JOURNAL OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT TECHNOLOGIES

e-ISSN: 3090-1669
Vol: 1 (3) (2025)

Purr-suasion in Action: How Catvertising Boosts Brand Recall through Cognitive Fluency

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Received: 18 Okt 2025,
Revised: 05 Nov 2025,
Accepted: 04 Des 2025

Citation: Achmad Ridha (2025). "Purr-suasion in Action: How Catvertising Boosts Brand Recall through Cognitive Fluency". Journal of Economics and Management Technologies, Vol. 1 No.3, Page Range. 130 - 140

DOI : 10.63288/jemtech.v1i3.12

Abstract

The Objectives – This study investigates how catvertising, or the strategic use of cat imagery in social-media advertising, influences brand recall through the mediating role of cognitive fluency. The research aims to understand how emotional engagement and cognitive simplicity jointly enhance advertising effectiveness in digital environments.

The Methods/approaches – Using a quantitative, cross-sectional approach, data were collected from 100 active social-media users aged 18–35 in Makassar City, Indonesia. Respondents were exposed to simulated social-media advertisements containing or excluding cat imagery and subsequently completed a seven-point Likert-scale questionnaire measuring catvertising, cognitive fluency, and brand recall. Data were analyzed using the Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) method, consisting of two stages: outer-model and inner-model evaluation.

The Results – The results reveal that catvertising has a significant positive effect on brand recall, while cognitive fluency also enhances recall independently. However, the interaction effect between catvertising and cognitive fluency is not significant, indicating that emotional appeal and processing ease operate as parallel rather than moderating mechanisms.

The Research Implications – These findings contribute to the theoretical integration of affective and cognitive perspectives in digital advertising research and highlight the importance of emotionally resonant yet cognitively simple designs. For practitioners, the study emphasizes the managerial relevance of incorporating familiar and emotionally appealing visuals to strengthen brand memorability in competitive social-media contexts.

Keywords: Catvertising, Cognitive Fluency, Brand Recall, Social Media Advertising, Digital Marketing

1. Introduction

In today's digitized communication landscape, social media has transformed the nature of advertising and the psychology of consumer engagement. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook are no longer merely channels for interpersonal interaction but have evolved into complex ecosystems of visual storytelling and brand communication. Within these platforms, competition for attention has become increasingly intense because users are exposed to thousands

Published by Candela Edutech Indonesia

of visual stimuli each day. This phenomenon has created what researchers call the attention economy, in which human attention rather than information has become the most valuable and scarce resource (Pieters & Wedel, 2017). In this context, advertisers face a major challenge: how to attract attention, evoke emotion, and ensure message retention within only a few seconds before users scroll away. As a result, marketing strategies have shifted from rational, argument-based appeals toward emotionally engaging and cognitively simple content that can generate instant resonance and memorability (Poels & Dewitte, 2019).

Among the various creative approaches that respond to this new communication reality, one particularly interesting and culturally pervasive phenomenon is catvertising, which refers to the deliberate use of cat imagery, videos, or narratives in advertising. The term first gained attention in early 2010s media discussions (Milner, 2016; O'Neill, 2012) and has since become emblematic of the internet's deep fascination with cats. From viral memes and YouTube clips to major brand campaigns, cats have become highly visible figures in digital culture. They represent a combination of humor, cuteness, and authenticity that resonates strongly with online audiences. Unlike dogs, whose imagery typically conveys loyalty and obedience, cats are often associated with independence, curiosity, and playfulness. These traits align closely with the ironic, expressive, and self-reflective tone of social media culture (Milner, 2016; Nauroth et al., 2019).

From a psychological perspective, cat imagery produces strong emotional responses. Studies in affective psychology indicate that emotionally charged stimuli are processed more deeply and remembered more effectively than neutral ones (Hudson et al., 2016; Langner et al., 2015). Cats, because of their expressiveness and perceived cuteness, evoke amusement, joy, nostalgia, and affection. These emotions activate approach motivation and increase attentional focus. When individuals experience positive emotions during exposure to an advertisement, their cognitive systems allocate more resources to processing it, which enhances encoding and memory retention (Yoon et al., 2018). Cat imagery also possesses an additional advantage in terms of familiarity. Because cats are so prevalent in online environments, cat images are processed fluently, meaning that they are recognized quickly and easily by the brain. According to processing fluency theory, stimuli that are easier to process are perceived as more pleasant and are more likely to be remembered (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Reber et al., 2004a; Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2020). Catvertising therefore combines two crucial elements of persuasive communication: emotional resonance and cognitive ease.

