

Empathy at the heart of customer experience: A holistic framework for understanding and enhancing consumer empathy through the lens of customer experience

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Abstract

Serving as a social glue in interactions, consumer empathy takes center stage in shaping a pleasant customer experience. Our holistic framework of an empathic customer experience, rooted in the perception–action model of empathy and established customer experience conceptualizations, unveils the close interrelationship between consumer empathy and customer experiences. Grounded in a systematic literature review and a conceptual synthesis, our study contributes to customer experience research by conceptualizing consumer empathy as a cognitive and affective customer experience response, potentially accompanied by supplementary customer experience responses, which we refer to as an empathic customer experience. This study advances empathy literature by offering a systematic overview of an empathic customer experience, covering stimuli at touchpoints that induce an empathic customer experience during consumer interactions, potential contextual factors, and evaluative outcomes of an empathic customer experience. From our results, we derive an agenda with several research directions for the joint investigation of consumer empathy and customer experience to contribute to both research fields. In addition, our framework provides insights for managers, including recommendations for designing stimuli to evoke an empathic customer experience.

KEYWORDS

consumer empathy, customer experience, empathic customer experience framework, perception–action model of empathy

1 | INTRODUCTION

Empathy and customer experience are closely intertwined concepts, as the following examples demonstrate: Anna, a loyal customer of an online retailer, notices increasingly tailored recommendations to her preferences. These personalized suggestions, generated by algorithms from her browsing behavior, make her feel understood and

enhance her experience with the brand. Peter, frustrated by a service failure of his bank, contacts customer support. Peter empathizes with the customer service agent after receiving an apology and appreciates the effort to resolve the issue, which transforms his negative customer experience into a positive one.

These seemingly small moments of empathy reflect a broader phenomenon: the importance of empathy in shaping positive

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customer experiences. At the same time, they also show the dilemma companies face in today's marketing landscape. On the one hand, increasingly objective, data-driven strategies (Pedersen, 2021) and artificial intelligence-based interactions are at the forefront (Hoyer et al., 2020; Huang & Rust, 2018). On the other hand, "[not only do] customers want to get their issues resolved, but they also expect agents to listen intently and care about finding a resolution" (Startek, 2024, p. 5), emphasizing the need to provide empathic interactions. Moreover, a recent Accenture report reveals that experiential factors now account for 60% of consumers' buying decisions, underscoring the critical role of personal care in shaping customer experiences and preferences (Curtis et al., 2021).

Empathy is a well-established concept often referred to as "putting oneself in another person's shoes" (McBane, 1995, p. 365). While this informal description captures the essence of empathy, established definitions describe it more formally as a cognitive and emotional response to the experiences of others (e.g., Davis, 1983). Despite the growing number of empirical studies on empathy in marketing research, the literature remains largely fragmented and scattered across various research settings. The marketing landscape has no clear positioning on empathy (Pedersen, 2021), with key aspects such as empirical antecedents, moderators, and consequences remaining unexplored. This deficiency has led to a lack of a systematic overview of its conceptualization, findings, and research settings.

As such, scholars have called for "literature reviews, bibliometric studies, and conceptual work" on empathy (Pedersen, 2021, p. 477) to explore its relationship to other constructs (Clark et al., 2018). For example, Bolton et al. (2018, p. 797) state that "empathy is an important dimension of customer experience." In essence, the customer experience is, a multidimensional concept focusing on various customer's nondeliberate responses to interactions (e.g., Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). As empathy and customer experience both manifest as responses to interactions, scholars have alluded to empathy's foundational role in the emergence of customer experiences, underscoring empathy as a key element in achieving high-quality experiences in service settings (Tan et al., 2019; Wieseke et al., 2012). Figure 1 juxtaposes the research settings of the consumer empathy literature, as well as key conceptual articles on customer experience. Furthermore, it illustrates the current overlap of empathy and customer experience in marketing literature, by listing the existing studies that touch on the joint investigation of both constructs. Surprisingly, none of the mentioned articles provide an answer on how these two constructs are related.

A potential reason for this shortcoming is that research that explicitly analyzes empathy and customer experience jointly is limited. A notable exception is Liu-Thompkins et al.'s (2022) work, which offers a conceptual framework for integrating artificial empathy into customer experience to bridge the "human-artificial intelligence" gap. While the study provides valuable insights, it is limited to empathy in

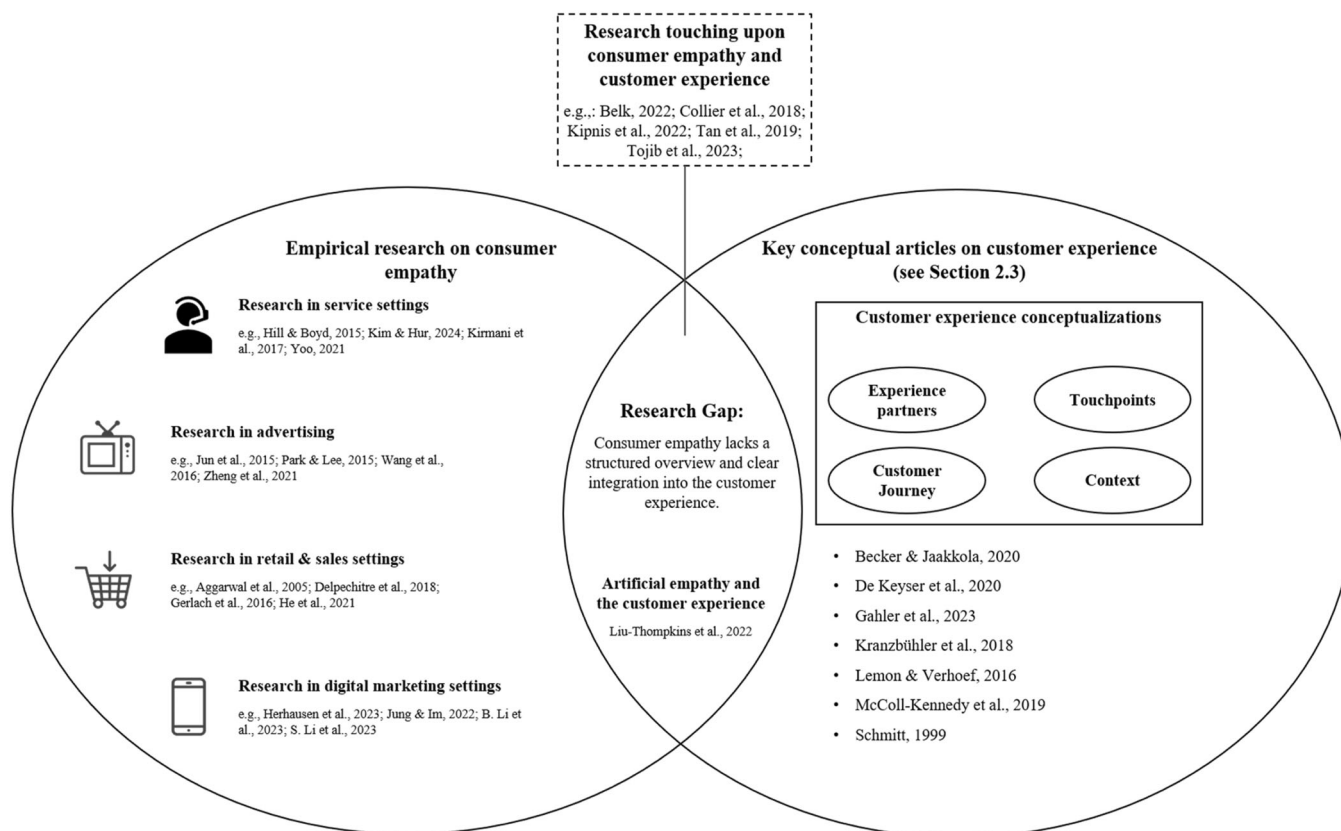


FIGURE 1 Research gap.

interactions with artificial entities. A few studies that touch on the joint investigation of empathy and the customer experience also take place in very specific research settings, such as sex working dolls (Belk, 2022; Kipnis et al., 2022). Consequently, as Figure 1 shows, whether and to what extent the two constructs are related across different research settings is uncertain.

To overcome these constraints, we conducted a systematic literature review on consumer empathy and ran a conceptual synthesis (MacInnis, 2011) by relying on key components of the customer experience to analyze the consumer empathy literature. Following the goals to “relate” and “explicate” conceptual syntheses (Kindermann et al., 2024; MacInnis, 2011), we developed an “empathic customer experience” framework to integrate the previously identified consumer empathy literature with the concept of customer experience. By doing so, we extend the literature in at least three ways.

First, owing to the rather unclear relationship between consumer empathy and the customer experience, we draw on the perception-action model of empathy (Preston & de Waal, 2002) and established customer experience literature (e.g., De Keyser et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) to derive a better understanding of an empathic customer experience. By integrating these two concepts, we add to the customer experience literature by offering a synthesized framework that future research can investigate.

Second, we adopt customer experience components to structure empirical findings on consumer empathy, thus adding to the scattered consumer empathy literature. Considering and analyzing the literature through a customer experience lens provides a unique understanding of and coherent structure for consumer empathy in marketing literature (Weidig et al., 2024). Specifically, we structure consumer empathy literature around various consumer interactions (e.g., experience partners, touchpoint types, customer journey stages) and identify antecedents (e.g., stimuli), moderators (e.g., contextual factors), and consequences (e.g., evaluative outcomes) of consumer empathy within a customer experience realm.

Third, drawing on a descriptive analysis and our conceptual synthesis, we identify key research gaps at the intersection of consumer empathy and customer experience and offer a research agenda that summarizes potential directions for future research. We thus extend both literature streams by advancing the evolving research field at the intersection of consumer empathy and the customer experience.

