

The influence of e-shopping experience factors on e-consumer satisfaction: managing online stores

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ABSTRACT

E-shopping has shown exponential growth mainly owing to advancements in internet technology and lockdown measures implemented to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus. It is evident from the literature that many researchers have attempted to identify the factors influencing e-shopping experience and e-consumer satisfaction; however, no consensus has been reached. Thus, this study aims to identify the e-shopping experience variables and establish which of these influence e-consumer satisfaction in South Africa. The study identified five e-shopping experience factors that may influence e-consumer satisfaction in the country. The study is quantitative in nature and adopted the descriptive research design. Non-probability sampling was used, and a total of 314 respondents completed the questionnaire. The study utilised an online survey and the measuring instrument was tested for validity and reliability by conducting an exploratory factor analysis and calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses formulated for the study. The results revealed that customer service, website usability, online security and product review influence e-consumer satisfaction. In addition, the results indicated that South African consumers are still unsure regarding their preference between online shopping and traditional brick-and-mortar stores. The results are, therefore, of significant importance to the management of online shops in improving the overall shopping experience for e-shoppers, increasing the level of consumer satisfaction, and ensuring future growth in this sector.

Keywords: online shopping, shopping experience, e-consumer satisfaction, experience marketing, online retail.

INTRODUCTION

E-shopping has grown exponentially primarily due to the advances in internet technology (Makhitha *et al.*, 2019) which have allowed individuals to change the way in which they do things, including the way in which they shop (Leonnard *et al.*, 2019). E-Shopping is a form of e-commerce (Schaefer & Bulbulia, 2021) which enables consumers to purchase products or services directly from the seller via the internet (Dixena & Sahu, 2018). The advantages associated with e-shopping provide further motivation for consumers to convert to this form of shopping and therefore acts as another contributor to the growth of e-shopping. These advantages include lower transaction and search costs, faster shopping (Dixena & Sahu, 2018), the convenience of being able to shop from anywhere at any time (Leonnard *et al.*, 2019), easy access to customer reviews, no pressure sales (Tran & Quang, 2019), avoidance of issues associated with visiting stores (e.g. low in-store stocks and crowded stores), improved product distribution and process interaction (Leonnard *et al.*, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the sub-sequent lockdown measures implemented by certain countries to contain the spread of the virus, led to an increase in e-shopping and therefore can be considered a further contributor to the growth of e-shopping (Schaefer & Bulbulia, 2021). The pandemic led to an increase in online shoppers of more than 4.4% between 2020/2021, it is estimated that more than 27% of the global population shop online, which amounts to more than 2.14 billion online shoppers worldwide. Currently, there are more than 12 million online stores in the world and by 2024 online global sales are estimated to reach more than USD 7 trillion (Fox, 2023).

Traditionally, South Africa (SA) was slow to adopt the e-commerce trend, with many consumers who still showed a preference for brick-and-mortar outlets which resulted in these outlets outperforming the e-commerce options for the same retailers. However, the rise of online retailers in South Africa, such as Takealot, Loot, Makro, Superbalist, OneDayOnly and Spree suggests a growing demand for online shopping in the country (Johnson & Iyamu, 2019). Furthermore, due to the enforced COVID-19 lockdown implemented in the country, many South African consumers had to reconsider the benefits of e-shopping (Hattingh & Ramlakan, 2022). Consequently, e-shopping increased by 40% in 2021 and by 30% in 2022 resulting in estimated sales of R55 billion (World Wide Worx, 2022). This upward trajectory is expected to continue as an increasing number of South Africans now own or have access to smart devices as well as expanded internet connectivity (Mordor Intelligence 2024). Furthermore, a growing number of businesses in South Africa have embraced the digital market which proves that e-shopping in South Africa is not just growing, it is evolving as new players enter the market and existing businesses expand their offerings (Cowling 2024). The preceding factors highlight why it is important to conduct a study on e-shopping in South Africa. In addition to the above-mentioned factors, South Africa has a growing middle class and a young and tech-savvy population which provides further reinforcement for a study on the South African context (Huge Connect 2023).

