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**Empathy in Marketing:
A Customer-Oriented Approach based on Authenticity**

Ana TODOROVA^{1*}, Svilena RUSKOVA²

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Abstract

Data are undeniably crucial to success in the digital economy and modern marketing landscape, strongly influenced by artificial intelligence apps. With the help of the data, specialists derive regularities, define target audiences, and increase the effectiveness of their strategies and activities. Last but not least, they allow merchants to provide their customers with more personalised experiences. However, while data have become indispensable, it is not enough to build loyalty and an authentic connection with consumers. Current research shows that in the technology-dominated world, understanding consumers' emotions, needs, and desires is increasingly essential for building strong relationships and driving loyalty. That brings to the fore the need for a customer-centric approach based on empathy and authenticity. The paper examines the role of empathy in marketing by analysing Bulgarian marketing campaigns. The authors seek an answer to the question of to what extent empathy is part of the strategies of Bulgarian marketing specialists and marketing service agencies. The methodology used includes content analysis and interviews with marketing professionals. The study shows that Bulgarian marketing campaigns that successfully used empathy focused on the authenticity and emotionality of their messages. There is also an intertwining of essentially different concepts, such as marketing with empathy and social marketing. The results clearly demonstrate the power of empathy in building the marketing strategy of the respective brand. They also allow for a more complete definition of the marketing approach with empathy and values. Therefore, the research enriches the existing theory and practice in the field of marketing and management.

Keywords: empathy, marketing, loyalty, marketing strategy.

JEL Classification: M31, M37.

¹ University of Ruse Angel Kanchev, Ruse, Bulgaria, attodorova@uni-ruse.bg.

* Corresponding author.

² University of Ruse Angel Kanchev, Ruse, Bulgaria, sruskova@uni-ruse.bg.

1. Introduction

Empathy, the human capacity to understand and resonate with the emotions of others, has been a well-researched area of study in various fields for a considerable amount of time (Kostadinova & Antonova, 2018). Moreover, in marketing, empathy is nothing new. Memorable brand campaigns touch the consumer's heart, confirming the rule that people buy on emotions (Lee, 2016). The latter is so influential in the process of selection and purchase decisions that consumers often overlook key facts for them. At the same time, the sincerity and courage on the part of companies to listen to their customers are essential (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). This requires a change in thinking and adaptation to the market in all aspects (Pedersen, 2021).

On the other hand, in today's fast-paced business landscape, the search for profitable marketing strategies is becoming increasingly important. The rise of digital technologies and artificial intelligence, on the one hand, and evolving consumer behaviour and generational shifts, on the other, are rendering traditional marketing strategies obsolete and ineffective (Liu-Thompkins et al., 2022). The dynamics of the business environment, the fight against competition, and the search for ways to satisfy the over-consumerism of society have increased the importance of information. However, even though data has become indispensable, is it enough to build an authentic connection between a brand and its consumers? In fact, digitisation and information arrays have not changed the essence of marketing, but have provided it with new ways to function (Ingwer, 2012).

Research shows that no matter what steps they go through in the buying process, customers are not fully aware of exactly how they make their final decision. It turns out that 90% of decisions happen at a subconscious level – emotion is the leading one, and then consumers try to justify it with logic (Rolls, 2014). That is, the more a company understands the emotional side of its consumers' lives, the more precisely it communicates its messages and the value it can offer, and the more effectively it reaches its target audiences (Ingwer, 2012). The most sophisticated firms make emotional connections part of a broad strategy that includes every function in the value chain – from product development and marketing to sales and service (Rust, 2020).

The present study seeks an answer to two main research questions – Do Bulgarian marketing specialists apply empathy in their practice, and can it be claimed that in this way, they increase the effectiveness of marketing campaigns? For this purpose, short interviews with marketing specialists were conducted, and a specific question from the survey was used for the study. The paper has the following structure: 1) A review of the scientific literature in the field of the researched topic was carried out; 2) The main research questions are asked; 3) The methodology of the research is built; 4) The results were analysed; 5) Relevant conclusions are formulated.