2 | CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Empathy

Literature in psychology and neuroscience offers various definitions of empathy, thereby lacking consensus on an established definition (Clark et al., 2018; Gerdes et al., 2010). Definitional discrepancies primarily stem from ambiguities surrounding empathy's conceptualization in terms of dimensions (e.g., cognitive, affective). This issue is

also mirrored in marketing literature, in which our analysis reveals a multitude of definitions being employed. Table 1 presents the most frequently cited definitions of empathy in marketing literature. It categorizes each definition by its dimensionality and records the frequency of its occurrence in marketing literature. Regardless of this, the literature largely agrees that empathy is a cognitive and/or affective response to an interaction with an individual or an object. The cognitive dimension refers to “perspective taking,” or adopting another person's perspective (Davis, 1983, 1996). The affective dimension pertains to (1) “empathic concern,” in which a person experiences feelings of concern for the welfare of others and thus addresses emotions, and (2) “emotional contagion,” in which a person observes another's joy or suffering and experiences similar emotions in return (Davis, 1983, 1996). In our work, we follow the multi-dimensional understanding of empathy as encompassing at least a cognitive and an affective dimension (Davis, 1983; Decety & Jackson, 2004). It is important to note that empathy commonly occurs in social interactions among humans. However, humans can feel empathy not only toward other people but also toward any target (e.g., animals, companies, robots) (Belk, 2022; Preston, 2007). Every human possesses the ability to feel empathy, even if it can be induced by stimuli, with its strength being situation-specific (Batson et al., 1981; Preston, 2007). As we aim to integrate empathy into the customer experience concept, we refer to empathy exclusively from a consumer perspective.

2.2 | Perception-action model of empathy

The perception-action model of empathy by Preston and de Waal (2002) provides the theoretical foundation for many studies conceptualizing empathy. This model encompasses the psychological mechanisms underlying empathy, including both cognitive and affective responses (Preston & de Waal, 2002; Preston, 2007), and is supported by recent empirical research from neuroscience (e.g., Clark et al., 2018; Decety & Jackson, 2004). It posits that empathy operates as a process through a perception-action mechanism in the brain (Decety & Jackson, 2004). To do so, it necessitates both a human subject and an object, which can be human or nonhuman (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Preston & de Waal, 2002). “Perception” refers to a human subject perceiving the state or situation of a human or non-human object and taking its perspective. This part represents the cognitive dimension of empathy. Thus, the model proposes that the subject experiences emotions, related to the perceived situation, through the “action,” referred to as affective empathy. Notably, this process of perception-action occurs automatically and without conscious or effortful thinking (Preston & de Waal, 2002; Preston, 2007).

Preston and de Waal (2002) further argue that empathy can entail supplementary responses beyond the cognitive perspective-taking and affective response. For example, they take facial expressions such as yawning as part of the empathic process. Similarly, Davis (1996) views additional immediate, subconscious

TABLE 1 Overview of empathy definitions in marketing literature.

Author(s) (Year)	Definition	Dimensionality	Frequency of occurrence ^a
Davis (1983, 1996, p. 12)	"A set of constructs having to do with the responses of one individual to the experiences of another. These constructs specifically include the processes taking place within the observer and the affective and non-affective outcomes which result from those processes."	CognitiveEmotionalBehavioral	13x
Batson et al. (1997, p. 105)	"An other-oriented emotional response congruent with another's perceived welfare."	Emotional	11x
Preston de Waal (2002, p. 4)	"Attended perception of the object's state automatically activates the subject's representations of the state, situation, and object, and that activation of these representations automatically primes or generates the associated autonomic and somatic responses, unless inhibited."	CognitiveEmotional	7x
Hoffman (2001, p. 157)	"An affective response that is more appropriate to someone else's situation than to one's own situation."	Emotional	6x
Smith (2006, p. 3)	"The sensitivity to, and understanding of, the mental states of others."	CognitiveEmotional	4x
Eisenberg and Miller (1987, p. 91)	"An emotional response that stems from another's emotional state or condition and that is congruent with the other's emotional state or situation."	Emotional	3x
Mehrabian and Epstein (1972, p. 525)	"A vicarious emotional response to the perceived emotional experience of others."	Emotional	2x
Murray et al. (2019, p. 3)	"The ability to identify understand and react to others' thoughts, feeling, behavior, and experiences."	CognitiveEmotional	2x
Rogers (1957, p. 210)	"The ability to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy, and with the emotional components and meanings... as if one were the other person."	CognitiveEmotional	2x
Wieseke et al. (2012, p. 317)	"The ability to sense another's thoughts, feelings, and experiences to share the other's emotional experience and to react to the observed experiences of another person."	CognitiveEmotional	2x
Other definitions (mentioned once)	For example, Barret-Lennard (1962); Baumeister (2007); Cuff et al. (2016); Decety and Jackson (2004); Hogan (1969); Plank & Reid (2010); Zaki et al. (2020)	Different variations	34x

Note. The final row lists authors whose definitions have been used only once in marketing literature. Additionally, the results of our systematic literature review show that 17 articles in marketing do not specific define empathy.

^aOccurrence in the marketing literature, based on our literature sample.

(e.g., behavioral) responses as part of empathy. In the scope of this work, we draw on these psychological conceptualizations, and conceive consumer empathy as a process of automatically induced perspective-taking (cognitive response) and emotional contagion (affective response) of other individuals' or objects' experiences, feelings, or situations, which may encompass supplementary, immediate responses (Preston & de Waal, 2002; Preston, 2007).

2.3 | Customer experience and its components

Customer experience is a multidimensional construct focusing on customers' non deliberate cognitive, affective, behavioral, social, and sensorial responses (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Lemon &

Verhoef, 2016) to interactions with experience partners at touchpoints along the customer journey (De Keyser et al., 2020; Gahler et al., 2023). It emerges as a consumer's response directed to an interaction, originating and existing at the moment the interaction takes place (Gahler et al., 2023). As such, companies cannot create customer experiences per se but can stimulate and enhance consumer responses to interactions, known as customer experience responses, by deliberately designing touchpoints through stimuli (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Kranzbühler et al., 2018).

Following prior research (e.g., Gahler et al., 2023; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), we contend that consumer interactions take place at touchpoints, or the points of interactions between consumers and experience partners (De Keyser et al., 2020; Gahler et al., 2023). According to Gahler et al. (2023), experience partners can be

personnel (e.g., salesperson, artificial intelligence agent), brands (e.g., product, commercial), or other customers (e.g., friend, relative). Furthermore, customer experiences occur in either an online or offline environment, referring to the touchpoint type, and at one of the three customer journey stages: pre-purchase, purchase, or post-purchase.

Five types of responses to an interaction exist, representing the established customer experience dimensions in the marketing literature: cognitive, affective, behavioral, social, and sensorial (De Keyser et al., 2020; Schmitt, 1999). Consequently, several responses can be evoked simultaneously by an interaction with an experience partner at a specific touchpoint. More specifically, stimuli at touchpoints automatically and subconsciously evoke a customer experience (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020), which a consumer can evaluate as positive, neutral, or negative (De Keyser et al., 2020). Importantly, customer experience responses are subjective in nature and can be strongly influenced by contextual factors acting as moderating variables to the emergence of the customer experience (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019), including (1) “customer,” involving customer characteristics such as personality traits, skills, and knowledge; (2) “situational,” referring to the immediate context, such as the location in which an interaction takes place, or other individuals involved; and (3) “sociocultural,” encompassing the broader environment in which consumers are situated, such as nature, culture, or the economy (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Finally, customer experience responses differ from evaluative outcomes such as customer satisfaction, intentions, or attitudes (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; De Keyser et al., 2020). Extant literature agrees that evaluative outcomes require a certain degree of effortful thinking and are therefore understood as rather long-term outcomes or consequences of a customer experience (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Gahler et al., 2023).

2.4 | Consumer empathy as a customer experience response

In this section, we aim to integrate the concepts of consumer empathy and customer experience to develop our empathic customer experience framework. By highlighting commonalities, our conception combines consumer empathy, building on the perception–action model of empathy, and existing customer experience conceptualizations, as outlined in Section 2.3, to form an empathic customer experience. We base our reasoning for integrating the main ideas of the perception–action model of empathy with the customer experience concept on three arguments.

First, prior studies have incorporated the term “experience” into definitions of empathy (e.g., Decety & Jackson, 2004; Hall & Schwartz, 2019), emphasizing that empathy can be subjectively perceived and experienced by individuals. According to the perception–action model of empathy and recent neuroscience research, empathy unfolds automatically and unconsciously (Innamorati et al., 2019).

This aligns with conceptualizations of customer experience responses that also proceed automatically and unconsciously (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Second, similar to customer experience responses (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020), empathy can be felt toward any target (e.g., individual, object), with stimuli activating consumer empathy, which represents a cognitive and affective response to a target (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Preston, 2007).

Third, as noted, empathy represents a process that incorporates both cognitive and affective responses (Preston & de Waal, 2002). Similarly, customer experience encompasses responses that may also include cognitive and affective responses (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). We argue that perspective-taking can constitute an initial cognitive customer experience response while subsequent emotional contagion represents an affective customer experience response, with both building the “empathic core” of an empathic customer experience and representing the key component of the empathic process. Furthermore, as mentioned in Section 2.2, an empathic process can be extended by supplementary, automatically induced responses (e.g., facial expressions, yawning) (Davis, 1996; Preston, 2007). These nondeliberately occurring responses align with marketing literature, which suggests that customer experience encompasses responses from several dimensions (e.g., behavioral, social, sensorial) (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). We thus argue that an empathic customer experience may be accompanied by cognitive, behavioral, social, and sensorial supplementary customer experiences as part of the empathic process. These responses can occur either individually or collectively.

Given these commonalities, we define an empathic customer experience as a consumer’s response, caused by a stimulus during an interaction with an experience partner at a touchpoint along the customer journey, involving perspective-taking of a target object (i.e., cognitive response) and an appropriate emotional contagion according to the perceived situation (i.e., affective response). Supplementary customer experience responses (e.g., cognitive, behavioral, social, sensorial) may further complement an empathic customer experience.

