



**A Generational Perspective: The Role of Age in Emotional and Brand Responses to
Advertising:**

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Introduction

With the rise of digitization, media, and technology have become inescapable parts of daily life. Advertisements, whether on TV or in public spaces, constantly interrupt our content and attention. Amidst the preliminary distractions and annoyances we seem to automatically associate with advertisements, certain ones manage to stand out. They may captivate our attention, pull our senses, and resonate with our emotions. For a moment, we chose not to skip the ad, and to sit with the resonating story. In some cases, such advertisements can strike an emotional cord with the audience, leaving a lasting effect and a trace of inspiration. Perhaps we observe this effect within our parents, who express their admiration for the bittersweetness and inspiring messages.

Companies play strategic measures to cultivate compelling story narratives to touch audiences's emotions, whether that be inspiration, motivation, nostalgia, or even sadness, etc. This raises the question: who is most emotionally affected by such advertisements? To what extent do people report being moved by emotional ads, and does this influence their brand affinity, loyalty, and purchase decisions? Prior research has spoken to the significant effect that emotional resonance has on an individual. However, there is limited research there is limited research on how different age groups respond to emotional advertising. Therefore, this study aims to explore how different age groups impact emotional receptiveness to ads.

I hypothesize that older individuals will be more receptive to emotional advertisements than younger individuals, as they report strong emotional responses, creating lasting memories. I also hypothesize that this high emotional resonance will drive them to have a greater desire to purchase (Lescroart & Kurnit, 2018). For instance, tear-jerking ads during significant events like ones from the Olympics can foster emotional connections that translate into increased consumer

action. Such emotional moments resonate deeply with viewers, for this hypothesis is grounded in the understanding that emotions play a significant role in decision-making and consumer behavior and that middle-aged individuals, having experienced more significant life events, are more likely to resonate with emotional advertising. (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005).

Additionally, this hypothesis is supported by the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST), which suggests that as people age, their social goals and priorities change in response to their perception of time (Carstensen, 2021). This theory describes while younger individuals tend to focus on knowledge acquisition and future-oriented goals, older adults often focus on emotionally meaningful relationships and activities. Given that older individuals tend to derive greater emotional satisfaction from these connections, they may be more likely to exhibit stronger emotional responses to emotional advertisements. Furthermore, middle-aged adults typically have a broader range of life experiences, like raising children, career achievements or struggles, health challenges, and/or personal losses. These experiences can make them more sensitive to emotional triggers in ads, especially those related to family, health, etc. Through reflecting on their past and their legacy, they may be more vulnerable to nostalgic or sentimental content in ads. Therefore, I predict that emotional responses to the ads will increase with each ascending age cohort. For instance, I predict early middle adulthood (30–44) would report a higher emotional response than young adulthood (18-29).

Moreover, it is important to understand the role emotions play in advertising. For a product to truly resonate with an individual, the ad must not only deliver information to satisfy a consumer's cognitive demands but also create positive emotional responses. In some cases, advertisements can evoke tear-jerking feelings, which can still be considered "positive", if individuals report feeling a strong connection to the message or appreciate the quality of the

storytelling. Furthermore, in marketing and advertising literature, emotion is often conceptualized as either “a mood state during the viewing of commercials” (Friestad & Thorson, 1986) or as a mental readiness that gets triggered by the cognitive appraisals that people make about commercials (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999; Friestad & Thorson, 1986). Researchers studying what motivates consumers' intentions to share content have found that emotion is one of the most influential factors (Heath, Bell, & Sternberg, 2001). Therefore, in the age of proliferating digital advertisements and competition, past research suggests that emotions are pivotal in capturing individuals to resonate, and therefore potentially driving purchasing actions. Understanding the emotional sensitivities of different age cohorts is crucial for marketers aiming to design effective advertising strategies. Coupled with the impact of older individuals with generally higher emotional resonance, it becomes clear that this age demographic viewing emotionally charged ads may lead to increased engagement and a stronger likelihood of driving consumer behavior.

