin (2021:326-334), emojis liberate marketing campaigns from the formal framework of marketing by making content light-hearted while maintaining quality. Customers who trust a brand are more likely to be involved with a brand's emojis digital marketing communications.

In conclusion, the Generation Z cohort is more involved when they have accepted and trusted the innovation. Emojis have formed part of this cohort's vocabulary, which may have a positive impact on the marketer's marketing strategies for this generation.

Recommendations

Brands should ensure that they create playful, interesting, and informative content using emojis for younger customers, which can be done through storytelling, with a string of emojis or a combination of words and emojis. This helps to easily warm them to the brand on digital media, create trust and stimulate involvement with the brand. Using emojis helps to humanise a brand, which creates a platform for the young consumers to develop trust and interest to involve them with a brand that understands and relates to them.

7.2.7 Trust - customer engagement

The current study showed that 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., 2022:315-333; Gammoh, 2021:1-131). Emojis are recognised as a vital easy-to-implement tool that managers can strategically use in this ever-changing technology. It is critical that brands pay close attention to how they can use emojis to attract customers and engage them while building trust. This study finds that trust leads to customer engagement and intention to purchase because of emojis used in digital marketing communications.

As Generation Z consumers become increasingly influential in the marketplace, it is essential for marketers to understand their preferences and communication styles. The use of emojis in digital marketing communications is one way to reach Generation Z consumers and build strong and lasting relationships with them.

Recommendations

Emojis can help brands convey playfulness, through an interesting, enjoyable, and continued interaction with their target groups. Brands can benefit from higher levels of engagement as well as a variety of other advantages of playful content. Organisations must first earn the trust of their audience, which can be accomplished by consistently sharing content that benefits and excites them, such as emojis that provide emotional human gestures that are perceived when someone is present. Marketers could create competitions that encourage customers to participate, such as when a beverage organisation used 24 emojis to help customers choose the best combination (Barysevich, 2017).

7.2.8 Trust - intention to purchase

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). A few investigations found comparable relationships between trust and intention to purchase, in emoji digital marketing communications (Ma & Wang, 2021:443-456; Nguyen & Sharkasi, 2021:63-73; Starr, 2021:1-156). Hence, it was concluded by this study that the using of emojis in brand communication on digital media can increase customer trust and intention to purchase among young customers.

The findings of this study suggest that emojis can be used as an effective marketing tool to increase trust and intention to purchase among young consumers. Marketers should consider using emojis in their digital marketing communications to reach young consumers. However, it is important to use emojis in a way that is authentic and relevant to the brand and target audience.

Recommendations

Customers need to trust brands for them to gain purchase intent. Any advertisement from a brand that customers are not familiar with enough to trust may not stimulate positive behavioural attitudes. Thus, brands are encouraged to stay in constant contact with their target market to create trust, and entertainment, using emojis to add to the excitement. Brands may use emojis to convey a message or to encourage young customers to use them as well when responding to enjoyable and creative posts, which contain the simple and easy to understand sequence of trusted and familiar emojis that could increase purchase intentions. For instance, Netflix posted a thread with the emojis 💔💔, implying that not having a movie to watch is heart-breaking. These kinds of posts may be a good place to stimulate positive purchase intentions among young consumers.

7.2.9 Customer engagement - intention to purchase

The study found that emojis used in digital marketing communications resulted in a positive relationship between customer engagement and intention to purchase. The use of emojis in

promotional texts elicits more pleasant emotions and results in a more favourable attitude to the advertisement (Dmitrieva, 2019). Research demonstrates the comparable associations between customer engagement and intention to purchase when emojis are used in digital marketing communications among the Gen Z cohort (Dmitrieva, 2019; Baek et al., 2022:988-1002). However, in comparing advertisements with emojis and those without, Lee et al. (2021:1-15) found that advertisements lacking emojis stimulated lower purchase intent. Thus, this study concluded that customer engagement had a positive effect on purchase intent due to emojis used in digital marketing communications among young consumers.

The findings of this study suggest that emojis can be used as an effective marketing tool to increase customer engagement and intention to purchase among young consumers. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that emojis can be a valuable tool for marketers who want to create effective digital marketing campaigns that resonate with young consumers and increase customer engagement and intention to purchase.

Recommendations

Emojis only have a positive impact on customer engagement and purchase intent when they are deemed appropriate for the context, in other words when the content is relatable to the targeted group, and when the communicated information is clear and easy to understand. Emojis add personality and relatability to a brand, and they can significantly increase engagement and intention to purchase for marketers. To engage their target audience, brands and organisations are encouraged to adopt a marketing strategy that uses emojis, as this helps to increase a customer's engagement and intention to purchase. For example, Nando's South Africa (2022) posted on Twitter: "Funny, our chicken comes with wings so how is it our fault that the Swallows didn't fly high enough? 😳" (Moroka Swallows is a popular South African soccer team). This post encouraged positive customer engagement, while also reminding them of Nando's, which increased purchase sentiment due to the favourable buzz created when the post went viral.

