



The role of emotions in the adoption and use of programmatic advertising by organizations

El papel de las emociones en la adopción y el uso de la publicidad programática por parte de las organizaciones

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the role of emotions in innovation adoption within organizations. Rather than adopting the traditionally individualistic lens through which emotions have often been examined, this study explores emotions as part of the organizational context in which they emerge. Programmatic advertising is used as a specific case of marketing innovation to examine the underlying process of its adoption or non-adoption by digital marketing experts. Based on fifteen in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with digital marketing managers, we aim to understand how emotions may influence the adoption or rejection of innovations such as programmatic advertising within organizations. Prior to the fieldwork, a literature review was conducted on both programmatic advertising and the relationship between emotions and innovation adoption. Our findings reveal a range of discrete emotions, both positive and predominantly negative, directed towards different targets. Some results confirm previous research on the functional and psychological factors that affect the adoption or rejection of innovations. However, one of the main contributions of this paper is that, unlike previous studies that adopt an individualistic lens to examine emotions, we explore them as the outcome of collective dynamics related to organizational culture, cultural norms concerning innovation adoption, risk-taking, and implicit career consequences. The study also provides further empirical insights into how cultural perceptions of certain controversial innovations affect the activation and expression of emotions. Managerial implications and future research avenues are also discussed.

Keywords: Programmatic advertising; Qualitative research; Emotions; Innovation adoption; Organizational culture; Controversy.

R E S U M E N

Este artículo se centra en el papel de las emociones en la adopción de innovaciones dentro de las organizaciones. Sin embargo, en lugar del enfoque individualista tradicionalmente adoptado para entender las emociones, se han vinculado con el contexto organizativo en el cual surgen. La publicidad programática se utiliza como un caso concreto de una innovación en marketing para explorar el proceso subyacente de su (no) adopción por parte de expertos en marketing digital. A través de quince entrevistas cualitativas en profundidad de carácter semiestructurado realizadas a responsables de marketing digital, se pretende entender el papel que pueden desempeñar las emociones en la (no) adopción de innovaciones como la PA dentro de las organizaciones. Con carácter previo al trabajo de campo, se llevó a cabo una revisión de la literatura tanto en el ámbito de la publicidad programática como en el de las emociones y la adopción de innovaciones. Los resultados muestran la existencia de una diversidad de emociones discretas, tanto positivas como mayoritariamente negativas, dirigidas a distintos objetos. Se confirman resultados de investigaciones previas en relación con factores funcionales y psicológicos que pueden afectar su adopción o rechazo. Sin embargo, una de las contribuciones principales del estudio es que, a diferencia de la literatura previa que adopta un lente individualista para estudiar emociones, estas se exploran como resultados de dinámicas colectivas relacionadas con la cultura organizativa, las normas culturales sobre la adopción de innovaciones y la toma de riesgos, así como las percepciones colectivas sobre posibles consecuencias profesionales. También, se proporcionan otros resultados empíricos interesantes sobre las percepciones culturales acerca de ciertas innovaciones controversiales que afectan la activación y expresión de emociones. Finalmente, se discuten las implicaciones para la gestión y las futuras líneas de investigación.

Palabras clave: Publicidad programática; Investigación cualitativa; Emociones; Adopción de innovaciones; Cultura organizativa; Controversia.

1. INTRODUCTION

A substantial body of previous research has advocated the adoption of innovations in organizations as a means of increasing firms' competitiveness and efficiency (Fernández-Rovira *et al.*, 2021; Zeng *et al.*, 2015). Some studies have focused on organizational structure and design, including resources, incentives, and governance structures, to explain firms' propensity to adopt innovations (González-Blanco *et al.*, 2024; Ritchie *et al.*, 2015). Others have examined factors related to the innovation to be adopted, the company seeking to adopt it, and the service provider (Hussein & Mourad, 2014; Zeng *et al.*, 2015). For example, the company's attitude towards risk-taking and organizational learning, the degree of trialability, understood as the extent to which the innovation can be tested or experimented with, its compatibility with the organization, and its perceived complexity are among the variables that have already been examined. A lack of knowledge about certain innovations and a weak legal framework governing their use can also hinder adoption because of the uncertainty they generate (Pérez-Elizundia *et al.*, 2020). Although innovative tools such as artificial intelligence, big data solutions, and programmatic advertising can improve company performance and efficiency, as well as facilitate advertising and promotional decision-making, organizations may still lack clarity regarding the advantages and disadvantages of their use or may resist their adoption (Amado *et al.*, 2018; Campbell *et al.*, 2022).

However, while these studies provide valuable insights into the structural, technological, and strategic determinants of innovation adoption, they pay considerably less attention to the emotional processes underlying organizational decision-making.

The adoption of innovations, such as new digital tools, is closely linked to organizational decision-making processes and their underlying psychological mechanisms. Organizational decision-making can be shaped by emotions (George & Dane, 2016). In line with Martin and Briggs (1986), emotion and cognition are closely intertwined. For instance, the affect-as-information hypothesis suggests that people draw information from how they feel (Clore *et al.*, 2001; Lan, 2002). In some cases, affect has even been found to be a stronger predictor of people's decisions than careful, rational decision-making (Pham *et al.*, 2001). Valor *et al.* (2022) argue that "the cognitive evaluation of an innovation follows from the immediate feelings of consumers (e.g., if one feels anxious about using the innovation, then the innovation must be difficult to use)" (p. 5). Overall, positive emotions can encourage the adoption of new technologies, whereas negative emotions, such as anxiety and anger, can hinder it (Ahn & Shin, 2015; Zheng & Bensebaa, 2020; Zhou *et al.*, 2024). Nevertheless, much of the research on emotions has adopted an individualistic lens. Emotions, like cognitions, although felt and expressed by individuals, are generated within specific contexts and are shaped by collective dynamics and organizational and societal norms. Therefore, further insight is needed into how broader organizational and cultural contexts influence individual affective states in relation to innovation adoption.

With this gap in mind, this study aims to provide insight into how emotions are embedded in processes of collective sense-

making and shaped by the organizational culture within which innovation is interpreted. It also examines how these emotions, in turn, may enable or hinder the adoption of certain innovations, such as programmatic advertising, within organizations.

