Relational Benefits as Predictors of Relationship Quality Outcomes in Online Retailing

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the extent to which structural assurance mechanisms and economic benefits of online shopping are used by online shoppers as cues to infer the relational benefits of confidence and special treatment, respectively. The study further posits that these relational benefits foster relationship quality outcomes for online retailers. The study's findings—based on survey data obtained from 580 online shoppers—suggest that the online retailing structural assurance mechanisms and the selected economic benefits online shopping positively predict online shoppers' special treatment benefits and confidence benefits. The results also show that special treatment benefits and confidence benefits positively predict relationship quality outcomes. The findings also show how the relational benefits serve as mediating mechanisms through which the online retailing structural assurance features and customisation and functional convenience affect the relationship quality outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Confidence Benefits, Online Retailing, Relational Benefits, Repurchase Intention, Special Treatment Benefits, Willingness to Pay More, Word-of-Mouth

1. INTRODUCTION

Building strong online customer relationships is widely seen as a strategy that online retailers could implement in order to secure the future growth of the online retailing trade (Kozlenkova Palmatier, Fang, Xiao, & Huang, 2017; Verma, Sharma, & Sheth, 2016). Indeed, the literature has robustly and consistently linked building strong customer relationships to a number of business outcomes, including increased revenue, customer loyalty, price inelasticity, word-of-mouth referrals, lower acquisition costs, upselling, and cross-selling (Guerola-Navarro, Gil-Gomez, Oltra-Badenes, & Sendra-García, 2021; Rodriguez & Boyer, 2020). However, research suggests that online retailers find it increasingly challenging to foster relationships with customers (Verma et al., 2016). To improve this, online retailers are making significant investments in developing long-term relationships through the provision of additional benefits beyond the core product to their customers. These benefits that customers receive from firms through their sustained relationship are called 'relational benefits' (Gremler, Van Vaerenbergh, Brűggen, & Gwinner, 2020). Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner (1998) specifically define

relational benefits as the kinds of benefit that customers receive over and above the performance of the core service. Relational benefits thus accrue from long-term cooperation between a firm and its customers, and extend beyond the core benefits (such as products and service quality) that customers receive from the firm (Su, Li, & Cui, 2009).

Prior research has shown that relational benefits are important to firms owing to their role in fostering commitment, boosting loyalty intention, and increasing word-of-mouth referrals (Gremler et al., 2020; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002; Lee, Choi, Kim, & Hyun, 2014). This logic holds true for online retailers too, with the provision of relational benefits enabling them to strengthen their existing customer relationships and to improve their ability to convert first-time buyers into committed and loyal customers. Relational benefits fall under the rubric of relationship marketing more generally, which denotes the act of "attracting, maintaining and enhancing customer relationships" (Berry, 1983). The raison d'être of relationship marketing is to foster enduring relationships with customers by delivering long-term value for them, with the aim of retaining them over the long-term (Grönroos, 1994). Relational marketing suggests that, to meet the long-term value needs of customers, firms must offer more resources and activities than just their core product/s (Grönroos, 1997). Previous research has shown that, beyond the core benefits offered to consumers, certain economic, psychological, social, and individual benefits inspire customers to develop and maintain long-term relationships with retailers (Berry, 1995; Bitner, 1995; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Grounded in these studies, Gwinner et al. (1998) proposed and empirically examined a framework for relational marketing. These authors posited that, in the long term, customers obtain three forms of benefit beyond a core product or service offering: confidence benefits, special treatment benefits, and social benefits.

The term 'confidence benefits' refers to reducing risk and scepticism in transactions and improving reasonable prospects from the transactions. The second type of relational benefit, 'special treatment benefits', refers to both economic and customization benefits that customers derive from the retailer. Third, 'social benefits' denotes the emotional aspect of the relationship, which emphasises the personal recognition of customers by the employees of a firm, and the cultivation of rapport between the employees of the firm and its customers (Gwinner et al., 1998). A follow-up study by Patterson and Smith (2001) validated this three-dimensional relational benefit nomenclature.

Prior research on the relational benefits in online retailing has analyzed their effects on customers' satisfaction, repurchase intention, and word-of-mouth referrals (Su et al., 2009; Park & Kim, 2003). Other researchers have examined the impact of website information quality, security perception, and site awareness on relational benefits (Park & Kim, 2006). Furthermore, the study of Yen and Gwinner (2003) analyzed the roles of perceived performance and control in relation to confidence benefits on the one hand, and of convenience and efficiency in relation to special treatment benefits on the other. However, the existing research is not only sparse when it comes to relational benefits in online retailing, but is also vague about what constitutes a relational benefit at all. Indeed, Gremler et al. (2020, p. 581) note that "relatively few studies examine antecedents of customer relational benefits". The present study addresses this research opportunity by addressing the antecedents of relational benefits and their impact on relationship-quality outcomes for online retailers.

Other research (e.g., Yen & Gwinner, 2003) has identified confidence benefits (i.e., reduced uncertainty or anxiety regarding an online retailer's performance) and special treatment benefits (i.e., the economic and customization benefits provided by online retailers) as important relational benefits in e-commerce. Important factors that have not received attention in the literature, however, are the processes through which structural assurance mechanisms of online retailing (i.e., the features of online shopping platforms that minimize online shoppers' safety and security concerns) influence confidence relational benefits. This is important because online shoppers' perception of online safety is widely cited as the most critical barrier to growth in online retailing (Mohammed & Tejay, 2017). It is unsurprising, therefore, that online retailers are investing significant resources in the development of structural assurance mechanisms that are designed to provide customers with a sense of security.

Evidence shows that structural assurance mechanisms are a crucial component of institutional trust in electronic markets and a prerequisite for building customer confidence (Maduku, 2016; Wingreen, Mazey, Baglione, & Storholm, 2019). Given its importance for consumer confidence, the question of how online retailers' structural assurance mechanisms serve as cues that signal confidence relational benefits to online shoppers is certainly significant to online retailers.

In the first instance, the present study examines how online retailing structural assurance mechanisms (payment system guarantees, seals of approvals guarantees, and transaction protection) serve as extrinsic online shopping cues that customers can rely on to feel more confident in the security of their transactions (a confidence benefit). Second, the study aims to show how this boost in customer confidence can improve the quality of the relationship between shoppers and online retailers, leading to more word-of-mouth referrals, higher repurchase intention, and a general willingness of online customers to pay more.

In addition, research has shown how customization (Wu, Quyen, & Rivas, 2017; Yoo & Park, 2016) and functional convenience (De Kerviler, Demoulin, & Zidda, 2016; Duarte, e Silva, & Ferreira, 2018; Khan & Khan, 2018) are also important factors influencing online purchasing behavior, owing to their ability to provide economic (and other) benefits to the consumer. Indeed, the study of Yen and Gwinner (2003) identifies convenience as an antecedent to special treatment within the broader schema of relational benefits in online retailing. The convenience of online shopping also speaks to an economic benefit, as it enables shoppers to save time and money. Although special treatment comprises the customization and economic benefits provided by retailers (Gremler et al., 2020), scarcely any research examines how customization fosters special treatment benefits. The present study, therefore, attempts to broaden the existing research on the antecedents of special treatment benefits by adding customization to functional convenience and examining the extent to which these serve as special treatment cues for online shoppers. Ultimately, this study seeks to show how online retailers could positively impact the perceived special treatment of their customers by improving customization and functional convenience, and how this perception of special treatment could lead to better outcomes for retailers through increased word-of-mouth referrals, greater repurchase intention, and a general willingness among customers to pay more.

This study contributes to the literature on online retailing customer relationships in three ways. First, the study broadens the current view of relational benefits in the context of online retailing through the theoretical lens of cue utilization theory. The findings of the study show how, on the one hand, online retailing structural assurance mechanisms and, on the other, their economic and customization service efforts are used by online shoppers to infer the relational benefits of confidence and special treatment respectively. Second, the study not only demonstrates the combined effects of online shopper confidence and relational benefits on their relationship quality outcomes with retailers, but also delineates the relative importance of these relational benefits on customers' relationship quality outcomes with online retailers. Third, by examining the online shopping customer relationship from the perspective of online shoppers in South Africa, this study contributes to the online retailing customer relationship literature, and does so from the perspective of a context that is an under-researched yet important market for the growth of online retailing. Because of cultural differences and disparities in global online retailing lifecycles, the extrapolation of other findings on this topic – based on samples drawn from Asian and Anglo-Saxon contexts – to the contexts of an emerging African economy such as South Africa (which is in a different phase of online shopping) may be problematic without validation. Finally, the findings of this study have managerial implications for online retailers in their efforts to develop and nurture long-term relationships with their customers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Overview of the Existing Literature on Relational Benefits

The concept of 'relational value' can be traced back to the study of Morgan and Hunt (1994), who argued that firms that receive superior benefits from their relationship with partners relative to other

partners are more likely to the committed to the relationship. Thus the authors adopted a concise approach to examining the benefits that firms are likely to obtain from maintaining their relationship with partners. Taking the customer perspective, Gwinner et al. (1998) examined the benefits that customers receive from being loyal to a firm. Thus, the present study is based on the latter study. Since that study, several others have examined the issue of relational benefits from the customer's perspective. Appendix A provides an overview of such studies.

