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Shopping behaviour in B2C Retail Online Shopping:

*A study on the mediation effect of E-commerce Trust and Intimacy
perception in Webrooming, Showrooming and Avoidance*

Amanda López Barreto

Dissertation

presented as partial requirement for obtaining the Master Degree Program in Data-Driven Marketing

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Universidade Nova de Lisboa

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By

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Master Thesis presented as partial requirement for obtaining the Master's degree in Data-Driven Marketing, with a specialisation in Digital Marketing and Analytics

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STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY

I hereby declare having conducted this academic work with integrity. I confirm that I have not used plagiarism or any form of undue use of information or falsification of results along the process leading to its elaboration. I further declare that I have fully acknowledged the Rules of Conduct and Code of Honor from the NOVA Information Management School.

Amanda López Barreto

[Barcelona, 15th of July]

DEDICATION

TO MY MUM, MY FUNDAMENTAL PILLAR

For being my best example, for the sacrifices she made, so I can be writing this thesis, and for the time we could not spend together because of my “I have an idea”. An idea she supported without knowing the what, how, or how much and has led me to this accomplishment. I’m lucky to have the best motivational, supporting and “Yes” person I know as my mum.

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the mediation effects of Trust and Intimacy in B2C Online Shopping sites, also referred to as E-commerce. Also, deepen on the effect of these concepts in the selection of a purchase channel, phenomenons known as Webrooming or Showrooming; or as opposite, Avoidance. To analyze these concepts, this dissertation is based on different theories, an extensive Literature Review, and the statistical analysis of 500 online surveys made to Online Shopping usual buyers in Spain. Based on this, an empirical test is made, using PLS-SEM and a disjoint two-stage approach, to determine a correlation between the SOR-based Conceptual Framework concepts and the Hypotheses. It concludes by confirming that Trust, and also Intimacy, positively affect Online B2C E-commerce perception, and have a direct mediation effect on Webrooming, Showrooming, and Avoidance. These and other results imply new contributions – among others – to retailers, specially those that implement omnichannel strategies.

KEYWORDS

Online Trust; Online Intimacy; Retail Online Shopping; B2C E-commerce; Showrooming, Webrooming; Avoidance

Sustainable Development Goals (SGD):



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

BBB Better Business Bureau. It is a private non-profit organization founded in 1912. BBB's self-described mission is to focus on advancing marketplace Trust

SOR Stimulus-Organism-Response

B2B Business to Business

B2C Business To Consumer

OPRs Online Product Recommendations

CRs Customer Reviews

1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Internet has ushered businesses into an electronic era, resulting in profound transformations across various aspects of daily life. This encompassing impact spans customer communication, information access concerning product offerings, as well as the methods of browsing for and procuring goods and services (Kim & Lennon, 2008). While it is true that since the rise of Internet, e-commerce has been a trend that has grown gradually, it is also worth noting, the great peak of online consumption and the digital acceleration created by the *Covid-19 pandemic*¹. To set a size to this increasing trend, in 1996, when the internet just started, Internet commerce was estimated between \$500 and \$600 million (Gefen, 1997). The first quarter 2023 e-commerce estimate increased 8.0 percent ($\pm 1.6\%$) from the first quarter of 2022 while total retail sales increased 3.6 percent ($\pm 0.4\%$) in the same period. E-commerce sales in the first quarter of 2023 accounted for 15.1 percent of total sales (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). On the other side of the ocean, in 2022, European e-commerce had a growth rate of 11% and a turnover of 797 billion. Taking a worldwide view of the situation, it was predicted to close with an estimated 5.7 trillion U.S. dollars worldwide in 2022. (Cramer-Flood, 2022) and are expected to total \$5.9 trillion worldwide in 2023, and up to 7.6 trillion in 2026 (Global Ecommerce Sales Growth Report for 2021-2026, 2022).

As mentioned in the European E-commerce Report 2022, e-commerce continues constantly growing. For example, in 2021, despite lockdowns being lifted and consumers' ability to visit physical stores again. More recently, promotions on E-Commerce marketplaces like the Amazon Prime Day², recorded its sales record in 2023, earning a total sum of \$12.7 billion worldwide, and registering more than 375 million items sold in the frame of the two-day promotional period. Therefore, we can assume that these high numbers in revenue of retail sales are due to a high acceptance of this new way of shopping. Actually, according to the PayPal E-Commerce European Index, 97% of consumers or purchases online, and every two-in-three (65%) make it on a weekly basis, which demonstrates the adoption and penetration of online purchasing for various categories.

However, the industry faces some tough challenges due to low entry barriers, which leads to a very competitive market. In addition, due to its digital nature, there is a "fundamental lack of faith between most businesses and consumers on the web" (Hoffman, 1999). At the same time, a complicated socio-economic context, provoked by the pandemic, has led to a revenue and technology acceleration

¹ Covid-19 Pandemic: Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. (World Health Organization)

² Amazon Prime Day: Amazon Prime Day is an annual shopping event exclusively for Amazon Prime members. It offers significant discounts and deals across a wide range of product categories. Prime Day typically lasts for two days and has become a highly anticipated event for online shoppers.

for e-commerce, but to a huge worldwide social and economic crisis at the same time. In addition, complicated global situations with major impact on European and global markets are happening at the start of 2023. Such as, the energy crisis, the comeback of the Covid-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine – these challenges are creating economic uncertainty for both consumers and brands. “Consequently, the value provided by a customer to a company and the profitability obtained from the value-conscious customers may be affected negatively” (Mandal, 2020). So, a company might incur losses unless it understands the psychology of its customers during tough times (Jakob, 2013) and concentrates its efforts on the features that positively impact their shopping behaviour and experience.

In conclusion, it is an increasingly competitive and information overloaded market, with an economically uncertain situation. That makes it important for companies to know how to be close to their consumers and create relevant shopping experiences, both offline and online, in an omnichannel and seamless way.

Due to the mentioned context, exponential growth and importance, “studying online shopping behaviour of consumers has been one of the most significant research agendas in e-commerce during the past decade” (Chen, 2009). According to research, the qualities of information display, navigation, and order fulfilment in interactive shopping hold greater significance in the domain of e-commerce compared to traditional retailing (Alba et al., 1997; Reynolds, 2000). But looking beyond the design and comfort-related features, there is one feature that drives the purchase and for which there is a large research gap: the human and emotional factor – and whether when these emotions are detected it can affect positively or negatively the overall user online purchasing experience and ultimately, how they choose to make their purchases. This thesis strives to satisfactorily address an essential research gap. Identified by Darley, Blankson, and Luethge (2010), the authors stated that: there is a “paucity of research on the impact of online environments on decision-making” and deepen in the concepts of Trust, Intimacy and its effect on Perception, Webrooming, Showrooming and Avoidance.

This study takes some basic concepts from the theory of “Hierarchy of needs” (Maslow, 1943) and Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions (Robert Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions by Freedman, 2012) as an example. The guiding research objective of this study and the aim of it, is to be able to identify the effect on the emotions of Trust and Intimacy, and its relation to Online Shopping Perception. Also, how these emotions and perception affect search and purchasing channel preference. In order to achieve this objective, we will have to answer questions such as “Which is the perception and effect of Trust

and Intimacy in B2C Online Retail”? Or “Does the Online Retail B2C perception affect the channel in which we decide to search and buy?.”

In 2021, e-commerce accounted for nearly 19 percent of retail sales worldwide. Forecasts indicate that by 2026, the online segment will make up close to a quarter of total global retail sales (Cramer-Flood, 2022). Due to the importance of the topic and its undeniable growth, the expected results from this research are to confirm or deny a Positive or Negative effect within Trust and Intimacy and Online B2C perception and the way in which consumers decide to search and buy (Webrooming and Showrooming).

The study starts with a summary of the reasons and context why the topic of the dissertation is extremely important. It includes among others: background information, problem identification, objectives, relevance and expected contributions. After, the literature review serves as the frame for defining the hypotheses and the suggested model. Then, it reviews and explains the chosen research methodology and the main finding using PLS-SEM to analyze the results of an online survey. Those findings are essential for the last part of the study: A major conclusion and a set of recommendations and suggestions for further research in order to keep creating value for both consumers and Online Retailers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.2 IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS AND EMOTIONS IN PURCHASING DECISIONS

Over the past ten years, scientists have started to become more interested in consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998), in which emotions intervene. Emotions are conscious sentiments about oneself and things in the environment, according to cognitive theory (Oatley et al., 1987). Emotions are the names and descriptions that people assign to certain physiological states of arousal from a cultural perspective (Turner, 2007). In a world saturated with brands and products (Liu, 2009), it is clear that consciously, brands arouse different emotions, and some of them can even make us love them or feel closer to the brand. This phenomenon, known as Love Brands, is as described by Roberts, 2005: being a characteristic of a lovemark, Brand Love consists of positive effect from customers to a brand (Roberts, 2005).

Several consumer theories support emotions as a fundamental driver of purchase motivation (Barr & Cuthbertson, 1991; Maslow, 1943). Neoclassical consumer theory suggests that the consumer's perception of the value of the product is the determinant of its price, and that purchase decisions are driven by the desire to maximise personal satisfaction (Barr & Cuthbertson, 1991). Also, Maslow (1943) divides the consumer needs into five, taking into account its emotional needs as well. From the bottom of the hierarchy upwards, the needs are: physiological (such as food and clothing), safety (such as job security), love and belonging needs (such as friendship), esteem, and self-actualization. This demonstrates that the ultimate goal and need of humans is not related to the functional needs, but to the emotional ones that are unconsciously associated. This plays an important role in the way customers purchase, trying to satisfy their emotional needs and achieve a sense of Love, Belonging, Esteem and Self-Actualization.

2.2 THE CONCEPTS OF TRUST AND INTIMACY

The idea of **Trust** has several dimensions and is hard to describe. This issue is partly caused by the way words like “trustworthiness”, “trust”, “entrusting” and “trusting” are used in our everyday language, as said by Landsfor and Hubscher (2004). Trust, it's one of the main human emotions, and it's categorised as a mid-intensity emotion, which develops in admiration as defined in the Wheel of Emotions theory (Robert Plutchick, 1980) (see Annex).

On the other hand, **Intimacy** is also an abstract concept. Usually related to “physical” Intimacy, it has different connotations and a variety of meanings and differentiations (like the emotional, social, sexual, intellectual and recreational as described in the PAIR by Schaefer & Olson, 1981). However, in almost every case, Intimacy refers to a relationship in which there is a feeling of closeness (Natarelli & Plapler, 2017).

This research efforts mean to study the meaning and relationship of Intimacy in regard to e-commerce shopping, taking the Maslow Pyramid³, also known as hierarchy of needs, as inspiration for defining the concept of Intimacy as one of the highest (in the pyramid) human needs. Other authors, like Conley (2019), took the Maslow pyramid as an example before, reinforcing that shopping is related to the higher levels of the pyramid (where Love and Belonging and Intimacy are associated). In the case of Conley (2019), he also relates the concept of Intimacy with the brand engagement, enhancing the importance of Intimacy for all brands. Conley (2019) believes that organizations achieve meaningful engagement (which is needed to create Brand Intimacy), when they meet requirements that customers were unaware they possessed, thus producing advocates and revolutionizing their industry.

In this study, we take Trust and Intimacy as the base constructs to explore their effect on the Perception of the channel and the purchase channel preference.

2.2.1 Trust in Online Shopping

Many scholars maintain that consumers are reluctant to buy from businesses they don't trust, hence Trust is crucial for effective commerce (Gefen, 2004; Kim et al., 2005), and has been considered one of the “single most powerful relationship-based marketing tools”(Berry, 1995). Gefen et al. (2004) pointed out that online Customer Trust plays a significant role in deciding the willingness to accept E-commerce. The ambiguity of space, objective elements in online buying, and how consumers interact with e-commerce sites and online suppliers make Trust more crucial than ever in today's world. “One of the main obstacles that affect the enthusiasm of customers in online shopping is distrusting e-commerce sites and online vendors” (Lanford & Hübscher, 2004). In support of this opinion, other authors choose to rely on the words of major institutions, as it is the case of Gefen (2000), which states that: “In the words of the *Better Business Bureau*⁴, there is a necessity of “promoting Trust and confidence on the Internet”. In fact, the *Better Business Bureau* claims that a

³ A 1943s research in which Maslow, investigated people's motivation and built a system based on 5 needs that must be addressed

⁴ **Better Business Bureau (BBB)** is a private nonprofit organization founded in 1912. BBB's self-described mission is to focus on advancing marketplace trust

major reason people do not buy online is their concern (among others) regarding reliability of companies.

However, due to the online nature of the E-commerce stores, it gets difficult to measure Trust as an interpersonal factor of behaviour concerned with beliefs about other people's honesty, goodness, aptitude, and predictability (Mayer et al., 1995) as it is usually defined – since E-commerce often involves no face-to-face encounters. That's why, for the best of this research, different authors and its different definitions of Consumer Trust and Online Trust, were taken into consideration. As, since it was stated before, Trust is typically subject to interpretation and can differ in the online world.

Different authors, (Keller, 2001; Gefen, 2004 & Luhmann, 1979; Lin, 2013) Ohanian (1990) and Gupta & Dubei 2016) mention concepts such as Reliability, Credibility, and Security in their definitions of Trust. All these aspects could be considered Brand Judgements, since “Brand Judgements involve how consumers combine all the various brand performance and imagery associations to form various types of opinions” according to Keller (2001). So, the judgements the consumer makes in order to consider an e-commerce site as Reliable, Credible and Safe, and ultimately a brand they can trust. It's important to take into consideration all these aspects and not only one definition in order to measure: Not only the Trust in the interface of the e-commerce and its functionality, but also regarding the brand itself and the e-commerce experience as a whole.

2.2.1.1 Trust and Reliability

Luhmann's theory of Trust states its relation to the concept of familiarity. Hence, apart from Familiarity, is a precondition for Trust and Reliability, claims Luhmann (1979). “Trust is only possible in a familiar world, it needs history as a reliable background” (Luhmann, 1979). This concept is not unique to the branding world, but a more natural phenomenon of humankind. “Reducing social uncertainty – understanding, predicting, and controlling the behaviour of other people – is a central motivating force of human behaviour” (Gefen,2004).

