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How Personality Traits Affect Customer Empathy Expression of Social Media Ads and Purchasing Intention: A Psychological Perspective

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Abstract: Consumers' personality traits significantly influence their perceptions regarding social media advertising. While prior research on consumers' purchasing intentions in social networking sites advertising has mainly focused on advertising valence antecedents, it is crucial to recognize that consumers' susceptibility to advertising persuasion, particularly in terms of empathic expression, varies based on a key criterion: whether consumers are driven to attain a specific desired state or are more inclined to avoid an undesirable state. Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT) posits that individuals operate under distinct motivational mechanisms that govern their determination to achieve desired goals, influencing how they process and evaluate advertising messages. In light of RFT, we conducted an online survey with 524 valid responses, utilizing partial least squares (PLS) for research model analysis. The findings revealed that promotion-focused individuals have positively influenced perceptions of social media ad effectiveness (informativeness, ad creativity, perceived relevance, and emotional appeal). In contrast, prevention-focused individuals negatively perceived social media ad effectiveness. Furthermore, this study highlighted that perceived relevance and emotional appeal have a more significant impact on attitudes toward expressing empathy than informativeness and ad creativity.

Keywords: regulatory focus theory; social media advertising effectiveness; empathy expression; intention to empathy expression; purchase intention



Citation: Demirci, S.; Ling, C.-J.; Lee, D.-R.; Chen, C.-W. How Personality Traits Affect Customer Empathy Expression of Social Media Ads and Purchasing Intention: A Psychological Perspective. *J. Theor. Appl. Electron. Commer. Res.* **2024**, *19*, 581–596.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer19010031>

Academic Editor: Diah Priharsari

Received: 12 January 2024

Revised: 19 February 2024

Accepted: 5 March 2024

Published: 7 March 2024



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1. Introduction

In recent years, information technologies have led to the rapid growth of social media, resulting in the tremendous development of social media advertising. Social media marketing enables advertising campaigns that create brand awareness and increase sales [1]; it also facilitates a company's relationship with potential customers, making it easier to target consumers precisely. According to eMarketer [2], in 2023, digital ad spending is set to rise to a whopping USD 601.84 billion, constituting a significant 67.1% of the overall advertising expenditure explicitly dedicated to social media ads. It also predicts that digital advertising spending will reach \$870.85 billion in 2027, accounting for 73.8% of the total ad spending. In Taiwan, the digital advertising industry reached NT 58.96 billion (USD 1.98 billion) in 2022, with an increase of 8.30% from 2021 [3].

In addition, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the public community has spent more time on social networking sites (SNS) using their mobile devices [4], resulting in increased exposure to social media advertising. Social media advertising plays a vital role in consumer decision-making, influencing consumer behavior and marketing practices [5]. Therefore, the ability to capture the user's attention and make them experience a positive response to the advertisement through a "click", "like", or "share" is critical to the success of social

media advertising [6–8]. Positive user responses and engagement with social media ads help spread the message among the users, contributing to the increased awareness of the featured brand. They are important for measuring social media advertising effectiveness [9]. An effective ad that can elicit positive perceptions and reactions from SNS users would likely generate advertising effectiveness and, thus, greater sales, resulting in a high return on investment in SNS advertising campaigns [10].

Previous scholars have predominantly adopted Ducoffe's [11] web-based advertising value model to investigate SNS users' attitudes toward advertising [12–15], yet research on positive user responses to social media ads is still relatively insufficient [10]. Lee and Hong [6] believe that in social media, just discussing user advertising attitudes is not enough to explain users' views on advertising fully. On social media, users actively show their empathy and express their attitudes toward advertising through various interactions, such as clicking the "Like" or "Share" buttons or commenting on posts [8]. The act of a "Like" or "Share" on social media creates visible traces, proving to other users that the content has been noticed. Indeed, these interactions essentially function as a form of social feedback, allowing users to directly engage with shared information and respond to other users [16]. While the correlation between attitude toward empathy expression (AEE) and intention to express empathy (IEE) is contextually fitting, it has been insufficiently examined in existing studies, and there is a dearth of research on users' favorable reactions to social network advertising, as highlighted by Lee and Hong [6].

Moreover, existing research on consumer purchasing intention in the SNS context has primarily concentrated on the antecedents of advertising value, such as informativeness, entertainment, and irritation; however, consumers differ in their susceptibility to advertising persuasion attempts, precisely empathy expression, which can be discerned through a pivotal criterion: whether a consumer is driven to achieving a specific desired state or motivated to steer clear of an undesirable one. Notably, there exists a research gap in connecting the value/effectiveness of advertising to customers' personality characteristics [17], with one significant individual distinction influencing an individual's reaction to persuasion being their regulatory focus trait [18]. The regulatory focus theory (RFT), as formulated by Higgins [19], suggests that individuals possess distinct motivational mechanisms that guide their determination to achieve desired goals, influencing how they process and evaluate advertising messages [14,20]. This theory posits that individuals' motivations can be categorized into two distinct types: promotion-focused individuals utilize eagerness as a strategy to maximize gains and benefits, whereas prevention-focused individuals employ vigilance as a strategy to minimize pain, loss, and risk [18,21]. In today's context, comprehending consumer personality traits holds significant importance. For example, contemporary shopping malls increasingly implement recommender systems to aid decision-making and boost customer purchases [22], while online platforms deploy personalized recommendation systems to cater to individual user needs [23]. These recommendation systems assist promotion-focused customers in discovering suitable products and facilitate their impulsive buying behavior. Regarding prevention-focused customers, electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM) can be a reliable source as it can reduce anxiety while making a purchase decision [24]. Website security and reliable transactions also help reduce prevention-focused customers' anxiety and enhance purchases [25]. Interestingly, the SNS advertising literature has surprisingly overlooked regulatory focus. Examining how regulatory focus influences positive consumer responses to SNS advertisements, particularly empathy expression, is crucial. This significance arises from the fact that the activation of persuasion knowledge extensively delineates how consumers process SNS ads, and regulatory focus plays a pivotal role in determining the activation of persuasion knowledge [17]. Consequently, integrating Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT), social media advertising effectiveness, and empathy expression to investigate consumers' purchasing decision process is fitting for the context of SNS advertising.

