

## THE ROLE OF EMPATHY, ANXIETY AND PERSONALITY IN PURCHASING DECISIONS CAUSED BY ADVERTISING

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**Abstract:** *Today's trend in marketing research takes little into account the role of enduring personality traits and momentary emotional influence in customer decisions. This research is looking for an answer to the fact that consumers who, by their own admission, consider advertising to be an important factor in their purchasing decisions, the personality and the attitude of their emotional attitudes have the capacity to do so. The following results were given by filling out a valid personality and empathy test involving 965 people. Those who consider advertising to be important insecurity, shyness and vulnerability, as well as emotional instability, characterise individuals who feel uncomfortable and have anxious or live on the desire to help endangering themselves. In an empathy situation, elevated arousal causes high levels of anxiety, sometimes too much, but this is not only a momentary state, but these individuals are generally characterized by extreme emotional responses.*

**Keywords:** *empathy; anxiety; personality; purchasing decision; advertising.*

**JEL Classification:** *D83.*

### 1. Introduction

Theories that tried to categorize human nature according to a single trait, have not proven fruitful. Among these, is the simple theory of altruism, according to which, humans are driven by the desire to do something good, and help to each other without counting on any kind of repayment (Trivers, 1971).

Two large groups of later theories trace altruistic behaviour to internal and external factors relative to the individual. The former standpoint is represented by the psychoanalytic approach. According to this theory altruistic behaviour may occur in two ways: one way is a healthy identification with an altruistic figure, the other is turning anxiety and guilt into altruistic behaviour. The early relationship between the caretaker and the child is determinative in these two possible cases for the development altruism. The identification with the generous, helpful mother will develop the adulthood assistance, while the lack of help and gift in childhood will lead to the neurotic form of altruism (Nielsen, 2017).

Ethology gives an explanation for another internal reason for altruism. Altruism has a survival value, which does not limit to the individual, but extends to the family – for example the „selfless” parental help to the child – moreover the whole species: help for a stranger. So it is not the individual's but rather the genes survival is important (Dawkins, 2016).

The situational approach to altruism is represented by the learning theory. Similar to the psychoanalytic theory, the presence of the altruistic figure is also important in the learning theory, who in this case acts as a model. The helpful attitude develops through the effects of the rewards and punishments and is dependent on the reactions of the individual toward these effects (Caprara et al., 2000).

During the turning point from the 70'-s into the 80'-s the interaction model started to spread about, which focused on the correlation between the inner dispositions and the outside factors (this way the model's structure resolved the earlier nature-nurture debate too). The internal emotional conditions, and the mood affects the helper's behaviour, at the same time the biological aptitude is influenced by learning and development, even the helper's behaviour is developing. So in an exact situation, another's tough situation evoke an increased internal state – an arousal – which in itself is not sure to lead to a helpful behaviour. A stimuli from the environment is necessary, which the individual will accept as relevant or reject as a result of a decision making process. The emotional and cognitive components create a dynamic, active unity. (Pervin, 1981).

Next we take a look at Martin Hoffman's theory (2000) about the development of empathy and Takie Sugiyama Lebra's thoughts of Japanese socialisation (Lebra, 1994).

Both author found that altruistic behaviour roots from the early mother-child relationship, but a striking difference is that the former approaches the development of empathy from the side of the child, while the later from the side of the mother, which also represents the fundamental difference in the two cultures.

In Hoffman's theory the child is based on the progressive seclusion of self-other and the empathy development progresses in parallel with it. In the first year of life at the sight of the other's suffering develops the pursuit of comfort. In the second year – at the start of the self-other differentiation – the other's and the self's tranquillization gets in focus. Along the cognitive line the child also experiences a duality in emotions, which is caused by the feeling of his or her own distress and it's reduction, and also the anxiety for someone else's distress. It is a precondition for the development of altruistic behaviour, that the child feels that his need for easing his and the others suffering is connected. This phase is a transition between the initial „quasi egoistic distress response” and the real compassion, what's base is the appearance of the tending to another after the second year.