The foremost study on relational benefits conceptualised it as a unidimensional construct (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). However, Gwinner et al.'s (1998 study analyzed the construct from a multi-dimensional view, and argued that customers who are loyal to a firm derive confidence, social, and special treatment benefits from the firm. Prior research has examined how some or all of those three relational benefits impact on various business outcomes in a variety of contexts. However, from the overview of the literature provided (see Appendix A), it seems abundantly clear that most studies have examined the concept of relational benefits from the perspective of customers of service firms. In spite of its importance in building relationship-quality outcomes, only a handful of studies (Alagarsamy, Mehrolia, & Singh, 2021; Su et al, 2009; Sung & Kim, 2017; Yen & Gwinner, 2003) have examined the concept of relational benefits in online retailing. However, very few of these studies – together with the others on relational benefits in offline contexts – have examined what constitutes relational benefits. Thus gaps remain regarding what variables predict the types of relational benefits in online retailing. Specifically, the roles of online shopping security features such as payment system guarantees, seals of approval guarantees, perceived transaction protection in fostering confidence benefits (lower perceived risk of online shopping) in online shopping have been overlooked in the literature. Moreover, the extent to which relational benefits generate an important relationship quality outcome such as willingness to pay more has also been overlooked in the literature. In summary, there is limited empirical evidence on the antecedents of relational benefits in online retailing – and that is what the present study seeks to address.

2.2. Relational Benefits and Relationship Quality in Online Retailing

The focus of the present study is on the predictors of relational benefits and their impact on the quality outcomes of the relationship between online shoppers and online retailers. For online retailing to live up to its growth potential, online retailers must shift from concentrating on transactional relationships to nurturing profitable and long-lasting relationships that are mutually beneficial to themselves and their customers. To achieve this, more research is necessary. The relational benefits that customers derive from retailers are the defining hallmarks of their relationship quality (Yen & Gwinner, 2003). However, in the domain of online retailing, the issue of relational benefits and their implications for relationship quality between online shoppers and online retailers is sparsely researched.

The notion of relational benefits has become important to both practitioners and researchers, given its importance in customer satisfaction and other relationship quality outcomes (Gremler et al., 2020). In the online retailing context, Yen and Gwinner (2003) have found that confidence and special treatment benefits had a significant impact on customer satisfaction and online loyalty in Taiwan; and a study by Park and Kim (2006) found that relational benefits had a significant positive effect on online shopping commitment to online retailers in South Korea. Similarly, Su et al. (2009) discovered that confidence, special treatment, and honour benefits were significantly correlated with Chinese online shopper satisfaction, repurchase intention, and positive word-of-mouth referrals. In another study on Chinese consumer loyalty to a sharing economy service, Yang, Song, Chen, and Xia (2017) found consumer perceptions of confidence, special treatment, social, and safety benefits to be associated with their commitment to a retailer. The study's findings show that consumer commitment also mediates the impact of the relational benefits on loyalty. A study by Sánchez-Casado, Confente, Tomaseti-Solano, and Brunetti (2018) identified monetary saving, recognition, social value, entertainment value, and exploration as evidence of the relational benefits offered by brands on their social media pages that influence customer-based brand equity and the brand loyalty of social media users in Spain and Italy.

However, that study neither distinguished between the various relational benefits nor examined the different facets of relational benefits. A study by Wong, Chang, and Yeh (2019) examines the impact of relational benefits (functional, social, confidence, and special treatment) on Taiwanese customers' mobile switching behavior. Their findings show that, whereas social and special treatment benefits are not significantly related to customers' switching behavior, functional and confidence benefits are.

While the existing literature does recognise the importance of relational benefits for relationship quality outcomes, it is noteworthy that, besides the study of Yen and Gwinner (2003), no other research has examined the antecedents of relational benefits. However, understanding these antecedents is important, as it would enable online retailers to concentrate their efforts on those activities that leverage relational benefits and so improve the quality of their relationship with online shoppers. The question of how online shoppers infer relational benefits from online retailer activities can be explained by cue utilization theory, which is explained below.

2.3. Cue Utilization Theory

Cue utilization theory states that consumers rely on cues to form their beliefs about objects, and that this affects their behavior in relation to the object (Zou & Liu, 2019). Originally used in marketing as a framework to analyze consumers' perceptions of product quality, cue utilization theory proposes that consumers rely on a range of cues – including price, taste, colour, and scent – as surrogate ways to infer a product's quality (Olson & Jacoby, 1972). These cues can be evaluated with regard to their confidence value (CV) and predictive value (PV). A cue's CV refers to the extent to which a consumer believes in their capacity to evaluate the cue correctly. PV, on the other hand, denotes a cue's reliability and the subjective probability that relying on the cue will lead to a successful solution (Olson & Jacoby, 1972). According to Olson and Jacoby (1972), a consumer's evaluation of the importance of cues in their appraisal of quality is based on the PVs and/or CVs of the associated cues. Researchers (Jacoby, Olson & Haddock, 1971; Valenzi & Andrews, 1971) have further distinguished between intrinsic and extrinsic cues. 'Intrinsic cues' refers to product-related items such as ingredients and critical components that could not be modified without changing the physical characteristics of the product, whereas 'extrinsic cues' denotes attributes that are related to the product (e.g., price and image) but that are not inherently part of the physical product.

In the domain of online retailing, cue utilization theory has been applied to examine a number of issues. Griffith and Gray (2002) used the theory to ascertain the effect of two extrinsic online retailer cues (brand familiarity and website vividness) on consumers' evaluation of online retailer credibility, quality, and emotional feedback. The results of their study suggest that the two extrinsic cues garnered positive consumer responses. Also drawing on cue utilization theory, Wang, Cui, Huang, and Dai (2016) examined the role of online retailer reputation and product presentation in online shoppers' product quality evaluations. The results of the study, for both low-involvement and high-involvement situations, showed that retailer reputation and product presentation influenced product quality evaluation. Similarly, Kukar-Kinney and Xia (2017) relied on cue utilization theory to examine consumer responses to online retailers' daily promotional deals. Their findings showed that extrinsic cues influenced consumer evaluations of deals and consumers' intention to purchase in situations where intrinsic product and deal cues were either absent or inadequate. A study by Kunz and Seshadri (2015) identified community reputation, online communication, and perceived similarity with the online community as cues that foster consumers' relationship quality outcomes (specifically, trust and sympathy) with online travel communities.

The preceding overview reasonably demonstrates the applicability of cue utilization theory to examine how various online retailers' cues are used by online shoppers to inform their beliefs about those retailers. Given that relational benefits are a dimension of 'relationship quality' (Macintosh, 2007), it is contended that, just as cue utilization theory is a useful framework for analyzing consumers' perception of product quality, it could also be instrumental in analyzing relational quality in online

retailing. It is argued that consumers use cues to make judgments about the relational benefits of online retailers.

3. RESEARCH MODEL AND DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESES

3.1 Research Model

Based on the literature, this study proposes a conceptual model (Figure 1) to examine the antecedents of online retailing relational benefits and how their impact influences relationship outcomes. First, the model posits that online retailers' structural assurance mechanisms – online payment system guarantees, seals of approval guarantees, and transaction protection – are cues that online shoppers use to infer the confidence benefits of online retailers. Given that confidence benefits are closely linked to the reduction of risk and uncertainty (Gwinner et al., 1998), it is justified to examine how online structural assurance mechanisms could provide cues for online shoppers' perception of confidence benefits.

Second, the model posits that the customization and functional convenience benefits provided by online retailers are used as cues by online shoppers to infer special treatment benefits. These factors are justified, as they connote the customization and economic benefits that online shoppers derive from online shopping (Yen & Gwinner, 2003). Furthermore, Yen and Gwinner (2003) argue that, given the lack of direct interpersonal interaction between online retailers and online shoppers in the online environment, social benefits would be inconsequential in that environment. As a result, their research focuses exclusively on confidence and special treatment benefits. Follow-up studies (Bilgili, Candan, & Bilgili, 2014; Colgate, Buchanan-Oliver, & Elmsly, 2005) did not find social benefits to be significant antecedents of relationship quality outcomes in the online environment. Thus the current study does not address social benefits.

Third, the model posits that confidence and special treatment benefits will be positively associated with relationship quality outcomes – specifically, positive word-of-mouth referrals, repurchase intention, and a willingness to pay more. The relationships between the constructs in the model are presented in the paragraphs that follow.

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model
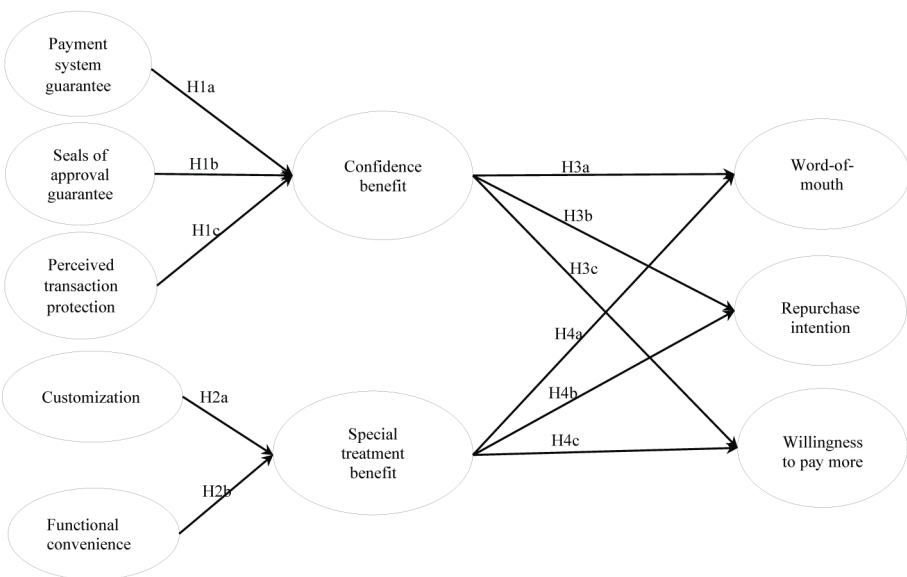
3.2. Online Retailing Structural Assurance Mechanisms as Predictors of Confidence Benefit

'Structural assurance' refers to features in the electronic marketplace that exist to reduce transactional uncertainty and concerns about safety between various trading parties. It reflects the extent to which the parties believe that the infrastructure of electronic marketplaces will safeguard their transactions (Wingreen et al., 2019). As a dimension of institutional trust (McKnight, Cummings & Chervany, 1998), structural assurance has been widely identified as more critical in electronic environments than in physical environments, owing to the absence of physical cues on which parties can rely in electronic environments that might indicate malpractice or opportunistic behavior (Lankton, McKnight, & Thatcher, 2014). In fact, prior research has emphasised the role of structural assurance in assuaging consumer concerns about risk and increasing consumer satisfaction with electronic commercial transactions (McCole, Ramsey, Kincaid, Fang, & Huifang, 2019). Prior research (e.g., Sha, 2009) has identified payment system (credit card) guarantees, seals of transaction guarantees, and perceived transaction protection as the crucial elements of structural assurance mechanisms in electronic markets. Thus, the present study argues that these dimensions of structural assurance serve as cues that online shoppers could rely on to infer confidence benefits from online retailing.

