

“Point-and-Click” – B2B-Customer Loyalty in the Internet: An Empirical Study on Potential Antecedents Exemplified at German Company “WERU”



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Abstract The Internet is an indispensable platform for the provision of products and services of a company and for the communication with customers. A significant increase in the number of e-commerce interfaces in the Business-to-Business (B2B) environment has already been noticed for several years. One of the biggest challenges facing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the construction industry is the complex issue of retaining customers in B2B-relationships. Especially in an internet-based, constantly changing context, this is an uncertain and ambitious challenge. In our study, we investigate the antecedents of customer loyalty of B2B-customers using the internet. Based on the findings of Janita et al., we developed a conceptual model containing the constructs potentially influencing loyalty of B2B-customers in the internet. Conducting an online survey with the B2B-customers of WERU, a German industrial component manufacturer in the building sector, our final data set contains 187 observations. Results show a direct, highly significant effect of customer satisfaction and trust and a highly significant total effect of image via customer satisfaction on customer loyalty.

Keywords Customer loyalty · B2B · SME · Internet · E-commerce · SEM

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Introduction

Due to changes in the general economic environment and competition, the important position of managing a customer relationship, especially customer loyalty, was recognized over 40 years ago (Hoffmann 2008). In 1975, Bagozzi began to study the exchange process between supplier and consumer, through which a stronger connection can be established (Bagozzi 1975). Relationship marketing (Berry et al. 1983), which replaced the outdated individual transaction between two organizations is characterized by a long-term customer relationship (Hoffmann 2008). Through technological advancement, companies have the opportunity to develop customer loyalty activities in the form of virtual communities, websites, customer clubs, web stores or electronic services on the internet (Keuper et al. 2002; Schwartz 2017). Neither scientifically nor practically has the topic of customer loyalty lost any of its importance nowadays, but it is becoming increasingly important for companies (Barsch 2019; Kunze 2000).

In contrast to B2C-markets, B2B-marketing is especially focused on long-term relationships with the related customer organization (Fredebeul-Krein 2012). By cultivating that relationship, the loyalty of the B2B-customer and derived future business is estimated to be strengthened (Ramaseshan et al. 2013). Furthermore, the number of current and potential customers in a B2B-market is much smaller than in a B2C-market (Barsch 2019). Therefore, the product is more closely tailored to the customer, which results in a higher degree of individualization (Fredebeul-Krein 2012). Especially in the construction industry, the service and quality of products are very important. On the basis of these factors, it becomes apparent that the driving variables of customer loyalty in B2B are considered to be different from B2C (Forooz Pishgar et al. 2013). However, studies in that present research context only exist in very small numbers. Most studies regarding customer loyalty in the internet are concerned with the B2C-market (Dowling 2002; I. Eid 2011; Srinivasan et al. 2002). Even if the internet doesn't seem to change the fundamental idea of customer loyalty and its structure, it extends additional types of possible interactions with B2B-customers (Strauss 2011). That raises the question about specific internet related antecedents of B2B-customer loyalty.

As a consequence, we see a research gap regarding to the influencing factors of customer loyalty in the Internet for SEM in the B2B-sector. Accordingly, we define the following research questions:

- RQ1:** Which factors influence B2B-customer loyalty in the internet?
- RQ2:** What related actions should industrial SMEs take in the B2B-sector?

To answer these questions, this paper is structured as follows: Firstly, we offer a structured overview of studies that investigate customer loyalty in B2B. Secondly, we derive our conceptual model and address our research hypotheses. Thirdly, we present our results after having performed a structural equation model analysis. Finally, we discuss the effects of our results on the theory; we also give practical recommendations for WERU. Future research areas on the topic and limitations of the study are addressed as well.

Theoretical Background and Research Approach

On the basis of the economic and behavioral theories, we analyzed four models with respect to their suitability in the context of this study.

The European Performance Satisfaction Index (EPSI) model (González Menorca et al. 2016) was introduced in 1999 for a European country comparison of customer satisfaction. The quality and significance of the index has already been confirmed in several studies (Bruhn 2008). The study came to the conclusion that expectations affect the image and that the product quality perceived by the customer is dependent on the customer expectations regarding the product. The expectations as well as the perceived quality positively influence the perceived value and the customer satisfaction as well as the image positively influence loyalty. However, the connection between perceived value and customer satisfaction is not very high (González Menorca et al. 2016). The EPSI model offers valuable approaches for customer retention on the internet. Moreover, the importance of all variables of the model has been repeatedly confirmed by the theories. The application for industrial SMEs in the B2B-context is possible due to the robustness against changes in the company, the sector, and the geographical area. However, the model cannot be used completely without restrictions for the present study, since specific influencing factors regarding the Internet are not part of it.