Although catvertising has become common in digital advertising practice, its psychological effects remain insufficiently explored in academic literature. Previous research has established that emotional appeals enhance attention and persuasion (Langner et al., 2015; Micu & Plummer, 2019) and that cognitive fluency improves information processing and evaluation (Liu, 2020; Schroll et al., 2018). However, the intersection between these two mechanisms in the context of visual social media advertising has rarely been investigated. This absence is surprising because the combination of emotional and fluent processing could explain why some advertisements are more memorable and appealing than others. Furthermore, while

many studies have explored fluency as an internal mechanism that facilitates evaluation, fewer have examined its potential moderating role in determining when emotionally salient cues become more or less effective. Understanding how emotional and cognitive processes interact in a highly visual, fast-moving digital environment is therefore both theoretically and practically important.

The theoretical basis of this study builds upon two key frameworks: the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Processing Fluency Theory. The ELM distinguishes between central and peripheral routes of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), with social-media users typically relying on the peripheral route due to low involvement and multitasking behavior (Kapoor et al., 2022). Under these conditions, emotional cues such as cat imagery have a stronger effect on attention and memory than rational message content. Processing Fluency Theory complements this explanation not only by emphasizing the ease with which information is processed but also by suggesting that fluency may condition the effectiveness of persuasive cues. Because fluency generates a sense of ease and positive affect, advertisements processed more fluently may strengthen or weaken the influence of emotional stimuli depending on how readily viewers can integrate the message.

Although catvertising has gained attention in global digital culture, empirical studies on this phenomenon remain limited and largely focused on Western contexts. Research has examined emotional cues in advertising and the independent effects of cognitive fluency, yet few studies have integrated these mechanisms within a single model or tested them in Southeast Asian environments such as Indonesia, where visual humor, cuteness-oriented content, and meme culture may function differently. This lack of contextual and theoretical integration leaves unclear whether emotional appeal and processing ease interact in shaping brand recall, or whether their influence operates independently. Accordingly, empirical investigation in the Indonesian social-media context is needed to address these gaps.

Based on these theoretical considerations, this study aims to examine the relationship between catvertising and brand recall while assessing whether cognitive fluency conditions the strength of this relationship. To guide this inquiry, the study formulates research questions that explore whether catvertising enhances brand recall, whether cognitive fluency independently contributes to recall, and whether fluency moderates the influence of catvertising on memory performance. These questions form the logical foundation for the development of the study's hypotheses. The first hypothesis (H1) proposes that catvertising in social media advertisements positively influences brand recall. The second hypothesis (H2) proposes that cognitive fluency exerts a direct influence on brand recall. The third hypothesis (H3) posits that cognitive fluency moderates the relationship between catvertising and brand recall, such that the effect of catvertising becomes stronger when the advertisement is perceived as more fluent.

Social media platforms represent an appropriate context for testing these hypotheses. Unlike traditional media where exposure is deliberate and prolonged, social media advertising competes within an environment of distraction and minimal attention span. Users rarely engage in analytical evaluation of advertising messages; instead, their responses are guided by quick, affective judgments. In this

environment, emotionally appealing and cognitively simple advertisements are more likely to stand out, be shared, and be remembered (Kim & Kim, 2021). Catvertising, with its ability to trigger emotion and cognitive ease simultaneously, offers an effective mechanism for increasing both engagement and recall.

The significance of this study lies in both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it extends understanding of how affective and cognitive factors interact to influence advertising effectiveness by conceptualizing cognitive fluency as a moderating condition rather than a mechanistic pathway. Practically, the findings are expected to offer insights for marketing practitioners who design digital advertising campaigns by highlighting when and under what perceptual conditions cat-based visual content is most likely to enhance brand memorability.