7.3 Usage factors influences for emoji digital marketing communications

7.3.1 Emoji usage

This current enquiry found that the respondents who always and often used emojis reported more positive customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes compared to the respondents who used emojis sometimes and rarely in digital marketing communications among the members of Gen Z. Das et al. (2019:147-156) suggested that emoji effects primarily depended on their appropriateness for the context. Therefore, the emoji usage may be more varied between younger generations than the elderly as the latter may misinterpret the signs (Esposito et al., 2017:1-15). Hence, it can be concluded that using emojis in the right context could lead to higher levels of customer engagement and purchase intent among young consumers.

It is important to use emojis in the right context. Emojis that are not appropriate for the context can be confusing or even offensive to consumers. Marketers should carefully consider the target audience and the overall tone of the message before using emojis. Marketers can use emojis to create more effective digital marketing campaigns that resonate with Generation Z consumers and increase customer engagement and purchase intent.

Recommendations

When developing marketing strategies for a brand, it is critical to consider what works and how the audience responds to that approach. Emojis are now part of the digital vocabulary and brands need to understand how the Generation Z uses emojis, which will assist them to convey more personalised messages to evoke the emotions needed to simulate positive purchase intentions. Brands could share content and ask the younger customers to vote using emojis, which would help spread marketing communication messages (via eWOM) faster than conventional social media “please like and share”. Hence, brands are encouraged to use interactive emoji tactics when communicating with the younger consumers to increase customer engagement and intention to purchase.

7.3.2 Emoji brand message engagement

Respondents who engaged always with a brand online showed more positive attitudes in terms of customer engagement and intention to purchase compared to those who least engaged with a brand using emojis in digital marketing communications. This aligns with the results by Casado-Molina et al. (2022:315-333) who demonstrated that brands with clearer and more defined emoji strategies had higher brand engagement. Emojis use by brands in social media advertisements, engagement, and product announcements were regarded as more appropriate (Cavalheiro et al., 2022:1-8). The results are validated by several other studies (Casado-Molina et al., 2022:315-333; Baek et al., 2022:988-1002; Deng et al., 2021:1-15; McShane et al., 2021:96-110; Raco, 2021:1-50; Smits, 2021; Cavalheiro et al., 2022:1-8). Emojis help to emphasise the importance of the specific context in which brands communicate. Results showed that emoji used by brands in social media advertisements, consumer social media post replies, and product announcements were perceived as more appropriate (Cavalheiro et al., 2022:1-8), which confirms the findings of this study.

The findings of this study suggest that emojis can be an effective tool for brands to increase customer engagement and intention to purchase. However, brands should also consider the context in which they are using emojis to see what works best for their target audience. What matters most is that brands use emojis in a way that is authentic, relevant, and appropriate.

Recommendations

Using emojis in a brand’s messaging can add an extra level of personality and relatability to the brand, which creates message engagement. Brands are encouraged to use emojis as they form

part of the younger generation's digital language. Members of Gen Z can be asked to interact with the post made by a brand, and using an emoji is an easy way to encourage engagement. Ge and Gretzel (2018:1272-1295) indicate that digital media influencers can initiate consumer engagement by displaying emoji individually or in combination, which can entice consumers to participate in interactions. Brands are also encouraged to utilise digital platform influencers, especially those who are also of the Gen Z cohort, as they regularly share content that includes emojis that may increase customer engagement and purchase intentions.

7.3.3 Online usage hours

Respondents who spent a greater number of hours engaging online showed more positive attitudes to customer engagement and intention to purchase compared to those who spent fewer hours using emojis in digital marketing communications. Huang et al. (2022:665-682) found that consumers spent an average amount of at least five hours on social media advertising. The findings of the current study verify the conclusions of Sharma et al. (2020:9450-9467) and Huang et al. (2022:665-682). The young consumers' overall perception of emojis are effectively used in social media marketing, and users find it amusing, humorous, personalised, simple to grasp, persuasive, and spend huge amounts of hours online.

The findings of this study suggest that emojis can be an effective tool for marketers to reach young consumers who are spending a significant amount of time online. Emojis can make digital marketing communications more appealing and enjoyable for young consumers, which can lead to increased customer engagement and intention to purchase.

