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The human side of digital marketing: empathy, authenticity and trust in customer relationships

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Abstract: Digital marketing has become increasingly automated, data-driven and algorithmic, yet recent studies show that customer relationships still depend on human factors such as empathy, authenticity and trust. This article develops a conceptual and analytical research approach based on recent academic studies and international reports. The paper argues that technological efficiency is not sufficient for sustainable customer relationships. Brands must combine digital personalization with emotional relevance, transparent communication and coherent behavior. The findings highlight trust as a strategic resource, empathy as a relational capability and authenticity as a differentiating factor in digitally mediated marketing.

Keywords: digital marketing; empathy; authenticity; trust; customer relationships

JEL Classification: M31; M15; D91; O33

1. Introduction

Digital marketing has evolved rapidly, moving from simple online presence to complex ecosystems of customer interaction based on data, automation, artificial intelligence, social media and personalization. Brands can now communicate with highly segmented audiences, anticipate behavior, adapt messages and measure consumer reactions almost in real time. This transformation has increased the operational efficiency of marketing, but it has also raised an essential question: to what extent does the relationship between brand and customer remain authentic when a growing part of communication is technologically mediated?

In recent years, discussions about digital marketing have focused strongly on performance, conversion, automation and optimization. However, recent research and market reports suggest that long-term performance cannot be separated from trust. Consumers do not evaluate only the product or the offer. They also evaluate the intention behind the communication, the transparency of data use and the consistency between what the brand promises and what the customer actually experiences.

The 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer, reported on a global survey of approximately 32,000 adults in 28 countries, shows a visible decline in confidence in leaders and public communication. Seven out of ten respondents believe that government officials, business leaders and journalists deliberately mislead them by

saying things they know are false or gross exaggerations (Edelman, 2025). This broader environment of distrust inevitably affects the way consumers interpret commercial messages.

At the same time, digital consumers do not reject technology itself. They discover brands on social platforms, purchase through digital channels and accept personalization when it provides real value. The problem is not the digitalization of communication, but the possible loss of the human component of the relationship. A brand may become faster and more efficient, but if the interaction feels cold, intrusive or artificial, customer trust may be weakened rather than strengthened.

This article starts from the idea that the human side of digital marketing becomes a strategic advantage in a context of automation and synthetic content. Empathy, authenticity and trust are not decorative values; they influence loyalty, advocacy, tolerance toward mistakes and the quality of long-term customer relationships. In markets where digital tools become increasingly accessible to all competitors, differentiation depends not only on technology, but also on how credibly and responsibly brands use it.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Type of research

The article is designed as conceptual and analytical research based on recent literature and relevant international reports concerning digital marketing, customer relationships, trust, authenticity, artificial intelligence, social media and customer experience. The purpose is not to test statistical hypotheses on a proprietary sample, but to synthesize and interpret recent evidence regarding the role of empathy, authenticity and trust in digitally mediated customer relationships.

This approach is appropriate because the subject is still evolving rapidly. Transformations caused by artificial intelligence, automation, synthetic content and social platforms cannot be fully understood through a single empirical dataset. They require an integrated reading of academic studies, market reports and recent industry developments.

2.2. Sources and selection criteria

The analysis considered three categories of sources. The first category includes academic studies published mainly between 2019 and 2025 on customer engagement, loyalty, social media, artificial intelligence, influencer marketing, transparency and trust. The second category includes international reports and market analyses, such as the Edelman Trust Barometer, Deloitte analyses of trust and digital trust, and Sprout Social data concerning influencer marketing and artificial influencers. The third category includes recent industry cases and analyses that illustrate the tension between digital efficiency and perceived authenticity.

The sources were selected according to three criteria: recency, relevance for marketing and customer relationships, and connection with one of the three core concepts of the article: empathy, authenticity or trust.

The analysis does not aim to provide an exhaustive systematic review, but a structured synthesis of directions that are particularly relevant for contemporary marketing practice.

2.3. Research questions

The research is guided by four questions: RQ1. Why does the human side of digital marketing become more important in a context dominated by automation and artificial intelligence? RQ2. How does empathy influence brand communication and customer relationships? RQ3. What role does authenticity play in a digital environment affected by synthetic content, virtual influencers and automated communication? RQ4. How can trust be built and maintained in digital customer relationships?