This level of control that humans need could be also defined as Predictability. In online shopping, predictability is sometimes a factor which can dictate the final purchasing action (Gefen & Straub, 2004), since prospective buyers must have belief. They must anticipate consistent performance from e-commerce, such as timely delivery of products and services.

As other studies have shown, the personality of each individual also affects the concept of Trust regarding brands. The study from Gefen (2000), surveying 217 individuals about their experience shopping in an e-commerce book store, showed that while familiarity indeed builds Trust, “it is primarily people's disposition to Trust that affects their conviction in the vendor”. Therefore, the Trusting Disposition of every individual will also be taken into account.

2.2.1.2 Trust and Credibility

Another concept, highly related to Trust by the scholars Keller (2001) and Ohanian (1990), is Credibility. Keller defines Trust as “a judgement made by a perceiver regarding the **Credibility** of the caller”, which results in positive communication features that affect the recipient. The author also states that the Credibility of a brand extends to assessments of the business that created it. So, in order to measure credibility and therefore Trust, the empiricist states three dimensions of Brand Credibility: **Expertise**, **Trustworthiness** and **Perceived Quality** (the first two, also introduced in the research by Ohanian, 1990). Expertise is related to the level of competency, innovation, and market leadership of a brand; Brand Trustworthiness is “the capacity of a brand to be perceived as sensitive to the interest of customers”, and Brand Likeability “is what a brand needs to have in order to be seen as entertaining, fascinating, and worthwhile” (based on the three dimensions of Credibility by Keller, 2001).

Notwithstanding, in order to complement the definition of Credibility in the context of Trust for online stores, the concept of **Perceived Quality**, introduced by both Keller (2009) and Ohanian (1990), as another of the Brand Judgments made by consumers, was chosen. It's also worth to measure inside the parameters of credibility, and have an extensive review since the customer is not able to have visual and material proof of the quality of the product

According to Keller (2009), perceived quality refers to how customers perceive a product's overall quality in relation to competing options on the market. It's the “consumers' feeling about a product” (Khan et al., 2019). It has been proved that the quality perception not only affects credibility (and therefore Trust) but also the purchasing decision. Perceived quality has been related to purchase intention (as a short term effect). On the other hand, other authors have related perceived quality with the concepts of Brand Trust and Loyalty (as a long term effect). Nevertheless, there has been a different range of opinions on these regards, since they had different conclusions on the relationship of these terms. Sengguruh, Esti and Rahayu (2020) based the foundations of their research on this significant differences, since authors like Alhadad (2015); Biedenbach and Marell, (2009), confirmed that perceived quality has a significant impact on Brand Loyalty and Trust; While other studies

(Listiana, 2015; Marakanon and Panjakajornsak, 2016) found no significant relationship between perceived quality and these Brand Dimensions. The research gap gets even more significant when we talk about research involving both the concepts of perceived quality and the online shopping or e-commerce phenomenon.

2.2.1.3 Trust and Security

In order to have a more focused context of the concept of Trust around e-commerce, it is worth mentioning the concept of **Security**. It analyzes how customers feel about the management of their personal data's security, and has an impact on their level of confidence in online services (Palak & Akshat, 2016; Hoffman et al., 1999; Miyazaki & Fernandez, 2000). E-commerce security is one of the most noticeable security features that influence the end user through their interactions with e-businesses and has its own unique peculiarities. Actually, "major two critical problems for both e-commerce consumers and sites are privacy and security" (Palak & Akshat, 2016), to the point that some customers refused to buy online due to the lack of Trust or fear for their personal information (Niranjanamurthy & Dharmendra, 2013). In order to avoid it, E-sellers must design settings where customers feel secure and at ease while engaging in any kind of data transaction. Trust is an important issue in e-commerce stores since they integrate different payment systems in which the retailer or sales person is not present in person (and instead, is just dealing with an interface), which represent an increased perception of security risk (p.228).

To determine the relationship between Trust and Security in online shopping, some elements of the E-commerce Security Framework (Labuschagne, 2000; Kim et al., 2005) will be taken into consideration, such as: Data Integrity, Data Confidentiality and Data Authenticity. Other elements of the E-commerce Security Framework also include: Access Control and Non-repudiation (more technical elements, which will not be considered in this investigation).

Data Integrity ensures info has not been tampered with (Niranjanamurthy & Dharmendra, 2013) . From an IT point, it is implemented by message digest or hashing, which is a cryptographic function to protect a piece of data (Niranjanamurthy & Dharmendra, 2013). However, a usual way for consumers to measure the integrity of the e-commerce stores, is the verification of reviews, (also called OPRs - Online Product Recommendations) made by other customers (CRs - Customer Reviews) and its content. With CRs , customers are able to obtain a realistic buying experience and a resource to understand the items by reading online reviews. But not all recommendations count, since research

made by Benlian et al. (2012) shows that: “Customer reviews express higher trusting beliefs and perceived affective quality than provider recommendations”.

Data Confidentiality is “the ability to prevent unauthorized parties from interpreting, modifying or understanding data” (Labuschagne, 2000). It is one of the main concerns of the e-commerce industry, and it’s considered a critical organisational and technological requirements for any efficient and productive online payment transaction activity (Abdul et al., 2020; Niranjnamurthy & Dharmendra, 2013). With the introduction of online payments, online scams and identity theft emerged as a consumer's fear (Hille et al., 2015).

Lastly, on the concepts considered for describing the relation between Security and Trust, authenticity plays a big role. Data Authenticity, is described as ensuring that someone is who he or she claims to be, both in the case of the brand and consumer. It can be implemented for example by the usage of Digital Signatures or Trusted Third Parties, which provide an insignia or Digital Certificate that can be shown on websites as a sign of Authentication (Niranjnamurthy & Dharmendra, 2013).

To summarise, there is vast research made regarding the concept of Trust, yet, it's still unclear how crucial Trust is obtained as a holistic concept towards the brand (and not as an asset that from the mere functionality or security of a website), as Egger (2000) confirmed in the context of “Online Shopping and how the perception of Trust are conquered”. Previous research also focused on the Trust built by the interface (and related it to security and privacy) (Alba et al. 1997; Loiacono, et al., 2002, Reynolds; Song & Zahedi 2005; Yun Y, et al., 2005) and User Experience design (Nielsen Norman Group, 2000). However, as Luhman (1979), Geffen (2004), Keller (2001) and Ohanian (1900) show in their research, it also relies on abstract concepts (such as Predictability, Familiarity and Trusting disposition or Expertise, Trustworthiness, Likeability, Perceived Quality and Security concepts).

2.2.2 Intimacy in Online Shopping

Intimacy, as noted by Levenson (1974), “is a venerable word with a long history of changing meaning”, also, it means different things to various people, and has huge importance in the Western world (Hook et al., 2003). It has often been attributed to human relationships (Lee, 2022; Fletcher et al., 2019; Hall, 2019). However, in terms of marketing and consumer behaviour, the most common term of study is Brand Intimacy (Fournier, 1998; Ntarelli, 2018; Park et al., 2006; Roberts 2004), which can be defined as “the science of how we bond with the brands we use and love” (Ntarelli, 2018); along with Customer Intimacy, a proposed business model created by Treacy & Wiersema (2007), consisting in

delivering what specific customers want; but seen as what the brands can do for customers in order to build intimacy and loyalty in the long-term.

As a consequence, one can say that the research concentrates its efforts in relation to the dimensions of the brand. It's been proven that brands and branding are one of the factors that influence Intimacy (Park et al., 2006; Roberts 2004, Natarelli, 2018; Fournier, 1998). But it's also a fact that there is an insufficient body of research in regard to the dimension of the existence of Intimacy in the purchasing channel (as of Offline and Online), not relating it to a specific brand. The growth of the internet – and most recently, innovations on AI and VR technologies – has made it feasible to interact personally with mass markets (Cusumano et al., 2020), making Intimacy a concept no longer attached to face-to-face interaction (Eileen, B and Rhacel, S., 2010). It is extremely important to also consider this purchasing channel dimension, in order to understand customers better and get to know if this Intimacy is something that customers are missing in an online environment.

Further data analysis by Jasper (2000), using factor analysis, indicated four major characteristics in the sense of Customer Intimacy. “The four dimensions are Care, Communication, Trust and Comfort” (Jasper, F., 2000). Also mentioned by Hook et al. (2003), the categories of Love and affection (Care), trust, and self-disclosure (meaning communication).

2.2.2.1 Intimacy and Care

Intimacy is sometimes defined narrowly to mean the familiarity resulting from close association. (Jamieson, 2007) achieved as a result of an action that repeats. In this close association, it's critical for creating intimacy, understood as an expression of affection and care (Waring et al., 2003). Therefore, not every action that repeats will create intimacy (Hook et al., 2003). Also, Kunce & Shaver (1994) as cited by Jasper (2000), takes the concept from defining care as noticing and responding to another's needs. Therefore, we refer to the situation created by Online Shops and their customers, when, interacting overtime, they develop a sense of relationship, and create intimacy through showing affection and care. This “Sense of Caring”, was described by Cook (2010) as one of the intangible reasons for initial purchase decisions. Some elements that would increase this “Sense of caring” are: Courtesy, Willingness to help and Ability to Problem-Solve (Cook, 2010). These elements can be perceived, (through different ways or touchpoints), in both offline and online environments.

Customer care in the field of marketing encompasses a strategic approach aimed at transforming an organization into a customer-centric entity, thereby setting it apart from competitors. The primary objective of this approach is to enrich the overall customer experience. This strategy can be viewed as a contrasting alternative to the product-centric marketing approach (Cook, 2010).

Within offline retail settings, the prevailing perspective regarding customer care often characterizes it as an action performed by the company, rather than a perceptible experience or emotion felt by the customers themselves (Lewis, 1988; Sturdy, 1998; Majava & Isoherranen, 2019; Serravalle & Pantano, 2023). It's frequently associated with the concepts of Support Hotlines, Customization and Personalization, for example, offering customizing corners in-store (Cook, 2010; Serravalle & Pantano, 2023). In online settings, care is understood as "the attention paid to pre- and post-purchase" (Souitaris, V., & Balabanis, G., 2007, p.247). These concepts possess a substantial operational nature, exhibiting practical relevance and applicability in various contexts, but they do not fully encompass the emotional dimension associated with the profound sense of caring and intimacy.

2.2.2.2 Intimacy and Empathy

Empathy is the capacity to feel other people's emotions and make guesses about what they could be feeling or thinking (Berkeley University, 2005). "It can be conceived of as an interaction between any two individuals, with one experiencing and sharing the feeling of the other" (Decety & Lamm, 2006). It is a healing energy, according to therapists, and it is crucial to the development of relationships (Suler, 2016)

Empathy, unlike other concepts associated with Intimacy, has not conventionally been regarded as a marketing concept within the realm of academic research. However, scholarly discourse has characterized empathy within the domains of leadership and interpersonal relationships as "a genuine desire to help individuals, demonstrated through practices such as active listening, adept questioning, and maintaining a non-judgmental stance" (Cook, 2010).

When applied to the context of Online Shopping and Intimacy, this empathetic approach holds promise for cultivating meaningful connections and enriching customer experiences. As noted by Suler (2016), empathy has been found to be one of the most appreciated human traits in technology.

Researchers confirm that "service encounters" are crucial for consumers (Bitner, 1990; Cook, 2010; Shostack, 1985). Defined firstly by Shostack (1985), those are "the periods of time in which customers directly interact with a service". It is known that empathy is a human feeling, and human feelings are better expressed and understood more deeply in a one-to-one interaction and in in-person (offline) environments (Burgoon et al., 2021; Lieberman & Schroeder 2020). This is due to non-verbal communication, "from exchanging a smile, to touching, to modulating the sound of one's voice to convey emotions (e.g., humour or sarcasm)", "making the issuer of the message seem less capable of having emotions" (Lieberman & Schroeder, 2020 p.17). One of the streams of research posits that face-to-face service encounters tend to exhibit higher levels of empathy (Burgoon et al., 2021).

Conversely, another line of research provides reassurance that senior managers' reaffirmation of their commitment to empathetically engaging consumers can potentially yield benefits even within technology-driven and online environments (Gorry, G., & Westbrook, R., 2011).

Empathy plays an important role during these “service encounters” and helps in having a better sense of satisfaction, intimacy, and decision-making. Therefore, it should be considered and studied, to confirm or deny if this subtle and profound human feeling can be recreated or perceived digitally.

2.2.2.3 Intimacy and Communication

In a study made by Waring et al. (2003), the investigators discovered communication, understood as the ability to resolve conflict, to be one of the key indicators for intimacy. Also, vast literature suggests (Hatfield, E., & Rapson, R. L., 1993; Hook et al., 2003; Cook, 2010) that Self-disclosure, (or the capacity of communicating to express one’s feelings) is one of the four components to assess intimacy in a relationship.

Additionally, the yearly-conducted study of Gallop (2023), shows, year by year, that there is a high correlation between employee engagement and customer engagement. Empathizing, the importance of communication for the creation of intimate feelings in relationships.

2.2.2.4 Intimacy and Personal Experience

Shopping experiences offline and online can vary in the different and individual touchpoints (interactions) (Bitner et al., 2008). However, “this siloed focus on individual touchpoints misses the bigger – and more important – picture: the customer’s end-to-end experience” Maechler et al. (2019). Moore and Doherty (2007), go even one step further in providing the term “experience economy”, in which “the process of purchasing a product is as significant as the product”. Therefore, considering the findings of Maechler et al. (2019) “Personal Experience is widely regarded as the accumulation of touchpoints that a consumer had (p.2)”. In this case, with a specific purchase channel (online), and their feelings during those experiences.

Campo and Breugelmans (2015) argue that those who have a certain expertise, will have confidence in the seller and the delivery method, thus developing a feeling of Intimacy. Thus, we propose that expertise plays a vital role in developing Intimacy in a purchasing channel.

Memories are the cognitive processes through which individuals encode, store, and retrieve information from past experiences (Srull et al., 1985). Previous behavioural studies suggest that memories are playing a big role in our daily life decision-making processes such as purchasing channels (Zeitamova et al., 2012). Empirical studies provide evidence that consumers respond

positively when they have a history or a series of positive memories (Brown et al., 2003; Orth and Gal, 2012). Memories can also be associated with a personal shopping experience, for example shopping in a marketplace (Bernard, 2011) differs from shopping in a mall (Li et al., 2021), and therefore, creates different memories.