The Theoretical Framework of Customer Loyalty (Cheng et al. 2008) was developed to identify the driving indicators regarding customer loyalty of a Chinese internet provider. The results of this study showed that especially customer satisfaction and service quality have a significant impact on customer loyalty (Cheng et al. 2008). Focusing on services, the approach of Cheng et al. might not be completely transferred to industrial manufacturing companies, as internet providers offer a smaller range of services. Nevertheless, potential with regard to service quality and switching costs has been seen for the expansion of the future investigation model. The switching costs in the B2B-sector can be closely related to the economic switching costs, as the theories have shown several times before.

The development of the Modified Technology Acceptance Model (I. Eid 2011) was based on the previously limited research in the field of e-commerce in Saudi Arabia. The aim was to gain initial knowledge of the factors influencing customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty of e-commerce customers. In this model, customer satisfaction is identified as a significantly influencing variable of customer loyalty and serves as a mediator between the individual constructs. The quality of the user interface and the information quality of e-commerce websites represent an indirect influence variable of loyalty (I. Eid 2011). Regarding the context of our study, it can be stated that customer loyalty on the internet of the B2B-environment has hardly been researched. Although the model was developed for the B2C-sector, it seems to be transferable to B2B-relationships. There are no limitations regarding the company size or industry. However, the application of this model can lead to differentiated results in a cross-national comparison. In addition, predominantly male respondents were interviewed, which is also expected in the context of this study.

The Model of Antecedents of Client Loyalty (Janita et al. 2013) deals with B2B electronic marketplaces in Spain, especially in the construction industry. Image, perceived quality, perceived value, and customer satisfaction have proven to be important factors influencing customer loyalty. In contrast to some B2C studies, this study has shown, that there is no correlation between the perceived quality of service and customer satisfaction (Janita et al. 2013). In view of these variables, the model can be applied to our present research context, since it was also applied to the B2B-sector with regard to electronic marketplaces. Additionally, the industry sector corresponds to the context of this study and there are no limitations regarding the size of the company.

Taking into account the model assessment, we used an extended version of the Model of Antecedents of Client Loyalty by Janita et al. (2013). Nevertheless, it should be noted that a modification of the selected model will be made. First of all, the expectations as a construct are neglected in the investigation model. This is due to the fact that several studies have already come to the conclusion that the effects of expectations on customer loyalty either do not exist at all or are very small (Gronholdt et al. 2000). In addition, the construct commitment is also excluded. The commitment was hardly considered in the theories presented and the models examined. This is possibly due to the fact that commitment contains similar aspects of loyalty (Janita et al. 2013). Furthermore, the switching costs are recorded as a construct of the switching barriers. The social influences will not be considered. This is based on the assumption that in B2B-relationships the influence of the social environment is not taken into account when deciding to switch the manufacturer (Jones et al. 2000). The attractiveness of competitors is to be integrated as a single construct because of the large number of competitors in the market. The perceived risk is included as an additional construct for the research model, by reason that every purchase decision is associated with a certain risk. The construct trust is also included in the research model, as this has proven to be an important predictor for successful cooperation with customers in the B2B-environment (Gounaris 2005). With the digital age, trust is gaining importance, as interaction with customers is becoming much easier as an important influence on future partnerships (Schmitt 2019).

This model provides a basis for answering our research questions (Fig. 1). The following assumptions are expected based on the model and theory analysis (Table 1):

Methodology

We conducted a standardized online survey in Germany with approximately 1030 specialized retailers of the industrial company WERU. WERU is one of the leading manufacturers of windows and doors in the European market. WERU bought the company Unilux in 2014, creating the WERU Group, which can operate as a full-range supplier in the market. A total of 1150 employees are employed which puts WERU in the SME segment. The retailers of WERU were asked to participate in the online survey. The participants were asked to rate each question on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = do not agree at all, 5 = agree completely). The items and their associated constructs are shown in Table A1. The total sample size was 187.

