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The Mechanism of the Affect Heuristic in Social Media Marketing

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Abstract. With the growing integration of personalized content recommendations, emotionally engaging advertisements, and seamless purchasing functions on social media platforms, understanding how emotional responses influence consumer judgments and purchasing decisions has become increasingly important in digital marketing research. This literature review examines how the affect heuristic influences consumer responses to social media marketing. Drawing on existing research, it explores how short videos, live streaming, and algorithmic recommendations amplify emotional responses and shape purchase-related decisions. The findings suggest that positive emotions influence consumer behaviour through emotional arousal, trust, social validation, and emotional contagion. Negative emotions, particularly fear and sadness, are effective under specific conditions, such as when credible solutions or meaningful outcomes are presented. However, emotional marketing also raises ethical concerns, including manipulation and consumer vulnerability. The review concludes that the effectiveness of emotional appeals depends on product type, platform characteristics, and consumer context. Further research using experimental and transactional data is needed to establish causal relationships between emotional responses and actual purchases.

Keywords: Affect Heuristic, Social Media Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, Emotional Appeals, Purchase Decisions

1. Introduction

Short-video and social-commerce platforms such as TikTok, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu have become important channels through which many contemporary brands reach consumers, and they increasingly host the purchase itself rather than merely the advertisement. Their videos are short, emotional, and delivered by recommendation algorithms [1]. In such scenarios, consumers might make purchase decisions based on their initial reactions instead of careful consideration, while those browsing live-stream commerce might switch from viewing to purchasing during the same session [2, 3]. The affect heuristic, or the tendency to evaluate an object based upon the positive or negative emotion it evokes, provides a valuable window into this process [4]. However, when discussing emotional marketing, it is common to treat emotions as being generally positive and uniform, and to conflate emotions, intentions, and purchases. In sum, this review suggests that the affect heuristic is an important but contingent factor in social media marketing: it is effective in increasing purchase-

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related responses in low-involvement and hedonic contexts, but with negative emotion, offering a credible resolution of the negative affect is necessary in order to persuade. The review first presents the theoretical underpinnings of affect-based judgement, followed by a discussion of how platform features enhance it, a consideration of positive and negative emotional pathways in turn, and finally, implications and limitations.

2. Theoretical foundations

2.1. The affect heuristic

Affect serves as information when processing resources are limited, replacing effortful analysis. Slovic et al. proposed that people tag stimuli with positive or negative valence and consult these tags when forming judgements [4]. Finucane et al. provided the critical experimental findings: judgements of risk and benefit were inversely related; this inverse relationship became more pronounced when decision time was shortened; information that increased perceived benefit also decreased perceived risk in the absence of risk information [5]. The time-pressure finding is most relevant to social media, as a feed that changes several times a second recreates the time-limited conditions that favour affect. In a consumer context, Shiv and Fedorikhin found that participants under cognitive load chose a chocolate cake over a healthier fruit salad, a result consistent with the above [6]. These studies together suggest that affective choice is not a characteristic of the consumer, but rather a function of limited processing capacity, making the platform context, rather than solely the individual consumer, the unit of analysis.

2.2. Dual-process accounts and their limits

According to dual-process theory, feelings are strengthened when attention is constrained, but there is a limitation in this popular version of the theory. Kahneman compared a fast, associative System 1 with a slow, effortful System 2; the affect heuristic is typically understood as a classic System 1 process [7]. Evans and Stanovich warn that the description should not be taken at face value: although the hallmark of Type 2 processing is that it requires working memory, Type 1 processing should not be confused with error [8]. Lerner et al. further note that emotions do not simply replace reasoning; rather, certain emotions have clear appraisal tendencies, such that while both fear and anger are negative emotions, they drive risk judgements in opposing directions [9]. While emotional content is more likely to elicit an immediate response than informational content in low-involvement contexts, valence is not a fine enough measure because results depend on the type of emotion activated and whether the consumer has the ability to deliberate.

3. How social media platforms amplify affect

Social media marketing can best be described as value communication that is conducted from the brand's perspective and relies on platforms that allow for user-generated content, interaction, and networked distribution. The definition is based not only on platform-specific features but also on the relationship between brands and users, and the three features discussed below are plausibly those that enhance the affect heuristic. First, algorithmic repetition and constant scrolling can strengthen emotional signals and leave less time to reflect on the product; Montag et al. identified the short-video format and recommendation algorithm as key to TikTok's ability to capture attention [1]. Second, the affordances of live video, including real-time visibility and interaction, help to enhance

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consumers' sense of presence and immersion, thereby boosting purchase intentions [10]. Third, including the transaction in the content interface eliminates the delay that might allow initial affect to subside. Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut provide an important qualification: live streaming also helps to lower uncertainty about products and sellers, and thus increases trust [11]. Platform effects are not simply emotional; they involve emotion as well as information, and accounts claiming that all persuasive power comes from feeling overstate the case.