Methods

A total of 111 participants (54.1% female, 45.9% male, 00.9% transgender female, 00.9% transgender male) were recruited via Prolific for a study on “Emotions in Daily Life.” Ages ranged from 22 to 62 years ($M = 36.8$, $SD = 9.75$). The sample was predominantly Hispanic, Latino(a,x), Chicano(a,x), or Spanish (45.9%), with 44.1% identifying as European-American, White, Anglo or Caucasian, 9.9% as African-American, Black, African, Caribbean, 4.5% as Native American or American Indian, 2.7% as East Asian-American, or East Asian, 1.8% as Middle Eastern or North African, 1.8% as Southeast Asian-American or Southeast Asian, and 0.9% as South Asian-American or South Asian.

Eligible participants were those 18 years of age or older, who listed their nationality and current residence as the United States and were fluent in English. Each participant completed a battery of measures assessing emotion-relevant individual differences and outcomes, including daily experiences of emotions, emotion-related skills and traits, and indicators of health and well-being. The variables of interest that are reported here were excerpted from this larger dataset. The sample size was determined by the amount of funding available to offer participants an appropriate level of monetary compensation for a study of this nature and set in advance at approximately 100 participants. This study was approved by the University of Richmond Institutional Review Board (IRB). All participants provided informed consent before completing the study. The following age cohorts for this study were constructed with the following age ranges:

Age Cohorts:

- 1) Young Adulthood: 18–29 years
- 2) Early Middle Adulthood: 30–44 years
- 3) Older Adulthood: 45+

We instructed the participants to watch an advertisement called “‘Thank You, Mom’ Campaign Ad: ‘Strong’ (Rio 2016 Olympics)” for the brand Procter & Gamble, a company that manufactures and sells products under a wide range of brands, including Pampers (diapers), Bounty (paper towels), and Tide (laundry detergent). The ad is 2 minutes and 16 seconds long and was released during the time of the 2016 Olympics to air during the games. It highlights the strength and support mothers give throughout life’s challenges, featuring authentic moments between the mothers and their children as they grow up to become Olympic athletes. It features

emotional scenes of children facing hardships such as safety threats and dangers, dealing with injury, social ostracism, etc., while their mothers are giving sincere encouragement and comfort. The end of the ad shows these grown children finally competing on the Olympic stage with their mothers watching them, tearful in pride, as the mothers' love and support played a pivotal role in their future successes. The tagline says, "It takes someone strong to make someone strong," celebrates the profound impact of mothers on their children's journeys, beyond sports, and in overall life. The following instructions were summarized to the participants as follows:

"The following is an advertisement for the brand Procter & Gamble, a company that manufactures and sells products under a wide range of brands, including Pampers (diapers), Bounty (paper towels), and Tide (laundry detergent). Again, please make sure that your sound is turned on and that you are using headphones if necessary".

Measures

After watching the ad, participants were instructed to consider their **emotional response** when watching the advertisement, and then indicate the extent to which they felt each of the following emotions. The preceding measures included a **modified** version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule which assesses feelings experienced while viewing advertisements (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). They were instructed to respond to the following prompt: **"Consider how you felt while watching the advertisement, then indicate the extent to which you felt each of the following emotions"**. Participants were asked to rate 10 different emotional descriptors, with all items measuring positive affect (e.g., "enthusiastic," "inspired"). Responses were collected using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('Very slightly or not at all') to 5 ('Extremely'), indicating the degree to which each emotion was experienced after

watching the ad. The PANAS scale allows for the calculation of two separate scores: a positive affect score (PA), which was used to assess participants' overall emotional state and their reactions to emotional advertising content.

Next, participants were assessed on their **brand response** toward the video using a using 7-point Likert scale, to the following prompt: **"Overall, what is your attitude toward the video advertisement that you just watched?"** Responses were collected on two separate 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (Favorable) to 7 (Unfavorable). Likewise, the second Likert scale ranged from 1 (Like very much) to 7 (Dislike very much). Participants' ratings on these scales were used to understand their overall attitude and emotional response to the advertisement. Lower scores indicate a more positive attitude and higher scores reflect a more negative attitude.

Then, participants' attitudes were measured using another 7-point Likert scale, assessing their general attitude toward the brand (Procter & Gamble) and its associated brands. Participants responded to the following prompt: **"Overall, what is your attitude toward Procter & Gamble and its brands?"**, anchored with the same measures as the previous scales, Favorable (1) to Unfavorable (7) and Like very much (1) to Dislike very much (7). These scales were used to measure participants' overall perceptions of both the advertisement and the brand, capturing both affective (liking) and evaluative (favorability) dimensions. Lower scores indicate a more positive attitude and higher scores reflect a more negative attitude. The data from these scales helped assess the impact of the advertisement on participants' attitudes toward the ad itself and toward Procter & Gamble as *a brand*.