Recommendations

Brands should encourage customers and their targeted groups to spend more time with them online through their content. Emojis can be used when running competitions and giving discounts, and customers can be encouraged to comment with an emoji how they feel, because most of the time young consumers feel lonely and the brands can give comfort by letting the customers that they are not alone, especially in times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In times with diminished human contact such as a lockdown, brands should use the opportunity to keep young customers entertained by sharing interesting and engaging content that includes emojis. Emojis could be used in interactive subject lines and transmitted via instant messaging, social media, mobile apps, and other digital channels, which could also help brands to break through the clutter and seize attention to ultimately keep young consumers online longer, which could increase customer engagement and purchase intentions.

7.3.4 Digital spending

This enquiry found that the respondents who always or often used emojis showed more positive customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes compared to the respondents who

used emojis sometimes or rarely in digital marketing communications. Respondents who engaged always with a brand online showed more positive attitudes in terms of customer engagement and intention to purchase compared to those who least engaged with a brand using emojis in digital marketing communications. Respondents who spent a greater number of hours engaging online showed more positive attitudes to customer engagement and intention to purchase compared to those who spent fewer hours using emojis in digital marketing communications for. The current inquiry shows that respondents who spent greater amounts via digital platforms showed more positive consumer engagement attitudes compared to the respondents who spent higher amounts using emojis in digital marketing communications. Research indicates that digital spending is adopted by most young adults (Dabija & Lung, 2019:1-8; Smit, 2021; Payfast, 2021; Uthman et al., 2021:1-71; CM Group, 2022). Dmitrieva (2019) found that people are more likely to buy a product if the advertisement includes emoji, which substantiates the results of this study.

The findings of this study suggest that emojis can be an effective tool for marketers to reach young consumers who are spending a significant amount of time online and are willing to spend money via digital platforms. It is important for marketers to stay up-to-date on the latest trends in emoji usage and to use emojis in a way that is authentic and relevant to their brand and target audience.

Recommendations

Even if the marketing message is for utilitarian products, brands should find creative, entertaining, and appealing ways to incorporate emojis. This will ensure that the targeted market spends money on digital media. Schroeder (2017) reported a surge in visibility and engagement after introducing emojis, which ultimately boosts revenue. The use of emojis in digital marketing communications increases engagement and intention to purchase. So, emojis are amusing, comfortable, and simple to use, which make it easier for younger customers to find themselves clicking the "checkout" button after enjoying the content, and making products appear enticing to try out.

7.4 Population group - Coloured population

The research suggest that the Coloured population group showed more positive customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes due to emoji digital marketing communications in comparison with the White population group. Some studies have found a corroboration between Coloured ethnicity and digital marketing communication using emojis amongst the Generation Z cohort (Du Plessis, 2020; Murthy et al., 2020:1-18). Alshenqeeti (2016:56-69) mentions that although there are some regional variations in how emojis are used, their increasing global ubiquity suggests that they may be a way to avoid, or at least reduce, cross-cultural misunderstanding. This study also demonstrates the importance of being more inclusive when brands use emojis.

The findings of this study suggest that brands should be mindful of the cultural differences in emoji usage when creating digital marketing campaigns. It is important for brands to be more inclusive when using emojis, which means using emojis that represent a variety of people and cultures.

Recommendations

Emojis are made available with a variety of skin colour options, so brands should be mindful of the skin colour they use when sending marketing communications, as it may be misrepresented. Young consumers want to belong, and they want to be comfortable while at it, so brands can assist by customising and using emojis of different skin colours for their diverse Generation Z audience when creating and sharing these digital marketing communications, which could assist in increasing customer engagement and intention to purchase.

7.5 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 the usage of emojis, and the usage frequency of these emojis in the context of digital marketing towards the young consumers. This section will discuss the theoretical insights uncovered in the findings of this study.

Firstly, 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 (Hussein & Hassan, 2016:1006-1023; Hayes et al., 2020:17-30; Dmitrieva, 2019; Baek et al., 2022:988-1002; Huang et al., 2022:665-682; Cavalheiro et al., 2022:1-8). This means that the use of emojis in digital media platforms by brands positively influences customer engagement and intention to purchase. Smits (2021) supports these results by observing that emoji usage also displays a brand as playful and easy to engage with. This speaks to the brand's personality and how comfortable it is for the younger generation to engage with it before making purchasing decisions. Innovative technologies are constantly being developed, introduced, and advanced in our modern society. Such technologies, however, are meaningless unless there is also a willingness to introduce and accept them. As a result, the TAM was developed as an instrument to determine information technology acceptance (Kim et al., 2016:4997-5013). In this research, the author extends previous studies of the TAM (Kim et al., 2016:4997-5013; Jan et al., 2019:202-210; Purwanto, 2020:118-135) to explain young consumers' voluntary usage of emojis in digital marketing platforms.