This study aims to discern the determinants of social network advertising effectiveness and develop a theoretical framework that explains the generation of positive user responses

on social media. The conceptual model, rooted in Regulatory Focus Theory, encompasses elements of SNS advertisement effectiveness and empathy expression. Leveraging the Regulatory Focus Theory, it explores how psychological characteristics of social media users influence their perception of an SNS ad's effectiveness (informativeness, advertising creativity, advertising relevance, and emotional appeal) and proposes an integrated research model that explains how to build positive user responses toward social media advertisements and influence subsequent purchasing intentions. The findings of this research will offer valuable insights for companies aiming to achieve a positive return on investment from their social network campaigns.

The subsequent sections of this study are organized as outlined below. Initially, we undertake a comprehensive review of the relevant literature to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive understanding of the essential concepts needed to develop a theoretical framework and formulate hypotheses. We explore the literature on Regulatory Focus Theory, SNS advertising effectiveness, and empathy expression to gain insights into potential antecedents influencing consumer purchasing intention. Following this, we outline the methodology for gathering data, describe the sample characteristics, and detail the measures utilized to evaluate the proposed model. Subsequently, we present the results of the study and engage in a thorough discussion of key findings. Lastly, we offer implications, discuss limitations, and propose avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

2.1. SNS Advertising Effectiveness

In terms of advertising value, previous research has used entertainment, informativeness, and irritation as constructs of advertising value [21,26]. However, traditional advertising value constructs are not entirely appropriate for the social media advertising context due to the differences between social and traditional media [10]. Therefore, in addition to the traditional constructs of advertising effectiveness, new constructs are needed to explain SNS users' positive response behavior (i.e., empathy expression). First, emotional appeal is more suitable to social media context than entertainment, given that it encompasses a broad spectrum of emotions, including excitement, frustration, and anger, in addition to entertainment [6]. When users have a solid emotional appeal toward messages on SNS, they are more likely to respond positively to persuasive messages [27]. Informativeness and advertising creativity are also recognized as factors significantly influencing SNS users' attitudes [28]. SNS users consider social media content with helpful information [13] and creative ideas more interesting and are more willing to engage and express their empathy [6,28]. Finally, in traditional advertising, ads play an intrusive role, which may or may not be relevant to the viewer. However, SNS ads are targeted precisely to specific viewer segments based on their profile. SNS platforms have sophisticated algorithms that enable advertisers to deliver timely, appropriate, and customized messages based on users' preferences and shopping habits [29]. In this way, SNS ads can generate better results, reduce advertising costs, improve advertising effectiveness, and attract more potential customers [30]. Therefore, this study identifies emotional appeal, informativeness, advertising creativity, and perceived relevance as critical factors relevant to our investigation; these elements play a pivotal role in influencing the development of behavioral responses to SNS advertising.

Within the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) framework, attitudes are pivotal in shaping behavioral intentions [31]. The burgeoning interest among researchers in the advertising literature underscores the escalating focus on understanding the potential impacts of attitudes on user behavior, as illustrated by studies like Chang et al. [32] and Lee and Cho [33]. However, prior research has inadequately addressed users' positive empathic reactions to behavior toward SNS ads [6]. Our study uses the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) to conceptualize the user's behavior in responding positively to an SNS ad. The positive response of users to social network advertising is considered a behavioral outcome shaped by their attitude towards the response. According to the TRA framework,

the user's positive attitude, manifested through empathic expression, is influenced by their beliefs regarding the efficacy of an SNS ad. These beliefs encompass emotional appeal, informativeness, advertising creativity, and perceived relevance. Furthermore, when a user holds a strong belief that expressing support for a compelling ad through the "Like" button is desirable (reflecting an attitude favoring empathy expression), they are highly likely to click it promptly and without hesitation (indicating a desire to express empathy), this action also facilitates the sharing of their reaction with acquaintances.

2.2. Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT)

As an extension of classical motivation theory, Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT) posits that human behavior is driven by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain [19,34]. For instance, Mosteller and Poddar [35] and Song and Qu [36] indicated that promotion-focused consumers prioritize the attraction effect, aiming to maximize gains. In contrast, prevention-focused consumers are notably sensitive to the compromise effect, seeking to minimize adverse outcomes in their decision-making. These findings imply that consumers tailor their approach or avoidance in online informational exchanges based on context, and individuals with different regulatory focus characteristics will also exhibit diverse attitudes and perceptions of advertising [14]. Aligning the message content with the regulatory focus of the target audience increases the likelihood of the marketing offer being accepted [37]. RFT provides a valuable framework for investigating why different people may perceive the effectiveness of social media ads differently. Intriguingly, limited research has explored whether the perceived effectiveness of SNS ads is influenced by regulatory focus. Thus, the current study investigates how regulatory focus affects the perceived effectiveness of SNS ads.