The last survey item with the same 7-point Likert scale asked: ***"If you had an occasion to purchase consumer goods, how likely would you be to purchase from those Procter & Gamble brands?"*** Responses were collected on two separate 7-point scales, again, anchored at:

Very likely (1) to Very unlikely (7), and Definitely yes (1) to Definitely no (7). These scales were used to assess participants' likelihood of purchasing Procter & Gamble products. Lower scores indicate a higher likelihood of purchase and higher scores reflect a lower likelihood of purchase. The results provided insight into the effectiveness of the emotional advertisement in influencing participants' purchase intentions. With this item, we can truly assess if there was a correlation between high emotional resonance and inclination to purchase. Also, individual scale scores were computed by averaging the total 10 items for the Emotional Response Scale, and the 3 items for the Brand Response scale, respectively.

Results

The data presented offers insight into the emotional responses of 111 participants who were asked to rate their feelings while watching an advertisement. Out of the 111 participants, there were 32 young adults (N=32), 48 middle-aged adults (N=48) and 31 older-age adults. First, their ***emotional response*** scores were taken. They rated various emotions, including feelings of hopefulness, inspiration, and joy, on a scale where higher means indicate stronger feelings. Here is an analysis of the mean and standard deviation of each emotion:

- **Hopeful:** Average response was 2.37 with moderate variability (SD = 1.24), indicating a mild sense of hopefulness.
- **Inspired:** Participants felt slightly inspired (Mean = 2.49, SD = 1.29), with diverse responses.
- **Moved:** Scored relatively high at 2.86 (SD = 1.17), indicating that many felt somewhat moved.
- **Touched:** Highest mean at 2.95, with low variability (SD = 1.19), indicating a stronger emotional connection.
- **Joyful:** Lower mean of 2.04 (SD = 1.39) indicates joy was not strongly felt, with wide-ranging responses.
- **Happy:** Scored 2.12 (SD = 1.31), indicating mild happiness with some variability.
- **Refreshed:** Lowest mean at 1.86, with high variability (SD = 1.46), suggesting low but varied feelings of refreshment.

- **Energized:** Low at 1.93 (SD = 1.44), indicating slight energy levels with diverse responses.
- **Loving:** Scored moderately at 2.53 (SD = 1.37), with a range of responses indicating a mild loving response.

To summarize overall, participants responded more strongly to emotions like "Moved" and "Touched," while feelings of "Refreshed" and "Energized" were lower. This demonstrates older adults were more likely to feel mixed emotions contrary to younger adults.

To evaluate the relationship between emotional response and brand response, I calculated a Pearson's r correlation coefficient. Internal consistency is a measure of reliability used to determine the extent to which multiple items used to measure the same variable are related. The emotional response scale showed strong reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.96. The brand response scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.73, indicating somewhat moderate reliability. These values indicate that the scales used in this study are internally consistent and suitable for further analysis.

To examine the effect of age on emotional responses and brand attitude, a One-Way Between-Subjects ANOVA was conducted with age group as the independent variable. Participants were divided into three age groups: *age cohort 1*, 2 and 3.

Effect of Age Cohort in Emotional Responses:

1. **Young Adults (Age Cohort 1):** Mean = 2.27, SD = 1.23, N = 32
2. **Middle-Aged Adults (Age Cohort 2):** Mean = 2.29, SD = 1.15, N = 48
3. **Oldest Adults (Age Cohort 3):** Mean = 2.51, SD = 1.09, N = 31

Positive **emotional response scores** were subjected to a one-way analysis of variance with one between-subjects variable having three cohorts of age (younger, middle-aged, and older). A Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons was used to examine the pairwise

differences. The omnibus F test did not reveal a statistically significant relationship between age and positive emotional response to the emotional ad, $F(2, 108) = 0.444$, $p = .642$, $\eta^2 = .008$. Though the oldest adults reported the highest levels of positive emotions ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.09$), they were similar to middle-aged adults ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.15$), a statistically non-significant difference of 0.22, 95% CI [-0.32, 0.76], and to younger adults ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.23$), a statistically non-significant difference of 0.24, 95% CI [-0.33, 0.81]. The difference between middle-aged and younger adults was also statistically non-significant: 0.02, 95% CI [-0.48, 0.52]. The total mean emotional response across all age groups is 2.34 with a standard deviation of 1.15 ($N = 111$). These means suggest that the oldest adults had slightly higher emotional response scores than the other age groups, though the difference is small. Overall, the results suggest that the age cohort does not have a statistically significant effect on emotional response.