3.2.1 The Relationship Between Perceived Payment System Guarantees and the Confidence Benefit

A 'perceived payment systems guarantee' is the extent to which online shoppers believe that online retailers co-operate with banks and other financial institutions in taking extra precautions to protect their financial data and information from reaching unauthorised third parties. Yang (2017) identifies the threat of malware attacks – the use of malicious software to gain access to financial and personal information – as the most significant barrier to customers' acceptance of online payment systems. Other studies (e.g., Khan, Olanrewaju, Anwar, Mir, & Yaacob, 2020) have similarly found that the security of the payment systems is an important consideration for online shoppers. Following cue utilization theory, it is argued that perceived payment system guarantees serve as extrinsic cues on which online shoppers can rely to infer the relational benefit of confidence from online retailers, since the relational benefit of confidence is partly a product of reduced risk and uncertainty in transactions. Thus the extent to which online shoppers perceive that their payment systems will be protected during their transactions with online retailers will be related to their perception of confidence benefits. Thus, it is proposed that:

H1a: Payment system guarantees have a positive association with online shoppers' perception of the confidence benefit.

3.2.2 The Relationship Between the Seal of Approval Guarantee and the Confidence Benefit

A 'seal of approval guarantee' denotes the degree to which customers have confidence that the seal of approval granted by accreditation authorities can protect their interests and well-being. Seals of approval are often given by independent accreditation bodies upon the careful assessment and verification of an online retailer's business practices and policies (Özpolat, Gao, Jank, & Viswanathan, 2013). This accreditation serves as an external cue on which customers rely to legitimise the online retailer's ability, reliability, professionalism, and quality. This cue is capable of building online shoppers' confidence in the ability of the online retailer. Thus researchers note that seals of approval are particularly important cues in endorsing a retailer's ability to protect online shoppers' privacy and to provide security for their transactions (Casado-Aranda, Dimoka, & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Indeed, many online shoppers tend to have confidence in online retailers who have a seal of approval

from an independent accreditation body that protects their interests (Cardoso & Martinez, 2019). However, scarcely any other study has analyzed the impact of seal of approval guarantees as cues for confidence benefits. The present study argues that online shoppers could rely on the presence of seal of approval guarantees on online retailing websites to infer the relational benefit of confidence. On this basis, the present study proposes that:

H1b: Seal of approval guarantees have a positive association with online shoppers' perception of the confidence benefit.

3.2.3 The Relationship Between Perceived Transaction Protection and the Confidence Benefit

The perceived protection of online transactions is central to consumer confidence in the online retailing system (Chong, Lacka, Boying, & Chan, 2018). Consequently, perceived transaction protection is considered to be one of the main structural assurance mechanisms in online retailing (Sha, 2009). Perceived transaction protection is the protection given by both the legal system and the online retailing technology infrastructure to ecommerce trade that secures consumers' electronic transactions. The legal assurance system ensures predictability in ecommerce partners' actions and outlines the punitive cost of opportunistic behaviors. The built-in technological infrastructure of ecommerce systems is able to guarantee secure and legitimate online transactions. Consistent with cue utilization theory, these legal and technological infrastructures serve as cues that help online customers to feel more comfortable and confident that the online system is capable of keeping them from harm and protecting their well-being (Taylor, 2016). Thus the present study argues that the extent to which online shoppers perceive that their transactions are protected will reinforce their perception of confidence benefits in online retailing. Consequently, the hypothesis below is proposed:

H1c: Online transaction protection has a positive relationship with online shoppers' confidence benefit.

3.3 The Role of Customization and Economic Benefits of Online Retailing as Cues of Special Treatment Benefits

3.3.1 The Relationship Between Customization and Special Treatment Benefits

Customization, in this context, is viewed as the online retailer's ability to make specific products or service and transaction offerings to suit the needs of a specific customer (Pham & Ahammad, 2017). Online retailers are increasingly relying on customization to personalise their offerings to meet individual customer expectations, in the hope of delighting them and retaining their loyalty (He, Harris, Wang, & Haider, 2016). Online retailers' efforts at customization may serve as extrinsic cues that can communicate special treatment benefits to online retailers. Indeed, research (Aichner & Coletti, 2013) shows that customization enhances the individual customer's personal status and sets them apart from others—thus contributing to a customer's perception of special treatment benefits. However, there is barely any research that examines this phenomenon. The present study argues that online retailers' efforts to customize their offering to customers will provide extrinsic cues that online shoppers could use to infer special treatment benefits from online retailers. Thus it is proposed that:

H2a: The perceived customization of online retailers has a positive relationship with online shoppers' perception of special treatment benefits.

3.3.2 Functional Convenience and Special Treatment Benefits

'Online shopping convenience' denotes the ability of an online shopping platform to assist consumers to purchase and direct the delivery of their products without time and location restrictions. Furthermore, 'convenience' refers to the flexibility of online shopping in terms of time (it can be completed very quickly), effort (it precludes the requirement of visiting a physical shop), savings (it offers opportunities for discounts and bargains), and the option to take immediate advantage of advertisements (Verma et al., 2016)—all of which represent economic and practical value to online shoppers. Thus, relying on cue utilization theory, it is argued that customers could infer economic benefits from the functional convenience of online shopping because of its ability to save them both time and money. Moreover, the convenience benefits of online shopping also give customers a level of autonomy, as retailers can offer them the flexibility to decide when and where their shopping will take place (Collier & Sherrell, 2010). Given that autonomy is one of the basic psychological needs of consumers (Chang, Huang, & Lin, 2015) the extent to which online shopping fulfils this basic need (through the functional convenience it provides) may serve as a cue for special treatment benefits. Indeed, previous research (e.g., see Yen & Gwinner, 2003) has established that the greater convenience that online shoppers derive from shopping online is a significant factor that influences consumers' perception of special treatment benefits. Based on the foregoing, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2c: Online shopping functional convenience has a positive relationship with online shoppers' perception of special treatment benefits.

3.4 Relationship Outcomes of Confidence Benefits and Special Treatment Benefits

3.4.1 Relationship Quality Outcomes of Confidence Benefits

The provision of relational benefits by retailers to their customers results in improved relationship outcomes. Relying on social exchange theory, it is contended that the provision of confidence and special treatment relational benefits by online retailers will culminate in improved relationship quality outcomes with their customers. Indeed, the fundamental concept at the heart of social exchange theory in the context of relationship marketing is reciprocity (Bagozzi, 1995). The idea of reciprocity assumes that, when customers receive services or products that they consider valuable, it triggers them to reciprocate by being more favorable toward the retailer and/or doing something positive for the retailer in return. Thus online shoppers who perceive relational benefits from online retailers are more likely to cooperate with those retailers and exhibit improved relationship quality outcomes.

The sections that follow outline the proposed impact of relational benefits on relationship quality outcomes.

3.4.2 Relationship Quality Outcomes of Special Treatment Benefits

Online shoppers have an innate need to be confident about the activities of online retailers (Fazal-e-Hasan, Ahmadi, Mortimer, Grimmer, & Kelly, 2018; Verma et al., 2016). Indeed, online shopper confidence in online retailers increases their confidence to make transactions on the web and reinforces their faith in the retailer. Prior research has shown that the relational confidence that customers have in retailers has positive implications for a number of relationship quality outcomes, including commitment, loyalty, and word-of-mouth referrals (Ng, David, & Dagger, 2013; Yang et al., 2017). In the online retailing research domain, Yen and Gwinner (2003) have found that Taiwanese online shoppers' satisfaction with, and loyalty to, online retailers was positively predicted by confidence benefits. Similarly, Su et al. (2009) found confidence benefit to be positively related to Korean online shoppers' satisfaction with online retailers, their repurchase intention, and positive word-of-mouth referrals. Based on such evidence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: Online shoppers' perceived confidence benefit has a positive relationship with their spreading of positive word-of-mouth messages.

H3b: Online shoppers' perceived confidence benefit has a positive relationship with their repurchase intention.

H3c: Online shoppers' perceived confidence benefit has a positive relationship with their willingness to pay more.

3.4.3 Relationship Quality Outcomes of Special Treatment Benefits

The perceived special treatment benefits that customers derive from their relationship with retailers is presented as one of the most significant drivers of their loyalty (Bojei, Julian, Wel, & Ahmed, 2013). Special treatment benefits give the customer a sense of their importance to their retailers, and make them feel respected and valued. Thus, in addition to keeping customers loyal, special treatment benefits have other important relational quality outcomes, such as predicting positive word-of-mouth referrals and customers' willingness to pay more (Su et al., 2009). With this in mind, the following hypotheses are suggested:

H4a: Online shoppers' perceived special treatment benefit has a positive relationship with their positive word-of-mouth messaging.