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. Das et al. (2019:147-156) and

Dmitrieva (2019) were among the first to investigate the use of emojis in marketing communications; however, there has not been much research on how these emojis affect the attitudes of younger consumers when used in digital marketing communications. To bridge this gap, this study examined emojis in the context of digital marketing communications towards the Generation Z group. This study showed a positive association between involvement and perceived usefulness due to emoji digital marketing communications. This highlights the fact that involving emojis in digital marketing communications is useful as it can be interesting and involve young consumers, as well as changing their perceptions and attitude towards digital marketing communications with emojis. These findings contribute to the growing literature on the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications and their ability for productive efficiency. In addition, a positive relationship between involvement and perceived ease of use of emojis in digital marketing communications was found in this research, adding to the knowledge that involving emojis in digital marketing communications involves the younger customers as they are understandable and yield positive results. Moreover, this study found a positive relationship between the perceived ease of use and the perceived usefulness of emojis in digital marketing communications.

Dmitrieva (2019) concludes that emojis operate as a universal form of language that can influence perceptions of an advertisement by creating an emotional link and more favourable attitudes towards marketing communications. These findings prove and contribute to the theory that emojis are not difficult to use and have the power to improve digital marketing communications. There were positive perceived usefulness and customer engagement attitudinal associations towards the use of emojis in digital marketing communications, according to the findings of the current study. This adds value to the knowledge of the process of how emoji convenience impacts the young consumer's engagement. The current research further revealed a favourable relationship between perceived ease of use and customer engagement when emojis are used in digital marketing communications. Duffett et al. (2019:1-24) suggested that Generation Z expects seamless information. This study contributes to the knowledge that emojis provide consistency in brand messages, they are easy to understand, and this increases the level of customer engagement. The trust and customer engagement relationship showed positive attitudes. It is possible to increase customer engagement by including emojis in brand communications on digital media because doing so makes organisations appear more playful, which leads to increased customer engagement (Smits, 2021). Even though the aforementioned study did not demonstrate or prove the association, it can be concluded that emojis appeal to customers and are more effective at increasing positive influence on younger customers. Trust and involvement associations were found to yield positive attitudes towards the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications amongst the Generation Z cohort. These findings contribute to the customer-

centric process whilst also involving a credible digital language that is interesting when communicating with the members of Gen Z. Favourable attitudes were found between trust and intention to purchase association due to the emojis in digital marketing platforms towards the younger customers. This adds to the knowledge of the customer buying process, emojis are safe to use and they stimulate interest in marketing communications.

The current research found that the relationship between customer engagement and intention to purchase showed positive attitudes towards the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications. Emojis play an important role in attracting attention, stimulating interactions, and improving consumer experience, as well as intent to purchase (Das et al., 2019:147-156). Hence, the findings of the study contribute to the TAM literature that emoji usage in digital marketing communications positively influences various associations between involvement, trust, perceived usefulness, and perceived ease of use, which ultimately has a favourable influence on customer engagement and intention to purchase among Generation Z consumers.

The results showed that emojis used in digital marketing communications had in significant positive influence on Generation Z's emoji usage, emoji brand message engagement, online usage hours, and digital spending toward engagement and intention to purchase, which add to the TAM discourse. This is parallel to the findings by Rodrigues et al. (2017:1532-1543) where people who exhibited positive attitudes toward emoji use are more likely to perceive a message with emoji as more efficient. Emojis are oriented towards persuading a receiver to engage with the message, therefore serving a direct goal in creating customer engagement. Dmitrieva (2019); Lee et al. (2021:1-15); and Smits (2021) concur that emoji presence also increases purchase intentions. Thus, emojis in digital marketing communications made some original contributions to the TAM based on the limited research in cross-tabulation of Generation Z's emoji usage factors with customer engagement and intention to purchase. Emoji usage showed positive results on positive customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes towards marketing communications with emojis among the members of Gen Z. However, Cavalheiro et al. (2022:1-8) found that in situations involving greater seriousness or responsibility from a brand, people may be less receptive to emoji usage (e.g., the call back of a defective product). Emoji usage needs careful execution as it has been proven to be a sensitive and effective matter. The findings add value to the knowledge that the emoji usage leads to favourable customer reactions towards the brand and that the context needs to be considered.

The current enquiry found a positive response to the emoji brand message engagement in terms of customer engagement and intention to purchase because of emojis in digital marketing communications. This study encourages the use of emojis by brands in digital platforms. These findings add to the new dimension of how emojis work in brand communications (Smits, 2021:1-

58). Large numbers of online usage hours were shown to be associated with positive attitudes to increase customer engagement and intention to purchase because of emojis in digital marketing communications. According to Smith et al. (2019:1-14), brands should consider that young consumers have short attention spans, especially when reading, but much longer attention spans when engaging in interactive activities. Emojis are simple to understand, and they can quickly capture attention and communicate a message. Consequently, this study contributes to the knowledge that younger consumers are attracted by an interesting and engaging content. More positive consumer engagement resulted in higher digital spending attitudes due to emojis used in digital marketing communications. Esposito et al. (2017:1-15) evaluated the efficacy of nudges designed to discourage the purchase of incompatible, digital products. The use of emojis in emotive messages appealed more to the younger generation, who were more accustomed to them during digital spending. So, the current study contributes to the view in existing literature that young consumers are willing to spend more money on digital purchases because of the use of emojis in marketing communications. Hence, the current study also provided a significant addition to the TAM theory in the field of advertising and Generation Z attitudes research via cross analysis with various emoji usage factors versus consumer engagement and intention to purchase.

