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QUALITY EXPECTATION FACTORS INFLUENCING E-CUSTOMER SATISFACTION: EVIDENCE FROM ONLINE SHOPPING IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about an increased need for online shopping, and a steady increase in online shopping was recorded. However, only about 1.4% of online traffic eventually buys online, which leads to a need to gain knowledge of the factors which drive online shopping customer satisfaction and purchasing intention. It is imperative to consider consumer quality expectations when evaluating e-consumer satisfaction. The aim of this study establishes which quality expectation variables influence e-customer satisfaction in South Africa. The study models three quality expectation variables and e-customer satisfaction. The study uses non-probability samples of 237 respondents. A quantitative approach is used in which structured data is gathered and quantitatively analyzed. The measuring instrument used is an online survey. The items in the questionnaire are validated by conducting Exploratory Factor Analysis and subsequently Cronbach's alpha values are calculated for each of the valid constructs to confirm inter-item reliability. Multiple Regression tests are used to determine the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The results indicate that of the three quality expectation factors, only shopping experience expectations have a significant influence on e-customer satisfaction. Service convenience expectations and product offerings expectations are recording insignificant associations with e-customer satisfaction. The study is therefore identifying the need for online shops to augment e-customer satisfaction through exceeding customers' quality shopping experience expectations.

Keywords: Online Shopping, Quality Expectation, E-Customer Satisfaction, Businesses, Consumer Behavior

1. Introduction

The global financial and economic crisis 2008-09 has been characterized by a massive global downturn with lack of demand. The expression most frequently addressed to the global lack of demand phenomenon is the term *Great Recession* (Islam and Verick, 2011). The subsequent

transmission of the output shock to labor demand, measured by responsiveness of employment and unemployment, was unexpectedly muted. The muted responsiveness phenomenon challenges, *inter alia*, Okun's Law, the fundamental empirical relation that is usually detected between output changes and unemployment changes, and points to labor market miracles associated with the Great Recession (Islam and Verick, 2011; Elsby *et al.* 2010; Okun, 1962).

There has been a steady growth in online shopping in South Africa. In 2020, the online retailing sector recorded a 19% compound annual growth rate (CAGR), proving that online shopping was gaining momentum over in-store retailing (Watling and McCabe, 2020). A further compounded annual growth rate of 10% was predicted by Delport (2020) in the next four years, with online user penetration rates estimated to rise to 51% by 2024. Online retailing was further promoted by the terror of the Covid-19 pandemic, which brought about the need for ubiquitous shopping environments. Other online shopping facilitating conditions, such as hardware and infrastructure, were also improved. The resulting effect was astounding, as an approximate 40% increase in South Africa's online retail industry growth was recorded since the COVID-19 lockdown (Research and Markets, 2020).

However, regardless of the rising trend in online shopping, the online shopping market in South Africa accounts for roughly only 1.4% of retail sales (Watling and McCabe, 2020). Completed online purchases are still on the low side, likely because of quality expectation factors associated with buying a product online. The lack of adequate product quality information online has proved to be one of the reasons consumers may discontinue shopping online (Bhatti *et al.* 2018). This pertains to product, service and information quality provided. The overall product quality, superiority and performance in online shopping have a direct effect on e-customer satisfaction (Vasić *et al.* 2019). Al-Jahwari *et al.* (2018) also mention problems associated with online shops providing a totally different product from what was ordered by the consumer or even worse, empty delivery parcels. This has resulted in consumers being frustrated.

It seems that there is a variance between what South African customers expect from an online purchase and what they actually receive. According to World Wide Worx (2018), online shops do not spend sufficient time researching and developing strategies for the online market, leading to substandard marketing strategies that fail to exceed consumers' quality expectations. When a customer is buying an online product, there is a need for the service provider to offer an accurate description of the product so that the customer weighs up their quality expectations.

South Africa has over 2000 shopping centers, and this creates competitive pressure for online shops since consumers have a substitute of shopping physically (Makhitha *et al.* 2019). To gain a competitive advantage in the online shopping environment, it is vital to ensure that consumers are satisfied with the quality of products and services purchased online (Vasić *et al.* 2019). E-customer satisfaction is a measure by which online consumers' expectations are compared with the performance of the product or service. Satisfaction is mainly about consumers getting what they want exactly as they would have expected it (Makudza *et al.* 2021a). Satisfaction can be viewed as an outcome of the overall post-purchase evaluation (Kruger, 2016).

Regardless of a steady growth in online shopping, there is a dearth of empirical evidence on the role of the influence of quality expectation on e-customer satisfaction. This study investigates the influence of online shopping quality exceptions on e-customer satisfaction in the South African context. Thus, research into quality expectations of online shopping and how they drive e-customer satisfaction could provide valuable for online businesses which seek to be competitive in South Africa.

The aim of this study is to establish which quality expectation variables influence e-customer satisfaction in South Africa. The results of this study can be utilized to benchmark present practices and encourage future changes by online retailers. The application of advanced statistical techniques using a relatively large sample size has contributed to recent empirical evidence on SA consumers' online quality expectations factors which influence e-customer satisfaction as knowledge was gained according to which online shopping expectations issues should be managed, given the increase in online shopping since COVID-19.

In the section to follow a literature review on online shopping, as well as quality expectations factors that influence e-customer satisfaction. The study's methodology will be described, followed by results and suggestions.

