

Article

# Factors Affecting Sustainable Purchase Intentions of SNS Emojis: Modeling the Impact of Self-Presentation

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**Abstract:** To promote more sustainable consumption of Social Networking Service (SNS) emojis, it is necessary to understand the relationships between social psychological antecedents and SNS users' intention to purchase emojis. This study aimed to investigate motivational factors affecting users' intentions to purchase SNS emojis. We examined SNS users of Kakao Talk, the most widely used instant messaging service in South Korea, and investigated the relationships among five latent constructs: Self-presentation, symbolic values, playfulness, purchase intentions, and need for uniqueness. The results of this study indicate that self-presentation does not directly affect the intention to purchase emojis ( $\beta = 0.10, p > 0.05$ ). Rather, self-presentation positively influences purchase intention through the mediating path of SNS users' perceived symbolic value ( $\beta = 0.60, p < 0.001$ ) and playfulness ( $\beta = 0.35, p < 0.001$ ) to purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.29, p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta = 0.37, p < 0.001$ ). Further, symbolic value affects playfulness ( $\beta = 0.56, p < 0.001$ ), which in turn leads to consumers' intentions to purchase emojis. This study highlights that SNS users' need for uniqueness functions as a moderator in the relationship between self-presentation and their intentions to purchase emojis.

**Keywords:** SNS; emojis; self-presentation; symbolic value; playfulness; need for uniqueness

## 1. Introduction

As digital communication becomes dominant, people have various options to convey their ideas and emotions. SNS accelerates this trend and provides novel methods to help people communicate with each other. In particular, online communication using emoticons is noteworthy because they can be used to depict facial expressions and gestures parallel to those conveyed in face-to-face communication (F2F). In comparison to F2F communication, online communication is considered to be more ambiguous because of the lack of non-verbal cues (e.g., voice tone, facial cues, and body language) that help prevent potential misunderstandings [1]. However, the use of graphic representations helps online communicators to express specific emotional states and convey the delicate context of a message. By using these cues, individuals can overcome the ambiguity of text messages and may perceive their use as a strategy to enhance and improve communication quality.

This study focuses specifically on emoji-based communication among SNS users and factors affecting intentions to purchase emojis. Strictly speaking, the emoji is different from emoticons. According to Evans [1] (p. 1), an “emoji is an iconic, visual representation of an idea, entity, feeling, status or event, that is used alongside or instead of words in digital messaging and social media.” Emoticons are typographical displayed images of faces, but emojis are pictorial expressions, like animated characters, which are generally combined with texts, thus creating a new form of written communication. Relatedly, there is also recent evidence showing that, in contrast to emoticons, emojis are becoming more frequently used in online communications [1] and are evaluated as more appealing, positive, creative, and meaningful [2]. Consequently, emojis have become popular for clarifying

online communication. Therefore, the effectiveness of using emojis in online communication could be different from using traditional emoticons and should be a matter of discussion. However, little is known and reported about consumers' motives for emoji consumption, and not many studies have found the underlying mechanisms that affect users' willingness to purchase emojis. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the gratifications of SNS emoji use and its effect on behavioral intentions to purchase emojis. Specifically, we make two main contributions to the extant literature. First, this study theoretically advances current research into consumers' social psychological traits (e.g., self-presentation) that contribute to sustainable purchase decisions. Although most extant research focuses on the consumer processes involved in building purchase intention for products, we posit that there is a possibility that people have more intention to purchase if they find symbolic value through external expression from their consumption of a product or service. Thus, this study concentrates on psychological predictors (i.e., self-presentation, symbolic value, playfulness) involved in building SNS users' intention to purchase emojis. Second, from the viewpoint of brand marketers, the current study is designed to explore how people perceive the use of emojis and their motives for including them in SNS communications. Since branded emojis should be regarded as commercial products, it is important for practitioners to understand consumers' social psychological perspectives that affect sustainable purchase intents. In this study, we aimed to identify these key factors to inform brand marketers' use of emojis as a creative and innovative branding tool.