The Coloured population group showed more positive customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes due to emoji digital marketing communications in comparison to the White population group. Bai et al. (2019:1-16) reported that emojis show a high degree of contextual sensitivity; different language types influence the use of emoji; and users in different countries tend to use emoji differently. This means that differences in emoji usage exist not only between countries, but also within the same country. This adds to the human affectivity knowledge that emoji usage is structured by different backgrounds, geographical areas, and skin colour, all of which trigger positive and negative consumer responses. Therefore, these variables are also likely to shape specific perceptions, such as the appropriateness of brands using emoji in consumer communication (Cavalheiro et al., 2022:1-8). Because there is little research on the effect of emoji demographic factors on the TAM, these findings significantly contribute to the theoretical framework of attitude research in digital advertising.

7.6 Managerial or practical implications

Emojis are considered to play an important role in digital media communication, whether between two people, a group or with brands; emojis could intensify the persuasive appeals that are meant to generate customer engagement and encourage intention to purchase. This study can contribute to organisations in South Africa, since they can use emojis in their digital marketing communications to engage consumers, especially in time such as the recent COVID-19

pandemic, when young consumers were looking for brands that would understand and connect with them. Emojis save time, are simple to understand, and are clearer than voice notes or videos. Sharma et al. (2020:9450-9467) state that the most important feature of emojis is their ability to convey a message in a more simple, convincing, and humorous manner, which is why youth are drawn to them and recall and remember them for a long time.

Organisations and brands in South Africa should take this digital language serious 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 the younger consumers, as this 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 it is beneficial for building trust, involvement and forging lasting relationship with younger consumers. Second, emojis allow brands to personalise the message they want to convey to their target audience. According to the findings of this study, Generation Z use 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 in digital marketing communications, brands could create appealing and involving content, which could result in an increase in customer engagement and intention to purchase. Thirdly, emojis are useful and easy to use, involving, and are considered trustworthy (Das et al., 2019:147-156; Hayden, 2019; McShane et al., 2021:96-110), 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, organisations should use them, but keep in mind that emoji effects can vary depending on their fit (Dmitrieva, 2019; Wang et al., 2023:1-15).

The current study found some significant results which brands should take note of when targeting the younger consumers (members of Gen Z) on digital platforms to enhance customer engagement and intention to purchase. When utilising emojis in digital marketing communications, brands should ensure that they are easy to use and to 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 colour or personality; emojis can intensify a message, improve efficiency, and provide relevant information; and they are perceived as credible, trustworthy, and secure (trust). Emojis humanise 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 in digital platforms (involvement), especially when brands share content using emojis that invite younger customers to share their thoughts, which will facilitate favourable 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 the 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 customised emojis that can be used to purchase products by the younger generation, which could facilitate sustainable relationships, customer satisfaction and increase sales.

It could also be beneficial for brands to consider the emoji usage in their digital marketing, on different digital platforms; even though they have not investigated in the current study. Das et al. (2019:147-156), Dmitrieva (2019), Cavalheiro et al. (2022:1-8), and Wang et al. (2023:1-15) comment that a customer's engagement depends on the context, so brands should take into consideration the type and frequency of emoji brand message customers engage in; the hours spent engaging in digital platforms and the average monthly spending on digital platforms. Understanding the usage characteristics of younger customers can help brands decide which emojis to use in marketing campaigns to increase customer engagement and intention to purchase. For example, if an organisation provides financial services, customising emojis could help brands stand out by creating their own emojis that depict exactly what the brand is offering; this could resonate with younger customers and increase customer engagement and intention to purchase. How customers search for information, interact with, and purchase products and services on digital platforms should be considered by brands. For example, they could keep track of the emojis that younger customers prefer and monitor how and when they use them in order to tailor content that appeals to the customer base, which could positively influence customer engagement and intention to purchase to emoji usage.

