Empathy and Identification as an Online Technology of Blogger's Communication in Digital Marketing

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Abstract This article is about innovative technology of digital marketing, which allows communicating successfully with producers of goods with consumers at the stage of making a purchasing decision in order to increase sales of goods and services. The specifics of the purchasing decision-making process in the online environment at all its stages are described, the theoretical justification for the inclusion in the digital purchasing decision-making process of a blogger purposefully using the socio-psychological mechanisms of empathy and identification, is described. The result of it is an additional stimulating effect on the consumer when he became acquainted with a particular product. The results of the author's empirical study proving the effect of these mechanisms in the process of making a purchasing decision are presented. It's described that, provided to the subject to the actualization of the buyer's conscious needs, the blogger creates the unconscious needs of the recipients that affect the consumer's interest in the product, and, as a result, the level of willingness to purchase goods increases. At the same time, the corresponding emotion of the blogger is transmitted to the potential consumer, which leads to an increase in the likelihood of buying a product. The scientific novelty of this technology lies in the fact that for the first time it has been theoretically described and practically proved the feasibility of using socio-psychological mechanisms at certain stages of the decision to purchase in digital marketing. It's empirically proven for the first time that the targeted use by a blogger, a reference person, of the totality of the socio-psychological mechanisms of empathy and identification at the time of contact with a potential buyer increases the buyer's willingness to purchase the appropriate product. This is the substantial essence of this online digital marketing technology,

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which allows to increase sales in the future by influencing the consumer of a reference personality, acting as a symbolic intermediary between manufacturers of goods and representatives of the target audience in the process of making a purchasing decision. The article provides a theoretical justification for the action of this online marketing technology empirically proves the relationship between the using of this technology and the level of willingness of a potential consumer to make a purchase, gives practical recommendations to manufacturers of goods to increase sales.

1 Introduction

In the era of global digitalization of all economic sectors, the issue of successful online communication between manufacturers and consumers has become particularly important, since the effectiveness of direct marketing declines and the market dictates the need to develop innovative technologies that will help boost sales via online communications. One of the most future-oriented online technologies that will make the online communication with the customer more efficient, and thus raise sales, is communication with representatives of the target audience through a blogger as a symbolic intermediary between manufacturers and consumers who intentionally uses a combination of social and psychological techniques such as empathy and identification in making a purchase decision.

Digital marketing pays special attention to purchase decision-making. Blackwell R. D., Angel D., Miniard P., Bykova M. K. and Azoev G. L. theoretically developed and gave science-based underpinning of purchase decision-making. And nowadays, bloggers have a major impact on the success of the purchase decision-making. For instance, according to a study conducted by Admitad analysts, the amount of online sales through bloggers and "opinion leaders" for the first half of 2019 made up 60 billion, and specifically for this period increased by 21% in social networks. Besides, over half of purchases were made via social network VKontakte, where sales soared by 53% [1]. It is this fact that justifies the choice of a communication channel with the target audience when the authors conducted an empirical study.

Let us describe the purchase decision-making on the Internet with the participation of the blogger as a symbolic intermediary between the manufacturer of the goods and the customer. Thus, at the first stage of decision-making, the consumer recognizes the need for something under the impact of need-activating factors that give impetus to its occurrence [2]. Usually, these factors are age, sex, and situation. Next, the consumer starts searching for information necessary for making a decision about a product or service. There are two types of searches (internal and external). The internal search involves an analysis of previous experience and knowledge about the

product, ease of use, quality and feelings after use. An external search consists in the assessment of the information available in the mass media, to which a blogger with a vast number of subscribers belong to, as well as advice and recommendations from friends and acquaintances, including social networks and messengers. As a rule, the consumer uses external search if he does not have sufficient personal experience (the need arose for the first time) or wants to try something new. The third step in the purchase decision-making is the evaluation and choice of options before the purchase. At this stage, a wide range of goods, the availability of full information about them on the website or in the blog, the frequency of purchase (spontaneous or regular), and individual selection criteria of the consumer are critical. This stage is followed by online purchase, therefore the secure and convenient payment, as well as home delivery or feedback option, are essential. Then goes the stage of consumption, where the main factors are ease of use, storage and lack of side effects.

At this stage, during the utilization of goods the consumer can get a positive experience, negative experience or dissatisfaction. A positive experience is getting positive feelings from the purchase due to product properties such as high efficiency, good quality, ease of use, etc.