In the context of social media ads, marketers prioritize the inclusion of relevant product information in advertisements to mitigate consumer annoyance, as the delivery of appropriate and pertinent information is critical; the effectiveness of mobile advertising is notably influenced by the informativeness of ads and consumers' perceptions of enjoyment or ad creativity [14]. Mosteller and Poddar [35] argue that a promotion orientation may be triggered when consumers perceive the effectiveness of social media ads. In contrast, a prevention orientation may arise when online cues prompt considerations about preventing privacy violations. Moreover, given that promotion-focused individuals are inclined to notice, appreciate, and respond positively to gains associated with an ad message, Ozcelik and Varnali [21] suggest that a positive relationship is expected between the level of promotion focus and the overall effectiveness of online ads. Building on this rationale, the present study posits that promotion-focused customers should find it easier to harbor positive perceptions of SNS ad effectiveness. Conversely, the opposite rationale can be applied to the correlation between prevention focus and SNS ad effectiveness, considering the characteristics of prevention-focused individuals. Customers with a prevention focus who harbor heightened concerns about adverse outcomes generally exhibit lower satisfaction with positive outcomes (e.g., gains and non-gains) than their promotion-focused counterparts. Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated.

The promotion-focused hypothesis (H1): *A promotion focus positively influences (a) informativeness, (b) emotional appeal, (c) advertising creativity, and (d) perceived relevance in social media advertising.*

On the other hand, consumers with a prevention focus aim to avoid adverse outcomes; they tend to make logical decisions and pay more attention to self-protection and safety [38]. Since prevention-focused individuals are more likely to concentrate on avoiding adverse outcomes, their attentiveness to the benefits highlighted in social media ads is likely to be diminished, potentially attenuating the positive impact on the effectiveness of SNS ads. Therefore, in the current online advertising environment, consumers with prevention-focused characteristics pay more attention to personal data and the risk of inappropriate

use and loss of privacy [39]. In other words, people with preventive focus characteristics will negatively affect the effectiveness of SNS ads [40]. Based on the above, we propose the following hypothesis:

The prevention-focused hypothesis (H2): *A prevention focus negatively influences (a) informativeness, (b) emotional appeal, (c) advertising creativity, and (d) perceived relevance of social media advertising.*

2.3. Attitude toward Empathy Expression

Attitude refers to a person's likes or views about a particular thing [41]. Ducoffe [11] defines an attitude toward advertising as the degree of likes and dislikes toward the content presented in advertising. Amidst the rapid advancement of mobile phones and the ubiquity of social media platforms, users' attitudes toward advertising on these platforms have become an urgent research topic. Lee and Hong [6] proposed that to explain users' attitudes toward social media advertising, the attitude toward empathy expression (AEE) is better than the traditional attitude toward the advertising approach. When users are exposed to social media advertising, they usually enter an evaluation stage, which results in emotional responses (i.e., like, love, care, wow, angry, sad, etc.). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or YouTube, provide mechanisms for users to give an emotional response. Through these mechanisms, users can give a positive response (i.e., clicking the "Like" button) or a negative response (i.e., not liking) to express their evaluation of the advertisement. Lee and Hong [6] extended this view and defined empathy expression as "the extent to which users respond to social media advertisements by clicking the "Like" button." Marketers recognize the value of consumers' social relationships on social platforms exhibited by "liking/sharing" an advertisement, purchasing an advertised product, or spreading positive electronic word of mouth [42]. On the other hand, it is necessary to mention that some users will ignore or skip an advertisement when it is not relevant or interesting. In social media advertising, where users can scroll past or skip ads, a lack of engagement can be interpreted as a negative response [43]. Thus, this research follows a similar definition and considers users' liking behavior as an empathy expression.

2.4. Informativeness

The informativeness of advertising is defined as the degree to which a social media ad offers information that users perceive as applicable [6]; when an advertisement is informative, it provides product information that consumers find useful and valuable [44]. Thus, the primary purpose of advertising information is to provide consumers with information about new products or services. Previous research has shown that information is essential for developing consumers' attitudes toward e-commerce websites [13] and social media advertisements [10,20]. Lee and Koo [45] believe that informational advertisements on social media will attract users' attention and affect users' attitudes to form positive responses. In examining social media advertisements, Lee and Hong [6] confirmed that informativeness has a positive effect on the attitude of empathy. In other words, when a social media advertisement can bring informational content to the audience, it will enhance users' attitudes toward the advertisement. Given this explanation, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: *Informativeness positively influences attitude toward empathy expression.*

2.5. Emotional Appeal

Emotional appeal involves clearly articulating specific interests or reasons, capturing consumers' attention to promote products or services, and making an effort to encourage them to consider or make a purchase [46]. Studying branded posts on Facebook, Moran et al. [8] found that when ad content contains rich content, it encourages interaction, which in turn will generate more online positive responses (i.e., clicking the "Like" button or sharing a post). Similarly, Khobzi et al. [27], who studied liking and sharing Facebook

messages, found that messages with a strong emotional appeal will increase the attitude of liking and sharing. Lee and Hong [6] also pointed out that the stronger the emotional appeal of social media advertisements, the more positive the users' attitudes toward empathy in advertisements. Building upon the findings from the studies mentioned above, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: *Emotional appeal positively influences attitudes toward expressing empathy.*

2.6. Advertising Creativity

Advertising creativity is defined as the degree of originality and unexpectedness of a social media advertisement [6]. To be creative, an advertisement should include distinctive, unique, and original elements [28]. Thus, many scholars have emphasized that advertising creativity refers to innovative, divergent, and original advertising efforts [47,48]. Rosengren et al. [28] pointed out that creative and innovative advertising improves consumers' attitudes toward advertising. Similarly, Lee and Hong [6] believe that attitude toward empathy expression is an extension of advertising attitude; therefore, examining advertising creativity and empathy expression within social media advertising, they found that advertising creativity and users' attitudes toward empathy expression are significantly related. In other words, novel and creative advertisements attract social media users' attention and increase their favorability, affecting their attitude toward the advertisement. Based on the above description, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5: *Advertising creativity positively influences the attitude toward expressing empathy.*