H4b: Online shoppers' perceived special treatment benefit has a positive relationship with their positive repurchase intention.

H4c: Online shoppers' perceived special treatment has a positive relationship with their willingness to pay more.

3.5 The Mediating Role of Relational Benefits

In the preceding sections, it has been posited that perceived payment system guarantees, seals of approval guarantees, and perceived transaction protection as structural assurance features in the retailing environment are cues on which online shoppers rely to reduce their apprehension when shopping online. It was argued that these cues predispose customers to perceive confidence relational benefits (reducing risk and increasing realistic expectations) from online retailers, and subsequently foster relationship quality outcomes. Similarly, it was argued that customization and functional convenience are cues that online shoppers rely on to infer special treatment benefits (customization and economic benefits). Thus online shoppers who perceive relational benefits from online retailers are more likely to cooperate with them and exhibit improved relationship quality outcomes (Gremler et al., 2020). This cooperation draws on the concept of reciprocity in the context of relationship marketing (Bagozzi, 1995) and, correspondingly, online shoppers who perceive relational benefits from online retailers may be driven to reciprocate by being loyal, spreading positive word-of-mouth messages, and being willing to pay more for the online retailer's products. Thus it is argued that the extent to which structural assurance mechanisms, customization, and functional convenience induce relationship quality outcomes will be mediated by the degree to which they signal cues of relational benefits. In accordance with the foregoing, we hypothesize that:

H5a: The impact of online retailing structural assurance mechanisms (perceived payment system guarantees, seals of approval guarantees, and perceived transaction protection) on online retailers' relationship quality outcomes with online shoppers (positive word-of-mouth referrals, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay more) is mediated by confidence relational benefits.

H5b: The impact of customization and functional convenience on online retailers' relationship quality outcomes with online shoppers (positive word-of-mouth referrals, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay more) is mediated by special treatment relational benefits.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Context of the Study

The context of this study is South Africa. It is a country of approximately 60 million people (StatsSA, 2020) with an estimated ecommerce market value of USD 1 billion (Euromonitor, 2021). This market value is projected to increase at a compound annual growth rate of 20 per cent, reaching almost USD 3 billion by 2024, making it one of the biggest ecommerce markets in Africa. The ecommerce user penetration, which is estimated be 37 per cent in 2020, is predicted to hit 50.8 per cent by 2022 (Statista, 2020b). This contrasts with the market potential in other countries such as the US, the UK, and China, which are in their maturity phase. For instance, in 2018 the percentage of consumers who made a least one online purchase in the previous 12 months grew to 92 per cent of internet users in China, 93 per cent of users in the US, and 97 per cent of users in the UK (Statista, 2020a).

In South Africa, the product categories commonly bought online by consumers include clothing, shoes, groceries, consumer electronics, books, cars, cosmetics and body care products, furniture and household products, travel related goods, sports and outdoor products, and drugs and healthcare products. The typical South African online shopper is an educated, high-earning millennial who has experience of and is comfortable with using the internet for their communications and transactions (Statista, 2021). Challenges for South African online retailers include the fact that consumers are continually re-evaluating their online options, resulting in retailer switching (Accenture, 2019). This brings into sharp focus the need for online retailers to develop and reinforce cues that promote relational benefits, as these are important for promoting relational quality outcomes such as customer commitment and loyalty.

4.2 Development of Research Instrument

The constructs employed in this study were measured with pre-validated multi-item scales that were adapted to suit the online shopping context. All the scales were measured on a seven-point Likert response format scale with anchors ranging from 1 'strongly disagree' to 7 'strongly agree'. The scale items are presented in Appendix A. The items used to measure the relational benefits of confidence and special treatment, as well as functional convenience, were adapted from the study of Yen and Gwinner (2003). Those items used to measure payment system guarantees, seals of approval guarantees, and perceived transaction protection were developed for this study based on the study of Sha (2009). The items used to measure customization, willingness to pay more, and positive word-of-mouth referrals were adapted from Srinivasan et al. (2002). Finally, repurchase intention was measured with items adapted from Rose, Clark, Samouel, and Hair (2012).

Three established researchers in the fields of retailing and ecommerce independently reviewed the draft of the instrument that was developed for this study. This was to ensure the content validity and clarity of the wording and instructions. Subsequently the instrument was pre-tested on a sample of 30 participants of different ages, genders, income groups, levels of education, and experience with online shopping. The participants were requested to complete a copy of the instrument and to provide their views on the comprehensibility of the instructions, the phrasing of the statements, the general layout of the instrument, and how much time the instrument took to be completed. This pre-testing exercise revealed minor typographical issues, but the participants generally indicated that the instrument was easy to read and understand. The internal consistency test using Cronbach's alpha was implemented to ascertain the reliability scale items for their respective constructs. The Cronbach's alpha values exceeded 0.7, denoting that the measurement items were internally reliable. Thus, with the minor typos corrected, the instrument was finalised for the fieldwork.

4.3 Sampling and Sample Description

The present study's target population was South African online shoppers of 18 years old or more who had bought a product from an online retailer in the previous three months. Owing to the absence of

a sampling frame, a non-probability sampling technique (by means of convenience sampling) was implemented to choose the sample. Thus participants were obtained on the basis of their availability and readiness to take part in the study. Experienced research assistants contacted consumers who fitted the target profile in various locations, including their homes, places of work, and recreational parks, and presented them with a printed questionnaire. A self-administered survey technique was used to obtain the data. After explaining the purpose of the study and the ethical measures in place to protect their anonymity and the confidentiality of their information, the voluntariness of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any point during the study without negative consequences, willing participants were given a copy of the printed questionnaire to complete. Of the 1,000 questionnaires distributed, 619 were returned. Upon physical inspection, 39 questionnaires were discarded because they had too much missing data, thus leading to a usable sample of 580 for the analysis, representing an effective response rate of 58 per cent. The responses were captured in the SPSS statistical software. The descriptive statistics of the sample were analyzed using SPSS version 26. The profile of the sample is presented in Table 1.

Males made up 51.1 per cent of the sample, and in terms of age, the largest proportion of participants (40.10 per cent) were aged from 18 to 24 years. A quarter of the participants (25.10 per cent) reported shopping online at least once a month, and 22.20 per cent shopped a few times a month. More than half of the participants (54.50 per cent) bought between one and three items online within the three months before the survey, and 48.30 per cent of them reported spending an average of one to three hours on online shopping websites weekly.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample

Sample characteristics	Frequency	Valid percentage
Gender Male Female	 288 276	 51.1 48.9
Missing data	16	
Age (in years) 18 – 24 25 – 30 31 – 36 37 – 40 40+	 288 209 62 35 34	 40.10 36.80 10.70 6.20 6.00
Missing data	12	
Frequency of online shopping within the past three months A few times in a week Once a month A few times a month Once in the past three months A few times in the past three months	 60 144 127 97 145	 10.50 25.10 22.20 16.90 25.30
Missing data	7	
No of items bought online in the past 3 months 1 – 3 4 – 5 6+	 316 260 4	 54.50 44.80 0.70
Average hours spent on online retailers' website in a week <1 1 – 3 4 – 5 >5	 248 280 34 18	 42.80 48.30 5.90 3.10

Given the disparity in the age of the respondents, a Kruskal-Wallis analysis of variance was conducted to ascertain whether there were significant differences in the age groups for the summated scales. The results showed no significant differences in the age groups in the constructs of interest to the study. Specifically, the results showed no significant differences in the age categories of the respondents in terms of their perception of seals of approval guarantees ($\chi^2(4)=1.723$, p=0.231); perceived transaction protection ($\chi^2(4)=4.904$, p=0.386); payment system guarantees ($\chi^2(4)=4.598$, p=0.498); customization ($\chi^2(4)=10.433$, p=0.126); functional convenience ($\chi^2(4)=10.742$, p=0.955); confidence benefit ($\chi^2(4)=9.654$, p=498); special treatment benefit ($\chi^2(4)=1.685$, p=0.745); word of mouth ($\chi^2(4)=1.972$); willingness to pay more ($\chi^2(4)=6.812$, p=0.358); or repurchase intention ($\chi^2(4)=2.916$, p=0.574).

5. DATA ANALYSES AND RESULTS

5.1 Missing Data Treatment and Data Analysis Procedures

As with much survey research, the data obtained for this study had instances of missing information. Little's MCAR test was applied to ascertain the pattern of missing data (Little & Rubin, 1987). The results showed that missing values were missing randomly (p>0.05), suggesting the absence of a systematic error pattern in the missing data. Given this, a mean imputation technique was applied to treat the missing data. The main analyses were executed with the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) technique, using the SmartPLS version 3.6 software. This technique was considered appropriate for this research, given that the overriding objective of the study was to predict the antecedents and consequences of online shoppers' relational benefits. Indeed, Hair et al. (2020) have noted that the PLS-SEM technique is the most appropriate to use when the analysis aims to test a research framework from a predictive stance. Following the widely recommended two-step procedure, the measurement scale was first analyzed to ascertain its validity. Thereafter the model was analyzed to examine the significance of the hypotheses, ascertain the effect sizes of the relationships, and determine the predictive relevance of the model. Before the implementation of these data analysis techniques, the threat of common method bias was first assessed.