Since, in both types of channels, the customer is the foundation of the business and keeps it in existence, therefore, it is worthwhile to fulfil the existing research gap in terms of intimacy and online customer care. We provide a novel approach for measuring the degree of Intimacy established with a customer in Online Shopping stores.

The current section of the literature review examines complex emotions of Intimacy and Trust in the context of online buying, since they are important factors in relationships. Consumers' desire to do online transactions is influenced by their level of Trust, which is essential for efficient commerce. Therefore, customer impressions of E-commerce are influenced by a number of trust-related factors, including Reliability, Credibility, and Security (adapted from Gefen,2004; Gupta & Dubey 2016;; Keller,2001; Luhmann, 1979; Lin 2013; Ohanian, 1990). One of the most important factors in developing relationships with businesses and consumers is Intimacy, since it is a basic human desire (Lee, 2022; Fletcher et al., 2019; Hall, 2019) and it can be defined with factors like Care, Communication, Empathy and Personal Experience (adapted from (Cook, 2010;Hook et al., 2003; Jasper 2000, and Maechler et al. 2019). The notion of the constructs forming Trust and Intimacy, and these emotions in the purchase channel, whether it is Online or Offline, are, nevertheless, not well-established in study, in comparison to the same notions in regard to brand. This research attempts to offer insights into improving consumer experiences in the e-commerce space by examining aspects including care, communication, empathy, and personal experience.

To summarize, Trust and Intimacy are deeply related to Online Shopping and are essential for efficient commerce, influencing consumers willingness to engage in online transactions. As e-commerce continues to thrive, recognizing and balancing both functional and emotionality aspects, such as the above referenced.

2.3 ONLINE RETAIL SHOPPING - FUNCTIONALITY VS EMOTIONALITY

“With the development of the Internet, e-commerce has changed the people’s how-to buy and customers have become accustomed to using the Internet instead of the store to make purchases. Compared with the traditional business model, online shopping has a wide range of selectivity and

“one-stop” shopping; moreover, there aren’t the obstacles of time, space, and circulation”(Yuping, 2016).

However, there are other types of obstacles in e-commerce stores, which refer to functionality, and for which vast research can be found. For instance, one of the commonly accepted studies conveys two factors about retail online shopping: The model considers perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness are the major influencing factors on the acceptance behaviour (Pavlou, 2003). On the other side, Usability is one of the topics which is considered to be related within customer satisfaction. But, as said by Roland Hubscher (2004), usability has frequently been promoted as the magic fix for underperforming internet enterprises. Although better usability will generally improve these sites and their potential for success, usability alone will not result in a highly thriving online presence. After all, regardless of how aesthetically pleasing and functional the website may be, no sane individual will spend money at an unreliable online retailer.

“E-commerce websites should emphatically consider the **hedonic value** of customers, whether they can offer interest and joy in online shopping is the most important factor” Yuping, 2016.

On the other side, recent research shows that emotions are also a key consideration in the design of e-commerce websites. An e-commerce website should satiate the emotional demands of its visitors, not only its functional ones. (Guo et al., 2015).

Emotions are able to drive engagement, (which entails a two-way dialogue between a brand and its customers, since today’s companies have the ability to listen and present more intelligent and individualized marketing messages and encourage users to make a purchase while simultaneously sharing it (Henderson on Digiday, 2012) which is an invaluable asset for any brand.

Actually, studies like the one from the global consultancy Gensler (2013), show that “high-emotion” customers are more satisfied, purchase their favourite brands more often (see Annex 2), and are more likely to recommend the brand to their friends. Also, they were two times more likely than “low-emotion” consumers to say that their favourite brand is part of their daily routine. Therefore, the study concludes by affirming that “brands need to recognize the investments, both financial and emotional, that customers are willing to make, and repay the favour” (Gensler, 2013).

While the most recent research is beginning to name emotions in e-commerce and purchase intent as a determining factor, no results are found on how precise emotions like Trust and Intimacy affect it.

These can be perceived and positively or negatively alter the perception of online retail and affect the final decision for a purchase channel as the final outcome.

2.4 SHOPPING BEHAVIOURS: WEBROOMING, SHOWROOMING AND AVOIDANCE

According to Schiffman and Kanuk (2000), consumer behaviour refers to how consumers choose their personal or home items by using the resources they have available, such as money, time, and effort. As said before, this behaviour can be influenced by emotional components and motivations (Barr & Cuthbertson, 1991; Maslow, 1943; Roberts, 2005), even acquiring the status of hedonic⁵ approach to shopping, in opposition to utilitarianism (Rajan, 2020).

There are many factors influencing consumer shopping behaviour and channel preference, some of them subjective to each person's personality, and others, commonly accepted. Such as, Positive emotions influence, (always increase consumers' purchasing intentions, while negative emotions reduce consumers' purchasing intentions (Pappas et al., 2016); Past purchase behaviour (Van den Poel & Buckin, 2005), which can cause behavioural biases; Perceived benefits and value for money (subjective to the monetary level, category of the article etc.) (Chang & Wang, 2011) and Social Influence, as conceptualized by Turner (1991), which refers to the impact created by society on individuals, shaping their thoughts, values, and actions and contributing to the formation of their social identity. It encompasses the influence of societal beliefs, norms, and values, which play a significant role in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviours. We can therefore conclude that was research is found on general shopping behaviours, motivations and biases.

Several factors, as previously discussed along the literature review, exert influence on the consumer's choice of browsing channel to make an optimal selection, as well as the channel through which they ultimately decide to make the purchase. Either for pure online retailers or omnichannel ones, knowing about the customer journey is essential (Lemon et al., 2016). As Lemon et al. (2016) agree, solely through a comprehensive understanding of consumers' channel choice behaviour can retailers effectively shape and influence it using appropriate strategic interventions.

Lepkowska-White, (2004) studied in an early-stage of e-commerce and omnichannel strategies, the type of customers in regard to the channel choice for different parts of the journey. She identified

⁵ Hedonic shopping refers to the act of engaging in shopping activities primarily for the sake of pleasure, enjoyment, and emotional gratification, rather than solely for the purpose of fulfilling functional or practical needs.

three types of customer. This classification pertains to distinct consumer groups based on their shopping behaviours and preferences, and is explained below.

Verhoef et al., (2007), after taking these three groups into consideration, grouped all these customers by the name of research-shoppers, studying the phenomenon in a more general way. These shoppers are the ones with a tendency to use one channel for browsing and another for purchasing.

2.4.1 Webrooming

Firstly, we have online browsers, who primarily utilise the internet to educate themselves about products and services, but opt to make their final purchases in traditional brick-and-mortar stores (Lepkowska-White, 2004). This leads to Webrooming, a phenomenon in which Online Browsers create within their shopping behaviour. From search Online, to Buying On-Site (Aw, E.C.X., 2019;2020).

A substantial body of research indicates that E-commerce will only gain power, even dethroning traditional commerce, in the upcoming years (Einav et al., 2017). On the other hand, an alternative perspective bases on Webrooming as a key factor to indicate the that E-commerce will be just one more touchpoint in a new and more integrated customer journey, based on the fact that, as Webrooming suggest, a lot of people browses but not everyone converts, resulting in low conversion rates. Contradicting, therefore, the “gloom and doom hearsay on how online commerce is dominating, and may one day eliminate the existence of physical stores” (Aw, E.C.-X., et al. 2021). In any case, “a retailer should not be concerned if a consumer decides to browse its website but does not buy online, since the consumer may then decide to buy the product in-store’ (Soopramanien & Robertson, 2007) . Retailers should then integrate it in their omnichannel strategy when possible.

The motivations behind this concept, are the previous mentioned on the chapter of Intimacy (such as communication, empathy with the Sales Staff, Sense of Caring and Personal experience (Villani, 2018) – since historically, there used to be a large tradition of Offline Shopping).

Also, consumer traits and channel factors play a big role. Such as the motivation to touch the product (of course, not applicable to service type of products) (Flavián et al., 2019), the need for interaction; Or the Perceived convenience, usefulness (Wang et al., 2021), and perceived risk of buying Online (Niranjanamurthy & Dharmendra, 2013), are mentioned in the Webrooming literature. In their research, Arora and Sahney (2018) found that consumers' perceptions of the aforementioned motivations—such as advantages provided by online channels (low search effort and access to online reviews) and purchase advantages found only in online stores (such as motivation to touch, interactions with sales staff, assistance, or other benefits like immediate possession) — have a significant impact on attitude and Webrooming propensity.

Some of these concepts have also been mentioned along the chapter of Trust in Online Shopping.

Thus, we can confirm, based on previous works, that the motivations on Webrooming are highly correlated with the concepts behind trust and Intimacy. However, we haven't found them together as a matter of study.

2.4.2 Showrooming

Secondly, we have online shoppers who engage in the process of browsing and gathering information offline or in physical stores, but ultimately make their purchases through online channels.

Showrooming is a phenomenon, which Online Shoppers create within their shopping behaviour (Kang, J. Y. M., 2018). From searching On-Site, to Buying Online . Studies on this phenomenon, consider it a mainstream concept, which will be highly integrated into our daily routines (Willmott, B., 2014). According to Willmott (2014), certain conventional Offline Retailers may interpret this behaviour as a potential threat due to its disruptive impact on the foundational principles upon which their strategies have been traditionally constructed. Therefore, the increasing need for comprehension. Another phenomenon, which also falls under the term showrooming understood more broadly, is the search for information online while the user is in the physical store – usually associated with high ticket purchases (Grewal et al., 2018).

Both cases are relevant, not only to Omni-channel retailers but also to all retailers, since the search phase is not exclusive to the brand and product itself, but to the category in which the product or service falls. The investigation of this behavioural paradigm has predominantly centred on formulating remedies and strengthening marketing approaches for Omnichannel Shopping. Nevertheless, existing research has primarily concentrated on Omnichannel-related aspects, overlooking the examination of underlying human emotions that act as driving forces for such behavioural transitions. Consequently, there remains a notable gap in the scholarly exploration of the specific motivational factors that instigate these behavioural shifts.

2.4.3 Avoidance

It's worth mentioning, a third group of consumers based in the preferred channel for purchasing. As identified by (Lepkowska-White, 2004), some users avoid using the Internet or any other Digital tools for neither searching nor buying information or services. In her research, Lepkowska-White (2004) names them as "Hard core Offline Shoppers", explaining that this group of shoppers is "comprised of the continuously diminishing group of individuals, who do not use the resources of the internet either for information gathering – including research, product comparison – or for shopping purposes – actual purchases."(Lepkowska-White, 2004). As expressed, the concerns on Security (Hoffman et al.,

1999; Miyazaki & Fernandez, 2000; Palak & Akshat, 2016.) and perceived risk (Niranjanamurthy & Dharmendra, 2013) are behind the motivation of the so-call Non-Shoppers (Mutum, 2006). This is because the Non-Shoppers “are concerned with the security aspects of online shopping and afraid of making losses over the net” (Mutum, 2006). Another key finding by Mutum (2006) regarding this groups' motivation, is that they perceive the act of buying online as a “hassle”, in comparison to Online buyers.

As found on this chapter, there is existing research on the abstract concepts of Trust and Intimacy, however, it tends to relate to the brand dimension. The major objective of this study, subsequently, is to comprehend the sources of the emotional Trust and Intimacy experienced while online purchasing, as well as how these elements connect to the prior components we covered in the context of Online Retail perception. We also aim to give an answer to how these feelings relate to the ideas of Webrooming, Showrooming, and Avoidance. We want to shed light on how consumers' emotions affect their online purchasing experiences and how merchants may enhance their relationships with their customers by exploring these elements. By filling in a knowledge gap and providing insightful information to both academics and retailers, this study hopes to improve all stakeholders experience with online purchasing and increase its reliability.

3. CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

The proposed figure below – Figure 1 – summarises the master's thesis's overall goal. As shown, it examines the Online Retail Shopping Perception, and its outcome in meanings of Online Shopping Behaviours, in particular, Showrooming and Webrooming. The elements of perception that are being studied are the concepts of Trust and Intimacy, and how both of them influence Online Shopping Perception. The model studies how different items found in previous research from Top Journals, books, and articles relate to the concepts of Trust (understood as Reliability, Credibility, and Security) and Intimacy (Care, Empathy, Communication, and Personal Experience). The model further compares these two constructs and sees if they affect equally or differently, and positively or negatively. In addition, the mediation effect of them will also be analyzed. Concluding, therefore, on a greater idea of the customer emotions and it's effect.

The following framework was developed taking as an example the SOR (Stimulus-Organism-Response) framework, “in which environment stimulus (S) results in emotional response (O) thereby fostering behavioural response (R)” (Wang, M., et al.,2021). Many prior studies have applied the SOR theory to e-commerce. Therefore, SOR seems a rational theory to examine the proposed model (Zhou et al., 2022; Min et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2020). This model proposes a contribution to the multidimensional Trust formation model in B-to-C e-commerce from Kim et al. (2005) introducing the SOR framework, the concept of Intimacy, and expanding it to the phenomenons of Webrooming, Showrooming or Avoidance as an outcome.

3.1 Hypotheses

Based on the Literature Review, the research gap on the Channel side, and the interference and effect on these concrete emotions and purchasing attitudes, the following hypotheses were formulated, – resulting as well in the below Conceptual Model:

H1: Trust and Intimacy affect online B2C Perception.

H1a: Trust affects online B2C Perception

H1b: Intimacy affects online B2C Perception.

H2: Online B2C Perception affects channel preference.

H2a: Online B2C Perception affects Showrooming.

H2b: Online B2C Perception affects Webrooming.

H2c: : Online B2C Perception affects avoidance.

H3a: Trust affects avoidance.

H3b: Intimacy affects Webrooming.

H4: Online B2C Perception mediates the relationship between Trust & Intimacy and channel preference.

H4a: Online B2C Perception mediates the relationship between Trust and Showrooming.

H4b: Online B2C Perception mediates the relationship between Trust and Webrooming.

H4c: Online B2C Perception mediates the relationship between Trust and avoidance.

H4d: Online B2C Perception mediates the relationship between Intimacy and Showrooming.

