

The Mediating Role Of Online Customer Assistance In The Adoption Of Online Purchase: Empirical Evidence From KSA During Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the role of online customer assistance is investigated as a mediator of online purchase adoption in the “Kingdom of Saudi Arabia” (KSA) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research conducts examination of influences from perceived ease of using and customer support on the consumers’ online shopping behaviour by using Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Regression analysis and correlation tests were used to analysed data collected by surveying 80 respondents. This study reveals that perceived ease of use and online customer assistance affect the likelihood of an online purchase. Given these findings the study recommends that enterprises enhance their customer support system by employing live chat and AI driven service so that the adoption of online shopping can further increase, other than enhancing usability of the platform. The recommendations provided here are critical for KSA businesses which are looking to adjust to the post pandemic e-commerce environment and fill the increasing need of convenient and dependable online shopping.

Keywords: Online shopping, online customer assistance, perceived ease of use, “Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)”, e-commerce adoption, COVID-19, consumer behavior, regression analysis, customer support systems.

Introduction

Background of the Study

During the COVID-19 pandemic, global consumer behaviour has changed so rapidly and people are shopping in various trends around the world.

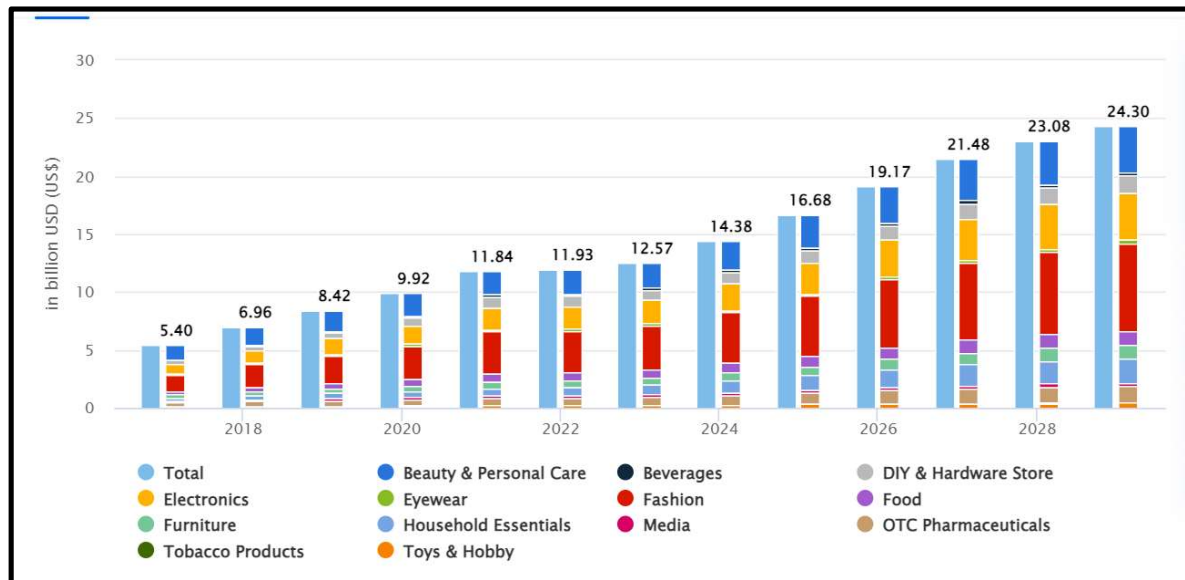


Figure 1: Projected Revenue for e-commerce market for KSA

(Source: statista.com, 2024)

Revenues to about 14 billion US dollars for the fiscal year 2024, the growth in e-commerce in Saudi Arabia has also risen. Lockdowns and, more than anything transformed the retail sector, the restrictions on movement and social distancing measures, leading increasingly more consumers online (Nanda, Xu & Zhang, 2021). However, as more people made bigger use of online shopping, it became vital to provide a frictionless customer experience. Out of this, online customer assistance options like live chat and chatbots came into play as an essential element to help customers have a pleasant experience of buying.

Problem Statement

Challenges during online shopping are still faced by many KSA's online shoppers despite the rapid growth of e-commerce. One problem is a lack of good customer support, leaving customers confused and a high cart abandonment rate. Research puts the figure at 75% of KSA online shoppers who broke off buying because of things like product information that is not clear and complicated checkout processes (barilliance.com, 2023). Yet, while many businesses provide customer support, research into how well it boosts user-friendliness and trust in shopping through online is still in its infancy, particularly amidst the COVID pandemic.