2. Literature review

2.1. The development of online shopping

Online shopping started as business-to-business (B2B) applications in 1981 while business-to-consumer applications followed later in 1984 (Aldrich, 2011). Michael Aldrich, a British entrepreneur, made great contributions to online shopping in 1979 when he developed videotext technology (Jusoh and Goh, 2012). The videotext system used a telephone line to connect a household television to a real-time transaction processing computer (Aldrich, 2011). The use of videotext technology heralded the beginning of Internet shopping practice (Lee and Lau, 2017).

As chronicled by Aldrich (2011), business-to-consumer (B2C) online shopping only became commercially viable in the late 1990s as a result of advances in the World Wide Web, improved telecommunications and Internet connectivity, mass installations of home computers, and an increase in the number of service providers. The advent of the Internet accelerated the growth of distance shopping, telemarketing and online shopping for the period 1990s to 2000s (Santos *et al.* 2017). Amazon.com, the online bookstore created by Jeff Bezos, made history by becoming the first bookstore to exist only on the Internet (Patel, 2015). As a result of Amazon's success, many other brick-and-mortar bookshops began to create an online presence (Patel, 2015). Thereafter, the popularity of online shopping grew, and a host of other online shopping portals proliferated.

Since 2010, online shopping has continued to grow owing to further advances in Internet penetration, the availability of speedy networks and associated security (Aldrich, 2011; Mkhosi, 2017). Also, smartphones or mobile devices have become increasingly important in driving the growth of online shopping (Prinsloo, 2018). The whole evolution of ubiquitous shopping practice is changing unexpectedly owing to the entrance of various cutting-edge virtual technologies such as augmented reality, stereoscopic three-dimensional displays and smartphone technologies (Lee and Lau, 2017). In South Africa, studies have confirmed that when shopping online, consumers prefer to use smartphones over computers (Goga *et al.* 2019).

Evidence from the nations with the highest e-commerce sales suggests that the development of online shopping will improve GDP in the long run (Dolfen *et al.* 2019). According to UNCTAD (2020), global e-commerce sales totaled almost \$26 trillion in 2018, contributing 30% of GDP. Studies also show that online shopping has both a direct and indirect influence on international trade, as well as on employment (Mkhosi, 2017; Terzi, 2011).

Additionally, it is believed that the use of electronic methods and the Internet may greatly simplify and speed up the initiating and conducting of business as well as reducing the cost (Naresh and Reddy, 2016). As a result, the amount of international trade is expected to rise. Also, online shopping is projected to create new employment directly and indirectly whilst displacing existing ones (Nair, 2017). Therefore, increased demand and productivity can result in an increase in indirect employment creation (Terzi, 2011).

2.2. Quality expectations

Quality expectations are based on the confirmation paradigm which measures online shopping and product quality from the discrepancy between consumers' expectations against their perceptions (Milan *et al.* 2015). This means that, when consumers' perceptions of the online service outweigh consumers' expectations, it leads to quality perception and e-customer satisfaction (Makudza, 2021). The following discussion presents the quality expectation factors which influence e-customer satisfaction, namely information quality, service quality and product offerings.

2.2.1. Information quality expectations

Information quality relates to the extent to which consumers are provided with information relevant to their needs (Rehman *et al.* 2012). Online consumers expect to receive all relevant, accurate and appropriate information about a product given that they would not be able to touch or feel the product before deciding to purchase (Vasić *et al.* 2019).

Information aids online consumers in making informed purchasing decisions (Ayambaa and Chang, 2012). Consumers are concerned with the product usage benefits information offered by online shops' websites (Al-Jahwari *et al.* 2018). Guo *et al.* (2012) point out that the beneficial information of online shops' website content allows consumers to perceive lower risks, make the best decisions easily based on accurate justifications and subsequently influence the intention to purchase online. Ayambaa and Chang (2012) add that the availability of product guarantees and warranty information on the online shop's website is also crucial in minimizing consumers' risk, thereby enhancing more benefits and value from using online shops. As a result, the quality of information provided on a website can reflect the quality of the product (Milan *et al.* 2015).

The format of website content is another critical dimension of information quality: it relates to how the information is presented on the website (Guo *et al.* 2012). To lessen the degree of difficulty and time it takes to access information, it is vital to arrange website material in a format that makes it as searchable as possible (Cheung and Lee, 2005). The website also gives consumers a variety of levels of richness, from text to multimedia and 3D visual images. Consumers find information more appealing and beneficial if it is presented in multimedia and 3D visuals so as to view the product from different angles in an interactive manner rather than as a text format (Singh and Srivastava, 2018). The use of images, text, sound and video on a website make content appealing as well as informative (Singh and Srivastava, 2018). According to Wang and Le (2016), adding a click and balloon plug-in on the website will help consumers access more information about the products that they are buying. A click function presents more specific information about the specific unit or product for which the consumer is shopping (Wang and Le, 2016).

Information quality is also explained by website content. Website content relates to the usefulness and completeness of information on the website. The quality of website information implies that the information provided about products and services on the Internet is up to date (Hanjaya *et al.* 2019) and adequate (Kannaiah and Shanthi, 2020). Websites can give consumers extensive and detailed up-to-date product information, allowing them to find more specific knowledge about the items, thereby increasing their confidence in purchasing them (Wei *et al.* 2018). Pearson *et al.* (2012) further add that just as in conventional shops, an online shopping experience requires a conspicuous presentation of 'new arrivals'. This relates to a notice or pop-up banner which informs consumers of newly introduced brands or product items (Pearson *et al.* 2012). As indicated by Al-Jahwari *et al.* (2018), consumers are more likely to be attracted and retained if valuable and detailed information is provided on the online shop's website.