This study aims to move beyond the individualistic lens often adopted in the study of emotions, in which decision-makers are viewed as isolated and independent actors. Instead, it conceptualizes both emotions and cognitions as emerging from complex collective processes and dynamics related to several factors: cultural norms concerning professional agency and identity, innovation and risk adoption, the perceived broader repercussions of professional decisions, and other boundary conditions, such as organizational and cultural factors that may amplify or attenuate these repercussions. The context of this study is programmatic advertising (PA) and its adoption by digital marketing professionals. Drawing on fifteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with digital marketing managers, we aim to uncover how these collective organizational dynamics influence participants' emotional responses and ultimately shape the decision to adopt, or not adopt, PA. However, our findings extend beyond this specific digital tool, particularly given that most industries are undergoing profound transformations that encourage the adoption of digital tools and smart technologies (Gerli *et al.*, 2022).

Although PA has been studied in various contexts, we argue that it still represents a significant innovation within the digital marketing landscape. Several authors have described it as disruptive (Busch, 2016; Jensen & Sund, 2018) and as having "the potential to change the way advertisement space is sold to advertisers and presented to the wider society" (Jensen & Sund, 2018, p. 36). Despite its growing adoption, PA continues to evolve rapidly, introducing new challenges and opportunities for marketers (Malthouse *et al.*, 2018). The complexity of PA systems, together with persistent privacy concerns and ongoing technological developments, means that many organizations are still in the process of understanding and integrating this technology (Talukder & Quazi, 2010). In this study, we examine PA as an innovation from the perspective of marketing professionals grappling with its implementation and implications, thereby providing fresh insights into the emotional and cognitive processes involved in its adoption. Unlike previous studies, we focus on the specific challenges and opportunities presented by PA within a rapidly evolving digital marketing landscape. Our work extends the existing literature by exploring how the perceived complexity and risks of PA influence marketing professionals' emotional responses and decision-making processes. This context-specific approach allows us to uncover nuanced emotional dynamics that may not be present in other technological innovations, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of emotions in the adoption of complex, data-driven marketing technologies.

This study makes several key contributions to the literature on emotions and innovation adoption in marketing. First, we develop a conceptual framework that integrates emotional dimensions, emotional targets, influencing factors, and perceived adoption outcomes, based on empirical evidence from the context of programmatic advertising. This framework offers an exploratory approach to understanding the complex interplay between emotions and innovation adoption decisions in organizations, conceptualized as a collective process of sensemaking. Its main novelty

lies in showing how emotions related to the potential adoption of an innovation may be triggered by ideological factors, such as the ethical concerns and controversies surrounding the innovation under study, as well as by its perceived impact on professionals' identity and agency. The study also sheds light on the boundary conditions related to organizational culture that may amplify the professional threat experienced by participants. Finally, our findings offer practical insights for managers seeking to implement PA, highlighting the importance of addressing emotional barriers and leveraging positive emotional drivers.

The remainder of the manuscript is structured as follows. First, we provide a brief overview of programmatic advertising and the literature on emotions, innovation adoption, and resistance. Although there is a well-established stream of research on emotions and innovation adoption, much of this work has focused on consumer contexts and on the early stages of innovation adoption (Wood & Moreau, 2006). Next, we describe the methodological design of the study. Finally, we present and discuss the main findings.

2. THE EMERGENCE AND GROWTH OF PA

Digital media sales were traditionally conducted through direct negotiations between advertisers and media agencies (Carrillo-Durán & Rodríguez-Silgado, 2018). This process was time-consuming, labour-intensive, and costly, and was often prone to delays and errors. With the rapid expansion of the internet, new technologies emerged to manage the massive growth of digital advertising (Campbell, 2023). Among these, programmatic advertising (PA) emerged as a technology designed to facilitate the management of advertising transactions (Chen *et al.*, 2019). Programmatic buying refers to the process of managing and executing media purchases through technology in order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of buying, placing, and optimizing media inventory (Li *et al.*, 2017).

Programmatic advertising (PA) has evolved from traditional models of ad space purchasing into a real-time trading system driven by big data analytics and sophisticated bidding techniques, enabling highly granular transactions at the level of individual ad impressions (Li *et al.*, 2018). Alongside traditional actors, such as advertisers and agencies, new stakeholders have emerged, including ad networks, ad exchanges, trading desks, demand-side platforms (DSPs), supply-side platforms (SSPs), and publishers or websites (Cozzolino *et al.*, 2021). In digital media, impressions refer to the number of times an ad appears on a user's screen. Programmatic buying allows advertisers to leverage technology and data to purchase individual impressions that reach target audiences at the most relevant moment and in the most relevant context. This represented a breakthrough in the digital landscape, as advertisements were traditionally purchased on the basis of webpages, whereas PA enables "audiences to be bought", meaning that advertisers can reach individuals with specific profiles based on their prior browsing behaviour (McGuigan, 2019).

Among the advantages of programmatic advertising (PA) is the ability to purchase digital ads in real time, often at a lower cost, by leveraging data and technologies that automate parts of

the buying process and thereby improve audience targeting (Lee *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, advertising can be simultaneously targeted across news platforms, social media, and mobile apps, creating more personalized offerings for users (Palos-Sanchez *et al.*, 2019; Samuel *et al.*, 2021). This approach is not limited to large platforms or corporations; it can also be adopted by retailers, delivering significant improvements in consumer performance outcomes (Ciuchita *et al.*, 2023).

At the same time, several concerns have been raised, including issues related to brand safety and the appearance of ads on undesirable or low-quality websites. In this regard, PA increasingly focuses on the media context for bidding as a response to the reliance on personal data, which raises legal and ethical challenges (Häglund & Björklund, 2024). Although strategies such as blacklists can be used to avoid certain websites, the process of monitoring and control remains effortful and time-consuming for those in charge of digital strategy (Shehu *et al.*, 2021). Another issue that has been widely discussed concerns the perceived invasiveness of PA for users. In their study, Palos-Sanchez *et al.* (2019) review previous work on users' perceived privacy on the internet in relation to tools such as PA. Cooper *et al.* (2023) examine the impact of PA across multiple levels, including consumers, ad tech platforms, advertisers, and publishers. Similarly, White and Samuel (2019) discuss data privacy as a major concern for PA adoption, together with the difficulty of using PA due to its technical complexity and the possibility of locking customers "into an 'eco-chamber' of exposure to repetitive adverts" (p. 160). Indeed, this is a rapidly evolving field. Studies such as that by Malthouse *et al.* (2019) propose a multi-objective approach that integrates programmatic advertising and recommender systems (RS), establishing a new frontier for research in advertising and RS. Alongside this, artificial intelligence can play a key role in essential aspects of programmatic advertising, such as the automation of purchasing processes (Ford *et al.*, 2023).