2.7. Perceived Relevance

In social media advertising, perceived relevance is defined as the degree to which consumers believe it is self-relevant or helps them achieve their personal goals and values [12,49]. Research shows that the perceived relevance of advertisements has a significant positive effect on consumer attention [50]; when advertisements are relevant to consumers, they will attract their attention and increase the level of acceptance of advertisements [51]. Research on social media advertising also suggests that perceptual relevance positively affects users' attitudes toward advertising [52,53]. Based on the above description, we propose the following hypothesis:

H6: *Perceived relevance positively influences the attitude of empathy expression.*

2.8. Intention to Express Empathy

Khobzi et al. [27] defined a user's positive response behavior as "the likelihood of a user's 'like' or 'share' behavior on social media advertisements." Similarly, from a social media perspective, researchers have defined the possibility of a user's "Like" clicking behavior as an empathy intention [6,54]. Chen et al. [10] found a meaningful positive connection between attitude and the consideration of ad clicks. If consumers strongly believe it is valuable to express support for an engaging ad by clicking 'Like', they will undoubtedly feel inclined to click 'Like' or share it with friends without hesitation. Similarly, it can be presumed that an individual experiencing heightened empathy will maintain a positive attitude towards expressing empathy and will be highly motivated to convey empathy by clicking 'Like' for the SNS ad [6]. Hence, it can be inferred that users with a positive attitude toward expressing empathy will also be inclined to convey their response to the advertisement by clicking on the "like" in the social advertisement. Building on the above description, we put forth the following hypothesis:

H7: *The attitude toward empathy expression in advertising positively influences the intention to express empathy.*

2.9. Purchase Intention

Purchase intention refers to the likelihood that consumers plan or are willing to buy a specific product or service in the future [15]. Investigating the correlation between the number of likes on Facebook and sales, Bhattacharyya and Bose [55] discovered a positive and significant relationship between the number of likes in an advertisement on a company's page and the number of sales. In a study on Facebook fan pages, Chang et al. [32] found that liking behavior moderates the relationship between perceived value and purchase intentions. In an empirical examination of SNS, Onofrei et al. [56] observed that consumer-to-consumer social media interactions positively influence purchase intention. Building on the above description, we propose the following hypothesis:

H8: *The intention to express empathy positively and significantly influences purchase intention.*

3. Methodology

3.1. Measurement Development

This research created a questionnaire for collecting data through an online survey. Measurement scales for the constructs in the research model were adopted from relevant previous studies focusing on social media ads (refer to Appendix A). A seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"), was utilized to assess the constructs. The instruments employed to measure these constructs were adapted from previous studies. A pre-test involved three experts knowledgeable in information management and social media advertisement. They offered feedback on items related to the constructs, encompassing scale wording and instrument length. During the pilot test, 68 respondents from Facebook participated, resulting in minor adjustments to item content and structure before the formal survey.

3.2. Data Collection

Throughout a month-long survey, considering participants' convenience, we employed an online questionnaire, inviting those with previous exposure to social media advertising to participate. To facilitate participant understanding, this study begins with an overview of social media advertising, presenting three instances on social networking platforms. The questionnaire was distributed through Facebook groups, and as an incentive, participants who completed the questionnaire were allowed to enter a prize draw for twenty-five NTD 300 (USD 10) grocery store gift cards. The questionnaire had a control question that checked whether the respondent had experienced social media ads. If the respondent did not have experience with social media ads, their response was discarded automatically. By the end of the survey, 524 valid questionnaires had been collected, paving the way for comprehensive analysis and further research. Among 524 valid participants, most of the sample was female ($n = 305$, 58.2%), while 41.8% ($n = 219$) were male. Regarding the age of the respondents, 49.0% ($n = 257$) indicated that their age was between 19 and 24 years, and 38.7% ($n = 203$) indicated that their age was between 25 and 35 years. Respondents with age 35 and above comprised 11.8% ($n = 62$). Most participants were university students ($n = 400$, 76.3%) and graduate students ($n = 100$, 19.1%). In addition, the respondents mostly visit social networking websites at least once a day (68.3%), followed by at least once an hour (25.6%), while they mostly spend "30 min to 1 h" per visit (55.5%), followed by "less than 30 min" (25.4%).

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1. Common Method Bias

Given that we gathered independent and dependent data from the same source using the same method, the potential for common method bias (CMB) was recognized as a concern in this study [57]. To proactively address and identify CMB, we implemented several precautions. We performed a duo of tests specifically crafted to scrutinize its presence. First, we integrated the method provided by Podsakoff et al. [57], specifically leveraging

Harman’s single-factor test in our model; we examined the potential impact of common method bias; if a single factor exhibits a total variance surpassing 50%, it suggests the likelihood of CMB influencing both the data and subsequent empirical outcomes. In our analysis, a single factor was responsible for 24.19% of the total variance, and when considering the entire spectrum of factors within the model, 74.73% of the variance was explained. As a result, we confidently affirm that common method bias does not significantly impact the integrity of our study’s findings. Second, we conducted a more in-depth assessment of the method factor, following the methodologies recommended by Liang et al. [58] and Leong et al. [59] to enhance the clarity of our evaluation. We integrated a common method factor associated with all single-indicator constructs in the Smart PLS model. Our analysis yielded compelling results, with the loadings of the primary variables being uniformly significant ($p < 0.001$), while none of the loadings associated with the common method factor achieved significance. Consequently, based on these findings, we confidently assert the absence of any common method bias (CMB) issue within the scope of this study.

