



Using affective content to promote high-involvement services on social media

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ABSTRACT

Service providers' communication on social media has become a viable method to influence customer purchasing behavior and firm outcomes. Because services are intangible, one of the most pertinent challenges is to design text-based social media content to reduce customers' perceived risk and enhance desired outcomes. According to Emotions as Social Information (EASI) theory, affective expression can positively influence observer's reactions. Yet, evidence suggests that affective content (i.e., the use of affective words) is less helpful in high-involvement situations, as customers prefer cognitive information to reduce risk. However, four experiments reveal that high-involvement service providers can enhance customers' purchase intentions by employing affective content in their online communication. This is because affective content signals effort of the provider, reducing perceived risk, and increasing purchase intentions. Results also demonstrate affective content works better for prevention- (vs. promotion) focused customers and for providers with high-quality reputations, indicating the relative primacy of inferential over affective processes when evaluating affective content. Practically, service providers should carefully rebalance their communication to increase affective content in social media posts.

1. Introduction

Given the importance of a strong social media presence to communicate with customers and increase purchase intentions, firms spend about £268 billion annually on promoting their businesses on social media (Sproutsocial 50+ of the most important social media marketing statistics for 2023, 2023). However, promoting high-involvement services (e.g., education, gyms, healthcare) presents unique challenges due to the greater level of associated risk (Barcelos, Dantas, & Senecal, 2018; Keh & Sun, 2008) so providers need to convince customers, who lack information and expertise, to purchase their services. In addition, the effectiveness of promotional messages depends on customer and firm characteristics (Lee, 2021; Tu, Kwon, & Gao, 2022). Therefore, providers of high-involvement services would benefit from knowledge of what content to use to promote their services on social media, how to adapt this content to certain customer types, and how to modify this content based on firm characteristics.

Guidance on how to post on social media using affective content is abundant in the popular press (e.g., Holt, 2016; Magids, Zorfas, & Lee-mon, 2015). Affective content - messages aimed at evoking emotional

experience via the use of affective words (Ludwig et al., 2013) - can garner twice as much profit as cognitive content, message text providing factual descriptions about services / products (Miller, 2016). Consequently, social media research has examined affective content due to the centrality of emotionality in social media communication (Lee, 2021). However, affective content's use in promoting high-involvement services is underexplored (Wang, Jiang, Han, & Qiu, 2022).

This research addresses this gap by exploring the role of affective content in promoting high-involvement services on social media. With a series of four experiments, we contribute to literature in three important ways. First, Emotions as Social Information (EASI) theory (van Kleef, 2009) evolved to explore the effect of emotions on customers' decisions via affective or cognitive pathways (van Kleef, 2014). We extend the theory to social media communication and propose that emotional expression via the use of affective content in high-involvement service providers' communication on social media has a positive effect on customers' purchase intentions via the cognitive pathway. The reason is affective content helps customers form inferences about providers (i.e., perceived effort) that reduce risk perceptions, a key driver of purchase intentions in high-involvement settings. This finding offers insight into

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the role of emotionality (affective content) in risk-taking situations and addresses calls for research into the underlying mechanism by which affective content has its effects on social media (Lee, 2021).

Second, van Kleef and Côté (2022) indicate the target of emotional expression influences its effectiveness. Individuals orient towards objectives via either promotion or prevention regulatory foci (Higgins, 1997). These foci engender different reactions to affective information (Shah & Higgins, 2001). While research on the nexus between regulatory focus and emotions has concentrated on intrapersonal effects (e.g., Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Yen, Chao, & Lin, 2011) there is evidence that regulatory focus shapes individuals' reactions to others' emotions (van Doorn, van Kleef, & van der Pligt, 2014). We extend this by studying how promotion (vs. prevention) focus shapes customers' perceptions of providers of high-involvement services when viewing affective content on social media. This is critical given the burgeoning attention towards, and recognition of, the pivotal social functions of emotional expression like affective content (van Kleef, 2014).

Third, the efficacy of provider communication is contingent on firm attributes (Batra & Keller, 2016; Tu et al., 2022) and the effect of emotions as information depends on the appropriateness of the emotional expression (van Kleef, 2009). One characteristic which may determine the effectiveness of affective content is brand reputation. Brand reputation signals the power of providers and affective content is more suitable for low power communicators (Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2016). Our research contributes by exploring how providers with different reputations (i.e., quality vs. social responsibility reputation) could use affective content and shows that affective content works better for providers with high-quality reputations. This finding contributes to ongoing discussions on the importance of brand characteristics in predicting customers' actions (Oliveira et al., 2022; Pansari & Kumar, 2017) and advances research on how provider characteristics influence the effectiveness of communication (Antonetti & Crisafulli, 2022; Tu et al., 2022). Collectively, these findings will help providers of high-involvement services to promote their services online more effectively.

2. Background and hypothesis development

2.1. Emotions as information and customers' behaviors

The crucial role of emotions in influencing judgements is consistently acknowledged (Ashtar, Yom-Tov, Rafaeli, & Wirtz, 2023). When assessing a situation, people ask themselves "How do I feel about this" (Schwartz & Clore, 1983) and use the answer to shape their evaluation and behavior. For example, emotions influence investors' intention to explore financial products (Hillenbrand, Saraeva, Money, & Brooks, 2020) and customer-firm relationships (Kohli, Yen, Alwi, & Gupta, 2021). In service encounters, emotions drive customer satisfaction (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999; Mattila & Enz, 2002) and purchasing decisions (Strizhakova, Tsarenko, & Ruth, 2012; Tran, Robinson, & Papparoidamis, 2022). As such, prior research supports predictions that emotions could be used as information to influence customers' behaviors (Ashtar et al., 2023).

However, emotions not only reflect one's internal affective states but also serve as social informational cues to convey messages to observers. Emotions as Social Information (EASI) theory (van Kleef, 2009) specifically elucidates how observers perceive and utilize emotional expressions. EASI theory posits emotional expressions influence observers' behavior via two pathways: (1) affective reactions and (2) cognitive appraisals. Affective reactions are evoked when an individual's emotional expression prompts a spontaneous matching response in an observer through 'contagion' (Pugh, 2001). Cognitive appraisals guide observers' behaviors via inferences about the feelings and intentions of the expresser (Wang, Kirillova, & Lehto, 2017). Service research has shown emotion's impact on others' reactions using EASI pathways. For example, emotional displays provide information about the affective experience of frontline employees and their intentions toward customers

(Kelner & Haidt, 1999). This influences customers through cognitive and affective pathways (van Kleef & Côté, 2022; van Kleef, 2009). Similarly, employees' inauthentic emotional displays decrease perceptions of service performance because it deters customers from the provider (Lechner & Mathmann, 2021). However, research on EASI has paid little attention to emotional expressions on social media, although communicating emotional expressions is common in text-based social media posts (Lee, 2021). Our study contributes by using EASI theory to enrich understanding of social media communication and behavior through emotional expression.

2.2. Emotional expressions in text-based social media messaging

Although emotions lack verbal properties, affective content makes them accessible and contagious (Herhausen, Ludwig, Grewal, Wulf, & Schoegel, 2019). Affective content is critical to social media since customers like to discuss emotional experiences (Berger & Milkman, 2012), often via reviews and word-of-mouth communication about products and experiences (for a review, see Berger, 2014). Researchers have shown the impact of customers' emotional expressions via the use of affective content on social media on marketing outcomes such as review helpfulness (Yin et al., 2017, 2021), customers' engagement with information (Herhausen et al., 2019), and purchase decisions (Ludwig et al., 2013).