Effect of Age Cohort in Brand Responses:

1. **Young Adults (Age Cohort 1):** Mean = 2.45, SD = 0.80, N = 32
2. **Middle-Aged Adults (Age Cohort 2):** Mean = 2.57, SD = 1.18, N = 48
3. **Oldest Adults (Age Cohort 3):** Mean = 2.28, SD = 0.97, N = 31

Brand response scores were then subjected to a one-way analysis of variance with one between-subjects variable having three cohorts of age (younger, middle-aged, and older). A Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons was used to examine the pairwise differences. The omnibus F test revealed a statistically significant relationship between age and brand response scores, $F(2, 108) = 0.749$, $p = .475$, $\eta^2 = .014$. Middle-aged adults reported the highest brand response scores ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.18$), though their scores were not significantly different from younger adults ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 0.80$), with a mean difference of 0.12, 95% CI [-0.30,

0.54]. Middle-aged adults also did not significantly differ from the oldest adults ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.97$), with a mean difference of 0.29, 95% CI [-0.13, 0.71]. The difference between younger and oldest adults was also not statistically significant: 0.17, 95% CI [-0.31, 0.65]. The overall mean brand response score across all age groups is 2.45, with an SD of 1.03 ($N = 111$). This suggests that middle-aged adults had a slightly higher average brand response score than the other age cohorts, while the oldest adults had the lowest mean score, though these differences were insignificant. Overall, the results suggest that the age cohort does not have a statistically significant effect on brand response.

To evaluate the relationship between emotional response and brand response, I calculated a Pearson's r correlation coefficient. The correlation was statistically significantly different than zero, with high emotional response scores to the ad positively associated with high brand response scores ($r = -0.655$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [-.750, -.534]. This negative correlation suggests participants with more positive emotional responses like the brand more. In other words, the findings support the hypothesis that people who had a higher positive emotional response liked the brand more. The 95% confidence interval (which ranges from -.750 to -.534) indicates high confidence in the strength and direction of the relationship, with a strong effect size between the two variables.

Graphs/Visuals

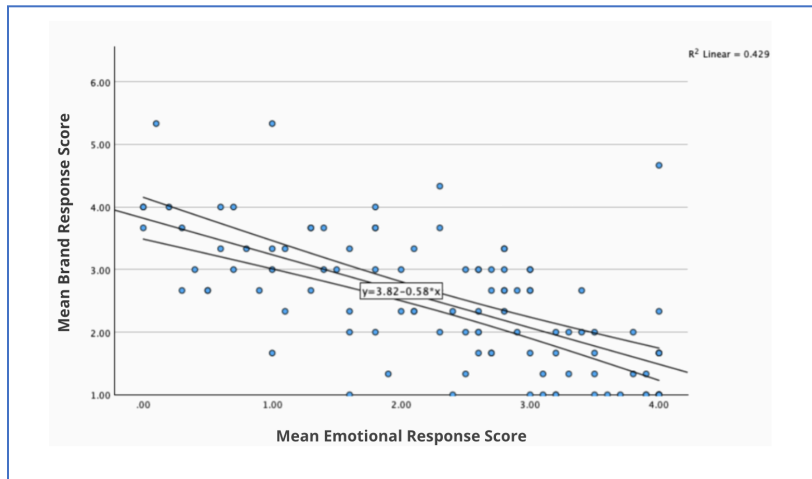


Figure 1. Scatterplot depicting the linear relationship between mean emotional response scores and mean brand response scores. Solid line indicates the regression line. Dotted lines indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the mean of brand response scores at each emotional score value.