3 | METHODOLOGY

To grasp the role of consumer empathy in customer experiences more thoroughly, we undertook a comprehensive review of the marketing literature on consumer empathy. We employed a domain-based systematic literature review on consumer empathy, which we analyzed through a qualitative content analysis by drawing on main conceptualizations from the customer experience literature as a coding scheme. By doing so, we ran a conceptual synthesis of the consumer empathy and customer experience literature resulting in the empathic customer experience, by integrating both literature streams conceptually.

First, for our literature review, we followed the guidelines (e.g., Siddaway et al., 2019; Snyder, 2019) of the well-established Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) statement to ensure transparency and reliability in our

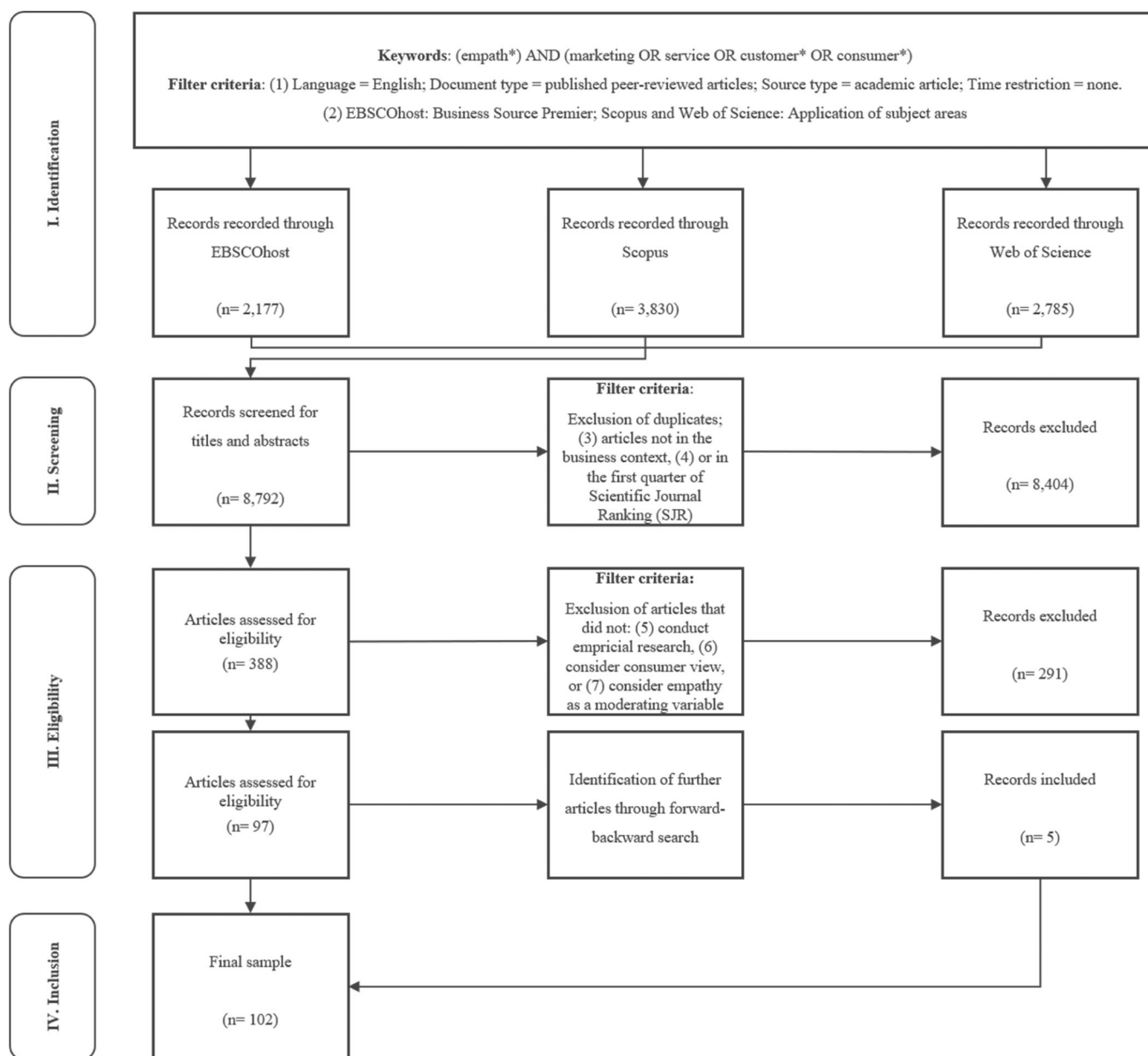


FIGURE 2 PRISMA: Process of literature search.

procedure (see Figure 2) (Moher, 2009). Following frequently cited methodological articles on systematic literature reviews, we initially selected search terms that align with our first research goal (Siddaway et al., 2019; Snyder, 2019) of providing a comprehensive view of consumer empathy in marketing and its linkage to the customer experience. During the “Identification” stage of the PRISMA procedure, we adopted a broad search strategy.¹ We used the search string (empath*) AND (marketing OR service OR customer* OR

consumer*) to be inclusive and cover the entire scope of consumer empathy. We gathered potentially relevant articles from three scientific databases (EBSCOhost, Scopus, and Web of Science) in April 2024. We applied only broad filter criteria to reduce the number of nonrelevant articles but to maintain our focus on our research questions (Siddaway et al., 2019; Snyder, 2019). Specifically, we included only peer-reviewed and already published journal articles in English, without any time restrictions. As we used the database Business Source Premier from EBSCOhost and the Social Sciences Citation Index platform from Web of Science, we applied respective subject areas (business and social sciences) for our search on the Scopus platform. Subsequent “Screening” involved reviewing titles and abstracts of 10,666 articles, eliminating those that were not business-related, and ensuring a minimum quality standard by

¹To cover the global scope of empathy, we used only “empath*” as a search term without synonyms, following Hall and Schwartz’s (2019) approach of a broad search strategy for a literature review on empathy in social psychology. We narrowed our search terms to “marketing” and “service” to encompass marketing-related literature and to “consumer*” and “customer*” Snyder (2019) to address additional customer experience-related literature.

excluding articles not ranked in the top quarter of Scimago's Scientific Journal Ranking. We extracted 388 articles for their "Eligibility" through full-text analysis. To link empathy literature to customer experience, relevant articles had to have conducted empirical research and considered empathy from a consumer perspective (e.g., Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). We excluded articles investigating empathy as a moderating variable and thus treating empathy as an external factor, contrasting our conception of empathy as a consumer response. In addition, we applied a forward-backward search to include potentially overlooked articles (Webster & Watson, 2002). Ultimately, we included a final sample of 102 articles in our literature review and coding process. Paul et al. (2021) state that this can be generally considered a robust and comprehensive sample size for a systematic literature review ($n > 40$). We provide an overview of our entire literature sample in Web Appendix A.

Second, drawing on the results of our systematic literature review, we conducted a descriptive analysis of our final sample, examining the number of articles published per year, the number of articles published in each journal, and the methodologies used to assess consumer empathy in empirical research. We also outlined the primary research settings for consumer empathy and the various consumer interactions, focusing on the respective experience partners, touchpoint types, and customer journey stages (see Section 4).

Third, to address our second research objective—integrating the concepts of consumer empathy and customer experience through a conceptual synthesis—we conducted a qualitative content analysis as an appropriate type of analysis for systematic literature reviews (Sauer & Seuring, 2023). As we outline subsequently, we employed a deductive coding approach (Bengtsson, 2016; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This approach enabled us to achieve the conceptual goals of relating and explicating² by identifying key intersections between consumer empathy and customer experience (Kindermann et al., 2024; MacInnis, 2011). Furthermore, it allowed us to view consumer empathy literature through a customer experience lens by using the terminologies of both concepts as our coding scheme (Weidig et al., 2024). In more detail, our coding scheme enabled the conceptual synthesis of the literature on consumer empathy and customer experience as it represents the components of our conceptual framework. In accordance with the perception-action model of empathy (Preston & de Waal, 2002), we classified cognitive and affective empathy to depict the procedure of an empathic customer experience.

Furthermore, we coded subconscious, immediate responses to interactions as supplementary customer experience responses, which prior research has treated as dependent variables of consumer empathy (Davis, 1996; Preston & de Waal, 2002). As introduced in Section 2.3, we categorized the identified consumer interactions as

experience partners, touchpoint types, and customer journey stages (Gahler et al., 2023).

We classified antecedents to consumer empathy as stimuli at interactions that experience partners are able to design to foster an empathic customer experience. To cover potential contextual factors of an empathic customer experience, we employed three categories: customer, situational, and sociocultural (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Prior research has used these contextual factors as moderating variables when studying the emergence of consumer empathy. Dependent variables of consumer empathy referring to long-term, deliberate outcomes were assigned codes to evaluative outcomes of empathic customer experiences (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). We provide an exemplary overview of our deductive coding scheme in Web Appendix B.

4 | DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

In this section, we present the descriptive results of our literature review on consumer empathy in marketing research. We provide a brief overview of the articles published per year (see Figure 3) and per journal (see Figure 4), the methodological approaches employed by the authors, and the research setting of the study. Finally, we present descriptive results of consumer interactions, accounting for experience partner, touchpoint type, and customer journey stage (see Table 2).

Our findings indicate continuous growth in the number of empirical articles on consumer empathy in marketing and marketing-related literature between 2010 and 2024, except for 2020. The graph in Figure 3 underscores the importance of consumer empathy in marketing and service research, which is particularly evident since 2021.

The 102 reviewed articles were published across 42 different journals. Notably, one-third of the sample was published in *Psychology & Marketing* (12), *Journal of Retailing & Consumer Services* (9), *Journal of Business Research* (8), and *Journal of Consumer Research* (5). In addition to marketing-oriented journals (78%), consumer empathy research also appears in computer science (7%), psychology (6%), and other business-oriented journals (9%). Figure 4 provides an overview of the most important journals for empirical research on consumer empathy. In addition, we identified 29 other journals that have published one or two empirical articles on consumer empathy (for overview of all relevant journals, see Web Appendix C). This broad distribution emphasizes the relevance of consumer empathy across various research settings.