Aim

This study attempts to fill the gap by examining how online customer assistance can mediate these problems as well as motivate online shopping in KSA.

Research Objectives

- To understand the effects of perceived availability on the adoption of online purchases in KSA are examined.
- Study the effect of online customer assistance on the publicity of internet purchases.
- Analyse the mediating effect of online customer assistance on the relationship between online purchase adoption as well as user-friendliness of online purchase.

Research Questions

- What is the effect of perceived ease of use on online purchase adoption in KSA?
- How does online customer assistance affect the adoption of online purchases?
- How does online customer assistance mediate the relationship between online purchase adoption and ease of use?

Importance of the Study

The importance of this study lies in how businesses in “KSA” can use online customer assistance to boost consumer trust, satisfaction and eventually e-commerce adoption.

Scope of the Study

With the COVID-19 pandemic, online customer assistance will play an important role in the promotion of e-commerce adoption in KSA in the context of customers’ online shopping behaviour of during this period.

Literature Review

Overview of Online Purchase Behaviour

Online purchase behaviour is defined as consumers’ decisions and actions while dealing with products and services, via the Internet. Different factors include how easy it is to use the platform, how much people can trust it, how many products are available, how easy people can find the product as per their desire. Convenience, product variety and the ease with which consumers can compare prices appear to drive most of the online behaviour of consumers today (Puengwattanapong & Leelasantitham, 2022). Trust in the platform’s security and reliability is key to successful online purchases. The rise of digital literacy and internet penetration to more than 99% in KSA along with a growing base of online shoppers' preference for mobile shopping applications (saudigazette.com.sa, 2024).

Role of Customer Assistance in E-Commerce

In e-commerce, customer assistance is supported by features of live chat, chatbots, FAQs and call support to guide customers towards buying. Helping to offset issues such as cart abandonment and dissatisfaction, online customer assistance is extremely important. Real-time customer support increases consumer trust and resolves consumer problems that occur during the purchase as the key element for the consumer to finish the transaction (Dhanalakshmi et al. 2020). Online shopping is still new in KSA compared to Western markets and is further lagging in Internet penetration, making effective customer assistance both critical and unique in closing the gap between consumer uncertainty and successful purchase, even for those who aren't familiar with the process or experiencing technical issues.

“The Impact of COVID-19 on E-Commerce in KSA”

Traditional retail operations being globally caused to halt by the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated the transformation of Traditional to its online counterpart. In the financial year 2020, online sales grew massively by 60 percent and KSA’s e-commerce market also grew by leaps and bounds this year (bcg.com, 2021). When the social distance and lockdown measures continued consumers had to continue shopping online. In the pandemic consumers in KSA relied more on e-commerce for daily needs like groceries and electronics. But that rapid growth left behind holes in customer support systems: many retailers were unready for the rush in demand and there was widespread consumer dissatisfaction.

Theoretical Framework

“Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)”

A widely espoused approach to understanding how users come to accept and use technology is based on the “Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)”. This postulates that the two major factors driving user acceptance of different upcoming technology which are easy to use and effective for business. The TAM is applicable to understanding how consumers in KSA perceive the online platforms they use and how customer assistance features can influence the ease of use and usefulness of e-commerce platforms. According to the model, consumers who view providing online platforms as a pleasant user experience and think the contribution of customer assistance is of value will purchase online more frequently (Yang et al. 2021).

The revised TAM proposed by Davis et al. (1989) is shown in the following figure.

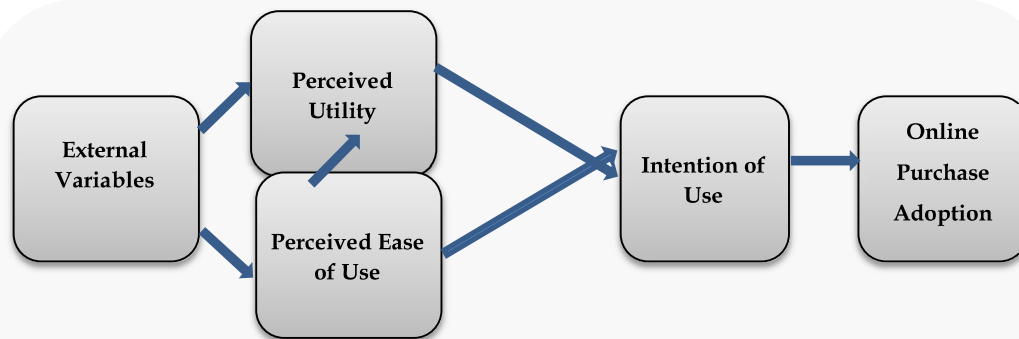


Figure 2 : Technology Acceptance Model (Revised TAM)
(Source : Davis et al. 1989)