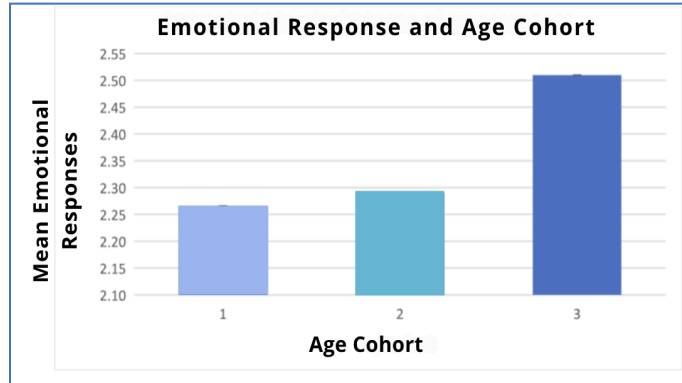


Figure 2. Bar graph depicting the mean emotional response scores for each age cohort (Young Adults: 18–29, Middle-Aged Adults: 30–44, and Oldest Adults: 45+). Emotional responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger emotional reactions to the advertisement. No statistically significant differences were found between the groups ($p > .05$).

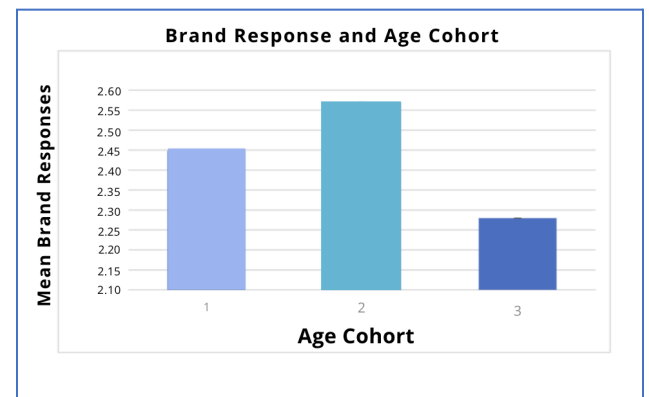


Figure 3. Bar graph depicting the mean brand response scores for each age cohort (Young Adults: 18–29, Middle-Aged Adults: 30–44, and Oldest Adults: 45+). Brand responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger positive attitudes toward the brand. The Middle-Aged Adults cohort reported the highest mean score; however, the differences between age cohorts were not statistically significant ($p > .05$).

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that age cohorts did not significantly influence emotional or brand responses to the P&G "Thank You, Mom" Campaign Ad: "*Strong*" (Rio 2016 Olympics). Contrary to the hypothesis, emotional responses did not consistently increase with age, and this lack of differentiation across age groups also meant that older cohorts were not more likely to express a stronger intention to purchase P&G products. The results go against the expectation that older individuals would be more receptive to emotional advertising, given their life experiences and emotional priorities.

While the oldest adults demonstrated slightly higher **emotional response scores** than the other age groups, the difference was too weak to draw conclusions about the relationship between age and emotional response to the ad. This small difference may be subtly linked to the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST), as previously stated, which suggests that as older adult's social goals and priorities change in response to their perception of time, in turn, derive greater emotional satisfaction from relational connections, and more sensitivity to life's turbulences and triumphs. SST could potentially explain why the oldest age cohort might exhibit stronger emotional responses to the ad which was designed to be emotionally charging, even if the findings in this study were not statistically insignificant.

Interestingly, this study did reveal a significant relationship between participants' emotional responses to the ad and their attitudes toward the brand. Specifically, those who shared a more positive perception of P&G to the positive items of the scales after watching the ad were more likely to express a desire to purchase its products. This supports established marketing behavior research, such that when people are more emotionally engaged, this leads to increased brand affinity and influences purchasing decisions. This finding, however, is separate from the

age-related hypothesis. It does not necessarily explain the differences between the age cohorts and their emotional or brand responses.

There are several limitations in this study which will be outlined. First, only one "emotional" video advertisement was shown, and there was no "control" video for comparison to establish a baseline. Had there been a control video show (i.e. another P&G commercial that only advertised the efficiency of the product without any emotional storyline), this would have allowed researchers to better assess how participants' responses differed between an emotional versus a neutral stimulus, and how this impacts participants' emotional responses and purchase intentions. Additionally, the survey collected only Likert-scale quantitative data, omitting qualitative, open-ended questions about the video advertisement. By including open-ended questions, this could have given participants the opportunity to write about their emotional experiences, thoughts, and personal connections to the ad. This limitation may have hindered the more nuanced and complex reactions to the advertisement, thus potentially impacting mean scores.