Furthermore, Table 2 outlines the methods used in the articles. Predominantly, quantitative articles have been published with data collected through experiments or surveys. Only one article employed a mixed-method approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research. Analogous to the large number of definitions of consumer empathy used in marketing research (see Table 1), the articles adopted many different scales to assess consumer empathy. This highlights the ongoing quest for a standardized measurement of empathy from the consumer perspective.

²Kindermann et al. (2024, pp. 30–31) describes *relating* as "find[ing] similarities and connect[ing] previously disparate conceptual entities (i.e., integrating)," and *explicating* as "mapp[ing] out the antecedents, consequences, or boundary conditions of a conceptual entity (i.e., delineating)."

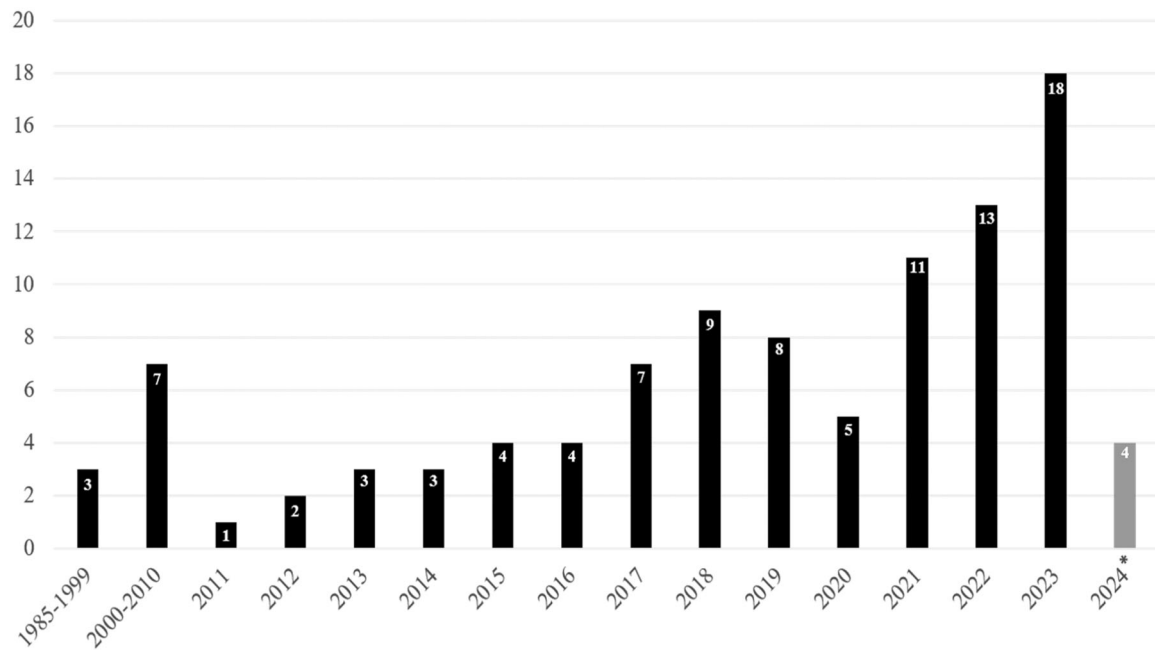


FIGURE 3 Number of articles published per year. * Figure as of April 2024.

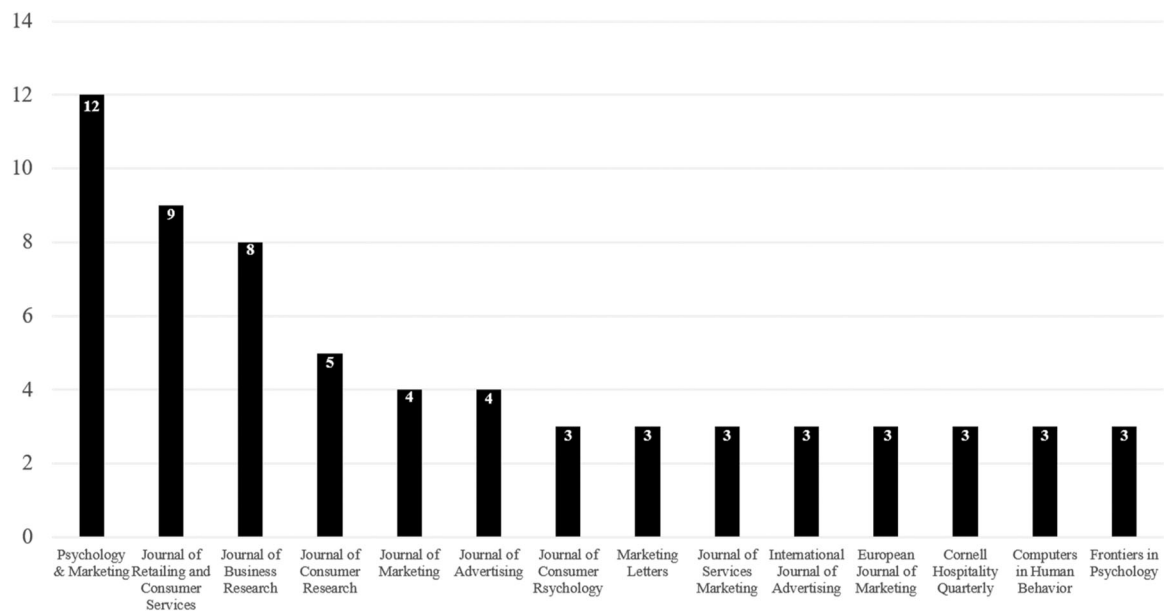


FIGURE 4 Number of articles published in main journals.

We identified four primary research settings in marketing literature that focus on consumer empathy. First, 53% of the empirical research pertained to service interactions, encompassing research settings such as hospitality and interactions involving artificial marketing agents such as service robots. Second, 29% of research focused on interactions through advertising, spanning both offline and online contexts, including commercials in charity, retail, and service settings. Third, 12% of the articles addressed interactions in retail and sales settings, covering scenarios such as grocery shopping and business-to-business sales. Fourth, 6% of articles delved into

interactions within digital marketing environments, emphasizing the role of consumer empathy on platforms such as social media.

With respect to relevant consumer interactions for an empathic customer experience, we provide an overview of the distribution of these interactions across experience partners, touchpoint types, and customer journey stages in Table 3. The table shows the frequency of specific combinations of these elements together with exemplary consumer interactions taken from our literature sample. The majority of interactions focus on “personnel” experience partners ($n = 49$), including both human and artificial experience partners. Human

TABLE 2 Article types and methodologies applied.

Paper type	Method	Total
Quantitative	Lab experiment	55
	Survey research	30
	Field experiment + lab experiment	6
	Field experiment	4
	Longitudinal methods (panel)	3
	Lab experiment + survey research	2
	Neuroscientific approach	2
	Others	3
Qualitative	None	0
Mixed-method	Interview, survey	2

partners include sales or service employees (Delpechitre et al., 2018), while artificial ones are chatbots, service robots, or virtual assistants (Mari et al., 2024). In addition, a substantial number of articles address consumer interactions with “brand” as the experience partner ($n = 41$). Experience partners in this category typically encompass companies as a whole, advertisements, products, and packaging (Chen, Razzaq, et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2024). Finally, studies on consumer empathy consider interactions with “other customers” as experience partners ($n = 12$). Within this category, we identified interactions that consider not only other customers (e.g., through customer reviews) but also social media influencers and suffering individuals, such as patients (Hossain & Rahman, 2022; Wang et al., 2016). We provide a detailed breakdown of all experience partners in our literature sample in Web Appendix D.

With respect to touchpoint type, we found more consumer interactions in offline settings ($n = 57$) than in online settings ($n = 33$). Offline touchpoints are represented through personal interactions, offline channel advertisements, or shopping scenarios (Ding et al., 2021; Park & Lee, 2015). Respective consumer interactions involving online touchpoints include encounters with chatbots, digital advertisements, or online reviews (Allard et al., 2020; Park & Rhee, 2019). In addition, we identified several articles comparing empathy levels of offline and online touchpoints (e.g., human employee vs. artificial agent), which we classify as covering both offline and online touchpoints (Gelbrich et al., 2021; Liu-Thompkins et al., 2022).

Finally, the majority of articles examining consumer empathy focus on the pre-purchase stage of the customer journey ($n = 52$). Typical interactions in this stage include advertisements or sales calls (e.g., Fisher & Ma, 2014; Li, Peluso, et al., 2023). Moreover, several articles examine consumer interactions during the post-purchase stage ($n = 32$), covering scenarios such as service recovery or product returns (e.g., Jiao & Wang, 2018; Wei et al., 2020). The fewest number of articles on consumer empathy address interactions during the purchase stage ($n = 17$), particularly focusing on consumer

interactions during checkout in restaurants or similar establishments (e.g., Davis et al., 2017; Hershcovis & Bhatnagar, 2017).

5 | CONSUMER EMPATHY AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: A CONCEPTUAL SYNTHESIS

In this section, we describe our empathic customer experience framework resulting from our conceptual synthesis (see Figure 5). Drawing on the perception–action model of empathy, we first introduce the centerpiece of our framework—the empathic customer experience, including “perception” and “action” (empathic core)—and supplementary responses that an empathic customer experience may encompass. We then delineate stimuli that can cause an empathic customer experience and highlight potential contextual factors that can influence the emergence of an empathic customer experience. Finally, we illustrate how an empathic customer experience may affect evaluative outcomes.

5.1 | Perception and action of an empathic customer experience

According to the perception–action model of empathy (see Section 2.2), an empathic customer experience entails (1) a cognitive response in the form of perception and perspective-taking and (2) an affective response, referring to emotional contagion (Davis, 1983, 1996), which together form the empathic core of an empathic customer experience. By drawing on marketing research on consumer empathy, we explore the process of an empathic customer experience encompassing its cognitive, affective, and supplementary responses.