Literature Gap

Although previous literature has detailed much about online purchase behaviour and different important factors that contribute to the uptake of e-commerce, less research has been done on how online customer assistance is a mediating factor for KSA. Generally, most studies focus on ease of use and trust in general rather than focusing on the impact of customer support services on these factors as a source of purchase. Furthermore, the study of this unique COVID-19 context and its role in the KSA e-commerce setting, in particular the contribution of customer assistance in dealing with the challenges resulting from this unprecedented online shopping growth, has not been explored adequately.

Research Model and Hypothesis development

The proposed research model seeks to explore the mediating role of online customer assistance in the relationship between the ease of use of online platforms and the adoption of online purchases within the context of Saudi Arabia (KSA), especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. This model addresses the literature gap by focusing specifically on how customer support services can influence purchasing behaviors in an increasingly digital marketplace.

Prior research suggests that user-friendly interfaces and straightforward navigation significantly enhance user experience, which in turn drives purchase decisions. In the context of KSA, where digital literacy is increasing, this relationship is critical (Davis, F. D. (1989); Alharbi, A. (2020)).

The role of online customer assistance is crucial in the KSA e-commerce landscape, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when more consumers turned to online shopping. Effective support services can address customer concerns, answer queries, and reduce uncertainty associated with online transactions, thereby enhancing overall confidence in making purchases (Pappas, I. O., Patra, A., & Tzokas, N. (2020); Kumar, A., & Gupta, S. (2021)). The pandemic has accelerated the shift to online shopping, emphasizing the need for responsive customer assistance. The research model takes into account how this unique context has affected consumer behavior, particularly in KSA, where traditional shopping was predominant before the pandemic (Rogers, R. (2020); El-Ganainy, A., & Ali, S. (2021)).

Based on the literature, the author proposes the following hypotheses.

H1: *A strong positive relationship exists between the ease of use of online platforms and the adoption of online purchases.*

This hypothesis posits that as the usability of online platforms increases, consumers are more likely to engage in online shopping.

H2: *The adoption of online purchases for customers can be improved by significantly enhanced online customer assistance.*

This hypothesis suggests that effective online customer support (e.g., live chat, chatbots) can further facilitate the decision-making process for customers, encouraging them to complete their purchases.

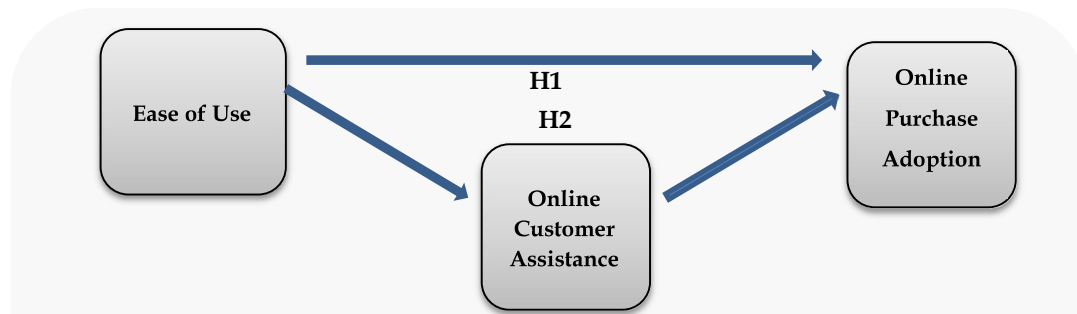


Figure 3 : Research Model

This model illustrates that ease of use directly influences customer adoption of online purchasing. However, it also posits that this relationship is mediated by the effectiveness of online customer assistance.