Ultimately, this study argues that catvertising represents more than a passing online trend. It exemplifies the intersection of emotional resonance and cognitive ease two principles that define persuasive communication in the digital era. In a world saturated with information and shaped by algorithmic exposure, the most successful advertisements are those that feel good and are easy to process. Catvertising embodies both of these qualities. By examining this phenomenon empirically, the present study contributes to a deeper understanding of how emotional and cognitive mechanisms jointly shape advertising effectiveness in contemporary social-media environments.

2. Methodology

This study employs a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships between catvertising (X), cognitive fluency (M), and brand recall (Y). The Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) technique was selected because it is appropriate for predictive models, supports the analysis of direct and moderating effects, and performs well with relatively small sample sizes and non-normal data distributions.

The target population consisted of active social-media users aged 18–35 years residing in Makassar City, representing a demographic segment that frequently engages with digital advertisements. Purposive sampling was applied using the following criteria: (1) active users of Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube for at least one hour per day, (2) prior exposure to online advertising content, (3) absence of severe visual impairments that could affect perception, and (4) no participation in similar advertising-related studies within the last six months to prevent carryover bias. A total of 100 respondents were recruited, meeting the minimum threshold recommended by the PLS “ten-times rule” for stable parameter estimation.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via social-media channels. Because the study did not use visual stimuli, respondents were instead presented with brief written descriptions of social-media advertising scenarios. These scenarios were designed to prompt respondents to evaluate their general perceptions of cat-related advertising content, rather than a specific advertisement. After reading the descriptions, participants completed a structured questionnaire measuring the three latent constructs. Each construct consisted of three reflective indicators adapted from validated prior scales. Catvertising items measured respondents’

perceptions of the appeal and emotional attractiveness of cat-themed advertising *(e.g., "Cat-related advertising content tends to feel more engaging to me").* Cognitive fluency items assessed how easily respondents process advertisements with familiar or simple visual elements *(e.g., "I can understand this type of advertisement quickly and effortlessly").* Brand recall items captured respondents' self-reported ability to remember brands featured in such advertisements *(e.g., "I can easily recall the brand presented in this type of advertisement").* All items used a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"). A small pilot test was conducted to ensure clarity, readability, and internal consistency of the questionnaire.

Data analysis was performed using SmartPLS 4. The analysis followed two main stages. The first stage involved evaluating the measurement model by examining indicator reliability (factor loadings ≥ 0.70), convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted ≥ 0.50), discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion), and construct reliability (Composite Reliability ≥ 0.70 and Cronbach's alpha ≥ 0.70). The second stage assessed the structural model, testing: (1) the direct effect of catvertising on brand recall, (2) the direct effect of cognitive fluency on brand recall, and (3) the moderating effect of cognitive fluency through an interaction term ($X \times M \rightarrow Y$). Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was applied to determine statistical significance at the 0.05 level.

Through this analytical procedure, the study ensures that the measurement and structural components of the model meet the required criteria for validity and reliability. The use of SEM-PLS provides methodological robustness and supports the exploration of how emotional and cognitive factors jointly shape advertising recall within the context of social-media marketing.

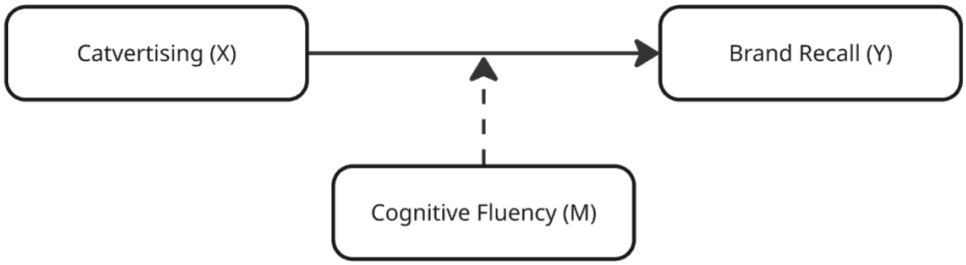

Figure 2.1. Conceptual Framework of the Research Model

3. Result and Discussion

The analysis consisted of two stages, beginning with the outer model to test validity and reliability, followed by the inner model to examine the structural relationships among variables.