4. Positive emotion and purchase-related outcomes

4.1. Arousal, trust, and impulse buying

The positive emotions triggered by short videos and live streams seem to have the most significant impact on purchase-related outcomes through arousal and trust. A meta-analysis by Iyer et al. reveals that hedonic motives and affective states were reliable correlates of impulse buying well before social media [12]. Ming et al. conclude that social presence in live-stream commerce helps to build trust and flow experience, which in turn positively influence impulse buying, while Wang et al. demonstrate that streamer interaction boosts both trust and emotional arousal, which mediate its effect on impulse buying [2, 3]. Positive affect can signal a safe environment, narrowing information search and decreasing attention to negative cues. Wang et al. also found that expected regret diminishes these relationships, suggesting that this boundary condition is the point at which a moment of reflection can interrupt the path from affect to purchase [3]. The evidence is consistent, but it is largely cross-sectional and based on self-reported tendencies or intentions rather than observed transactions, limiting its causal strength.

4.2. Social validation and attention

The second pathway is through social signals which complement, but do not replace, affect. Content that is liked, commented on and shared is also considered to be widely accepted, and viewers may think that the product is well liked and desirable, which can sometimes aid conversion. Thus, dwell time and engagement are useful metrics of the process, but are not direct measures of purchase. A cumulative effect is possible, but there is also a possible effect of viewer interest on longer viewing times, so the causal direction should be interpreted properly. There is product type-based moderation of this pathway. With hedonic products, humorous influencer messages have been shown to result in emotional contagion and greater engagement and purchase intent, whereas informative messages had a stronger effect on utilitarian products [13]. Examples on Xiaohongshu also illustrate the relationship between enthusiasm and audience response, as beauty creators use colourful words in a hyperbolic way, but these serve as illustrations rather than as a causal argument. Therefore, the commercial value of social validation depends on the match between emotional tone and product category.

4.3. Emotional contagion and sharing

The third route carries affect beyond the initial viewer, and the evidence suggests that sharing and selling are separate outcomes. Berger and Milkman conducted a study that revealed that high-arousal positive emotions (awe) and high-arousal negative emotions (anger, anxiety) were correlated with increased sharing of news articles, while sadness was correlated with decreased sharing [14]. In an examination of YouTube ads, Tellis et al. found that positive emotions increase sharing rates,

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whereas strong initial branding decreases them [15]. Goldenberg and Gross argue that such effects might be more pronounced online, because platforms provide a wealth of emotional information and also reward expressive content [16]. The affective effects can last for several weeks within networks, and their downstream effects on purchasing vary and remain an open question, according to Wilkie et al. [17]. This trade-off is best addressed by Akpinar and Berger, who found that emotional content that was not brand-related boosted sharing but had little effect on brand evaluation, while brand-related content improved both [18]. Optimising the strategy for shares alone may then create attention that does not reach the product.

5. Negative emotion: conditions and boundaries

Positive affect is persuasive because it makes a product seem desirable, while negative affect creates an aversive state that consumers seek to avoid. Its persuasiveness therefore depends on whether or not a marketed product provides that escape.

5.1. Fear appeals in risk-related categories

Fear appeals are most likely to be effective in categories where the product offers a realistic means of reducing the threat, such as insurance, health, security, and personal care. There is meta-analytic evidence supporting this conditional perspective. Overall, Tannenbaum et al. found that fear appeals are effective; they found little evidence that fear appeals backfire, contrary to a common assumption, and the efficacy statements in the messages increased their effectiveness [19]. Bigsby and Albarracín likewise show that adding self-efficacy and response-efficacy information increases persuasion, and Limbu and Huhmann report that, in vaccination campaigns, messages combining a credible threat with response efficacy and self-efficacy are more effective than threat-only appeals [20, 21]. While the question of whether threat captures attention and then leads to action remains an open one, Balconi et al. found measurable emotional reactions to COVID-19 advertising [22]. The affect heuristic explains the mechanism: fear induces an aversive state, and the recommended product is attractive because of its ability to alleviate it. The strength of fear is therefore less important than the match between threat and solution, and fear is not well suited to hedonic categories in which there is no threat to resolve.