Dissatisfaction is getting negative experience of consumption resulting in the avoidance of purchases (side effects, poor quality of the product or its low performance, complicated use, etc.) Negative experience is trying not to find out in the state of dissatisfaction through which the person also gains positive experience from the purchase. The final stage of the purchase decision-making is the evaluation of the product's use by the consumer. If the evaluation is satisfactory, then the process is cyclical at the fourth stage (the purchase), i.e. factors such as problem awareness, information search, and evaluation of options before the purchase are skipped. If the evaluation is unsatisfactory, then the purchase decision-making will restart from the first stage in the event of sufficient the number of need-activating factors [3].

Thus, the blogger enters into online communication with a potential consumer through publication of video, audio and photo content at the second, third and fourth stages of the purchase decision-making. However, the social phenomenon of blogging is not yet scientifically based.

Despite that blogging has been explored since the end of the nineteenth century and various types of communication efficiency in the blogosphere, as well as their criteria, have already been identified, this topic is challenging. The progressive development of modern technologies evokes the emergence of new channels and types of communication between bloggers and subscribers, and, consequently, new technologies for online interaction.

Although the blog dates back to the first half of the 90s, initially it was textual, like an online diary. The main difference of blogs from the traditional diary was focus on a wide audience and publication in a social network. Blogs of that period are characterized by low interactivity, as they allowed communicate with the audience only through text comments. Initially, the term "blog" meant "a website where someone writes about their beliefs, activities, and experiences" [4]. But technologies for communication with consumers of goods have drastically changed, and only textual content has turned out to be not enough for productive interaction. Therefore,

since 2011, bloggers have started to add video content, which made mainstream platforms like LiveJournal, Blogger, etc. unpopular. From that time, blogs have become much different from the first text versions and allowed a blogger to communicate with the audience not only via text messages but also through photo, audio, and video content. The above transformations raised the popularity of blogs and allowed bloggers to benefit from them by advertising [5].

Today blogging is a large-scale phenomenon that embraces almost all areas of people's lives, which makes it an exclusive tool for online sales and an integral part of digital marketing, influencer marketing. Modern bloggers are treated as mass media. They are opinion leaders for their subscribers who earn millions through advertising. According to Forbes magazine, the most successful Russian bloggers in 2019 were Kseniya Sobchak, Nastya Ivleeva and Yuriy Dud' with 1, 0.9 and 1.4 million dollars respectively [6].

One of the essential criteria for bloggers' performance is the amount of sales made by their recommendation. In addition to sales criteria, there are usually the number of subscribers, view reach and the number of targeted clicks [7]. For high sales figures, the blogger should build communication in a way that he/she could persuade the consumer to make a decision on the purchase of a product or service (the fifth stage of the purchase decision-making). If the content published by the blogger meets the interests of the potential consumer, then in this situation it can be referred to the need-activating factors. Further, at the stages of information search and evaluation of options before the purchase, the completeness of information on the product provided by the blogger, as well as the blogger's reference rate and a common emotional space between the blogger and the potential buyer is in priority. Therefore, we deem it expedient to describe the action of a qualitatively new technology of online communication between a blogger and a subscriber based on a combination of socio-psychological mechanisms of empathy and identification. Besides, it should be noted that the performance of this technology is contingent on the blogger's reference for subscribers. In our understanding, the blogger's reference is a high consistency (almost complete identification) between the interests, opinions, and values of the blogger and the target audience; some kind of quality of the subscriber existing in his mind and reflecting the level of identification of his own judgments, rules, values and opinions with attitudes, opinions, and estimates of the blogger. That is, the higher the consistency of opinions, the higher the reference of the influencer and user of the content. Thus, we figuratively treat a blogger-reference person as a check-point for a subscriber-customer when developing a model of his behavior in making a purchase decision.

In addition, the socio-psychological mechanism for identification of the user with the influencer comes into action only if the blogger is a reference person in communication with the subscriber-customer since the subscription allows talking about the consistency of opinions, estimates, judgments, attitudes, behavior patterns of the user of the social network and the person he subscribed. G. Feltser supposes it's the essence of the identification mechanism [8]. The subscriber thinks something like this: a person with whom I agree and completely trust, bought the product I need, which means I will buy exactly the same product without an additional check.

That is, identification is one of the vital socio-psychological mechanisms, and on the Internet too. During online communication, one person (subscriber) subconsciously assimilates himself with another (blogger). As A. Freud described, the subject of identification unconsciously identifies oneself with an object [9], namely the subscriber with the influencer. Thus, thanks to the socio-psychological mechanism of online identification, a subject possesses the desired object in symbolic terms and keeps the emotions.