3. Literature review and analytical results

3.1. Trust as a scarce strategic resource in digital marketing

The first analytical result is that trust has become one of the most important strategic resources in digital marketing. In an environment saturated with advertising, sponsored content, influencers, reviews, algorithms and automated messages, consumers become more cautious. They do not evaluate only the offer, but also the credibility of the source and the perceived intention of the brand.

The trust deficit is not limited to politics or media. Deloitte argues that trust is increasingly hard to win and easier than ever to lose. Its analysis notes that in the United States fewer than 40% of customers trust technology brands to display competence and good intent, while trustworthy companies may significantly outperform their competitors (Deloitte, 2024). For marketing, this means that trust is not only a reputational concept; it has economic value.

Recent research on brand loyalty also supports this idea. A bibliometric and content analysis covering 28 years of brand loyalty research shows that emerging themes include brand love, consumer-brand identification, social networks and brand experience (Yazdi, Ramachandran et altera, 2024). Loyalty is therefore increasingly understood as relational and attitudinal, not only behavioral. A customer may repeatedly purchase because it is convenient, but true loyalty requires confidence, identification and perceived value in the relationship.

For digital marketing, the implication is clear. Personalization without trust may be perceived as surveillance. Automation without trust may be interpreted as avoidance of human responsibility. Influencer communication without trust may become a form of disguised persuasion. Therefore, trust is the foundation on which the other dimensions of digital relationship marketing are built.

3.2. Empathy as a relational capability

The second analytical result is that empathy becomes a strategic capability in digital communication. In data-driven marketing, there is a strong temptation to treat the customer as a profile, segment or probability of conversion. Nevertheless, customers perceive themselves as persons with needs, emotions, frustrations and

expectations. The difference between relevant communication and intrusive communication often depends on whether the brand understands the emotional context of the customer.

Studies on brand social activism illustrate the importance of empathy in public communication. Li, Montgomery and Mousavi (2022) analyzed brand relationship norms and showed that consumers evaluate brands more negatively when they fail to respond or respond with low empathy in sensitive social contexts. High-empathy responses reduce negative evaluations. This finding is important because it shows that empathy is not only a stylistic preference; it is a relational norm. Customers expect certain brands to behave consistently with the type of relationship they claim to have with the public.

Empathy is also relevant in customer service and customer experience. A frustrated customer does not seek only a fast answer, but also recognition of the problem. Automation may solve part of the process, but if it is poorly designed, it can amplify frustration. Research on AI-powered customer engagement emphasizes that transparency, explainability and organizational accountability are necessary for building trust in automated interactions (DeZao, 2024). From a relational perspective, a brand that automates the interaction must still preserve the feeling that the customer is understood.

Thus, empathy transforms digital communication from message delivery into relationship building. It creates the difference between a brand that merely sends something to the customer and a brand that appears to understand what matters to the customer.

3.3. Authenticity in a digital environment of synthetic content

The third analytical result is that authenticity becomes increasingly important precisely because digital communication is becoming more artificial. AI-generated content, virtual influencers, synthetic images, fake reviews and automated messages create an environment in which consumers find it more difficult to distinguish authentic interaction from simulated interaction.

This issue is highly visible in influencer marketing. Vogue Business (2024) identifies a shift away from transactional sponsored content toward longer-term collaborations, niche communities, lo-fi content and creators perceived as more authentic. The report also notes that influencer fatigue and consumer skepticism are pushing brands toward more meaningful partnerships rather than simple visibility campaigns. This confirms that audiences do not reject influence, but they reject influence that appears purely commercial and disconnected from credible personal experience.

Artificial influencers intensify the authenticity dilemma. According to Sprout Social's 2024 Influencer Marketing Report, cited in press coverage, 37% of respondents said AI influencers could make them more interested in a brand, while another 37% said they would make the brand less trustworthy (Sprout Social, 2024). The same technology may therefore attract attention and damage trust at the same time. This ambivalence is particularly important for marketers because attention is not equivalent to relationship value.