In addition to these concerns, it appears that, although the growth of PA has been rapid, many practitioners do not have a clear understanding of what PA is and may often lack the skills and knowledge required to adopt it as a new marketing technique (Samuel *et al.*, 2021). A report published by the Internet Advertising Bureau (hereinafter, IAB) in 2013 highlighted misconceptions in this area regarding terminology, with several terms being used interchangeably, such as "programmatic," "RTB," "programmatic direct," "programmatic premium," "programmatic guaranteed," "automation," among others. Moreover, PA growth rates vary from market to market. In specific markets, such as Spain, PA adoption rates and growth lag significantly behind those of the US or UK markets (Martínez-Martínez *et al.*, 2017). Considering these considerations, PA emerges as an innovative marketing technique that can bring important benefits to companies but may also raise significant controversy.

3. EMOTIONS: ADOPTION VERSUS RESISTANCE TO INNOVATIONS AND DIGITAL TOOLS

There is a broad field of research on innovation adoption and resistance. These studies address a variety of factors that can affect both employees and managers (Fang & Zhang, 2021).

The theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) have commonly been used, often focusing on an innovation's perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness (Claudy *et al.*, 2015). Claudy *et al.* (2015) provide a comprehensive review of several functional and psychological barriers, such as tradition and image barriers, which may generate resistance to innovation adoption.

Nevertheless, Valor *et al.* (2022) point out that previous research on innovation adoption has largely overlooked the role of emotions. In their integrative review, they identify five dimensions that explain how emotions affect innovation adoption. These include the discrete emotions involved in innovation adoption decision-making, such as fear, anger, and pride; the targets of these emotions; the role of emotions at different stages of innovation adoption and use; emotion regulation; and the interplay between emotions and cognitive appraisals in final decision-making regarding innovations.

Regarding discrete emotions, Valor *et al.* (2022) distinguish between anticipated, experienced, and retrospective emotions. Anticipated emotions refer to how individuals believe they will feel and mainly emerge during the contemplation phase, before adoption or initial trial. Experienced emotions refer to those felt during the actual use or trial of an innovation, such as when trying out a new product, whereas retrospective emotions refer to emotions felt in the past in similar situations. Regarding the targets of emotions, four are identified: the innovation itself, the process of replacing the existing option, the self, and significant others.

Previous research has focused extensively on the complexity of innovations and the emotions associated with it. Some authors (Choi *et al.*, 2011; Chiu *et al.*, 2021) appear to limit the evaluation of innovations to their perceived ease of use and usefulness. Perceptions of complexity may generate negative anticipated emotions, such as fear; therefore, companies that sell innovative products need to communicate clearly to customers how easy their products are to use (Wood & Moreau, 2006). However, if a product is marketed as "easy to use" but does not meet this expectation, this may facilitate initial trial and adoption but later lead to experienced emotions such as frustration and dissatisfaction, as well as product return, due to disconfirmed complexity expectations.

Other studies focus on emotions related to the self and self-image. Rezvani *et al.* (2015) found that, in the case of electric vehicles, positive anticipated emotions such as joy, pleasure, and pride can positively affect purchase and use. This may be due to feelings of pride, or reduced guilt, associated with choosing an environmentally friendly product. It may also be because consumers "are thrilled by the electric car as the latest toy" (Moons & DePelsmacker, 2012, p. 219). Alternatively, consumers may experience anticipated regret because they "may delay purchases of the current best technology in favour of future technology" (Shih & Schau, 2011, p. 243).

The research identified in this field concurs that emotions play an important role in innovation acceptance across different contexts. Research on strategic decision-making has increasingly acknowledged emotions as core mechanisms shaping how decision-makers interpret information, assess risks, and anticipate outcomes, particularly in complex and uncertain organizational

contexts (Neumann, 2017). However, studies on emotions and innovation adoption or non-adoption have often considered decision-makers as individual and independent actors. This is problematic because emotions, like cognitions, are often shaped by collective organizational dynamics, which remain undertheorized.

Several authors (Fang & Zhang, 2021; Raffaelli *et al.*, 2019) argue that framing an innovation in positive emotional terms by top management may be key to its acceptance by employees. Apostolidis *et al.* (2022) studied employees' emotions in response to rapid technology adoption during COVID-19, revealing both positive and negative emotions and highlighting the importance of established organizational practices that enable adoption, reduce resistance, and increase employee satisfaction and well-being. Gaudine and Thorne (2001, p. 183) suggested that "organizations may adopt strategies so that transient emotional states may have time to change before a decision not requiring immediate closure is made. This may reduce the effect of biased probabilities due to affective states". This discussion shows that employees' emotions do not depend solely on individuals themselves, but also on the organizational context to which they belong, including established organizational practices, organizational culture, leadership, and the organizational emphasis placed on the role of emotions in individual and collective decision-making. In fact, Maitlis and Ozcelik (2004) coined the term "toxic decision-making processes" to describe inappropriate organizational cultures in which organizational decision-making practices produce widespread and pervasive negative emotions among employees, such as indignation, anger, anxiety, and fear. Furthermore, certain collective understandings are implicit and invisible. For instance, several authors (Beaudry & Pinsonneault, 2010; Montargot & Ben Lahouel, 2018; Zheng & Montargot, 2021) have found that whether an innovation is perceived by employees as a threat or an opportunity, and the degree of control they feel they have over it, may generate both positive emotions, such as excitement and happiness, and negative emotions, such as anger and fear, thereby affecting innovation adoption at the organizational level. Cieslak and Valor (2025) add that resistance often emerges from perceived threats to professional roles, autonomy, identity, and established work practices within organizations. Therefore, how these perceptions and emotions emerge depends on broader organizational culture, shared norms, and collective sense-making, which require further investigation.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative methodological design to provide holistic, in-depth insights into the role of emotions in the adoption of PA within organizations (Lim, 2025). Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted via video call with digital marketing managers. The sampling process was purposive and theoretical (Patton, 2014). The selection criteria were that respondents should have: i) knowledge of digital advertising; ii) prior professional experience in the field; and iii) a current professional role in digital advertising. Within this sample, diversity was sought in terms of years of experience, type of company, and

the sectors in which participants worked (see Table 1). Data collection and data analysis took place in parallel, thereby shaping the sampling process. For example, given that the first participants resisted PA adoption, “negative cases” of PA adoption were later included for comparison regarding the role of emotions in such cases (Grodal *et al.*, 2021). During the final stages of data collection, no substantially new themes emerged, indicating that theoretical saturation had been reached. Therefore, it was decided not to conduct additional interviews (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014).