Next, let's address the effect of the empathy mechanism. Empathy is understood as comprehension of an emotional state, penetration into feelings of the person [10]. Therefore, in this article under the term "empathize" we mean a person's ability to perceive emotional states, i.e. show empathy. E. A. Ichalovskaya in her work says that the initial form of empathy development is emotional invasion, which then turns into emotional identification, that is, treating the feelings of the empathy object as your own [11]. Then the subscriber perceives private open variables of the empathy object (blogger) such as emoji, stickers, gif-animations, memes, emoticons, punctuation, way and style of communication.

The third stage is the interpretation of external variables such as the time factor, the task factor, the individual features of the communicator and the recipient [12]. The communicator here should be a blogger (reference person), and recipients—representatives of his target audience (subscribers).

To assess the action of the socio-psychological mechanisms of empathy and identification, we conducted an empirical study.

2 Background and Methodology

In order to determine the effect of the socio-psychological mechanisms of empathy and identification, we conducted an empirical study.

The theoretical and methodological basis for this empirical study was the work of R. D. Blackwell, D. Angel, Miniard P., Bykova M. K., Azoeva G. L., Dovzhika V. N., Kurasova O. V., Ichalovskaya E. A.

The purpose of the study is to prove that a combination of empathy and identification mechanisms is a useful digital marketing technology for online communication between bloggers and customers in digital marketing in the process of making a purchasing decision, which allows increasing sales.

At the same time, we assume that the use of a set of socio-psychological mechanisms of empathy and identification in a digital environment by a blogger as a reference person who purposefully uses these mechanisms at the time of contact with a potential buyer increases his willingness to purchase the appropriate product.

The theoretical methods (analysis, generalization, and synthesis) are aimed at solving the problem of the study.

In the course of the study, we have employed the methods of collecting primary empirical information such as a critical analysis of academic literature, a secondary analysis of documents, questionnaires, and an online survey.

In the questionnaire, we included a list of the most successful Russian bloggers for 2019 according to the rating of Forbes magazine: Yuri Dud, Nastya Ivleeva, Ksenia Sobchak and others [6].

For the analysis of primary empirical information, we have used the methods of generalization, comparison, logical and correlation analysis.

Statistical processing of data attained during the study has been made using SPSS 17.0 program for Windows.

The scientific novelty of this technology lies in the fact that for the first time the possibilities of using socio-psychological mechanisms at certain stages of the decision to purchase in digital marketing are described. This online digital marketing technology makes it possible to increase sales in the long term by influencing the consumer of a reference personality acting as a symbolic intermediary between producers of goods and representatives of the target audience in the process of making a purchasing decision. The results of the author's empirical study proving the effect of these mechanisms in the process of making a purchasing decision are presented.

For the first time it is described that, subject to the actualization of the buyer's conscious needs, the blogger creates the unconscious needs of the recipients that affect the consumer's interest in the product, and as a result, the level of willingness to purchase goods increases. At the same time, the corresponding emotion of the blogger (for example, the joy of "What a cool product") is transmitted to the potential consumer and the same emotions appear in his mind at that moment in time (transfer of emotion from the blogger to the recipient), and then the identification mechanism is activated at the next level (identification) with the influencer ("I also want to own such a cool product!"), which serves as a serious incentive to fulfill the need that has arisen, and leads to an increase in the likelihood of buying a product.

The practical significance of the results of the empirical study lies in the fact that the conclusions and suggestions contained therein are aimed directly at improving the effectiveness of online digital marketing technologies and can be used in the practical activities of digital marketing specialists and bloggers to increaseт their sales.

3   Results

At the first stage of the study, for identification of factors affecting the empathy of one person to another, we developed a special methodology and surveyed representatives of the target audience with 216 Internet users of 16–35 years old. The sample is random since any network user can participate in an online survey.

After analysis of the findings of the empirical study, we revealed that the main factors affecting the communication are "availability of free time" (72.2% of respondents), "individual features of the communicator" (67.6%) and "focus on activities" (27.3%) (see Fig. 1). Bearing in mind the above figures we can conclude that consistency between the individual features of the respondent and the communicator is an integral part of online communication because it means the creation of common
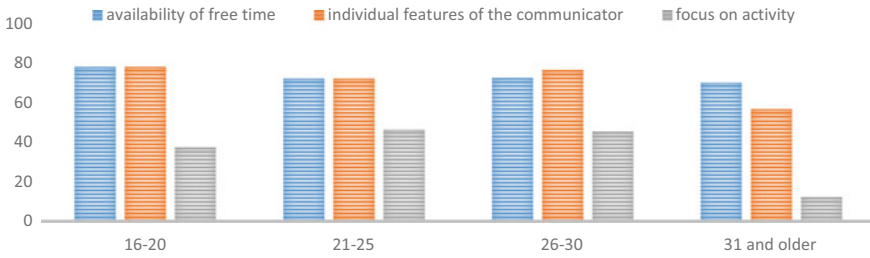
Fig. 1 Factors affecting the empathy mechanism in the communication

emotional space between the parties, and, therefore lay the groundwork for the empathy mechanism.