In e-shopping, as in traditional brick-and-mortar shopping, customer satisfaction can have a significant influence on the retention of existing customers and the attraction of new customers. In the case of e-shopping specifically, customer satisfaction plays a vital role as it influences customers' decision whether to continue to shop online or not (Tandon & Kiran, 2019). Therefore, customer satisfaction promotes online purchase intention. Furthermore, a satisfactory purchase experience motivates customers to repurchase (Miao *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, it is important for managers to understand how to satisfy their customers, as this will ensure the continuity of the business, foster customer loyalty and retention, ultimately leading to enhanced profitability (Öztürk & Dündar, 2020; Rosenberg & Czepiel, 2017). Furthermore, customer satisfaction will enable managers to get feedback from customers which can be used to better manage and improve services or experiences (Khadka & Maharjan, 2017).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The increase in e-shopping in South Africa emanating from the COVID-19 pandemic warrants further investigation into a trend that is expected to continue in an upward trajectory. As previously indicated customer satisfaction has a significant influence on e-shopping and consumer e-shopping experience. Therefore, a logical next step is to firstly determine if COVID-19 had an effect on SA consumers spending patterns and secondly, to explain and examine the e-shopping variables that influence e-consumer satisfaction in SA consumers.

Several studies have been conducted on e-shopping. The most recent studies focus on factors affecting the growth of e-shopping in the COVID era (Hashem, 2020; Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). While others focus on the influence of service quality on e-shopping adoption and loyalty (Rehman *et al.*, 2022; Tankovic & Benazic, 2018). In addition, other studies focus on factors which affect the adoption of e-shopping (Saleem *et al.*, 2022; Butt *et al.*, 2022). Recent studies which dealt with customer satisfaction and online shopping include Alam, *et al.* (2021) research which examined factors affecting customer satisfaction with online shopping in Malaysia. The results of the study indicated that customer service, information quality, response time, transaction capability, delivery, merchandise attributes, security, privacy, convenient payment methods and price positively influence customer satisfaction in online shopping. A different study conducted by Jaiswal and Singh (2020) sought to identify the major factors affecting customers' overall e-shopping experience and online customer satisfaction. The findings of the study suggest that economic value, customisation, post-purchase experience and customer services are major factors on which customers evaluate their e-experience and satisfaction. In an earlier study, Tandon and Kiran (2019) investigated e-shopping in India and identified three factors that have a significant influence on e-consumer satisfaction namely: social media interactions, day on delivery mode of payment and website usability.

It is evident from the literature sourced that many researchers have attempted to identify the factors influencing e-consumer satisfaction, however, no consensus has been reached (Dospinescu *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, from the recent studies reviewed none have been identified which have focused specifically on the South African consumers' e-shopping experience variables and none have given specific attention to the effect of COVID-19 on South African consumers shopping patterns. In addition, Shumba and Ferreira (2023) suggest that a comprehensive approach is necessary for enhancing e-consumer satisfaction in South Africa. It is, therefore, necessary to conduct research on e-shopping experiences in South Africa and identify factors that influence e-consumer satisfaction as the behaviour and profile of e-consumers differ from one country to another (Rao *et al.*, 2021).

Based on the preceding discussion it is evident that e-consumer satisfaction is necessary for the growth of e-shopping (Miao *et al.*, 2021) and therefore important for management of online stores to identify the factors that influence e-consumers' satisfaction. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to identify the e-shopping experience variables and establish which of these influences e-consumer satisfaction in South Africa.

This study can assist the management of online stores to create satisfactory e-shopping experiences, which will help maintain relationships with existing customers and also create the possibility of attracting new customers.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

This section presents a literature review and the hypothesis development for this study.

E-SHOPPING EXPERIENCE

The technological revolution of the previous two decades has resulted in changes in consumer expectations as well as the creation of new experiences within the context of websites or digital platforms (Hoyer *et al.*, 2020). Currently, many customer encounters are dominated by digital elements, which boost customer expectations beyond merely adequate services and towards more exceptional experiences, eventually increasing consumer satisfaction. This demonstrates that increased internet use and the growth of digital communication technologies have resulted in a more complicated customer experience (Pomfret *et al.*, 2020). It is important for the management of online stores to understand their customers' requirements and to work on creating customer experiences which meet or surpass customer expectations (Leachman & Scheibenreif, 2023). In the era of technology, pleasant experiences will not only contribute to consumer pleasure and loyalty, but also to comments, likes, and recommendations via digital networks (Khan *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, a customer's experience will influence whether or not the individual will engage with the same company in the future (Bravo *et al.*, 2019). To attract and maintain e-customers, management of online shops must understand the evaluative criteria used by e-consumers when selecting an online store (Tran & Quang,