Another aspect of information quality is information relevance expectations (Dangaiso *et al.* 2022). Information relevance relates to whether the information offered on the website is usable and addresses the information requirements of consumers (Cheung and Lee, 2005). According to Pilík (2012), when consumers make a decision to buy, they usually rely on other users' product reviews. Makudza *et al.* (2021a) found that consumers find product reviews from other peers more acceptable than an online shop's word-of-mouth. Quality information on the website is also a function of detailed product usage instructions (Rita *et al.* 2019). Instructions of how to use the product and how to dispose of the products are typical for techno-based products (Parise *et al.* 2016). Some well-to-do online shops' websites also offer product demonstration on how to use the product. However, Beneke *et al.* (2012) contend that all products should have detailed instructions on the label. Beneke *et al.* (2012) add that it is required by law for products to be well labeled, whether virtual or physical products, by giving detailed information about the product's ingredients, shelf life, weight and nutritional content.

2.2.2. Service quality expectations

E-customer service quality can be described as the degree to which a website facilitates efficient and successful shopping, purchasing and delivery (Barutçu, 2010). Responsiveness is a major attribute of electronic service quality that requires online shops to be fast in enquiry response and prompt in offering useful assistance about product enquiries (Lionello *et al.* 2020). It is used to refer to the prompt reaction to customer queries and availability of assistance (Pearson *et al.* 2012). Responsiveness can also relate to whether the website can give timely service, useful

assistance and reliable information about the products or services. Suleiman *et al.* (2012) maintain that responsiveness ensures that users receive quick service. Thus, it can be described as the willingness to assist consumers and deliver swift service.

Service quality can also be understood through the return and replacement strategy since customer service also encompasses return handling policies provided during and after the sale (Blut *et al.* 2015). Before purchasing products, consumers are concerned about the terms and conditions of the return policy (Khan *et al.* 2015). The return policy provides lenience if the product does not function as expected and needs to be exchanged or refunded. In high-quality online environments, the extra expenses of fulfilling return policies can be mitigated by greater profits from sales (Dangaiso and Makudza, 2022), whereas low-quality online shops may not adopt simple return policies since they know that their low quality will result in more products being returned and that the expenses of returning products would outweigh any extra profits from sales to consumers lured by easy policies (Khan *et al.* 2015). Components of return handling policies, according to Rita *et al.* (2019), include whether the online shop offers convenient methods for returning products, whether the online shop charges additional fees for defective goods returned, whether the online shop provides a considerable guarantee and whether the online shop has a plug-in for consumer reports of product problems.

2.2.3. Product offerings expectations

Product offerings refer to the range, value and quality of products and services on sale online (Rudansky-Kloppers and Strydom, 2021). It is an attribute that relates to giving consumers variety and options to choose from at an affordable price (Makudza *et al.* 2021b). Product quality offering of online shops is more difficult for consumers to predetermine before purchasing, especially in new task buying situations (Slindist, 2020). Consumer confidence and loyalty with online product offerings are therefore enhanced over time through trial and error and repeat purchases (Makudza *et al.* 2021b).

Product information availability on a website is crucial in assisting consumers to make informed purchase decisions in online shopping (Sam and Sharma, 2015). Information about promotions and discounts is much sought after by consumers as they aspire to obtain low-priced products (Khan *et al.* 2015). Websites that display genuine promotional information have more consumer traffic and patronage than those that do not run and display promotional information (Wu *et al.* 2021). Even information about product prices helps consumers in making a decision about whether to buy in-store or online (Chen and Huang, 2013). Being value maximisers, consumers perform a cost benefit analysis between online and offline buying in order to make an informed decision which is cost effective on their part (Tandon *et al.* 2021).

If online shops offer variety and more categories to consumers, they stand a better chance of enhancing e-customer satisfaction through product offerings. Product variety pertains to the range of products that can be purchased online (Rudansky-Kloppers and Strydom, 2021). Katawetawaraks and Wang (2011) indicate that consumers shop online because online shops provide a greater variety of products and services from which online consumers can choose. Moreover, consumers are motivated to shop online where they can find all kinds of products with a variety of choices regarding features, colors and sizes. Also, online shopping websites need to provide more options for consumers such as payment plans and payment methods that suit their preferences and convenience (Katawetawaraks and Wang, 2011).

Owing to online shops' inability to deliver product experience before purchase or usage, the most popular products online are brands with high equity and those with a traceable and guaranteed record of high quality (Tasara *et al.* 2021). Lu *et al.* (2014) highlight that online shopping allows for the customization and personalization of consumer goods to suit the clients' needs. Although customization adds more to the cost of production, Singh and Srivastava (2018) posit that consumers are more concerned about value and quality than cost. Through personalization and customization, online shopping has an added advantage of offering unique products that address the unique needs of niche market segments.