Research has also established that customers' text-based emotional expressions on social media influence observers in two ways. First, observers can "catch" emotional expressions from affective words via social transmission (Berger, 2014). This influences their engagement with social media posts (Herhausen et al., 2019). Second, observers make inferences about senders (e.g., perceived effort) when reading affective content on social media (Yin, Bond, & Zhang, 2017). Both these processes are aligned with EASI theory.

It is not only customers who express emotions on social media, brands do too. A brand might try to increase post virality via affective content to influence customers' decisions (Lee, Hosanagar, & Nair, 2018; Ordenes et al., 2019). However, previous research has not systematically evaluated the effectiveness of affective content in a firm's social media posts on customers' purchasing decisions in complex contexts. This is particularly important in high-risk contexts, such as high-involvement services, where emotions are often considered less helpful.

Involvement refers to the personal relevance of a context (Celsi & Olson, 1988), and high-involvement services imply greater perceived risk (Barcelos et al., 2018). Perceived risk refers to the nature and amount of uncertainty that customers associate with a purchase (Cox & Rich, 1964), and this influences information requirements (Ross, 1975). Providers of high-involvement services typically focus on cognitive content to facilitate a more rational evaluation of the purchase (Zhang, Sun, Liu, & Knight, 2014). This may explain why prior research on the effect of affective content on social media (see Table 1) mainly focuses on products rather than services.

However, there is evidence that emotions can play an important informational and motivational role, even for tasks involving more rational and cognitive processes (Damasio, 2006). Affective content helps customers make inferences about the sender (Yin et al., 2017) which implies the cognitive path of EASI theory. This inferential cognitive process might help customers to form their purchasing decisions in high-involvement service settings. Building and extending EASI theory to the context of social media, our research explores whether and how affective content used by providers of high-involvement services influences customers' purchasing decisions via this cognitive path.

When considering affective content in high-involvement services, providers also need to consider their firm's and customers' characteristics (Tu et al., 2022). Following van Kleef and Côté (2022), we suggest that the effectiveness of EASI depends on the target of the message (e.g., types of customers) and the appropriateness of message content for a

Table 1
Affective content and customer outcomes.

Authors (Year)	Study Context	Theory Used	Platform	Independent Variable(s)	Mediator(s)	Moderator(s) Level		Outcome(s)
						Customer	Firm	
Araujo, Neijens, & Vliedenthart, 2015	100 Brands	N/A	Twitter	Emotion				Re-Tweets
Ashley & Tuten, 2015	28 Brands	N/A	Twitter Facebook MySpace	Emotional Appeal				Engagement Score
Cervellon & Galipienzo, 2015	Luxury Hotels	N/A	Facebook Pages	Emotional Content				Attitude to Hotel Quality Perception
Cheung, Pires, & Rosenberger, 2020	Smartphones	N/A	Facebook	Entertainment	Engagement			Engagement Brand Awareness Brand Image
Chwialkowska, 2019	FMCG Fashion Telecomms	N/A	Facebook	Emotional Appeal				Sharing Liking Comment
Coelho, Santos de Oliveira, & Severo de Almeida, 2016	Food Hairdressing Footwear Body Design Gym Wear	N/A	Facebook Instagram	Entertaining Content				Facebook Likes Instagram Likes Facebook Comments Instagram Comments
Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013	FMCG	Uses & Gratifications	Facebook	Entertainment				Likes Comments Shares
de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012	Food Accessories Leisure Wear Alcoholic Drink Cosmetics Mobile Phones	N/A	Facebook	Entertaining Content				Likes Comments
Demmers et al., 2020	Fairs Conferences	Uses & Gratifications	Facebook	Entertainment		Buying Stage: Pre During Post		Engagement
Dolan, Conduit, Frethey-bentham, Fahy, & Goodman, 2019	Wine	Dual Processing, Uses & Gratifications	Facebook	Entertaining Content				Engagement (Passive)
Estrella-Ramón, García-de-Frutos, Ortega-Egea, & Segovia-López, 2019	Banking Technology Telecoms Automotive Retail	Media Richness, Uses & Gratifications	Facebook	Affective Content				Brand Equity
Ge & Gretzel, 2018	Tourism	Relief, Superiority, Uses & Gratifications	Weibo	Humour				Engagement
Lee, 2021	Shoulder Bags	Canonical Cultural	Twitter Weibo	Emotionality	Norm Alignment Group Associations			Brand Status
Lee & Hong, 2016	Carpooling	Theory of Reasoned Action, Social Influence, Persuasion	Facebook	Emotional Appeal				Attitude toward Empathy Expression
Lee et al., 2018	782 Companies	Economic	Facebook	Emotion				Likes Comments
Li & Xie, 2020	Airline SUVs	Mere Presence Effect, Image Characteristics Effect	Twitter Twitter	Positive Sentiment				Likes Retweets Likes Retweets Likes
Lin & Peña, 2011	Airline Television	Social Information Processing, Diffusion of Innovation	Instagram Twitter	Socio-Emotional Content				Likes Retweets
Liu, Shin, & Burns, 2021	Luxury	Dual Perspective	Twitter	Entertaining Content				Engagement
Meire, Hewett, Ballings, Kumar, & Van den Poel, 2019	Soccer	Customer Engagement	Facebook	Emotional Content				Customer Sentiment
Ordenes et al., 2019	Hospitality Retail Food Manufacturing	Speech Act	Facebook Twitter	Message Positivity				Sharing (Facebook) Sharing (Twitter)
Shahbaznezhad, Dolan, & Rashidirad, 2021	Airlines	Media Richness	Facebook Instagram	Emotional Content			Format Platform	Likes Comments

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Authors (Year)	Study Context	Theory Used	Platform	Independent Variable(s)	Mediator(s)	Moderator(s) Level		Outcome(s)
						Customer	Firm	
Swani, Milne, Brown, Assaf, & Donthu, 2017	Fortune 500	Psychological Motivation	Facebook	Emotional Appeal				Likes
Tafesse, 2015	Automotive	Uses & Gratifications	Facebook	Entertainment				Comments
Wagner, Baccarella, & Voigt, 2017	Automotive	Uses & Gratifications, Elaboration Likelihood	Facebook	Emotional Appeal				Likes
Wang et al., 2017	Tourism	Equity, Regulatory Focus		Emotional Appeal				Comments
Wang et al., 2022	Airbnb	N/A	Airbnb	Affective Expression				Shares
Weiger, Hammerschmidt, & Wetzel, 2018	Retail	Self-Determination	Social Media	Entertainment				Likes
Yang et al., 2019	Retail	N/A	WeChat	Persuasive Content				Comments
Yuki, 2015	Sports Retail Beauty Publishing Games Automotive News	N/A	Facebook	Emotion				Shares
Current Study	Higher Education Dental Services Gym	Emotions as Social Information (EASI)	Facebook Social Media	Affective Content	Perceived Effort Perceived Risk	Regulatory Focus	Brand Reputation	Attitude to Destination Intention to Recommend Occupancy Rate
								Engagement
								Customer Spending Price Insensitivity Sharing
								Purchase Intentions

specific provider (e.g., provider characteristics).