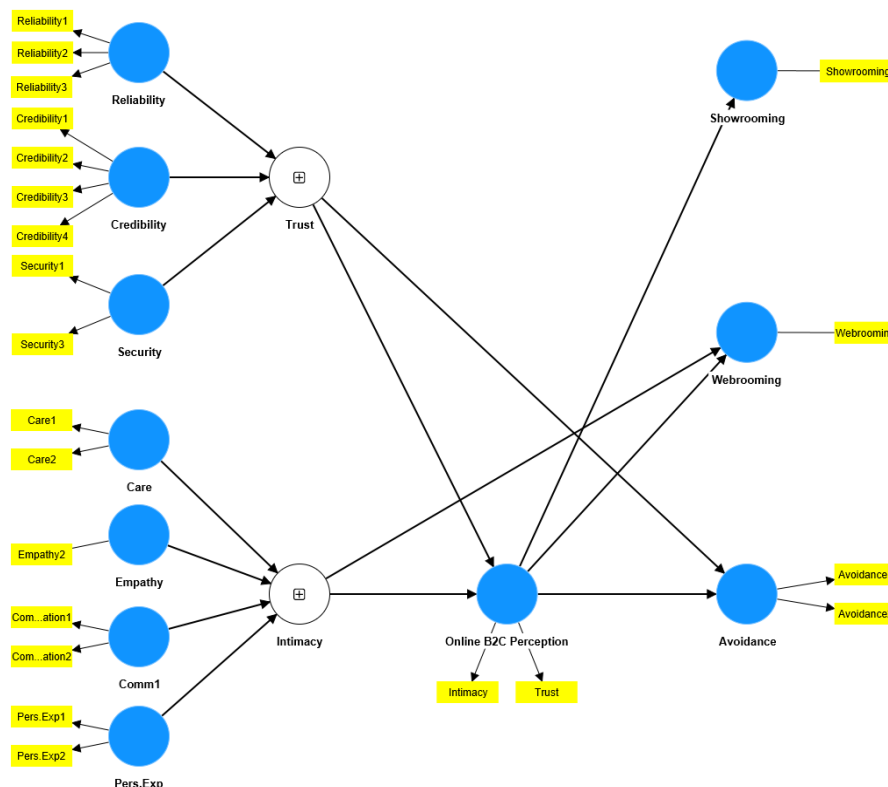
H4e: Online B2C Perception mediates the relationship between Intimacy and Webrooming.

H4f: Online B2C Perception mediates the relationship between Intimacy and avoidance.

The hypotheses presented herein serve as informed predictions based on existing knowledge and theories, aiming to investigate the relationships between the emotional, perceptual and channel preference variables in the present study. This dissertation seeks to gain deeper insights into how the specific emotional constraints chosen affect the phenomena of the different types of research-shoppers under investigation and its behavioural response (Webrooming, Showrooming, and Avoidance) and to contribute valuable knowledge to the field and stakeholders through rigorous analysis and empirical investigation.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model



4. METHODOLOGY

The basic assumption of this study is that Trust mechanisms suggested by Gefen (2004) and Luhmann (1979) and Intimacy described by Keller (2001) and Roberts (2004) have an important role in Online Retail Perception, and due to the lack of human interaction, they affect negatively on it, creating an online gap.

The purpose of this conclusive study is to dig deeper into the understanding of key factors (drivers and stoppers) in online shopping behaviour and prove whether there is an existence of gap of Trust and Intimacy and how it affects the Purchasing Channel.

The study adopted a reflective-formative type of hierarchical research model. PLS-SEM 4.0 was used to test the model, because it involved second-order formative constructs. The disjoint two-stage approach was adopted in this study due to the presence of second-order formative constructs and an unequal number of lower-order reflective constructs.

Hair, et al. (2019) directed that the conceptual model did not show the second-order constructs. In this approach, firstly the measurement model was estimated without the presence of second-order construct, from which the scores of latent variables were estimated and stored separately in the original data file. In the second step, the estimated scores of lower-order constructs were used as the indicators of the second-order constructs, thus making them lower-order constructs (Becker et al., 2012). After that, the reliability and validity were assessed for all the constructs and later the structural model was tested using PLS-SEM for hypotheses testing (Sarstedt et al., 2019a, b; Hair et al., 2019).

4.1 Data Collection and Sampling

To collect the consumer perception data, an online survey of a total of 14 questions was launched using the platform *Appinio*⁶, that provides a mobile app-based panel to conduct quantitative market research. The survey was open from 26th of April to the 10th of June. Before launching the survey on the platform, the questionnaire, and research were registered at the NOVA IMS Ethics Committee and pre-registered in Aspredicted.org. In total, 500 complete answers were collected.

⁶ See Annex. Appinio is a company that was created in Germany ten years ago to change the market research industry providing an end-to-end market research service with quality, fast and delivering real-time market insights. It includes a mobile based app owned panel – in UK, US, Spain, Germany, and France – and professional consulting services. (<https://www.appinio.com/en/>)

To determine the sample size and have a sample size with strong statistical power, the Cochran's Equation for calculating sample size (1977) was used, as seen in the below calculation. At first, the calculation was made taking into account a 5% margin of error. Significance Level (p) = 0.05 = 5%. Relationships existed either as a success (50%) or failure (50%), and Hypotheses can be confirmed based on p -value. Opening the questionnaire for a longer time, the suggested sample of 474, was surpassed, achieving an even better sample size power of 501 responses.

$$N = \frac{P(1-P)(Z)^2}{e^2}$$

$$N = \frac{0.50(1-0.50)(1.96)^2}{(0.05)^2}$$

$$N = \frac{0.9604}{0.0025}$$

$$N = 384.16 \sim 384$$

The unit of analysis is the individual consumer, who has experience with purchasing products at Online stores in specific retail categories in Spain. Additionally, we consider persons who shopped online in the past six months with (at least) with a monthly frequency, since to be profiled as "online shoppers", customers are assumed to shop online more than once a month (Lepkowska-White 2004). The screening questions achieved a national representative target (quota sampling technique) of adults 18-55, residents in Spain. All data was analyzed and reported at a 95% confidence level. We conducted data validation and one outlier was detected and removed from the total sample, leaving a total of 500 completes.

4.2 Measures

The online survey had four parts, the first part containing screening socio demographic questions. The other three parts were questions regarding the concepts of Trust, Intimacy and Shopping Behaviour outcome. These questions were adapted from previous research and frameworks collected in the Literature Review defining the concepts of Trust, Intimacy and Purchasing Channel Preference. Also, a Likert Scale (1 = I do not agree at all, 7 = Strongly agree) was considered as an answer.

Survey questions covered three major areas:

- **Sample Filtering questions:** The first part of the questionnaire included questions about the online shopping attitudes of the sample (Use and Frequency). In order to confirm that the sample is familiar with Online Shopping, we got the complete results only from persons who would buy online more than once a month and filtered out the rest.

- **The first big block of questions included questions about Trust, Intimacy and Way of Shopping** (Showrooming, Webrooming or Avoidance): the various constructs defined in the literature review (e.g., Reliability, Familiarity, Trusting disposition, Intimacy ; Care, Empathy, Communication, Personal Experience; Webrooming, Showrooming, Avoidance).

Questions for the constructs of Trust (Gefen, 2004; Gupta & Dubey, 2016; Keller, 2001; Lin , 2013; Luhmann, 1979; Ohanian,1990), were adapted from (Cook,2010; Jasper, 2000; Maechler et al. 2019; Treacy & Wiersema, 2009). Questions for Purchasing Channel Preference (only considering Webrooming, Showrooming and Avoidance) were adapted from (Aw,2019;2020;2021; Lepkowska-White, 2004; Mutum & Ghazali; 2006). Table 0. defines the questions, measurements, and scales made to define and measure the relationship between the co-constructs that were found to define Trust, Intimacy and Purchasing Channel Preference.

4.3 Data analysis

The study adopted a reflective-formative type of hierarchical research model. PLS-SEM 4.0 was used to test the model, because it involved second-order formative constructs. The disjoint two-stage approach was adopted in this study due to the presence of second-order formative constructs and an unequal number of lower-order reflective constructs. Hair, et al. (2019) directed that the conceptual model did not show the second-order constructs. In this approach, firstly the measurement model was estimated without the presence of second-order construct, from which the scores of latent variables were estimated and stored separately in the original data file. In the second step, the estimated scores of lower-order constructs were used as the indicators of the second-order constructs, thus making them lower-order constructs. After that, the reliability and validity were assessed for all the constructs and later the structural model was tested using PLS-SEM for hypotheses testing.

The sample size was adequate to evaluate the model using PLS-SEM. Previous studies provide evidence that PLS-SEM is appropriate to assess models using small to medium sample sizes (Ringle et al., 2012). In addition, we comply with the Crochan's equation for determining the sample size.

Table 0

Scale and Measurements

	Construct/Scale	Code	Items	Measurement Item	References
Trust	Reliability	R1	Predictability	I am quite certain about what I will get after buying online and when I will get it	Adapted from Gefen (2004) and Luhmann (1979)
		R2	Familiarity	I know how to get what I need from with e-commerce stores	
		R3	Trusting disposition	I generally trust e-commerce stores	
	Credibility	C1	Expertise	I find personalized recommendations when buying online	Adapted from Keller (2001)
		C2	Trustworthiness	When buying online, I find more brands that are sensitive to my interests	
		C3	Likeability	I'd rather spend an hour shopping online than in a shopping mall	
	Security	C4	Perceived Quality	I tend to check the Social Media quality of the E-commerce stores I buy at before buying	Adapted from Ohanian (1990)
		S1	Data Integrity	I'm more likely to buy on an online store if it displays verified user reviews	Adapted from Lin (2013) and Gupta & Dubei (2016)
		S2	Data Confidentiality	When buying online, I'm afraid of being robbed giving my credit card information	
S3	Data Authenticity	I'm more likely to buy on an online store if it has an authentication certificate from a third party			
Intimacy	Care	CA1	Care	When I shop online, I feel cared for	Adapted from Jasper (2000), Treacy and Wiersema (2009), and Cook, (2010)
		CA2	Personalisation	When I buy online, I feel like they know me, it's somehow a tailored experience	
	Empathy	E1	Support	I would have like to feel support from sales assistants while I buy online	Adapted from Jasper (2000) and Cook, (2010)
		E2	Understanding	When I buy online, I feel like my service expectations are met	
	Communication	CO1	Social Interactions	For me, its important to interact with others while I shop online	Adapted from Jasper (2000) and Hook et al. (2003) and and Cook, (2010)
		CO2	Feedback	I miss receiving opinions from others while buying online	
	Personal Experience	PE1	Expertise	In the past, I usually shopped online	Adapted from Jasper (2000) and Maechler et al. (2019)
		PE2	Memories	I have many positive memories while shopping online	
	Online Shopping Perception	Trust and Intimacy	OP1	General Perception	In general, I trust online stores
OP2			In general, I feel intimacy and closeness when I shop online.		Adapted from Jasper (2000), Treacy and Wiersema,(2009), Lee and Shin, (2014)
Shopping behaviour outcome	Purchasing Channel Preference	S1	Showrooming	I tend to Browse In-Store and Buy Online	Adapted from Aw, (2019; 2020;2021) and Lepkowska-White, (2004)
		W1	Webrooming	I tend to Browse Online and Buy In-Store	
		A1	Avoidance	In general terms, I avoid buying online	Adapted from Mutum & Ghazali (2006) and Lepkowska-White, (2004)
		A2		In general terms, I avoid buying offline	

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Below, a specific analysis within different statistical methods using PLS-SEM 4.0 was made. Results can also be found in the following online dashboard link for a data visualization:

<https://admin.appinio.com/#/analyzer/648734370dd3204984115a0a>

5.1 Demographic Analysis

Frequency distribution was used to describe the frequency and percentage of the respondents falling under each category, hence explaining the demographic distribution of the sampling population (Table 2). Results indicated that almost half of the respondents were female (50.5%), and half were male (49.50%).

Furthermore, around two-third of the respondents were employed (employed or self-employed) (64.13%), while a few were not employed (15.43%). More than half of the respondents had at least one child (< 18 years old) in the household (54.91%). Nearly forty-four percent of the respondents were in a solid partnership (43.89%), while the remaining were either married/ in registered partnership (29.06%) or available/ single (27.05%). Also, two-third of the respondents were equally distributed in the household size categories of three persons (33.67%) or four persons (31.06%). Most of the respondents fell into the second income category (23.85%), followed by the third income category (18.04%) and first income category (17.03%). Most of the respondents had been educated till lower secondary school (24.85%), followed by primary education (23.25%) and higher secondary school (14.43%). All respondents had lived in an urban area (100%) and had shopped on the Internet (100%).

Lastly, the respondents either shopped on the internet on a monthly basis (49.50%) or weekly basis (44.89%), while some respondents were also found to have shopped on the internet on a daily basis (5.61%).

