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Research Paper

# Consumer Social Media Engagement with Video Ad in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The main objective of this article is to analyze the narrative of an advertising video in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic through a utilitarian (informativeness) and hedonic (playfulness) perspective and evaluate its consequences on brand engagement. In this article, we propose a quantitative approach based on structural equation models. The questionnaire was disseminated in April 2020, and 235 valid responses were obtained and analyzed using the software AMOS v26. The results confirmed the adjustment of the data to the conceptual model established and that empathy with the content in advertising videos has a mediating effect on playfulness and informativeness effects in brand engagement in social networks during COVID-19 pandemic. Our study analyses the narrative of an advertising video in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic through a utilitarian (informativeness) and hedonic (playfulness) perspective and evaluates its consequences on brand engagement. Despite the existence of several studies on advertising, its relationship with brand engagement is still poorly studied in the literature, especially in the pandemic period. This work demonstrates the importance of empathy with video as important factor in digital brand engagement, even in times of crisis.

Keywords: Informativeness; Playfulness; Social Media Engagement; Covid 19 campaign; Video Ad

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades advertising has gained power in the marketing strategies of many companies.

In a pandemic context, the advertising effort has become more demanding and with new

challenges. Advertising effectiveness increasingly depends on informative and entertaining

content. Ads containing useful information are perceived as less intrusive (Edwards et al., 2002)

and therefore have greater receptivity. Similarly, videos that use humor and fun are more popular

and considered less evasive by consumers (Goodrich et al., 2015).

Through advertisements, brands tell stories (storytelling) that generate empathy in consumers

through characters that express feelings and desires with which they identify themselves as well

as with the brands/products (Green et al., 2005). Brands that generate stronger emotional

reactions lead to greater consumer recall and persuasion (Fernández-Aguilar et al., 2019).

Through social media, users share information and engage with brands (Westberg et al., 2018).

This engagement plays a strategic role for brands (Hajli et al., 2017).

In this sense, this study aims to analyze the relationship between informativeness and playfulness

with video empathy and brand engagement intention. To meet the study objectives, three

hypotheses and an underlying conceptual model were defined. To test the conceptual model

presented and the research hypotheses of this study, we conducted a quantitative cross-sectional

survey, having obtained 235 valid answers.

Our study's main contribution is that we analyze the narrative of an advertising video in the

context of the COVID-19 pandemic through a utilitarian (informativeness) and hedonic

(playfulness) perspective and evaluate its consequences on brand engagement. Despite the

existence of several studies on advertising, its relationship with brand engagement is still poorly

studied in the literature, especially in the pandemic period.

The article is divided into five sections. Section 2 reviews the literature, establishes the

hypotheses, and defines the research conceptual model. Section 3 describes the methodology

used, followed by the results, which are presented in section 4. Section 5 draws the conclusions,

discusses the results, and highlights the implications.

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#### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Informativeness

The main objectives of advertising are to inform, persuade and generate recall (Kotler & Keller, 2012). The function of inform means providing content about products and services that will help consumers better understand these same products and services (Zhao & Yan, 2020). According to Kang et al. (2020), the ad information is the richness of the ad perceived by the consumer.

With the advancement of the Internet, consumers seek access to information quickly and easily (Korgaonkar & Wolin, 1999). However, brands should be careful with the content produced as it can cause irritation (Wang & Nguyen, 2018) when content is too manipulative and uninformative, which leads to negative attitudes (Wang & Nguyen, 2018).

According to these authors (Wang & Nguyen, 2018), "the perception of informativeness is considered as people's assessment of whether all the information they receive is useful or useless." The role of advertising is to provide useful, relevant, and quality information about products (Hashim & Zolkepli, 2014). If the information disseminated is relevant, it will lead to a positive attitude of the consumer towards the brand (Leung & Cheung, 2004).

In the digital context, social media advertisements are part of advertising planning to generate greater engagement. According to Hilde et al. (2018), the success of an advertising campaign in social media includes the seduction and originality of the ads valued by informativity.

Consequently, informative ads generate empathy among people (Shin, 2018) and lead consumers to associate the ad with a positive brand image (Lee & Hong 2016). The combination of humor with information positively affects the attitude towards the ad (Stysko-Kunkowska, 2010). Lee and Hong (2016, p. 360) analyzed the effectiveness of advertising and found that "advertising that contains emotional appeal, informativeness, and creativity has the potential to contribute to positive online behavior."

Informativeness and fun or playfulness in ads generate more positive and happy attitudes (Nebaimoro, 2017), increasing purchase intention as well (Wang & Nguyen, 2018).