2019) and which aspects drive e-consumer satisfaction (Leachman & Scheibenreif, 2023). E-shopping experiences are shaped largely by individual e-consumer expectations, these include customer service, product awareness, website usability, security and product reviews (Izogo & Jayawardhena, 2018; Jaiswal & Singh, 2020). Each of these factors will be discussed in the following section.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Customer service encapsulates everything a business does for its customers to enhance their experience (Jeske *et al.*, 2015). It can be defined as the totality of activities implemented by businesses to add value to their products and services (Tasara *et al.*, 2021). Customer service is an important part of the e-shopping experience (Singh & Söderlund, 2020) and customers have different preferences for service during the encounter. Customer preferences are dependent on the type of assistance required, personal knowledge about the product or service under purchase consideration and psychological characteristics (ie. introvert or extrovert) (Lee & Lee, 2020). Just as it is in an offline setting, online customers expect superior customer service from an online store (Wolfenbarger & Gilly, 2003). Online customers want responsive, reliable and helpful customer service, where their enquiries are attended to timeously and carefully by friendly contact centre employees (Tran & Quang, 2019). Furthermore, online customers want service providers who will listen to and handle their complaints swiftly and render a reliable service (Singh & Söderlund, 2020). Other indispensable factors in customer service include the provision and receipt of products displayed on the website, on time and in a pristine condition (Wolfenbarger & Gilly, 2003) as well as product variety and a product return policy. The provision of good customer service leads to positive word-of-mouth recommendations and can therefore be viewed as a free promotional tool for businesses. Furthermore, good customer service leads to customer satisfaction which results in a return of customers to the business and repurchase from the business (Richard *et al.*, 2021). Singh and Söderlund (2020) also identified customer service as a key factor for e-consumer satisfaction. Nguyen *et al.* (2020) concur that customer service is one of the biggest contributors to e-consumer satisfaction. Based on the discussion the following hypothesis is developed:

H₁: Customer service influences e-consumer satisfaction when customers shop online.

PRODUCT AWARENESS

Product awareness refers to the degree of knowledge which consumers have about a product, brand or service (IGI Global, 2023). Product awareness has been identified as the most important phase for selecting a product as it assists in differentiating brands from competing brands. Furthermore, product awareness aids in promoting customer buying decisions and is also required for building brands (Awosemo & Karaduman, 2020). Additionally, product awareness has also been found to influence e-consumer satisfaction (Poranki, 2015). Product awareness is closely associated with customisation as the latter can enhance the former (Fauver, 2020). Da Silveira *et al.* (2001) define customisation as a system that uses information technology, flexible processes, and organisational structures to deliver a diverse range of products and services to fit the particular needs of the customer. Therefore, customisation allows customers to customise a product to suit their own taste, and thus requires input from the customer to create, or co-create, a final product offering (Pallant *et al.*, 2020). Customisation has become an important aspect for businesses due to its relationship with a business' product life cycle (Mashud *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, customisation has also become an important aspect for consumers as it enriches the consumers' experience (Dospinescu & Buraga, 2021). Its apparent importance has resulted in customisation becoming an increasingly common aspect, which is frequently included in business strategic choices (Pallant *et al.*, 2020). According to Pereira (2020), customisation can help to improve e-consumer satisfaction. Burns (2020) agrees that product customisation heightens e-consumer satisfaction. Based on the foregoing discussion, the following hypothesis is drawn:

H₂: Product awareness influences e-consumer satisfaction when customers shop online.

WEBSITE USABILITY

The usability of a website is measured by the ease of use of an interface (Mohd & Zaaba, 2019). Users who access an organisation's website frequently formulate a judgement about the organisation based on their perception of its website (Mifsud, 2022). Online shoppers prefer to use websites that are rich in usability and in instances where websites are perceived to be less user-friendly users tend to become disinterested and revert to searching for a different website (Guo *et al.*, 2023). A usable website enables shoppers to achieve their goals of using the site, this in turn will assist the businesses to achieve their own goals (Mifsud, 2022). Management of online stores must pay attention to the usability of their site if they wish to achieve their goals of retaining and converting customers to e-shopping (Mohd & Zaaba 2019). As a result, attention should be given to ensuring that their website is well structured (Matera *et al.*, 2006) and easy to understand and navigate. Furthermore, websites should have smooth and fast interaction (Tran & Quang, 2019), attractive and appealing graphics and a layout which enables users to access information easily (Tandon & Kiran, 2019). According to Nguyen *et al.* (2021), website usability has a significant effect on e-consumer satisfaction. Guo *et al.* (2023) agree that website usability has a positive influence on e-consumer satisfaction. It is thus, hypothesised that:

H₃: Website usability influences South African e-consumer satisfaction when customers shop online.