In Japanese culture the omoiyari (the corresponding of empathy) is at the peak of the moral values hierarchy. Parents are consciously striving to achieve, that the sense of omoiyari takes root in their children. The mother in particular is an embodiment of empathy. She must be selfless and self-sacrificingly indigent. In child-rearing, the child is verbally encouraged to mimic empathy and to responding. She exercise the child, to feel just like her. If this is successful, the child will become susceptible to experiencing her mother's feelings, pain and desires. Then the mother can control him/her. In this way the child's previously uncontrolled, egocentric behaviour – which is otherwise accepted and allowed, as an age-specific attribute – gets under control through becoming the motherly empathy. The child

abandons such behaviour that would hurt his/her mother's feelings or would make the parents be ashamed of.

Learning empathy also develops the child's social sensitivity towards his/her mother and through her towards others. Later in adulthood it reveals itself in a way, that the person feels obligated to avoid bothering someone else. So the child will become an autonomous being through the empathic upbringing, through the inevitable basis of identity development (Lebra, 1994).

Both theory start out from the mother-child dual union and puts a huge emphasis on the role of the development of empathic feelings in becoming an adult human.

To not just live in the world as a simple „information processing specialist”, we need spontaneity, the ability of spontaneous empathy (Buda, 2012).

According to Kohut (1985) with the help of empathy the other person conveys and impression on us, which is similar to the unintentional, intuitive nature of face recognition. The similar nature of empathic tuning and the face recognition roots from the mother-child relationship according to Kohut, and this is where it starts to develop. The child's first experience is the mother's face, which represents empathy, reflection, and acknowledgment, ensuring the healthy personality development. Later the information analysis and cognitive stance develops upon this primeval empathic entity. Kohut calls the former primary thinking process and the latter secondary thinking process. In the individual's life both are present, both are working at the same time and neither excludes the other.

In Kohut's personality development theory the mother, as a reflecting self-object, helps in the transformation of the child's grandiose self-illusion. In Mahler's theory (Mahler et al., 1987) this phase is the omnipotent, shielded mother-child system, which gradually decomposes and the child with the help of the hatching process becomes an autonomous, healthy being through separation and individuation.

In the kohutian theory grandiosity is replaced by idealization. To the child the parent – especially the father – becomes an ideal, which helps develop the child's super-ego. To be similar to the ideal is called ambition. The ideal is an outer, while the ambition is an inner disposition compared to the individual. From these narcissistic sustenance needs (which is the mother's reflective behaviour) develops the transformed narcissism, which Kohut thinks consists of five components. The complex of creativity, empathy, the acceptance of finiteness, sense of humour and wisdom develops in the hope of overcoming self-interest. So the healthy personality carries within itself the childlike empathy, the ideals – like for example the subject of work – accepts the transcendent existence that is beyond the individual, the manifestation of internal relief and the acceptance of the superiority of values compared to death.

The ability of empathy is vital for the everyday life: according to Kohut we couldn't even interpret even the basic movements without empathy – and its psychic counterpart, the introspection. It is indispensable in healing, teaching, even the modern societies play upon this when presenting an advertisement or movie.

The social conditions of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries call forth the alienation of individuals. Everything is being automated and speeding up, so there is less time and energy to

spare for human relations. In the everyday rush, it is the empathy, what can connect people and through connecting relations can provide safety (Davis, 2018).

The emotional state that is congruent with, and was triggered by another individuals' status is called empathy. The state in Batson and Coke's definition is basically the heightened arousal level. The two author's model (ref. Batson and Powell, 2003) is based on this, which distinguishes two phases of assistance. In the first phase the cognitive takeover of the viewpoint (perspective taking) increases the empathic emotional reaction. In an experiment quoted by the authors, the observers who were instructed to take over the viewpoint of the target displayed higher physiological arousal than those who were instructed to watch the movement of the target. Moreover, the former observers labelled the high arousal congruent to the perceived state of the target.