The customer population group should be considered as it makes it easier to find younger customers, understand what is meaningful to them, and convey emoji brand campaigns that resonate with them. The above-mentioned demographic factor is influential because it promotes equality among members of Generation Z. Emojis are an inclusive communication tool that crosses geographies and demographic groups; brands could use these to connect better with younger customers, despite population differences, because emojis offer a huge variety of colours, forms, categories, and types for a brand to choose from when sharing content. According to the findings of this study, using emojis in digital marketing communication had a positive impact, which is something brands should consider when developing marketing strategies. This current study also found that emojis have some positive effects when used in digital marketing communications and allow marketers to be more effective by ensuring that the digital media route contributes to a positive and constructive attitude of the digital media audience.

7.7 Research 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, due to the COVID-19 social distancing protocols, data collection took place through the researcher's personal online accounts and relied on referrals, so the sample was conducted using a non-probability sampling technique, which may not be completely representative. Third, 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. 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. Fourth, 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 e-WOM 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 respondents in Cape Town, South Africa; therefore, future research might focus on other parts of the country to gain a broader geographical and cultural perspective on emoji usage and adoption in South Africa.

The study addressed and answered all the research objectives:

Firstly, the research successfully determined the influence of perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, trust, and involvement on customer engagement and intention to purchase due to emojis being used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z in Cape Town. Secondly, the influence of emojis in digital marketing communications on Generation Z's customer engagement and intention to purchase regarding this form of marketing communications. Emojis may be used to create more effective digital marketing campaigns that resonate with young consumers and increase customer engagement and intention to purchase. Thirdly, this study found that the Coloured population group showed more positive customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes due to emoji digital marketing communications in comparison with the White population group, proving that Coloured people are more likely to use emojis and to respond positively to emoji digital marketing communications. Lastly, the current study established that there was a positive influence usage factors had on customer engagement and intention to purchase owing to the use of emojis in digital marketing communications among Generation.

7.8 Conclusion

A study by Mladenović et al. (2022:1-18) focused on Generation Z and provided evidence that emojis increase affect and purchase intent. However, this current study found that emojis used in advertising increase customer engagement and purchase intent among South Africa's Gen Z cohort. The findings indicate that there is great potential for the use of emojis in digital marketing communications. This study's primary research objective was to determine the influence of perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, trust and involvement on customer engagement and intention to purchase due to emojis used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z in Cape Town. According to the findings from the responses by the Generation Z sample polled in this study, incorporating emojis in the promotional texts stimulates more pleasant emotions and create positive attitudes towards digital marketing communications in terms of increased customer engagement and intention to purchase. This study extended the TAM and developed a new model that was able to show that involvement was positively associated with perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use; perceived ease of use was found to be associated with perceived usefulness; both perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use were positively associated with customer engagement; involvement was associated with trust and customer engagement in a favourable way; and, trust and customer engagement were positively associated with intention to purchase. This enquiry established that the attitudes of Generation Z toward emoji marketing communications were generally positive, and all the hypotheses were supported.

Furthermore, it was demonstrated that the use of emojis in digital marketing communications increased customer engagement and intention to purchase. Das et al. (2019) report that a consumers' prior experience with and attitude toward a brand in terms of valence, as well as other factors such as brand personality, may influence how they respond to the brand using emoji in their advertising communications. Emojis contribute to the consumer's positive perception of a brand. According to the findings of this research, it can be concluded that using emojis in digital marketing communications has an influence on Generation Z's customer engagement and intention to purchase, therefore answering the first research question and objective. Further, the enquiry found that emoji usage in digital marketing communications resulted in greater Gen Z cohort customer engagement and intention to purchase than when emojis were not used; increased online hours on digital platforms by the members of Gen Z sample also resulted in positive customer engagement and intention to purchase sentiment; higher levels of emoji brand message engagement caused more favourable customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes; and higher online monthly digital spending amounts resulted in more positive customer engagement predispositions among Generation Z respondents, which answers the second research objective. This study affirmed that the Coloured members of Gen Z group showed more positive customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes due to emoji digital marketing

than the White population. However, gender, age, and education level had no significant influence on emojis used in digital marketing communications for customer engagement and intention to purchase. Hence, population group was the only significant demographical factor, which answered the third research objective.

This study provides significant theoretical and practical implications, which contributes to the knowledge of the extended TAM, digital marketing, and the usage of emojis in digital marketing communications in South Africa. It considered how emojis can improve communication and how these symbols can be used as a marketing and communication tool for the Gen Z cohort for increasing positive customer engagement and intention to purchase attitudes. This study is significant because it will help brands, organisations, marketers, and advertisers improve their market competitiveness by ensuring that customer preferences are more fully understood and adapted to changing technology, as well as serve as a platform to enhance the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies. As most things appear to be fully moving digital, generational preferences change, and new generations take over, there will always be a need for the improvement in digital marketing communications. Hence, this study has verified that emojis encourage customer engagement and intention to purchase among young customers.