2.3. Affective content and purchase intentions in high-involvement services

Drawing on the EASI model (van Kleef, 2009), we propose that in high-involvement services, the positive effect of affective content in providers' social media posts on customers' purchase intentions is driven by inferential cognitive processes (van Kleef & Côte, 2022). High-involvement services include risk and uncertainty. Research on EASI shows affective cues to be particularly useful in situations comprising information uncertainty (van den Bos, 2003). Affective content is linked to cognitive elaboration and more systematic processing of information (Isen, 2001). It allows customers to draw inferences about providers (Keltner & Haidt, 1999) that bridge information asymmetries. Providers' use of affective content can reveal the nature of the posting firm (Cohen, Pham, & Andrade, 2008; van Kleef, 2009), helping customers better evaluate service delivery.

Affective content can be positive, showcasing friendliness ("You are more than welcome") (Su, Mariadoss, & Reynolds, 2015), or negative, indicating sadness and empathy ("We are so sad to learn [...] totally feel your frustration") (Herhausen et al., 2019). These affective cues allow customers to evaluate the posting firm and augment their decision-making ability by helping them to form perceptions about providers (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Lench, Flores, & Bench, 2011). Thus, the inferential process triggered by affective content should drive customers' purchase intentions when choosing a high-involvement service (Yin, Bond, & Zhang, 2021). Formally:

H1. In high-involvement services, affective content in providers' social media communication has a positive effect on purchase intentions of customers.

2.4. The mediating effect of perceived effort and perceived risk

Per EASI theory's inferential path, affective content influences

purchase intentions because customers draw inferences about providers. However, as Table 1 shows, research on the mediating effect of such inferences is rare. We focus on service provider effort, since customers' processing of decision-relevant information often involves an evaluation of the information source. Also, research has shown that readers infer sender effort from discrete emotions in a message (Yin, Bond, & Zhang, 2014). Here, effort is the extent to which a customer believes that a service provider exerted thoughtful deliberation on the content of a post (Yin et al., 2017). Prior research has suggested that customers form spontaneous inferences about sender characteristics (Naylor, Lambertson, & Norton, 2011) and emotional expression therefore serves an important motivational function. People who express high levels of emotion are considered enthusiastic as well as more willing to spend energy and take action (Seo, Barrett, & Bartunek, 2004). Combining this logic with the fact that affective content expresses senders' emotions (Ludwig et al., 2013), we argue that when providers use affective content, it signals effort has gone into offering the service and translating this offering into written posts for customers. Therefore, affective content in communication on social media from providers should influence customers' perceptions of provider effort.

Greater perceived effort should then reduce perceived risk because it signals motivation to deliver positive outcomes (Skinner, Chapman, & Baltes, 1988). Risk concerns how certain a customer is that consequences will be amenable (Clow, Tripp, & Kenny, 1996; Sweeney, Soutar, & Johnson, 1999). Goffman (1959) suggests that perceived risk depends on the sender's intention and effort. In services, employee effort is viewed as controllable (Mohr & Bitner, 1995), so as effort increases, risk decreases (Clow et al., 1996). Customers will be more likely to purchase products or consume services when there is a lower level of risk (Sweeney et al., 1999). Collectively, customers seeing affective content in communication on social media should see the organization as putting in extra effort, leading to reduced risk perceptions. Thus:

H2. In high-involvement services, the influence of affective content in providers' social media communication on purchase intentions is serially mediated by perceived effort and perceived risk: Affective

content increases perceptions of provider effort that in turn reduces customers' perceived risk, positively influencing customers' purchase intentions.

2.5. Customer-level moderator: Regulatory focus

EASI depends on the target customer (van Kleef, 2009). Regulatory foci (i.e., prevention vs. promotion) determine how people decode and process information (Pham & Chang, 2010; van Kleef & Côte, 2022) and emotions (Shah & Higgins, 2001). Prevention-focused individuals try to make decisions that avoid mistakes and are more likely to experience sorrow (Higgins, 1998; Song & Qu, 2019). Promotion-focused people seize opportunities and are more likely to experience happiness (Pham & Chang, 2010; Zou & Chan, 2019). Prevention and promotion foci affect intrapersonal emotions (Higgins & Cornwell, 2016). However, how different foci shape customers' reactions to affective content is less known (Lechner & Mathmann, 2021). Integrating regulatory focus theory with EASI, we predict customers' regulatory foci shape inferences of affective content in social media posts of providers of high-involvement services.

Prevention-focused customers should use information to rationally evaluate a purchase, thus avoiding mistakes and risk. However, affective cues that "stand out" are more likely to influence judgments (Greifeneder, Bless, & Pham, 2001). Building upon expectancy violation theory (Burgoon, 1993), we argue that affective content should be more appealing to prevention-focused customers because they have a lower expectation that service providers will communicate with them emotionally (i.e., they are expecting to rationally evaluate their purchase). If affective content is perceived as diagnostic, it offers decision inputs for customers (Greifeneder et al., 2001). Moreover, certain heuristics (e.g., reliance on the behavior of others) help prevention-focused individuals avoid mistakes (Gigerenzer, 2008). Since affective content shows service providers' intentions and is more diagnostic in high-involvement situations (Grice, 1975; Ludwig et al., 2022), it should reduce prevention-focused customers' perceived risk. Taken together:

H3. In high-involvement services, customers' regulatory foci moderate the influence of affective content in providers' social media communication on customers' risk perceptions; the influence is stronger (weaker) for prevention (vs. promotion) focused customers.

2.6. Firm-level moderator: Brand reputation

van Kleef (2009) notes the influence of EASI depends on the appropriateness of the emotional expression. In addition, the effectiveness of provider communication depends on firm (i.e., sender) characteristics (Batra & Keller, 2016; Lee, 2021; Tu et al., 2022). The most important differentiating characteristic for a firm is its brand (Aaker, 2020; Keller & Swaminathan, 2019).

A brand's reputation can change the impact of its communications (Dirsmith & Covaleski, 1983). Brand reputation demonstrates provider power and affective content is better suited to low power communicators (Dubois et al., 2016). However, little is known about how providers with different reputations (i.e., quality vs. social responsibility reputation) should use affective content. Brands engaging in social responsibility initiatives are perceived as warmer and more caring (Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012). Meanwhile, a reputation for delivering quality services elevates a competence perception (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010). We therefore explore whether and how brand reputation influences the effect of intensity of affective content in social media posts of high-involvement service providers on customers' purchase intentions.

It is likely that customers of high-involvement services expect messages from providers with a reputation for social responsibility to contain more affective content than those from providers with a quality reputation. Indeed, sustainability messages often incorporate affective content (DiRusso & Myrick, 2021). The tendency, and therefore

expectation, for messages from social responsibility brands to be more emotional has important implications for reader inference. Once more adopting expectancy violation theory (Burgoon, 1993), we argue customers should perceive affective content as *more* impactful from providers with a quality reputation (where it "stands out") than from providers with a social responsibility reputation (c.f., Greifeneder et al., 2001). Consequently, customers should respond more positively to affective content from providers with a reputation for quality than from providers with a reputation for social responsibility. Therefore, the impact of affective content on purchase intentions will be stronger for service providers with a quality reputation compared to a social responsibility reputation. Thus, we propose:

H4. In high-involvement service settings, brand reputation moderates the influence of affective content in providers' social media communication on purchase intentions; the influence is stronger (weaker) for providers with a quality reputation (vs. a social responsibility reputation).