Authenticity does not mean improvised or unprofessional communication. It means coherence between brand identity, promises, behavior and customer experience. A campaign can be creative and well produced, but if it contradicts the lived experience of customers, it may generate skepticism. In digital marketing, authenticity functions as a protection mechanism against distrust. The easier it becomes to produce synthetic content, the more valuable real and coherent brand behavior becomes.

3.4. Transparency as a condition for digital relationship acceptance

The fourth analytical result is that personalization is not sufficient for building durable customer relationships. Although personalization is one of the central promises of digital marketing, it becomes problematic when consumers do not understand how their data are used, why they receive certain recommendations or whether they interact with a human being or an automated system.

DeZao (2024) argues that the lack of clarity around AI-driven decision processes reduces customer trust and that organizations need explainable models, clear data policies and accountability cultures. In marketing, this observation is directly relevant. Customers may accept automated recommendations if they perceive them as useful and fair, but they may reject them if they feel observed, manipulated or unable to control the interaction.

Research on trust dynamics in automation also suggests that trust is not stable. It changes from one interaction to another. Yang, Schemanske and Searle (2021) show that system failures produce stronger decreases in trust than the increases generated by successful interactions. This means that a single negative automated experience can affect the relationship with the technology and, indirectly, with the brand that uses it.

Consequently, transparency should be understood as a relational mechanism. It is not enough for a brand to personalize communication. The customer must understand why a message is received, how personal data are used and when the interaction is mediated by automation.

3.5. Loyalty as experience, not only satisfaction

The fifth analytical result is that loyalty in digital marketing cannot be reduced to immediate satisfaction. A customer may be satisfied after a transaction and still not become loyal. Loyalty requires continuity, trust, relevant experiences and the feeling that the brand understands customer needs over time.

An empirical study on customer orientation in sales shows that active listening is a significant antecedent of loyalty (Muzumdar and Kurian, 2021). Although the study focuses on salesperson-customer interactions, the conclusion is useful for digital marketing as well: customers remain loyal when they feel listened to and understood, not simply targeted. In digital settings, listening may include social listening, customer feedback analysis, community management and responsive service design.

Recent research on attitudinal loyalty also shows that loyalty may support advocacy and cross-buying behavior. Putera and Famiola (2024) show that attitudinal loyalty stimulates customer advocacy and additional purchasing behavior in banking contexts. For relationship marketing, this means that the objective is not merely conversion,

but the transformation of customers into advocates. Advocacy cannot be produced only through automation; it depends on the perceived quality and credibility of the relationship.

Therefore, digital loyalty is built through a sequence of interactions that are consistent, credible and emotionally relevant. It is the cumulative effect of many touchpoints, not the result of a single campaign.

4. Synthesis of findings

Table no. 1 synthesizes the main findings identified in the literature and industry reports analyzed in this article.

Table no. 1. Main findings on the human side of digital marketing

Analyzed dimension	Finding from recent literature	Implication for marketing
Trust	A general trust deficit affects brands and digital communication.	Trust should be treated as a strategic asset, not only as a reputational effect.
Empathy	High-empathy brand responses reduce negative evaluations in sensitive contexts.	Communication should be emotionally adapted, not only technically personalized.
Authenticity	Consumers are skeptical toward artificial, opportunistic or incoherent content.	Brands should avoid synthetic communication that is not aligned with their identity.
Transparency	Opacity in AI-powered engagement reduces acceptance and trust.	Brands should explain data use, automation and the role of AI in customer interactions.
Loyalty	Loyalty is linked to experience, listening, relationship quality and advocacy.	Marketing should aim for long-term relational value, not only conversion.

Source: Author synthesis based on the analyzed literature and reports.

The synthesis confirms that the human side of digital marketing is not an alternative to technology, but a condition for its effective use. Digital tools may improve speed, segmentation and execution, but trust, empathy and authenticity determine whether the customer interprets the interaction as valuable or intrusive.

5. Conceptual model

Based on the analytical results, the article proposes a conceptual model of the human side of digital marketing. The model starts from empathy and authenticity as two relational inputs. Empathy helps the brand recognize the customer's situation, emotion and need. Authenticity ensures coherence between communication, brand identity

and real behavior. Transparency acts as a protective mechanism, especially when artificial intelligence and automation are used. Together, these dimensions support trust. Trust then enables loyalty, recommendation and customer advocacy.