Outer Model Evaluation

The evaluation of the outer model aims to assess the reliability and validity of the measurement constructs before testing the structural relationships. The results presented in Table 1 show that all constructs Catvertising (X), Cognitive Fluency (M), and Brand Recall (Y) meet the recommended thresholds for reliability and validity.

Table 3.1. Construct Reliability and Validity

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Cognitive Fluency (M)	0.753	0.856	0.664
Catvertising (X)	0.857	0.913	0.777
Brand Recall (Y)	0.861	0.915	0.783

Source: Data processing result, 2025

Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.753 to 0.861, all exceeding the minimum acceptable level of 0.70, which indicates internal consistency among the items within each construct. Specifically, the Catvertising construct recorded an alpha of 0.857, Cognitive Fluency 0.753, and Brand Recall 0.861. These results confirm that the indicators for each latent variable are reliable and measure a common underlying dimension.

Composite reliability (ρc) values are also satisfactory, with scores of 0.856 for Cognitive Fluency, 0.913 for Catvertising, and 0.915 for Brand Recall. All values are above the critical threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency and high reliability across the indicators. Similarly, the composite reliability coefficients based on ρA are within the ideal range (0.783–0.873), further confirming the robustness of the measurement model.

Convergent validity is assessed using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), which reflects the proportion of variance captured by the construct relative to measurement error. The AVE values for all constructs are above the 0.50 threshold, with Cognitive Fluency (0.664), Catvertising (0.777), and Brand Recall (0.783), demonstrating that more than half of the variance in each construct is explained by its respective indicators. These results validate that the indicators strongly represent the underlying latent constructs and that the measurement model achieves satisfactory convergent validity.

Overall, the results of the outer model analysis indicate that all constructs fulfill the statistical criteria for internal consistency reliability and convergent validity. This confirms that the measurement model is both stable and valid, allowing the study to proceed to the next stage of analysis the inner model evaluation, which tests the hypothesized relationships between Catvertising, Cognitive Fluency, and Brand Recall using the structural path coefficients.

Inner Model Evaluation

The inner model evaluation aims to test the hypothesized relationships among the latent variables after confirming that the measurement model met the reliability and validity criteria. This stage examines the direct and indirect effects of catvertising (X), cognitive fluency (M), and brand recall (Y) within the structural framework using the SEM-PLS approach.

Table 3.2. Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing Results

Relationship	**Original Sample (β)**	***t*-statistics**	***p*-value**	**Result**
Catvertising → Brand Recall	0.433	5.992	0.000	Significant
Cognitive Fluency → Brand Recall	0.259	2.801	0.005	Significant
Catvertising × Cognitive Fluency → Brand Recall	−0.027	0.333	0.739	Not Significant

Source: Data processing result, 2025

As shown in Table 2, two of the three tested relationships are statistically significant. The first result demonstrates that catvertising has a significant positive effect on brand recall (β = 0.433, t = 5.992, p = 0.000). This finding supports H1 and indicates that advertisements containing cat imagery enhance consumers' ability to remember brands. The emotional and visual appeal of catvertising captures attention and evokes positive affect, which facilitates deeper cognitive processing and memory encoding. This aligns with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), suggesting that emotional and visual cues can serve as effective peripheral routes to persuasion in low-involvement contexts such as social media advertising.

The second result reveals that cognitive fluency has a significant positive effect on brand recall (β = 0.259, t = 2.801, p = 0.005). This supports the idea that advertisements that are easier to process tend to be more memorable. When information is fluently processed, individuals perceive it as more familiar, credible, and pleasant, leading to stronger recall. This is consistent with Processing Fluency Theory (Reber et al., 2004b) which explains that cognitive ease enhances the likelihood of information being stored and retrieved from memory.