5.2 Common Method Bias

To control common method bias (CMB), the present study employed a number of procedural measures such as assuring respondents of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, and ameliorating their apprehension by assuring them that there were no 'correct' or 'wrong' answers. Before estimating the measurement and structural models, statistical procedures were applied to determine whether the data were affected by CMB. Following the procedure of Podsakoff et al. (2003), the effect of the unmeasured latent common factor was controlled. All items were allowed to load on the unmeasured latent factor as well as on their hypothesized constructs. All the factors in the measurement model were constrained to fit a single factor representing the common method effects. CMB is said to be present if the latent common factor model fits the data better than the hypothesized factor model. The results suggested that this latent common factor model demonstrated a poor fit with the data ($\chi2$ [902] = 5543.723, p < 0.001). The latent factor model was then compared with the hypothesized factor model. Again, the result also showed that the fit of the common factor model was significantly worse than the hypothesized factor model ($\Delta\chi^2$ [351] = 4242.712, p < 0.001), thereby indicating the absence of CMB in the data.

5.3 Validation of the Measurement Model

The validity of the measurement scale was examined to establish its convergent validity and discriminant validity. In assessing the convergent validity, the factor loading, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) were used. According to Hair et al. (2020), to achieve convergent

validity, the factor loadings should be significant and exceed 0.708, the composite reliability should exceed 0.7, and the AVE should be greater than 0.5. The results, shown in Appendix B, demonstrated that the item loadings were all statistically significant at p<0.001 and exceeded the 0.708 threshold. In addition, the composite reliability values were higher than the recommended 0.7 threshold. Last, the AVE estimates for the measurement model were all above the 0.5 threshold. Taken together, the results affirmed the convergent validity of the measurement scale.

5.4 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell-Larcker technique (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). According to this technique, discriminant validity is confirmed when the square root of the correlations is larger than the inter-factor correlations. This study's results, presented in Table 2, showed that the square root of the correlations (the bold diagonal values) were larger than the correlations among the constructs (the values beneath the bold diagonal values). The HTMT criterion suggests that, for discriminant validity to be achieved, the HTMT statistic should not exceed either a conservative threshold of 0.85 or a liberal threshold of 0.9 (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). The results presented in Table 2 show that the highest HTMT statistic was 0.797, which is lower than the 0.85 recommended threshold, further affirming the discriminant validity of the scale using the HTMT technique.

The bold diagonal values are the square root of the AVEs, the values below the diagonal values are the inter-factor correlations, and those above are the HTMT ratios.

5.5 Structural Model Analysis

Before assessing the structural model to test the theorized relationships, the threat of collinearity among the predictor variables was examined by means of the variance inflation factors (VIF). The VIF results obtained for this study ranged from 1.008 to 2.181, which are lower than the conservative threshold of 3. Therefore, collinearity did not pose a critical threat to the exogenous variables employed in this study. The results of the structural model estimation for hypotheses testing are presented in Figure 2 and Table 3.

A bootstrapping technique (Hair et al., 2017) with 5,000 resamples, with 580 observations per sample, and the no sign change option, was applied to determine the significance of the path estimates.

The results of the study suggested that online payment system guarantees (β =0.197, p<0.001), seals of approval guarantees (β =0.219, p<0.001), and transaction protection (β =0.235, p<0.001) are extrinsic online retailing cues that have a positive effect on online shoppers' perception of

Table 2. Discriminant validity analysis

	Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Confidence benefit	3.772	0.799	**0.824**	0.638	0.574	0.661	0.655	0.557	0.712	0.577	0.560	0.645
2	Functional convenience	3.732	0.876	0.542	**0.829**	0.629	0.530	0.620	0.498	0.797	0.559	0.392	0.574
3	Payment system guarantees	3.502	0.867	0.476	0.519	**0.781**	0.630	0.602	0.683	0.680	0.797	0.546	0.583
4	Customization	3.399	0.848	0.514	0.415	0.478	**0.802**	0.603	0.584	0.777	0.528	0.469	0.656
5	Repurchase intention	3.775	0.971	0.580	0.552	0.519	0.492	**0.908**	0.540	0.681	0.626	0.614	0.714
6	Seals of approval	3.546	0.819	0.472	0.421	0.566	0.457	0.481	**0.827**	0.625	0.698	0.553	0.535
7	Special treatment benefit	3.638	0.865	0.544	0.622	0.502	0.548	0.546	0.480	**0.787**	0.690	0.491	0.658
8	Transaction protection	3.470	0.803	0.496	0.482	0.660	0.419	0.562	0.600	0.533	**0.846**	0.533	0.610
9	Willingness to pay more	3.263	0.775	0.372	0.260	0.347	0.282	0.421	0.362	0.296	0.351	**0.715**	0.455
10	Word-of-mouth referrals	3.709	0.904	0.551	0.493	0.484	0.511	0.639	0.456	0.507	0.531	0.298	**0.839**

Figure 2. PLS path model estimation results

***p>0.001; **p>0.05; ^{ns}p<0.05 at two-tailed.
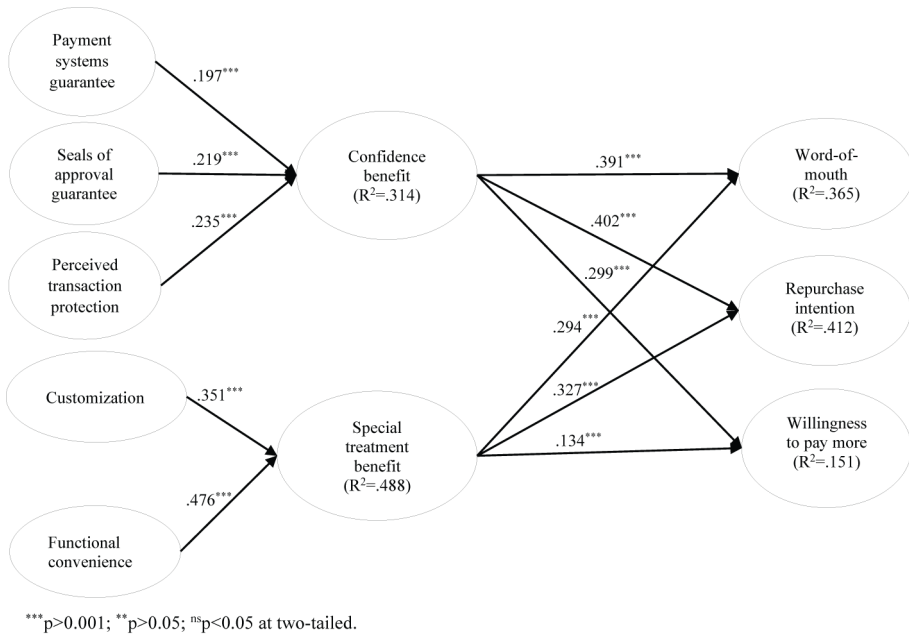
Table 3. Results of the structural model analysis

	Hypotheses	Beta	95% bias corrected CI	Decision	f^2	Effect size
1a	Payment system guarantees → confidence benefit	0.197***	[0.099; 0.300]	Supported	0.029	Small
1b	Seals of approval → confidence benefit	0.219***	[0.115; 0.320]	Supported	0,041	Small
1c	Transaction protection → confidence benefit	0.235***	[0.141; 0.323]	Supported	0.039	Small
2a	Customization → special treatment benefit	0.351***	[0.212; 0.361]	Supported	0.199	Medium
2b	Convenience → special treatment benefit	0.476***	[0.312; 0.448]	Supported	0.367	Large
3a	Confidence benefit → word-of-mouth referrals	0.391***	[0.309; 0.471]	Supported	0.170	Medium
3b	Confidence benefit → repurchase intention	0.402***	[0.326; 0.476]	Supported	0.194	Medium
3c	Confidence benefit → willingness to pay more	0.299***	[0.196; 0.392]	Supported	0.074	Small
4a	Special treatment benefit → word-of-mouth	0.294***	[0.211; 0.372]	Supported	0.096	Small
4b	Special treatment benefit → repurchase intention	0.327***	[0.253; 0.402]	Supported	0.128	Small
4c	Special treatment benefit → willingness to pay more	0.134*	[0.028; 0.235]	Supported	0.015	Weak

A bootstrapping technique (Hair et al., 2017) with 5,000 resamples, with 580 observations per sample, and the no sign change option, was applied to determine the significance of the path estimates.

***p>0.001; **p>0.01; *p>0.05 at two-tailed.

f^2 (effect size); estimates above 0.35= large effect; 0.15 – 0.35 = medium effect, and 0.02 – 0.15 small effect (Cohen, 1998).

confidence benefit. These provide empirical support for H1a–H1c. These factors together predicted 31.4 per cent of the variance in online shoppers' perception confidence benefits. It is noteworthy that perceived transaction protection was the strongest (with the highest beta value) of the structural assurance mechanisms explaining online shoppers' perception of confidence benefits. The results also

showed that customization (β =0.351, p<0.001), and functional convenience (β =0.476, p<0.001) were positively associated with special treatment benefits, providing statistical evidence in support of H2a and H2b. These factors cumulatively predicted close to half of the variance (48.8 per cent) in special treatment benefits, with functional convenience being the strongest predictor (having the highest beta value).

The results further indicated that confidence benefits positively predicted online shoppers' positive word-of-mouth referrals (β =0.391, p<0.001), repurchase intention (β =0.402, p<0.001), and willingness to pay more (β =0.299, p<0.001), providing empirical support for H3a-c. Similarly, the results showed that online shoppers' perception of special treatment benefits positively predicted their positive word-of-mouth referrals (β =0.294, p<0.001), repurchase intention (β =0.327, p<0.001), and willingness to pay more (β =0.134, p<0.05). These results provided support for H4a-c. In terms of their predictive ability, the results showed that confidence and special treatment relational benefits respectively predicted 36.5 per cent, 41.2 per cent, and 15.1 per cent of the variance in word-of-mouth communication, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay more.

