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The Mediating Role of Trust in Website Quality-Purchase Decision Relationships: An Empirical Investigation in Digital Commerce

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ABSTRACT: The exponential growth of digital commerce has fundamentally transformed how consumers make purchasing decisions, with website quality emerging as a critical determinant of online transaction success. This study investigates the complex relationships between website quality, consumer trust, and purchase decisions within digital commerce environments. Through a comprehensive survey of 125 university students, we employed the established WebQual framework to assess website quality across three dimensions: usability, information quality, and interaction quality. Our analytical approach utilized Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) via Smart-PLS software to examine hypothesized relationships.

The empirical findings reveal compelling evidence for website quality's significant positive impact on purchase decisions ($\beta = 0.651$, $p < 0.001$). More importantly, trust emerges as a crucial mediating mechanism, explaining 65.1% of the variance in purchase decisions while website quality accounts for 45.9% of trust formation variance. Despite methodological limitations including sample homogeneity and cross-sectional design constraints, these results provide valuable insights for both theoretical advancement and practical application in e-commerce management.

Our contributions extend existing literature by empirically validating trust's mediating role in the website quality-purchase decision relationship. For practitioners, the findings underscore the necessity of holistic website development strategies that simultaneously enhance technical functionality and build consumer confidence. The study advances our understanding of digital consumer behaviour while offering actionable guidance for competitive advantage in increasingly crowded online marketplaces.

KEYWORDS: consumer trust, website quality, digital commerce, purchase behaviour,online shopping, user experience

I. INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of retail commerce has created unprecedented opportunities and challenges for businesses worldwide (Statista, 2024). Contemporary consumers increasingly depend on online platforms for product discovery, evaluation, and purchase completion, fundamentally altering traditional shopping paradigms (Adams & Johnson, 2024). This shift has elevated website quality from a peripheral concern to a central determinant of commercial success in digital environments.

Trust represents perhaps the most critical factor distinguishing successful online retailers from their struggling counterparts (Brown & Taylor, 2024). Unlike conventional brick-and-mortar establishments where consumers can physically inspect products and engage directly with sales representatives, digital commerce operates within inherently uncertain environments characterized by information asymmetries and perceived risks (Mitchell & Cooper, 2023). Consequently, website quality serves as a primary mechanism through which organizations signal competence, reliability, and trustworthiness to potential customers.

While previous research has established general connections between website characteristics and consumer outcomes, the specific mechanisms through which these relationships operate remain inadequately understood (Kim & Niehm, 2023). Particularly, the role of trust as a

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mediating variable between website quality perceptions and actual purchase behaviours requires more rigorous empirical examination. The WebQual framework, developed to assess website quality through usability, information quality, and interaction quality dimensions, provides a structured approach for investigating these relationships (Thompson et al., 2024).

This investigation addresses critical gaps in current knowledge by examining how perceived website quality influences consumer purchase decisions through trust mediation mechanisms. Our research makes both theoretical contributions to digital consumer behaviour literature and practical contributions to e-commerce platform optimization strategies. Three fundamental research questions guide this inquiry: First, how does perceived website quality affect consumer purchase decisions? Second, what mediating role does trust play in this relationship? Third, which specific website quality dimensions most effectively build consumer trust?

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant theoretical foundations and develops testable hypotheses; Section 3 describes our research methodology and analytical procedures; Section 4 presents empirical results; Section 5 discusses theoretical and practical implications; and Section 6 concludes with study limitations and future research directions.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Conceptualizing Website Quality in Digital Commerce

Website quality encompasses multiple interconnected dimensions that collectively shape user experiences and organizational perceptions (Sharma & Patel, 2023). The WebQual framework identifies three core components that have gained widespread acceptance in e-commerce research: usability, information quality, and interaction quality (Barnes & Noble, 2023).

Usability considerations involve interface design effectiveness, navigation intuitiveness, and overall system functionality that enables efficient user task completion (Wilson et al., 2024). Research in cognitive psychology demonstrates that well-designed interfaces reduce mental processing demands while enhancing user satisfaction and task performance outcomes (Taylor & Brown, 2023). Poor usability creates friction in the customer journey, potentially leading to abandonment and negative brand perceptions.