5.1.1 | Cognitive empathy (perception)

Cognitive empathy captures the perception of an individual's or object's situation and comprises the process of perspective-taking (see Section 2.2) as part of the empathic core, which we initially introduced as the cognitive response in an empathic customer experience to another's perspective. The results of our conceptual synthesis indicate that consumers may take the perspective not only of their respective experience partners but also of additional individuals or objects involved in the interaction. First, interactions with “personnel” experience partners include those with employees or artificial agents. Employees with direct customer contact (i.e., salespeople and service staff) are primary objectives of perspective-taking in these interactions (Davis et al., 2017; Gerlach et al., 2016). However, consumers can also take the perspective of artificial agents (Kim & Hur, 2024). In interactions with “other customer” experience partners, cognitive empathy represents consumers' perspective-taking of fellow customers or social media influencers. In this case,

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Customer journey stage						
Prepurchase			Purchase		Post-purchase	
Touchpoint type			Touchpoint type		Touchpoint type	
Offline	Online	Both	Offline	Online	Offline	Online
Watching image ads for retail with or without depicted movement (Grigsby et al., 2023)	Watching ads through virtual reality versus video format (Moriuchi & Murdy, 2022)		Supporting charities based on offline information (Verhaert & van den Poel, 2011)		Moral decision making on product return in wrong store (Jiao & Wang, 2018)	
Other customers	Frequency of consumer interactions:		Frequency of consumer interactions:		Frequency of consumer interactions:	
	3x	6x	1x	1x	None	1x
	Examples:	Examples:	Examples:	Examples:	Examples:	Examples:
Experiencing fortune versus misfortune of a friend (Hwang & Chu, 2019)	Online reviews of service recovery measures from other customers (Allard et al., 2020)		Decision for donation at restaurant check-out (Mattila & Hanks, 2012)	Observation of service interaction between service robot and other customer in restaurant (Sheng et al., 2024)		Revenge approval after reading negative online reviews (De Campos Ribeiro et al., 2018)
	Witnessing the suffering of other humans (Wang et al., 2016)	Social Media posts from Influencer (Jung & Im, 2021)				

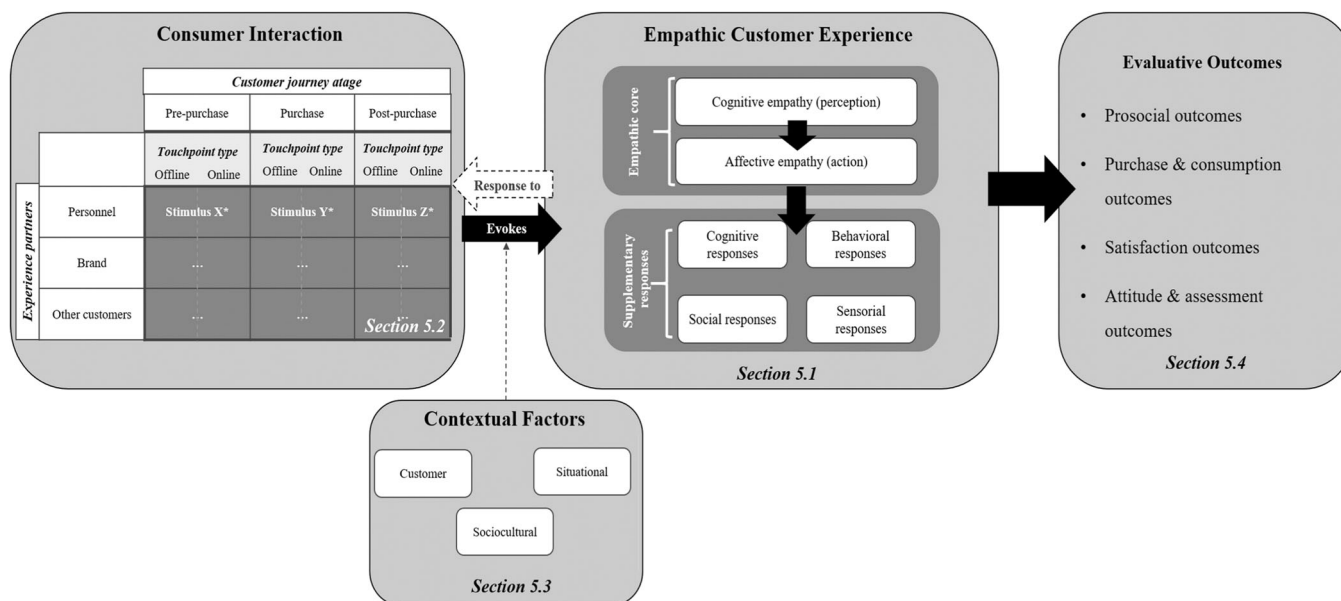


FIGURE 5 Empathic customer experience framework. *Stimulus X, Y, and Z serve as placeholders in the figure. The stimuli identified from the literature sample are presented within Table 5 (Section 5.2).

perspective-taking occurs when consumers perceive others' experiences through, for example, reports, online reviews, social media posts (De Campos Ribeiro et al., 2018; Li, Chen, et al., 2023).

Second, cognitive empathy can unfold toward objects, particularly advertising characters, companies, or products, and occurs during interactions with "brand" experience partners. Regarding visual advertisements, consumers often engage in perspective-taking of depicted characters, such as distressed children or homeless individuals in charity advertisements (Bagozzi & Moore, 1994; Bartsch & Kloss, 2019). Perspective-taking also emerges toward advertising characters in retail advertisements (Akestam et al., 2017; Escalas & Stern, 2003). Furthermore, cognitive empathy can be specified toward a company in service recovery scenarios and complaint management (Min et al., 2015), but also through text-based advertisements, in which the focus is more on the written content (Ein-Gar & Levontin, 2013). Eventually, perspective-taking can be directed toward products, such as during grocery shopping (Ding et al., 2021).

5.1.2 | Affective empathy (action)

We now shift our focus to the subsequent *affective response* ("action"), known as *emotional contagion* (see Section 2.2), as part of the empathic core within the empathic customer experience. Drawing on the results of our conceptual synthesis, we delineate two primary categories of affective responses within the empathic core. Affective empathy can manifest as emotions directed toward a specific individual or object or as either positive or negative mood, depending on the interaction.

First, affective empathy as emotions directed to another individual or object may align with the respective experience partner or

with objects (e.g., in advertisements). Common affective responses include sympathy, compassion, being moved, and pity toward the targets of the emotion (Basil et al., 2006; Jiao & Wang, 2018; Lee & Holden, 1999; Yang & Yen, 2018). Feelings of tenderness, soft-heartedness, and the sense of being touched can also characterize affective responses within empathic customer experiences (Mattila & Hanks, 2012; Verhaert & van den Poel, 2011; Yu et al., 2024).

Second, consumers' moods in empathic customer experiences can be either positive or negative. A successful service recovery, for example, can cause positive moods such as feelings of warmth, gratitude, and appreciation (Haupt et al., 2023; Pelau et al., 2021; Simon, 2013), as well as feelings of happiness, nostalgia, and delight (Collier et al., 2018; Hwang & Chu, 2019; Zhou et al., 2012). Conversely, encountering an advertisement with suffering people may lead to negative moods, such as feelings of concern, disgust, and unease (Kang et al., 2024; Sung et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2012). In extremely unfavorable perceived interactions, such as observing other humans in severe pain, affective responses can encompass exceptionally negative feelings of guilt, sadness, anger, and even fear or pain (Bagozzi & Moore, 1994; Basil et al., 2008; Zheng et al., 2021).

5.1.3 | Supplementary customer experience responses

In line with the perception-action model of empathy, we now describe *supplementary customer experience responses* that are associated with the empathic customer experience (Davis, 1996; Preston & de Waal, 2002). These supplementary responses accompany and thus go beyond the empathic core as outlined in Section 2.4 and are treated in empirical studies as dependent variables of consumer

TABLE 4 Overview of supplementary responses from the literature sample.

Dimension	Supplementary response	Valence	Author, year
Cognitive	Imagination	Positive	Grigsby et al. (2023)
	Immersion	Positive	Jung & Im (2021)
	Maladaptive responses	Negative	Basil et al. (2008)
	Narrative transportation	Positive	Grigsby et al. (2023)
	Perceived competence	Positive	Haupt et al. (2023)
	Reactance	Negative	Bartsch & Kloth (2019)
	Responsibility	Positive	Kandaurova & Lee (2019)
	Understanding	Positive	Liu & Sundar (2018)
Behavioral	Ad-skipping	Negative	Jeon et al. (2024)
	Call duration	Positive	Li, Peluso, et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2019
Social	Altruistic motive	Positive	Li, Chen, et al., 2023
	Psychological distance	Positive	Lv et al. (2022)
	Social judgment	Positive	Kim et al. (2022)
	Social presence	Positive	Mari et al. (2024)
Sensorial	Spine-tingling perception	Positive	Liu & Sundar (2018)

empathy that occur automatically and spontaneously. We identify supplementary cognitive, behavioral, social, and sensorial responses in our literature sample, as summarized in Table 4.

First, our conceptual synthesis uncovered supplementary *cognitive customer experience responses*, which can include an improvement of imagination and narrative transport (Grigsby et al., 2023), increase consumers' understanding of an individual or object (e.g., experience partner), and strengthen consumers' perceived responsibility for the situation (Kandaurova & Lee, 2019; Liu & Sundar, 2018). An empathic customer experience can also be accompanied by an increase of consumers' immersion in the experience (Jung & Im, 2021) and has the potential to mitigate maladaptive responses, such as reactance (Bartsch & Kloth, 2019; Basil et al., 2008).

Second, we identified two *behavioral customer experience responses* in our literature sample. An empathic customer experience can increase interaction duration, resulting, for example, in longer calls with sales agents (Li, Peluso, et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2019). It can also mitigate ad-skipping behavior on online video platforms (Jeon et al., 2024).

Third, we identified *social customer experience responses*, such as consumers' improved social judgment (Kim et al., 2022) and increased

altruistic orientation (Li, Peluso, et al., 2023). Furthermore, the findings of our literature analysis show that an empathic customer experience can reduce the psychological distance between consumer and agent (Lv et al., 2022) and enhance the perceived social presence of the experience (Mari et al., 2024), particularly in interactions with artificial agents. Last, the only *sensorial customer experience response* we were able to identify in our literature sample is spine-tingling perception (Liu & Sundar, 2018).