2.3. E-customer satisfaction

Kotler and Keller (2016) describe satisfaction as a consumer's sentiments of joy or disappointment when comparing the perceived performance of a product or service with expectations. Satisfaction is considered a key driver of purchase behavior intentions (Sánchez-García *et al.* 2012). Electronic customer satisfaction can be defined as the number of consumers, or percentage of total consumers, whose reported online experience with a business, its products or its services (ratings) exceed specified satisfaction goals (Alsamydai *et al.* 2012). Makudza (2021) adds that the disconfirmation paradigm best explains service quality and customer satisfaction. When consumers' satisfaction emanates from online buying, it becomes e-customer satisfaction (Vijay *et al.* 2019).

Owing to the rapid growth in online shopping, e-customer satisfaction has consequently become an important matter for discussion in the context of e-commerce (Momtaz *et al.* 2011). E-customer satisfaction assists consumers in purchasing decisions and is evidenced through consumers' repeat purchases, repurchase behaviors, trust and loyalty to the online shop (Deyalage and Kulathunga, 2020). It is personal to each consumer and assessed based on their expectations of the online shop (Tran and Vu, 2019). Moreover, it is important for the management of online shops to always meet consumer expectations with the goal to improve e-customer satisfaction. E-customer satisfaction can be obtained through being helpful, responsive and replying promptly to consumer inquiries (Amoah and Marriott, 2021; Blut *et al.* 2015). Through real-time consumer services, e-customer satisfaction may be enhanced by real-time processing of orders within a day or two. Additionally, real-time systems give consumers quality information about the product mix width, depth and line options for consumer purchasing.

Based on the above literature the hypothesized model (Figure 1) was developed.

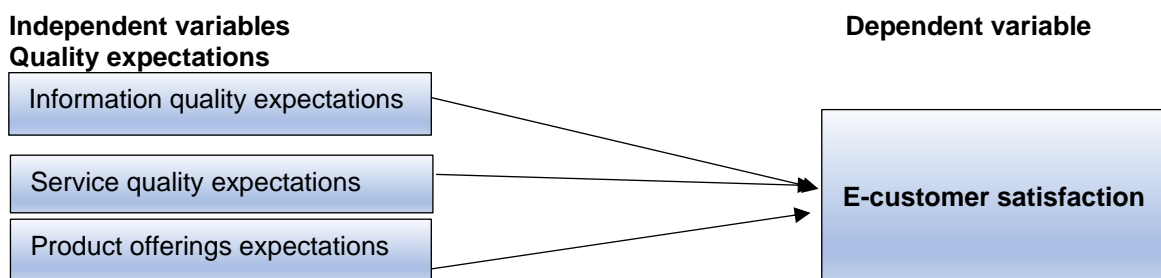


Figure 1. Hypothesized model

Based on the hypothesized model (Figure 1), the following three research hypotheses were formulated:

- H₁: Information quality expectations influence e-customer satisfaction when shopping online.*
- H₂: Service quality expectations influence e-customer satisfaction when shopping online.*
- H₃: Product offerings expectations influence e-customer satisfaction when shopping online.*

3. Methodology

It must be noted that this paper forms part of a larger study and focuses only on the influence of quality expectation on E-customer satisfaction in a South African context. The study utilizes a positivistic research paradigm. This paradigm enables hypothesis testing from which conclusions can be made in a study using statistical techniques (Bell *et al.* 2019). The study adopted descriptive research typologies as it used pre-determined questions in order to answer the who, when, what, where and when questions regarding the study (Saunders *et al.* 2007). The quantitative research approach was applied as the data is numeric in nature and therefore involves forming deductions based on quantitative data as advised by Leedy and Ormrod (2020).

Non-probability sampling techniques, convenience and snowball sampling, were used to reach the target population which consisted of South African online consumers aged 18 years

and older. A new measuring instrument was created, and items were generated from literature. An online survey was specifically adopted for the study. Online surveys are popular due to their low cost and general ease. Respondents can answer questions on their own time and at their own speed. Online surveys that do not employ standard methods can be deployed and returned quickly (Howard, 2021). Respondents were asked to give their level of agreement for the stated items, with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

The on-line survey contained a cover letter which detailed the purpose of the study, the expectations, as well as assurances of confidentiality and the protection of the rights of respondents who participated in the study. In addition, the online survey did not seek to collect identifiable or sensitive data about the participants, and they could not be identified individually as only a summary of the results would be reported.

An Exploratory Factor Analysis was used to reduce the data to a smaller set of summary variables (Bryman, 2008). A minimum cut-off point of 0.5 was deemed acceptable for construct validity (Babbie and Mouton, 2008). Cronbach's alpha values were calculated for each of the valid constructs to confirm inter-item reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficients of greater than 0.70 were deemed to be acceptable (Taber, 2018). Pearson's product moment correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the associations between the independent variables (information quality expectations, service quality expectations and Product offerings expectations) and the dependent variable (e-customer satisfaction). Multiple Regression Analysis was conducted to examine whether statistically significant relationships exist between quality expectation and e-consumer satisfaction.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Demographic information of respondents

Respondents consisted of 65% females and 34% males. More respondents were aged between 26 to 35 years old (48%), whilst few respondents were those aged above 65 years. In terms of ethnic affiliations, the Black ethnic group constituted the majority (85%), whilst the White ethnic group represented 11%, the Colored ethnic group 3% and 1% were from the Asian ethnic group. The average number of children for respondents was 2 children, whilst 71% were single, 25% married and about 4% were living with partners. Most respondents were employed (52%) whilst 40% were students, 6% unemployed and 2% were retirees. Postgraduate degree holders constituted 42% of the sample, first degree holders 37% and diploma holders 9%. Respondents with secondary and national certificates were least represented with 3% and 8% representation respectively.