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APPENDIX A: RESPONDENT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Faculty of Business and Management Sciences
Ethics Informed Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Category of Participants (tick as appropriate):

Staff/Workers		*Teachers*		*Parents*		*Lecturers*		*Students*	**X**
Other (specify)									

You are kindly invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Mihlali Maraule from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. The findings of this study will contribute towards (tick as appropriate):

An undergraduate project		*A conference paper*	
An Honours project		*A published journal article*	
A Masters/doctoral thesis	**X**	*A published report*	

Selection criteria
You were selected as a possible participant in this study because:

(a) You are between the ages of 18-25 years (i.e. are a member of the Generation Z cohort).
(b) You use digital platforms, which include emojis.

The information below gives details about the study to help you decide whether you would want to participate.

Title of the research: Influence of emojis in digital marketing communications on customer engagement and intention to purchase among Generation Z in Cape Town.

A brief explanation of what the research involves:

The research involves an investigation on the influence of emojis in marketing communications among members of Generation Z. The specific research objectives of the study are to: determine the influence of perceived ease of use, perceived enjoyment, perceived usefulness, trust, involvement and mobility on customer engagement due to emojis used in digital marketing communications among Generation Z in Cape Town.

Procedures
If you volunteer to participate in this study the following will be done:

1. Describe the main research procedures to you in advance, so that you are informed about what to expect;
2. All interviewees will be treated with respect by arriving on time for all the interview schedules and being well prepared;
3. Conduct an introduction with the interviewee in order to break ice;
4. All the interviewees will be asked for permission to record the interviews and also take some note where applicable;
5. In a case where there is no clarity, the interviewees will be allowed to ask for confirmation or clarity of words/sentences/phrases to ensure accuracy of the data collected;

6. Participants will be told that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identifiable as theirs;
7. Participants will be given the option of omitting questions they do not want to answer or feel uncomfortable with;
8. Participants will be told that questions do not pose any realistic risk of distress or discomfort, either physically or psychologically, to them;
9. At the end of each interview all the interviewees will be thanked for their time and information provided for this study;
10. Participants will be debriefed at the end of their participation (i.e. give them a brief explanation of the study).

You are invited to contact the researchers should you have any questions about the research before or during the study. You will be free to withdraw your participation at any time without having to give a reason.

Kindly complete the table below before participating in the research.

Tick the appropriate column		
Statement	Yes	No
1. I understand the purpose of the research.		
2. I understand what the research requires of me.		
3. I volunteer to take part in the research.		
4. I know that I can withdraw at any time.		
5. I understand that there will not be any form of discrimination against me as a result of my participation or non-participation.		
6. Comment:		

Please sign the consent form. You will be given a copy of this form on request.

Signature of participant	Date

Researcher

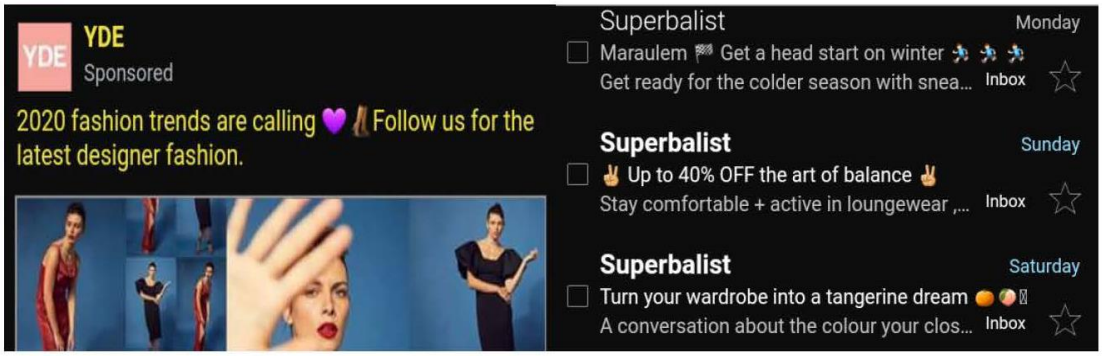
	Name:	Surname:	Contact details:
1.	Mihlali	Maraule	068 279 8409

Contact person: Mihlali Maraule	
Contact number: 068 279 8409	Email: maraulem@gmail.com

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE

Emoji Marketing Communications Survey

Dear Participant, thank you for voluntarily participating in this survey on emojis, which includes marketing communications/ advertisements (refer to the example below). The survey will not take longer than 10 minutes to complete and no personal information is required. Responses are confidential and will provide valuable information on emoji marketing communications, which will be used for academic purposes.