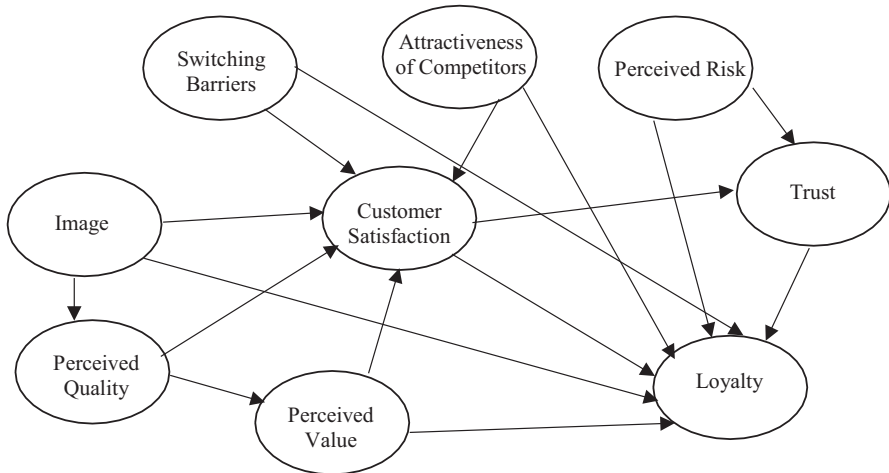


Fig. 1 Conceptual model

Table 1 Overview of expected influences regarding the constructs

	Hypotheses
H1:	The better the image, the higher the customer satisfaction.
H2:	The better the image, the higher the perceived quality.
H3:	The higher the trust, the higher the loyalty.
H4:	The higher the perceived barriers to switching, the lower the customer satisfaction.
H5:	The higher the satisfaction, the higher the trust.
H6:	The higher the satisfaction, the higher the loyalty.
H7:	The higher the perceived quality, the higher the perceived value.
H8:	The higher the perceived quality, the higher the customer satisfaction.

Data Analysis and Results

Our data analysis draws on partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 3.3.0. For the significance tests, we perform the bootstrapping procedure with 5000 subsamples and apply the option without sign change (Hair et al. 2017). The constructs attractiveness of competitors (ATCO), image (IMG), switching barriers (SB), perceived risk (PR) and loyalty (LOY) were measured reflectively. The evaluation of the construct reliability leads to the exclusion of the construct from the initial measurement model. The analysis reveals acceptable results for the rest of the constructs (min. Cronbach’s $\alpha > 0.82$, min. $\rho_A > 0.83$, min. $\rho_C > 0.82$) (see Table A2 for fully reported results of internal consistency) (Hair et al. 2014). We also tested the convergence validity. For this purpose, the indicator loadings were evaluated. The indicator loadings should correspond to a value of 0.7, in the best case 0.708, which all indicator loadings have achieved. A second criterion for convergent validity is the extracted average variance (AVE).

The AVE scores are above the minimum threshold of 0.5 for all constructs, indicating that on average, all reflectively measured constructs account for more than 50% of the variance of their indicators. To evaluate discriminant validity, we first consider the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which states that a latent variable should share more variance with its items than with any other latent construct (Hair et al. 2017). This condition is met since all AVE measures are greater than the inter-construct correlations. Second, we evaluate the discriminant validity using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of the correlations (HTMT). The HTMT values in both groups are well below the threshold of 1, whereas the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals do not include the value of 1, which means that the measurement models fulfil the recommended rule of thumb (Hair et al. 2017). Furthermore, the indicator loadings are larger in both groups than the cross loadings. Taking these three criteria, we can conclude that discriminatory validity is achieved, thus indicating a satisfactory extent to which the five factors differ from each other. The constructs perceived quality (PQ), perceived value (PV), customer satisfaction (CS) and trust (TRU) were measured formatively. Therefore, the first criterion is multicollinearity. This expresses the linear dependence of manifest variables on other manifest variables (Walter 2009). None of the values exceeds the threshold value of 5, so that there is no multicollinearity. The next step is to check the external weights of the formative indicators. It is noticeable here that not all indicators are significant. PV1 with $p = 0.45$ and PV3 with $p = 0.99$ have not proven to be significant. Hair et al. (2017) justify this by stating a higher number of indicators for measuring a construct increases the probability that indicators are not significant. Nevertheless, this is unexpected, since the construct was made measurable by empirically proven items. Besides the p values, we had to consider the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals of the indicators. The limits here are 2.5% and 97.5% and were fulfilled. Furthermore, a value of 0 should not be present (Hair et al. 2017). This can be confirmed in Table 2.