The present study focuses on the case of Kakao Talk, which is the most popular social networking app in South Korea, launched by Kakao Inc., with its number of subscribers exceeding 45 million users as of July 2019 [3]. According to a recent statistic, 93% of South Korea's population uses Kakao Talk on their smartphones, and over 20 million of the total users purchased emojis while chatting [3]. Thus, given the proliferation of Kakao Talk emojis, this study aims to construct a theoretical framework to understand and assess dominant factors (i.e., self-presentation, symbolic value, playfulness) that lead to users' intentions to purchase emojis. In addition, the current research examines the moderating influence of SNS users' need for uniqueness on the relationship between self-presentation and emoji purchase intention.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *Emoji Use and U&G Perspective*

According to media richness theory [4], communication channels differ with respect to the amount of information that each channel can convey. The concept of media richness describes a specific communication channel's capability to deliver messages with rich information [5]. The theory suggests that four factors determine a communication channel's capacity for rich information: (1) The ability to convey multiple cues such as facial expression and gestures, (2) timely feedback such as the immediacy of response to a query, (3) language variety including various language symbols, and (4) the ability to convey personalized communication such as displaying personal emotions [4]. In this regard, for effective communication, messages must be conveyed on channels that exhibit adequate media richness capacities [5]. Consequently, communication channels such as SNSs, e-mail, and/or mobile instant messaging services hold varied attributes with differing media richness capacities.

Although instant messaging resembles other Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), such as email with its text transmission feature, it has a unique feature that enables users to express emotions with facial expressions using emoticons. Therefore, this type of communication (i.e., instant messaging), which enables users to send nonverbal cues (i.e., emoticons) through text messages, is considered to provide information richness in the communication process [5]. Furthermore, human communication is more than simply speaking, writing, or interpreting words; it is conducted through complex steps such as context, grammar, experience, or non-verbal expressions [6]. However, CMC, which has become a major communication method in modern society, is limited in terms of contextual or non-verbal

expression, as compared to F2F. Accordingly, it is often pointed out that CMC might disrupt the correct understanding of a message's context or nature [7].

Some studies suggest that people can overcome the potential limits of CMC by using emoticons [8–10], and these nonverbal cues can help them communicate more accurately [11]. As such, people use emoticons and express various emotions such as happiness, sadness, and anger by combining different characters [12,13]. Previous studies have reported that using emoticons improves the quality of CMC, just like using facial expressions and/or body language in F2F [8,14]. Emoticons have evolved from a text-based form (e.g., ^^) to a graphic-based form thanks to the development of IT technologies. This type of graphical representation is called an “emoji”, and allows users to express their emotional state; therefore, emojis can be seen as informal communication tactics in digital communication [2,15]. Furthermore, along with the popularization of smartphones, emojis have developed and exist in various forms such as common objects, facial expressions, places, and animals.

Researchers assert that the uses and gratifications (U&G) perspective offers a deeper understanding of user acceptance of media or media content [16,17]. The U&G perspective postulates that people choose and use media based on their own needs [17]. In other words, this psychological communication perspective emphasizes an individual's voluntary attitude towards choosing and using a specific medium according to his/her needs and motivations [18]. In previous studies, researchers have attempted to explain SNS use from the perspective of U&G, and this theoretical approach has been an adequate and useful framework to understand users' needs and motives in the context of various CMC settings such as Facebook, Twitter, and WeChat [16,19–21]. Therefore, from this perspective, we will try to identify antecedents underlying emoji use that affect users' intentions to purchase emojis.

As shown in Table 1, this study examined prior research related to media usage. Although several past studies of emoticons or emojis have provided findings on new media usage, these studies have not examined the social psychological factors that encourage consumers to purchase emojis and how the particular branded content affects user adoption and usage behavior of a certain SNS app. In particular, the current study examines the social psychological factors for sustained purchasing and using of emojis. In this context, it is asserted that the U&G perspective provides a starting point for understanding why people use emojis in their SNS communication.

**Table 1.** Summary of related literature and results.

Perspective/Subject	Researchers	Findings and Contributions to Emoji Usage Research	Research Gaps
CMC	Derks & Bos [8]	Emoticons are used in a way similar to facial behavior in face-to-face communication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited awareness of users' psychological and social factors in SNS communication and media-related behaviors.</li> <li>Little is known about the influence of branded content (i.e., emoji) adoption and use of SNSs in the marketing industry.</li> <li>No study has examined the social psychological motivation to use emojis delivering messages.</li> </ul>
	Jibril & Abdullah [9] Lo [11]	Identified emoticons can be approached as contributory to conversation, not merely compensatory to language. Considered emoticons as a communication tool in that, although presented as verbal cues, they perform nonverbal functions.	
Emoticon	Huaung, Yen, & Zhang [15]	Enjoyment, personal interaction, perceived information richness, and usefulness were proposed motivations for the use of emoticons.	
	Tossell et al. [14]	A longitudinal research design was used for emoticon research and differences were found between genders; females sent more messages with emoticons.	

Table 1. Cont.