ONLINE SECURITY

E-shopping can be related to many negative results that are not present in conventional retail, one of these negative aspects is personal security (Tran, 2020). Security in online purchases refers to the ability to perform electronic transactions that are harmless, and which enable the buying and selling of offerings through the internet with established protocols which protect the customer and the service provider (Mohd & Zaaba, 2019). The increased security risk associated with online shopping can be attributed to the fact that the transaction involves a higher degree of uncertainty compared to a conventional purchase as the buyer and seller are not engaged in a face-to-face transaction during the buying process. Management of online stores must be able to control and maintain the security of data transactions (Bimaruci *et al.*, 2020; Shumba & Ferreira, 2023). This will require the incorporation of a variety of dimensions including safety, integrity, repudiation, authenticity, confidentiality, privacy and availability (Prasad *et al.*, 2016). Security is one of the most important factors to ensure the success of e-commerce (Teltzrow & Kobsa, 2004). The adoption of e-shopping is largely dependent on customers' trust concerning the security of the website (Mohd & Zaaba, 2019). Consequently, retailers and service providers are still experiencing constraints when attempting to persuade customers to adopt e-shopping as the security risk remains prevalent (Makhitha *et al.*, 2019). Consumers are nervous about shopping online as they fear their personal information will be used elsewhere (Tran, 2020). Businesses can guarantee online security by providing a privacy statement and information concerning the security of the shopping mechanism (Bimaruci *et al.*, 2020). Tandon and Kiran (2019) indicate that online security has a strong influence on e-customer satisfaction. Mofokeng (2021) agrees that perceived online security is an important predictor of e-consumer satisfaction and therefore hypothesised:

H₄: Online security influences e-consumer satisfaction when customers shop online.

PRODUCT REVIEW

Many customers tend to first search for feedback or reviews before purchasing a product or making use of a service provider for the first time. The feedback and reviews provided by previous buyers assist the customer in determining whether to buy the product or not (Magenest, 2021). The advancement of information and communication technologies particularly the Internet, has created more opportunities for customers and service providers to share information among themselves (Thomas *et al.*, 2019). In this context, online reviews have emerged as a new communication channel. These reviews can be regarded as a special form of electronic word of mouth (eWOM), have become increasingly popular among customers (Wang *et al.*, 2018). Online reviews are gradually becoming among

the most influential sources of information and customers rely on these reviews when making purchase decisions (Chakraborty, 2019) online reviews tend to be more persuasive than information distributed by marketers as the information is created by customers who do not have a vested interest and are therefore independent and perceived as being more credible (Plotkina & Munzel, 2016). In addition to the benefits of online reviews to customers, the reviews also present value creation opportunities for businesses as they represent a source of product and service improvement and can therefore increase revenue and cultivate long-term relationships. In addition to product reviews, customers will frequently be able to rate the performance of a product or alternatively view the rating of the product by other customers. Product rating generally includes a range of one to five stars which provides an indication of customer satisfaction with the product. Due to this, a good rating is preferable to impress, attract and persuade prospective customers to buy a product (Magenes, 2021). Both ratings and reviews enable customers to share their experience with a product or service and give it an overall star rating. Prospective customers rely on reviews and ratings to make more informed purchase decisions (Von Helversen *et al.*, 2018). Reviews have been found to have an influence on e-consumer satisfaction (Lopes *et al.*, 2020). In a study conducted by Ventre and Kolbe (2020), respondents also indicated that e-WOM (online reviews) influence e-consumer satisfaction. A more recent study by Tobon and Garcia-Madariaga (2021) supports this finding. Drawing from the preceding discussion, the following hypothesis is formulated.

H₅: Product review influences e-consumer satisfaction when customers shop online.

E-CONSUMER SATISFACTION

Consumer satisfaction in the online environment refers to the contentment experienced by consumers during a prior online purchasing experience (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003). In an online environment, satisfaction is characterised as an emotional state which encapsulates affective reactions to online experiences (Lindgaard, 2007). E-consumer satisfaction depends on the extent to which the customer's expectations have been met or exceeded (Habel *et al.*, 2016) and therefore management of online stores should strive to meet and exceed their customers' expectations throughout all the stages of their order fulfilment (Nguyen *et al.*, 2018). It is more expensive for businesses to attract new customers than to retain existing customers, therefore businesses spend considerable resources on service quality and ensuring customer satisfaction (Miao *et al.*, 2021). According to Singh and Söderlund (2020) satisfactory online experiences have a positive influence on repurchase intention and word of mouth recommendations and also promote a sustainable relationship with consumers (Mahadin *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, customers who are satisfied are not price sensitive and will tolerate a random bad experience of goods and services from an online store (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020). Businesses that prioritise their consumers and who meet their consumers' needs will benefit from a more satisfied consumer in the long run (Rao *et al.*, 2021). Consumer satisfaction in the online environment is a deal-breaker for consumers, therefore management of online stores must do their utmost to ensure that their consumers' needs are met or exceeded (Rao *et al.*, 2021).