3. Methodology

We test our hypotheses with four experiments. Following previous work, and to increase the generalizability of our results, we adopt different contexts (Allen, Brady, Robinson, & Voorhees, 2015) and samples from different countries (Cleveland & Bartikowski, 2023). In Study 1a, we conduct a scenario-based experiment in the high-involvement service setting of higher education to examine the effect of affective content on customers' purchase intentions (H1). Study 1b replicates Study 1a in the context of dental services. Study 2 examines the serial mediation effect of perceived effort and perceived risk (H2) while replicating the main effect (H1) in the context of U.K. gym services. Study 2 also tests the moderating effect of regulatory focus on the relationship between affective content and perceived risk (H3). Study 3 uses a U.S. gym context to replicate the main effect (H1) and the serial mediation effect (H2). Study 3 further demonstrates the moderating effect of quality vs. social responsibility reputation (H4). Fig. 1 depicts our model and hypotheses.

3.1. Study 1a

Study 1a assessed the main effect of affective content on purchase intention (H1). We used higher education as the study context because it is a high-involvement service (Dearden, Grewal, & Lilien, 2019), is one of the fastest-growing industries worldwide (Tu et al., 2022), and universities use social media to reach out to and attract prospective students (Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016).

3.1.1. Method and procedure

We conducted a scenario-based experiment using a single-factor (low vs. high affective content) between-subjects design with random assignment. We used Prolific to recruit 290 U.K. A-level¹ students intending to apply for a university undergraduate degree ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.11$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.15$; 61.2 % females). We chose U.K. participants because nearly 83 % of U.K. students use social media to make their university selection (Ducille, 2019) and in the U.K. higher education is viewed as a customer-centric business (Nixon, Scullion, & Hearn, 2018). Participants engaged in a role-playing exercise in which they are searching online for a university. They find a Facebook post of a university with high (vs. low) affective content (see Appendix A.1 for post content). After reading the post, participants answered questions measuring intention to choose the university (3-item scale, $\alpha = 0.94$; $M = 3.20$; $SD = 1.53$; adapted from the purchase intention scale of White & Yuan, 2012) (see Appendix B for the measures used in our studies).

¹ "A-level" students are final year students in the U.K., the equivalent of High School "seniors" in the U.S. (typically 18–19 years old).

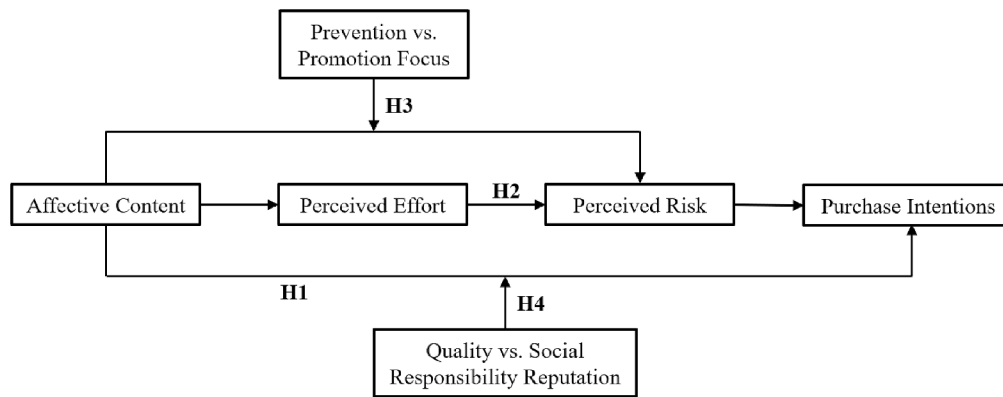


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of the influence of affective content on purchase intentions.

We asked participants to rate scenario realism (“1” = *very unrealistic*, “7” = *very realistic*). Scenarios were realistic with a mean ($M = 5.07$; $SD = 1.16$) significantly above the scale midpoint of 4 ($t(289) = 15.62$; $p < 0.01$). To confirm our manipulations of affective content we asked participants to what extent they thought the text of the university’s post seemed emotional (7-point scale). Participants in the high affective content condition perceived significantly more emotion ($M = 4.61$; $SD = 1.33$) than participants in the low affective content condition ($M = 3.64$; $SD = 1.41$; $F(1, 288) = 35.65$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, affective content was properly decoded.

3.1.2. Results and discussion

We conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) featuring affective content manipulation as the independent variable and intention to choose the university as the dependent variable. Results indicated a significant direct influence of affective content on intention to choose the university ($M_{\text{high affective}} = 3.38$; $SD_{\text{high affective}} = 1.58$ vs. $M_{\text{low affective}} = 3.01$; $SD_{\text{low affective}} = 1.45$; $F(1, 288) = 4.34$, $p < 0.05$). This result supported H1 and demonstrated that affective content in social media posts of providers of high-involvement services had a positive impact on purchase intentions (i.e., intention to choose a university).

3.2. Study 1b: Replication

Building on Study 1a, we conducted a replication to verify that the effect of affective content on purchase intentions holds across different high-involvement service settings. In Study 1b we used dental services because they are high-involvement (Lovell & Yip, 1996) and providers of dental services use social media to attract customers (Mander, 2022).

We used Prolific to recruit 180 U.K. participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 30.69$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 13.80$; 67.8 % female) as more U.K. adults are seeking tooth-straightening treatment (British Dental Nurses Journal, 2020). Procedure followed Study 1a (see Appendix A.2 for post content and Appendix B for measures). After reading the Facebook post, participants indicated their intention to choose the dental provider using the same scale as Study 1a ($M = 3.84$; $SD = 1.63$). Scenarios were realistic with a mean ($M = 5.15$; $SD = 1.07$) significantly above the scale midpoint of 4 ($t(179) = 14.41$; $p < 0.01$). Study 1b confirmed that the manipulation of affective content was successful because participants in the high affective content condition perceived significantly more emotion ($M_{\text{high affective}} = 4.59$; $SD_{\text{high affective}} = 1.30$) than participants in the low affective content condition ($M_{\text{low affective}} = 3.36$; $SD_{\text{low affective}} = 1.56$; $F(1, 178) = 32.89$, $p < 0.01$). ANOVA results showed a significant direct influence of affective content on intention to choose the dental service provider ($M_{\text{high affective}} = 4.10$; $SD_{\text{high affective}} = 1.66$ vs. $M_{\text{low affective}} = 3.58$; $SD_{\text{low affective}} = 1.56$; $F(1, 178) = 4.77$, $p < 0.05$). This corroborates Study 1a and further supports H1.

3.3. Study 2

Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1 in the context of gym services. Services marketing research has often used different contexts to enhance the generalizability of results (e.g., Allen et al., 2015; Strizhakova et al., 2012). We chose gyms because they are a high-involvement service industry with revenues of £1.8 billion (Statista Market size of the gym, health, fitness club industry in the United Kingdom (UK) from 2012, 2022a), and gyms use social media to attract customers (Fitness Network, 2019). Study 2 also tested the serial mediating effect of perceived effort and perceived risk on purchase intentions (H2) and examined the moderating effect of the regulatory foci of customers on perceived risk (H3).