## 2.2 Playfulness

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in research on playfulness, indicating it as a precursor of the state of flow (Kang et al., 2020). Advertising can offer consumers several uses

and gratifications such as information about products, entertainment, reaffirmation of values, experiences, or even social integration (O'Donohoe, 1993).

Consumer behavior is characterized by intertwined biological, psychological and cultural considerations (Sapolsky, 2018). More than ever, consumers are actors on the consumer market stage (Solomon et al., 2006). Human behavior is driven by two major mechanisms: positive reinforcement (Daw et al., 2002; McGue & Bouchard, 1998) and negative reinforcement (Ohme et al., 2010; Staddon & Cerutti, 2003). In the former, the consumer seeks comfort and satisfaction, and in the latter, there is a strong aversion to loss (Ariely, 2010). Understanding the stimuli that motivate this reward and this aversion to loss requires analyzing and working on the motivating elements of Emotion, Attention, Cognition and Memory (Müller-Oehrin & Schulte, 2014), such as entertainment and playfulness. If advertising videos activate, these mental triggers engagement will be around.

Humorous brand advertising videos have gained increasing popularity, appearing less intrusive and evasive than advertisements (Goodrich et al., 2015). Several analyses about emotional investigations have shown that videos are one of the most effective methods of inducing humor (Fernández-Aguilar et., al, 2019). One of the main reasons for their success is that videos can generate a dynamic context using stimuli like those in real life, but without the ethical problems that can arise when manipulating emotions (Fernández Megías et al., 2011).

Images of happiness increase self-reported happiness (Siedlecka & Denson, 2019). In addition, this procedure increases galvanic skin responses, skin conductance, heart rate, and body temperature. It decreases inspiratory and expiratory times: a response consistent with evidence for the proposed physiological correlates of happiness (Siedlecka & Denson, 2019). Psychophysiological changes are the expression of the consumer's response to the stimulus that was exposed in the context of consumption (Sapolsky, 2018), such as a television advertisement. The informative, useful, attractive and humorous, entertaining contents make the video more effective, allow better memorization and allow a greater receptivity because they generate a positive attitude from customers towards the ad itself, the brand, and the company (Goodrich et al., 2015). The individuals obtain pleasure during the process of interaction with the advertising video, although with differentiated levels of impact (Caruana & Vella, 2004).

However, consumer happiness is strongly dependent on the brand relationship (Cherrier & Munoz, 2007), with people being happier with advertisements whose content is relevant,

informative, useful, creative, and entertaining. If the ad in video format does not have these characteristics, they will abandon the video as it is annoying and time-consuming (Nebaimoro, 2017).

Videos associated with strong emotions are twice as likely to be shared on networks as those with a weak emotional appeal (Nelson-Field, 2013).

# 2.3 Empathy, video, and advertising

The communication strategy should not be developed for people; it should be developed with people. Currently, we live in the Attention Economy (Davenport & Beck, 2002), attention is a resource, the price of anything is the amount of time that the customer offers in exchange (Davenport & Beck, 2002), being that the busy minds of consumers promote the search for positive rewards (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1990). The attention is selective and limited and can be considered a filter through which certain stimuli gain preference (Kandel, 2009). For advertisers, attracting attention is critical to build and refresh consumers' brand memories and increase their purchasing predisposition (Simmonds et al., 2020).

Considering Damasio (2011), "We are not thinking machines that feel, we are machines that think," we realize that it is to create connection and build trust with customers. According to Forrester Consulting, "65% of marketers seek to implement emotional marketing", however, most consumers (53%) distrust in some way the brands they buy, according to The Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: In Brands We Trust.

Empathy involves three dimensions: affective, cognitive, and emotion regulation. Thus, promoting empathy is essential for brands, allowing the ability to share another person's feelings (Krznaric, 2015. Riess, 2017). Intention to express empathy can positively influence consumer purchase intention, as well as the perceived Herd Effect (Hwang & Salmon, 2004), which had an indirect impact on intention to express empathy (Lee & Hong, 2016).

Considering the consumer as an emotional being who deals with a transient but coordinated set of responses (Rottenberg et al., 2007), the same adapt to the stimuli (Ekman, 1992). The consumer is thus presented as a social being by nature, immature and unable to feed or defend himself, finding in the social attachment system (attachment and social ties) a way of survival (Eisenberg, 2012).

Communicating through empathy is thus to work on social emotions (Krendl, & Heatherton, 2017) and mirror neurons (Kilner & Lemon, 2013), realizing that without the involvement of

communication, its effects are limited on consumer behavior (Kim et al., 2017). Emotional reactions not only come first but facilitate memory and influence consumer actions (Ferrer et al., 2015).