Perspective/Subject	Researchers	Findings and Contributions to Emoji Usage Research	Research Gaps
Emoji	Choi, Hyun, & Lee [2] Prada et al. [22]	Confirmed that image-based tactile emojis can improve the texting experience of visually impaired individuals. Found gender differences in emoji use were particularly evident in younger participants. Women reported using emojis more often and chose emojis with more positive attitudes.	

## 2.2. Psychological Predictor: Self-Presentation

Researchers suggest that consumers' needs, psychological traits, and social context predict media use behavior [23,24]. In this study, we focus on self-presentation as a social psychological predictor involved in building users' intention to purchase emojis. As mentioned, SNS users use emoticons to communicate with other users accurately [8–11], and emojis enable users to express emotions easily [11]. In other words, expressing emotion by using emoticons or emojis is a different kind of self-presentation [2,15]. The concept of self-presentation refers to the process by which individuals attempt to build an identity by controlling self-images available to others [25]. Self-image includes how others perceive and evaluate him/her as well as how he/she views him/herself [25,26]. The process of controlling a person's own view of him/herself works as an important motivation related to his/her behavior patterns; therefore, management of one's own image and self-presentation are very important tasks in a person's life [25].

An individual's self-presentation can be expressed using various methods. Previous studies mostly focused on real-life self-presentations [26]; online communication provides a new platform for self-presentation [27]. Online users utilize a social space by building relationships with other online users and communicating with them, presenting themselves through online media, and being interested in how others perceive them [28]. Research has found that individuals tend to be less concerned about others' judgment of themselves in online settings than in real-life [28]. In other words, individuals are likely to present themselves in online settings more easily and freely, because relationship risks are low in online communication compared to those in real-life settings [28]. A recent study also suggests that self-presentation can be a powerful personal branding tool that affects consumer decision-making [29]. Therefore, an individual's desire to present themselves can explain their motivation to participate in an online social space and, through this explanation, the relationship between motivation to use social media and a desire for self-presentation can be indirectly understood. Relatedly, it is claimed that brand marketers should design tools to trigger consumers' desire to express their individuality through personal profile descriptions [30]. In addition, it has been asserted that emoticons can support a favorable social image and serve as a means of self-presentation [31].

From the perspective of online self-presentation, one of the motivations for SNS use is to achieve self-esteem through self-presentation [32,33]. For example, according to a recent study by Moon and Um [34], scholars investigated SNS usage patterns and reported that SNS users tend to show positive self-presentation, which refers to the selection of behaviors to expose positive traits to others. Thus, as one of the most influential drivers affecting SNS usage, self-representation can affect level of SNS usage. In this regard, researchers suggest that SNS users who desire to make a positive self-presentation through their SNS use are likely to spend more time on online communication [33]. Therefore, the desire for self-presentation is expected to have a certain amount of influence on the intention to purchase emojis.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *Self-presentation will positively influence SNS users' emoji purchase intention.*

### 2.3. Symbolic Values

People purchase products or services that are perceived to match their image, and are satisfied by purchasing them [35,36]. Consumers consider not only the functional attributes of products, but also express their self and personality in the process of consumption [37]. Therefore, the behavior of purchasing a product (or service) is an external expression of him/her-self [38]. In this study, our premise is that symbolic values perceived by emoji users may play a key role in mediating the effect of self-presentation.

Symbolic value refers to the extent to which a purchase enhances self-esteem and status in others' eyes [39]. Generally, symbolic value is regarded as an essential factor in consumers' purchase of a product [40,41]. In the current study, as non-verbal graphic cues, we posit that emojis are branded products for selling, and the use of emojis can be a symbolic presentation. Consumers are motivated to present an ideal image of themselves [34]. For example, it was found that the cuteness of branded emoticons conveys a sense of playfulness, which creates a favorable social image to others [31]. Despite different products or services, it is suggested that symbolic value functions as a more powerful motivation to make a purchase decision than other essential factors such as product quality and/or price [41]. Thus, this implies that symbolic value can serve as a crucial factor in predicting SNS users' purchase intention of emojis. As discussed, a major function of emojis is to provide non-verbal meaning in CMC communication. This suggests that the symbolic value of emoji uses in CMC communication should be discussed to judge whether emojis could properly play their role. Hence, the more strongly consumers feel that their use of emojis meets their desires to achieve symbolic values, the more likely they will be to purchase emojis. Therefore, the following hypothesis was established:

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *The symbolic value of emojis will positively influence SNS users' intention to purchase emojis.*