2. Problem Statement

The impact of information technology on company-customer relationships is complex, bringing both benefits and risks (Lee, 2016). While technology facilitates

interaction and can optimise processes, it also hides a trap. Their overuse, motivated by “innovation” focused on cost reduction, can lead to alienation and a lack of empathy (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011).

Human connection is required to provide proper customer care. Managers and front-line employees must be able to empathically listen to customers' needs (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011). Instead of relying on technologies focused only on automation and optimisation, companies need to invest in building teams capable of empathy and emotional intelligence (Liu-Thompkins et al., 2022). A lack of human touch can lead to a lack of transparency, ineffective service, and growing customer frustration. Gorry and Westbrook (2011) believe that the right combination of technological innovation and personalised treatment is necessary to achieve a long-lasting and successful business-customer relationship.

In turn, Kim and Sullivan (2019) opine that effective marketing strategies are critical to business growth, customer acquisition, and building brand awareness. According to the scholars, companies should define marketing strategies that are in line with their business objectives and effectively reach their target market. Without challenging the formulated statement, Prasetyoh and Purnamasarit (2023) add that it is an empathy-based marketing communication that could both promote and serve to achieve common interests. Through this method, the goal is to build a relationship between stakeholders and instil brand loyalty.

Marketing is the act of individuals and groups focusing on fulfilling the desires of others in a social process (Rolls, 2014). Therefore, empathy, which is the capability to comprehend another individual's perspective, has been recognised as a longstanding foundation of marketing. Since it was established, the field has highlighted the significance of comprehending and empathising with the customer perspective in business (Pedersen, 2021). While empathy-based marketing is a concept with a long history, for most brands, building an emotional connection with consumers and partners is more guesswork than science. In this sense, it is highly underestimated and neglected (Rust, 2020).

At the same time, the rise of information and communication technology has also led to exponential growth in data-driven marketing. Its primary application is to discover patterns, build target audiences, measure and improve marketing campaigns, and provide personalised experiences for users (Liu-Thompkins et al., 2022). In line with global technological transformations, the values and needs of consumers have also fundamentally changed. Therefore, it is imperative that marketers, if they wish to be successful, adapt to the new reality and find new ways to connect with their customers (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). Data alone are not enough.

Rust (2020) argues that when companies connect with customers' emotions, the payoff can be huge. The scientists give an example of a large banking institution providing credit cards for a specific generation of consumers. The campaign, which aims to inspire an emotional connection, increases card usage among the segment by 70% and new account growth by 40%. Therefore, in order to understand and attract their customers, brands must resonate with them emotionally, i.e., they must apply a customer-centric marketing approach based on empathy (Ingwer, 2012).

What has been said so far confirms that in empathic marketing, a central place is given for communicating with customers, listening to their thoughts and feelings, observing how they use the particular product, and integrating everything described (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). A staggering 65% of B2B customers are overwhelmed by excessive messages from businesses, deeming most of them irrelevant, according to a Forrester report (Route, n.d.). According to Kim and Sullivan (2019), brands earn 52% more from emotionally engaged customers than just satisfied ones. Meanwhile, a MarketingWeek article cited by Route (n.d.) states that only 30% of marketers and advertisers demonstrate a high level of empathy in their marketing communications. The main reason is that brand empathy requires a conscious and long-term effort to engage with customers at every level of interaction: online, offline, at checkout, and even after the purchase process is finalised.

In the dynamic marketing space, technology, social media, video, and content are emerging as constant factors for success. These fundamental tools have proven their resilience over the years, and their influence is only growing stronger. According to Liu-Thompkins et al. (2022), marketers need to closely monitor the evolution of artificial intelligence, which could transform the marketing landscape. Still, it should be remembered that they are only tools and, as such, serve to implement and realise a specific approach.

The future of marketing will be increasingly linked to the automation of advertising algorithms, extensive use of artificial intelligence, technologies such as voice messages and virtual reality, and content created by both influencers and users themselves (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). However, marketing will continue to try to meet the ever-increasing demands of consumers. Therefore, in addition to data and different instruments, a tremendous amount of empathy is needed to understand the specific needs of customers and to communicate the solutions that companies offer correctly (Liu-Thompkins et al., 2022).