3.3.1. Method and procedure

We used a scenario-based 2 (high vs. low affective content) \times 2 (prevention vs. promotion focus) between-subjects experiment with random assignment. A Prolific sample of 296 U.K. workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 34.37$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.18$; 68 % females) participated. We focused on U.K. customers because the gym and fitness market in the U.K. increased 33.3 % in 2022 (IBISWorld (2022), 2022). Participants first completed a regulatory focus manipulation task in either a promotion-focused or prevention-focused condition. They were asked to consider their current hopes, aspirations, and duties (vs. obligations and responsibilities) and enter at least two in a text box (Freitas & Higgins, 2002).

After the regulatory focus task, participants were asked to imagine they want to sign a 24-month contract with a new gym to stay fit and because their doctor recommended doing so following an injury. They extensively researched different gyms and found “Fitness Centre”. Participants were assigned to read a high or low affective content Facebook post (see Appendix A.3 for materials used). Participants then answered questions (all 7-point scales, see Appendix B) measuring perceived effort ($M = 4.44$; $SD = 1.35$), perceived risk ($M = 3.76$; $SD = 1.37$), and purchase intentions ($M = 4.37$; $SD = 1.37$). Scenarios were realistic with a mean ($M = 5.39$; $SD = 0.97$) significantly above the scale midpoint of 4 ($t(295) = 24.55$; $p < 0.01$).

Two-way ANOVA results demonstrated that we successfully manipulated affective content ($M_{\text{high affective}} = 4.61$; $SD_{\text{high affective}} = 1.32$ vs. $M_{\text{low affective}} = 4.13$; $SD_{\text{low affective}} = 1.31$; $F(1, 292) = 9.92$; $p < 0.01$). There was no main effect of the regulatory focus manipulation ($F(1, 292) = 0.39$, $p > 0.05$) and no significant interaction of affective content and regulatory focus ($F(1, 292) = 3.15$; $p > 0.05$) on perceptions of affective message content. To confirm the regulatory focus manipulation, we asked participants what is more important for them to do (“1” = *something they ought to*; “7” = *something they want to*) (Pham & Avnet, 2004; $M = 4.29$; $SD = 1.78$). Two-way ANOVA results demonstrated that participants were more likely to do something they ought to do when they were in the prevention condition ($M = 3.83$; $SD = 1.73$), compared to the promotion condition ($M = 4.79$; $SD = 1.72$; $F(1, 292) = 22.44$, $p <$

0.01). There was no significant difference in participants' preference to do something they want to do in the high vs. low affective content conditions ($F(1, 292) = 0.80, p > 0.05$) and no significant interaction between regulatory focus and affective content ($F(1, 292) = 0.19; p > 0.05$).

3.3.2. Results and discussion

ANOVA results showed a significant direct effect of affective content on purchase intentions ($M_{\text{high affective}} = 4.66; SD_{\text{high affective}} = 1.38; M_{\text{low affective}} = 4.08; SD_{\text{low affective}} = 1.46; F(1, 294) = 12.33, p < 0.01$) and perceived effort ($M_{\text{high affective}} = 4.74; SD_{\text{high affective}} = 1.36; M_{\text{low affective}} = 4.14; SD_{\text{low affective}} = 1.25; F(1, 294) = 15.37, p < 0.01$). However, affective content had no direct influence on perceived risk ($M_{\text{high affective}} = 3.61; SD_{\text{high affective}} = 1.39; M_{\text{low affective}} = 3.91; SD_{\text{low affective}} = 1.33; F(1, 294) = 3.59, p > 0.05$).

To examine the serial mediation effect of perceived effort and perceived risk (H2), we used PROCESS Model 6 (Hayes, 2017). Regression analyses showed a significant positive influence of affective content on perceived effort ($\beta = 0.60, SE = 0.15, p < 0.01$), a significant negative influence of perceived effort on perceived risk ($\beta = -0.35, SE = 0.06, p < 0.01$) and a significant negative influence of perceived risk on intention to choose a gym ($\beta = -0.43, SE = 0.05, p < 0.01$). Additionally, the direct influence of affective content on purchase intentions was no longer significant when the two mediators were jointly included ($\beta = 0.22; SE = 0.13, p > 0.05$) compared to the model without the mediators ($\beta = 0.58, SE = 0.16, p < 0.01$). Consistent with H2, the serial indirect effect is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.09; 95\% \text{ CI } [0.04; 0.16]$). The simple mediation via perceived effort ($\beta = 0.22; 95\% \text{ CI } [0.09; 0.38]$) in isolation was also significant. However, this effect was not significant when perceived risk was the only mediator ($\beta = -0.04; 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.09; 0.18]$). Table 2 presents these direct and mediated effects.

We tested the moderating effect of regulatory focus using PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2017). Results show the direct effects of affective content ($\beta = 0.13, SE = 0.22; p > 0.05$) and regulatory focus ($\beta = 0.28, SE = 0.22; p > 0.05$) on perceived risk were not significant. H3 was supported as results demonstrated a significant negative interaction effect of affective content and regulatory focus on perceived risk ($\beta =$

$-0.83, SE = 0.31; p < 0.01$). Finally, the influence of affective content on perceived risk was not significant for promotion focus ($\beta = 0.13; SE = 0.22; \text{CI } [-0.31; 0.57]$) but this influence became significant for prevention focus ($\beta = -0.70; SE = 0.21; \text{CI } [-1.13; -0.27]$). Fig. 2 visualizes these results.

Study 2 confirmed that the effect of affective content on purchase intentions in the context of high-involvement services is serially mediated by perceived effort and perceived risk. Additionally, when prevention-focused (vs. promotion-focused) customers read affective content from a provider of high-involvement services, they perceived less risk in the purchase decision.

3.4. Study 3

Study 3 replicated the serial mediating effect of perceived effort and perceived risk on purchase intentions (H2) and tested the moderating effect of brand reputation (H4). We chose U.S. gym services to demonstrate that the effect of affective content on purchase intentions is consistent across samples (U.S. vs. U.K. customers). Research has previously used cross-national samples to enhance the generalizability of results (Cleveland & Bartikowski, 2023). The U.S. gym context is relevant because one in five Americans belongs to at least one health club (Connor, 2021) and the industry is considerable, with revenues of US \$35 billion (Statista Revenue of the fitness, health and gym club industry in the United States from 2012, 2022b).

3.4.1. Method and procedure

We used a scenario-based experiment with a 2 (high vs. low affective content) x 2 (quality vs. social responsibility reputation) between-subjects design with random assignment. We recruited 297 U.S. workers from Prolific ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.90; SD_{\text{age}} = 12.32; 64.2\% \text{ female}$). We used the same procedure and affective content scenarios as Study 2, with minor adjustments for language (see Appendix A.3). To manipulate brand reputation, additional scenarios focused on either the service provider's quality or social responsibility reputation (see Appendix A.4). After reading Facebook posts, participants answered questions (all 7-point scales) measuring perceived effort ($M = 4.56; SD = 1.24$),

Table 2
Studies 2 and 3: The influence of affective content on purchase intentions.