The hypothesised model visualises the development of the hypothesis drawn from literature as displayed in Figure 1.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University's Faculty Ethics Research Committee - Human. The ethical clearance number for the study is H22-BES-MRK-081. Respondents were recruited voluntarily, and respondents were informed of the confidentiality of their information. In addition, respondents were advised that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they may opt out at any time without any consequence.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section first presents the descriptive statistics followed by validity and reliability analysis and then the inferential statistics are presented and discussed.

Descriptive statistics

All 314 respondents answered yes to the three filter questions in the questionnaire. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents.

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

| Variable | Levels | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------|-------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender | Female | 187 | 59 |
| | Male | 127 | 41 |
| Age group | 18-25 | 106 | 34 |
| | 26-35 | 149 | 47 |
| | 36-45 | 42 | 13 |
| | 46-55 | 13 | 4 |
| | 56-65 | 4 | 1 |
| | 66+ | 0 | 0 |
| Home Language | Afrikaans | 12 | 4 |
| | English | 65 | 20 |
| | Xhosa | 150 | 48 |
| | Zulu | 27 | 9 |
| | Setswana | 24 | 8 |
| | Sepedi | 21 | 7 |
| | Sesotho | 11 | 3 |
| | Tsonga | 4 | 1 |
| Education | School exit level certificate | 36 | 11 |
| | Certificate | 34 | 11 |
| | Diploma | 65 | 21 |
| | Degree | 87 | 28 |
| | Post-graduate diploma/degree | 92 | 29 |

As can be seen from Table 1, the questionnaire asked respondents to provide information on four demographic variables. These demographic variables include gender, age group, home language and the education of the respondents. According to Table 4.2, there were more female respondents (59%) than male respondents (41%). The most prominent age group to participate in the study were the age group of 26-35 (47%) with the second most respondents falling in the age group of 18-25 (34%), while there were no respondents in the age group of 66+ of age. Just less than half of respondents (48%) were Xhosa speaking, while 20% of the respondents were English speaking, 9% were Zulu speaking and 4% of the respondents were Afrikaans speaking. Post-graduate degree/ diploma (29%) was the most common educational qualification with a degree (28%) being the second most common. Table 2 indicates the shopping patterns of consumers.

TABLE 2. SHOPPING PATTERNS OF CONSUMER

| Shopping Patterns of Consumer | Percentage | | | Mean | SD |
|---|------------|---------|----------|------|-----|
| | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | | |
| My online shopping increased since the Covid-19 pandemic | 70 | 15 | 15 | 3.9 | 0.7 |
| I prefer online shopping versus shopping at a brick-and-mortar shop | 43 | 30 | 27 | 3.3 | 1.1 |
| Online shopping saves me time | 79 | 15 | 6 | 4.3 | 0.9 |
| I am familiar with online shopping apps/websites | 85 | 15 | 0 | 4.5 | 0.6 |
| I find online shopping more appealing than a brick-and-mortar shop | | | | | |
| I find that online shopping sites provide a wider product variety | 52 | 26 | 22 | 3.5 | 1.3 |

As can be seen from Table 2, most respondents agreed that their online shopping increased since the Covid-19 pandemic (70%). Most of the respondents indicated that they are familiar with online shopping apps and websites (85%) and that online shopping saves them time (78%). Just more than half of the respondents (52%) agreed that online shopping sites provide a wider product variety. In general, the respondents were unsure regarding their preference between online stores and brick-and-mortar shops. Only 43% of the respondents indicated that they prefer online shopping stores, while 27% preferred brick-and-mortar shops and 30% of the respondents had no specific preference between the two. The mean score of 3.3 for the latter, which tends to 3 on the rating scale, further indicates that the respondents were neutral regarding this item. The other items had mean scores that tended towards 4 (agree) on the rating scale, which indicates their agreement with the statements. The standard deviation (SD) ranged from 0.6 to 1.3 which indicates that the respondents' selections were very similar.