3. Research Questions

Based on the literature review and applied examples of the effectiveness of empathy-based marketing, the authors of the study formulate the following research questions:

RQ1: *Do Bulgarian marketers apply empathy in their marketing strategies?*

RQ2: *Do the examples applied by Bulgarian marketing practice confirm the effectiveness of empathy-based marketing?*

4. Research Methods

The research methodology is divided into two stages. The *first stage* includes interviews with representatives of the marketing community in Bulgaria. The sample is composed of full and associate members of three of the most significant associations in Bulgaria, uniting companies and specialists in marketing, advertising, communication, and public relations. These are the Bulgarian Association of Communication Agencies, Digital Outdoor Advertising Association and IAB

BULGARIA, with respectively 63, 78 and 124 full or associate members as of April 1st, 2022. Subsequently, the total number of 265 individuals and legal entities was reduced to 212 after excluding the members who were repeat members in the different associations. The final selection of respondents was made on the basis of one or more of the following criteria: 1) *for marketing specialists* – declared free profession or professional position with a company in the field of marketing, advertising, brand management, etc., from the same field of activity; 2) *for representatives of marketing agencies*: active profiles on social networks; maintained corporate site; belonging to one or more associations related to the subject of activity;

The purpose of the applied criteria is to include only people with professional experience in the field of research. Thus, the conclusive group of respondents was formed of 150 individuals and companies actively engaged in marketing, advertising, and communications. The interviews were conducted as an anonymous online survey from April 12 to April 30, 2022. For this purpose, a Google form was used, distributed through personal e-mail messages or messages on social networks. For this study, one of the seven questions included in the formal survey was addressed: *Would you give an example of this skill [showing empathy] in your work?* The question seeks a direct answer as to what meaning the Bulgarian marketing specialists attach to the concept of empathy and whether they associate it with their professional commitments.

The *second stage* involves the analysis of media posts and video content to identify actual campaigns, applying the principles of empathy-based marketing. Based on the literature review for the analysis, specific criteria were developed to embody these principles: 1) captivating storytelling; 2) emotional messages; 3) stated values; 4) authenticity;

5. Findings

Eighty-four people, or 59% of those invited to participate ($N=150$), responded to the survey. Although the questionnaire was distributed by personal invitation to specific individuals, the responses remained anonymous. Respondents were asked to share their first names or the name of the company they work for. The majority – 76 (90.5%) chose to remain anonymous.

Georgi Malchev (*Explora* agency), participant in the research, says that when it comes to marketing, it is most important to activate the hormone of happiness and good mood in the audience. That can happen through quality content marketing, but also through an undeniable display of empathy towards customers and their needs. Another respondent linked empathic marketing to building the right customer journey. Another respondent believes that empathy helps them better understand the target audience and also guides their communication with customers. This boosts the effectiveness of all campaigns they execute for the company.

The majority of participants linked empathy to stepping into their customers' shoes and experiencing what customers experience. The marketer's words emphasise the importance of emotions and metrics in marketing, adding to the

previous statement. Moreover, empathy is needed to understand emotions. Of the 84 comments received:

- 1 (1.2%) person gave a direct example of empathy in marketing, pointing to the world-famous advertisement of the Dove brand – *Real Beauty Sketches*;
- 1 (1.2%) respondent argued that we should not focus only on empathy;
- 3 (3.6%) people believe that empathy and emotions have no place in marketing;
- 7 (8.3%) respondents associate empathy in marketing with participation in a social cause or the implementation of social marketing;
- 20 (23.8%) associate empathy primarily with relationships within their teams and do not give examples of how they associate it with their customers;
- 60 (71.4%) are of the opinion that empathic marketing is: a) knowing their customers and communicating with them emotionally, not aggressively; b) building a long-term relationship at the expense of short-term profit; c) being helpful beyond the agreed upon; d) the main ingredient of personalisation – an increasingly imperative trend in digital marketing; e) creating emotional content and compelling storytelling.

From the summary of opinions, it is clear that Bulgarian digital marketers understand the essence of empathy-based marketing. At the same time, the Dove campaign mentioned in the interviews is a good starting point for searching for similar marketing campaigns in Bulgaria as well. *Dove Real Beauty Sketches* encourages people to rediscover themselves and appreciate their uniqueness. It is one of the most viewed ads online and has won a number of awards. The company also stated that the campaign significantly improved organic advertising and word-of-mouth sharing (Dove, 2023).