4.2. Measurement Model

We employed partial least squares (PLS) analysis through SmartPLS to examine our research hypotheses. The PLS approach enables the simultaneous assessment of measurement model parameters and structural path coefficients [60]. In this study, a two-step approach was utilized for data analysis. First, we employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to scrutinize the measurement model, assessing all constructs’ discriminant and convergent validity. Second, a structural model analysis was conducted to empirically evaluate the significance of the path coefficients and test the research hypotheses. The reliability of constructs was assessed using both Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliabilities (CR) for all constructs. The values for all nine constructs exceeded 0.70, surpassing the thresholds recommended by Fornell and Larcker [61], as indicated in Table 1. In terms of convergent validity, all average variance extracted (AVE) values were above 0.50, with significant loadings surpassing 0.70 (see Appendix A), indicating ample convergent validity [62]. In Table 2, AVE values ranged from 0.603 to 0.803, surpassing the cutoff criteria [62], demonstrating fair convergent validity.

Table 1. Reliability and validity.

| Construct | Mean | Standard Deviation | Composite Reliability | Cronbach’s α | AVE |
|--|------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-------|
| Promotion Focus (PROM) | 5.46 | 0.89 | 0.864 | 0.862 | 0.646 |
| Prevention Focus (PREV) | 2.51 | 1.08 | 0.788 | 0.754 | 0.657 |
| Emotional Appeal (EA) | 4.7 | 1.56 | 0.949 | 0.947 | 0.905 |
| Informativeness (INF) | 5.31 | 1.13 | 0.930 | 0.924 | 0.768 |
| Advertising Creativity (AC) | 4.90 | 1.23 | 0.946 | 0.940 | 0.769 |
| Perceived Relevance (RE) | 4.93 | 1.25 | 0.941 | 0.934 | 0.793 |
| Attitude Toward Empathy Expression (AEE) | 4.67 | 1.50 | 0.952 | 0.951 | 0.873 |
| Intention to Express Empathy (IEE) | 4.40 | 1.69 | 0.975 | 0.975 | 0.929 |
| Purchase Intention (PI) | 4.80 | 1.40 | 0.957 | 0.956 | 0.849 |

In assessing discriminant validity, we employed the approach outlined by Fornell and Larcker [61] and initially compared the average variance extracted (AVE) with the shared variance between variables. The square root of the average variable explained by a specific construct surpassed the corresponding inter-measure correlation. Table 2 displays the results, with all bolded square roots of the AVE surpassing the correlations between variables, confirming the discriminant validity of the constructs. Furthermore, employing the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) criterion for discriminant validity in variance-based SEM, Table 3 indicates that discriminant validity is confirmed, as all HTMT ratios are below 0.85 [62]. Therefore, this study demonstrates good convergent and discriminant validity.

Table 2. Discriminant validity for the Fornell–Larcker criterion.

| | PROM | PREV | EA | INF | AC | RE | AEE | IEE | PI |
|------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| PROM | 0.824 | | | | | | | | |
| PREV | −0.283 | 0.811 | | | | | | | |
| EA | 0.489 | −0.416 | 0.951 | | | | | | |
| INF | 0.544 | −0.376 | 0.695 | 0.876 | | | | | |
| AC | 0.471 | −0.308 | 0.741 | 0.762 | 0.870 | | | | |
| RE | 0.518 | −0.328 | 0.765 | 0.729 | 0.807 | 0.891 | | | |
| AEE | 0.488 | −0.331 | 0.733 | 0.740 | 0.767 | 0.807 | 0.934 | | |
| IEE | 0.465 | −0.272 | 0.693 | 0.789 | 0.706 | 0.652 | 0.820 | 0.964 | |
| PI | 0.486 | −0.340 | 0.727 | 0.767 | 0.755 | 0.802 | 0.804 | 0.783 | 0.921 |

Note 1: Diagonal values are the square root of AVE, whereas the remaining values are correlation coefficients between variables. Note 2: PROM = promotion focus; PREV = prevention focus; EA = emotional appeal; INF = informativeness; AC = advertising creativity; RE = perceived relevance; AEE = attitude toward empathy expression; IEE = intention to empathy expression; PI = purchase intention.

Table 3. Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) criterion.

| | PROM | PREV | EA | INF | AC | RE | AEE | IEE | PI |
|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----|
| PROM | | | | | | | | | |
| PREV | 0.313 | | | | | | | | |
| EA | 0.602 | 0.471 | | | | | | | |
| INF | 0.610 | 0.387 | 0.757 | | | | | | |
| AC | 0.592 | 0.324 | 0.767 | 0.767 | | | | | |
| RE | 0.622 | 0.308 | 0.819 | 0.802 | 0.817 | | | | |
| AEE | 0.572 | 0.374 | 0.780 | 0.793 | 0.809 | 0.815 | | | |
| IEE | 0.548 | 0.300 | 0.738 | 0.609 | 0.756 | 0.761 | 0.804 | | |
| PI | 0.573 | 0.382 | 0.807 | 0.815 | 0.787 | 0.825 | 0.811 | 0.801 | |

Note: PROM = promotion focus; PREV = prevention focus; EA = emotional appeal; INF = informativeness; AC = advertising creativity; RE = perceived relevance; AEE = attitude toward empathy expression; IEE = intention to empathy expression; PI = purchase intention.