### 2.4. Playfulness

It has been verified that in mobile services, playfulness generally works as a more powerful factor than in other media services [41,42]. However, the effect of perceived playfulness between SNS messaging users has seldom been carefully investigated. In this study, the term playfulness refers to the essence of play accompanied by positive experiences using SNSs [5]. Perceived playfulness is found to influence consumers' behavioral intentions in various contexts, such as online games [31] and SNS channels [43]. Hsieh and Tseng [5] also found that using both text messages and emoticons in mobile instant messaging can increase information richness and is positively connected to a person's perceived playfulness. Using emoticons in text-based communication helps people experience more enjoyment when they use instant messaging [15]. Emojis, which are images used to express emotion, enable users to enliven online conversation by displaying emotion and humor, which adds to the fun or sense of playfulness experienced by users [5]. Therefore, the playfulness of emoji usage is a fundamental component in mobile media usage settings [5].

In addition, in research on emoticon or emoji use in online communication settings, it is argued that the playfulness emoji users feel during the course of using emojis might work as a very important motivation to use those emojis [15]. From the large body of CMC research, it is widely acknowledged that emotions can be delivered more effectively to others via the use of emojis [11]. Hence, in the context of SNS communication using emojis, the use of emojis can generate perceived playfulness in social interactions. Based on these findings, it can be hypothesized that playfulness might have a powerful influence on the intention to purchase emojis.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3).** *Playfulness will positively influence SNS users' emoji purchase intention.*

Given that self-presentation is a core motivating factor for why people express themselves in online communication, a direct relationship between self-presentation and symbolic values can be

postulated. This study also proposes that the quality of playfulness is evident in users when consuming entertaining content or media. Emojis are used to convey users' emotions in a more effective way, and thus communicating emotion is pleasurable for SNS users who seek positive self-presentation. In this regard, self-presentation could be an antecedent of playfulness during the use of emojis.

**Hypothesis 4 (H4).** *Self-presentation will positively influence the symbolic value of emojis.*

**Hypothesis 5 (H5).** *Self-presentation will positively influence SNS users' perceived playfulness.*

As discussed above, this study supposes that the motivation for emoji use comes from the desire of users to express themselves through the purchasing of emojis. This motive is linked to symbolic satisfaction as they can satisfy themselves through using emojis because the behavior fits the core desirable values of users. In this regard, our hypothesis is suggested as follows:

**Hypothesis 6 (H6).** *Symbolic values will positively influence SNS users' perceived playfulness.*

### 2.5. Need for Uniqueness

Need for uniqueness is defined as pursuing differentness relative to others through the acquisition and utilization of consumer goods [44], which can be a predictor of uniqueness-enhancing consumer behaviors. For example, in addition to visual aesthetics, clothing fashions are often considered to be a visible way to show individuality [45]. Avoiding similarity and being creative in dressing styles are important factors for consumers who prefer to be different from others [44]. In terms of sustainable product consumption, the need for uniqueness can lead to an increased rate of purchases with those items being used for shorter periods of time [46]. In a similar vein, one of the main reasons for purchasing entertainment content (e.g., event tickets, webtoons, movies, dramas, etc.) is a need for distinction via consumption [47]. In general, online users are provided with greater freedom to differentiate themselves by expressing their uniqueness through digital associations on the online platform [46]. Thus, the purchase of branded emojis allows SNS users to be associated with the embedded meaning of the brand and the symbolic meanings conveyed through emoji graphics [31,46]. Thus, purchasing emojis is a unique consumption practice for consumers who choose to show their individuality. Thus, the purchasing of emojis helps satisfy consumers' needs for uniqueness [31]. Based on the results of these studies, it is inferred that the level of need for uniqueness in an individual is closely related to the intention to purchase emojis. Therefore, the following hypothesis was tested in this study:

**Hypothesis 7 (H7).** *SNS users' need for uniqueness will moderate the effect of self-presentation on the intention to purchase emojis.*

Figure 1 illustrates the visual description of the study's research model and the relationships of individual hypotheses.