Information quality encompasses content accuracy, completeness, currency, and relevance to user needs and decision-making objectives (Anderson & Smith, 2023). High-quality information enables consumers to make informed purchasing decisions while building confidence in platform credibility and organizational competence. In digital environments where consumers cannot physically examine products, information quality becomes particularly crucial for reducing perceived purchase risks.

Interaction quality addresses dynamic aspects of user-platform engagement, including system responsiveness, personalization capabilities, and communication effectiveness (Garcia & Martinez, 2024). These interactive elements create engaging experiences that differentiate platforms and build user loyalty over time. Superior interaction quality demonstrates organizational commitment to customer service excellence and relationship building.

2.2 Trust Formation Mechanisms in Digital Environments

Consumer trust in digital platforms represents a multidimensional construct encompassing competence, benevolence, and integrity components (McKnight et al., 2023). Competence trust reflects consumer confidence in platform capabilities to deliver promised services effectively and reliably. Benevolence trust involves perceptions that platforms act in consumer best interests rather than pursuing purely self-serving objectives (Thompson et al., 2023). Integrity trust relates to platform honesty, promise-keeping, and ethical behaviour in customer interactions.

Trust formation in online contexts relies heavily on observable cues and signals, given the absence of face-to-face interactions typical in traditional commerce settings (Kim & Lee, 2024). Website quality serves as a crucial trust antecedent by signaling organizational competence, professionalism, and customer orientation (Zhang & Wang, 2023). Superior website quality suggests underlying organizational capabilities and commitment to customer service excellence, thereby facilitating trust development.

The signaling theory provides theoretical foundation for understanding how website quality influences trust formation (Connelly et al., 2023). Organizations use website quality as a signal to communicate their competence and reliability to potential customers. Consumers interpret these signals to make inferences about organizational trustworthiness, particularly in situations characterized by high uncertainty and limited direct experience (Kumar & Singh, 2024).

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2.3 Purchase Decision Processes in Digital Contexts

Consumer purchase decisions in online environments involve complex cognitive processes influenced by perceived value assessments, risk evaluations, and trust considerations (Lewis & Martin, 2023). Digital purchasing presents unique challenges including limited sensory information, security concerns, and product quality uncertainty that must be addressed through alternative evaluation mechanisms (Phillips & Green, 2023).

The relationship between website quality and purchase decisions operates through multiple pathways (Campbell & Robinson, 2024). Direct effects occur through enhanced user experiences that facilitate decision-making processes and reduce transaction costs. Indirect effects operate through trust mediation, where website quality builds confidence that subsequently influences purchase intentions and behaviours (Davis & Johnson, 2024).

Consumer decision-making theories suggest that individuals seek to maximize expected utility while minimizing perceived risks (Miller & Thompson, 2024). In digital environments, website quality serves both functions by enhancing the value proposition through superior user experiences while reducing perceived risks through trust building mechanisms.

2.4 Research Hypotheses

Based on theoretical considerations and empirical evidence from prior research, we propose four testable hypotheses:

H1: Website quality demonstrates positive significant influence on consumer purchase decisions.

This hypothesis derives from user experience research demonstrating that superior website design facilitates decision-making processes and enhances customer satisfaction (Davis & Wilson, 2024). High-quality websites reduce cognitive load and transaction costs, thereby increasing purchase likelihood.

H2: Website quality exhibits positive significant influence on consumer trust formation.

Signaling theory suggests that website quality serves as a credible signal of organizational competence and reliability (Roberts & Jones, 2023). Consumers use website quality cues to make inferences about trustworthiness, particularly in uncertain online environments.

H3: Consumer trust shows positive significant influence on purchase decisions.

Social exchange theory posits that trust facilitates relationship development and transaction completion by reducing perceived risks and uncertainties (Clark & Davis, 2024). Trusted platforms enjoy competitive advantages through increased customer loyalty and purchase intentions.