In contrast, the interaction effect between catvertising and cognitive fluency on brand recall is not significant (β = −0.027, t = 0.333, p = 0.739). This means that cognitive fluency does not moderate the relationship between catvertising and brand recall. The effect of cat imagery on brand recall remains stable regardless of the perceived fluency level of the advertisement. Thus, while both variables positively influence recall, their effects operate independently rather than interactively. This finding suggests that catvertising functions primarily through emotional engagement, whereas cognitive fluency contributes through a separate cognitive mechanism that facilitates information processing.

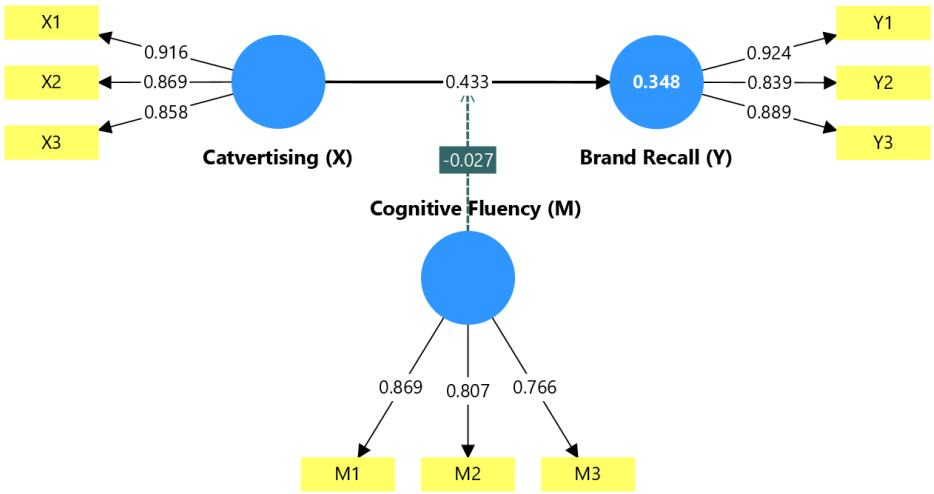

Figure 3.1. SEM-PLS Structural Model

As depicted in Figure 2, the R^2 value for brand recall is 0.348, indicating that approximately 34.8% of the variance in brand recall is explained by catvertising and cognitive fluency. This value reflects a moderate explanatory power according to the criteria proposed by (Hair et al., 2019). The figure also highlights that catvertising exerts the strongest direct influence on brand recall, confirming its central role in shaping consumer memory. Meanwhile, the nonsignificant interaction term suggests that the emotional impact of cat imagery is sufficiently powerful to influence recall without relying on the ease of processing.

Overall, these findings indicate that catvertising and cognitive fluency both play important yet distinct roles in enhancing brand recall in social-media advertising. Catvertising drives recall through emotional engagement and visual distinctiveness, whereas cognitive fluency strengthens recall by reducing mental effort during information processing. Together, they reveal that emotionally engaging and cognitively simple messages are key determinants of memorability in digital advertising environments.

Discussion

The findings of this study strengthen the argument that both emotional and cognitive mechanisms contribute to advertising effectiveness in social-media environments. Catvertising demonstrates the strongest direct impact on brand recall, indicating that emotionally salient and culturally familiar imagery can capture attention quickly and promote memory storage. This aligns with prior research showing that positive affect and visual expressiveness enhance the encoding of brand information, particularly in low-involvement media contexts (Hudson et al., 2016; Langner et al., 2015; Micu & Plummer, 2019). Consistent with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), catvertising appears to function as a highly salient peripheral cue that facilitates recall even when cognitive elaboration is minimal.

Cognitive fluency also demonstrates a significant direct effect on brand recall, supporting Processing Fluency Theory, which posits that stimuli perceived as easy to

process evoke positive judgments and are more likely to be remembered (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Reber et al., 2004b). This finding resonates with the broader literature showing that perceptual clarity and familiarity strengthen consumers' memory and evaluation of advertising content (Liu, 2020). In this study, respondents who perceived social-media advertising descriptions as fluent reported stronger brand recall, suggesting that processing ease remains an important predictor of memory performance.