Table 1 provides a description of the sample. Participants had an average of 6.6 years of professional experience in digital advertising across different work positions. We acknowledge that vary-

ing levels of decision-making authority among respondents may influence their emotional responses to PA adoption. To address this potential contextual influence, we categorized participants according to their decision-making power and analysed their responses accordingly. This approach aligns with previous research on emotions in organizational decision-making (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017). In addition, participants worked in different types of companies: companies with fewer than 250 employees, hereinafter referred to as SMEs; companies with more than 250 employees, hereinafter referred to as big companies; and media agencies. These companies belonged to different sectors, and some used PA whereas others did not.

Table 1
List of Respondents

	Company type	Position	Experience (years)	Currently using PA
Respondent 1	Small Company	Chief Marketing Officer	5.0	No
Respondent 2	DSP	Indirect Channels	4.0	Yes
Respondent 3	Agency	Senior Affiliate Account Manager	15.5	No
Respondent 4	Big Company	Brand Marketing Manager	4.0	Yes
Respondent 5	Agency	Digital Marketing Specialist	3.0	Yes
Respondent 6	DSP	Chief Operating Officer	1.5	Yes
Respondent 7	Big Company	Senior Manager Digital Partner	6.0	Yes
Respondent 8	Technology	Head of Growth	8.0	No
Respondent 9	Small Company	Head of Ecommerce	8.0	No
Respondent 10	Big Company	Brand manager	1.5	Yes
Respondent 11	Small Company	Marketing Manager	6.0	Yes
Respondent 12	Agency	Account Director	16.0	Yes
Respondent 13	Small Company	E-commerce Manager	11.0	No
Respondent 14	Technology	Client Solutions Manager	5.0	No
Respondent 15	Technology	Growth Associate DACH	4.6	No

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In order to preserve respondents’ anonymity, interviewees’ names were replaced with identifiers such as Respondent 1 or Respondent 2, and company names were not disclosed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted following a scripted interview guide. Nevertheless, additional follow-up questions were asked based on interviewees’ responses. One of the paper’s authors, who is an expert in PA, conducted the interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The concept of theoretical saturation guided our sampling and data collection process. We followed the approach described by Guest *et al.* (2006), who define saturation as the point at which no new themes or information emerge from additional data collection. To determine saturation, we used the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), analysing data concurrently with data collection. After each interview, we conducted a preliminary analysis to identify emerging themes and concepts. We tracked the emergence of new codes and themes across interviews, noting when new information became less frequent. By the thirteenth interview, we observed a significant decrease in the emergence of new themes. We then conducted two additional interviews to confirm that saturation had been reached, finding that these interviews primarily reinforced existing themes rather than introducing new ones. To further

ensure saturation, we applied the following criteria proposed by Hennink *et al.* (2017): 1) code saturation, meaning that no new codes were generated from the data; 2) meaning saturation, meaning that a comprehensive understanding of the identified themes had been achieved; and 3) inductive thematic saturation, meaning that no new themes or refinements to existing themes were emerging.

This approach allowed us to determine with confidence that theoretical saturation had been reached, thereby supporting the methodological rigour of our study.

The data analysis strategy was based on thematic analysis (Hernández *et al.*, 2014). The authors reviewed the transcripts and identified themes related to the role of emotions and emotional discourse. First, in vivo codes were assigned following an inductive logic, which initially involved identifying emotions in participants’ discourse, including whether they were positive or negative and the type of emotion expressed, such as fear or shame. Once this first round of coding was complete, the next step was to further contextualize the emotions described, including their target, why they emerged, and the factors that mediated their emergence, such as organizational culture, the participant’s position and previous professional experience, and their ideological stance regarding the morality of the innovation.

Following the process traditionally described in Grounded Theory and in Gioia's methodology (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), the first round of coding was informant-centric, whereas the second round was more researcher-driven, guided by the researchers' theoretical sensitivity and prior knowledge. This approach makes it possible to link the empirical findings with previous research in the field and to continue the ongoing debate, while also allowing new insights to emerge. For example, previous research has found that the organizational framing of specific innovations as either a threat or an opportunity affects their adoption (Raffaelli *et al.*, 2019). Thus, during the second round of coding, when analysing first-order codes, we explored how these framings could potentially relate to specific emotions described by participants. We found that previous literature was confirmed to some extent, as framings of innovations as risky within the organization were linked to emotions such as fear. However, new insights also emerged regarding emotions, participants' attitudes towards adoption, and broader cultural framings of innovations, both in the media and in society, particularly in relation to the perceived ethicality of the innovation.

The second-order coding process involved reading the interview transcripts multiple times. We aimed to examine whether factors previously identified as significant were relevant in this particular empirical context, following a deductive process. To do so, we asked multiple questions, many of them open-ended in order to remain receptive to new insights, while interpreting the data one interview at a time. For example, we asked whether the participant was familiar with and experienced in the use of PA; whether this familiarity led to certain emotions, either positive or negative; whether, in the absence of such familiarity, the emotion described was limited to fear or included other emotions; and whether the described emotion was linked to other personal, professional, or organizational factors. We then compared patterns across interviews, asking, for instance, why two participants with no experience of PA differed in whether they described fear, or whether a perceived threat to participants' autonomy or empowerment also appeared in other interviews. Grodal *et al.* (2021) describe "asking questions" as one of the analytical moves commonly used by qualitative researchers. Overall, following Gioia *et al.* (2013, p. 21), we combined "knowing and not knowing" by approaching the data with theoretical sensitivity while remaining open to new empirical insights.

5. FINDINGS

In this section, we adopt an emotional lens to analyse participants' discourse and explore the emotions that emerge when the adoption of programmatic advertising (PA) is considered, as well as the reasons underlying their emergence.

5.1. So, how do I feel about it? Individual factors, expressed emotions and their target

Some participants use this technology, although the majority do not. Therefore, most of the emotions expressed here are anticipated rather than experienced. Most respondents who use PA express excitement when discussing it and its multiple perceived benefits.