Table 1*Demographic Analysis*

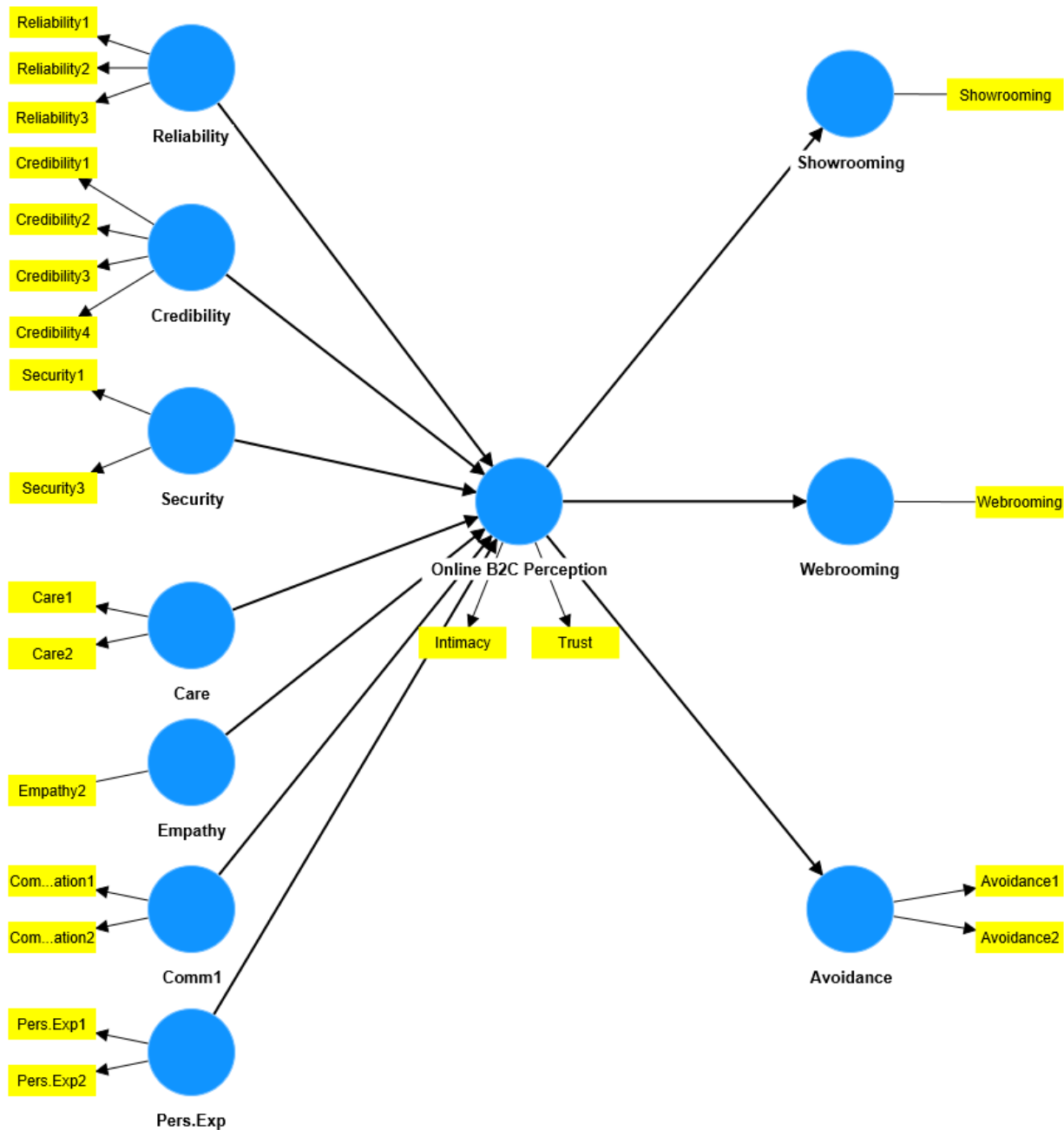
Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	247	49.50%
	Female	252	50.50%
Working Status	Employed (Employed/ Self-Employed)	320	64.13%
	Not employed/ Not working	77	15.43%
	Pupil/ student/ in-training	52	10.42%
	In Interest	26	5.21%
	Others	24	4.81%
Children in household (<18)	At least one child (<18) in the household	274	54.91%
	No children (<18) in the household	225	45.09%
Marital Status	Available/ Single	135	27.05%
	Married/ In Registered Partnership	145	29.06%
	In a solid partnership	219	43.89%
Household Size	1 Person	26	5.21%
	2 Persons	107	21.44%
	3 Persons	168	33.67%
	4 Persons	155	31.06%
	More than 4 Persons	43	8.62%
Income category	Income category 1 (Lowest)	85	17.03%
	Income category 2	119	23.85%
	Income category 3	90	18.04%
	Income category 4	71	14.23%
	Income category 5	57	11.42%
	Income category 6	30	6.01%
	Income category 7	18	3.61%
	Income category 8 (Highest)	29	5.81%
Education Level	Less than Primary Education	9	1.80%
	Primary Education	116	23.25%
	Lower Secondary School	124	24.85%

	Higher Secondary School	72	14.43%
	Post-Secondary Tertiary Education	28	5.61%
	Short Tertiary Education	30	6.01%
	Bachelor or Similar Degree	47	9.42%
	Masters or Similar Degree	68	13.63%
	Ph.D. or Similar Degree	5	1.00%
Urban (> 100k Einw.)	No	499	100%
	Yes	0	0%
Shop on Internet	No	0	0%
	Yes	499	100%
Frequency of Shop on Internet	Every Day	58	5.61%
	Weekly	224	44.89%
	Monthly	247	49.50%

5.2 Measurement Model of Reflective Constructs – Reliability and Validity

Figure 2

Measurement Model for Reflective Constructs (Step-1)



In the first stage of the disjoint two-stage approach, the reliability and validity of the lower-order constructs were tested. Firstly, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) was tested to test reliability (Table 2). Both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability should be higher than the threshold level of 0.70 (Hair, et al., 2017). All variables had a Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability higher than 0.70, indicating that all variables were reliable.

Secondly, convergent validity was tested using the factor loadings and average variances extracted (AVE) (Hair, et al., 2014) (Table 2). To achieve acceptable convergent validity, the factor loadings of all items should be higher than the threshold level of 0.70 (Landau & Everitt, 2017). Two items i.e., one question from empathy 'I would like to feel support from sales assistants while I buy online' and one question from security 'When buying online, I'm afraid of being robbed giving my credit card information' had a factor loadings of 0.060 and 0.049 respectively. Thus, these items having low factor loadings were deleted from the model. All remaining items had achieved acceptable factor loadings of 0.70, thus considered as acceptable convergent validity. Also, the average variance extracted for all constructs was higher than the threshold level of 0.50 as suggested, thus achieving acceptable convergent validity.

Thirdly, the discriminant validity was tested using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) matrix (Table 3). All values of Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) were less than the threshold values of 0.85 as suggested by Hair et al. (2017). Hence, the discriminant validity has been achieved. Hence, the PLS-SEM analysis proceeded.

Table 2*Reliability and Validity Measures of Lower-Order Reflective Constructs*

Constructs	Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Reliability	R1	0.861	0.839	0.902	0.755
	R2	0.857			
	R3	0.889			
Credibility	C1	0.771	0.747	0.840	0.568
	C2	0.793			
	C3	0.737			
	C4	0.711			
Security	S1	0.882	0.701	0.870	0.770
	S3	0.872			
Care	CA1	0.946	0.878	0.942	0.891
	CA2	0.942			
Communication	CO1	0.911	0.818	0.916	0.846
	CO2	0.928			
Empathy	E2	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Personal Experience	PE1	0.958	0.754	0.879	0.785
	PE2	0.808			
Online B2C Perception	OP1	0.885	0.721	0.878	0.782
	OP2	0.883			
Showrooming	S1	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Webrooming	W1	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Avoidance	A1	0.792	0.704	0.862	0.758
	A2	0.943			

Table 3*Discriminant Validity of Zero-Order Reflective constructs (HTMT criterion)*

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Avoidance										
2	Care	0.41 1									
3	Communication	0.12 6	0.47 5								
4	Credibility	0.27 2	0.67 7	0.66 8							
5	Empathy	0.27 6	0.70 3	0.59 2	0.64 1						
6	Online B2C Perception	0.40 8	0.79	0.78 3	0.81 6	0.73 3					
7	Personal Experience	0.66 7	0.44 4	0.08 3	0.22 1	0.25 4	0.31 8				
8	Reliability	0.11 5	0.47	0.74 4	0.68 3	0.52 3	0.69 6	0.09			
9	Security	0.15 4	0.38 7	0.57 3	0.61 4	0.45 2	0.55 4	0.16 9	0.56 7		
10	Showrooming	0.57 2	0.35 9	0.04 1	0.23 1	0.21 5	0.33 3	0.56 1	0.09 1	0.14 7	
-1 1	Webrooming	0.48 7	0.14 1	0.14 4	0.09 5	0.04 7	0.09 3	0.56 3		0.07 6	0.51 2

5.3 Measurement Model of Higher-Order Formative Constructs

In the **disjoint Two-stage** approach, it is recommended that after checking for reliability and validity, the second-order constructs are calculated using the latent variables' scores of lower-order reflective constructs as computed by SMART-PLS (Becker, et al., 2012). These latent variables' scores will then be treated as lower-order constructs of higher-order formative constructs (Becker, et al., 2012). These lower-order constructs were further assessed for multicollinearity and significance of outer weights in higher-order formative constructs.

Table 4

VIF Values and Significance of outer weights of higher-order formative construct (Trust & Intimacy factors)

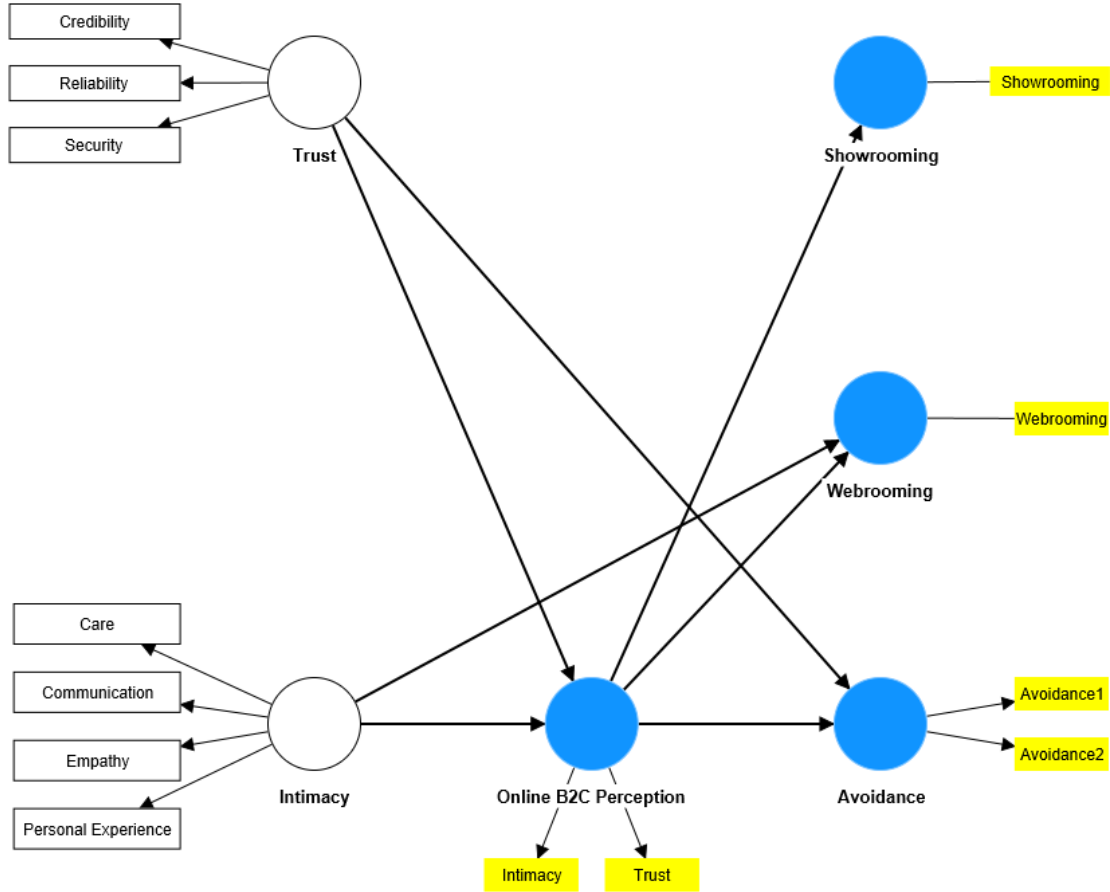
	VIF	Original Sample (O)	T statistics ($ O/STDEV $)	p-value
Trust				
Reliability	1.538	0.410***	14.658***	0.000
Credibility	1.568	0.500***	16.320***	0.000
Security	1.343	0.315***	10.087***	0.000
Intimacy				
Care	1.964	0.409***	22.517***	0.000
Communication	1.433	0.219***	6.825***	0.000
Empathy	2.092	0.347***	20.668***	0.000
Personal Experience	1.171	0.376***	10.628***	0.000
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$				

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was used to assess the multi-collinearity among lower-order constructs of higher-order formative constructs. All VIF values ranged between 1.171 and 2.092, which was less than the threshold value of 5 as suggested by Hair, et al. (2017). Thus, there was no issue of multicollinearity in the model. Furthermore, the outer weights were computed by conducting PLS-SEM with 5,000 bootstrapping subsamples. Results indicated that all outer weights were significant at 5% ($p < 0.05$), proposing that each lower-order construct significantly measure their reflective higher-order constructs including Trust and Intimacy and hence can be used as lower-order constructs for higher-order formative constructs in the structural model.

5.4 Structural Model – Hypotheses Testing

Figure 3

Step Two of Disjoint Two Stage Approach



In the second stage of the disjoint two-stage approach, PLS-SEM with 5,000 subsamples bootstrapping was conducted to test the hypotheses and conceptual model in the structural model. Firstly, model fit was tested using SRMR value. The SRMR value of 0.071 was less than the threshold level of 0.08, thus indicating to have achieved model fit. Hence, the hypotheses testing can proceed. The quality of the structural model was further assessed with the help of coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2) (Table 6). The coefficient of determination (R^2) must be higher than 0.10 as suggested by Falk & Miller (1992), while the predictive relevance (Q^2) must be higher than 0 as suggested by Hair et al. (2017) to have adequate model fit. The effect size (f^2) can be small (0.02), medium (0.15) and large (0.35) and determines the effect of a particular construct on the endogenous constructs if it was omitted from the model. If the effect size (f^2) is less than 0.02, it indicates no effect. Thus, the hypotheses testing proceeded alongside the assessment of the structural model.

Results indicated that both Trust and Intimacy had a significant positive effect on online B2C perception (Trust: $t = 7.483$, $p < 0.001$; Intimacy: $t = 10.377$, $p < 0.001$). The path coefficient (as indicated by original samples) indicated that Intimacy had a stronger effect on online B2C perception ($\beta = 0.490$) compared to Trust ($\beta = 0.336$). In simple words, one-unit increase in Intimacy will increase the online B2C perception by 0.490 points, while one-unit increase in Trust will increase the online B2C perception by 0.336 points. The coefficient of determination (R^2) for online B2C perception was 0.560, which indicated that 56.0% variances in online B2C perception were explained by Trust and Intimacy. The predictive relevance (Q^2) was also higher than 0, hence indicating that the path model has a high predictive accuracy.

Lastly, the effect size for impact of Trust on online B2C perception was 0.157, indicating medium effect, while the effect size for impact of Intimacy on online B2C perception was 0.329, indicating medium effect as well. Hence, **hypothesis 1a and 1b accepted**.