4.2. Factor analysis

Data for the study was subjected to Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). A minimum cut-off point of 0.5 was used to accept factor loadings (Babbie and Mouton, 2008). Guided by Maskey *et al.* (2018), items which cross loaded were discarded from further statistical analysis.

Three factors were subjected to EFA, namely information quality expectations, service quality expectations and product quality expectations. Table 1 depicts the eigenvalues and the total variance expressed as a percentage.

Table 1. Factor extraction

Variables	Eigenvalues	% Total variance
Shopping experience expectations	39.69	56.70
Service convenience expectations	2.56	3.65
Product offerings expectations	1.15	1.65

As can be seen from Table 1, three factors with eigen values greater than 1 were extracted. However, some items intended to load on a particular variable loaded on other variables instead. This called for the renaming of the established variables. Product offerings

expectations maintained its name. However, new variables were named *shopping experience expectations and service convenience expectations*.

4.2.1. Shopping experience expectations

Table 2 shows the results of the *Shopping experience expectations* variable. The results are based on the EFA test, Cronbach alpha test and the eigenvalues.

Table 2. Validity and reliability of Shopping experience expectations

Eigenvalue: 36.69% of variance = 56.70		Cronbach's alpha = 0.991		
Items	Statements	Factor loading	Item correlation	Cronbach's alpha after deletion
	I shop online at stores if they have ...			
WF6	A 3D security for safe credit or debit card payments	0.632	0.785	0.991
WF9	A website that makes it easy to return to previously displayed pages	0.562	0.778	0.991
WF10	An encrypted (SSL certificate) website for personal data safety	0.594	0.724	0.991
LF1	A reputation for meeting product delivery dates	0.715	0.852	0.991
LF2	A courier delivery service known for speedy delivery	0.730	0.883	0.991
LF3	A quick order process time	0.749	0.894	0.991
LF5	An order tracking function to trace order status	0.708	0.840	0.991
LF6	A free delivery fee linked to an affordable minimum order placement	0.701	0.710	0.991
LF9	A well-known delivery courier service provider	0.522	0.798	0.991
LF10	Notifications for order delays	0.682	0.832	0.991
IQ1	Detailed product instructions for product usage	0.591	0.852	0.991
IQ2	Product reviews	0.663	0.732	0.991
IQ3	A click function on the product for content information	0.638	0.733	0.991
IQ6	Complete product information and no other information needs to be sourced	0.556	0.766	0.991
IQ7	3D visual images that display products from all sides	0.601	0.861	0.991
IQ8	Up-to-date product information	0.769	0.861	0.991
IQ9	A function which indicates new product additions	0.552	0.899	0.991
IQ10	Product guarantee details	0.733	0.885	0.991
SQ1	A fast response time to queries	0.755	0.883	0.991
SQ2	A hassle-free returns and replacement process	0.798	0.847	0.991
SQ3	A fast enquiry response	0.785	0.791	0.991
SQ4	A function that keeps me up to date with the order processing details	0.811	0.848	0.991
SQ5	Process my order within a day or two	0.761	0.880	0.991
SQ6	Indicated the number of product items available for purchase	0.626	0.906j	0.991
SQ7	A policy of confirmation of parcel's delivery	0.737	0.863	0.991
SQ8	No additional fees for returns	0.781	0.839	0.991
SQ9	An easy way to report product problems	0.792	0.810	0.991
SQ10	Offered useful assistance about product enquiries	0.684	0.796	0.991
PO3	Products known to be of high quality	0.701	0.850	0.991
PO9	Prices that are cheaper than buying in-store	0.624	0.835	0.991

Table 2. Continued

PO10	Product combination offerings that can be customized to my needs	0.543	0.844	0.991
PR1	Visually displayed products that match my vision of the real product	0.664	0.826	0.991
PR2	Described the functionality of products that match the customer reviews	0.625	0.912	0.991
PR3	Indicated there are no hidden product maintenance expenses	0.634	0.879	0.991
PR4	Indicated the product is repairable if needed	0.592	0.882	0.991
PR5	Clearly indicated the expected delivery period	0.775	0.869	0.991
PR6	Required delivery location confirmation	0.710	0.793	0.991
PR7	Navigation that allowed for quickly finding the product needed	0.710	0.855	0.991
PR8	A few easy ordering process steps	0.701	0.858	0.991
ES1	A shopping cart that saves product selection to add on later	0.516	0.878	0.991
ES2	An easy to navigate ordering process	0.674	0.847	0.991
ES6	Value for money product offering	0.690	0.903	0.991
ES7	An easy to log in website	0.678	0.785	0.991
ES8	Different payment options	0.634	0.778	0.991
ES9	An easy-to-use payment system	0.714	0.724	0.991

In addition, shopping experience expectations relate to service quality expectations about real time responsiveness to queries and enquiries, a good free-return policy with a short order processing time, notification thereof as well as provision of delivery details (Barutçu, 2010; Blut *et al.* 2015; Suleiman *et al.* 2012). Shopping experience expectations also relate to product expectations where consumers expect online products to be of high quality and cheaper than buying in-store (Chen and Huang, 2013; Tandon *et al.* 2021). Lu *et al.* (2014) highlight that online shoppers expect customization and personalization of goods to suit their needs. Consumers rely on delivery location confirmation and expectations and quick navigation ordering processes to minimize the perceived risks associated with online shopping (Masoud, 2013). Shopping experience expectations also relate to ease of shopping expectations of online consumers concerning the simplicity of the online shopping experience such as easy navigation ordering processes, an easy to log in website offering easy and different payment options and value-for-money product offerings (Elgendy *et al.* 2019; Rudansky-Kloppers and Strydom, 2021; Turhan, 2014).