From the point of view of the campaign selection criteria set out in the Methodology, *Dove Real Beauty Sketches* fully meets the principles of empathic marketing: 1) In an inspiring way, the brand retells a significant problem – excessive self-criticism of women; 2) The messages are emotional and in no way aggressive – the advertising campaign never tells its customers “Buy a Dove product, and you will be beautiful”. Quite the opposite – the message is “You are beautiful the way you are.” 3) The principal value of the brand is perfectly communicated – “Be natural, be yourself, love yourself.” 4) For many years, Dove has communicated the same values. In this respect, the authenticity of the brand finds its natural presence in the *Real Beauty Sketches* campaign. An image built over many years that consumers recognise, appreciate, and reward with their loyalty.

In the context of the Bulgarian marketing reality, such super-fascinating examples are difficult to find. However, despite this, there are plenty of brands that purposefully apply the empathetic marketing approach. In its essence, as explained earlier, it requires authenticity and emotionality and not necessarily significant investments. That is why it is also among the most affordable marketing techniques. Content analysis of online media posts and video content identified three campaigns that met the set criteria. These are *Super Rustic Offer* of Gurmenitsa Bulgaria, *IKEA Homes* of IKEA Bulgaria and *Milk for the New Generation* of Olympus Foods Bulgaria.

The messages of the Bulgarian brand Gurmenitsa and their advertising campaign *Super Rustic Offer* are aimed at everyone who grew up in the village with their grandparents. The brand evokes memories of a carefree childhood shared with friends and typical Bulgarian food – *lyutenitsa*. The motto of the campaign is “*Rustic is delicious. It is so delicious that your face shows what you had for breakfast. Sometimes on the T-shirt too.*” (Rostar, n.d.). *Super Rustic* is an extremely well-chosen slogan that expresses the quality born from the authentic preparation of *lyutenitsa* and reverses the logic of a famous Bulgarian expression with a negative connotation: *super rustic = unpleasant behaviour*. In this case, the expression aims to show that there is nothing wrong with rural; on the contrary – it is something that the user should return to and not forget. That has been the message of the brand since its inception, and Gurmenitsa adheres to it, striving to create a bridge between the city and the village (Gurmenitsa, n.d.). The campaign tells about the taste of real food without additives and with actual Bulgarian products. *Super Rustic* achieved significant popularity with a series of videos in which selected volunteers explained, “How do you eat a Lutenica slice properly?” The brand's storytelling is flawless and unadulterated, implements the natural emotions and words of its volunteers, and stabs the consumer in the heart with the memory of the carefree summers in the countryside. *No data are available on campaign performance.*

The content marketing of IKEA Bulgaria – *IKEA Homes* also impresses with its empathic content (IKEA, n.d.). The campaign is closely focused on storytelling and tells the story of different families and their transformed homes in a series of blog posts. In every single story, problems are touched upon that are typical for Bulgarians and probably for all families – insufficient home space, low budgets, and clutter. At the same time, the campaign communicates the values of the IKEA brand – sharing, togetherness, quality of life and family spirit, which inevitably attract the audience and make the consumer dream of being part of *IKEA Homes*. *No data are available on campaign performance.*

The advertising clip of the Olympus Foods Bulgaria (n.d.) brand – *Milk for the New Generation* also relies on solid emotions and messages. At the centre are the children and their future. The storytelling describes in some seconds different negative or positive situations from the everyday life of the new generation. What is specific about this marketing campaign is the perfect collaboration between empathy-based marketing and social marketing as a concept. Social marketing seeks to influence social behaviour, not for the benefit of the marketer, but to benefit the target audience and society as a whole (Andreasen & Kotler, 2003). With its *Milk for the New Generation* campaign, Olympus aims not only to shed light on significant issues such as school aggression, the problems of disadvantaged children, and environmental pollution but also to motivate behaviour in adolescents that opposes injustice and supports others. The message is emotional and highly empathetic, and there is hardly a child or adult who does not associate with the images of the video. *No data are available on campaign performance.*