4.3. Structural Model Analysis

Following the validity and reliability assessments, we employed the bootstrapping technique with 5000 re-samples to scrutinize the structural validity of the proposed model. Table 4 and Figure 1 showcase the results of the structural model analysis. The structural model indicates that promotion-focus significantly and positively influences informativeness ($\beta = 0.482, p < 0.001$), emotional appeal ($\beta = 0.457, p < 0.001$), advertising creativity ($\beta = 0.487, p < 0.001$), and perceived relevance ($\beta = 0.509, p < 0.001$). Conversely, prevention focus exhibits a significant negative impact on informativeness ($\beta = -0.223, p < 0.001$), emotional appeal ($\beta = -0.307, p < 0.001$), advertising creativity ($\beta = -0.169, p < 0.001$), and perceived relevance ($\beta = -0.181, p < 0.001$). Informativeness, emotional appeal, advertising creativity, and perceived relevance significantly and positively affect the attitude toward empathy expression ($\beta = 0.144, p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.250, p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.226, p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.321, p < 0.001$, respectively). Additionally, attitude toward empathy expression positively correlates to expressions of empathy ($\beta = 0.900, p < 0.001$). Consequently, the intention to express empathy demonstrates a robust association with purchase intention ($\beta = 0.776, p < 0.001$). Thus, the study’s results substantiate all proposed hypotheses.

Moreover, the R^2 value denotes the percentage by which the exogenous variables elucidate the variation in the endogenous variables, serving as an indicator of the overall predictive power of the model. Chen et al. [63] suggested that the R^2 value for exogenous variables should exceed 0.20 to be statistically viable. Figure 1 illustrates the path coefficients between the exogenous and endogenous variables and the R^2 and path coefficient values. As depicted in Figure 1, the explained variances are 34.3% for informativeness, 31.3% for advertising creativity, 34.4% for perceived relevance, 38.4% for emotional appeal, 74.0% for attitude toward empathy expression, 80.9% for intention to express empathy, and 60.2% for purchase intention. All R^2 values surpass the minimum criterion of 0.20 [63].

Finally, we examined the variance inflation factor (VIF) scores. The highest VIF value is 3.22 (ranging from 1.0 to 3.22), well below the threshold value of 5, indicating the absence of multicollinearity among any of the constructs [62].

Table 4. Research hypothesis verification.

| Hypotheses | Path Coefficient | t-Value | Result |
|--|------------------|---------|-----------|
| H1a: Promotion Focus → Informativeness | 0.482 | 12.916 | Supported |
| H1b: Promotion Focus → Emotional Appeal | 0.457 | 12.398 | Supported |
| H1c: Promotion Focus → Ad Creativity | 0.487 | 10.412 | Supported |
| H1d: Promotion Focus → Perceived Relevance | 0.509 | 11.861 | Supported |
| H2a: Prevention Focus → Informativeness | -0.223 | 6.038 | Supported |
| H2b: Prevention Focus → Emotional Appeal | -0.307 | 8.047 | Supported |
| H2c: Prevention Focus → Ad Creativity | -0.169 | 3.294 | Supported |
| H2d: Prevention Focus → Perceived Relevance | -0.181 | 3.986 | Supported |
| H3: Informativeness → Attitude Toward Empathy Expression | 0.144 | 2.743 | Supported |
| H4: Emotional Appeal → Attitude Toward Empathy Expression | 0.250 | 4.477 | Supported |
| H5: Ad Creativity → Attitude Toward Empathy Expression | 0.226 | 3.741 | Supported |
| H6: Perceived Relevance → Attitude Toward Empathy Expression | 0.321 | 4.713 | Supported |
| H7: Attitude Toward Empathy Expression → Intention to Empathy Expression | 0.900 | 81.981 | Supported |
| H8: Intention to Empathy Expression → Purchase Intention | 0.776 | 37.031 | Supported |

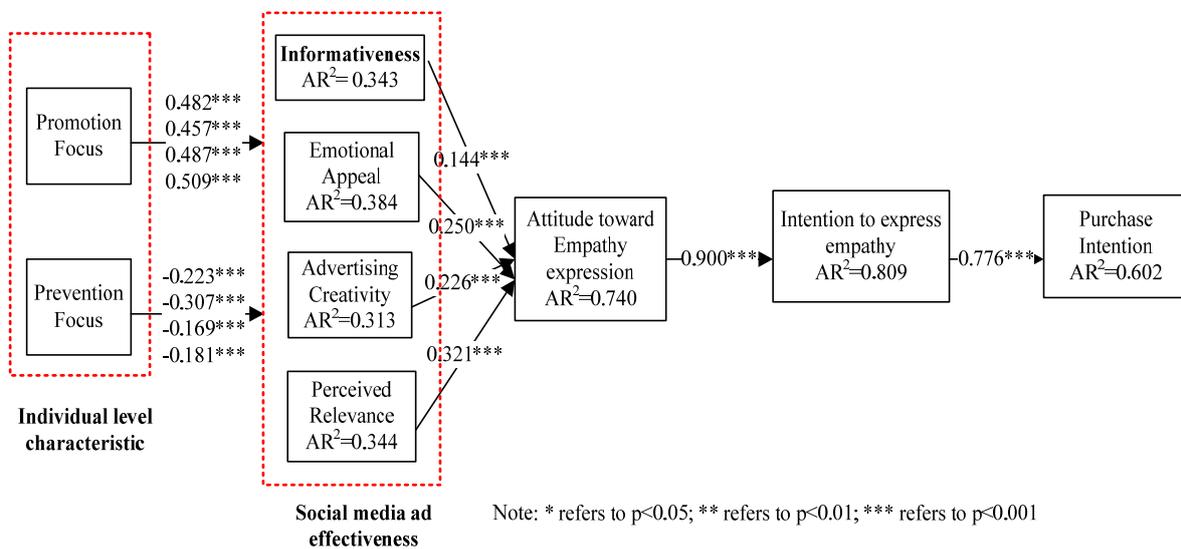


Figure 1. Results of structural model analysis.