The video in communication allows empathy by the presence of several inducers of emotions such as stories (Hopkins, 2015), the characters that express desires, feelings, and experiences, which leads the consumer to identify or not with them and with the brands/products (Green et al., 2005), visual stimuli, music, situational procedures and images (Ferrer et al., 2015), with advertising messages that successfully generate a strong emotional reaction being stronger in dimensions such as memory or persuasion (Fernández-Aguilar et al., 2019), and faster in emotional connection (Ferrer et al., 2015).

Thus, the first hypotheses are:

H1: The informativeness of the video has positive effects on empathy with the video

H2: Playfulness of the video has positive effects on empathy with the video

## 2.4 Social Media Engagement

With the advent of social media, brands are faced with the challenge of creating engagement with consumers. The main goal of brands on social media is to increase online engagement (Hallock et al., 2019).

By advertising on social media, brands promote long-lasting relationships with consumers (Arora, Bansal, Kandpal, Aswani & Dwivedi, 2019). Guesalaga (2016, p. 75) defines social media engagement "as the extent to which the organization's important customers are active in using social media tools."

According to several authors, social media engagement is measured through interactions such as likes, comments, and shares (Bonilla et al., 2019). This engagement ranges from low (consuming content) to high (contributing and/or creating content) (Tsai & Men, 2013). In this perspective, Muntinga et al. (2011) proposed the COBRA model - Consumers' Online Brand-Related Activities, which differentiates three levels of engagement with brands on social networks: 1) consumption - low engagement - users only view content, assuming a passive posture (lurkers); 2) contribution - users interact with the content by "liking" or commenting; 3) creation - high engagement - users create content about the brand (in their profile or reviews) (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011). Schivinski *et al.* (2016), based on the model of Muntinga *et al.* (2011), showed the hierarchical relationship and influence of consumption on contribution.

However, engagement depends on the platform used, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or Youtube (Khan, 2017). On Instagram, for example, the engagement is higher than on Facebook due to the visual content disclosed (Pentina et al., 2018). On the other hand, studies by Voorveld et al. (2018) showed that the type of experience in each social network influences engagement with advertising. Consumer engagement on social media brings numerous advantages for brands, such as "recommending, referring, and discussing the brand on social media, as well as providing feedback to the company" (Chiang et al., 2017). On the other hand, engagement leads to increased brand value (brand equity) (Van Doorn et al., 2010), loyalty (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015), brand awareness, and perceived quality (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015).

The emotional connection generated by engagement leads to greater brand attachment (Harrigan et al., 2018), satisfaction, commitment (Kim et al., 2018), and increase purchase intention (Brodie et al., 2013).

With social media, users share content, information and engage with brands (Westberg et al., 2018), playing a strategic role (Hajli et al., 2017).

Therefore, the last hypothesis is:

H3: Video empathy has positive effects on brand engagement intention on social media The conceptual model presented (figure 1) demonstrates the effects of informativeness and playfulness on video empathy and consequently on brand engagement intention.

## 2.5 Conceptual model

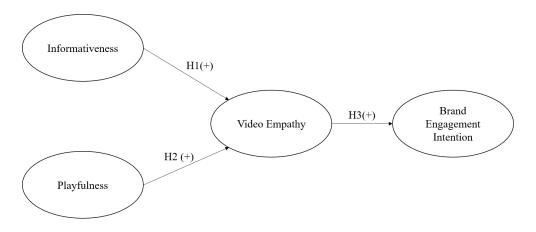


Figure 1. Conceptual model

#### 3. METHODOLOGY

To test the conceptual model presented and the research hypotheses of this study, we conducted a cross-sectional study.

To collect the data, we chose to present a video of the Staples brand<sup>1</sup>, which was disseminated online between April and May 2020 and, after the respondents viewed the video, we presented a self-administered questionnaire because it is important to guarantee the anonymity of individuals. To measure the variables under study, we used 5-point Likert scales ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The operationalization of the variables was based on other previous studies and is described in Table 1. Thus, for the concept of informativeness, we adapted two items of the scale used by Lee and Hong (2016), for the concept of playfulness, we adapted the items of Hsieh and Tseng (2017), for video empathy, we developed the three items applied in the study of Scales and Stern (2003). We used the items developed in the study of Schivinski et al. (2020) for brand engagement.