Validity and reliability testing

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted using the software package STATISTICA. Six factors emerged with Eigen values of one and above. Of these six factors, five were independent variables and one was a dependent variable. For ease of presentation only a summary of the validity and reliability results is presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3. VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY TESTING RESULTS

| | Factors | Retained items | Eigen values | Factor loadings | | Cronbach's alpha |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------|-------|------------------|
| | | | | Min | Max | |
| Independent variable | Customer service | 7 | 13.21 | 0.565 | 0.843 | 0.924 |
| | Product awareness | 7 | 4.55 | 0.593 | 0.857 | 0.891 |
| | Website usability | 6 | 2.37 | 0.553 | 0.803 | 0.845 |
| | Online security | 6 | 1.58 | 0.522 | 0.656 | 0.890 |
| | Product review | 3 | 1.23 | 0.559 | 0.773 | 0.739 |
| Dependent variable | E-Consumer satisfaction | 6 | 1.20 | 0.542 | 0.689 | 0.670 |

As can be observed from Table 3, all variables had at least three retained items with eigen values of 1 and above. The retained items had factor loading scores of 0.5 and above and Cronbach's alpha values that exceeded the 0.6 cut-off point adopted for this study. Based on these results, satisfactory evidence of validity and reliability has been provided. Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for the valid and reliable variables.

TABLE 4: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR VALID AND RELIABLE VARIABLES

| Variable | Factors | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|-------------|-------------------------|------|--------------------|
| Independent | Customer service | 4.53 | 0.71 |
| | Product awareness | 4.11 | 0.95 |
| | Website usability | 4.64 | 0.61 |
| | Online security | 4.71 | 0.64 |
| | Product review | 4.19 | 0.90 |
| Dependent | E-consumer satisfaction | 4.40 | 0.62 |

The constructs *product awareness* and *product review* had mean scores of 4.11 and 4.19 respectively. These mean scores tend to 4 on the rating scale which indicate that the respondents agree that they have certain product awareness and product review expectancy in achieving e-consumer satisfaction. The independent variables *customer service*, *website usability* and *online security* had means of 4.5 and above (tends to 5 on the rating scale), indicating that the respondents strongly agree that they have certain *customer service*, *website usability* and *online security* expectancy in achieving e-consumer satisfaction. The standard deviation for all the independent variables were low (less than 1), meaning that the responses were fairly similar among respondents.

With regards to *customer service*, Kenese and Bali (2020) confirm that consumers want to be compensated if they incur any losses and that customers want to be informed when their complaint has been received as well as feedback during the complaints handling process. In addition, customers want complaints to be dealt with in a timeous manner. Roggeveen and Rosengren (2022) assert that customers want to easily find the contact details of the company on their website and that customer care representatives should be well trained.

With regard to *customer awareness*, Jaiswal and Singh (2020) confirm that consumers want online shops to store their shopping preferences and provide them with similar products and customise their shopping pages based on their preference. A study by Wang *et al.*, (2021) indicates that consumers are constantly seeking interactive features on online shopping websites. In addition, consumers want to share the product that they have or want to purchase on their social media platform, so that people, including friends and relatives, can comment and provide their own experience with the product. Alimamy and Gnoth (2022) argue that consumers are seeking more personalisation product options available in online stores.

Regarding, *website usability*, Amoah and Marriott (2021) and Tandon and Kiran (2019) confirm that consumers prefer online shops where products are easy to find, and the site should be visually pleasing and easy to navigate. A study by Mohd and Zaaba (2019) found that consumers prefer websites that have well organised product categories, and the image of the product should download quickly. In addition, Matera *et al.* (2006) confirm that consumers prefer online stores that regularly update their website information.

Regarding *online security*, Thangamuthu (2020) confirms that consumers seek online shops that provide 3D secure payment transactions on credit and debit cards, as well as a bank verification pin sent to their mobile device for verification. Bimaruci *et al.* (2020) confirm that consumers favour websites that guards against phishing and malware attacks and shields against clickbait attempts.

With regards to *product review*, Von Helversen *et al.* (2018) confirm that consumers want to be able to rate and review products as well as their overall shopping experience on the online shop's website. Ventre and Kolbe (2020) confirm that consumers prefer online shops where they can read the reviews of the products by people who have bought them before.

With regards to *e-consumer satisfaction*, Mofokeng (2021) confirms that online buyers are happy when they sense a lower risk while purchasing from an online store. As stated before, e-consumer satisfaction in the online world is a deal-breaker for consumers, hence online retailers must do all possible to meet or surpass their customers' expectations (Rao *et al.*, 2021). Consumers are also satisfied with online shopping if the online store provides a good return and replacement policy that allows for online or offline returns. Another consideration is if the online store offers a refund policy, as this is a vital factor in retaining customers and encouraging further transactions. Consumers

want information about promotions and discounts because they want to buy low-cost items (Khan *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, online shopping websites should offer additional payment plans and payment method alternatives for customers to choose from (Katawetawarakas & Wang, 2011).