In the second phase the empathic emotion increase the motivation for assistance. In a related experiment the leaders of the experiment varied two recordings. The test subjects listened to a radio broadcast about a girl's sad fate. The task of one group was to empathize themselves into the girl's position, the other's to pay attention to the technique of the broadcast. In the other recording, the test subject's received a soothing, or rather stimulant placebo. As expected, the test subjects who linked the heightened arousal levels to the girl's emotions were the ones who were instructed to emphasize and thought they had received a stimulant.

So the sight of another person's suffering creates a physiological reaction, which the individual will label congruent to the observed person's feelings, which will then result in a motivation to reduce the victim's suffering.

Batson et al. (1981) in an earlier experiment tested the theory, whether aid is motivated by egoism or if genuine help exists. According to Hoffman's empathy theory both have a basis in the early personality development. Experiencing one's own distress – in other word the observer's own arousal – can result in the observer trying to reduce it using aid only as a tool.

So in the case of egoistic motivation the goal is to reduce distress via aid or escape, which was caused by the sight of the suffering individual. The former is chosen by the observer, if the latter would invoke more negative emotions like distress, like guilt or shame. So if we increase the intensity or number of negative consequences of escape then the degree of wanting to aid will increase as well. But if we decrease the consequences, the will to help will decrease as well. Altruistic motivation on the other hand is independent from the consequences of escape, because in this case the observer want to reduce the other's suffering.

Batson et al. performed to experiments related to this topic. In the first experiment the test subject had to watch a girl being electrocuted. The leaders of the experiment varied two conditions: the similarity vs. dissimilarity between the observed individual and the test subjects and the easy vs. difficult escape condition. In the case, when the test subject was informed, that the observed individual was like him/her, the result was altruistic help, while the variation of the other condition had no effect on the test subject. But in the other case, when the test subject and the observed individual were different, which called forth an egoistic motivation, the sight of the

observed individual's bigger pain (more electrocution – harder escape condition) resulted in help.

In the other experiment instead of the similarity condition, they varied the condition of empathic concern attributed as placebo or the condition of distress. The results supported the claim of the first experiment: in the case of the distress condition, where the motivation was egoistic, the rate of aid given was lower in an easy escape situation than in a hard one.

Starting out from the aid motivated by egoism and altruism, relating to Hoffman's empathy development, newer research of empathy resulted in a multidimensional approach (Davis, 1983).

Global empathy can be characterized by its four aspects:

- uptake of perspective, which means taking on another perspective for example in an argument,
- fantasy, during which the individual imagines him- or herself in the situation of a hero from a film or novel,
- empathic concern, which expresses sympathy toward another, and
- personal distress, which grabs on the individuals discomfort and anxiety in a tense interpersonal situation.

Davis worked out the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), in which each of the four component makes up a subscale. In his investigation he analysed the relationship of the four IRI scales and the 5 constructs related to it: social competence, self-assessment, emotionality, sensitivity toward others and – only with an intention to orient – intelligence. These relate to the IRI scale through theoretical or logical ways. Taking on a perspective correlated positively with social competence, self-assessment, the understanding of others and negatively with self-centred sensitivity (which means, what impression the individual creates in others). The fantasy indicator correlated positively with verbal intelligence and emotional reactivity, and in the case of men with sensitivity. The empathic concern correlated positively with the understanding of others and emotionality. The distress correlated positively with timidity, social anxiety, the emotional vulnerability and the self-centred sensitivity toward others.

One of the factors influencing purchasing decisions is the personality of the customer. There are models present, which describes and analyse customer decisions as communicational process (Pólya, 2019), but also others which put family on the forefront (Horváthné et. al., 2012), or operationalized research which takes one aspect of personality into account (Agárdi, 2019, Korpás and Szabó, 2019, Szentesi, 2007, Szakács, 2016) However little is said about customer personality, or it is interpreted one-sidedly in general, with little attention payed to the deeper psychological analysis of the personality.