However, the hypothesized moderating effect of cognitive fluency was not supported. Cognitive fluency did not significantly strengthen or weaken the impact of catvertising on brand recall. Several factors may explain this outcome. First, the emotional salience of catvertising may be sufficiently strong to drive memory formation on its own, leaving little room for perceptual factors to further enhance the relationship. Prior studies have suggested that emotionally charged stimuli often dominate cognitive influences in fast-paced digital environments (Kim & Kim, 2021), a pattern that appears consistent with the present findings.

Second, most prior work conceptualizes fluency as a *mediating* mechanism that shapes how individuals respond to stimuli (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Liu, 2020), rather than a moderating condition. When measured as a general perceptual tendency as in this study fluency may exert a stable direct influence rather than dynamically altering the strength of another predictor. This could account for the strong direct effect but non-significant interaction effect.

Third, the relatively young and digitally literate sample limits variability in perceived fluency. Prior literature suggests that fluency-based interactions are more likely to appear when there is higher heterogeneity in cognitive style, familiarity, or processing difficulty (Reber et al., 2004a; Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2020). Homogeneity in digital experience among respondents may have reduced the possibility of detecting interaction effects.

Taken together, these results suggest that emotional cues and perceptual ease function as *parallel but independent* drivers of brand recall. While both contribute to memory outcomes, catvertising exerts its influence primarily through affective resonance and cultural familiarity, whereas cognitive fluency enhances recall through processing simplicity. The absence of moderation provides insight into boundary conditions under which fluency does not amplify emotional cues a finding that refines existing theoretical assumptions about the joint effects of emotion and cognitive processing in digital persuasion.

From a managerial perspective, the results imply that advertisers can rely on emotionally distinctive imagery, such as cat-themed content, to improve brand recall even when the fluency of the overall advertisement cannot be optimized. At the same time, ensuring that advertisements remain simple, clear, and easy to process remains beneficial, as cognitive fluency independently enhances recall. The findings therefore support the integration of emotionally engaging visuals with perceptually fluent design principles, while suggesting that attempts to manipulate fluency specifically to strengthen the impact of catvertising may yield limited additional benefit.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how catvertising and cognitive fluency influence brand recall among active social-media users in Makassar City, Indonesia. The findings provide strong empirical evidence that catvertising has a direct and significant positive effect on brand recall, confirming that emotionally engaging visuals particularly those featuring cat imagery can effectively capture attention and strengthen memory encoding. Cognitive fluency was also found to positively influence brand recall, indicating that advertisements perceived as easy to understand and process tend to generate stronger memorability and more favorable consumer responses.

Importantly, the study also demonstrates that cognitive fluency does not significantly moderate the relationship between catvertising and brand recall. This suggests that while both emotional imagery and processing ease independently enhance recall, the strength of catvertising's effect does not depend on the level of fluency perceived by viewers. The non-significant moderation offers a theoretical contribution by identifying a boundary condition under which emotional cues operate independently of cognitive processing ease an insight that refines existing interpretations of the Elaboration Likelihood Model and Processing Fluency Theory in digital advertising contexts.

Theoretically, this study contributes to digital advertising psychology by integrating emotional and cognitive pathways within a unified empirical model. The findings highlight that emotional appeal (catvertising) and perceptual simplicity (fluency) represent parallel mechanisms that support brand memory. By showing that fluency strengthens recall directly but does not amplify the emotional effect of cat imagery, the study advances understanding of how affective cues and cognitive processing jointly but not interactively shape consumer memory in social-media environments.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that marketers should design advertisements that balance emotional resonance with cognitive clarity. The use of emotionally appealing and culturally familiar visual elements such as cats can help brands stand out and be remembered in crowded digital feeds. At the same time, ensuring that advertisements remain simple, clear, and easy to process enhances consumer recall regardless of the specific emotional content used.

Future research could expand this study by incorporating more diverse geographic samples, varying levels of digital literacy, or alternative emotional cues to determine whether the non-significant moderation persists across different audience segments and advertising formats. Such extensions would help clarify when and for whom emotional and cognitive factors interact to influence advertising effectiveness.

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