Finally, looking at the structural model, we need to evaluate multicollinearity by considering the value of variance inflation factor (VIF). The first run showed that some values far exceeded the maximum target value of 5 (Hair et al. 2014). For this reason, the elimination of different constructs and their effects were tested. In view of this, it was recognized that the link between image and loyalty and the link between perceived value and loyalty generated outliers to a high degree, so that no basis for further testing was provided. Accordingly, the decision was made to remove these two links from the model. The test procedure has finally shown that the results are no longer distorted. The obtained VIFs for the modified model are well below the number of 5, which means that there is no serious collinearity problem among the predictor variables (Hair et al. 2014). Path coefficients as well as their significance are summarized in Table 2.

Finally, this table addresses our first research question and gives an overview of the factors which strongly influence customer loyalty on the internet and which influence it less.

Table 2 Path coefficients and significance

	Path Coefficient	<i>p value</i>	Sig.	95% bias corrected confidence intervals
CS → LOY	0.37	0.00	***	[-0.07;0.42]
CS → TRU	0.79	0.00	***	[0.13;0.91]
IMG → CS	0.32	0.00	***	[0.17;0.50]
IMG → PQ	0.77	0.00	***	[0.65;0.85]
IMG → TRU	0.18	0.00	***	[-0.47;0.35]
PQ → CS	0.36	0.00	***	[0.20;0.50]
PQ → PV	0.73	0.00	***	[0.62;0.80]
PR → LOY	-0.10	0.00	***	[-0.90;0.26]
PR → TRU	-0.03	0.00	***	[-0.64;0.17]
PV → CS	0.30	0.00	***	[0.16;0.43]
SB → CS	0.07	0.15	ns	[-0.03;0.31]
SB → LOY	0.26	0.00	***	[0.01;0.36]
TRU → LOY	0.34	0.00	***	[-0.55;0.45]

Note: *** $p \leq 0.001$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$; ns not significant

Conclusion, Discussion and Future Research

Our results could also empirically confirm the strong theoretical role of customer satisfaction as a precursor of loyalty. These findings are clearly similar to those of previous research on both online B2C and online B2B e-commerce which report strong evidence for such a relationship (Chumpitaz et al. 2004; Pin Luarn et al. 2003; Ding et al. 2011). However, satisfaction was not only a pioneering factor for loyalty, but also a direct, very strong influencing factor in our study. Therefore, we can also underline the theoretical assumption (Selnes 1998). In turn, trust has been cited in most studies and theories as a significant factor influencing customer loyalty, especially on the internet. Our results also determine a significant correlation within this path (Brunner et al. 2008).

It is clearly recognizable that image is the most important influence for perceived quality. In this context, the established hypothesis H2 can be confirmed, as there is a strong, highly significant correlation. For this reason, it is advisable for SME in this industry to provide sufficient information to customers through an active communication policy via the internet. This can be made for example via e-newsletters or social media channels (Kreutzer et al. 2020). In the course of this survey, it was found that Instagram and Facebook are the main channels which are used. In this case, the focus should be on WERU’s competence and know-how as the analysis showed. However, the reputation of producing high quality products should not be neglected either as the image has a very strong impact on the perceived quality by the customers. The perceived quality has also proven to be a influencing factor of loyalty via the perceived value and the customer satisfaction. For this reason H7 can also be confirmed. On the basis of the survey and the analysis, it was found that the image is important for customer satisfaction. H1 can be divided on the basis of the moderate, highly significant correlation. Moreover, the provision of e-learning tools or community platforms via internet can also provide a way to counteract