5. Discussion

This study examines the connections between regulatory focus, the effectiveness of SNS ads, empathy expression, customer satisfaction, and purchase intention. To explore these linkages, eight hypotheses are formulated based on theoretical arguments and supported by survey data, contributing to the existing body of research.

First, the findings of this study endorse the proposition that promotion focus positively influences the effectiveness of SNS ads (informativeness, advertising creativity, perceived relevance, and emotional appeal) (H1a~H1d). In contrast, prevention focus negatively influences impulse buying (H2a~H2d). Hence, this study confirms that consumers' psy-

chological characteristics will affect their perceptions and acceptance of advertisements. Promotion-focused consumers aim to achieve positive outcomes so that they will pay more attention to the effectiveness of SNS ads. In contrast, prevention-focused consumers aim to avoid adverse outcomes such as the loss of personal information or inappropriate use and tend to ignore the value provided by the effectiveness of SNS ads.

Second, regarding ad effectiveness criteria, the results showed that informativeness and emotional appeal significantly positively affect the attitude toward empathy expression (H3 and H4). If the content of social media advertisements can touch consumers' emotions, it can make consumers have a better empathetic attitude toward advertisements. Similarly, when consumers perceive social media advertisements as providing instant, convenient, and useful information about new products or services, they have a better attitude toward empathy expression. The results showed that advertising creativity and perceived relevance have a significant positive effect on attitude toward empathy expression (H5 and H6), which means creative and relevant social media advertisements will attract consumers' attention and increase consumers' empathy attitude towards advertising. Moreover, the results of this study show that perceived relevance has the highest effect on attitude toward empathy expression in social media advertisements. This means that when the content is relevant and related to consumers' preferences and needs, it can enhance consumers' attention and increase their empathy toward advertisements more than any other factor.

Finally, the results showed that attitude toward empathy expression has a positive effect on the intention to express empathy (H7), and the intention to express empathy has a positive significant effect on purchase intention (H8). When SNS users see an advertisement, they express their thoughts by clicking the "Like" button. When consumers have a positive attitude toward empathy expression, it will affect their intention to express empathy. In addition, when SNS users are willing to express their empathy for social media advertisements and "Like" the advertisements, their willingness to buy the products in social media advertisements will increase.

6. Conclusions

Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT) provides interesting insights into understanding customer behavior based on psychological characteristics. This study investigated how RFT can be used in estimating the efficacy of social media ads and purchasing behavior. It involved an online survey of 524 social media users. It found that promotion-focused individuals positively influence perceptions of social media ad effectiveness (informativeness, ad creativity, perceived relevance, and emotional appeal). In contrast, prevention-focused individuals negatively impact social media ad effectiveness. The contribution of this study can be categorized into two main aspects: theoretical and practical.

6.1. Theoretical Contribution

The findings offer valuable insights regarding the factors shaping user attitudes toward empathy expression and the behavioral intention to express empathy in the context of SNS ads. As we delve into the details below, these findings entail theoretical and practical implications for SNS ads.

The initial theoretical implication arises from the scarcity of studies investigating how consumers' characteristics influence their perception of SNS ads [35,38]. This study provides empirical evidence for the negative impact of prevention focus on the effectiveness of SNS ads. Consumers with prevention-focused characteristics are inclined to overlook the value conveyed in the advertising message, leading to a reluctance for further purchasing behavior. These findings build upon and extend the insights of Ozcelik and Varnali [21].

Second, a limited number of studies have delved into the dimensions of advertising effectiveness [10]. Scholars have recognized the importance of informativeness and emotional appeal [8,27]. Thus, the present study makes a significant contribution to extant literature. Additionally, this research explores the impact of ad creativity and perceived relevance on attitude toward empathy expression (AEE). It enhances its predictive power in

elucidating viral behavioral intentions within the SNS environment [21]. Our findings enrich the literature by emphasizing the significance of ad creativity and perceived relevance in explaining attitudes toward empathy expression and viral behavior among SNS users.

6.2. Practical Contribution

On the practical side, our research results also offer implications. First, our results highlight that individual characteristics significantly influence how customers perceive advertising. Customer segmentation based on personal characteristics can be executed through cluster analysis. Cluster analysis is an exploratory tool that aims to group a set of objects so that objects in the same cluster are more similar than those in other clusters, and it remains essential to marketing analysis [64]. Marketers are advised to utilize commercially available analysis packages and statistics software or employ more advanced data analysis processes using languages like R or Python with the data provided by social media platforms through their APIs. Promotion-focused consumers can provide product/service-related information, as well as emotional advertising, to deliver advertising messages to achieve better results. Prevention-focused consumers can provide additional information about product warranties, return policies, personal privacy, and data security measures that will help reduce concerns about possible adverse outcomes.

Second, this study provides valuable insights into what factors are essential for social media advertisers. Our results show that emotional appeal is one factor that positively affects the attitude toward empathy expression in social media advertising. This suggests that advertisers should add more emotional materials to attract the attention of social media users and encourage them to generate emotional responses. In addition to text and images, visual and audio elements such as videos, music, etc., can create an emotional atmosphere closer to the product/service in the advertisement. Advertisers also need to pay attention to the informativeness of advertisement content. Consumers attach great importance to whether the advertisement provides convenient, timely, and relevant information about the advertised product/service. It is necessary to ensure that the content of the advertising message meets consumers' needs and provides complete information. Advertisers should work diligently to design more exciting and creative advertisements to attract consumers' attention and enhance consumers' empathetic attitudes toward advertisements. In social media, users prefer creative, novel, innovative, and surprising advertisements. Among all other factors, perceived relevance is the most crucial factor of advertising effectiveness. Therefore, when advertisers carry out ad campaigns on social media, they should place advertisements that meet consumers' preferences and are relevant to their characteristics based on usage data. If advertisers integrate user data into advertising materials and produce content according to consumers' preferences, they can improve advertising effectiveness while reducing costs [65].