The age cohorts in this study were constructed in an unconventional way due to the sample's demographic composition. Notably, there were no participants classified as "elderly," given that the oldest individual was just 59 years old. The fact that a 45 year old is regarded as an "older" adult, categorized into cohort 3, may be initially misleading to some. Because the age ranges skewed more on the younger side (likely because the study relied on participants who were comfortable using technology to complete compensation surveys) this could have naturally attracted a younger demographic. In future iterations of this study, had we recruited a larger sample of this legitimate "older" age cohort, we may assume to see more substantial effects differing in emotional and brand response means to the ad.

Furthermore, the emotional response scores, adapted from the PANAS survey included a blend of high and low arousal positive emotions. To reiterate, participants responded more strongly to emotions like "Moved" and "Touched," while feelings of "Refreshed" and "Energized" were lower, even though all these items were classified as “positive” emotions. This distinction between the valence and arousal—upbeat, high-energy emotions versus deeper, more sentimental feelings could have contributed to variability in the data, potentially skewing the means. Therefore, this could have potentially impacted the results, notable in the lack of statistically significant differences between age cohorts. In future iterations of this study, it would be beneficial to adapt this scale more thoroughly, such that valence and arousal of positive emotions is taken into account. When targeting emotions in emotional ads, mean scores for emotional responses may have higher construct validity if the positive emotion items include more deeper, sentimental positive emotions.

The overall statistically insignificant findings when examining age cohorts with emotional response and brand response initially may be surprising, as they contradict the original hypothesis. In retrospect, age does not appear to significantly impact one's ability to report a strong emotional response to an ad; all three age cohorts reported similar levels of positive response to the advertisement. However, this study did affirm the pre-existing literature stating that emotional advertisements can successfully drive consumer interest in purchasing from a brand. We can suggest that some emotional advertisements may resonate across age groups, rather than being more impactful for specific age demographics. This may be especially true for the specific ad used in this study — P&G “Thank You, Mom' Campaign Ad: "Strong" (Rio 2016 Olympics)” which featured a diverse cast, including mothers, grandmothers, children, and young adult athletes. The range of age and journeys of life represented likely enhanced the ad's

universal appeal, fostering emotional resonance across all age groups. Perhaps if the ad only featured older participants, we may predict to see higher emotional responses from older age cohorts compared to their younger ones. Future iterations of this study could explore this phenomenon further.

Beyond advertising, this study suggests that age may not always play a significant role in emotional responses. It highlights the idea that emotional universality has the power to resonate across different age groups and other domains, allowing people to connect with something deeper in human experiences—whether through media, storytelling, or real-world events.

Appendix:

Experimental Stimuli and Instructions:

Instruct

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The following is an advertisement for the brand **Procter & Gamble**, a company that manufactures and sells products under a wide range of brands, including Pampers (diapers), Bounty (paper towels), and Tide (laundry detergent). Again, please make sure that your sound is turned on and that you are using headphones if necessary.



Video linked here: [P&G 'Thank You, Mom' Campaign Ad: "Strong" \(Rio 2016 Olympics\)](#)

All Survey items:

procter

Consider how you felt while watching the advertisement, then indicate the extent to which you felt each of the following emotions.

	Not at all	A little	Moderately	Very much	Extremely
Hopeful	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Inspired	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Moved	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Touched	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Joyful	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Not at all	A little	Moderately	Very much	Extremely
Happy	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Refreshed	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Energized	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Loving	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Loved	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

procter11

Overall, what is your attitude toward the video advertisement that you just watched?

Very favorable ☐ Favorable ☐ Somewhat favorable ☐ Neither favorable or unfavorable ☐ Somewhat unfavorable ☐ Unfavorable ☐ Very unfavorable ☐

procter12

Overall, what is your attitude toward Procter & Gamble and its brands?

Very favorable ☐ Favorable ☐ Somewhat favorable ☐ Neither favorable or unfavorable ☐ Somewhat unfavorable ☐ Unfavorable ☐ Very unfavorable ☐

procter13

If you had an occasion to purchase consumer goods, how likely would you be to purchase from those Procter & Gamble brands?

Very likely ☐ Likely ☐ Somewhat likely ☐ Neither likely nor unlikely ☐ Somewhat unlikely ☐ Unlikely ☐ Very unlikely ☐

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