It is interesting that there is a strong statistically significant relationship (0.1) between the variables "age" and "focus on activity" (Pearson correlation 0.269). Only 37.5% of respondents of 16–20 years old have chosen the factor "focus on activity" as the main one. But as for the 21–25 age group, this factor was picked by 46.5% of respondents, among 26–30 age group—by 31% of respondents, and over 31 years old—by 12%. It is not surprising, because people of over 31 years old belong to generation X, and 16–30-year-old respondents—generation Y. According to the theory of generations, Y is the generation of social networks.

Since the surrounding has changed rather quickly, they are full of energy, easy-adaptable, can perform a vast amount of work in a short time, and, therefore, have a stronger focus on current activities [13].

There is a statistically significant relationship (0.1) (Pearson correlation −0.253) between the variables "free time" and "individual features of the communicators", which indicates that if the respondent chooses "availability of free time, he will not deem important the "individual features of the communicators" and vice versa.

All the above said leads to the conclusion that empathy mechanism cannot be used in online communication without "availability of free time", consistency between "individual features" and "focus on activities" (for over 20-year-old people). These factors lay conditions for common emotional space and after that people can pass to the stages of empathy.

In the second stage of our empirical research, we put the task to show the action of the socio-psychological mechanisms of empathy and identification. We also developed a questionnaire with regard to the specifics of the task.

A sample of the study are consumers of 18–34 years old, actively using digital marketing technologies and having an account on social networks. The total sample size made up 205 respondents.

To prove the action of the socio-psychological mechanism of empathy, we explored the key stages such as joining the object of empathy and decentration of the subject of empathy when the object is a blogger. At these stages, there is a common emotional space of the blogger with representatives of the target audience, i.e. the

blogger's feelings and emotions are shared by the audience. And this situation gives rise to an emotional relationship between the blogger and the audience.

According to the findings of the second stage, the most popular social networks and video hosting sites today by the criterion of use are Vk (Vkontakte), Instagram, YouTube (99, 93.7, and 93.2% respectively). Next, follow TikTok and Facebook (29.3 and 22.4% of respondents). However, accounts in Vk (Vkontakte), Instagram, YouTube are kept by 98.5, 93.7, and 83.2% of respondents respectively. Along with that, 43.9 and 26.3% of respondents have TikTok and Facebook. In total, 89.3% of respondents subscribed to bloggers on social networks and video hosting sites.

The most interesting blog topics for respondents are travel (63.9%), beauty (51.2%), fashion (47.8%). The least popular topic is children (13.7%) due to the young age of the respondents.

According to the results attained in the online survey, Yuri Dud' is the most popular blogger. He is well-known to 92.2% of respondents. Nastya Ivleeva and Ksenia Sobchak hold the second and third places (91.7 and 84.9% respectively). The least popular blogger is Wylsacom (Valentin Petukhov). Only 51.1% of respondents know him (see Fig. 2).

The blogger should have the features to make a respondent subscribe to his account, such as interesting content, awareness of the topic, close emotional relations, as well as common interests and values. The answer "interesting content" has been chosen as a key condition for need activation in making a purchase decision. Through activation of conscious needs, the blogger evokes the unconscious needs of the recipients and respectively the interest in purchase. In a perfect scenario, this interest should be satisfied with the help of the information provided by the blogger in the decision-making on the purchase of goods. The emotion of the individual arising at the moment signals that the actions taken for satisfaction of the need correspond to the need itself.

The second popular answer is "awareness of the topic" (72%). One of the important blogger's features in the identification is competence, expertise and no intention to manipulate the audience (reliability). In identification, the individual accepts influence as a means of consolidation of his inner values.
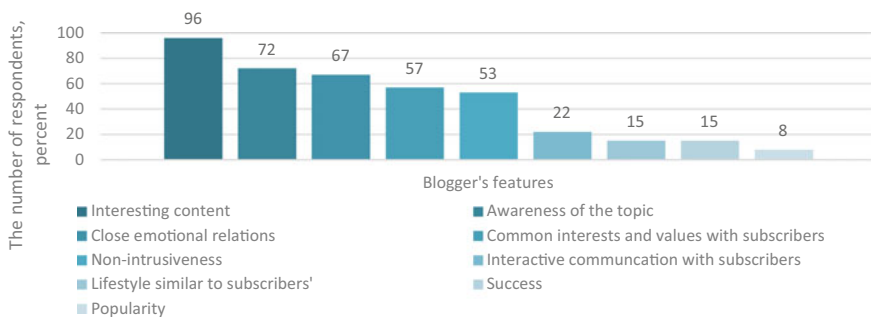