A mediation analysis was conducted (a) to ascertain the extent to which the impact of the structural assurance mechanisms on the relationship quality dimensions was mediated by online shoppers' perception of the confidence relational benefits, and (b) to examine the extent to which the impact of online shoppers' perception of customization and functional convenience on the relationship quality outcomes was mediated by special treatment benefits. Following the recommendations of Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010), the direct relationships between the antecedents and the outcomes were examined. Next, the mediators were included in the model to estimate the indirect and total effects. The results are presented in Table 4. Mediation exists when the indirect relationship is significant; the mediation is partial when the direct and the indirect effects are both significant; and it is full when the direct relationship is not significant, but the indirect relationship is (Zhao et al., 2010).

Table 4. Results of the mediation analysis

	Direct	Indirect	Total effect	Mediation?
Payment system guarantees → repurchase intention	0.155***	0.079***	0.234***	Yes, partial
Payment system guarantees → WPM	0.113*	0.059 **	0.172***	Yes, partial
Payment system guarantees → word-of-mouth	0.140 **	0.077***	0.217***	Yes, partial
Seals of approval → repurchase intention	0.111*	0.088***	0.199***	Yes, partial
Seals of approval → WPM	0.189***	0.066 **	0.255***	Yes, partial
Seals of approval → word-of-mouth	0.114 *	0.086***	0.230***	Yes, partial
Transaction protection → repurchase intention	0.240***	0.094***	0.334***	Yes, partial
Transaction protection → WPM	0.151*	0.070***	0.221***	Yes, partial
Transaction protection → word-of-mouth referrals	0.230***	0.092***	0.322***	Yes, partial
Functional convenience → repurchase intention	0.210***	0.125***	.0.335***	Yes, partial
Functional convenience → WPM	0.006 ns	0.051 *	0.057**	Yes, full
Functional convenience → word-of-mouth	0.143***	0.112***	0.255***	Yes, partial
Customization → repurchase intention	0.165***	0.095***	0.260***	Yes, partial
Customization → WPM	0.097ns	0.039 **	0.136***	Yes, full
Customization → word-of-mouth	0.232***	0.086***	0.318***	Yes, partial

WPM = willingness to pay more; ***p>0.001; **p>0.01; *p>0.05

The results suggested that the impacts of the online retailer structural assurance cues (payment system guarantees, seals of approval guarantees, and perceived transaction protection) on the relationship quality dimensions (repurchase intention, word-of-mouth referrals, and willingness to pay more) were all mediated by customers' perception of the confidence benefits, thus providing empirical support for H5a. However, all the mediations were partial, given that direct relations were all significant. Similarly, they suggested that the effects of the online retailer cues of customization and functional convenience on the relationship quality dimensions were mediated by the special treatment benefits, and therefore provided empirical support for H5b. What is noteworthy here is that all but two of the mediated relationships were partially mediated. The impacts of functional convenience on willingness to pay more, and of customization on willingness to pay, were fully mediated by the special treatment benefits.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Research Implications

In spite of the importance of relational benefit in fostering customer–brand relationship outcomes, studies on relational benefits in ecommerce, and particularly in online retailing, are few and far between. Prior research offers rich insights into the effectiveness of relational benefits for customers' relationship quality outcomes in offline settings. Given that relational benefits in online settings differ significantly from those of offline settings, understanding the cues that drive online customers' perception of relational benefits is of central interest for both online retailers and academic researchers. The present study introduces the cue utilization theory to the online retailing relationship marketing literature to address how online retailing structural assurance mechanisms (perceived payment system guarantees and so forth) and the economic benefits of online shopping (such as customization and functional convenience) are used as cues by online shoppers to infer confidence relational benefits and special treatment relational benefits respectively. The present study makes an initial contribution to the literature by extending the cue utilization theory to the online retailing relationship marketing domain. This extension is particularly important, given that prior application of the cue utilization theory in consumer studies has been mainly in product evaluation and website quality (Chung, Pil Yu, & Thorndike Pysarchik, 2006; Longstreet, 2010; Rao & Monroe, 1988; Wang et al., 2016). More importantly, the findings of the present study contribute to addressing the relative paucity of studies on the antecedents of relational benefits (Gremler et al., 2020).

The findings of this study also contribute to the literature by elucidating the differential effect of online shoppers' perceived confidence benefit and special treatment benefit on promoting their relationship quality outcomes with online retailers. Confidence benefits had a stronger impact on all the relationship quality outcomes than special treatment benefits had on the same relationship quality outcomes. Specifically, online shoppers' perception of confidence benefits had a stronger impact (β=.391) on positive word-of-mouth communication than special treatment benefit (β=.294). Similarly, confidence benefit had a stronger impact on repurchase intention (β=.402) than special treatment benefit (β=.327) had on repurchase intention. Finally, online shoppers' perception of confidence benefit had a stronger impact (β=.229) on the willingness to pay more than perceived special treatment benefit had on the same construct (β=.134). These results are not only interesting, but are also noteworthy, as they are counterintuitive to the assumption that special treatment benefits are more capable of engendering superior customer relationship quality outcomes than confidence benefits. These findings, however, are contextually relevant. In 2018 and 2019, credit and debit card fraud in South Africa increased by over 20 per cent, with losses from online transactions amounting to USD 258.6 million (IOL, 2020). This, in addition to the relatively high crime rate in South Africa, might make online shoppers feel particularly susceptible to fraud during online transactions. This may provide a proximate explanation for why the perceived confidence benefit derived from online

shopping had a stronger effect on online shoppers' relationship quality outcomes with online retailers than did the perceived special treatment benefits.

Furthermore, the findings of this study highlight how relational benefits serve as mediating mechanisms through which online shoppers' perceptions of the structural assurance mechanisms and the customization and functional convenience of online retailing influence the relationship quality outcomes. The findings show that the extent to which online shoppers' perception of structural assurance mechanisms drive their positive word-of-mouth referrals, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay more will depend, to some extent, on the degree to which the structural assurance mechanisms signal cues of confidence relational benefits. This also holds true for the impact of customization and functional convenience on the relationship outcome variables. Specifically, the findings suggest that the impact of customization and functional convenience on the relationship quality outcome variables examined in the study – positive word-of-mouth referrals, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay more – will be emboldened to some extent by the degree to which to customization and functional convenience signal special treatment benefits to online shoppers. However, it is important to emphasise that, in the case of the impact of perceived functional convenience and customization on customers' willingness to pay more, the findings of the full mediation suggest that perceived functional convenience and customization will only engender online shoppers' willingness to pay more if they signal cues of special treatment benefits for the customer. Thus functional convenience and customization will not promote consumers' willingness to pay more if they fail to communicate special treatment benefits to them. These results are particularly interesting, and deserve attention.

6.2 Implications for Online Retailers

Through the lens of cue utilization theory, the present study offers online retailers some recommendations on how they can build a loyal client base and reap the rewards of relational benefits.

6.2.1 Focus on Building Confidence Relational Benefits

Online retailers must be aware that, compared with the special treatment benefits (customization and economic benefits), online shoppers' perception of confidence benefits (reducing uncertainties and building realistic expectations) has a stronger impact on those shoppers' relationship quality outcomes. This finding reaffirms the role of confidence benefits in fostering relationship quality. The present study also introduces structural assurance mechanisms as cues that online shoppers use to infer confidence benefits. In fact, structural assurance is linked to institutional trust, and this allows customers to gain confidence when transacting with firms that they perceive to have strong structural assurance systems in place. Thus online retailers' ability to leverage structural assurance mechanisms to provide safety cues to online shoppers is critical to providing elevated levels of confidence relational benefits to such shoppers. To strengthen confidence relational benefits, online retailers must direct their attention to addressing the significant antecedents of structural assurance mechanisms (i.e., payment system guarantees, seals of approval guarantees, and perceived transaction protection). To aid this, online retailers should consider collaborating with payment system providers to provide secure systems that protect the integrity and confidentiality of online payment systems. They may also need to double their efforts to obtain industry-leading seals of approval that are widely known by online shoppers as evidence of online shopping website security and quality.

The findings also highlight that online shoppers believe that their relationship with online retailers will lead to secure and safe online shopping transactions, and emphasise the need for online retailers to protect shoppers' transactions. To strengthen online shoppers' perceived transaction protection, online retailers could consider reinforcing the current transaction protection mechanisms on their websites with strategies such as multiple transaction password authentications and facial recognition technologies. They also need to collaborate with law enforcement agencies to identify cyber criminals, leading to speedy prosecutions in line with the laws appropriate to the countries in which they operate. These strategies are likely to reinforce online shoppers' perception of the security of their transaction

with online retailers. Given that perceived transaction protection is the strongest of the structural assurance mechanisms examined in this study, and has the greatest impact on signalling confidence relational benefits, these elements should be given significant attention by online retailers.

6.2.2 Develop Cues That Signal Special Treatment Benefits

Online shoppers' perceived special treatment relational benefits also matter in fostering their relationship quality outcomes (positive word-of-mouth referrals, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay more) with online retailers. This study's findings reveal the contingent effect of customization and functional convenience as salient cues on which online shoppers rely to infer the special treatment benefits that they receive from online retailers. To promote online shoppers' perceived relational benefits, online retailers may need to put in place or reinforce current strategies that create customized shopping experiences for their shoppers. Customized online shopping web pages and the use of predictive analytics could be used to analyze and predict products in which an online shopper might be interested, allowing online retailers to make suitable product recommendations to their customers. To improve functional convenience, online retailers could consider implementing autonomous shopping systems (De Bellis & Johar, 2020) that use the data that online shoppers feed into the system to create an optimal shopping experience for the consumer. This data could be used to direct shoppers toward appropriate purchasing decisions, including which brands they might like and the number of items they choose to purchase, as well as the best time to shop based, on available special offers. These systems would not only help online shoppers to conserve time and effort in online shopping, but also save them money.