Table 1. Items of the questionnaire

Variable	Code	Item Description	
Informativeness	INF1	The information in the ad is helpful.	
	INF2	I think the information in the ad is helpful.	
	EMP1	As I watched the ad, I felt as if the scenes were happening to me.	
Empathy with the	EMP2	As I watched the ad, I felt like I was one of the characters.	
video EMP3		While watching the ad, the characters' feelings were the same as	
		mine.	
Brand Engagement	BENG1	I will be following this brand on social media.	
	BENG2	I will search for more on this brand.	
	BENG3	I will be looking for fan pages for this brand.	
	BENG4	I will look for more videos of this brand.	
Playfulness	PLAY1	The video is joyful.	
	PLAY2	I find the ad pleasing.	
	PLAY3	The ad is fun.	

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=lesyGGFpxTE

Data were collected during April 2020 - the first lockdown in Portugal - and the questionnaire, implemented in Google Forms, was shared through social networks, obtaining a sample of 235 respondents of Portuguese nationality. The characterization of the sample, presented in Table 2, shows that 59.15% of respondents are female (N=139), and most observations originated from individuals under 30 years of age (N=165; 70.21%).

Variable N (%) Category 96 (40,85%) Gender Male 139 (59,15%) Female < 20 years 69 (29,36) Age 20 to 29 years old 96 (40,85%) 30 to 39 years old 17 (7,23%) 40 to 49 years old 27 (11,49%) > 50 years old 26 (11,06%)

**Table 2.** Characterization of the sample

### 4. RESULTS

The results were obtained by structural equation modelling, using the software AMOS v26, a multivariate data analysis technique that allows analysing the cause-effect relationships between the concepts under study.

Prior to data analysis, we verified that the VIF (Variance Inflactor factor) value was lower than the threshold value for multicollinearity not to exist (VIF<5) (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). We also analyzed that the Skewness (Sk) and Kurtosis (Ku) values were acceptable to consider that there are no major deviations from normality (Hair *et al.*, 2018).

The data analysis was conducted in two stages: analysis of the reliability of the measurement model and analysis of the structural model.

#### 4.1 Measurement model

In the analysis of the measures model we found that, overall, the measures model shows a good fit to the data ( $\chi$ 2=101.667; df=48 (p<0.01); GFI=0.933; CFI=0.975; NFI=0.954; IFI=0.975; TLI=0.966; RMSEA=0.069) (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). We also found that the standardized coefficients ( $\lambda$ ) are above the minimum value of 0.7 (p<0.05). Additionally,

we verified that the R2 value is higher than the value 0.2 indicated by (Chin, 1998). In addition, we confirmed that the Composite Reliability (CR) and the Average Variance Extracted (VEM) present values above the minimum values indicated by the literature (CR>0.7; VEM>0.5) (Table 3) (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988).

Table 3. Measurement model

Latent variable	Items Code	λ	t-values	R2	CR	AVE
INF					0,860	0,755
INF1	INF1	0,89		0,793		
INF2	INF2	0,847	10,628	0,717		
PLAY					0,899	0,747
PLAY1	PLAY1	0,852		0,726		
PLAY2	PLAY2	0,903	16,731	0,815		
PLAY3	PLAY3	0,837	15,46	0,7		
EMP					0,904	0,760
EMP1	EMP1	0,887		0,787		
EMP2	EMP2	0,925	19,305	0,856		
EMP3	EMP3	0,798	15,546	0,636		
BENG					0,942	0,802
BENG1	BENG1	0,938		0,88		
BENG2	BENG2	0,895	23,105	0,801		
BENG3	BENG3	0,864	20,991	0,746		
BENG4	BENG4	0,883	22,276	0,78		

Notes: INF=Informativity; PLAY=Playfulness; EMP=empathy; BENG=Brand engagement;  $\lambda$ =Standardized coefficients; R2=regression coefficients; HR=composite reliability; VEM=average extracted variance.

## 4.2 Discriminant validity

To complement the analysis of the validity of the measurement model, we analyzed the discriminant validity, and, through Table 4, we confirmed that the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion was met since the square of the interconstruct correlations are lower than the values of the Average Variance Extracted (VEM) presented on the diagonal.

Table 4. Discriminant Validity

Construct	INF	PLAY	EMP	BENG
INF	0,755			
PLAY	0,419*	0,747		
EMP	0,398*	0,368*	0,760	
BENG	0,489*	0,277*	0,555*	0,802

Notes: INF=Informativity; PLAY=Playfulness; EMP=empathy; BENG=Brand engagement. The values on the diagonal are the VEM values; \* all correlations are significant at 1%.