B2B-customer concerns (Kreutzer et al. 2020). Besides, the study has shown that a simple and convenient ordering process in the form of a web store for ordering doors and windows via online stores on the internet is required, as competitors and online providers already offer (Fensterversand.com 2021; Veluxshop.de 2021). As a premium manufacturer, the perceived product quality and value for the customers is also significant in this case. Therefore, the early involvement of customers in the development process of products could be useful to increase long term customer loyalty. To identify customer requirements via the internet, the creation of user groups might be helpful. These groups could enable particularly innovative customers, sales staff and internal employees to collaborate. In those groups, people can work together on new product introductions, further developments and elimination of products, independently of location and time, due to the internet (Kreutzer et al. 2020). Excluding the total effects, satisfaction has the strongest direct effect on customer loyalty. According to the theory, we confirm H6. Consequently, special attention should be paid to this construct. Satisfaction is an alignment of the expectations with the actual achievement, so that the communication measures are particularly important. In this case, a company should only communicate what it can actually implement. This must be ensured, especially for social media, as contributions can be distributed very quickly (Buchberger 2016). WERU is advised to carry out a continuous learning process through regular online satisfaction survey analyses. Due to the important role of the service, assessment possibilities should be provided in the internet, in the form of automated mails, feedback possibilities by means of follow-up processes or social media applications. If WERU decides to implement a survey, it is important to the customers that the measures and suggestions are actually considered and implemented (Kreutzer et al. 2020). Our investigation model exhibits a further effect path of the satisfaction on the loyalty. The connection of satisfaction and trust has proven to be the strongest relationship in the entire research model which confirms H5. The basis of trust seems to address the online communication between WERU and its customers. The customers emphasized open and honest communication as highly important. Accordingly, any changes in the future affecting the customers should be communicated online. Due to Covid-19, WERU for example has produced a short online video, showing B2B-customers who measured WERU during the Covid-19 pandemic. This activity could be applied permanently via the internet for customers in order to openly provide them with information even in crises and thereby strengthen their trust in WERU.

The survey shows that the perceived risks is a minor factor influencing trust. A significantly stronger effect on trust was expected due to the high average age of the customers and the unfamiliarity with this topic. However, when introducing a web shop, it should be ensured, that customers are given a sense of reliability beforehand and that concerns about the possible consequential risks of such an ordering process are dispelled. For example, extended guarantees or the existence of service hotlines can be communicated via internet (Huber 2013). Overall, it can be stated that trust has the greatest influence on loyalty after customer satisfaction. This significant connection can also be determined with H3. A fundamentally uniform, constant and professional customer-communication in the internet can create a radiating effect. This concerns the strategic orientation of the company, the customer orientation and

the related philosophy, the product offers and services as well as the positioning and identity of the brand (Huber 2013). In summary, communication measures on the Internet can generate a multitude of opportunities in terms of customer loyalty. This study provides relevant insights to possible factors determining the increase of customer loyalty. The consideration of this study is practice-oriented with very significant values compared to the existing literature.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations and also starting points for further research, which are discussed in the following. The selection of the constructs for the investigation model is based on empirical research and theories, but it can be assumed that, in addition to the constructs examined, a large number of other factors can influence customer loyalty. In this respect, a more intensive analysis could be achieved by integrating further constructs. In addition, the indicators of the constructs were determined based on the context of the investigation. Therefore, comparability with other research in the field of customer loyalty is not given. Thus, a uniform, standardized definition of constructs, which have been confirmed by repeated studies, could counteract this. It should be mentioned that due to the limited scope of the investigation, restrictions were accepted regarding the detailed operationalization of the items. The study was carried out exclusively in the German market, so that an unrestricted transferability into other cultures is difficult and could lead to different results. In view of the high dynamic nature of changes on the internet, it should be noted that the importance of the various drivers may change over time. This could mainly be due to changing customer requirements and experience attitudes on the internet and the development of competition.

Appendix

Table A1 Item summary – questionnaire for the retailers of WERU

Measurement model	Scale/item
Image	<i>5-point Likert scale (1 = fully disagree, 5 = fully agree)</i>
IMG1	In my opinion, WERU has a good reputation.
IMG2	WERU has a reputation for producing high quality products.
IMG3	WERU has a reputation for providing good services.
IMG4	In my opinion, WERU has a better image than its competitors.
Perceived quality	<i>5-point Likert scale (1 = fully disagree, 5 = fully agree)</i>
PQ1	WERU provides a high quality of product.
PQ2	In my opinion WERU is reliable.
PQ3	WERU handles my complaints immediately.
PQ4	The employees of WERU are competent.
PQ5	For me, the order process at WERU is simple and comfortable.
Perceived value	<i>5-point Likert scale (1 = fully disagree, 5 = fully agree)</i>
PV1	For me, the price-performance ratio of WERU is good compared to the competition.