Research Methodology

y of this study is positivist in which objective measurements and observable phenomena are central. The quantifiable data can be analysed through positivism when the relationships between variables are made clear (Mohajan, 2020). This study adopts a deductive approach, starting with existing theory, especially the Technology Adoption Model (TAM). This approach facilitates the testing of hypotheses derived from prior literature to identify the specific effects of “online customer assistance” on the online purchase adoption.

The research design is quantitative as this is the type of research where it is possible to get quantitative data and analysis does give an insight about pattern and correlation. This design allows us to objectively evaluate relationships between variables. The study sample consisted of 80 respondents’ online shoppers in KSA. The use of random sampling also assures that the probability of selection in any one individual of the population would be the same as in the other individual, making the sample representative (Noor et al. 2022).

Structured questionnaires and surveys are going to be conducted to collect data on perceptions of online customer assistance and how it affects purchase behaviour online. By using this method, specific and relevant data can be collected from respondents very fast. From the research, the independent variable is called “online customer assistance” and the dependent variable is the “adoption of online purchases”. Likert scale questions will help measure each variable accurately, to the extent possible so that people who are surveyed provide accurate perceptions.

Data analysis will be done on the data by using statistical methods such as regression analysis, ANOVA paired t-test and descriptive statistics. The use of these tools will then help explore the relationships between variables and what consumer behaviour needs to be followed. The results of this rigorous analysis will contribute to a more thorough understanding of online shopping dynamics in KSA as well as validate the research hypotheses.

Result and Findings

Demographic analysis

Gender

Gender				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	16	20.0	20.0
	Male	43	53.8	73.8
	Others	21	26.3	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	

Table 1: Gender Distribution

The breakdown of gender where it shows that 53.8% of participants goes to the male category whereas 20.0 percent are female category, and 26.3% identify as 'others.'

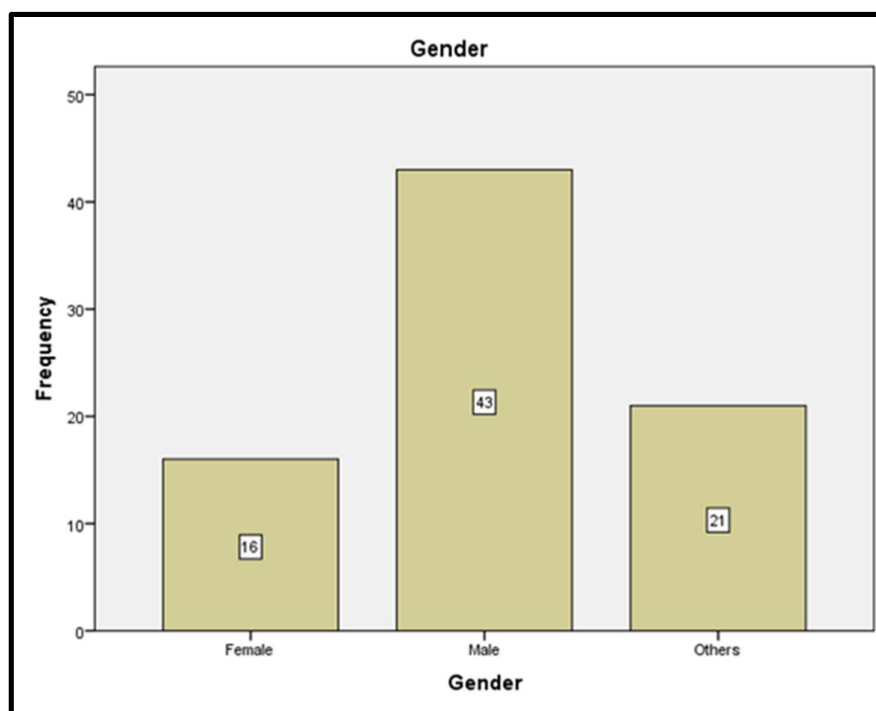


Figure 4: Gender Distribution

This documents a predominance of men participating, a trend of KSA society but also the inclusion of gender diverse individuals.

Age

Age				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
25-35	34	42.5	42.5	42.5
36-45	17	21.3	21.3	63.7
Valid 46-50	18	22.5	22.5	86.3
50-60	11	13.8	13.8	100.0
Total	80	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: Age Distribution

As per the above table, the 25-35 age group are 42.5% whereas the 36-45 age group are 21.3%. On the other hand, 22.5 percent belong to the 46-50 age group whereas the 50-60 age group are 13.8% of the respondents.