"Well it has so many benefits, to me [PA] seems wonderful, like the best invention in the world. That you can address someone..., well..., everything is now personalized and automated, so you say "I want to find this person now and this morning and the day after tomorrow and then reuse that in other ways..., come on, it's that is wonderful to me. Even with its risks, which are great, but quite manageable. It seems less risky to me than buying a space randomly, because it might not be relevant." (Respondent 7)

"It can provide enormous support for the omnichannel, which is what we were talking about. It generates a 360 scope of the user. You are not only focusing on when they are in Instagram, but you can also focus on when they are reading the newspaper." (Respondent 2)

"Optimizing the campaign through a platform, which you yourself have so that you can exercise, shall we say, the independence to manage and optimize. It is a tool that lends itself to being optimized based on your objectives ..., KPIs defined for each one of the campaigns, in different formats." (Respondent 3)

Only one respondent who already used PA expressed frustration with it, describing it as a difficult tool to use. She stated that PA "drives her crazy" and that she does not fully understand it, unlike other tools such as Google, Facebook, and TikTok, which she perceives as very clear and easy to use. In this case, frustration is not anticipated but experienced, and is related to the value barriers, understood as perceived value in relation to competing products, and complexity barriers, related to ease of use, identified by Castro *et al.* (2020).

"When you get into at the heart of all this and you say here I have a DSP, how do I put it in, how do I serve it, how do I buy it. I have already seen 1000 times what the ad is, what the structure itself is, but even so, it still seems awful to me." (Respondent 14)

By contrast, most non-users express anticipated negative emotions, most commonly uncertainty, mistrust, frustration, and fear, regarding the adoption of PA. The word "risk" is frequently repeated in their responses, reflecting their fear of using a new technology that they do not fully understand or trust. The following quotes are representative of these emotions. Several quotes are included so that we can subsequently examine the targets of these emotions.

"I have spoken to firms who do programmatic advertising, and they have offered me their services, and I have never said yes because I have never fully understood it." (Respondent 1)

"They tried to sell it to me as something magic... If they come telling me that ads can do magic when I have tried ads on websites and I know that nothing is magic, well I simply don't believe it." (Respondent 10)

"I am more of an e-commerce background, so I do not believe in display ads, unfortunately. I will spend 3000 euros and if this will not mean any purchases, pff.." (Respondent 9)

Respondents 7, 2, and 3, who already use PA, mention greater personalization, automation, and efficiency (Chen *et al.*, 2019; Helberger *et al.*, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2017). However, these advantages are either not understood or are not sufficiently convincing for respondents who do not use PA or do not wish to use it. One common denominator across the different quotes is the discrete emotions expressed discursively: anticipated anxiety and fear

regarding the use of PA. Unlike other negative emotions, such as anger, fear and anxiety emerge in contexts characterized by low certainty and low control (Valor *et al.*, 2023). PA is clearly perceived as high-risk by these respondents. The targets of these negative emotions are the self, PA itself, and the process of replacing other tools.

Regarding fear and uncertainty towards the self, managers perceive themselves as lacking the necessary skills and knowledge to make proper use of the technique. Some participants attribute this to themselves, which may also be interpreted as eliciting feelings of shame, as they did not search for information or make sufficient effort. Others attribute it to external actors, such as those selling PA to their company, who are not perceived as providing sufficient or reliable information. For example, some respondents suggest that PA is presented as something “magic”, eliciting feelings of frustration towards these actors. Previous literature has already shown that innovations often elicit feelings of fear, anticipated stress, and anxiety when they are perceived as risky (Rieple & Snijders, 2018; Valor *et al.*, 2023).

However, it is important to examine why these emotions emerge or, in other words, what is really perceived to be at risk. Rieple and Snijders (2018) examine Irish farmers’ resistance to new innovations and explain how they fear losing their autonomy, stability, links to their community, and traditional ways of life. Valor *et al.* (2023) find that some consumers reject photovoltaics because they fear losing considerable time and energy in paperwork, learning how to use the technology, or dealing with possible malfunctioning. In the present case, while respondents may be apprehensive that the product will not perform well enough or may not be reliable, as also observed by Castro *et al.* (2020), they also fear its impact on themselves: they may not be able to perform their work tasks properly and may be held accountable. It is worth noting that respondents holding senior managerial positions, and thus responsible for deciding which marketing tools are used, would be accountable for this decision; if PA did not work as expected, this could affect them professionally. By contrast, respondents who already use PA and are satisfied with it display pride in themselves for being able to make good use of these tools and to make a sound investment for their company.

“The risk if you don’t do it well (defining your audience) is that you’ll be connecting with an audience that you don’t want to reach and who probably have a bad opinion of your brand, and who have no relation to what you’re trying to sell them. I think that’s happened to all of us.” (Respondent 10)

“But in the beginning... For the managers of this department who have to defend the investment [on PA], well, until now you do not know how much you need to invest to get it back later, you don’t know.” (Respondent 13)

For those reluctant to use PA, their perception of risk is related to their inability to fully justify and defend the investment decision that PA adoption would require before their superiors and/or clients, as well as to the potential implications of this decision for their career development.

“Risk wises there’s obviously, there’s some risk in terms of transparency and seeing exactly where your ads run. Are they in good quality spaces? Are we actually getting them in front of real eye-

balls? Are people paying attention when they see our ads pop up? Beyond that there’s often risks and I guess depending on how you’re buying, if you’re buying like open auction stuff, it could potentially end up in not the greatest placement in the world. Where you are buying really cheaply but it’s not the greatest advertising in the world. A lot of clients want to see exactly where they’ve run, where did their ads end up and where their consumers are hanging out [...] we have a lot of clients that may not be aware of exactly what they want to avoid until after it’s happened. Just like, “oh I showed up on this random site like the news site I didn’t I didn’t really want to be on news sites”. Those are just things you kind of learn along the way. (Respondent 12)

5.2. Delving into the organizational culture: Organizational attitude towards PA and sense of empowerment within the organisation

Several authors have highlighted the importance of organizational attitudes towards innovations and new technologies in their adoption (Fang & Zhang, 2021; Raffaelli *et al.*, 2019). Raffaelli *et al.* (2019) examine innovation adoption in relation to how organizations positively frame innovations in emotional and cognitive terms, and how these innovations are interpreted in relation to a company’s legacy. In our sample, the perceived strategic organizational focus on innovation appears to influence managers’ emotional predisposition to adopt new technologies or to continue using existing tools.