(continued)

Table A1 (continued)

Measurement model	Scale/item
PV2	For me, the product quality is high.
PV3	For me, the price level is appropriate.
PV4	The service quality I receive from WERU is worth my time.
Customer satisfaction	<i>5-point Likert scale (1 = fully disagree, 5 = fully agree)</i>
CS1	Overall, I am satisfied with WERU.
CS2	I am satisfied with the products I receive from WERU.
CS3	In general terms, I am satisfied with the way of ordering.
CS4	I am satisfied with the service I receive from WERU.
Loyalty	<i>5-point Likert scale (1 = fully disagree, 5 = fully agree)</i>
LOY1	I intend to continue to do business with WERU.
LOY2	I would post positive messages about WERU on some internet message board.
LOY3	The probability that I will recommend WERU first to my customers is high.
Switching barriers	<i>5-point Likert scale (1 = fully disagree, 5 = fully agree)</i>
SB1	To change to another company involves the sacrifice of existing benefits accumulated with WERU.
SB2	To change to another company involves investing time in searching for information about other companies.
SB3	For me, the cost of switching to another manufacturer seems high.
Attractiveness of competitors	<i>5-point Likert scale (1 = fully disagree, 5 = fully agree)</i>
ATCO1*	Compared to WERU, there are other manufacturers with which I would probably be equally or more satisfied.
ATCO2	In comparison to other manufacturers, WERU offers a wider range of products.
Trust	<i>5-point Likert scale (1 = fully disagree, 5 = fully agree)</i>
TRU1	In my opinion, WERU is generally trustworthy.
TRU2	WERU communicates always honest with us.
TRU3	We trust that WERU keeps our best interests in mind.
TRU4	We trust that WERU is competent at what they are doing.
Perceived risk	<i>5-point Likert scale (1 = fully disagree, 5 = fully agree)</i>
PR1	For me, the decision to transact via webshop involves a significant amount of risk.
PR2	The purchase of products on the internet that does not meet expectations may result in a waste of my time.
PR3	For me, buying WERU products via webshop seems unreliable.
PR4	The purchase of the product demands a great amount of information.

Note: Items marked with an asterisk * are removed from the entire data set due to high share of missing values

Table A2 Criteria for assessing convergent validity and reliability for reflective constructs as well as multicollinearity and significance for formative constructs

Reflective		Formative									
Construct	Items	Outer loadings	AVE	Cronbach's α	Dijkstra-Henseler's ρ_A	Composite reliability ρ_C	Outer loadings	VIF	p-value	95% bias-corrected confidence intervals	
Image	IMG1	0.847	0.615	0.863	0.871	0.864					
	IMG2	0.681									
	IMG3	0.850									
	IMG4	0.747									
Loyalty	LOY1	0.875	0.661	0.847	0.873	0.852					
	LOY2	0.663									
	LOY3	0.902									
Perceived risk	PR1	0.836	0.538	0.824	0.839	0.820					
	PR2	0.683									
	PR3	0.767									
	PR4	0.770									
Switching barriers	SB1	1.0	0.626	0.816	0.915	0.824					
	SB2	0.640									
	SB3	0.778									
Perceived quality	PQ1						0.713	1.80	0.01	[0.05;0.37]	
	PQ2						0.894	2.71	0.00	[0.20;0.53]	
	PQ3						0.832	2.30	0.00	[0.11;0.43]	
	PQ4						0.666	1.76	0.01	[0.05;0.23]	
	PQ5						0.724	1.37	0.00	[0.20;0.50]	
Perceived value	PV1						0.565	2.20	0.45	[-0.12;0.25]	
	PV2						0.829	1.51	0.00	[0.30;0.60]	
	PV3						0.624	2.51	0.99	[-0.23;0.21]	
	PV4						0.915	1.72	0.00	[0.46;0.79]	

Customer satisfaction	CS1						0.862	2.34	0.00	[0.22;0.47]
	CS2						0.816	2.06	0.00	[0.16;0.40]
	CS3						0.702	1.56	0.00	[0.11;0.36]
	CS4						0.864	2.11	0.00	[0.25;0.49]
Trust	TRU1						0.877	1.97	0.00	[0.27;0.57]
	TRU2						0.892	2.70	0.00	[0.13;0.52]
	TRU3						0.861	3.06	0.01	[0.09;0.52]
	TRU4						0.748	2.19	0.01	[0.06;0.36]

Note: Outer loadings and AVE refer to convergent validity. Cronbach's α , Dijkstra-Henseler's ρ_A and Composite Reliability ρ_c refer to reliability. VIF refer to multicollinearity. P value and confidence intervals refer to significance

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