5.2 | Stimuli evoking an empathic customer experience

In this section, we introduce specific stimuli that prior research has shown to evoke empathic customer experiences. We analyze these stimuli through the conceptual synthesis of our literature sample. Potential stimuli that can cause an empathic customer experience depend on the research setting and therefore are limited in terms of applicability. We present a detailed overview of the stimuli for an empathic customer experience, including references to experience partners, touchpoint type, and customer journey stage, as identified through our qualitative content analysis, in Table 5. According to our conceptual synthesis, most empirical studies on consumer empathy have focused on stimuli that occur during the pre-purchase customer journey stage with "personnel" and "brand" experience partners at both offline and online touchpoints. Likewise, only a few stimuli are relevant for evoking an empathic customer experience during the purchase or post-purchase stage. In the post-purchase stage, the literature covers stimuli at offline and online touchpoints with "personnel" experience partners. Stimuli involving interactions with "other customers" as experience partners have only been identified in the pre-purchase stage at online touchpoints. In the following paragraphs, we therefore provide a detailed analysis of the individual stimuli we identified as potential antecedents to the emergence of an empathic customer experience.

First, our conceptual synthesis reveals several stimuli in interactions with the "personnel" experience partner (i.e., employees, salespeople, or artificial agents). For example, customer-oriented attitudes and behaviors (Gerlach et al., 2016) or observations of aggressive mistreatment of an employee by a consumer can evoke an empathic customer experience response toward the employee (Hershcovis & Bhatnagar, 2017). Research shows that employees who act morally are more effective in fostering an empathic customer experience than those who are merely competent (Kirmani et al., 2017). In service recovery scenarios, employees' remorseful apologies also enhance empathic customer experiences (Hill & Boyd, 2015). Similarly, research indicates that employees elicit higher levels of consumer empathy than artificial agents (Luo et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2023). Artificial agents, however, that express a high-degree of anthropomorphism, including visual design elements (e.g., face or body) or linguistic elements (e.g., language type) (Dootson et al., 2023; Pelau et al., 2021), or high levels of social interaction, proactivity, and interpersonal contact (Luo et al., 2019; Xie

TABLE 5 Stimuli evoking an empathic customer experience.

Customer journey stage						
Experience partner	Pre-purchase		Purchase		Post-purchase	
	Touchpoint type	Touchpoint type	Touchpoint type	Touchpoint type	Touchpoint type	
Personnel	Underdog employee status (+) (Kirmani et al., 2017)	Anthropomorphism of artificial agent (+) (Kim & Hur, 2024; Li, Peluso, et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2019)	-	Anthropomorphism of artificial agent (Dootson et al., 2023; Pelau et al., 2021; Pozharliev et al., 2021)	Customer-oriented attitude (+) (Gerlach et al., 2016)	Use of emojis in communication (+) (Wang et al., 2023)
	Interpersonal contact (+) (Lee & Yi, 2022)	Witnessed mistreatment of employee (+) (Hershcovis & Bhatnagar, 2017)	-	-	Customer-oriented behavior (+) (Gerlach et al., 2016)	Social interactivity of chatbot (+) (Yim, 2023)
	Human physician (+) (Zhang et al., 2023)	Personalization of chatbot (+) (Kim & Hur, 2024)	-	-	Remorseful apology (+) (Hill & Boyd, 2015)	
	Proactivity of artificial agent (+) (Xie et al., 2022)	-	-	-	Apology from employee (+) (Hill & Boyd, 2015)	
Nonhuman disclosure (-) (Luo et al., 2019)	-	-	-			
Business information disclosure (+) (Mangus et al., 2020)	-	-	-			
Personal information disclosure (+) (Mangus et al., 2020)	-	-	-			
I-pronoun usage (+) (Packard et al., 2018)	-	-	-			

(Continues)

TABLE 5 (Continued)

Customer journey stage			
Pre-purchase	Purchase		Post-purchase
Touchpoint type	Touchpoint type		Touchpoint type
• Low social distance (+) (Ein-Gar & Levontin, 2013) • Dramatic ad (+) (Escalas & Stern, 2003)	• Low product attractiveness (+) (Yu et al., 2024) • Human framing of company (+) (Tang & Gray, 2021)		
• Low target attractiveness (+) (Fisher & Ma, 2014)			
• High need severity (+) (Fisher & Ma, 2014)			
• High depicted movement (+) (Grigsby et al., 2023)			
• Underdog ad status (+) (Jun et al., 2015)			
• VR immersion (+) (Kandaurova & Lee, 2019)			
• Ad vividness (+) (Mooradian et al., 2008)			
• Telepresence (+) (Moriuchi & Murdy, 2022)			
• Severity of ad images (Sung et al., 2023)			

TABLE 5 (Continued)

Customer journey stage			
Pre-purchase	Post-purchase	Purchase	Post-purchase
Touchpoint type	Touchpoint type	Touchpoint type	Touchpoint type
Other customers	.	.	.
	• Unfairness of negative online review (+) (Allard et al., 2016/2020) • Influencer network centrality (+) (Jung & Im, 2021) • Influencer trustworthiness (+) (Jung & Im, 2021)	.	.

et al., 2022; Yim, 2023) can also induce an empathic customer experience. When interacting with company representatives (e.g., service employees) via online channels, disclosing personal or company-related information, as well as using emojis in written communication, can evoke empathic customer experience (Mangus et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). In addition, employees using first-person pronouns in written communication can evoke an empathic customer experience (Packard et al., 2018).

Second, we discovered stimuli in interactions with a “brand” experience partner, primarily within advertising settings including visual and content-related design factors. Visual stimuli focus on settings of an advertisement, such as vividness, drama, or depicted movement (Escalas & Stern, 2003; Grigsby et al., 2023; Mooradian et al., 2008). Such stimuli can also depict specific targets, such as distressed children, to evoke an empathic customer experience (Fisher & Ma, 2014; Sung et al., 2023). Content-related stimuli include emotional appeals, personalization cues, or underdog positioning (Bartsch & Kloth, 2019; Jun et al., 2015; Zheng et al., 2024). Reducing social distance between consumers and advertising content can also foster an empathic customer experience (Ein-Gar & Levontin, 2013). The medium through which an advertisement is displayed represents another crucial stimulus. Immersive environments, such as virtual reality, are more effective in facilitating empathic customer experiences due to increased telepresence than ordinary video advertisements (Kandaurova & Lee, 2019; Moriuchi & Murdy, 2022), whereas disclosing that an advertisement was generated by an artificial intelligence can hinder it (Arango et al., 2023). Furthermore, our results uncover stimuli that relate to a company's communication measures or image. For example, framing a company's image as humanlike (Tang & Gray, 2021) and emphasizing its environmental and responsible orientation can induce an empathic customer experience (Bae et al., 2023; Kang et al., 2024). In addition, interactions with physical products that exhibit anthropomorphic designs can create empathic customer experiences (Chen, Razzaq, et al., 2021; Ding et al., 2021).

Finally, marketing research has explored stimuli in interactions with “other customer” experience partners. For example, exaggeratedly negative comments or consumer reviews on companies can result in empathic customer experiences, whereby empathy toward harmed customers is experienced (Allard et al., 2016; Allard et al., 2020). In interactions with social media influencers, specific characteristics such as their network and trustworthiness can also serve as crucial stimuli for an empathic customer experience, which is then directed toward the influencer (Jung & Im, 2021).

5.3 | Contextual factors

We now discuss three categories of contextual factors—customer, situational, and sociocultural (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020)—that may either positively or negatively influence the impact of potential stimuli on empathic customer experiences and that empirical research on consumer empathy treats as moderating variables.

TABLE 6 Overview of contextual factors from the literature sample.

Contextual factor	Moderator variables	Valence	Author, year
Customer	Ability to experience emotions	Positive	Allard et al. (2020)
	Ad appeal	Positive	Chan & Septianto (2022)
	Age differences	Positive	Gerlach et al. (2016)
	Attitude towards homosexuality	Positive	Åkestam et al. 2017
	Consumer Power	Negative	Wei et al. (2020)
	Psychological ownership	Positive	Ding et al. (2021)
	Task orientation	Positive	Xie et al. (2022)
Situational	Employee-spotlight	Positive	Allard et al. (2020)
	Honest apology	Positive	Allard et al. (2020)
	Influencer effort	Positive	Li, Peluso, et al., 2023
	Persuasive intention	Negative	Lee & Yi (2022)
	Sponsorship disclosure	Negative	Jung & Im (2021)
	Goal frame	Negative	Zheng et al. (2024)
Sociocultural	COVID-19 pandemic	Positive	Yu et al. (2024)
	Responsibility for recipients	Negative	Lee et al. (2014)

Table 6 presents an overview of the respective contextual factors and their valence, resulting from our qualitative content analysis. Note that the identified contextual factors are specific to the interaction, and therefore depend on the research setting.

First, our findings indicate that “customer” factors primarily involve consumers' traits and characteristics, such as emotional processing ability and demographics (e.g., age) (Allard et al., 2020; Gerlach et al., 2016). Attitudes toward advertisement topics (Åkestam et al., 2017), low ambitions for goal achievement, and consumers' task orientation all potentially boost an effect of stimuli on the empathic customer experiences (Wei et al., 2020). Likewise, research indicates that the sense of product ownership in purchase decisions (Ding et al., 2021) is a crucial customer-related factor that fosters the impact of a stimuli on the emergence of an empathic customer experience (Xie et al., 2022).