“In my current company we don’t invest in any platforms to be honest no, at least, at the moment. We focus on SEO.” (Respondent 15)

“People do not want to get involved. This means changing many of the already acquired vices. Noone wants to get in the middle of that.” (Respondent 8)

Once managers have internalized the broader organizational stance on innovation adoption, they may either agree or disagree with it. However, even when they disagree, they may refrain from proposing changes due to fear of getting “in trouble” (Gambarotto & Cammazzo, 2010) or of suggesting an innovation perceived as risky, as illustrated in the previous quote from Respondent 8. Perceived empowerment and autonomy within the organization are also worth exploring in order to further understand the sense of risk explained in the previous section. In the following three quotes, we examine three different situations. In the first, Respondent 11 clarifies that he cannot participate in these decisions, without explaining his own attitude towards PA, which may indicate a low perceived sense of empowerment. In the second, Respondent 13, as already mentioned in a previous quote, acknowledges the risk and uncertainty of investing in PA, but is interested in this technology and feels sufficiently empowered to propose it to her superiors and investigate it further. This suggests a high perceived sense of empowerment. In the third, Respondent 4 feels that PA is a complex tool that may generate additional fatigue, but that it will be adopted because the company is interested in it, regardless of her own or other employees’ feelings. This suggests a low perceived sense of empowerment.

“it’s centralized [...] all the online activity is centralized at the Berlin office” (Respondent 11)

"I proposed it a few weeks ago and we will probably, at least, do some more research about it." (Respondent 13)

"Well, it requires a lot more work in the end. In other words, if you want to do it well you have to have a very good planning done. You must have studied your target very well; you must have a suitable message for each phase of the journey or for each moment of the day or for each user [...] I am telling you. Soon they won't let you do anything else. I believe that what they want is this: to create maximum synergies between all countries and have control of both costs and activity by brand." (Respondent 4)

5.3. The cultural embedding of PA

Two main themes emerged from our analysis regarding the emotional and cultural framing of PA: i) its perceived widespread acceptance and adoption in the market; and ii) its perceived framing as either an opportunity or a threat for different actors, beyond its efficiency as an advertising tool.

The current literature emphasizes that PA will be increasingly adopted. [Samuel et al. \(2021\)](#) predicted that PA could account for up to 80% of all digital advertising and provided examples of its use across sectors, from loyalty programmes to gaming. Similarly, [Stevens, Rau and McIntyre \(2016\)](#) identify PA as one of the latest innovative trends in the industry. However, our empirical findings show that participants believe only a limited number of companies are currently using PA, despite its strong future potential.

"Yes, without a doubt it is a medium in which you have to be and more on a day-to-day basis, right now I think that it is all about this. Not appearing in digital media does not make any sense, even the smallest players start to appear. They assign their budget more at the level of programmatic purchase and do not get to do big actions on TV, radio or these more traditional media." (Respondent 4)

Although PA's potential is acknowledged, some participants discuss regulatory changes that could interfere with its adoption, such as the elimination of cookies and access to third-party data. This uncertainty in the broader macroenvironment generates further feelings of anxiety and anticipation regarding future developments.

"I would define programmatic advertising as an opportunity, okay, a way to reach a potential consumer in the most optimal way possible. Let's say this is the definition, the beautiful story, to put it in some way, of an ideal world of advertising in which you get that person with the best message at the best time. What happens is that certain barriers occur along the way. Or if you don't have enough information, if you don't have cookies, or if you don't have access to third party data, you can't update the message or evolve the message depending on when the message is located. So I think in the end we're very early in the story of being able to customize this." (Respondent 8)

Other concerns are also raised, many of which have often appeared in previous research, such as ethical concerns related mainly to privacy and data security, but also to more limited access to information ([Palos-Sanchez et al., 2019](#); [White & Samuel, 2019](#)). Some respondents shift from their role as managers and organizational customers to that of citizens and individual consumers who evaluate PA's broader societal implications.

"There are people who say: It is a bit scary to think that they know that I want a bicycle, isn't it?" (Respondent 4)

"The risk is that it seems a little bit like spam because these pop-ups usually come at a point in time where you don't look for the product anymore. And also, in terms of data security people could feel like their personal data is not secured from their perspective." (Respondent 15)

"I will add something else. It is about ideologies and politics, like when they do electoral campaigns. It is kind like brainwashing. You condition people to watch the same type of stimuli over and over, the same type of ads or products or ideologies. You are not exposed to other things which you might not be interested in the beginning, but they could finally enrich you. You see the ad of that company that would pay more for you." (Respondent 10)

These framings present PA as a potential threat with broader societal implications. However, some participants suggest that these concerns are largely linked to how PA has been portrayed in the media, as noted by Respondent 14, or to the fact that it has not been adequately explained to consumers, as suggested by Respondent 8. These consumers may require further education about new technologies, as illustrated by the case of Tesla.

"All these stories about clickbait have made a bad name out of PA." (Respondent 14)

"To solve the fears and risks, well work needs to be done. Pedagogical and educational work is necessary. Say yes, we know we have this problem, but we are solving it. Let's take the example of Tesla cars. Obviously, people were afraid in the beginning to buy them. So, what did Tesla do? They said: we are fixing it. If this is explained, then the doubts that people have about investing in PA would be reduced." (Respondent 8)

6. DISCUSSION

Although much research on innovation adoption and resistance in organizations focuses on functional dimensions, such as ease of use, or on what the process of change entails, including new learning and organizational restructuring ([Beaudry & Pinsonneault, 2010](#); [Wood & Moreau, 2006](#)), more recent research has pointed to how the perceived impact of innovation adoption on individuals and organizations may shape emotional responses ([Yin et al., 2024](#)). [Cieslak and Valor \(2025\)](#) introduce an emotional lens to explore the phenomenon of resistance, finding that it is often linked to fear and anxiety concerning potential job loss, negative impacts on professional identity, and changes in socialization. Specifically, anticipated fear and anxiety have been linked to several potential situations: loss of professional autonomy, curtailed creativity at work, becoming outpaced by more tech-savvy colleagues, and diminished teamwork and socialization. The results of our study enrich our understanding of emotions not as individual psychological responses, but as the outcome of broader organizational and cultural sensemaking. Participants' emotions are embedded in a wider organizational and cultural context, which needs to be examined in order to understand how context shapes the activation, experience, and expression of emotions towards innovation (see Figure 1). This constitutes the main contribution of this study.