6.2.3 Synchronize Extrinsic Online Cues With Relational Benefits

The significant intervening role of relational benefits (i.e., confidence and special treatment benefits) on the impact of their antecedents (seals of approval guarantees, payment system protection, transaction protection, functional convenience, and customization) on the relationship quality outcomes of word-of-mouth communication, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay more suggest that linking these antecedents to relational value could, to some extent, be instrumental in achieving the relationship quality outcomes of positive word-of-mouth referrals, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay more. Therefore, we recommend that online retailers make an observable effort to develop their online shopping cues in a way that signals relational benefits to online shoppers.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this study provides useful theoretical and practical insights into online retailing, it has a number of limitations that provide scope for future research. The present study did not address the role of social relational benefits and outcomes for online retailers because this was in line with prior online retailing studies (Bilgili et al., 2014; Colgate et al., 2005) that have not found empirical support for this relationship in the context of ecommerce. However, in recent times, online retailers have deployed the use of chat bots to stimulate conversations with online shoppers, receive queries, provide customer service, and upsell products, among other things. These chat bots are intelligent systems that could be programmed to recognise customers by their names and to offer them personalised products and services on retailers' websites. Future studies could, therefore, examine the role of chat bots in providing social relational benefits to online shoppers. Moreover, some online retailers have a number of programs such as discounts and rebates, rewards, and free merchandise that they offer to returning online shoppers. Future studies could examine how consumers infer relational benefits from these programs, and their impact on dimensions of relationship quality. Although the sample size (n=580) was reasonably large, a majority of the study's participants (76.9 per cent) were aged from 18 to 30 years. While online shopping is unquestionably high among this age cohort, the findings of this study can only be extrapolated to other age groups with caution. Future studies could benefit

from a broader and more diverse sample to improve the generalizability of the findings to the broader online shopping population.

The limitations of this study notwithstanding, this research makes several significant contributions to the literature on online retailing relationship quality.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors of this publication declare there is no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX A: SUMMARY OF STUDIES THAT HAVE EXAMINED THE ISSUE OF RELATIONAL BENEFITS

Table 5. Summary of studies that have examined the issue of relational benefits

Author(s)	Topic	Key concepts examined		Methodology	N	Summary of findings
		Independent(s)	Dependant construct(s)			
Gupta (2022)	Effects of confidence and social benefits on consumers' extra-role and in-role behaviors: A social identity and social exchange perspective.	*Relational benefits:* ● Confidence benefits ● Social benefits *Mediators:* ● Consumer–Company Identification (CCI) ● Perceived value	● Civic virtue ● Consumer loyalty	Email survey among flight patrons	254	The findings reveal that relational benefits promote consumers' extra-role and in-role behaviors. Additionally, CCI mediates the effect of confidence and social benefits on civic virtue and consumer loyalty, whereas perceived value only mediates the relationship between confidence and social benefits and consumer loyalty.
Alagarsamy, Mehrolia, & Singh (2021)	Mediating effect of brand relationship quality on relational bonds and online grocery retailer loyalty.	● Convenience bond (CB) ● Structural bond (SB) ● Financial bond ● Empathy bond (EB) ● Social bond (SCB) *Mediators:* ● Mediators ● Attitudinal attachment ● Brand trust ● Sense of community	● Behavioral and attitudinal loyalty	Face-to-face survey among customers of online grocery retailers	316	The brand dimensions of brand quality relationship mediate the effect of financial, empathy, and social bonds on attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. It was established that relational bonds are positively related to relationship quality dimensions.
Hobeika (2021)	Measuring stereotypes in the banking industry – an application to client relational benefits	*Banker stereotype:* ● Formal clothing ● Partner ● Paternalistic ● Subordinate ● Shark	Expected relational benefits: ● Social benefits ● Psychological benefits ● Adaptation benefits	**Mixed method:** *Qualitative* (11 private banking clients, 17 retail banking clients) *Quantitative* Exploratory sample (n = 226) and confirmatory sample (n = 579)	833	The findings reflect that the formal clothing and partner stereotypes have a positive influence on all types of expected relational benefits.
Gil-Saura, Ruiz-Molina, Berenguer-Contrí, & Seric (2020)	The role of retail equity, value, and relational benefits in building B2B relationships in retailing.	*Relational benefits:* ● Special treatment benefits ● Social benefits *Mediators:* ● Retail equity ● Relationship value	● Trust ● Commitment	Personal survey among retail store managers	361	The findings reveal that all three relational benefits have a positive impact in building B2B relationships.

Table 5. Continued

Author(s)	Topic	Key concepts examined		Methodology	N	Summary of findings
		Independent(s)	Dependant construct(s)			
Shukla & Pattnaik (2020)	Linking relational benefits and customer loyalty: the mediating role of customer intimacy.	*Relational benefits:* • Confidence benefits • Social benefits • Special treatment benefits **Mediator:** • Customer intimacy	• Customer loyalty	Face-to-face survey among service providers	423	The findings confirm that the three relational benefits have a positive effect on customer intimacy. Additionally, customer intimacy is found to have a significant influence on customer loyalty.
Fatima & Mascio (2019)	Synchronizing relational benefits with customer commitment profiles.	*Relational benefits:* • Special treatment benefit • Confidence benefit • Social benefit	• Satisfaction	Face-to-face survey among financial services customers	290	The findings indicate that special treatment benefits, confidence benefits, and social benefits positively influence customers' satisfaction level.
Wong, Chang, & Yeh (2019)	The effects of consumption values and relational benefits on smartphone brand switching behavior.	*Product consumption value:* • Functional value • Emotional value • Social value • Epistemic value *Retail services' relational benefits:* • Functional benefit • Social benefit • Confidence benefit *Mediator:* Switching costs	• Brand commitment • Brand switching behavior	Online survey among respondents who owned at least one branded smartphone	565	The findings demonstrate that emotional value, social value, epistemic value, and confidence benefits have a direct effect on consumer–brand commitment and brand switching behavior.
Chou & Chen (2018)	The influences of relational benefits on repurchase intention in service contexts: the roles of gratitude, trust, and commitment.	• Confidence benefit • Special treatment benefit • Social benefit *Mediators:* • Gratitude • Trust • Relationship commitment	• Repurchase intention	Observation conducted among service firms	253	The findings point out that there is evidence of significant relationships between confidence benefits, special treatment benefits, social benefits, trust, gratitude, relationship Commitment, and repurchase intention.

Table 5. Continued

Author(s)	Topic	Key concepts examined		Methodology	N	Summary of findings
		Independent(s)	Dependant construct(s)			
Fatima, Mascio, & Johns (2018)	Impact of relational benefits on trust in the Asian context: Alternative model testing with satisfaction as a mediator and relationship age as a moderator.	*Relational benefits:* ● Confidence benefits ● Social benefits ● Specific treatment benefits *Mediator:* Customer satisfaction	● Dimensions of trust (competence, contractual, and goodwill trust)	Face-to-face survey among financial institutions' customers	300	The findings confirms that confidence benefit has a great impact on the level of competence trust and contractual trust. In addition, customer satisfaction is found to be a significant mediator between relational benefits and all the dimensions of trust.
Sánchez-Casado, Confente, Tomaseti-Solano, & Brunetti (2018)	The role of online brand communities in building brand equity and loyalty through relational benefits.	*Relational benefits:* ● Monetary ● Recognition ● Social ● Entertainment ● Exploration	● Customer-based brand equity (CBBE) ● Customer loyalty	Online survey among social media users.	295	The findings show that both social and exploration benefits have a significant impact on CBBE and on loyalty, while monetary and recognition benefits are positive associated with loyalty and CBBE.
Yang, Yu, & Bruwer (2018)	The effect of relational benefits in loyalty programs: Evidence from Chinese milk formula customer clubs.	*Relational benefits* (confidence benefits) ● Brand community identity ● Symbolic benefits *Mediators:* ● Economic benefits ● Information-sharing benefits	● Customer loyalty	*Mixed methods:* Focus group (26) among customers of infant milk formula Face-to-face survey among customers of infant milk formula	26 300	The findings show that the customer-confidence benefits and identity-related benefits have a positive and significant effect on a loyalty program. In addition, the economic benefits and information-sharing benefits are confirmed to play a mediating role in customer loyalty.
Odoom, Boateng, & Asante (2017)	An empirical investigation of perceived relational benefits and brand engagement in restaurant services.	*Relational benefits:* ● Social ● Exploration ● Entertainment ● Monetary saving ● Recognition	● Brand engagement	Self-administered questionnaire among patrons of 25 restaurants	500	Findings reflect that the three relational benefits (social benefit, exploration, and entertainment) contribute significantly to consumers' brand engagement.