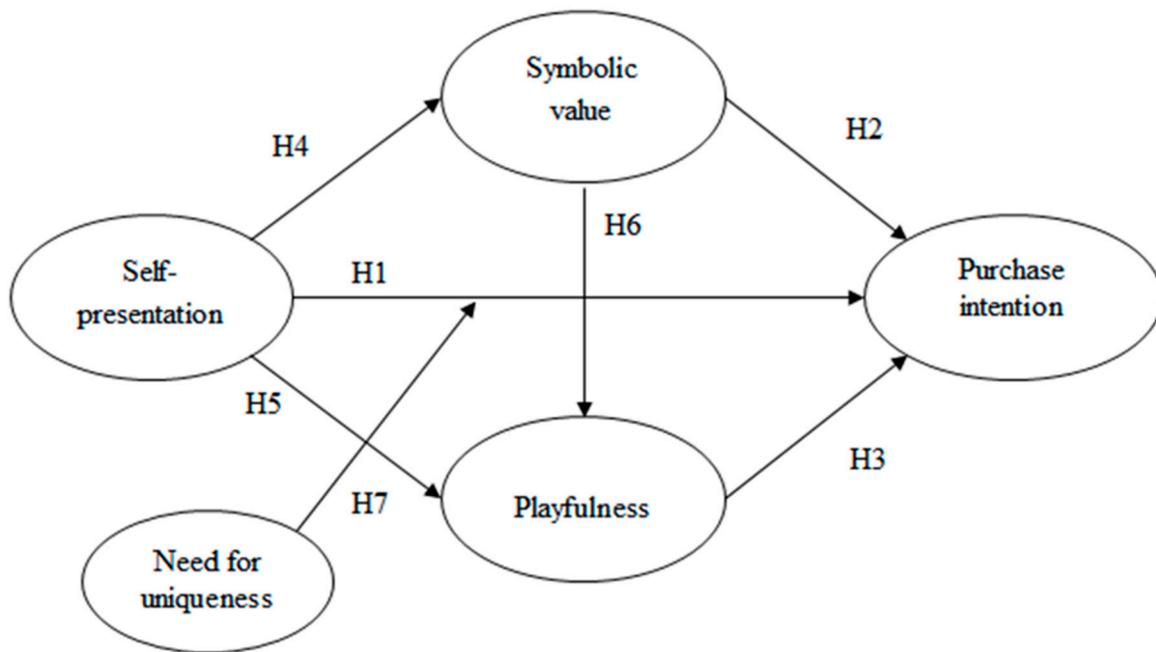


Figure 1. Research model.

### 3. Methodology

Although there are various research frames for exploring SNS users' emoji usage, the methodology employed in this study is an adaptation of previous experimental survey studies. When using a social psychological approach to study consumption behavior, researchers are advised to use an experimental framework to identify intrinsic motivating factors by presenting a specific use case [48]. For example, Lee and Cho [49] proposed an experimental survey to investigate how consumers' propensity for self-presentation and the need for uniqueness influence their attitudes toward branded webtoons. In this study, the researchers used actual branded webtoons to create a more realistic situation for survey participants. We used Kakao Talk emojis (see Figure 2) to make it easier for participants to imagine the purchase and use of emojis in SNS communication.

The current study used an online survey method to test the proposed research model. Following Gesselman et al. [50], participants who had actual experience of using Kakao Talk emojis were selected. To verify usage, in line with Konrad et al. [51], we asked the respondents to identify their most frequently used emojis in Figure 2. This procedure allowed us to verify that participants were actual emoji users. A total of 322 Korean users participated in this survey. Among the respondents, 148 (46%) were male and 174 (54%) were female. The respondents' ages ranged from 20 to 59 years, and their mean age was 39.9.