The internal consistency of the items measuring *Shopping experience expectations* was confirmed as the Cronbach's alpha coefficient had a value of 0.991 which was above the minimum value of 0.70, signaling high reliability of the measuring scale. The eigenvalue of more than one, 36.69, explained a variance of 56.70% in the data set.

4.2.2. Service convenience expectations

Table 3 presents the results of the EFA which extracted the variable *Service convenience expectations*, the items that loaded, the eigenvalue of the variable, the Cronbach's alpha (α) of each item and the overall variable.

Table 3 shows that *Service convenience expectations* contained three items with a minimum factor loading of 0.504 and a maximum of 0.642, therefore above the minimum cut-off point of 0.50. The three items which loaded relate to *Service convenience expectations* because Blackstock (2020) revealed that consumers prefer interactive live support chats over email and social media support because it offers added convenience. Beneke *et al.* (2012) indicate that consumers prefer product demonstrations as they offer user convenience through the elimination of hassles regarding using the product for the first time. Service convenience expectation is also brought about by the elimination of social risk which refers to the possible loss of social status in

the consumer's social group as a result of the product's unacceptability or disapproval of utilizing the Internet as a purchasing channel (Masoud, 2013).

Table 3. Validity and reliability of Service convenience expectations

Eigenvalue: 2.56		% of variance = 3.65		Cronbach's alpha 0.737	
Items	Statements	Factor loading	Item correlation	Cronbach's alpha after deletion	
WF8	I shop online at stores if they have ...				
	An interactive chat function to communicate on their website	0.642	0.564	0.649	
IQ4	Product demonstrations to show how to use the product	0.624	0.608	0.598	
PR10	A product reputation that gives me social status	0.504	0.520	0.709	

The eigenvalue for *Service convenience expectations* was 2.56, which was above one and explained 3.65% of the variance in the data set. *Service convenience expectations* had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.737, thereby surpassing the minimum cut-off point for reliability.

4.2.3. Product offerings expectations

Product offerings expectations is the third variable extracted in the EFA. Table 4 provides the statistical results for the items that loaded, the eigenvalue of the variable, as well as the Cronbach's alpha (α) of the overall variable.

Table 4. Validity and reliability of Product offerings expectations

Eigenvalue: 1.15		% of variance = 1.65		Cronbach's alpha = 0.816	
Items	Statements	Factor loading	Item correlation	Cronbach's alpha after deletion	
PO1	Unique products	0.668	0.710	0.711	
PO2	Well-known brands	0.608	0.691	0.727	
PO8	Frequent promotion offers	0.618	0.619	0.811	

Table 4 shows that three factors (PO1, PO2 and PO8) of the ten items intended to measure *Product offerings expectations* loaded onto the construct with factor loadings above 0.50. The factor loadings range between 0.608 and 0.668, indicating the presence of construct validity. The eigenvalue of *Product offerings expectations* was 1.15 which was higher than the minimum of one, explaining 1.65% of variance in data. The Cronbach's alpha value of 0.816 was above the minimum value of 0.70, proving that the measuring scale for this variable was highly internally consistent.

4.2.4. E-customer satisfaction

E-customer satisfaction is the dependent variable for the study. The EFA extracted variable explained a cumulative of 81.529% of the variance in the data. Results confirm that all questionnaire items of the dependent variable loaded onto the variable with factor loadings exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.50. The lowest factor loading was S9 with a loading of 0.711 and the highest was S3 with a loading of 0.959. Table 5 presents the eigenvalues, variances, validity and reliability results of e-customer satisfaction.

Table 5. Validity and reliability of e-customer satisfaction

Eigenvalue: 8.15		% of variance = 81.539		Cronbach's alpha 0.973	
Items	Statements	Factor loading	Item correlation	Cronbach's alpha after deletion	
S1	Online shops satisfied my needs if they	0.884	0.854	0.971	
S2	Allow both online or nearest in-store returns	0.933	0.912	0.969	
S3	Allow a refund for returns	0.959	0.943	0.968	
S4	Guarantee safe money transfers	0.940	0.922	0.969	
S5	Have packaging that protects products during delivery transit	0.835	0.798	0.973	
S6	Ensured there is no information overload	0.938	0.917	0.969	
S7	Meet my product quality expectations	0.950	0.934	0.968	
S8	Meet my delivery time period expectations	0.937	0.919	0.969	
S9	Update their website regularly to show timely information	0.711	0.664	0.978	
S10	Inform me about promotions on my preferred communication choice	0.913	0.894	0.969	
	Keep me informed of order changes				

Table 5 displays that *E-customer satisfaction* had an eigenvalue of 8.15, which was above the cut-off point of one. *E-customer satisfaction* had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.973 which was also above the minimum threshold of 0.70 and therefore deemed a reliable measuring scale. In accordance with the tests for validity (EFA) and reliability (Cronbach's alpha coefficient), the following section presents the reformulated operational definitions for both the independent and dependent variables as well as the revised hypothesized model and hypotheses.