#### 4.3 Structural Model

In the second step of our data analysis, we estimated the structural model and tested the research hypotheses under study. The results obtained suggest that the structural model has a good fit ( $\chi$ 2=124.289; df=58 (p<0.01); GFI=0.920; CFI=0.966; NFI=0.944; IFI=0.966; TLI=0.955; RMSEA=0.080) (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Bagozzi & Yi, 1988) and the results of the hypothesis test carried out are presented in Table 5. We found that the three hypotheses under study were supported by this study and R2EXP=0.225 AND R2BENG=0.321.

Table 5. Results of the hypothesis test

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t values	p value	Result
H1	PLAY→EMP	0,243	3,279	<i>p</i> <0,01	Supported
H2	INF→ EMP	0,317	4,053	<i>p</i> <0,01	Supported
Н3	EMP →BENG	0,566	8,951	<i>p</i> <0,01	Supported

Notes: INF=Informativity; PLAY=Playfulness; EMP=empathy; BENG=Brand engagement;  $\beta$ =Standardized trajectory coefficients.

#### 5. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to analyze the conceptual model regarding the relationship of informativeness and playfulness with video empathy and video empathy with brand engagement intention.

The results reveal that the designed structural model presents a good fit for the data.

Regarding the hypotheses, the results allowed validating the three hypotheses under study. These results reveal that informativeness and playfulness are two significant predictors of video empathy, and that video empathy significantly predicts brand engagement intention on social media.

The validation of H1 is in line with the results reported by several authors (Lee & Hong, 2016; Leung & Cheung, 2004; Hilde et al., 2018; Nebaimoro, 2017; Shin, 2018; Stysko-Kunkowska, 2010). Social media ads are part of advertising planning to generate greater engagement, so if the information disseminated is relevant, it leads to a positive consumer attitude towards the brand, generating empathy and contributing to positive online behavior. In the digital context the success and effectiveness of an advertising campaign on social networks necessarily depends on informativity, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The validation of H2 also meets the published results (Caruana & Vella, 2004; Cherrier & Munoz, 2007; Goodrich et al., 2015; Nelson-Field, 2013). Humorous and entertaining content makes the video more effective, enables better recall and allows for greater receptivity, and generates a positive attitude and emotional appeal toward the ad itself, the brand, and the company in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Individuals derive pleasure and feel happier during the process of interacting with the video advertisement with entertaining content.

The results alluding to H3 (Validated) are supported by the research findings of other authors (Fernández-Aguilar et al., 2019; Ferrer et al., 2015; Green et al., 2005; Hwang & Salmon, 2004; Lee & Hong, 2016; Simmonds et al., 2020). The use of videos is one of the most effective methods of engaging with brands, and one of the main reasons for their success is that videos generate a dynamic context using stimuli like real life. The use of videos attracts attention, which is fundamental to building and refreshing consumers' brand memories and increasing the propensity to purchase during COVID-19 pandemic. The video in communication allows characters to express desires, feelings, experiences, and stories, leading the consumer to identify with them and with the brands/products. This empathy with the videos positively influences the consumer's intention to purchase.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The current work contributes to the literature on social media advertising by identifying informativeness (utilitarian perspective), playfulness (hedonic perspective), and empathy with

video as important factors in digital brand engagement, even in times of crisis. Our results provide useful insights into what contributes to user attitudes toward expressing empathy and behavioral intention to express empathy toward an ad. This also allowed for the development of a conceptual framework to examine the mediating role of video empathy in the relationship between informativeness, playfulness, and engagement with brands. This conceptualization suggests, for example, that informativeness and playfulness may have the ability to influence the virality of online content. This paper thus highlights the potential importance of informativity and playfulness in fostering rich online interactions and, more broadly, in developing strong brand-consumer relationships.

In this sense the results should be framed in the COVID context and the conclusions should be analyzed carefully. As for practical implications, brand communication strategies need to respond to changes in consumer behavior in the face of ongoing challenges like COVID-19 pandemic. Our research identifies informativeness and playfulness of videos are important tools that managers should use strategically in the face of these challenges in times of disruptive crises. The ability of brands to inform and entertain brands to convey playfulness generates higher levels of engagement and several other benefits of informative and entertaining content in any situation.

#### **6.1 Limitations**

While this research contributes to the literature by identifying the antecedents of brand engagement on social media arising from consumer responses to video advertising, it incurs some limitations. First, the predictors we use in our model may not be exhaustive. More research is needed to explore other factors associated with video advertising that may impact brand engagement on social media arising from consumer responses to video advertising. Second, the sample is not very large and not fully representative of the Portuguese consumer population.

#### **6.2 Research directions**

Future research can investigate and test the relationships in our model using other samples, including comparing structural relationships across age, gender, and other sociodemographic characteristics (moderator variables), and should be conducted in other national contexts.

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