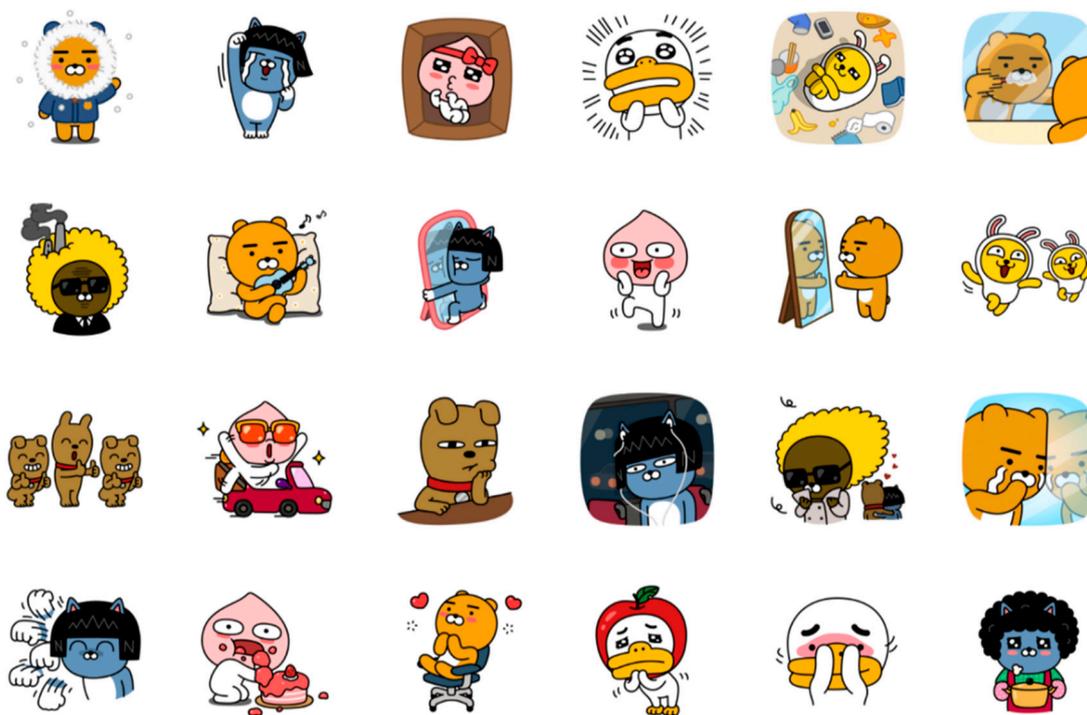


Figure 2. Examples of Kakao emojis.

Instruments and Measures

Five latent constructs were examined in this study: Self-presentation, symbolic values, playfulness, purchase intentions, and SNS users’ needs for uniqueness. We tried to use preexisting measurement scales to ensure scale reliability and validity. Seven-point semantic-differential scales or Likert scales were used to measure questionnaire items. All the measures had satisfactory internal consistency as they displayed a Cronbach’s alpha greater than 0.70 [52]. The measurement items used in the final structural equation model are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Constructs, indicators, and key statistics.

Latent Constructs	Indicators	M	SD	Confirmatory Factor Loadings
Self-presentation [53]	I care about my online image on SNS	5.41	1.16	0.83 <sup>b</sup>
	I want to express myself through my own online image on SNS	4.79	1.33	0.81 <sup>a</sup>
	I want to express what I want on SNS	5.06	1.37	0.82 <sup>a</sup>
	Index	5.09	1.28	Cronbach $\alpha$ = 0.88
Symbolic Value [54]	The use of emojis will indicate that I have taste	4.56	1.42	0.72 <sup>b</sup>
	The use of emojis will prevent me from appearing to be negative	4.31	1.38	0.84 <sup>a</sup>
	The use of emojis enhances the perception I have a desirable style	4.34	1.33	0.87 <sup>a</sup>
	The use of emojis will help me fit into a desirable social setting	4.57	1.34	0.79 <sup>a</sup>
	Index	4.45	1.36	Cronbach $\alpha$ = 0.92

Table 2. Cont.

Latent Constructs	Indicators	M	SD	Confirmatory Factor Loadings
Playfulness [55]	The use of emojis is pleasurable	5.24	1.31	0.78 <sup>b</sup>
	The use of emojis keeps me from becoming bored	5.04	1.34	0.74 <sup>a</sup>
	I am interested in the uses of emojis	5.17	1.27	0.79 <sup>a</sup>
	Index	5.15	1.30	Cronbach $\alpha = 0.95$
Purchase Intention [56]	I will buy emoji products	4.49	1.56	0.74 <sup>b</sup>
	I will buy character dolls	3.79	1.55	0.80 <sup>a</sup>
	I will buy character-related products	4.03	1.53	0.78 <sup>a</sup>
	Index	4.10	1.54	Cronbach $\alpha = 0.89$
Need for uniqueness [46]	I often look for one-of-a-kind products or brands so that I create a style that is all my own	4.25	1.21	0.89 <sup>b</sup>
	When buying merchandise, an important goal is to find something that communicates my uniqueness	4.27	1.17	0.89 <sup>a</sup>
	I am often on the lookout for new products or brands that will add to my personal uniqueness	4.28	1.19	0.90 <sup>a</sup>
	Index	4.27	1.19	Cronbach $\alpha = 0.96$