Table no. 2. Conceptual model of the human side of digital marketing

Component	Role in digital marketing	Expected relational effect
Empathy	Adapts communication to the emotional and practical context of the customer.	Reduces frustration and increases perceived care.
Authenticity	Maintains coherence between brand promise, communication and actual behavior.	Reduces skepticism and strengthens credibility.
Transparency	Clarifies the use of data, AI, automation and commercial intent.	Increases acceptance of digital interaction.
Trust	Connects repeated digital interactions into a stable relationship.	Supports loyalty and tolerance toward occasional mistakes.
Advocacy	Transforms satisfied customers into active promoters of the brand.	Generates recommendation and relational value.

Source: Author contribution.

The model highlights that empathy and authenticity support trust, while transparency protects the relationship in contexts where technology may generate suspicion. In this perspective, the human side of digital marketing is not a soft or secondary topic. It is a strategic framework for preserving customer relationships in an environment increasingly mediated by algorithms.

6. Discussion

The analysis reveals a paradox of digital marketing. On the one hand, brands have increasingly advanced tools for tracking, measuring, personalizing and automating customer interaction. On the other hand, the sophistication of these tools may create distance, suspicion and communication fatigue. The more invisible the technology becomes, the more important trust and transparency become.

Empathy matters because customers do not want only efficiency; they want recognition. Authenticity matters because the digital environment is increasingly populated by synthetic content. Trust matters because

consumers are more aware that their data, attention and decisions are influenced by systems they cannot fully see or understand. These three dimensions form a relational counterweight to excessive automation.

For marketers, the main implication is that digital performance should not be measured only through short-term indicators. Clicks, conversions, impressions and reach are important, but they are not sufficient. A brand may obtain engagement and still lose trust. It may personalize communication and still appear intrusive. It may produce content at scale and still seem artificial. Therefore, marketing strategies should integrate relational indicators such as perceived authenticity, trust, customer effort, recommendation intention and quality of experience.

The findings also suggest that artificial intelligence should be implemented with a clear human logic. AI can support listening, analysis and personalization, but it should not replace responsibility. When customers interact with an automated system, the brand remains accountable for the quality, fairness and transparency of that interaction.

7. Managerial implications

The first managerial implication is the need to design digital communication around customer context, not only around conversion objectives. Empathy should be integrated into message design, customer service scripts, chatbot flows and crisis communication protocols. A technically correct response may be relationally inadequate if it ignores the customer's emotional state.

The second implication concerns authenticity. Brands should develop clear guidelines for AI-generated content, influencer collaborations and social media communication. Authenticity should not be simulated through informal language only; it should be supported by consistent behavior, credible partnerships and transparent disclosure.

The third implication concerns trust governance. Organizations should define who is responsible for digital trust, how data use is communicated and how automated decisions are monitored. Trust should be measured, not assumed. Surveys, social listening, complaint analysis and customer journey feedback may help identify points where automation weakens the relationship.

The fourth implication is the need to balance automation with human availability. In simple transactions, automation may be preferred. In complex, sensitive or emotionally loaded situations, access to human support remains essential. The future of digital marketing is therefore not fully automated, but hybrid.

8. Measurement implications for relational digital marketing

One of the difficulties of the human side of digital marketing is measurement. Operational indicators are easy to collect: clicks, impressions, conversions, open rates, cost per acquisition and customer acquisition cost. Relational indicators are more difficult to capture, but they are essential for understanding whether digital marketing produces durable value or only immediate reaction.

Empathy can be measured indirectly through complaint resolution quality, customer effort, response tone evaluation, satisfaction after service interactions and qualitative analysis of feedback. Authenticity can be evaluated through perceived brand consistency, transparency of influencer collaborations, credibility of user-generated content and the alignment between communication and customer experience. Trust can be tracked through recommendation intention, willingness to share data, perceived fairness, complaint recovery and customer retention.

A relational dashboard for digital marketing should therefore combine performance indicators with human-centered indicators. The purpose is not to replace efficiency metrics, but to prevent a situation in which the brand appears successful in the short term while losing credibility in the long term.