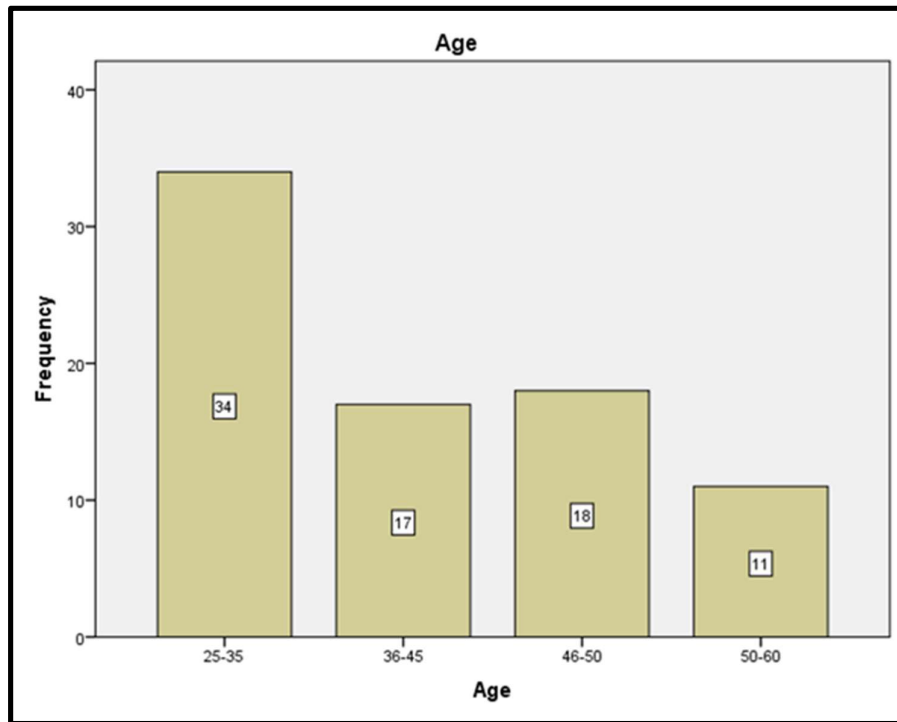


Figure 5: Age Distribution

That would indicate a new consumer base that's quite probably used to online shopping and technology.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
DV_Adoption_of_Online_Purchases	80	9.00	25.00	17.3000	5.15924
IV1_Perceived_Ease_of_Use	80	9.00	25.00	17.6875	5.05813
IV2_Customer_Online_Assistance	80	9.00	25.00	17.3500	5.19274
Valid N (listwise)	80				

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive statistics for the dependent variable adoption of online purchases and the independent

variables' "perceived ease of use" and "online customer assistance" suggest an adoption score of 17.30 (SD = 5.16) for online purchase adoption. The mean score for perceived ease of use is 17.69 (SD = 5.06), this time for online customer assistance is 17.35 (SD = 5.19). These values imply that on average, respondents had a good feeling about their online shopping experience, yet show some variability in their responses.

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.826
Approx. Chi-Square		425.266
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	df	105
	Sig.	.000

Table 4: Factor Analysis

"Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)" measure for sampling adequacy of 0.826 indicates that the sample is fit for this analysis if the value exceeds 0.6. The results of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($p < 0.001$) confirmed that variables are highly correlated and therefore this is in agreement with the validity of further statistical analyses (Shrestha, 2021).

Paired Samples Correlations				
		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	DV_Adoption_of_Online_Purchases &	80	.700	.000
	IV1_Perceived_Ease_of_Use			
Pair 2	DV_Adoption_of_Online_Purchases &	80	.757	.000
	IV2_Customer_Online_Assistance			

Table 5: Paired t-test

Correlation of 0.700 between the adoption of online purchases and "perceived ease of use" and 0.757 between the adoption of online purchases and online customer assistance. The strong positive correlations in these results indicate that ease of use and better client assistance are positively correlated with more online shopping behaviour.

Hypothesis testing

H1: "A strong positive relationship exists between the use ease of online platforms and the adoption of online purchases".

H2: "The adoption of online purchases for customers can be improved by significantly enhanced online customer assistance such as live chat, or chatbots."