Panel A: Direct effects				
Affective Content (AC)	Perceived Effort (PE)	Perceived Risk (PR)	Purchase Intentions (PI)	0.60***
				0.39***
				-0.35***
				-0.29***
				-0.43***
				-0.37***
				0.37***
				0.48***
				0.22 (0.58***)
				0.19 (0.40***)
				-0.08
				0.07

Panel B: Indirect (Mediation) effects (PROCESS MODEL 6)				
	Study 2		Study 3	
	B	95 % CI	B	95 % CI
AC → PE → PR → PI	0.09 ^a	[0.04; 0.16]	0.04 ^a	[0.01; 0.09]
AC → PE → PI	0.22 ^a	[0.09; 0.38]	0.19 ^a	[0.06; 0.34]
AC → PR → PI	-0.04	[-0.09; 0.18]	-0.03	[-0.13; 0.07]

Notes: Panel A: Results for Study 2 are in *italics*, and Study 3 are in **bold**. We report the direct effect of Affective Content on Purchase Intentions when the two mediators (Perceived Effort and Perceived Risk) are included without parentheses and the direct effect when the two mediators are not included in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Panel B: ^a Indirect (mediation) effects are significant when confidence intervals do not include 0.

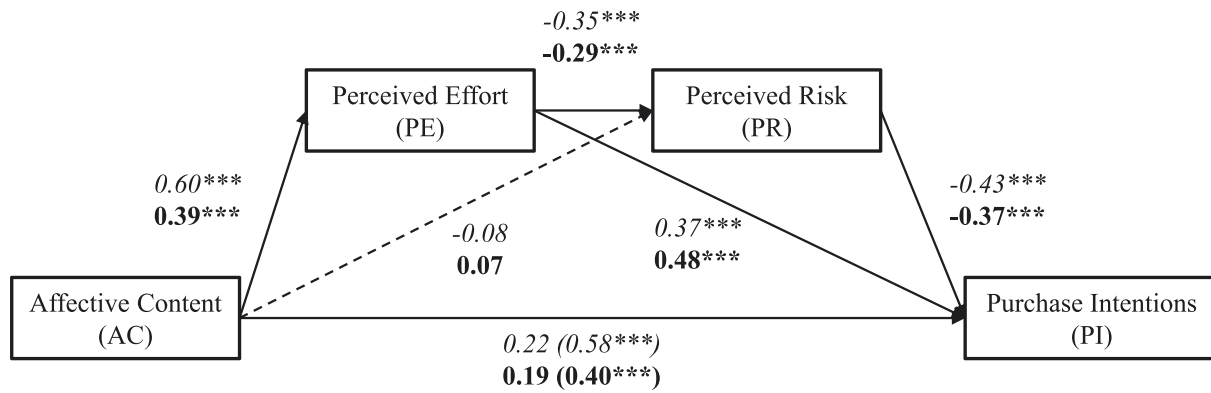


Fig. 2. Model of the influence of affective content on purchase intention.

perceived risk ($M = 3.26$; $SD = 1.21$), and purchase intention ($M = 4.70$; $SD = 1.31$) using similar scales to Study 2 (see Appendix B). Scenarios were rated as realistic ($M = 5.22$; $SD = 1.19$) and significantly above the scale mid-point of 4 ($t(296) = 17.61$; $p < 0.01$).

Two-way ANOVA results showed that we manipulated affective content ($M_{\text{high affective}} = 4.25$; $SD_{\text{high affective}} = 1.33$ vs. $M_{\text{low affective}} = 3.88$; $SD_{\text{low affective}} = 1.33$; $F(1, 293) = 5.67$; $p < 0.01$). There was no main effect of the reputation manipulation ($F(1, 293) = 1.38$, $p > 0.05$) and no significant interaction of affective content and reputation ($F(1, 293) = 0.47$; $p > 0.05$) on perceptions of affective message content. To check our reputation manipulation, we asked participants if “Fitness Center” had a good reputation for quality and good reputation for social responsibility (c.f., Johnson, Mao, Lefebvre, & Ganesh, 2019). Two-way ANOVA results showed participants in the quality condition reported higher quality perceptions and lower social responsibility perceptions ($M_{\text{quality}} = 5.69$; $SD_{\text{quality}} = 0.97$ vs. $M_{\text{social responsibility}} = 5.25$; $SD_{\text{social responsibility}} = 1.01$; $F(1, 293) = 14.84$; $p < 0.01$), in contrast to participants in the social responsibility condition ($M_{\text{quality}} = 4.23$; $SD_{\text{quality}} = 1.08$ vs. $M_{\text{social responsibility}} = 6.56$; $SD_{\text{social responsibility}} = 1.08$; $F(1, 293) = 340.62$; $p < 0.01$). There were no main effects of affective content on either quality reputation ($F(1, 293) = 0.17$; $p > 0.05$) or social responsibility reputation ($F(1, 293) = 0.01$; $p > 0.05$). Lastly, there were no significant interactions between affective content and quality reputation ($F(1, 293) = 2.45$; $p > 0.05$) or social responsibility reputation ($F(1, 293) = 0.01$; $p > 0.05$).

3.4.2. Results and discussion

We found a positive effect of affective content on purchase intentions ($M_{\text{high affective}} = 4.90$; $SD_{\text{high affective}} = 1.18$ vs. $M_{\text{low affective}} = 4.52$; $SD_{\text{low affective}} = 1.41$; $F(1, 295) = 6.72$, $p < 0.01$) and perceived effort ($M_{\text{high affective}} = 4.76$; $SD_{\text{high affective}} = 1.15$; $M_{\text{low affective}} = 4.36$; $SD_{\text{low affective}} = 1.29$; $F(1, 295) = 7.72$, $p < 0.01$). The direct influence of affective content on perceived risk was also not significant ($M_{\text{high affective}} = 3.24$; $SD_{\text{high affective}} = 1.20$ vs. $M_{\text{low affective}} = 3.23$; $SD_{\text{high affective}} = 1.23$; $F(1, 295) = 0.09$, $p > 0.05$). We tested the serial mediators using PROCESS Model 6 (Hayes, 2017). There was a significant positive influence of affective content on perceived effort ($\beta = 0.39$, $SE = 0.14$, $p < 0.01$), a significant negative influence of perceived effort on perceived risk ($\beta = -0.29$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.01$) and a significant negative influence of perceived risk on purchase intentions ($\beta = -0.37$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, the direct influence of affective content on purchase intentions was not significant when the two mediators were jointly included ($\beta = 0.19$; $SE = 0.11$, $p > 0.05$), compared to the model without the mediators ($\beta = 0.40$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$). Consistent with H2, the serial indirect effect was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.04$; $SE = 0.01$; 95 % CI [0.01; 0.09]). The simple mediation via perceived effort ($\beta = 0.19$; $SE = 0.07$; 95 % CI [0.06; 0.34]) in isolation was significant. However, the effect was not significant when perceived risk was the only mediator ($\beta = -0.03$; $SE = 0.05$; 95 % CI [-0.13; 0.07]). Table 2 presents

these direct and mediated effects.