Note: <sup>a</sup> Factor significance:  $p < 0.01$ , <sup>b</sup> loading was set to 1.0 to fix construct variance. The questionnaire was translated into Korean.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Prior to the main hypothesis testing, we validated several underlying assumptions for structural equation modeling (normality, sampling adequacy, and no extreme multicollinearity) [57], and the assumptions were confirmed to be within acceptable boundaries. More specifically, the first step was to estimate the goodness-of-fit for the hypothesized research in model testing. In this study, the  $\chi^2$ /degrees of freedom ratio was estimated to be 2.78 in the hypothesized model ( $\chi^2 = 239.227$ ,  $df = 86$ ). The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) was 0.97, the Incremental Fit Index (IFI) was 0.97, the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) was 0.95, and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was 0.075. Based on these measures, we concluded that the model was acceptable. To improve the model fit, the significance of the regression weights was examined first. All variables were significant except for the relationship between self-presentation and purchase intentions ( $p < 0.05$ ). Modification indices were then used to identify any theoretically meaningful paths/relationships omitted in the original model. We found that two pairs of observed variables had covariance, and we linked the errors to each other. The revised model was found to fit the data better than the original proposed model,  $\chi^2$  (209.659)/ $df$  (83) ratio = 2.52, CFI = 0.98, IFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.96, and RMSEA = 0.069. Thus, this model was deemed suitable for hypothesis testing.

### 4.2. Hypothesis Testing

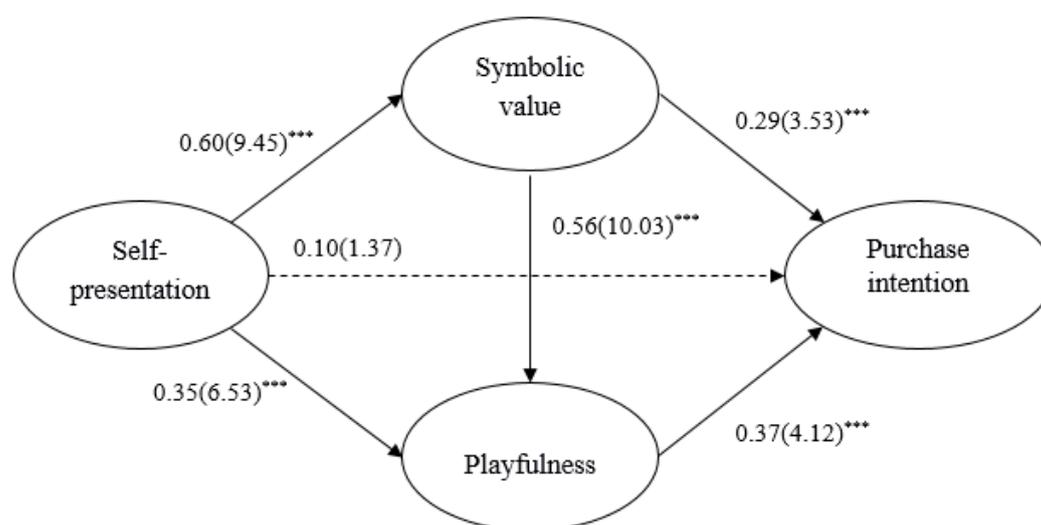
Based on the potential factors for SNS users to purchase emojis, the proposed model (see Figure 1) was tested using structural equation modeling. To test the research hypotheses, AMOS 21 was used for data analyses. The significance of the regression weights was examined for all constructs. As shown in Table 3, the results showed that self-presentation was not positively related to purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Thus, H1 was not supported. In supporting H2 and H3, symbolic value was directly linked to purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.29$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and playfulness was also positively and significantly related to purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The self-presentation factor exhibited a statistically significant relationship with the two factors, symbolic value ( $\beta = 0.60$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and playfulness ( $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, H4 and H5 are fully supported. Next, as expected, symbolic

value positively influenced playfulness ( $\beta = 0.56, p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, H6 was supported. The final model is shown in Figure 3 (path coefficients are standardized values and  $t$ -values are mentioned in parentheses).

**Table 3.** Results of hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Relationship	$\beta$	C.R.	$p$ -Value	Supported
H1	Self-presentation → Purchase intention	0.10	1.37	0.170	No
H2	Symbolic value → Purchase intention	0.29	3.53	0.000	Yes
H3	Playfulness → Purchase intention	0.37	4.12	0.000	Yes
H4	Self-presentation → Symbolic value	0.60	9.45	0.000	Yes
H5	Self-presentation → Playfulness	0.35	6.53	0.000	Yes
H6	Symbolic value → Playfulness	0.56	10.03	0.000	Yes

Furthermore, this study investigated the moderating effect of SNS users’ need for uniqueness on the relationship between self-presentation and SNS users’ purchase intention of emojis. For this purpose, the levels of need for uniqueness of our data sample were divided as either high or low using the mean split method ( $M = 4.26, SD = 1.15$ , and a chi-square difference ( $\Delta\chi^2$ ) test between the default model (without constraints) and the constrained model was conducted. The test results indicated that the need for uniqueness had a moderating effect on the relationship between self-presentation and emoji purchase intention ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 9.240, p < 0.01$ ). That is, SNS users with a high degree of need for uniqueness may have stronger intentions to purchase emojis, and this effect operates through the channel of self-presentation. Therefore, H7 was fully supported. The results of the moderating test are summarized in Table 4.