Second, “situational” factors pertain to company or business partners activities that moderate the effect of stimuli on empathic customer experience development. For example, honest apologies by employees in service recovery settings (Allard et al., 2020) or target group-specific goal framing in charity advertisements supports the development of an empathic customer experience (Zheng et al., 2024). Similarly, influencers' high efforts in social media activities positively affect empathic customer experiences emergence (Li, Peluso, et al., 2023). By contrast, situational factors diminishing the impact of stimuli on empathic customer experiences include companies' persuasive intentions, such as flattering comments, excessive attention at the point of sale (Lee & Yi, 2022), or the disclosure of sponsorships of social media influencers (Jung & Im, 2021). Third, our findings reveal the presence of two key factors within the realm of “sociocultural” factors encompassing environmental or

interaction setting-related moderators: (1) the positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in grocery purchase decisions (Yu et al., 2024) and (2) the sense of responsibility for recipients in charity settings. However, responsibility decreases the likelihood of an empathic customer experience (Lee et al., 2014).

5.4 | Evaluative outcomes

This section addresses evaluative outcomes resulting from an empathic customer experience, which we classified into four types: prosocial outcomes, purchase and consumption outcomes, satisfaction outcomes, and attitude and assessment outcomes. Table 7 provides an overview of the evaluative outcomes, conceived as deliberate outcomes of an empathic customer experience requiring cognitive effort, as extracted dependent variables of consumer empathy through our qualitative content analysis. Note that evaluative outcomes of empathic customer experiences always depend on the research setting.

First, a considerable amount of research on consumer empathy focuses on charity marketing, in which outcomes frequently align with prosocial and moral behaviors, such as donation intentions (e.g., Arango et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2016), and an increase in donation volume (e.g., Chan & Septianto, 2022; O'Loughlin Banks & Raciti, 2018). Prior research also shows that an empathic customer experience engenders a heightened willingness to engage in prosocial conduct and moral behavior, including the propensity to assist people in distress and consider environmental factors in decision-making (Jiao & Wang, 2018; Lee & Holden, 1999; Lee et al., 2019).

TABLE 7 Overview of evaluative outcomes from the literature sample

Category	Evaluative outcomes	Author, year
Prosocial outcomes	Donation intention	• Arango et al. (2023) • Bartsch & Kloß (2019) • Basil et al. (2006) • Basil et al. (2008) • Ein-Gar & Levontin (2013) • Lee et al. (2014) • Mattila & Hanks (2012) • Moriuchi & Murdy (2022)
	Moral/prosocial behavior	• Park & Rhee (2019) • Park & Lee (2015) • Sung et al. (2023) • Verhaert & van den Poel (2011) • Wang et al. (2016) • Zheng et al. (2021)
	Donation amount	• Bartsch & Kloß (2019) • Grinstein et al. (2019) • Jiao & Wang (2018) • Kirmani et al. (2017) • McGinnis et al. (2017) • Tang & Gray (2021) • Zhou et al. (2012)
	Helping behavior	• Chan & Septianto (2022) • O'Loughlin Banks & Raciti (2018) • Verhaert & van den Poel (2011)
	Eco-friendly behavior	• Anaza (2014) • Bagozzi & Moore (1994) • Lee & Holden (1999) • Lee et al. (2019)
	Maladaptive moral behavior	• Ding et al. (2021) • Lee & Holden, (1999)
Purchase and consumption outcomes	(Re-)Purchase intention	• Basil et al. (2006) • Basil et al. (2008)
	Word-of-mouth	• Åkestam et al., 2017 • Allard et al. (2016) • Allard et al. (2020) • Bae et al. (2023) • Cai & Yu (2022) • Chen, Razzaq, et al. (2021) • Hwang & Chu (2019) • Kang et al. (2024) • Li, Peluso, et al., (2023) • Sh. Li, Zhu, et al. (2023) • Luo et al. (2019) • Packard et al. (2018) • Simon (2013) • Stout & Leckenby (1986) • Wei et al. (2022) • Yang & Yen (2018) • Yu et al. (2024) • Yun & Park (2022)
	(Re-)Use intention	• Anaza (2014) • Collier et al. (2018) • Kang et al. (2024) • Li, Chen, et al. (2023) • Pozharliev et al. (2021) • Umasuthan et al. (2017) • Yim (2023) • Yun & Park (2022)
	Negative behavioral intentions (complaining; churn; etc.)	• De Kervanoael et al., (2020) • Kandaurova & Lee, (2019) • Kim & Hur, (2024) • Lv et al. (2022) • Yoo (2021) • Zhang et al. (2023)
		• De Campos Ribeiro et al. (2018) • Dootson et al. (2023) • Sheng et al. (2024)

(Continues)

TABLE 7 (Continued)

Category	Evaluative outcomes	Author, year
	Tipping behavior/ amount	• Davis et al. (2017) • Hershcovis & Bhatnagar (2017)
	Switching behavior from human to digital	Li & Zhang (2023)
	Willingness to pay	Allard et al. (2016)
Category	Evaluative outcomes	Author, year
Satisfaction outcomes	Customer satisfaction	• Aggarwal et al. (2005) • Anaza (2014) • Chen, Mohanty, et al., 2021 • Davis et al. (2017) • Delpechitre et al. (2018) • Gelbrich et al. (2021) • Gerlach et al. (2016) • Haupt et al. (2023) • Hocutt et al. (2006)
	Trust	• Aggarwal et al. (2005) • Chi & Hoang Vu (2023) • Mangus et al. (2020) • Mari et al. (2024) • Pelau et al. (2021) • Lv et al. (2022) • Weißhaar & Huber (2016)
	Forgiveness	• Collier et al. (2018) • Hill & Boyd (2015) • Wang et al. (2023) • Wei et al. (2020) • Wei et al. (2022)
	Loyalty	• Fan et al. (2023) • Gerlach et al. (2016) • Prentice & Nguyen (2020)
	Commitment	• Delpechitre et al. (2018) • Weißhaar & Huber (2016)
	(Un-)Fairness	Tang & Gray (2021)
Attitude and assessment outcomes	Attitude	• Åkestam et al. (2017) • Escalas & Stern (2003) • Grigsby et al. (2023) • Hershcovis & Bhatnagar (2017) • Jun et al. (2015) • Jung & Im (2021) • Kang et al. (2024) • Sheng et al. (2024)
	Assessment	• Allard et al. (2020) • Argo et al. (2008) • He et al. (2021) • Hershcovis & Bhatnagar (2017) • Lee & Yi (2022) • Yang & Yen, (2018)
	Persistence	• Gelbrich et al. (2021) • Kim et al. (2022)
	Technology acceptance	Pelau et al. (2021)

Second, an empathic customer experience positively influences purchasing, consumption, and usage decisions. Prior studies indicate that an empathic customer experience enhances purchase intention (e.g., Allard et al., 2020; Wei et al., 2022), leads to a greater willingness to pay premium prices, and fosters higher tipping as well as positive word of mouth (e.g., Allard et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2017; Pozharliev et al., 2021). Furthermore, empathic customer experiences encourage service reuse and co-creation, especially in interactions with artificial agents (Lv et al., 2022; Xie et al., 2022). Importantly, an empathic customer experience can mitigate negative behavioral intentions such as complaints, negative word of mouth, and customer churn (Sheng et al., 2024; Yim, 2023).

Third, empirical studies illustrate that an empathic customer experience increases customer satisfaction (e.g., Packard et al., 2018; Simon, 2013). Depending on the setting of the interaction, satisfaction refers to employees, the services provided, and the success of service recoveries (Aggarwal et al., 2005; Gelbrich et al., 2021; Roschk & Kaiser, 2013). Similarly, an empathic customer experience fosters consumer trust, loyalty, and commitment to companies, employees, or artificial agents (Chi & Hoang Vu, 2023; Fan et al., 2023; Weißhaar & Huber, 2016). Moreover, in the setting of complaint handling and service recovery, an empathic customer experience facilitates consumer forgiveness and can mitigate the perceived unfairness by consumers (Hill & Boyd, 2015; Tang & Gray, 2021).

Finally, the results of our conceptual synthesis show that an empathic customer experience shapes consumer attitudes and assessment, extending beyond specific advertisements, products, or brands to encompass perceptions of entire companies (Åkestam et al., 2017; Grigsby et al., 2023). Particularly in interactions with artificial agents, empathic customer experiences enhance consumer technology acceptance and perception of the agents' competence and usefulness (Pelau et al., 2021; Tojib et al., 2023).

6 | DISCUSSION

6.1 | Research contributions

This study examines the intersection of consumer empathy and customer experience. It explores the rising importance of consumer empathy and develops an empathic customer experience framework through a conceptual synthesis that integrates both literature streams. By doing so, we deduce insights for the consumer empathy literature from customer experience literature and vice versa while extending the application areas of both literature streams (Weidig et al., 2024). Our study contributes to research in at least three ways.

First, we conceptually synthesized consumer empathy and customer experience to better understand the relationship between these concepts, which have been investigated in isolation so far. Specifically, by conceptually synthesizing these concepts in a structured and systematic way, we combined the two literature streams with the conceptual goals of relating and explicating (MacInnis, 2011). To do so, we relied on the perception-action model

of empathy and identified empathic customer experience as a consumer response, caused by a stimulus during an interaction with an experience partner at a touchpoint, involving perspective-taking of a target object (i.e., cognitive response), and an appropriate emotional contagion according to the perceived situation (i.e., affective response). Supplementary customer experience responses (e.g., behavioral, social, sensorial) may further complement an empathic customer experience (see Section 2.4). Our conception allowed us to highlight the fundamental role of empathy in shaping customer experiences. As emotional and empathic components remain indispensable for cultivating a positive customer experience (Liu-Thompkins et al., 2022), our work contributes to customer experience research in this respect.

Second, we derived the empathic customer experience framework from our conceptual synthesis (see Section 5). This holistic framework advances consumer empathy research, which, as mentioned, is fragmented (see Figure 1). We distinguish the individual components of an empathic customer experience and further explore their interrelationships through our framework. In particular, we provide a detailed, literature-based review of all components of an empathic customer experience and thus offer a comprehensive structure of existing consumer empathy literature based on the customer experience. As we analyzed the empirical research on consumer empathy through a customer experience lens, we were able to discover the emergence of an empathic customer experience through stimuli (Section 5.2), its dynamics throughout the empathic core and potential supplementary responses of various dimensions (Section 5.1), potential contextual factors (Section 5.3), and the enduring impact on evaluative outcomes (Section 5.4).