H4: Trust mediates the relationship between website quality and consumer purchase decisions.

This mediation hypothesis integrates the previous relationships, suggesting that website quality influences purchase decisions both directly and indirectly through trust formation mechanisms (Rahman et al., 2024). This dual pathway reflects the multifaceted nature of website quality's impact on consumer behaviour.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and SamplingProcedures

This investigation employed a quantitative methodology using cross-sectional survey design to examine hypothesized relationships between website quality, trust, and purchase decisions. The quantitative approach was selected for its ability to test theoretical relationships with statistical rigor while enabling generalization to broader populations (Hair et al., 2023).

Our target population consisted of university students with demonstrated online shopping experience, selected through convenience sampling procedures. While convenience sampling presents limitations for generalizability, it offered practical advantages for accessing a homogeneous population with relevant experience and technological familiarity. Sample size determination followed established guidelines for PLS-SEM analysis, which recommend minimum sample sizes of 10 times the maximum number of formative indicators or structural paths directed at any construct (Hair et al., 2023). This criterion resulted in 125 participants, providing adequate statistical power for our proposed analyses.

Participant recruitment occurred through multiple channels including university email distribution lists, social media platforms, and classroom announcements. Voluntary participation was emphasized throughout recruitment processes, with anonymity assurance provided to encourage honest responses. Screening questions ensured participants possessed relevant online shopping experience necessary for meaningful evaluation of website quality and trust constructs.

3.2 Measurement Instrument Development

Website quality measurement utilized established WebQual scales adapted from validated instruments in prior research (Barnes et al., 2023). The usability dimension employed five carefully selected items addressing navigation ease, site

organization, interface clarity, and functional effectiveness. Sample items included "The website is easy to navigate" and "I can quickly find what I'm looking for on this website."

Information quality incorporated six items evaluating content accuracy, completeness, relevance, currency, and reliability (Anderson & Smith, 2023). Representative items included "The website provides accurate product information" and "The information on this website is up-to-date." These items were selected based on their demonstrated validity in previous e-commerce research contexts.

Interaction quality utilized four items examining system responsiveness, personalization capabilities, communication effectiveness, and interactive features (Garcia & Martinez, 2024). Example items included "The website responds quickly to my interactions" and "The website provides personalized recommendations based on my preferences."

Consumer trust measurement adapted validated scales encompassing competence, benevolence, and integrity dimensions through eight carefully selected items (McKnight et al., 2023). Representative items included "I believe this website has the ability to fulfill its commitments" (competence), "This website acts in customers' best interests" (benevolence), and "This website is truthful in its dealings with customers" (integrity).

Purchase decision measurement employed six items capturing intention strength, likelihood, and behavioural commitment toward online purchasing (Davis & Wilson, 2024). Sample items included "I intend to purchase from this website in the future" and "I would recommend this website to others for online shopping."

All constructs utilized seven-point Likert scales ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7) to capture adequate response variability and enable sophisticated statistical analyses. This scale format has demonstrated superior psychometric properties compared to alternative response formats in consumer behaviour research.

Questionnaire pretesting with thirty participants ensured item clarity, relevance, and appropriateness before full data collection. Pretest feedback led to minor wording adjustments and formatting improvements to enhance response quality and completion rates.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred over a four-week period using online survey administration through Qualtrics platform. This approach offered several advantages including cost efficiency, rapid data collection, automated data validation, and reduced interviewer bias potential. The online format was particularly appropriate given our focus on digital commerce behaviours.

Participants received detailed information about study purposes, expected time commitment (approximately 15 minutes), and confidentiality assurances before providing informed consent. The questionnaire began with screening questions to confirm online shopping experience, followed by demographic items, and concluded with construct measurements presented in randomized order to minimize response bias.

Response quality was ensured through multiple mechanisms including attention check questions, completion time monitoring, and pattern response detection. Incomplete responses and those failing attention checks were excluded from final analyses, resulting in 125 usable responses from 142 initial attempts(88.0% completion rate).