We further tested the moderating effects of quality vs. social responsibility reputation using PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2017). Results showed the direct effect of affective content on purchase intentions was not significant ($\beta = 0.06$; $SE = 0.21$; $p > 0.05$) while quality (vs. social responsibility) reputation had a negative effect on purchase intentions ($\beta = -0.66$; $SE = 0.20$; $p < 0.01$). The interaction effect between affective content and reputation type (quality vs. social responsibility) was significant ($\beta = 0.60$; $SE = 0.29$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore, H3 is supported as the effect of affective content on purchase intentions is significant for quality reputation ($\beta = 0.66$; $SE = 0.21$; CI [0.25; 1.08]) but becomes non-significant for social responsibility reputation ($\beta = 0.06$; $SE = 0.21$; CI [-0.35; 0.48]). Fig. 3 visualizes these results.

Study 3 demonstrated that reputation type (quality vs. social responsibility) moderates the effect of affective content on purchase intentions. As such, when a service provider with a quality (vs. social responsibility) reputation uses high (vs. low) levels of affective content in online posts, it leads to higher levels of purchase intentions (Fig. 4).

4. Discussion

Substantial research has tried to identify content that service providers should present on social media to enhance positive customer behavior (e.g., Lee et al., 2018; Meier et al., 2019). A common belief is that when consumption requires a higher level of involvement, customers incorporate messages more rationally and the use of affective content is less helpful (Ludwig et al., 2022). Our research challenges this assumption by highlighting the effects of affective content in posts on purchase intentions in the context of high-involvement services.

We further unveil the underlying serial mediation mechanism of perceived effort and perceived risk. In addition, prevention-focused (vs. promotion-focused) customers purchasing high-involvement services are less likely to experience risk if they read service provider posts with a higher intensity of affective content, increasing their purchase intentions. Moreover, the moderating effect of brand reputation, in the context of high-involvement services, on affective content works better for providers with a quality (vs. social responsibility) reputation.

4.1. Theoretical contributions

Our research provides several implications for growing scholarship on high-involvement services, brand communication and decision-making, and the broader topic of affective content in communication. First, we extend EASI theory (van Kleef, 2009), which has largely been employed to examine the role of emotion at the intrapersonal level in offline contexts (Bagozzi et al., 1999; Mattila & Enz, 2002). We extend EASI theory to social media and investigate the role of affective content in driving purchase intentions for high-involvement services. By so doing, we contribute to research on promoting services on social media,

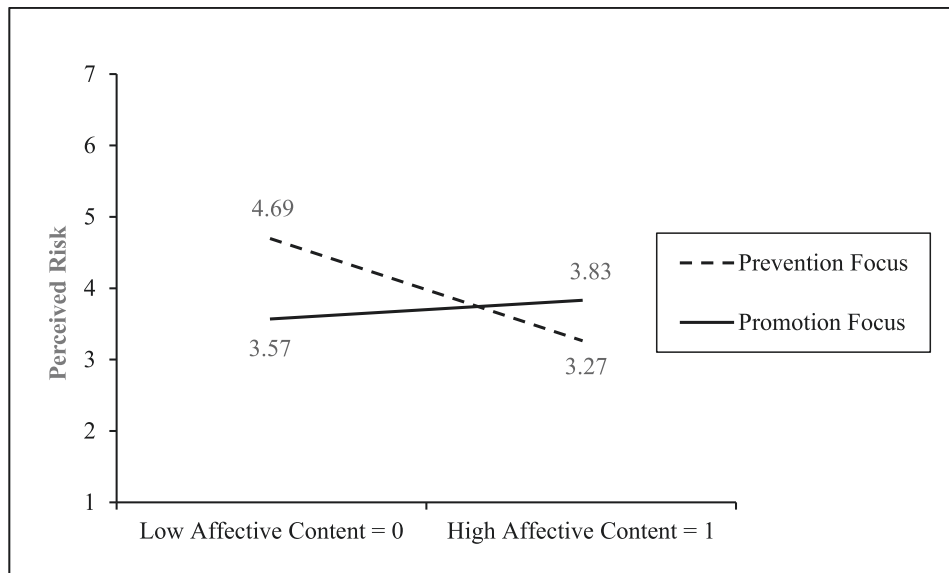


Fig. 3. Interaction of affective content and regulatory focus on perceived risk.

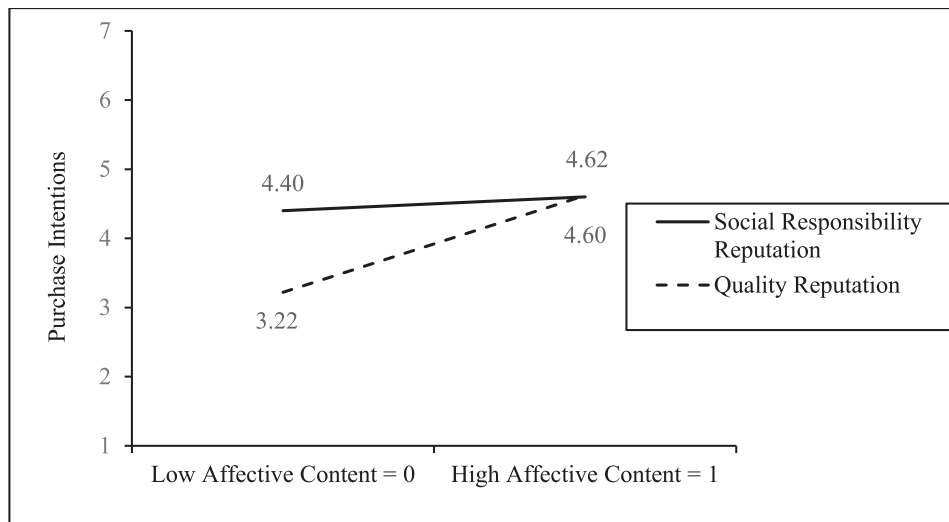


Fig. 4. Interaction of affective content and brand reputation on purchase intentions.

which has tended to focus on the use of cognitive appeals (Wang et al., 2022). Our findings challenge the assumption that emotionality is not helpful in situations when customers seek information to reduce risk (c. f., Ludwig et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2014). By exploring the effects of perceived effort and perceived risk on the relationship between affective content and purchase intentions, we show that customers evaluate affective content using an inferential cognitive process to understand providers’ intentions and make decisions (van Kleef, 2009). While existing literature on affective content mainly explores its direct effects (see Table 1), our findings address recent calls to investigate the underlying mechanisms explaining the effect of affective content in social media (Lee, 2021).

Second, we extend regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998) to show that EASI effectiveness (i.e., affective content) depends on target customers’ regulatory foci. Research linking regulatory focus and emotion highlights offline and intrapersonal effects (e.g., Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Yen et al., 2011). We contribute by showing that affective content reduces risk perceptions for prevention-focused (vs. promotion-focused) customers of high-involvement services. This challenges the assumption that emotionality works better for promotion-focused customers (Pham

& Avnet, 2004) and supports research showing that the use of affective content relies on customer characteristics (Lee, 2021; Miller, 2016). We also support van Kleef (2009, p. 184) claim that moderators of affective content “include the target of the emotional expression.”.