5.2. Sadness, empathy, and compassion fatigue

Charitable and crowdfunding solicitations tend to evoke sadness, which can be effective, but only up to a point. Small et al. demonstrated that a single identifiable victim attracted more donations than statistical descriptions of many victims, and that prompting deliberation reduced giving to the identifiable victim without increasing giving to statistical victims [23]. These stories can elicit feelings of empathy or personal distress, which can lead to donation through different channels: empathic concern can focus on the person who benefits, while distress can result in donation partly to alleviate the viewer's discomfort. The difference is important because a feeling of distress encourages avoidance. People who expect to face overwhelming demands for help, as Cameron and Payne demonstrate, down-regulate their emotional responses to victims, making them insensitive to mass suffering [24]. Exposure to disturbing content can also lead to compassion fatigue, reflected in diminished attention, sharing, or donation. Sadness is not well suited to online sharing, and appeals that pair sadness with evidence of real-world impact are more likely to maintain support [14].

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5.3. Ethical boundaries

Negative emotional marketing also raises ethical issues that positive branding does not, since it may exploit the vulnerable instead of creating value for them. Algorithmic feeds can serve high-arousal, negative content repeatedly, and targeting means that fear-based messages can be sent to users who are already feeling anxious about health, ageing, or finances. The online dynamics of Twitter favour emotionally charged content, as Brady et al. discovered: each additional moral-emotional word in a message was found to boost its diffusion [25]. Liu finds a paradox in persuasion: fear and scarcity appeals may negatively affect perceived ethicality and brand trust, but positively affect purchase intention [26]. Short-term conversion and long-term brand equity can therefore be pulled in opposite directions. Persuasion knowledge provides some protection: Boerman et al. demonstrate that knowledge of a message's persuasive intent can be triggered by disclosing a sponsorship, and that disclosure can dampen consumers' desire to share sponsored messages [27]. The affect heuristic can also be a source of harm to consumers, including excessive spending, increased health anxiety, and emotional fatigue, which is why it is not only an ethical obligation but also a commercial necessity to provide consumers with honest information and balanced threat messages.

6. Discussion and implications

The analysed literature suggests that the affect heuristic plays an important role as a link between social media content and purchase-related behaviour, although it is not the only factor and works alongside trust and uncertainty reduction [10, 11]. Positive emotions influence purchase-related outcomes through arousal and trust, social validation, and contagion, while negative emotions are category-specific and influence purchases only when paired with a clear solution. On the practitioners' side, there is a need to fit the emotion with the type of product: humour and aesthetic pleasure fit hedonic and fast-moving products, while fear fits products reducing perceived risks, where efficacy information is well communicated, and the action path is easy. Emotion ought also to be part of the brand and not borrowed from irrelevant content, and engagement is not synonymous with sales; it is a moment in the consumer's journey. The expected regret finding serves as a practical protection mechanism because it allows consumers to stop before checkout and weigh the emotional driver for buying a product against the cost, need, and product usage, a reflective pause which platform design otherwise takes away from the buying process.

There are definite limitations to these conclusions. This paper is a narrative review and therefore does not allow for the calculation of causal effect sizes. The majority of platform studies are cross-sectional, based on self-reported intentions, and strongly concentrated in Chinese live-streaming contexts; thus, generalisation is limited. Future research should integrate field experiments and transactional data, explore the differences between the various platforms in terms of the emotions they may trigger, examine how the impact of AI-driven emotional targeting on consumer welfare changes across markets with varying emotional expression and advertising trust norms, and include discrete emotions in the analyses to assess whether such differences exist.

7. Conclusion

The affect heuristic emerges from this review as an important but conditional mechanism in social media marketing. Short-video and live-stream environments recreate the time pressure and limited attention that favour feelings over thoughts, and positive feelings can lead to purchase-related outcomes in three ways: arousal and trust, social validation, and contagion. Negative emotions

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persuade within narrower limits, when fear is matched by a credible solution and sadness by visible impact, and both carry risks of avoidance, fatigue, and distrust. The wider point is that the same mechanism benefits marketers and at the same time exposes consumers to harm, with the crucial factor being design, that is, whether emotion is a part of a product's true worth or whether it is being used to circumvent judgement. The most pressing question in the field is whether feeling-driven intentions translate into purchases, and at what cost to consumer welfare: the evidence available to date is largely correlational, with a focus on intentions. In the future, as content increasingly becomes an integral part of transactions, the affect-based underpinnings of choice will become as important to consumer protection as they are to marketing effectiveness.

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