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.803 ^a	.644	.635	3.11723

a. Predictors: (Constant), IV2_Customer_Online_Assistance, IV1_Perceived_Ease_of_Use

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1354.583	2	677.291	69.701	.000 ^b
	Residual	748.217	77	9.717		
	Total	2102.800	79			

a. Dependent Variable: DV_Adoption_of_Online_Purchases

b. Predictors: (Constant), IV2_Customer_Online_Assistance, IV1_Perceived_Ease_of_Use

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.882	1.363		1.380	.171
	IV1_Perceived_Ease_of_Use	.363	.092	.356	3.934	.000
	IV2_Customer_Online_Assistance	.519	.090	.522	5.771	.000

a. Dependent Variable: DV_Adoption_of_Online_Purchases

Table 6: Hypothesis Testing

From the model summary it also indicates that, out of the total number of variations of the online purchase adoption that can be explained with the independent variables ("perceived ease of use and online customer assistance"), only 64.4% can be explained. This ANOVA table shows that the model is statistically significant ($F = 69.701$; $p < 0.001$) so that the dependent variable variance is explained by the interpreters.

The results from the coefficients table show that both independent variables are significantly used to predict online purchase adoption. The unstandardized coefficient for "perceived ease of use" is 0.363 ($p < .001$) and for online customer assistance, 0.519 ($p < .001$). Online customer assistance has a stronger influence on the adoption of online purchasing than perceived ease of use, this is further confirmed by standardized coefficients (Beta) of 0.356 and 0.522 respectively.

Discussion

These findings show that "perceived ease of use" and "online customer assistance" have significant effects on respondents' adoption of online purchases in KSA. There is a strong correlation of these independent variables with online shopping behaviour and therefore businesses should focus on bolstering customer support services and improving platform usage. This premium of younger consumers points out that e-commerce strategies must be centred on digital engagement and access. Secondly, it also marks the existence of a number of varied gender identities that make it imperative for marketers to incorporate inclusive strategies in their marketing systems. In all, by addressing these areas, it can improve customer satisfaction and create a better online shopping space from pandemics.

Conclusion and Recommendation

By focusing on the role of perceived ease of use and the online customer assistance in online purchases' adoption in KSA including the COVID-19 pandemic, this study adds to the literature. The strong correlations, and significant predictability of these factors, show that these companies must devote more attention to better customer support in their online channels, and to drive greater user experiences on their e-commerce platforms. There are some recommendations such as investment into such things as live chat and AI-driven assistance to respond to consumers' needs as quickly and effectively as possible. Besides that, e-commerce platforms should also make their designs as user-friendly as possible and services as easy to navigate as possible (Hemn et al. 2021). On the other hand, regular training of customer service representatives allows great customer service interactions. In the end, marketers will have ample online shopper demographics to consider in strategies to attract a wider audience. They use these strategies to increase customer loyalty as well as satisfaction and increase revenue in a competitive online market.

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Appendices
Appendix 1: Survey Questionnaire

“Link: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdFC8w6Ujmw190K8S5rVIMV9-tc71X1_Z_hZv6Fl27sipdcgg/viewform?usp=sf_link”

“What is Gender”?

Male

Female

“What is your age”?

25-35

36-45

46-50

50-60

DV_Adoption_of_Online_Purchases

“I frequently make purchases online.”

“I prefer to shop online rather than visit physical stores.”

“I will continue shopping online even after the COVID-19 pandemic.”

“I am more likely to adopt online shopping if the platform is easy to use.”

“Having access to online customer assistance influences my decision to make purchases online.”

“IV1_Perceived_Ease_of_Use”

“I find online shopping platforms easy to navigate.”

“It is easy for me to find the products I am looking for on online shopping platforms.”

“The online purchasing process (e.g., adding items to cart, checkout, payment) is simple and straightforward.”

“I feel confident using online shopping platforms without requiring external help.”

“I believe anyone, even without technical knowledge, can easily shop online.”

“IV2_Customer_Online_Assistance”

“I find live chat or chatbot assistance useful when shopping online.”

“Online customer service like live chat and FAQs, etc. helps me resolve issues or answer questions while shopping.”

“I prefer using platforms that provide easily accessible customer support while shopping.”

“I trust online shopping platforms more when I receive timely responses from customer support.”

“Having access to online customer assistance makes me feel more confident about completing my purchase.”