Table no. 3. Suggested human-centered indicators for digital marketing

Relational dimension	**Possible indicators**	**Managerial relevance**
Empathy	Customer effort score; complaint recovery satisfaction; tone evaluation; qualitative feedback themes	Shows whether the brand understands the customer context and reduces frustration.
Authenticity	Perceived consistency; disclosure clarity; credibility of creator partnerships; alignment between promise and experience	Shows whether customers perceive the brand as coherent and credible.
Transparency	Data-use clarity; AI disclosure; opt-in and opt-out clarity; explanation of recommendations	Shows whether customers understand and accept digital interaction.
Trust	Recommendation intention; willingness to share data; retention; trust pulse surveys	Shows whether repeated interactions generate confidence.
Advocacy	Net promoter score; organic mentions; reviews; user-generated recommendations	Shows whether customers become voluntary promoters of the brand.

Source: Author contribution.

9. Risks of ignoring the human side of digital marketing

Ignoring the human side of digital marketing may produce several risks. The first risk is communication fatigue. When customers receive too many automated messages, even technically personalized messages may become noise. The second risk is relational distance. If customers cannot access a human representative in complex situations, they may interpret automation as a lack of care. The third risk is authenticity erosion. If content is generated at scale without a clear brand voice, communication becomes interchangeable and weakens differentiation.

The fourth risk is trust collapse after a negative digital interaction. Since trust declines more sharply after failures than it increases after successes, brands should treat automated touchpoints as high-impact relational moments. A poorly designed chatbot, an inappropriate recommendation or a non-disclosed sponsored collaboration can damage the credibility of the entire brand, not only the specific campaign.

The fifth risk is ethical ambiguity. Digital marketing increasingly uses data, prediction and automation. Without clear rules, customers may feel manipulated rather than served. Ethical ambiguity affects not only compliance, but also long-term relationship quality.

10. Limitations and future research

The article has several limitations. First, it is conceptual and analytical, not empirical. It synthesizes recent literature and reports, but it does not test the proposed model on a primary dataset. Second, the field evolves rapidly, especially under the influence of artificial intelligence and synthetic media. Some findings that are relevant today may need reinterpretation as technologies and consumer expectations change. Third, the analysis focuses on general marketing implications and does not differentiate in detail between industries, although the human side of digital marketing may be more important in sectors such as education, health, financial services, luxury, hospitality and professional services.

Future research could empirically test the proposed model by measuring the relationship between perceived empathy, perceived authenticity, transparency, trust and loyalty in specific sectors. Another direction would be to compare human-only, AI-assisted and fully automated interactions in customer service and social media communication. Future studies may also examine generational differences, since younger consumers may be more open to AI-mediated interaction but not necessarily less sensitive to authenticity and trust.

11. Conclusions

The article analyzed the human side of digital marketing, focusing on empathy, authenticity and trust in customer relationships. Based on recent academic studies and international reports, the research shows that digital development does not reduce the importance of human factors. On the contrary, it amplifies it.

The first conclusion is that trust becomes a scarce strategic resource. In a social context marked by suspicion and abundant digital content, brands must earn trust through coherence, transparency and responsible behavior.

The second conclusion is that empathy has an essential role in digital communication. It allows brands to respond not only to functional needs, but also to the emotional states of customers. Without empathy, personalization may become mechanical or intrusive.

The third conclusion is that authenticity becomes critical in an environment where synthetic content is increasingly present. Brands using artificial intelligence, influencers, social media and automation must carefully manage the coherence between message and reality. The fourth conclusion is that transparency is a condition for the acceptance of technology in customer relationships. Consumers may accept automation and personalization if they understand how their data are used and if they feel they retain control over the interaction.

Finally, the human side of digital marketing is not a nostalgic return to traditional marketing. It is a condition for the future of marketing. Technology can accelerate communication, but only empathy, authenticity and trust can transform communication into relationship.

Notes

[1] This article has a conceptual and analytical character and is based on recent literature and international reports on digital marketing, customer relationships, artificial intelligence and trust.

[2] The term artificial intelligence is used in a broad sense, including predictive models, generative systems, chatbots, recommendation systems and automated decision support tools used in marketing and customer engagement.

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