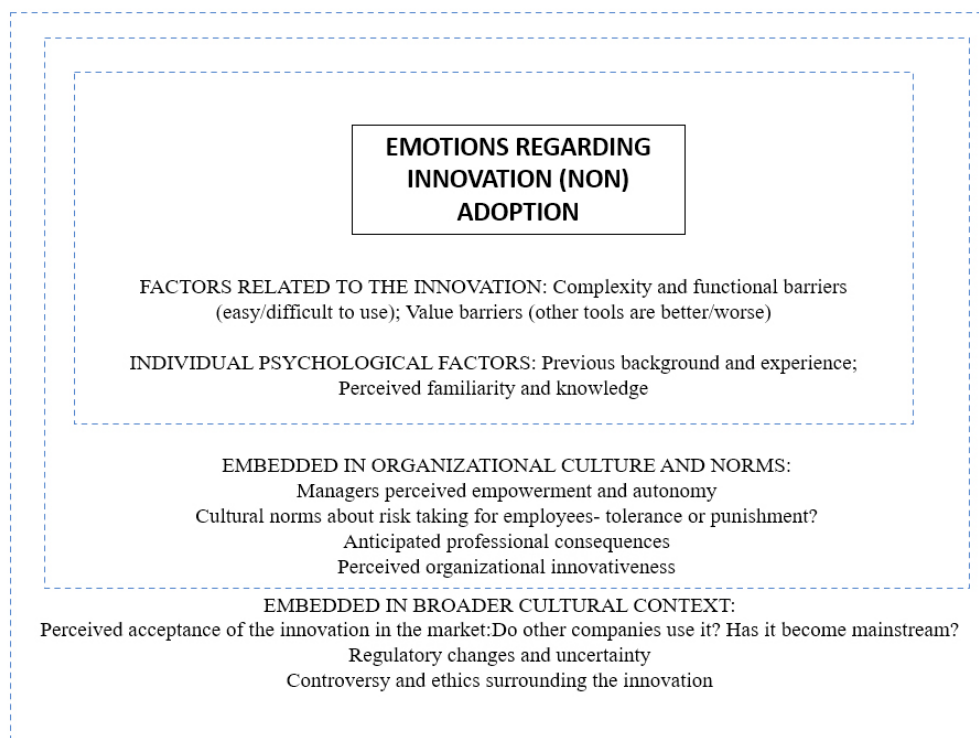


Figure 1

Embedding emotion activation and expression in their organizational and cultural context

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

For example, a substantial body of research has examined fear as a common emotion experienced by employees, managers, and entrepreneurs in relation to the adoption of new innovations (Beaudry & Pinsonneault, 2010; Rieple & Snijders, 2018; Wood & Moreau, 2006; Zheng & Montargot, 2021). However, we emphasize the importance of interpreting what exactly is at stake when these emotions emerge. We observe that innovation resistance among those involved in decision-making may also be related to the possibility of being held responsible if the innovation does not work as expected, which could jeopardize their future promotion and professional prestige. They may be held accountable by both their superiors and their clients. In addition, participants internalize organizational norms regarding risk-taking and innovation adoption; a favourable organizational context may elicit positive anticipated emotions, and vice versa. Perceived autonomy and empowerment are also particularly relevant here, as they shape how safe and confident employees may feel when proposing changes or defending positions that are not yet supported by top management.

Furthermore, participants draw attention to the broader social impact of the innovation examined. PA has been culturally represented as a controversial or even unethical innovation. Martínez-Martínez *et al.* (2017) described PA as a “new method that scares the media” (p. 206). However, beyond its novelty, PA has been discussed within the broader ongoing debate around cookies, privacy violations, and data security. Therefore, our study extends previous literature by suggesting the importance of considering the perceived cultural, social, and professional impact of innovations both within and outside organizations,

especially when they have been depicted as controversial or unethical in public debates. It is worth remembering that organizational employees are also citizens, and they may hold certain ideological and affective positions regarding the use of new technologies and digital transformation (Cieslak & Valor, 2025), which in turn may be shaped by broader cultural beliefs about certain innovations.

Our study points to specific boundary conditions related to cultural and organizational factors, such as perceived empowerment within the organization and marketplace perceptions of the innovation, including whether it is seen as ethical or unethical, or as a passing trend or a lasting development.

Furthermore, guided by previous frameworks and empirical research, we analysed the typology and targets of discrete emotions in relation to the adoption of PA. Our inductive approach makes it possible to unveil a blend of different emotions (Valor *et al.*, 2023), both negative and positive, whose combination produces different behavioural outcomes, such as advocating for the innovation, rejecting it, liking the innovation but remaining silent about it, and so forth. Anticipated and experienced emotions, such as fear and excitement, directed towards the self, the innovation, the change process, and others, ultimately influence adoption and resistance intentions. Some of our findings confirm previous research on innovation adoption and resistance. Our findings on the relationship between lack of familiarity and negative emotions align with Wood and Moreau's (2006) work on complex product adoption. We also found that perceived complexity can lead to negative anticipated emotions such as fear. Additionally, our results on decision-making responsi-

bility and fear echo the findings of Beaudry and Pinsonneault (2010), who identified fear as a key emotion in IT adoption processes. The diverse perceptions of PA's benefits and drawbacks highlight the multifaceted nature of innovation adoption, as discussed by Claudy *et al.* (2015) in their review of functional and psychological barriers to innovation adoption. Our findings on positive emotions, such as excitement and pride, support the work of Rezvani *et al.* (2015), who found similar emotions to positively affect the adoption of electric vehicles. For some participants, the perceived complexity of the tool elicits self-conscious emotions (Valor *et al.*, 2022), such as shame or

pride, depending on whether they feel that they lack or possess the ability to understand and use PA. This differs from cases in which complexity is attributed to the tool's technical characteristics or to the lack of clear information provided about it, as reflected in statements such as "very few people understand it" or "those selling it cannot explain it well". In the latter case, the elicited negative emotions are different, namely fear and frustration. Therefore, it is important to understand the exact emotional response elicited, its target, and why it emerges. Figure 2 summarizes the main findings regarding the type and target of the emotions expressed in this study.