Table 5. Continued

Author(s)	Topic	Key concepts examined		Methodology	N	Summary of findings
		Independent(s)	Dependant construct(s)			
Sung & Kim (2017)	The effects of perceived relational benefits on repurchase intention and word-of-mouth intention in the social commerce marketplace: Mediating effect of satisfaction and difference in market mavenism.	*Relational benefits:* ● Confidence benefits ● Convenience benefits ● Special treatment benefits ● Information benefits **Mediator** ● Satisfaction	● Repurchase intentions ● WOM intentions	Online survey among social commerce customers	490	The findings contend that satisfaction significantly mediates the relationship between relational benefits and repurchase intention, and the relationship between relational benefits and WOM intention.
Yang, Song, Chen, & Xia (2017)	Why are customers loyal in sharing-economy services? A relational benefits perspective.	*Relational benefits:* ● Confidence benefits ● Special treatment benefits ● Social benefit ● Safety benefit *Mediator:* ● Commitment	● Customer loyalty	Online survey among sharing-economy service customers	440	The findings show that there are significant inter-relationships between confidence benefits, social benefits, safety benefits, and commitment.
Lee, Choi, Kim, & Hyun (2014)	Relational benefits, their consequences, and customer membership types.	*Relational benefits:* ● Psychological benefits ● Social benefits ● Special treatment benefits *Mediators:* ● Satisfaction with employees ● Satisfaction with service firm	● Customer loyalty ● Customer cooperation. ● Customer participation	Self-administered survey among hotel restaurant patrons	522	The findings point out that there is an array of positive relationships between relational benefits, customer satisfaction, and customer voluntary performance.
Mackay, Petzer, & Mostert (2014)	Relational benefits and customer satisfaction—a South African short-term insurance industry perspective.	*Relational benefits:* ● Confidence benefits ● Social benefits ● Special treatment benefits	● Customer satisfaction	Face-to-face survey among short-term insurance customers	769	The findings indicate that confidence benefits strongly affect customer satisfaction more than social and special treatment benefits do.
Chen & Hu (2013)	The mediating role of relational benefits between service quality and customer loyalty in airline industry.	Service quality dimensions	● Relational benefits ● Customer loyalty	Personal survey among passengers at Taoyuan International Airport in Taiwan	403	The findings indicate that service quality has positive impacts on relational benefit and customer loyalty, while relational benefits directly influence customer loyalty.

Table 5. Continued

Author(s)	Topic	Key concepts examined		Methodology	N	Summary of findings
		Independent(s)	Dependant construct(s)			
Chen & Hu (2010)	The effect of relational benefits on perceived value in relation to customer loyalty: An empirical study in the Australian coffee outlets industry.	*Relational benefits:* ● Social benefit ● Perceived value ● Functional value	● Customer loyalty	Face-to-face survey of coffee outlets customers.	949	The findings imply that there is a positive association between relational benefits, perceived value, and customer loyalty.
Conze, Bieger, Laesser, & Riklin (2010)	Relationship intention as a mediator between relational benefits and customer loyalty in the tour operator industry.	*Relational benefits:* ● Confidence benefits ● Social benefits ● Special treatment benefits ● Variety-seeking benefits *Mediator:* ● Relationship intention	● Intentional loyalty	Postal mail survey among leisure travellers	1702	The findings discover that there is an interconnection between all relational benefits (confidence benefits, social benefits, special treatment benefits, variety-seeking benefits), relationship intention. and intentional loyalty.
Han & Kim (2009)	Outcomes of relational benefits: Restaurant customers' perspective.	*Relational benefits:* ● Social benefits ● Special treatment benefits ● Confidence benefits *Mediators:* ● Perceived price ● Perceived value	● Behavioral intentions	Website survey among full-service restaurant customers	350	The findings reveal that social benefits, special treatment benefits, and confidence benefits have a positive effect on perceived price and value.
Su, Li, & Cui (2009)	Analyzing relational benefits in an e-business environment from a behavioral perspective.	*Relational benefits:* ● Confidence benefit ● Special treatment benefit ● Social benefit ● Honor benefit	● Satisfaction ● Repurchase intention ● Word-of-mouth behavior	Exploratory analysis with two phases: 1. Focus group (25 online shopping customers) 2. Online survey (500 online shopping customers).	525	The findings show that relational benefits have a positive relationship with satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth.
Molina, Martín-Consuegra, & Esteban (2007)	Relational benefits and customer satisfaction in retail banking.	*Relational benefits:* ● Special treatment benefits ● Social benefits ● Confidence benefits	● Customer satisfaction	Face-to-face survey among bank customers	204	The findings imply that confidence benefits have a direct, positive effect on satisfaction.

Table 5. Continued

Author(s)	Topic	Key concepts examined		Methodology	N	Summary of findings
		Independent(s)	Dependant construct(s)			
Meldrum & Kaczynski (2007)	Confidence, social, and special treatment benefits as predictors of relationship strength in recreational settings.	*Relational benefits:* ● Social benefits ● Special treatment benefits ● Confidence benefits	● Relationship strength	Face-to-face survey among fitness class participants	255	The findings indicate that all three relational benefits are significant predictors of relationship strength in recreational settings.
Yen & Gwinner (2003)	Internet retail customer loyalty: the mediating role of relational benefits	*Internet self-service technologies (ISST):* ● Perceived control ● Performance ● Convenience ● Efficiency *Mediators:* ● Confidence benefits ● Special treatment benefits	● Satisfaction ● Loyalty	E-mail and face-to-face survey among participants who used internet bookstores or travel agencies	459	The findings state that confidence benefits mediate the impact of perceived control and performance on customer loyalty and satisfaction, while special treatment benefits mediate the effect of efficiency and convenience on customer loyalty and satisfaction.
Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler (2002)	Understanding relationship marketing outcomes: An integration of relational benefits and relationship quality.	● Confidence benefits ● Social benefits ● Special treatment benefits *Mediators:* ● Satisfaction ● Commitment	● Word-of-mouth ● Customer loyalty	Face-to-face survey among customers of service firms	336	The findings suggest that there is an array of positive associations between confidence benefits, social benefits, special treatment, satisfaction, commitment, word-of-mouth, and customer loyalty.

APPENDIX B: MEASURES OF THE CONSTRUCTS AND THEIR PSYCHOMETRIC PROPERTIES

Table 6. Measures of the constructs and their psychometric properties

	Factor loading	T-statistic
Confidence benefit: CR = 0.894, AVE = 0.679		
CNB1: I know what to expect when I visit the website of the online retailer	0.798	41.195
CNB2: The online retailer is perfectly honest and truthful	0.803	38.208
CNB3: The online retailer can be trusted completely	0.858	55.560
CNB4: The online retailer has high integrity	0.837	51.848
Functional convenience: CR = 0.898, AVE = 0.687		
CON1: With this online retailer I shop online whenever I want to	0.792	41.007
CON2: This online retailer helps me get through complicated shopping processes	0.824	40.974
CON3: My transactions with this online retailer are simpler	0.862	65.135
CON4: With this online retailer I am able to reduce efforts to purchase wanted products	0.835	61.389
Payment system guarantees: CR = 0.851, AVE = 0.591		
PSG1: I believe the online retailer will protect me in the case of problematic transactions on its online store	0.819	46.896
PSG2: I am confident that my credit/debit card payments are safe in the case of disputed purchases from the online shopping website	0.816	38.721
PSG3: I believe the online retailer will stand by me if problems occur during online payment transactions on the online store	0.763	25.109
Customization: CR = 0.844, AVE = 0.643		
CUS1: The online retailer makes purchase recommendations that match my needs	0.797	36.796
CUS2: The online retailer enables me to order products that are tailor-made for me	0.831	44.610
CUS3: The online retailer makes an effort to customize products and services to my needs	0.777	26.874
Repurchase intention: CR = 0.950, AVE = 0.825		
REI1: I intend to shop more often at this online retailer's website in the future	0.900	77.019
REI2: I intend to continue shopping at this retailer's website	0.942	143.483
REI3: I plan to continue shopping at this online retailer's website in the future	0.925	109.247
REI4: I expect my shopping from this online retailer to continue in the future	0.864	50.875
Seal of approval guarantees: CR = 0.897, AVU = 0.685		
SAG1: I believe it's safe to buy the online retailer because of the seals of approval, such as TRUSTe, Digicert, Safekey, etc., on the website	0.789	37.248
SAG2: I think seals of approval are important in my decisions to transact with the online retailer	0.834	52.254
SAG3: I believe that seal of approval-issuing agencies make substantial efforts to assess this online retailer's true competencies	0.856	59.764
SAG4: I believe that seal of approval-issuing companies undertake a thorough screening process before allowing online shops to use their seals to do business online	0.829	49.955
Special treatment benefits: CR = 0.829, AVE = 0.620		
STB1: I believe I get faster service from the online retailer than most customers do	0.807	39.860
STB2: I believe I get better deals from the online retailer than most customers do	0.849	66.571
STB3: I believe I get discounts from the online retailer that most customers don't get	0.698	21.871

Table 6. Continued

	Factor loading	T-statistic
Perceived transaction protection: CR = 0.910, AVE = 0.716		
PTP1: The online shopping websites have enough safeguards to make me feel comfortable using them to shop online	0.836	51.611
PTP2: I feel assured that legal and technological structures adequately protect me from the problems associated with online shopping	0.882	76.128
PTP3: I feel confident that encryption and other technological advances on the online shopping websites make it safe for me to purchase products	0.846	50.393
PTP4: In general, the online shopping websites are now a robust and safe environment in which to purchase products	0.818	48.374
Willingness to pay more: CR = 0.875, AVE = 0.778		
WPM1: I would stop buying from this online retailer if its competitors' prices decreased slightly		
WPM2: I would pay a bit more with this online retailer instead of buying from a competitor that offered the same benefits	0.871	31.719
WPM3: If this online retailer increases its prices, I will switch to other online retailers that offer better prices		
WPM4: I would continue to buy from this online store if its prices increased slightly	0.893	41.892
Word-of-mouth referrals*: CR = 0.904, AVE = 0.703*		
WOM1: I will recommend online websites to my friends or relatives	0.841	50.295
WOM2: I will recommend this website to anyone who seeks my advice	0.892	84.318
WOM3: I will write a positive review on this website	0.854	47.756
WOM4: I will write a positive review about this website on social forums	0.762	26.649

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