$\chi^2/df = 2.306, IFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.97, CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.064$   
 (\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ )

**Figure 3.** The results of hypothesis testing.

**Table 4.** Testing of moderating effect of need for uniqueness.

Relationship	Standardized Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	
	High Need for Uniqueness	Low Need for Uniqueness
Self-presentation → Emoji purchase intention	0.529 ***	0.087

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The employment of emojis has been considered an important SNS marketing tactic [1]; research on when, why, and how people use SNS emojis is crucial to ensure the successful implementation of sustainable emoji consumption. This study aims to provide an improved understanding of individual psychological traits that may, in turn, help in encouraging and reinforcing sustainable emoji uses among SNS users. As a case study, Kakao Talk, which is the dominant instant messenger service in Korea, was chosen for analysis of users' emoji purchases. It is acknowledged in other studies that SNS users tend to have self-presentational characteristics, and this proposition was confirmed in the context of emoji use. According to the results of this study, self-presentation plays a significant role in affecting the degree of SNS users' perceived playfulness while networking. A remarkable finding from this study is that self-presentation did not directly influence SNS users' intention to purchase emojis (H1). More specifically, self-presentation affects purchase intention only via the path of proposed mediating variables (i.e., symbolic value and playfulness).

As reviewed, symbolic value refers to the psychological satisfaction achieved through purchasing products that express an individual consumer's self [39]. Given the assumption that emojis could be used to express users' emotions, the identified relationship between symbolic value and playfulness seems plausible. In addition, we also found direct positive relationships between self-presentation and the two psychological variables, symbolic value and playfulness. The greater the self-presentational tendency of individuals, the more they place symbolic values on emojis and possess a playful quality during social networking. In short, both self-presentation and symbolic values are involved in the concept of self, and self-presentational users can experience symbolic value when using emojis.

A direct positive relationship between symbolic value and playfulness implies that self-expressing consumer behavior is one of the significant causal elements stimulating consumers' perceived playfulness. In addition, both symbolic value and playfulness also have a positive impact on purchase intention. This means that emoji users who care more about symbolic values are likely to purchase emojis and tend to express their self-images through purchasing emoji characters. Moreover, playfulness lies at the core of user satisfaction and plays a key role in affecting emoji purchase intentions. This study also suggests that the need for uniqueness plays a moderating role in the relationship between self-presentation and users' sustainable emoji purchase intention in the context of SNS communication. This finding indicates that an individual's need for uniqueness does affect the purchasing process if the need is strong.

This study offers several important managerial implications for marketers who hope to incorporate emojis as a marketing tool. First, emojis should be playful and enjoyable. Emojis are not only an important communication tool to make up for the weaknesses of CMC, but can also substitute for enjoyment. Emojis can be purchased and consumed for entertainment purposes; hence, entertaining elements of emojis should be considered.

Another managerial implication from the study findings is that emojis can be used as an emotional avatar by SNS users. Users send emojis to family or friends to actively express their emotions, feelings, and moods, which means that the use of emojis can be an important communication strategy. There is no doubt that using visual icons is more impressive and effective than using literal texts. In line with this notion, emojis are often used to present users' symbolic images and desirable identities. Therefore, marketers can develop various types of emojis as a means of building interactive brand relationships with SNS users. Further, this study's finding implies that the SNS emoji is a new form of branded content to engage consumers. These findings can inform a sustainable business model for companies, as well as guidelines for marketers to promote sustainable consumption of items.

However, this study has some limitations. First, although Kakao Talk is the number one mobile messenger in South Korea, this study focused only on emojis in the Kakao context. If we added more mobile messenger services in South Korea or in other countries, we might have different findings. Future research could use more diverse emojis other than just Kakao, and emoji usages from additional countries could provide broader understandings based on cultural differences among emoji users.

Second, it is advised that researchers undertaking future studies should extend the sampling methods to capture a larger sample size and cover a more diverse population of respondents, particularly from different nationalities. Lastly, there might be possible extraneous variable effects that were not controlled for in this research. Thus, to increase the generalizability of the study findings, future studies should consider more controlled research settings. For example, future research should discern the possible effects of other variables such as age and gender. However, despite these limitations, we believe that this study provides meaningful foundational data for future research.

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