In marketing research the examination of empathy appears in two areas. One of these is personal selling, where the effect of the empathic attitude of the ones acquiring service or merchandise, and the providers on the sales process is being examined (Delpechitre et al., 2019, Bahadur et al., 2019, Zerbini et al., 2019, Umasuthan et al., 2017, Máté, 2011).

The other area is the area of the charity ads which build upon empathy at its foundation (Weiss and Cohen, 2019, Bartsch and Closs, 2019, Keskin et al., 2017). This investigation was inspired by Kohut's realization, that empathy is an indispensable condition in everyday life, which advertising takes advantage of. The inquiry is based upon three additives. First, the emphatic arousal (Pervin, 1982) and the statement that the higher arousal will result in a higher degree of aid (Batson and Powell, 2003) Second, linking to this, Hebb's known diagram (Hebb, 1975) about the correlation between arousal levels and the effectiveness of behaviour governing stimuli: the increase of the arousal level above the optimal will cause an emotional disturbance. Third, Davis's results in personal distress correlation (Davis, 1983).

The questioning is this, does the emotional instability of everyday life situations go hand in hand with the personal distress (the heightened arousal created by the experience of another human's suffering) of individuals, who consider the advertisement as an important shopping factor on themselves. In other words: in the case of the individuals who consider ads important, is it the high arousal which seems to be the effect of the situation that is creating the personal distress or the appearance of empathic anxiety, or can it be considered a stable personality trait, which would mean a generally occurring response in situations that require empathy.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### **2.1. Test individuals**

In the first stage of the research was taken up a questionnaire with 1864 adults. According to the test results the individuals were divided into two groups, the first group professed, that they do not feel ads a decisive factor during their shopping decisions, while the other marked it as an influencing factor. In the following the paper will present the process of examination and the results of this group. The number of elements in this group is 965 individuals.

### **2.2. Tools**

To measure empathy and anxiety was utilized Davis' IRI scale (Davis, 1983) The test individuals had to decide about 28 questions how much it applies to them and indicate this on a five degree scale (0 = doesn't apply, 4 = applies much). The questionnaire contains both direct and converse statements. The score given for the statements equals the numbers given by the individual. The subscales must be summarised separately. Each subscale contains seven statements, so 0 to 28 points can be given.

The personality was measured with the Big Five personality test (Caprara et al., 1993). The questionnaire contained 132 items, and answers were required on an agreement scale of 5, the scoring was the same as previously. The five personality factors were divided into subscales of two by the authors, and they also added a scale measuring desirability, which shows the test person's tendency, to distort his

or her own self concept because of the desire to be approved by others. Each scale consists of 12 items.

### 2.3. Procedure

Test individuals filled both the questionnaires on the same occasion, first the Big Five, then the IRI. There are instructions on both the questionnaires, and the tested person fills the answer sheets alone.

### 3. Results

The test individuals' average results and standard deviation are the following:

**Table 1:** The test individuals' averages and standard deviations for each subscale

		Average	Deviation
IRI	Fantasy Scale	14.5	6.75
	Perspective Taking	17.05	5.13
	Empathic Concern	18.05	6.32
	Personal Distress	17.45	6.27
Big Five	Dynamism	36.6	5.97
	Dominance	36	5.87
Dynamism + Dominance	Energy (Extroversion)	72.6	10.24
Cooperation + Gallantry	Cooperation	44.3	4.84
	Gallantry	40.4	5
	Agreeableness	84.7	8.67
Accuracy + Endurance	Accuracy	39.4	8.13
	Endurance	40.3	7.54
	Conscientiousness	79.7	13.14
Emotional + Impulse Control	Emotional Control	44.15	11.15
	Impulse Control	38.6	9.7
	Neuroticism	82.75	18.83
to Culture + to Experience	Openness to Culture	41	6.99
	Openness to Experience	39.95	6.62
	Openness	80.95	12.33
Social Desirability	Social Desirability	38.2	4.53

Own source, own editing

There was also correlated the IRI questionnaire's subscales with the Big Fives' subscales. The correlations turned out to be the following between IRI and the divided Big Five subscales:

**Table 2:** Correlations between subscales

	Fantasy Scale	Perspective Taking	Empathic Concern	Personal Distress
Dynamism	0.145072	-0.01477	0.275429	0.017721
Dominance	-0.01197	-0.02446	-0.18878	-0.20031
Cooperation	0.072596	-0.08543	0.311216	-0.1401
Gallantry	0.454077 *	0.14066	0.450781 *	0.146761
Accuracy	-0.10838	-0.1719	0.057953	-0.27
Endurance	0.073451	-0.10916	-0.02463	-0.15441
Emotional Control	0.337662	0.096419	0.612521 **	0.645136 **
Impulse Control	0.127894	0.113519	0.375607	0.338103
Openness to Culture	0.158492	-0.3168	0.14418	-0.18857
Openness to Experience	-0.11486	-0.19808	-0.05905	-0.25425

(+ p<0.1, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01)

Own source, own editing

The correlations between the IRI subscales and the five personality dimensions and also the Social Desirability:

**Table 3:** Correlations between Personality traits and Empathic characteristics

	Fantasy Scale	Perspective Taking	Empathic Concern	Personal Distress
Energy	0.077728	-0.02263	0.052392	-0.10447
Agreeableness	0.302511	0.033481	0.433779 +	0.006491
Conscientiousness	-0.02494	-0.1691	0.021746	-0.25581
Neuroticism	0.265803	0.115564	0.556143 *	0.556134 *
Openness	0.02816	-0.28601	0.050026	-0.24348
Social Desirability	-0.12754	-0.44208 +	-0.32972	-0.41137 +

(+ p<0.1, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01)

Own source, own editing

For the sake of orientation the correlation was also looked at between the subscales in both the questionnaires. In the IRI between the Fantasy Scale and the Empathic Concern, and also between Fantasy Scale and Personal Distress the correlation is significant. In Big Five the most significant correlations were between Energy – and in it Dynamism –, Conscientiousness, Openness – and in it Openness to Culture – and Social Desirability subscales.

#### 4. In conclusion

It can be seen from the table of those who consider advertisement as an important factor, that there is a significant positive correlation between Neuroticism – and within it the lack of Emotional Control – and the Empathic Concern, furthermore the

Personal Distress. So this means that in situations that require empathy, the use of altruistic or egoistic empathy depends on – and comes with – how high the observing person's neuroticism is, so in general, in emotional situations how much he/she gives into his/her emotions without controlling them.

The correlation between the Gallantry and the Fantasy Scale and Empathic Concern scales is significant, and tendentious between Friendliness and Empathic Concern.

The Perspective Taking and Personal Distress correlates negatively with Social Desirability. The observer who cannot really take over his opponent's point of view in an argument, or feel less anxiety at the sight of another's suffering will take social demands in consideration much more. Society demands attention and the facing of those in need, so it would imply, that there is a positive correlation between Social Desirability and Perspective Taking. It is also possible, that someone who lies, lies exactly that he/she doesn't feel anxious, in order to protect him- or herself. Such distortion is imaginable in favour of self defense. The result is strange, but the relationship is tendentious. A new survey would perhaps yield a different result.

Summarized: looking at the personality factors and the IRI scales, Social Desirability shows a negative tendency toward Perspective Taking and Personal Distress, also tendentious is the relationship between Agreeableness and Empathic Concern. In accordance with the expectation a significant positive relationship can be detected between Neuroticism and Empathic Concern, and Neuroticism and Personal Distress. We have to be careful with the interpretation, because we can easily make a mistake by taking the high degree of neuroticism as a cause for altruistic or egoistic empathizing. The results only show that the two empathic approach comes hand in hand with emotional instability.

In the case of those who deemed ads important, next to uncertainty, timidity and vulnerability also instability describes those individuals who at the sight other's suffering will feel discomfort, anxiety or by even putting themselves in harm's way experience the desire to help. In an empathic situation the heightened arousal cause high – at times too high – levels of anxiety, but this is not just a momentarily state, rather these individuals are prone to extreme emotional reactions.

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