Filter: Do you use any digital platforms that include emojis? No ☐ Yes ☐

1. Which digital platform categories do you use? **Tick ALL that apply**

Search engines ☐ Social media ☐ Video posting platforms ☐ Blogging ☐

Websites ☐ Mobile Apps ☐ Messaging platforms ☐

2. Which digital platforms do you engage with? **Tick ALL that apply.**

Google ☐ Yahoo ☐ Bing ☐ Facebook ☐ Instagram ☐ Twitter ☐

YouTube ☐ Dailymotion ☐ Vimeo ☐ WordPress ☐ Tumblr ☐ Gmail ☐

WhatsApp ☐ Pinterest ☐ TikTok ☐ Other: _____

3. How often do you use emojis? **Tick ONE.**

Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always ☐

4. How often do you engage with brand messages, which include emojis? Tick ONE.

Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always ☐

5. How many hours do you spend engaging online per session? **Tick ONE.**

Less than ½ hour ☐ ½-to-1 hour ☐ 2 hours ☐ 3 hours ☐ 4 hours or more ☐

6. How much do you spend on average per month using digital platforms? **Tick ONE.**

Less than R250 ☐ R251-R500 ☐ R501-R750 ☐ R751-R1 000 ☐ R1 000+ ☐

7. Demographic factors

7.1 What is your gender? Male ☐ Female ☐

7.2 Your age (in years)? _____

7.3 Your highest level of education? Grade 8-11 ☐ Grade 12 ☐ Completed Grade 12 ☐

National Curriculum Statements (NCS)/diploma/certificate/degree ☐ Postgraduate degree ☐

7.4 With which population group do you associate yourself most?

Black ☐ Coloured ☐ Indian/Asian ☐ White ☐

Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree regarding brand usage, marketing communication messages and advertisements, which include emoji statements (TICK ONE block per statement):

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Customer engagement					
I can engage with brands that use emojis anytime					
I always respond to the advertisements, which include emojis					
Emojis effectively influence my level of online engagement with brands					
Emojis are engaging when used by brands and products					
Perceived ease of use					
Emojis in digital platforms are easy to use					
The use of emojis in brand digital platforms are easy to interpret					
Brands can easily use/include emojis every time they text and/or post					
Viewing emojis that are used by brands requires minimal effort					
Perceived enjoyment					
The use of emojis by brands and products exceeds my expectations					
Brands are able express emotions and feeling through emojis					
Emojis used by brands and products are fun					
Emojis used by brands are enjoyable					
Perceived usefulness					
Emojis improve the meaning of the message from brands and products					
Emojis in advertisements are convenient					
Emojis in advertisements improve efficiency					
Advertisements with emojis provide relevant information					
Trust					
Advertisements with emojis are credible					
Advertisements with emojis are trustworthy and secure					
I can trust brands that use emojis					
Emojis are reliable when used by brands and products					
Involvement					
Advertisements with emojis are interesting to me					
My level of interest with brands and products is high, which include emojis					
I am very involved with the use of emojis to convey meaning by brands					
Mobility					
Emojis enable brands to communicate with whoever they want					
I can see brands and products that use emojis everywhere					
Brands that use emojis in their advertisements can be viewed any time					
Intention to purchase					
Advertisements with emojis increase purchase intent of featured products					
Emojis usage by brands and products have a positive impact on my purchase decisions					
I will use advertisements with emojis to purchase a featured product					
I will use advertisements with emojis to buy online					

Thank you for your time!

APPENDIX C: ETHICS CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

P.O. Box 1906 • Bellville 7535 South Africa •Tel: +27 21 4603291 • Email: fbmsethics@cput.ac.za
Symphony Road Bellville 7535

Office of the Chairperson **Research Ethics Committee**	**FACULTY: BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCES**

The Faculty's Research Ethics Committee (FREC) on **20 October 2020**, ethics **Approval** was granted to **Mihlali Maraule (215191250)** for a research activity **Master of Marketing** at Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Title of dissertation/thesis/project:	**Influence of emojis in digital marketing communications on customer engagement among Generation Z in Cape Town** Lead Supervisor (s): Prof R Duffett and Mr L Mandhlazi

Comments:

Decision: APPROVED

Signed: Chairperson: Research Ethics Committee	**21 October 2020** **Date**

Clearance Certificate No | 2020FOBREC807

APPENDIX D: COPY EDITOR CERTIFICATE

Ken Barris, PhD

Editing and research writing services

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30-05-2023

To whom it may concern

This is to certify that I have copy-edited the following thesis by Mihlali Maraule:

> Influence of emojis in digital marketing communications on customer engagement and intention to purchase among Generation Z in Cape Town

Please note that this does not cover content, conceptual organisation or textual changes made subsequent to the editing process.

Best regards

Ken Barris

KEN BARRIS

APPENDIX E: TURNITIN ORIGINALITY REPORT

Influence of emojis in digital marketing communications on customer engagement and intention to purchase among Generation Z in Cape Town

ORIGINALITY REPORT

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