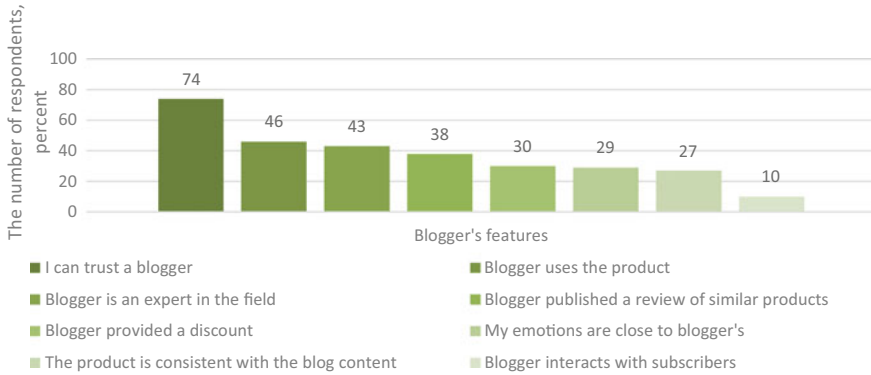**Fig. 2** The blogger's features essential for subscription

Fig. 3 Incentives for the purchase of goods by blogger's recommendation

It makes sense that reliability, which is one of the trust indicators, is the most meaningful in a purchase situation since for respondent it's more responsible action than subscription due to time and financial expenses.

The second answer is "close emotional relations" (67% of respondents). This answer means that the emotions of the blogger are close and transparent to his subscribers, i.e. we can talk about empathy and a common emotional space between the blogger and the subscriber.

The answer "success of a blogger" is the least popular (8% of respondents) due to the age of respondents (generation Z) [13]. Under generation theory, representatives of generation Z do not think that success is an important feature of both the blogger and the individual (see Fig. 3).

The interesting fact is that 65.4% of respondents buy products advertised by bloggers.

According to the research findings, the main incentives for purchase by blogger's recommendation are trust, blogger's experience as a user of the product and boggers' awareness. The "trust" has been chosen by 74% of respondents, which makes it a key condition for the purchase of a product or service, as far as trust is a cumulative component of the blogger's reference [14].

The next popular answers chosen by half of the respondents are "blogger is an expert and "blogger uses the product". This fact is the result of a socio-psychological identification mechanism. The idea of the latter is that respondents identify themselves with the blogger-reference person and simulate his behavior model.

4 Conclusions

Therefore, our assumption that the use of a set of socio-psychological mechanisms of empathy and identification in a digital environment by a blogger as a reference person who purposefully uses these mechanisms at the time of contact with a potential buyer increases his willingness to purchase the appropriate product is correct.

In the process of empirical research revealed at the first stage:

- As a result of the correlation analysis, a statistically significant relationship was found between the variables "age" and "focus on activity". Thus, this allows us to conclude that in order to create the conditions for using the empathy mechanism in online communication, the presence of factors is necessary: "availability of free time", coincidence of "individual characteristics" and, for the age category over 20 years, "focus on activities", While creating the prerequisites for creature a common emotional space.

At the second stage:

- it was empirically proved that the main characteristics, which are necessary for a blogger to subscribe to him, are: interesting content, awareness of the topic, emotional closeness and also common interests and values with the blogger;
- it was revealed that the main incentives for buying a product from a blogger are: trust in the blogger, personal use of the product by the blogger and knowledge in this area;
- in the process of making a purchasing decision, the identification of a blogger—a reference person with a target audience - is an effective online digital marketing technology and leads to an increase in sales;
- in the process of making a purchase decision, the empathy of a blogger with a target audience is an effective online digital marketing technology and it leads to an increase in sales;
- a set of identification and empathy mechanisms gives a cumulative effect in the online communication of a blogger—a reference person as an intermediary between a producer of goods and a buyer in digital marketing in the process of making a purchasing decision, which in turn leads to an increase in sales.

One of the most significant conclusions obtained as a result of the study can be considered that effective blogging online communication consists of two stages.

At the first stage, the empathy mechanism has the greatest weight, provided that the needs are actualized, so that the user performs the target action—subscribes to the blogger. Further, to complete the purchase of goods, the socio-psychological identification mechanism through which the subscriber copies the behavior model of the blogger-reference person acquires the greatest importance.

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