Third, the results from our conceptual synthesis enable us to derive several directions for future research that address the empathic customer experience framework and its components, as well as more general directions for further research on consumer empathy. Using our conceptual framework, we were able to identify research gaps at the intersection of consumer empathy and customer experience, which we summarize in Section 6.3 as part of our future research agenda. In doing so, we not only highlight fields in which further research is necessary but also provide concrete research questions that can serve as a foundation for future studies to advance the field of empathic customer experience.

6.2 | Managerial implications

Our empathic customer experience framework offers managers guidance on fostering consumer empathy. Specifically, companies can attain beneficial effects of empathic customer experiences if they account for three key takeaways in their strategies and during their everyday interactions with consumers.

First, our framework provides a comprehensive overview of the distinct levers (i.e., stimuli; Section 5.2) that drive the creation of an empathic customer experience (Section 5.1) during diverse consumer interactions with experience partners at offline and online

touchpoints along the customer journey (Section 4). Furthermore, we raise managers' awareness of potential evaluative outcomes of an empathic customer experience (Section 5.4) and the respective context in which an empathic customer experience may arise (Section 5.3).

Second, we recommend that managers deliberately design consumer interactions with all identified experience partners (i.e., personnel, brand, and other consumers) in an offline and online world (i.e., touchpoint type) along the customer journey to leverage empathic customer experiences. In particular, managers might incorporate anthropomorphic cues as stimuli in respective experience partners (e.g., artificial agents, advertising characters, products) to evoke an empathic customer experience (e.g., Chen, Razzaq, et al., 2021; Pozharliev et al., 2021). Managers should strategically implement these design elements to create more relatable and emotionally engaging interactions with consumers. Similarly, our findings suggest that managers should consider investing in technologies such as virtual reality in advertising, which can increase the level of telepresence and consequently induce empathic customer experiences (Kandaurova & Lee, 2019). Moreover, we demonstrate that the emergence of an empathic customer experience depends on contextual factors. Thus, managers should tailor consumer interactions to consumer traits and demographics (e.g., age distribution), situational factors (e.g., service failure), and sociocultural factors (e.g., a pandemic like COVID-19) to enhance the effectiveness of stimuli in fostering empathic customer experiences.

Third, our work clearly demonstrates that offering an empathic customer experience pays off. This is particularly evident in terms of prosocial outcomes, purchase and consumption decisions, consumer satisfaction, and consumer attitude. For charity firms, managers should leverage the ability of empathic customer experiences to promote prosocial behavior, such as increased donation intentions and engagement in moral behaviors (e.g., Arango et al., 2023). Fostering empathic customer experiences can also enhance purchase intentions and mitigate negative behaviors such as consumer complaints (e.g., Cai & Yu, 2022; Sheng et al., 2024). Finally, managers can improve overall consumer attitudes and satisfaction by recognizing consumer empathy as a crucial part of customer experiences and their relationships with consumers.

6.3 | Future research directions and limitations

In this section, we outline various directions for future research encompassing the empathic customer experience framework, its components, and broader fields for exploring consumer empathy in marketing, while also considering the limitations of our study. Table 8 offers a research agenda with potential research questions for future research.

First, our analysis shows that current research does not provide a clear picture as to which type of experience partner is best suited to elicit an empathic customer experience. Future studies could run experiments to identify the experience partners that most effectively

induce these experiences. Such an investigation could account for the appropriate touchpoint type and customer journey stage as well as contextual factors. Relatedly, scholars might extend the research setting by considering dynamic effects over time, as current studies have focused on single interactions of empathic customer experience so far. Furthermore, our analysis clearly reveals that most studies have explored the effect of an empathic customer experience on evaluative outcomes and neglected the effects on supplementary responses within the empathic customer experience, especially in terms of behavioral, social, and sensorial responses. We expect that particularly unconscious, automatic behavioral (e.g., nodding) and social (e.g., perceived social bonds) responses may constitute underlying mechanisms that influence evaluative outcomes of an empathic customer experience.

Second, with respect to the stimuli of an empathic customer experience and accounting for ongoing technological developments, future research could explore stimuli in artificial agents that induce an empathic customer experience beyond anthropomorphism. The integration of other emotional stimuli in this experience partner may serve as a fruitful starting point (Huang & Rust, 2018). Likewise, with the rise of social media and online recommendation platforms, interactions with "other customer" experience partners are gaining ground in consumers' everyday lives. However, research on stimuli of empathic customer experience in those interactions is still scarce. Similarly, future research might extend the investigation of stimuli to how to induce an empathic customer experience response to slogans, logos, and ethical branding with the "brand" experience partner, particularly with physical objects. Moreover, with respect to the customer journey stage, our findings reveal that stimuli of an empathic customer experience mainly address the prepurchase stage. Future studies should instead investigate potential stimuli with all three experience partners in consumer interactions in the purchase and postpurchase stages.

Third, with respect to contextual factors, our analysis discloses a general need for empirical studies to take potential moderators of an empathic customer experience into account. For example, in line with previous research on consumer empathy, an empathic customer experience may vary in strength across individuals, age groups, or situations (Preston & de Waal, 2002), which might serve as another starting point for future research in this respect. In our empathic customer experience framework, we focused on contextual factors that influence the emergence of an empathic customer experience. Contextual factors, however, also influence the effect of an empathic customer experience on evaluative outcomes (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020), which we leave for further research to explore.

Fourth, with the notable exceptions of De Campos Ribeiro et al. (2018) and Hershcovis and Bhatnagar (2017), the evaluated studies show a positive effect of an empathic customer experience on evaluative outcomes. By contrast, future studies might explore interactions in which an empathic customer experience evokes negative evaluative outcomes. Such studies would be particularly insightful for interactions that reveal moral and ethical misbehavior of companies or their employees toward consumers. Furthermore, we considered

TABLE 8 Research agenda and potential questions for future research.

Theme	Specific area of research	Potential research questions for future research
Empathic customer experience	Experience partners	• Which types of experience partners are most effective in fostering empathic customer experiences? • How do different types of experience partners affect the intensity of empathic customer experiences? • How do empathic customer experiences evolve across multiple interactions with the same or different experience partners over time?
	Touchpoint type & Customer journey stage	• At which stage of the customer journey can empathic customer experiences be elicited most effectively? • Which types of touchpoints (online vs. offline) are most effective in generating empathic customer experiences?
	Supplementary customer experience response	• What additional supplementary responses (e.g., social, sensorial) are emerge beyond empathic customer experiences? • Are certain supplementary responses stronger than others, potentially overshadowing or overpowering one another? • How might supplementary responses potentially influence each other within an empathic customer experience?
Stimuli of empathic customer experiences	Types of stimuli	• What are further stimuli of an empathic customer experience, especially with "other customers" as experience partners, and during the post-purchase stage? • What types of stimuli are most effective in inducing empathic customer experiences when compared against each other? • What stimuli are most effective in inducing empathic customer experiences during the purchase and post-purchase stages?
	Anthropomorphic cues	• Which combinations of anthropomorphic cues (e.g., expression, gesture, voice) are most effective in eliciting empathic customer experiences in interactions with artificial agents? • What stimuli, beyond anthropomorphism, can effectively induce empathic customer experiences in interactions with artificial agents?
	Stimuli of empathic customer experiences	• How do interactions with "other customers" on social media or online recommendation platforms impact empathic customer experiences? • What additional stimuli in interactions with "other customers" can enhance the induction of empathic customer experiences? • How do elements such as slogans, logos, or ethical branding influence the emergence of empathic customer experiences with physical products?
Theme	Specific area of research	Potential research questions for future research
Contextual factors	Types of contextual factors	• What additional contextual factors (e.g., sociocultural) moderate the emergence of empathic customer experiences? • What (contextual) factors might influence the effect of empathic customer experiences on evaluative outcomes?
	Intensity of contextual factors	• Which types of contextual factors have the greatest (least) impact on the emergence of empathic customer experiences? • Are there specific contextual factors that could harm the development of empathic customer experiences?
Evaluative outcomes	Valence of evaluative outcomes	• How does the intensity of evaluative outcomes vary across different settings? • Are there specific interactions that lead to empathic customer experiences which could potentially inhibit evaluative outcomes (e.g., interactions involving distressed consumers)?
	Not yet investigated effects	• What are the long-term effects of repeated empathic customer experiences on evaluative outcomes? • How do evaluative outcomes of empathic customer experiences quantitatively impact company performance?

(Continues)

TABLE 8 (Continued)

Theme	Specific area of research	Potential research questions for future research
Empathy in marketing & service (in general)	Various research areas	• How does an individual's inherent capacity for empathy (empathy as a trait) influence the emergence of empathic customer experiences? • What methods can be employed to integrate empathic capabilities into artificial agents? • How does empathy, from the perspective of a firm or employee, affect interactions with consumers and the quality of consumer relationships?

evaluative outcomes of an empathic customer experience from the consumer perspective. Determining the direct and indirect effects of an empathic customer experience on company performance (e.g., sales figures, acquisition of new customers, retention) would also be worthwhile.

Finally, in the quest for structuring the marketing literature with a customer experience lens in a systematic way, we needed to make some compromises with respect to the complexity of the resulting empathic customer experience framework. As such, we were not able to further distinguish between different views of consumer empathy as being either a consumer trait or a state. We leave this additional differentiation for further research. In addition, the objective and focus of our research were on consumer empathy, which we selected given the increasing number of publications on consumer interactions and the relevance for a beneficial customer experience. As such, our findings are naturally limited to this specific type of empathy and do not cover empathy in general. We therefore call for future research also to investigate employee empathy with a comprehensive view. Finally, our descriptive and conceptual analyses enabled us to derive an overview of the consumer empathy literature and the role of consumer empathy in the customer experience, but we were limited in deriving statements on the relative importance of these levers and evaluative outcomes. Running a meta-analysis might be fruitful to overcome this limitation.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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