Third, we contribute to emerging research on affective content and firm characteristics (e.g., Batra & Keller, 2016; Lee, 2021) by showing that providers of high-involvement services with a quality (vs. social responsibility) reputation should employ more (vs. less) affective content when communicating on social media. This finding supports and extends van Kleef (2009) suggestion that the effect of emotional expression depends on its appropriateness. We highlight how brand reputation interacts with affective content on social media to drive customers’ purchase intentions for high-involvement services. By so doing, we also address the call of Johnson et al. (2019) for research into the differing effects of brand reputation and enrich the brand and communication literature.

4.2. Managerial implications

To prosper, survive, and remain profitable, attracting customers is a

must for organizations. Increasing online communication's effectiveness is critical in helping customers build positive perceptions of service providers. Our findings support this notion and provide several managerial implications that will help providers of high-involvement services to effectively communicate online. Our study reveals that such providers can increase purchase intentions by employing affective content on social media. Service providers should train staff with social media responsibilities to increase affective content. Once an online post has been drafted, staff should review it to assess opportunities to include affective words. Staff could use comprehensive lists of affective words (e.g., kind, support, friendly) such as Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) from Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, and Blackburn (2015). Providers of high-involvement services should employ these resources to adjust messages before posting them online.

Furthermore, managers should consider how to use affective content to match with customers' regulatory foci. Specifically, to target prevention-focused customers, providers should use more affective content to demonstrate effort. For example, a dental service should include more affective content when communicating about dental floss compared to teeth whitening, since dental floss is seen as prevention-focused while teeth whitening is seen as promotion-focused (Kordrostami, Liu-Thompkins, & Rahmani, 2021). Such actions should reduce the perceived risk associated with high-involvement services and increase purchase intentions.

We also find that the effectiveness of affective content depends on service provider reputation. More precisely, affective content works better for service providers with a quality reputation, such as the Mayo Clinic or Cedars-Sinai Medical Center (U.S. News, 2022). By adopting affective content as a communication strategy, it may humanize a high-involvement, high-quality reputation service brand (i.e., enhance perceived effort), promoting a more inclusive and supportive service to offset potential risks.

For service organizations noted for their commitment to sustainability, such as Western Sydney University or Arizona State University, Tempe (World Economic Forum, 2022), the adoption of affective content may not be as urgent, but it is still useful. Affective content is generally appreciated by potential customers and positively contributes to service provider performance (i.e., purchase intentions).

Overall, our results suggest that through careful management of affective content in online posts, service providers can align with their reputation and customers' regulatory goals to increase perceptions of

effort, reduce purchase risk, and increase purchase intentions.

4.3. Limitations and future research

Our research highlights the importance of affective content in posts from providers of high-involvement services in driving desired outcomes. However, it has limitations that offer opportunities for future research. First, we define affective content as words in a message (c.f., Ludwig et al., 2013). However, emotionality can be expressed in myriad ways, such as images and videos (Lee, 2021). Although EASI theory predicts that responses to emotionality should hold regardless of cue type (van Kleef & Côte, 2022), future research would benefit from expanding emotionality expressed in social media to include images or videos and their influence on customers' decisions (e.g., willingness to pay).

Second, our research focuses on perceived effort and perceived risk as mediators of the effect of affective content on purchase intentions. We acknowledge that other mechanisms likely exist. For example, customers may perceive service provider posts with a high level of affective content as more credible or trustworthy (Xu & Wyer, 2010) and the brand as warmer (Lee, 2021). Future research could investigate additional mediators of affective content's effects.

Future research could also explore the management of affective content in brand communication across different touchpoints in the customer journey (Demmers, Weltevreden, & van Dolan, 2020). For example, customers can experience digital interactions with service providers via chatbots or might appreciate affective content in service recovery situations. More research could test the effect of affective content in service provider communication delivered by humans vs. artificial intelligence on customers' behavior.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Hai-Anh Tran: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Andrew Farrell:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation. **Heiner Evanschitzky:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Bach Nguyen:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Anna-Lena Ackfeldt:** Writing – review & editing.

Appendix A. . Experimental scenarios

A.1. Affective content and higher education in the U.K.

High affective content [**emphasis** added here for clarity, not during experiments].

Are you **excited** to apply to university? At the Nobel University, we want our students to have a meaningful and **wonderful** experience and know we will always have their interests at **heart**. Why not make us your first choice? We **love** to build your future together.

Low affective content.

Are you applying to university? At the Nobel University, we want our students to have a meaningful experience and know we will always act in their interests. Why not make us your first choice? We can jointly build your future together.

A.2 Affective content and dental services in the U.K.

High affective content [**emphasis** added here for clarity, not during experiments].

Relaxing and smiling? Nothing is easier to do for your teeth than our invisible aligners. Our clear aligner treatment is custom-built to offer the **perfect** fit for you. We would **love** to help you to straighten your teeth for a healthier and **beautiful** smile.

Low affective content.

Considering straightening your teeth? Nothing is easier to do for your teeth than our invisible aligners. Our clear aligner treatment is custom-built to offer the case that fits you. We will provide you with transformation for all aspects of your teeth straightening experience.

A.3. Affective content and gym services in the U.K. and U.S.

High affective content [**emphasis** added here for clarity, not during experiments].

Are you **excited** to stay fit? Fitness Centre/Center is **proud** to provide a simple and convenient way for members to achieve their personal health goals. We act in our members' best interests and help them get the body they have dreamed of. Our trainers would **love** to see you joining a 30-minute full-body workout class this Saturday. Be **happy** and stay fit with us!

Low affective content.

Are you thinking of staying fit? Fitness Centre/Center provides a simple, affordable and convenient way for members to achieve their personal health goals. We act in our members' best interests and help them get the body they expect. Our trainers are looking forward to seeing you joining a 30-minute full-body workout class this Saturday. With Fitness Centre/Center, you will stay fit!

A.4. Brand reputation and gym services in the U.S.

Quality reputation (adapted from Johnson et al., 2019).

Fitness Center is a chain of health clubs in the United States and is well known for helping members to achieve their personal health goals. Last year, Fitness Center was winner of the National Fitness Award for providing high quality service. The company recently invested over \$100,000 in new equipment and facilities to enhance the quality of its service. Further, their personal trainers provide excellent and personalized workout plans to members.

Social responsibility reputation (adapted from Johnson et al., 2019).

Fitness Center is a chain of health clubs in the United States. Over the years, they are highly respected by members and staff for their effort of giving back. Fitness Center has recently donated \$100,000 to support Young Lives vs Cancer - the U.S. Children's Cancer Charity. For the past 5 years, Fitness Center has given employees paid time off to volunteer in hospitals to help children with cancer. They also partner with Mental Health U.S. and are widely admired for organizing a 5-mile run to raise awareness of physical exercise and mental health.

Appendix B. . Measures for studies 1–3

Measures	Items
Perceived effort <i>Adapted from Yin et al., 2017</i>	How much thought has gone into writing the service provider's post? How much effort has been put into writing the service provider's post?
Perceived risk <i>Adapted from Delvecchio & Smith, 2005</i>	I am uncertain about the quality of the service I am not sure that the service offered by the provider would work satisfactorily
Purchase intention <i>Adapted from White & Yuan, 2012</i>	How likely is it that you would choose the service provider? How willing are you to choose the service provider? How much do you intend to choose the service provider?

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