4.3. Revised hypothesized model and hypotheses

Pursuant to the EFA and renaming of several constructs, Table 6 encapsulates the operational definitions of the valid and reliable variables.

Table 6. Summary of formulated operational definitions

Independent variable	Operationalization
Shopping experience expectations	Consumers' online shopping experience expectations that prompt purchasing intention relating to website security, logistics reordering, processing and product delivery, ease of shopping and not being exposed to risks.
Service convenience expectations	Service convenience expectations that prompt online consumers' purchasing intention relating to the availability of an interactive chat function for enquiries, product demonstrations showing the use of the product and a product reputation that can ensure a consumer's social status.
Product offerings expectations	Online consumers' expectations that prompt purchasing intention due to the unique products offered being well-known brands or frequent promotional offers.
Dependent variable	
E-customer satisfaction	Consumers' needs that are satisfied as the online shop exceeds their consumer expectations with up-to-date timely product information on promotion offerings, refunds and refund terms, communicate via their preferred communication mode, as well as meeting product quality, delivery and safe money transfer requirements.

4.4. Descriptive analysis and reliability tests

Table 7 depicts the descriptive statistics for the valid and reliable variables.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
Shopping experience expectations	4.01	0.95
Service convenience expectations	3.53	0.99
Product offerings expectations	3.78	1.01
E-customer satisfaction	4.25	1.03

As can be seen from Table 7, *Shopping experience expectations* scored a mean which tended to four (4.01) which indicates that on average respondents agreed that they are persuaded to purchase online if their *Shopping experience expectations* are met online. A standard deviation of 0.95 for *Shopping experience expectations* means that responses did not deviate from the mean. According to Schoonhoven and Does (2012), if the standard deviation is below 2.0, then the level of deviation from the mean is acceptable. *Shopping experience expectations* entail meeting online shopping expectations about website functionality, logistics functionality, information expectation, service quality, product offerings and perceived risks.

Service convenience expectations scored a mean which tended to four (3.53), indicating that on average respondents agreed that they are prompted to shop online if their *Service convenience expectations* are met. A standard deviation of 0.99 proves that the responses obtained revolved around the mean of 3.53 since they were below 2.0 (Schoonhoven and Does, 2012). It appears that respondents were in agreement that *Service convenience expectations* are associated with having an interactive chat function on the website for communication purposes, product demonstrations to show how to use the product and product reputations that can give buyers social status.

Product offerings expectations scored a mean which tended to four (3.78) indicating that on average respondents agreed that they are prompted to purchase online if their *Product offerings expectations* are met. A low standard deviation of 1.01 was also recorded, proving that data was clustered around the mean. It appears that consumers develop an online buying intention if the online shop offers unique products and well-known brands. Respondents also feel that frequent promotional offers stimulate their online purchasing intention.

E-customer satisfaction was the dependent variable of the study. Using descriptive statistics in Table 6, e-customer satisfaction scored a mean which tended to four (4.25). This means that respondents agreed that they were satisfied with their online purchasing. A standard deviation of 1.03 was recorded, which was below 2.0, which means that the responses did not deviate from the mean score of 4.25 (Schoonhoven and Does, 2012). It seems respondents are satisfied with online purchasing if they have a refund or return option. Guarantees for safe money transfers and the ability of the online store to meet delivery period expectations are some other considerations contributing to their e-satisfaction. Overall, it seems that respondents are satisfied when their online expectations are met, communication is flawless, delivery schedules are met, and safety and quality of products are guaranteed.

4.5. Pearson product moment correlation coefficient results

Table 8 presents the results of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients that were calculated for this study.

Table 8. Correlation matrix of online purchasing's systems functionality and e-customer satisfaction

Variable	ECS	SEE	SCE	POE
E-customer satisfaction (ECS)	1.000			
Shopping experience expectations (SEE)	0.792	1.000		
Service convenience expectations (SCE)	0.465	0.646	1.000	
Product offerings expectations (POE)	0.601	0.766	0.586	1.000

As is evident from Table 8, the lowest correlation was between service convenience expectations and e-customer satisfaction ($r=0.465$); whilst the highest correlation was between shopping experience expectations and e-customer satisfaction ($r=0.792$). Product offerings expectations and shopping expectations both recorded high correlations with e-customer satisfaction. Jahanshahi *et al.* (2011) justify the strong association between shopping experience expectations and e-customer expectation, indicating that when an order meets the consumer's expectations, it leads to e-customer satisfaction and a perception of exceptional online shopping experience. A study by Wu *et al.* (2021) also confirms a strong positive association between product offerings expectations and e-customer satisfaction.

4.6. Hypotheses testing and discussion

Table 9 presents the results of Linear Regression Analysis.

Table 9. Multiple regression analysis results

Dependent variable: R ² =0.689	E-customer satisfaction			Hypothesis number	Hypothesis
Independent variable	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig.(p)		
Shopping experience expectations	0.463	3.486	0.001**	H ₁	Accept
Service convenience expectations	-0.084	-1.653	0.099	H ₂	Reject
Product offerings expectations	0.013	0.218	0.828	H ₃	Reject

Note: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.001$.