Inferential statistics

This section presents the results of the inferential statistical analysis conducted in this study. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient analysis is firstly discussed and then the results of the multiple regression.

The Pearson product-moment correlation

According to Struwig and Stead (2013), the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient is used to assess the strength and linearity of two variables. The following values were used to assess the strength of the correlations: a weak correlation ≥ 0.29 , a moderate correlation ≥ 0.49 , and a high correlation of ≥ 0.50 (Cohen, 1988). Table 5 presents the results of the Pearson product moment correlation analysis.

TABLE 5. CORRELATION MATRIX OF THE VARIABLES

| Variables | ECS | CS | PA | WU | OS | PR |
|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----|
| ECS | 1 | | | | | |
| CS | 0.477 | 1 | | | | |
| PA | 0.341 | 0.615 | 1 | | | |
| WU | 0.477 | 0.409 | 0.216 | 1 | | |
| OS | 0.404 | 0.535 | 0.213 | 0.509 | 1 | |
| PR | 0.375 | 0.525 | 0.617 | 0.156 | 0.168 | 1 |

Key: ECS – E-Consumer satisfaction, CS – Customer service, PA – Product awareness, WU – Website useability, OS – Online security, PR – Product review.

Table 5 illustrates that all the variables reported positive Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients. However, most of the correlation relationships (r) indicated either a weak or moderate relationship ($r < 0.49$) between the variables. For the purpose of this paper, only the strong relationships are discussed in detail. *Customer service* reported a strong correlation with *product awareness* ($r = 0.615$), *online security* ($r = 0.535$) and *product review* ($r = 0.523$). These strong relationships are supported by Davidavičienė *et al.* (2019) who indicate that customer service in the electronic environment is influenced by the security of the website as well as by the customers' awareness of the product offering and product reviews left by customers. *Product awareness* reported a strong correlation with *product review* ($r = 0.617$). This finding is supported by Von Helversen *et al.* (2018), who state that product reviews have a strong influence on product awareness, especially if the product reviews are negative. *Website usability* reported a strong correlation with *online security* ($r = 0.506$). According to Alshamari (2016), the existence of online security is in direct conflict with web usability, as security features of a website can influence the ease of interacting with a website. In order to undertake regression analysis, multi-collinearity assumptions must be evaluated to guarantee that independent variables are not correlated (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). All the variance inflated factor values were below the cut-off value of 10 while all the tolerance values were above 0.1. Thus, multiple regression analysis could be conducted.

Multiple regression analysis

According to Kothari (2004), multiple regression analysis is a method that may be used to forecast the dependent variable based on a hypothesised model's numerous independent variables. The null hypothesis is rejected when a factor's t-value is less than 1.96 at a significance level of 0.05 or between 1.96 and 3.09 at a significance level of 0.001 (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). Table 6 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis.

TABLE 6. MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS RESULTS

| Dependent variable: E-consumer satisfaction | | | R ² = 0.359 | Hypothesis number | Hypothesis outcome |
|---|-------|---------|------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Independent variables | b* | t-value | Sig. (p) | | |
| Customer service | 0.161 | 2.261 | 0.024** | H1 | Supported |
| Product awareness | 0.022 | 0.342 | 0.732 | H2 | Rejected |
| Website usability | 0.313 | 5.810 | 0.000* | H3 | Supported |
| Online security | 0.118 | 1.994 | 0.046** | H4 | Supported |
| Product review | 0.206 | 3.427 | 0.000* | H5 | Supported |

*p<0.001 **p<0.05

As can be seen in Table 6, approximately 36 % of the variance in *e-consumer satisfaction* can explain the variances in the independent variables. No statistically significant relationship was found between *product awareness* and *E-consumer satisfaction*. The p-value exceeded 0.05. Therefore, H₂ were rejected.

Proof of statistical relationships were found at p=0.001 and p=0.05 among the independent variables (*customer service*, *website usability*, *online security* and *product review*), and *e-consumer satisfaction* (dependent variable). This is further supported by the t-values which exceed the critical value of 3.09 at p<0.001 and 1.96 at p<0.05. Therefore, H₁, H₃, H₄ and H₅ are accepted.