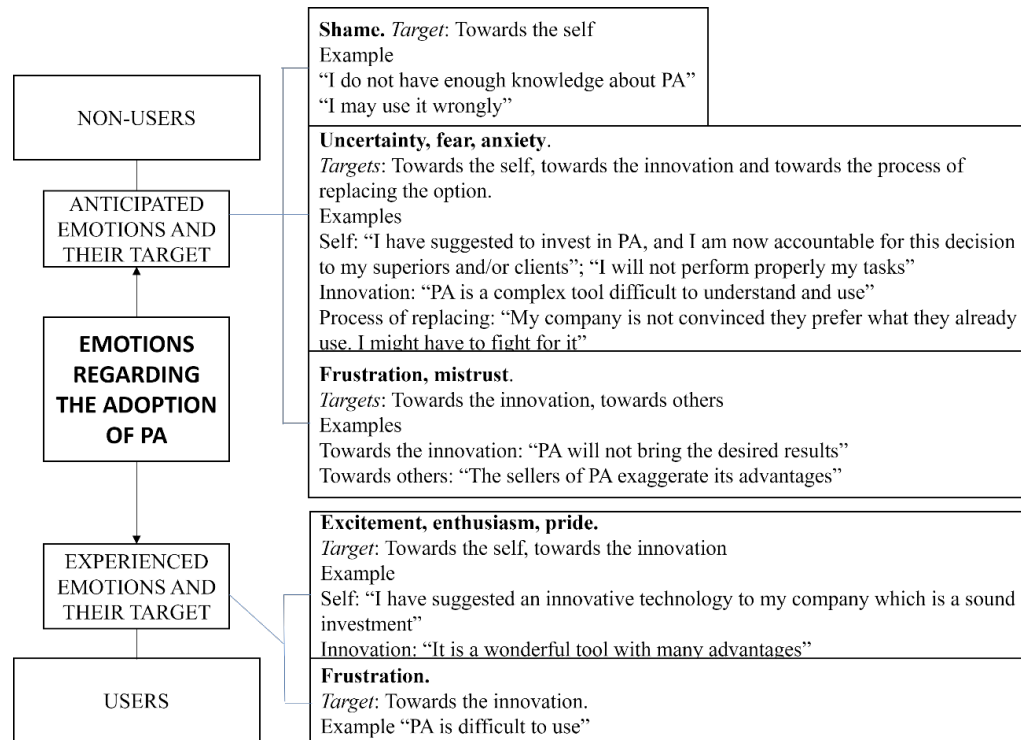


Figure 2
Emotions and their target in relation to PA

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In terms of epistemological positioning, we adopt a social constructionist paradigm. In our study, participants are our "knowledgeable agents" (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), and we therefore interpret their emotional responses within their constructed reality. We have identified specific factors at different levels, namely innovation-related, individual, organizational, and cultural factors, whose interplay shapes the emergence of different emotions in innovation adoption processes. Our findings particularly highlight the interplay between emotional reactions and the perceived complexity of PA, contributing to a more refined understanding of how technical sophistication affects innovation adoption in marketing contexts and underscoring the need for prior professional education (Stam & Stanton, 2010).

Finally, by examining PA adoption through an emotional lens, we provide practical insights for marketing managers navigating the implementation of advanced advertising technologies, thereby addressing a gap in the literature noted by Kumar *et al.* (2019). More specifically, we underline the following man-

agerial implications. A negative cultural framing of an innovative technology, either in the marketplace or in broader society, can influence the emotional responses of organizational clients. If the innovation is perceived as complex and/or unethical, this may counteract the product's selling points. Therefore, marketing managers of innovative products need to frame them in positive emotional terms, educate potential clients, and reduce the uncertainty surrounding the product and its underlying processes.

Beyond these general recommendations, our findings suggest several concrete managerial actions. First, organizations should invest in internal education and training programmes aimed at reducing employees' perceived complexity and uncertainty surrounding programmatic advertising. Our results show that negative emotions often stem from a lack of familiarity and perceived technical opacity. Structured training, cross-functional workshops, and internal knowledge-sharing practices can therefore play a key role in reducing fear and frustration

while increasing feelings of empowerment. Beyond this, organizations need to explore other, often invisible, collective dynamics concerning professional autonomy, empowerment, and the professional consequences faced by employees who advocate change. All these factors are relevant to innovation adoption and acceptance, as well as to the activation and expression of specific emotions.

Second, organizations should carefully manage the internal communication of innovation adoption decisions. Because managers may fear being held personally responsible if the innovation fails, creating psychologically safe environments for experimentation becomes critical. Pilot projects, incremental implementation strategies, and shared decision-making processes can help reduce perceived personal risk and encourage more proactive innovation advocacy.

Third, our findings highlight the importance of addressing the cultural and societal framing of programmatic advertising. Marketing and AdTech firms should proactively communicate ethical practices, data privacy safeguards, and transparency mechanisms. By doing so, they can counteract negative societal narratives and reduce the emotional resistance of both clients and employees.

Fourth, vendors and technology providers should adapt their sales and onboarding strategies. Participants frequently expressed distrust towards vendors who “sell programmatic advertising as magic”. This suggests the need for more transparent, educational, and consultative selling approaches that focus on realistic expectations and long-term value creation.

Finally, organizations should acknowledge that emotions play a key role in innovation adoption and should be actively managed as part of change management strategies. Emotional monitoring, feedback mechanisms, and leadership support can facilitate smoother adoption processes and reduce resistance to complex marketing technologies.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH

Our research has revealed several promising areas for future research. Future studies should explore how emotions interact with organizational dynamics such as leadership styles, group decision-making processes, and organizational readiness for innovation (Raffaelli *et al.*, 2019). For instance, transformational leadership may moderate the relationship between emotions and PA adoption decisions. Vuori and Huy (2016), for example, demonstrated how emotional dynamics between top and middle managers influenced strategic change at Nokia. Similarly, investigating how emotional contagion affects PA adoption decisions, as well as the adoption of other innovations, across different organizational levels and sectors could provide valuable insights. Another area worth exploring is the fit between the company’s brand identity and the branding of the innovation to be adopted.

Additionally, examining in greater depth how organizational culture shapes emotional responses after PA adoption, and from a longitudinal perspective, could further enrich our understanding of the evolution and complex interplay between emotions and organizational behaviour in this process.

For instance, future studies could build on previous research (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017) and qualitatively explore how emotions are expressed and managed throughout the innovation adoption and implementation process.

Further research could also examine the organizational practices that support the implementation of innovations perceived as risky and complex by employees, particularly those practices aimed at managing and regulating negative emotions and behaviours, such as active or passive employee resistance and employee silence (Gambarotto & Cammazzo, 2010). The acceptance and use of innovations could also be examined through an emotional lens across different tools and stakeholders. Finally, further research could explore how innovations are culturally framed and how this affects their adoption. For instance, in the advertising field, AI has generated considerable debate regarding the promises and risks it represents for different stakeholders, including brand managers, strategists, producers, and consumers, among others. Societal debates about innovations, such as data privacy in this case, need to be understood in relation to the legitimization processes of certain innovations over others. It would be insightful to understand the different emotional responses elicited by negatively framed innovations among these actors, as well as the psychological and cultural mechanisms that shape behaviours and decisions in organizational contexts.

8. DECLARATION ON THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TOOLS

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence tools were used in the writing, analysis, or interpretation of the results of this study. Such tools were employed solely for the purpose of reviewing grammar and enhancing linguistic clarity in the English text. All conceptual content, empirical data, statistical analyses and conclusions are the exclusive work of the authors.

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