Table 5

Hypotheses Testing

	Original samples (O)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	p-value
H1a: Trust → Online B2C Perception	0.336***	7.483***	0.000
H1b: Intimacy → Online B2C Perception	0.490***	10.377***	0.000
H2a: Online B2C Perception → Showrooming	0.086	1.267	0.205
H2b: Online B2C Perception → Webrooming	-0.099	1.407	0.160
H2c: Online B2C Perception → Avoidance	0.143*	2.234*	0.025
H3a: Trust → Avoidance	-0.165**	2.873**	0.004
H3b: Intimacy → Webrooming	0.374***	5.481***	0.000

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

When tested the model for effect of organism towards response (stimulus-organism-response), results indicated that online B2C perception had a positive significant impact on avoidance ($t = 2.234$, $p < 0.05$). However, online B2C perception did not have any significant effect on Showrooming ($t = 1.267$, $p = 0.205$) as well as on Webrooming ($t = 1.407$, $p = 0.160$). The path coefficient (as indicated by original samples) of 0.143 in case of avoidance indicated that a one-unit increase in avoidance will increase online B2C perception by 0.143 point.

The effect size (f^2) for each path measuring the impact of online B2C perception on Showrooming, Webrooming, and avoidance were 0.003, 0.005, and 0.012 respectively, which were less than 0.02 indicating no effect. Hence, only hypothesis 2c is accepted.

The study also analyzed the relationship between Trust and avoidance, as well as Intimacy and Webrooming in the structural model. Results indicated that Trust had a significant negative impact on avoidance ($t = 2.873, p < 0.01$). The effect size (f^2) of 0.027 was higher than 0.02, indicating a small effect. The path coefficient of -0.165 suggested that a one-unit increase in Trust will decrease the avoidance by 0.165 point. Similarly, results indicated that Intimacy had a significant positive impact on Webrooming ($t = 5.481, p < 0.001$). The effect size (f^2) of 0.088 was higher than 0.02, indicating a small effect as well. The path coefficient of 0.374 suggested that a one-unit increase in Intimacy will increase the Webrooming by 0.374 point. Hence, hypothesis 3a and 3b accepted.

Overall, the coefficient of determination (R^2) for Showrooming and avoidance was 0.176 and 0.180 respectively, which was higher than the threshold level of 0.10 as suggested by Cohen (1988). However, the coefficient of determination (R^2) for Webrooming of 0.088 was less than the acceptable threshold level of 0.10, which implied a possibility of direct effect between Trust & Intimacy (as a stimuli) and Showrooming, Webrooming, and avoidance (as a response) without online B2C perception (as an organism/ mediator). It would be interesting to analyze the mediation effect of online B2C perception in relationship between Trust & Intimacy (as a stimuli) and Showrooming, Webrooming, and avoidance (as a response). Apart from that, the predictive relevance (Q^2) scores of Showrooming, Webrooming, and avoidance were 0.167, 0.073, and 0.163 respectively, which were higher than 0, indicating to have a high predictive accuracy.

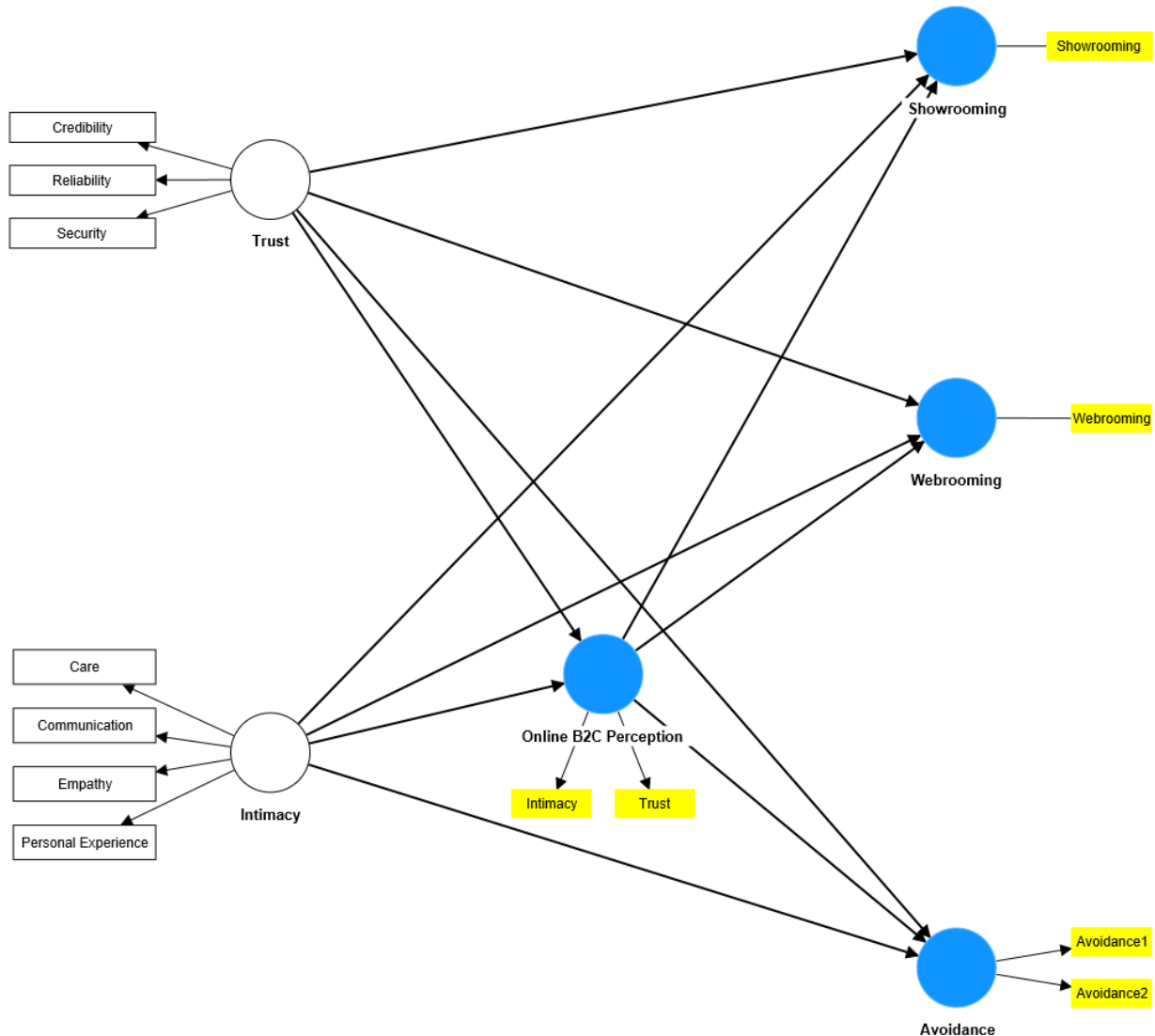
Table 6*Structural model assessment*

		Model Values		
SRMR Value		0.071		
Construct	R ²	Q ²	f ²	
Online B2C Perception	0.560	0.552		
Trust → Online B2C Perception			0.157	
Intimacy → Online B2C Perception			0.329	
Showrooming	0.176	0.167		
Online B2C Perception → Showrooming			0.003	
Trust → Showrooming			0.017	
Intimacy → Showrooming			0.112	
Webrooming	0.088	0.073		
Online B2C Perception → Webrooming			0.005	
Trust → Webrooming			0.024	
Intimacy → Webrooming			0.088	
Avoidance	0.180	0.163		
Online B2C Perception → Avoidance			0.012	
Trust → Avoidance			0.027	
Intimacy → Avoidance			0.098	

5.5 Mediation Analysis

Figure 4

Mediation Analysis



Mediation analysis was conducted using PLS-SEM approach with **5,000 sub-samples bootstrapping**, and the direct effects and specific indirect effects were reported in Table 7. Results indicated that Trust had a significant direct effect on Showrooming ($\beta = -0.137$, $t = 2.392$, $p < 0.05$), but did not have a significant indirect effect through online B2C perception ($\beta = 0.029$, $t = 1.234$, $p = 0.217$).

Hence, online B2C perception did not mediate the relationship between Trust and Showrooming. Furthermore, Trust had a significant direct effect on Webrooming ($\beta = -0.238$, $t = 3.964$, $p < 0.001$), but did not have a significant indirect effect through online B2C perception ($\beta = -0.033$, $t = 1.420$, $p =$

0.156). Hence, online B2C perception did not mediate the relationship between Trust and Webrooming.

Furthermore, Trust had a significant direct effect on avoidance ($\beta = -0.165, t = 2.873, p < 0.01$) as well as a significant indirect effect through online B2C perception ($\beta = 0.048, t = 2.056, p < 0.05$). Hence, online B2C perception partially mediated the relationship between Trust and avoidance. In terms of Intimacy, results indicated that Intimacy had a significant direct effect on Showrooming ($\beta = 0.491, t = 8.193, p < 0.001$), but did not have a significant indirect effect through online B2C perception ($\beta = 0.042, t = 1.246, p = 0.213$). Hence, online B2C perception did not mediate the relationship between Intimacy and Showrooming.

Also, Intimacy had a significant direct effect on Webrooming ($\beta = 0.374, t = 5.481, p < 0.001$), but did not have a significant indirect effect through online B2C perception ($\beta = -0.048, t = 1.246, p = 0.213$). Hence, online B2C perception did not mediate the relationship between Intimacy and Webrooming.

Lastly, Intimacy had a significant direct effect on avoidance ($\beta = 0.498, t = 8.154, p < 0.001$) as well as a significant indirect effect through online B2C perception ($\beta = 0.070, t = 2.216, p < 0.05$). Hence, online B2C perception partially mediated the relationship between Intimacy and Webrooming. Thus, hypotheses H4c and Hf4 accepted.

Having significant direct effects between Trust & Intimacy (as a stimuli) and Showrooming, Webrooming, and avoidance (as a response), a separate model was tested to determine the amount of variances in Showrooming, Webrooming, and avoidance explained by the Trust and Intimacy.

The coefficient of determination (R^2) scores for Showrooming, Webrooming, and avoidance were 0.256, 0.185, and 0.262 respectively, which indicated an adequately weak relationship between the variables. Although the relationship was considered to be weak, still the coefficient of determination scores (R^2) was better compared to the model where the online B2C perception was present as a mediator. Overall, the stimuli-organism-response theory was only supported in case of avoidance as channel preference. In all types of channel preferences, the stimuli (Trust and Intimacy) directly caused response (Showrooming, Webrooming, and avoidance) in the absence of organism (online B2C preferences).

Table 7*Mediation Analysis*

	Original samples (O)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	p-value
<i>Direct Effect</i>			
Trust → Showrooming	-0.137*	2.392*	0.017
Trust → Webrooming	-0.238***	3.964***	0.000
Trust → Avoidance	-0.165***	2.873***	0.004
Intimacy → Showrooming	0.491***	8.193***	0.000
Intimacy → Webrooming	0.374***	5.481***	0.000
Intimacy → Avoidance	0.498***	8.154***	0.000
<i>Specific Indirect effect</i>			
Trust → Online B2C Perception → Showrooming	0.029	1.234	0.217
Trust → Online B2C Perception → Webrooming	-0.033	1.420	0.156
Trust → Online B2C Perception → Avoidance	0.048*	2.056*	0.039
Intimacy → Online B2C Perception → Showrooming	0.042	1.246	0.213
Intimacy → Online B2C Perception → Webrooming	-0.048	1.246	0.213
Intimacy → Online B2C Perception → Avoidance	0.070*	2.216*	0.027
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001			

6. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH

The present research extends the literature on the topics of Trust and Intimacy related to Online Shopping B2C, and its mediation effect on the phenomenons of Webrooming and Showrooming.

Researchers in Trust (Geffen, 2004; Gupta & Dubey, 2016; Keller, 2001; Lin, 2013; Luhman, 1979 and Ohanian, 1900) and Intimacy (Cook, 2010; Hook et al., 2003; Jasper 2000, and Maechler et al. 2019) suggests that these complex human emotions, are formed within a range of sub-constructs or sub-emotions. The first finding of the study, essential for the further development of it, was to confirm that the variables established as lower-order constructs, measure their respective higher-order construct (using the Disjoint Two-Stage Approach). Therefore, it confirms, as the Literature Review suggested, that Reliability, Security, and Credibility mediate Trust; and Care, Communication, Empathy and Personal Experience, mediate Intimacy. This resulted in the analysis of the Higher Constructs of Trust and Intimacy as a whole, in a model with high predictive accuracy.

Past research on Trust, related to Online Shopping, focused on User Experience on the website, taking into account issues related to security (Hoffman et al., 1999; Miyazaki & Fernandez, 2000; Palak & Akshat, 2016) and functional or design web features. (Guo et al., 2015; Pavlou, 2003) This line of research demonstrates and gives evidence of the importance of these features for a better Customer experience. However, with the increasing growth of E-commerce (Cramer-Flood, 2022; Global Ecommerce Sales Growth Report for 2021-2026, 2022; U.S. Census Bureau, 2023), factors not related to the design or safety, demonstrate to be key for customers and need to be analyzed. This present research contributes to the confirmation of Trust and Intimacy as key factors, each one affecting positively the Online B2C Retail Perception (confirming H1, H1a and H1b). Also, it extends the literature on Trust and Intimacy related to Online Shopping and the dimension of Channel Preference (with Webrooming, Showrooming and Avoidance as a result), confirming the direct effect of both Trust and Intimacy on channel preference (H3b confirmed, and direct mediation effect confirmed for Trust and Webrooming on all three dimensions of channel preference). In doing so, this paper contributes to extending the literature on Trust, which, although extensive, has not been previously related to the topics of Showrooming and Webrooming - and allows light on new possibilities on Intimacy related to the rest of the topics.

Moreover, the hypothesis of Trust having a direct effect on Avoidance was confirmed (H3a). This perception is confirmed to be also partially mediated when introducing the Online B2C perception, and the same with the relationship between Intimacy, Online B2C Perception and Avoidance

(remarking as well that both can also be found to have a direct effect without the middle Organism). It also confirms that Online B2C perception by itself has a positive impact on avoidance (H2c) – When the perception of Trust and Intimacy in Online B2C is negative or low, it will directly affect by increasing digital channel-avoidant behaviours (this brings new insights into the Avoidant description of Lepkowska-White, 2004). Therefore, we can conclude that the only relation in which Online B2C Perception shows to have a mediating effect (on both Trust and Intimacy), is avoidance. By doing so, we extend previous research on Avoidance motivations (Mutum, 2006; Niranjnamurthy & Dharmendra, 2013) and perceived risks (Hoffman et al., 1999; Miyazaki & Fernandez, 2000; Palak & Akshat, 2016) by confirming the Lack of Trust as a motivation factor for avoidance, and adding the Lack of Intimacy as a mediator.