The results for H₁, H₃, and H₄ are confirmed by Jaiswal and Singh (2020), who did a study on the 'Influence of determinants of online customer experience on online customer satisfaction' in India. The results indicate that customer service, website usability and online security had statistically significant relationships with e-consumer satisfaction. This suggests that there are similarities in e-shopping expectations between the two developing countries.

The statistically significant relationship between product review and e-consumer satisfaction (H₅) is supported by Chen *et al.*, (2022), who found a strong statistically significant relationship between customer reviews and e-consumer satisfaction. This enhances the credibility of the present findings and also offers compelling proof that online reviews influence e-consumer satisfaction.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of the study add to the literature on e-shopping experience variables and e-consumer satisfaction. While previous studies focused on different countries, this study focused specifically on the South African context and identified factors that contribute to e-consumer satisfaction of the South African consumer. The study highlighted similarities in e-shopping expectations that can enhance e-consumer satisfaction between South Africa and India. Thus, it can be deduced that there are similarities in online shopping expectations among developing countries. Therefore, comparing online expectations between developing and developed countries can be of interest to future studies.

This study established that product awareness does not affect e-consumer satisfaction in South Africa, which contrasts with Poranki's (2015) findings in India, where product awareness was found to have an impact on e-consumer satisfaction. Although product awareness does not appear to influence e-consumer satisfaction in South Africa, the importance of this factor in relation to consumer buying decisions and product differentiation remains undisputed. In this study, it was found that customer service, website usability, online security and product review influence e-consumer satisfaction in a South African context. This implies that online shop managers should pay close attention to these factors to enhance their consumers' online shopping experience and to enjoy the benefits that can be derived from e-consumer satisfaction.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper aimed to identify the factors that influence e-commerce experience and establish which of these influence e-consumer satisfaction in South Africa. From the extensive literature review, five e-shopping experience variables were identified that may influence e-consumer satisfaction. The empirical results indicate that four (customer service, website usability, online security and product review) e-shopping experience variables influence e-consumer satisfaction in a South African context. The results further indicate that product awareness does not influence e-consumer satisfaction in the country. The respondents may have interpreted the items measuring product awareness as part of an information search or evaluation of alternative products before the actual purchase occurred.

The empirical evidence indicates that an enhancement of customer service will increase e-customer satisfaction. It is therefore recommended that the management of online stores ensure that the service they render online is of the same standard as what customers would expect to receive in a brick-and-mortar store and that customer service is not neglected due to the online space. Management of online stores is advised to have specific employees assigned to their e-shopping space. The responsibility of these employees will be to ensure that customers receive a service which is reliable and helpful and to ensure that customer complaints are dealt with efficiently and promptly. The responsible employees should be easily accessible, and consumers should know how to reach them.

The empirical results further indicate that website usability influences e-customer satisfaction. Navigating an online site can be daunting for first time users or non-regular users. If an online site is not user-friendly, it can cause frustration, not just for new users, but also for regular users, as this can lead to dissatisfaction. To improve navigation/ease of use, it is recommended that management of online stores have a short instructional video on their sites to guide users on how to navigate the site. This can be accompanied by a simple and visually appealing graphic to illustrate the process. Furthermore, chatbots can be employed to assist customers with challenges or difficulties they might encounter while shopping on the platform.

In addition, the results indicate that online security influences e-customer satisfaction. Therefore, if online consumers regard an online store as having strict online security measures, they will feel more reassured when making a purchase and ultimately be more satisfied. Management of online stores is recommended to ensure that their sites are secure and to set up alerts which will notify the store or online administrator of any irregularities related to payments, billing, or customer information. Online stores are further advised not to store credit or debit card passwords and CVV numbers and to assist their customers to be more secure by increasing the password parameters or configuring two-factor authentication.

The empirical results further revealed that product reviews can influence e-customer satisfaction. It is recommended that the management of online stores include a review section on their platform for customers to leave reviews. Another recommendation is that customers are sent a message asking them to review their experience with the online store after the online purchase has been completed. These reviews can then be posted on the online site. In addition, online stores should implement influencer marketing and employ influencers who will endorse the use of their products and online platforms.

The results suggest that although 70% of the respondents indicated that their online shopping has increased since Covid-19, they are still unsure regarding their preference between online stores and traditional brick-and-mortar stores. This implies that online shopping in South Africa has not yet reached its full potential, although the sector showed a 30% growth in the country from 2021 to 2022. The results are, therefore, of significant value to the management of online shops to improve the overall shopping experience for e-shoppers, increase the level of consumer satisfaction, and ensure future growth in the sector. In addition, the study's results contribute to the existing body of knowledge on how the e-shopping experience can enhance e-consumer satisfaction.

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