The given examples show that Bulgarian marketing specialists apply empathetic marketing in their campaigns. All three analysed marketing campaigns were

implemented by different marketing agencies, i.e., there are no isolated cases from the practice of one specialist or agency. In addition, a significant proportion of survey respondents recognise the empathetic marketing approach. That gives a positive answer to RQ1: *Do Bulgarian marketing specialists apply empathy in their marketing strategies?*

At the same time, information on the effectiveness of the messages in the specific analysed campaigns is not available in the free online space, which is why it is not included in the analysis. Traditionally, these are metrics that the respective brands or marketing agencies rarely disclose, although such a practice would only benefit the creators of this type of content. Some of the attached examples have been highly rated at industry competitions, which in itself hints at their high efficiency. However, such a correlation is not sufficient for a general conclusion. Therefore, it is not possible to answer RQ2 – *Do the examples applied from the Bulgarian marketing practice confirm the effectiveness of marketing based on empathy?*

Simultaneously, it should not be forgotten that effectiveness does not necessarily have only a material dimension. Even though it can be difficult to measure at times, efficiency can be defined as higher levels of customer loyalty and engagement. Whether they result in a direct sale or not, it is certain that similar marketing campaigns, such as the ones provided, enhance the brand's visibility and strengthen the impact of the well-established marketing strategy of word-of-mouth marketing. In summary, the lack of quantitative data does not automatically mean that empathy in marketing is ineffective. However, as the literature review made clear, marketing deals not only with emotions but also with data. Therefore, in order to be even more effective, authentic and user-oriented, it is recommended that marketing professionals generate and share more quantitative data in this direction.

5.1 Limitations of the Study

A significant limitation of the proposed study is subjectivity. Despite the formulated criteria for choosing marketing campaigns, the emotional aspect, i.e., the emotional perceptions of the study authors, also determines the choice of examples.

The second limitation is related to the lack of information regarding the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. The country's practice shows that brands rarely share this information. This complexity hinders the analysis and fails to clarify if empathic marketing is successful or merely emotional.

5.2 Applicability and Future Research

Although they emphasise the need to discuss the main aspects and advantages of empathic marketing and its effectiveness more, the study's results also demonstrate the power of empathy in building the respective brand's marketing strategy. They also allow a more complete definition of the marketing approach with empathy. Therefore, the study enriches the existing theory and practice in the fields of marketing and management.

In addition, Bulgarian marketers demonstrate an understanding of the essence of empathy in marketing, with a percentage of them making an analogy between empathic and social marketing. Some of the applied marketing campaigns meet the definition of social marketing, on the one hand, and empathic marketing, on the other. That motivates further questions about their 1) *Hypothetical sameness* – are we talking about the same concept with two names, and is every empathy-based marketing campaign also social marketing after all? 2) *Potential interdependence* – is social marketing possible without empathy? These are questions to which the authors will seek answers in their future developments.

6. Conclusions

Because of the growing emphasis on digitisation and automation, both businesses in general and marketing specifically appear to be slowly losing their empathetic core. The main objective of prioritising the client's well-being has been overshadowed by the focus on maximising profits regardless of consequences. Is this not a signal that such actions would lead to an outflow of customers but, above all, to the inability of companies to gain and retain consumer loyalty? Thanks to the new digital technologies, every company can afford to study the emotional triggers of its customers and, through additional experiments, develop successful strategies for emotional and engaging marketing.

The Bulgarian study demonstrates that local marketers perceive empathic marketing as an approach based on building an emotional connection with customers. The research also highlights that, according to brands, empathic marketing reflects the emotional perspective of consumers. Therefore, empathy in sales is associated with empathising with the emotions and expectations of customers, not investors and salespeople.

In conclusion, the authors of the current study seek to emphasise the fact that people fundamentally buy from people they trust and feel emotionally close to. It is impossible to develop emotional marketing campaigns aimed only at manipulating customers. In marketing, empathy is equal to being genuine and authentic. Even though brands aim to sell products and services and make money, they must alter their approach to guiding consumers through the marketing funnel. It needs to be more captivating, focused on the customer, and emotional – essentially, through empathetic marketing.

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