This research further demonstrates the strong effect of Intimacy in Online Shopping Perception and its mediation effect on Webrooming and Showrooming, and puts it in the spotlight as a crucial element. It suggests that Intimacy has greater impact on Online B2C Perception and a stronger effect size on Webrooming and Showrooming (as seen in change in dependent variable due to each independent variable (O) in the Mediation Analysis – Table 7) compared to the concept of Trust. Therefore, we can say that this study contributes to the extension of the topic of “Intimacy” (Cook, 2010; Hook et al., 2003; Jasper, 2000) (which does not have a literature as extensive as trust) by confirming it as one of the main topics to study in relationship marketing and customer care by evidencing the importance of Intimacy for Customers. It also collaborates in the extension of the findings (Gorry, G., & Westbrook, R., 2011), on the importance of empathy practices in Online environments – finding a direct relation, not only to these environments, but to Webrooming and Showrooming.

In general, this dissertation started from such abstract topics as the aforementioned lower-order constructs and relates them to the Online Shopping environment, and such actual and concrete phenomena as Webrooming and Showrooming. Consequently, this thesis is providing an analytical layer that can help various stakeholders involved, such as researchers, students, and retailers. In addition, as we have wanted from the beginning, starting from a social point of view and motivation, understanding this data from society and what it demands, can serve – beyond making consumers spend more money – to increasing the comfortable and human feelings during the shopping experience and make the user connect.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This research serves to contribute, augment, and advance the existing body of knowledge pertaining to consumer behaviour in the context of online shopping. By confirming direct relationships between specific emotions and resultant behaviours, it expands the theoretical understanding in this domain and fills a research gap on specific constructs.

As mentioned in the introduction, there's an exponential growth in the study of Online shopping behaviours of consumers, being one of the most significant research agendas (Chen, 2009). This study contributes to the knowledge of it, adds value on the Topics of Trust and Intimacy in Online Shopping, proving its direct effect and confirms the increasing tendency of Webrooming (78% of the participants declare to commit this practice) and Showrooming (half of the respondents, 52%, declared to commit it). The method used in this study, can be recommended to other researchers who want to analyze the relationship between specific emotions (Stimuli) affecting Online Shopping into a specific response (Response) in order to give an accurate answer on the upcoming challenges on consumer behaviour due to the use of technology.

Firstly, it can serve as a base for those who want to study Trust and Intimacy, since the constructs used in this research to define them, were confirmed as reliable and accurate lower-order constructs (multi-collinearity was checked with a 5,000 bootstrapping). Also, since the reliability, validity and model fit demonstrated, these constraints can be applied to other type of studies, in different fields rather than consumer behaviour. It enables researchers to base their work in the constructs of Reliability, Credibility, and Security in order to study Trust as a whole, and the same with the concepts of Care, Empathy, Communication, and Personal Experience to deepen on Intimacy. This allows researchers to have strong evidence in their research adding value to other knowledge fields.

For the best of our knowledge – after an exhaustive investigation work on different Journals, databases, University work repositories and Professional or Corporative Websites and reports – this dissertation presents a twofold approach on Online Shopping literature.

Firstly, although it implicates many concepts in which research existed before, it brings a new layer of information studying their correlations. For the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that crosses Trust and Intimacy with Online commerce B2C Perception and the perception of Webrooming and Showrooming as a response using the SOR framework.

Secondly, it contributes to a new line of research based on the emotions that a channel relationship creates, rather than a brand relationship. Therefore, it differentiates from the existent Literature review focused on the brand dimension (Brand Trust and Brand Love (as in Keller, 2001; Nilowardono et al., 2020 and Roberts, 2005); Brand Intimacy (as in Fournier, 1998; Ntarelli, 2018; Park et al., 2006; Roberts 2004)), and functional dimension (design and security in E-commerce as in Hoffman et al., 1999; Miyazaki & Fernandez, 2000; Palak & Akshat, 2016) and presents channel-based results. We demonstrated that both elements play a role in Online Shopping perception, and directly affect the way in which consumers decide to buy and make the final purchase decision. Furthermore, it expands the literature on Trust (confirming its direct mediation in Showrooming, Webrooming but above all, on Avoidance, where it has a direct effect (confirming H3a), and an Indirect effect mediated by Online Shopping Perception. Moreover, as said before, it fills the research gap on the concept of Intimacy related to the channel dimension.

Thirdly, it was found that there was a direct effect when removing the Organism, therefore the Stimuli (Intimacy and Trust), doesn't only affect the Online B2C Ecommerce perception positively (H, H1a, H1b), but also has a direct mediation effect on the channel preference. The testing of a model without an Organism, brought to light that the Stimuli (Trust and Intimacy) directly caused response (Showrooming, Webrooming, and Avoidance) in the absence of organism (online B2C preferences) - as stated in the mediation analysis.

To finalize, one of the most novel insights that our research result reveal, is that: While both Trust and Intimacy have a positive effect on Online B2C E-commerce perception (confirming hypotheses H1, H1a and H1b), Intimacy shows to have a stronger effect compared to trust. Suggesting that customers value Intimacy even more than trust, and declare to find it less while Shopping Online.

6.2 Managerial Implications

The different results, conclusions and findings, mentioned in this study, have important implications that should be considered for online retailers. Since we considered "Online Shopping" as a whole, both Only Online Retailers and Multi-channel retailers (also available offline) can find insightful conclusions.

There's valuable insights for all retailers who want to stay relevant in a constantly evolving environment by listening to what the customers demand. Several companies claim to use omnichannel strategies and expand to the online environment (Kent, 2016), for example traditional Offline retailers such as El Corte Inglés or Carrefour, integrate their Offline and Online selling strategies. However, in a fast-paced and constantly growing environment - is common to follow the

trends of the industry or what other competitors are doing in terms of expansion and use of technologies instead of creating new value (Kim, & Mauborgne, 2014). On the other side, as mentioned in the introduction, the fast growth comes with global challenges such as the economic and mental recuperation from a pandemic and the consequences of an on-going war against Ukraine. This dissertation confirms that moments of uncertainty, and in such a competitive and growing environment, it's important that retailers take into account the opinions and emotions of their customers (Mandal, 2020) integrating into their strategies concepts as Trust and Intimacy, which shows to have a positive effect on Online Channel perception (H1, H1a, H1b) and a mediation effect on the purchase channel.

The confirmation of Trust and Intimacy affecting online B2C Perception (H1, H1a, H1b), Online B2C Perception affecting avoidance (H3c), Trust affecting avoidance (H3a) and Intimacy affecting Webrooming (H3b) should be considered by retailers in order to create a differential value and remain close to their consumers in an over saturated market (due to low entry barriers and easy access to information and tools e.g. Shopify). All B2C retailers should be aware of the effect of Trust and Intimacy in Online B2C perception (H1). Firstly, the purely Online Retailers, but also the Offline retailers thinking about joining the Online selling environment as one of their distribution channels and the retailers who follow an Omnichannel strategy. As the literature confirms, customer journey is key (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), but also the capacity to be perceived as Trustable and develop an Intimate relationship.

Also, even if some of the relation were not considered as an initial hypothesis, the results of the present dissertation in the mediation analysis (Mediation Analysis - Table 7) bring insightful key concepts for retailers. The results confirm a stronger effect on Intimacy on Online B2C E-Commerce perception (H1b, presented on Table 6 - Hypotheses analysis). The supported hypotheses of the effect of Intimacy on Webrooming was confirmed (H3b), (confirming a positive effect), therefore a person who feels intimacy in online shopping, is likely to buy offline. However, this does not measure tendency to buy online; Tendency to buy online is measured by Showrooming. In our research, Intimacy proved to have a significant impact on Webrooming, but it also proved to have a significant impact on Showrooming. Therefore, it's essential to have a better understand of these concepts and integrate them in omnichannel strategies (Kent et al., 2016; Verhoef et al., 2007), since the Use of numerous channels improve perceived service quality, resulting in satisfaction (Flavián et al., 2019). This expands the customer journey literature, by detecting that users can buy both online or offline when they perceive intimacy in online shopping. The same happens with Trust, users can buy both online or offline when they perceive Trust in online shopping.

6.3 Limitations and further lines of research

This thesis has been conducted while considering a set of constraints and limitations.

Firstly, in order to focus the results on the Hypotheses, the demographics of the respondents were not analysed as a mediating factor. Further lines of research could go deeper on the different sub-segments of sub-targets and identify groups in which Online Perception exists as a mediation effect.

Also, another specific thing component of the Online Shopping behaviour that was not mentioned in the study, is the product category. Therefore, to deepen in the knowledge and spot specific bias and category-specific challenges, those who study individual differences in online shopping Trust and Intimacy, should include the effect on different categories (such as a product vs an experience or Retail vs Automotive).

Thirdly, it is worth noting that the study primarily examined the influencing relationship of specific higher-order constructs, rather than delving into the intricate mechanisms that explain how lower-order constructs impact Trust and Intimacy in the context of Online Shopping (Hook et al., 2003; Jasper, 2000). This is a possible subject for further exploration and future research into the intricate dynamics underpinning the creation and manifestation of Trust and Intimacy in the online shopping environment.

Additionally, as the study primarily aims to identify direct effects among the constructs presented in the Conceptual Framework, it did not extensively investigate the negative responses concerning the perception of Trust and Intimacy that were expressed by some participants. Future research could represent an object of study, in order to fulfill them and turn them into a more positive experience. By examining these negative responses and their underlying factors, researchers, and practitioners can work towards enhancing the overall online shopping experience and fostering stronger Trust and Intimacy between consumers and e-commerce platforms.

This dissertation was only limited to confirming the importance of Trust and Intimacy, and the fact that they affect Online B2C E-commerce perception and the election of the purchasing channel. Additional examination could verify how the latest developments of technologies like AR, VR and its applications like Chatbots, Metaverse, Virtual Assistants and Virtual Try-Ons try (Shaji & George, 2012) impact these higher-order constructs (see Annex Table 8 for an example). This type of research is needed in order to maintain an iteration in omnichannel retail strategies and keep improving the overall

consumer experience. Furthermore, if it is determined that technology can potentially contribute to addressing these issues, follow-up investigation should be conducted to examine the various sociodemographic characteristics that may be associated with Trust and Intimacy perceptions in Online Shopping platforms among customers.

Moreover, these possible follow-up studies could implement a series of guidelines of proved insights that could help retailers and stakeholders involved in Online Shopping commerce or Omnichannel strategies. For example, once sociodemographic and behavioural features have been identified, retailers could then employ techniques such as database filtering questions and Cluster Analysis to identify and categorize customers and know which group of people is more inclined to declare negative perceptions of Trust and Intimacy while shopping online. This would give shoppers more control over the experience, and allowing them to tailor the process (Burke, 2002):

- Subsequently, retailers could personalize the User Interface to cater to the specific needs of customers based on these identified features. This can be achieved by utilizing, if found, technology that enhances the sense of Intimacy and Trust during the online shopping experience
- In addition, during the registration process for new users, particularly those belonging to clusters that are sensitive to perceive Lack of Trust and intimacy when making online purchases, it may be beneficial to inquire about the preferred types of technology that users would like to utilize to enhance their overall shopping experience. These options may include features such as virtual reality trials, chatbots, real-time support assistants, stylists, or other professionals.

By adopting these strategies, retailers can strive to create a more tailored and personalized online shopping experience that addresses customers' needs and fosters a better sense of relationship. This, is incredibly important, since, as shown in this dissertation, there is still emotional needs to cover in regard to the Online Shopping experience, and only with continuous research and iteration of the shopping experience – keeping the customer and their emotional needs at the center of their strategic decisions – retailers be able to remain leaders.

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1. APPENDIX A

Questionnaire 1st Draft

Dear participant,

This is a survey (14 questions, around 10/15 min) to evaluate the perceptions of consumers buying online in different categories.

There is no risk involved in answering any of the following questions. Remember that your participation in this survey is voluntary, which means that you are free to participate or not, as well as give it up at any time. However, your responses are very important, completely anonymous, and will be used only for academic purposes.

*The panel of Appinio, automatically classifies (since it already knows it) the gender and age of the respondent – which already gave their consent and declared they are over 18 years old.

