

# Shopping with Voice Assistants: How Empathy Affects Decision-Making Outcomes

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## ABSTRACT

Empathy is a fundamental requirement for effective communication. Empathic salespeople can positively affect consumers' purchasing decisions and evaluation of the service encounter. Artificial intelligence-based voice assistants (VAs) such as Amazon Alexa and Google Home are at the core of domestic life to help any family member with repeated and fast-paced tasks. Although they increasingly assist shopping decisions and exhibit empathic behavior, it is unclear how consumers' affective responses toward VAs influence decision-making outcomes.

This article presents an individual-session experiment where families (vs. individuals) shop using an ad-hoc Alexa app featuring high (vs. standard) emphatic capabilities. Using structural equation modeling, the proposed model explicates the bases of consumers' beliefs toward VAs in terms of functional (usefulness), relational (trust), and social-emotional (empathy) attributes and predicts three behavioral outcomes, namely, intention to adopt as a delegated agent, intention to adopt as a decision aid and acceptance of product recommendations.

First, the findings demonstrate an increase in consumers' perceptions, beliefs and behavioral intentions when Alexa (a) frames messages to convey warmth and sympathy (empathic responses), (b) asks relevant questions to get to know the user before providing recommendations (empathic listening), and (c) offers proactive feedback on the choice while verifying the user's satisfaction (empathic feedback). Second, the study reveals that positive responses to empathic VAs hold constant in social shopping settings. Third, an interaction effect shows that families respond better to the functional attributes of empathic VAs, such as ease of use and usefulness, while individuals show a greater response to standard VAs.

These results advance understanding in the area of immersive customer experience in relation to marketing and service management. Furthermore, they contribute to the literature addressing consumer-machine relationship formation during product recommendation within the context of conversational commerce also in social settings.

Methodologically, this is the first marketing research employing a machine behavior perspective to develop an ad-hoc app to increase voice interaction realism; thus, enhancing the ecological validity of the study. In doing so, the effect of VA empathy level is measured in a controlled but realistic purchase environment.

The authors argue that research on human-VA interaction that ignores the effect of empathy and its social-emotional determinants on behavioral intentions is likely to generate biased results.