Table 9 indicates that approximately 68.9% of the variance in e-customer satisfaction can be explained by the variance in the independent variable factors. Only one statistically significant relationship was found between shopping experience expectations and e-customer satisfaction. This is evident from the t-values for shopping experience expectations (3.486). Using the critical value of 1.96 at a significance level of 0.05, H₁ is supported because its t-value exceeds 1.96.

Therefore, shopping experience expectations predict e-customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.463$; $P = 0.001$). The study of Vakulenko *et al.* (2019) also confirmed that consumer experience has a relationship with e-customer satisfaction through the mediation of delivery experience. When online shopping meets the consumers' expectations and there is the perception of an exceptional online shopping experience, it leads to e-customer satisfaction (Jahanshahi *et al.* 2011). Therefore, online shops which seek to take full advantage of the digital retail revolution should not only offer the necessary consumer experience, but they should actually perform well in exceeding the shopping experience which consumers actually expect (Gladly, 2022).

No statistically significant relationships were found between service convenience expectations and product offerings expectations with e-customer satisfaction. The P-values both exceeded 0.05. Therefore, H₂ and H₃ were rejected. This means that service convenience expectations and product offerings expectations do not influence e-customer satisfaction. The insignificant relationships found between service convenience expectations and product offerings expectations with e-customer satisfaction diverged somewhat from the findings of Turhan (2014), who identified a significant relationship between convenience and customer satisfaction, where

shopping convenience predicted customer satisfaction. However, Mulilima (2021) also confirms the results of this study.

The statistically insignificant relationship between product offerings expectations and e-customer satisfaction was confirmed in a study by Gondanzelo (2019) who found that product mix depth and width do not indicate online consumer satisfaction. Khan *et al.* (2015) confirmed that frequent information about promotions and discounts, which are part of product offerings expectations, are much sought after by consumers; however, it merely promotes immediate purchase but does not predict e-customer satisfaction.

5. Recommendations

Shopping experience expectations had a moderate influence on e-customer satisfaction. This suggests that respondents appear to agree that if their online shopping experience expectations are met, their e-customer satisfaction is enhanced. The empirical evidence reveals that to enhance e-customer satisfaction, online consumers expect an online shopping experience where they receive all relevant, accurate and appropriate information about a product given that they would not be able to touch or feel the products before deciding to purchase. Blut *et al.* (2015) confirmed that shopping experience expectations also encompass an expectation of return-handling policies provided during and after the sale. Khan *et al.* (2015) indicate that shopping experience expectations drive e-customer satisfaction through real-time responsiveness to queries and enquiries, a good free-return policy and quick order-processing time. Shopping experience expectations of responsiveness, whereby consumers expect online shops to be fast in enquiry response and prompt in offering useful assistance about product enquiries, influence the level of e-customer satisfaction (Lionello *et al.* 2020).

It is therefore recommended that to ensure e-customer satisfaction, online shops should meet and exceed online shopping experience expectations. It is important that online shops provide an online shopping environment which is safe and secure for consumers. Safety can be enhanced through introducing 3D security for safe credit and debit card transactions and encrypting a website by means of an SSL certificate for personal data safety. It is imperative that an efficient online order processing system is in place at an online shop where orders are processed within two days or less. In addition, online shops should have a reputable courier delivery service for effective outbound logistics to ensure that online purchases are speedily delivered and meet the stated delivery timeline. In their contract with the courier, it should be stated that there are penalties for late delivery and that orders must be delivered within a day or two. These couriers must use order-tracking communication to allow consumers to track their order delivery status and be notified immediately about order delays and expected delivery timelines. Online stores should consider offering free delivery to qualifying consumers who buy a specified order size or to a specific amount. Online stores should have a returns and replacement policy whereby returns are processed hassle-free and replacements are supplied within seven days. The returns and replacement policy must eliminate bureaucratic approvals for returns and replacements so that consumers get the required outcome faster, either by replacing the product or refunding it in full.

Online shops can augment the shopping experience by giving consumers up-to-date information and instructions on how to use products, product guarantees and showing all product reviews by consumers, regardless of whether positive or negative, so that they have an idea whether other consumers' expectations have been met. There should also be a click function on the product to obtain more information about the product and for indicating the uses and benefits of the product. The measurements of the product item could also be indicated as additional product information. In addition, providing a 3D visual image display of products ensures an all-round view. Visually displaying the products will enable consumers to get a good idea of the real product size and appearance.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to establish which quality expectation variables influence e-customer satisfaction in South Africa. The results indicate that only shopping experience expectations influence e-customer satisfaction in South Africa. It is thus evident that there is a need for online shops' marketers to meet and surpass shopping experience expectations through the provision of online shopping services which are secure, meet delivery schedules, offer sought-after product information and provide adequate information to reduce consumers' online shopping risk. It is important for online shops' marketers and management to determine and address what influences their consumers' e-customer satisfaction. It is also important for online shops to remain relevant and adapt continuously to the changing online shopping environment and changing consumer expectations, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also concludes that service convenience expectations and product offerings expectations do not influence e-customer satisfaction. In light of the foregoing results, future studies may test more factors which may be direct determinants of e-customer satisfaction. This study only validated one factor, hence the need to take a holistic approach in developing more consumer behavioral factors to test the effect on e-customer satisfaction.

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