Question	Answer
Please rate your degree of agreement with the following statements about on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).	I am quite certain about what I will get after buying online
	I know how to get what I need from with e-commerce stores
	I generally trust e-commerce stores
	I find personalized recommendations when buying online
	When buying online, I find more brands that are sensitive to my interests
	I tend to check the Social Media quality of the e-commerce stores I buy at before buying
	I would tend to buy a product based more on the opinion of a friend than on online reviews.
	I don't trust online reviews, I think they tend to be

	false.
	I'm afraid of being robbed giving my card online
	I only buy from online stores that also exist offline.
Please rate your degree of agreement with the following statements about on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).	I feel like I'm part of a community when I buy offline
	I tend to feel closer to a brand when I spend 1 hour in an online shop vs an on-site shop
	I feel a sentimental or affectionate relationship with brands I've known offline
	Please rate how strong you feel this emotions when shopping online vs offline: Closeness, Warmth, Care, Calm, Affection
	I'd rather spend an hour shopping online than in a shopping mall
If you are considering the purchase of a specific product that with a special emotional charge for you (e.g. a dress to assist to a wedding), where do you usually search for information (e.g. price, features etc.)?	All the time
	Often
	Sometimes
	Rarely
	Never
	I search online for information
	I go to a store and ask a sales person
	I use the chat function on online retail stores
	I ask friends and family
	I look for a service phone number on the store website and call them
I go on the brand's social media account	
I check reviews on forums and blogs	
Study 1	
	Measurement Item

Relate your perception of the following feelings with these 4.0 technologies:	Personal AI recommendations, Direct notifications through mobile VR try-on + I find certain and reliable the help of this technology I think technology it's sensitive to my interests I'm afraid to give my data to technology in exchange of a personal recommendation
	Personal AI recommendations, Direct notifications through mobile VR try-on + I feel like spending time talking using/talking with it I feel calm after the it's help I'd rather use it than recurring to a shopping assistant offline

Final Questionnaire in Spanish and English

Question no./ Número de preguntas	English - Survey Questions	Spanish - Preguntas de la encuesta	Type of question
F1	Do you usually shop on the Internet? A.Yes B.No	¿Compra por Internet? A.Si B.No	Single election
F2	How often do you usually shop on the Internet (e.g. online stores/marketplaces, comparison sites, etc.)? A: Every day	¿Con qué frecuencia suele comprar por Internet (por ejemplo, en tiendas/mercados online, comparadores, etc.)? A: Todos los días	Single election

	<p>B: Weekly</p> <p>C: Monthly</p> <p>D: A few times a year [Screen off].</p> <p>E: Never [Screen out].</p>	<p>B: Semanal</p> <p>C: Mensual</p> <p>D: Unas cuantas veces al año</p> <p>E: Nunca</p>	
F3	<p>Please rate your degree of agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).</p> <p>I'm pretty sure what I will get after buying online.</p> <p>I know how to get what I need with e-commerce stores.</p> <p>Generally, I rely on e-commerce stores.</p> <p>1= I don't agree at all</p> <p>2= I don't agree</p> <p>3= Somewhat disagree</p> <p>4= Neutral</p> <p>5= Somewhat agree</p> <p>6= Agree</p> <p>7=Completely agree</p>	<p>Por favor, valore las siguientes afirmaciones en una escala de 1 (no estoy de acuerdo en absoluto) a 7 (totalmente de acuerdo).</p> <p>Estoy bastante seguro/a de lo que obtendré después de comprar en línea</p> <p>Sé cómo conseguir lo que necesito en las tiendas de e-commerce</p> <p>Generalmente confío en las tiendas de e-commerce</p> <p>1 = No estoy de acuerdo en absoluto</p> <p>2 = No estoy de acuerdo</p> <p>3 = Algo en desacuerdo</p> <p>4 = Neutral</p> <p>5 = Un poco de acuerdo</p> <p>6 = De acuerdo</p> <p>7 = Totalmente de acuerdo</p>	Likert
F4	<p>Please rate your degree of agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).</p> <p>I find personalized recommendations when shopping online</p> <p>When I shop online, I find more brands that take my interests into account.</p>	<p>Por favor, valore las siguientes afirmaciones en una escala de 1 (no estoy de acuerdo en absoluto) a 7 (totalmente de acuerdo).</p> <p>Encuentro recomendaciones personalizadas al comprar por Internet</p>	Likert

	<p>I would rather spend an hour shopping on the Internet than in a shopping mall.</p> <p>I usually check the social networks of e-commerce stores before making a purchase.</p>	<p>Al comprar por Internet, encuentro más marcas que tienen en cuenta mis intereses</p> <p>Prefiero pasar una hora comprando en Internet que en un centro comercial</p> <p>Suelo comprobar las redes sociales de las tiendas online antes de realizar una compra</p>	
F5	<p>Please rate your degree of agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).</p> <p>You are more likely to buy from an online store if it displays verified user reviews.</p> <p>When I shop on the Internet, I am afraid of being robbed by giving my credit card information.</p> <p>You are more likely to buy from an online store if you have a third-party authentication certificate.</p>	<p>Por favor, valore las siguientes afirmaciones en una escala de 1 (no estoy de acuerdo en absoluto) a 7 (totalmente de acuerdo).</p> <p>Es más probable que compre en una tienda online si muestra opiniones de usuarios verificadas</p> <p>Cuando compro en Internet, tengo miedo de que me roben dando los datos de mi tarjeta de crédito</p> <p>Es más probable que compre en una tienda online si tiene un certificado de autenticación de un tercero</p>	Likert
F6	<p>Please rate your degree of agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).</p> <p>When I shop online, I feel that I am taken care of and that I am well treated</p>	<p>Por favor, valore las siguientes afirmaciones en una escala de 1 (no estoy de acuerdo en absoluto) a 7 (totalmente de acuerdo).</p> <p>Cuando compro online, siento que se preocupan por mi y estoy bien atendido</p>	Likert

	When I shop online, I feel like they know me, it's somehow a tailored experience for me.	Cuando compro online, siento que me conocen, es de alguna manera una experiencia a mi medida	
F7	<p>Please rate your degree of agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).</p> <p>When I shop online, I miss feeling the support of the sales assistants.</p> <p>When I shop online, I feel that my service expectations are met.</p>	<p>Por favor, valore las siguientes afirmaciones en una escala de 1 (no estoy de acuerdo en absoluto) a 7 (totalmente de acuerdo).</p> <p>Cuando compro por Internet, echo de menos sentir el apoyo de los dependientes</p> <p>Cuando compro online, siento que se cumplen mis expectativas de servicio</p>	Likert
F8	<p>Please rate your degree of agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).</p> <p>I feel comfortable shopping online because I have done it several times.</p> <p>I have many memories of positive experiences shopping on the Internet.</p>	<p>Por favor, valore las siguientes afirmaciones en una escala de 1 (no estoy de acuerdo en absoluto) a 7 (totalmente de acuerdo).</p> <p>Me siento cómodo/a comprando por internet porque lo he hecho varias veces</p> <p>Tengo muchos recuerdos de experiencias positivas comprando por Internet</p>	Likert
F9	<p>Please rate your degree of agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).</p> <p>For me, it is important to interact with other people while shopping online.</p> <p>I miss getting feedback from other people while shopping online.</p>	<p>Por favor, valore las siguientes afirmaciones en una escala de 1 (no estoy de acuerdo en absoluto) a 7 (totalmente de acuerdo).</p> <p>Para mí es importante interactuar con otras personas mientras compro en línea</p>	

		Echo de menos recibir opiniones de otras personas mientras compro por Internet	
F10	<p>To what extent do you agree with the following statements?</p> <p>Answers:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I do not agree at all 2. I do not agree at all 3. Somewhat disagree 4. Neutral 5. Somewhat agree 6. Agree 7. Strongly agree <p>Articles:</p> <p>I usually look in the store and buy online.</p> <p>I usually surf the Internet and shop in the store.</p>	<p>¿En qué medida está de acuerdo con las siguientes afirmaciones?</p> <p>1 = No estoy de acuerdo en absoluto</p> <p>2 = No estoy de acuerdo</p> <p>3 = Algo en desacuerdo</p> <p>4 = Neutral</p> <p>5 = Un poco de acuerdo</p> <p>6 = De acuerdo</p> <p>7 = Totalmente de acuerdo</p> <p>Suelo buscar en la tienda presencial y comprar por Internet</p> <p>Suelo navegar por Internet y comprar en la tienda presencial</p>	Matrix /Likert
F11	<p>To what extent do you agree with the following statements?</p> <p>In general, I avoid buying online, but I end up doing it.</p> <p>In general, I avoid shopping in physical stores.</p>	<p>¿En qué medida está de acuerdo con las siguientes afirmaciones?</p> <p>En general, evito comprar en línea, pero acabo haciéndolo</p> <p>En general, evito comprar en tiendas físicas</p>	Matrix/Likert
F12	<p>To what extent do you agree with the following statements?</p> <p>In general, I trust online stores</p>	<p>¿En qué medida está de acuerdo con las siguientes afirmaciones?</p>	Matrix/Likert

	In general, I feel intimacy and closeness when I shop online.	En general, confío en las tiendas online En general, siento intimidad y cercanía cuando compro online	
F13	How do you prefer tortilla? Select the option with a number on it A. With Onion B. With three potatoes C. Plain D. With potatoes	¿Cómo prefieres la tortilla? Seleccione la opción con un número A.Con cebolla B.Con tres patatas C.Sencilla D.Con patatas	Single Choice

APPENDIX B

Appendix B.NOVA IMS Ethics Committee Approval



This is to certify that

Project No.: **OTHER2023-3-177433**

Project Title: **Consumer behaviour in retail online shopping. A study on the effect of technology's emotional gap.**

Principal Researcher: **Amanda López Barreto**

according to the regulations of the Ethics Committee of NOVA IMS and MagIC Research Center this project was considered to meet the requirements of the NOVA IMS Internal Review Board, being considered **APPROVED** on 3/17/2023.

It is the Principal Researcher's responsibility to ensure that all researchers and stakeholders associated with this project are aware of the conditions of approval and which documents have been approved.

The Principal Researcher is required to notify the Ethics Committee, via amendment or progress report, of

- Any significant change to the project and the reason for that change;
- Any unforeseen events or unexpected developments that merit notification;
- The inability of the Principal Researcher to continue in that role or any other change in research personnel involved in the project.

Lisbon, 3/17/2023

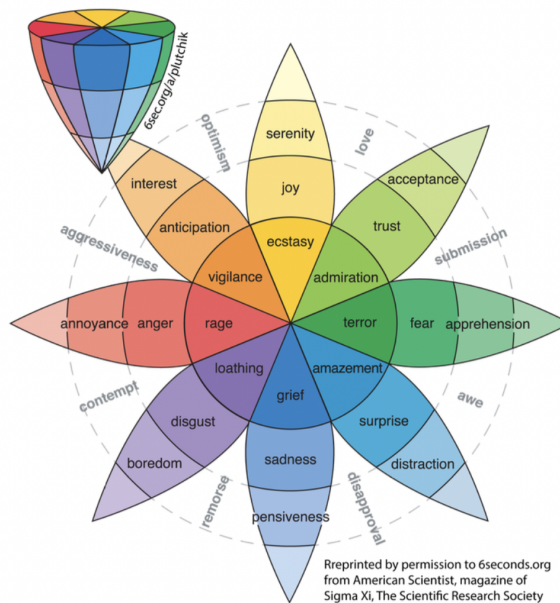
NOVA IMS Ethics Committee
ethicscommittee@novaims.unl.pt

ANNEXES

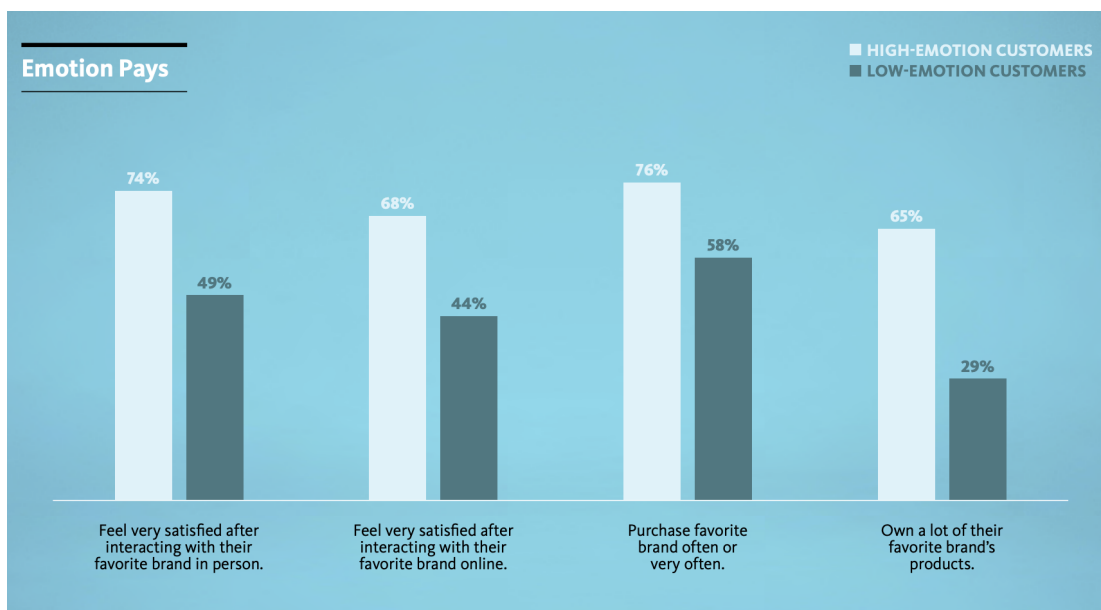
1.Plutchik's (1980) psychoevolutionary theory of basic emotions - Wheel of emotions

PLUTCHIK'S WHEEL OF EMOTIONS

NAME A FEELING & ENHANCE EMOTIONAL LITERACY



2.Representation of preferences and satisfaction of High-Emotion vs Low-Emotion Customers



3. Homepage of Appinio Website

appinio How it works Solutions Pricing Clients Company Resources EN Log in Register

From questions to insights in minutes.

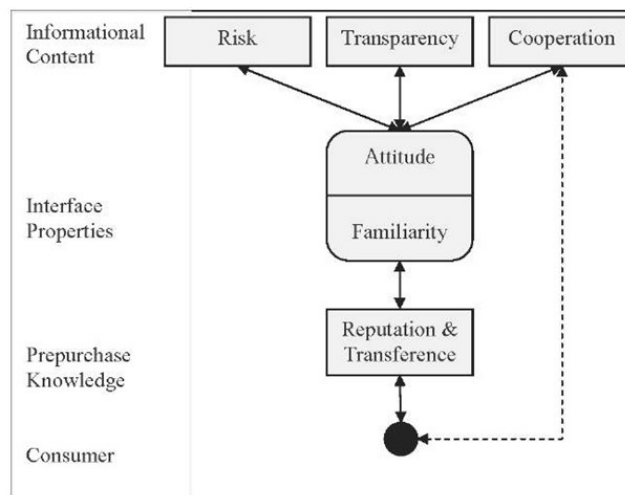
Market research as it should be. Reliable results, easy-to-use platform and consultants that have your back. All in real-time.

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4. MoTEC by Egger (2001)

5. Possible Study for Further Lines of Research



6.

Table 8

Scales and measurements for Further Lines of Research

Construct/Scale	Code	Items	Type of Question	Measurement Item	References
Technology 4.0				Relate your perception of the following feelings with these 4.0 technologies: Personal AI recommendations, Direct notifications through mobile, VR try-on +	Adapted from Gefen (2004) and Luhmann (1979) Adapted from Keller (2001) Adapted from Ohanian, R (1990) Adapted from (Hung Lin, 2013)
	Human-like characteristics	TT1, TTT2, TT3,TT4	Technology and Trust	Matrix Multiple Choice	I find certain and reliable the help of this technology I think technology it's sensitive to my interests I'm afraid to give my data to technology in exchange of a personal recommendation
				Relate your perception of the following feelings with these 4.0 technologies: Personal AI recommendations, Direct notifications through mobile VR try-on +	Adapted from Park, C. W., Macinnis, D. J., & Priester, J. R. (2006) Adapted from Keller (2001) and Roberts (2004)
				I feel like spending time talking using/talking with it I feel calm after the it's help I'd rather use it than recurring to a shopping assistant offline	