Finally, our results suggest that consumers' positive behavior (e.g., clicking the "Like" button) in response to social media advertisements significantly impacts purchase intentions. Therefore, when advertising on social media, advertisers should encourage users to engage more with the content. This can be performed through various methods, such as asking users to "Like" the post or share their opinion as a piece of comment below the post.

6.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study uses only Regulatory Focus Theory, informativeness, advertising creativity, perceived relevance, and emotional appeal as research variables to explore the influence of consumers' attitudes and intentions on empathy and purchase intention. For further studies, additional intermediate variables, such as gender, age, occupation, income, etc., can be added to better understand consumer behavior under different gender and income conditions. Moreover, the attitude toward empathy expression discussed in this study is only measured by the positive response behavior of clicking the "Like" button. However, positive response behaviors in social media include clicking "Like" and sharing, forwarding,

or commenting [8]. Future research can explore other positive response behaviors to explore empathy expression attitudes.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.-W.C. and S.D.; data curation, D.-R.L.; formal analysis, C.-W.C.; investigation, C.-J.L.; methodology, C.-W.C. and D.-R.L.; resources, C.-J.L.; software, D.-R.L.; supervision, C.-W.C.; validation, C.-W.C. and C.-J.L.; writing—original draft, S.D.; writing—review and editing, C.-W.C. and S.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Promotion Focus [21,66]

| | | |
|-------|-------|--|
| PROM1 | 0.832 | I often imagine how to realize my hopes and ambitions. |
| PROM2 | 0.900 | I think I am a person who strives to achieve my “ideal self” and then realize my expectations and ambitions. |
| PROM3 | 0.803 | I feel that I have made progress in my life. |
| PROM4 | 0.791 | I often imagine good things will happen to me. |

Prevention Focus [21,66]

| | | |
|--------|-------|--|
| PREVE1 | 0.854 | I am not cautious enough and sometimes get into trouble. |
| PREVE2 | 0.758 | I often worry that I will make mistakes. |
| PREVE3 | 0.818 | Overall, I focus on preventing negative events in life. |

Emotional Appeal [6]

| | | |
|-----|-------|--|
| EA1 | 0.945 | When I see a social advertisement, it will touch my strong emotions. |
| EA2 | 0.965 | The emotion conveyed in the social media advertisement attracted me. |
| EA3 | 0.943 | I like the emotional appeal of social media advertising. |

Informativeness [6,10]

| | | |
|------|-------|--|
| INF1 | 0.902 | Social media advertising is a good source of product/service information. |
| INF2 | 0.913 | Product/service information obtained from social media advertisements is useful. |
| INF3 | 0.854 | Social media advertisements will provide relevant information about products/services. |
| INF4 | 0.902 | The advertisements displayed on social media are a convenient source of product/service information. |
| INF5 | 0.806 | Social media advertisements will provide timely product/service information. |

Advertising Creativity [6]

| | | |
|-----|-------|--|
| AC1 | 0.924 | Compared with other advertisements, I think social media advertisements are special. |
| AC2 | 0.940 | Compared with other advertisements, I think social media advertisements are different. |
| AC3 | 0.883 | Compared with other ads, I think social media ads are eye-catching. |
| AC4 | 0.845 | I think social media advertising is amazing. |
| AC5 | 0.885 | I think social media advertising is creative. |

Perceived Relevance [12,50]

| | | |
|-----|-------|---|
| RE1 | 0.852 | When I saw an advertisement on a social networking site, I thought it might be related to my needs. |
| RE2 | 0.851 | When I see ads on social networking sites, I think it might be important to me. |
| RE3 | 0.926 | I think the content of social advertising is meaningful to me. |
| RE4 | 0.903 | I think social media advertising is in line with my interests. |
| RE5 | 0.917 | I think social advertising is valuable to me. |

Attitude Toward Empathy Expression [6]

| | | |
|------|-------|---|
| AEE1 | 0.928 | I think it is good to click on the social media ad "Like." |
| AEE2 | 0.930 | I am satisfied with clicking on the social media ad "Like." |
| AEE3 | 0.893 | For me, clicking on social media ads "Like" is valuable. |
| AEE4 | 0.891 | My overall attitude towards social media advertising is positive. |

Intention to Empathy Expression [6,54]

| | | |
|------|-------|--|
| IEE1 | 0.963 | I plan to click "Like" on the social media advertisement. |
| IEE2 | 0.962 | I would like to click "Like" on the social media advertisement. |
| IEE3 | 0.968 | In the future, I would like to click "Like" on the social media advertisement. |
| IEE4 | 0.963 | I will continue to click on the "Like" button of the social advertisement. |

Purchase Intention [10,12]

| | | |
|-----|-------|---|
| PI1 | 0.895 | I plan to buy products/services in social media advertisements often in the future. |
| PI2 | 0.938 | I am likely to buy products/services in social media advertising in the future. |
| PI3 | 0.955 | I will buy products/services in social media advertisements in the future. |
| PI4 | 0.900 | If I need it, I will buy the products/services advertised on social media. |
| PI5 | 0.919 | I am willing to buy the products advertised on social media. |

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