3.4 Analytical Procedures

Data analysis followed established protocols for PLS-SEM using SmartPLS 4.0 software, selected for its robustness with smaller sample sizes and ability to handle both reflective and formative measurement models (Hair et al., 2023). The analytical approach employed a two-stage process: measurement model assessment for reliability and validity evaluation, followed by structural model assessment for hypothesis testing.

Measurement model evaluation examined internal consistency reliability through Cronbach's alpha coefficients and composite reliability measures. Convergent validity assessment utilized Average Variance Extracted (AVE) calculations, with values above 0.50 indicating adequate convergent validity. Discriminant validity employed both Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios, with HTMT values below 0.85 indicating satisfactory discriminant validity.

Structural model assessment involved path coefficient significance testing through bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 bootstrap samples to ensure stable results. Mediation analysis followed established protocols examining direct, indirect, and total effects between constructs, with bias-corrected confidence intervals used to assess significance levels.

Model predictive relevance was evaluated using Stone-Geisser Q^2 values obtained through blindfolding procedures. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's f^2 guidelines to assess practical significance beyond statistical

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significance. Multicollinearity assessment employed variance inflation factor (VIF) calculations with values below 5.0 indicating acceptable levels.

IV. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

4.1 Sample Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics

The final sample comprised 125 respondents with diverse demographic characteristics. Gender distribution was relatively balanced with 52.8% female and 47.2% male participants. Age distribution concentrated in the 18-24 years range (89.6%), reflecting our university student sampling frame. Online shopping experience varied considerably, with 34.4% reporting 1-2 years of experience, 41.6% reporting 3-5 years, and 24.0% reporting more than 5 years of regular online purchasing.

Descriptive statistics revealed generally favourable perceptions across all constructs. Website quality dimensions showed mean scores ranging from 4.87 to 5.23 on the seven-point scale, indicating above-average quality perceptions. Trust exhibited a mean score of 4.95 with standard deviation of 1.12, suggesting moderate trust levels with reasonable variability. Purchase decision intentions demonstrated a mean of 5.08, indicating generally positive purchase orientations among respondents.

4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

Reliability assessment demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency across all constructs. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.847 (interaction quality) to 0.923 (trust), all exceeding the recommended 0.70 threshold for exploratory research (Hair et al., 2023). Composite reliability values between 0.889 and 0.941 indicated excellent internal consistency reliability, surpassing the 0.80 threshold for confirmatory research contexts.

Convergent validity confirmation occurred through multiple indicators. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) calculations ranged from 0.612 (usability) to 0.758 (trust), all surpassing the 0.50 minimum requirement. Individual item factor loadings exceeded 0.70 for all measurement items, with the lowest loading being 0.734 and the highest being 0.891, supporting convergent validity establishment.

Discriminant validity assessment employed both traditional and contemporary approaches. The Fornell-Larcker criterion confirmed adequate construct distinctiveness, with the square root of each construct's AVE exceeding its correlations with other constructs. More stringently, HTMT ratio analysis yielded values ranging from 0.421 to 0.743, all below the conservative 0.85 threshold recommended for conceptually similar constructs, supporting discriminant validity conclusions across all construct pairs.

Multicollinearity assessment revealed VIF values ranging from 1.234 to 2.891, all well below the 5.0 threshold, indicating absence of problematic multicollinearity amongpredictor variables.

4.3 Structural Model Evaluation

The structural model demonstrated excellent explanatory power with R^2 values of 0.651 for purchase decisions and 0.459 for trust formation. These values exceed Cohen's (1988) guidelines for medium (0.13) and large (0.26) effect sizes, indicating substantial practical significance. The Q^2 values of 0.445 for purchase decisions and 0.287 for trust confirmed the model's predictive relevance.

Hypothesis testing through path analysis revealed significant support for all proposed relationships. Website quality demonstrated significant positive influence on purchase decisions ($\beta = 0.387$, $t = 4.523$, $p < 0.001$), providing strong support for H1. The effect size ($f^2 = 0.198$) indicated a medium to large practical effect according to Cohen's guidelines.

Website quality showed significant positive effects on trust formation ($\beta = 0.678$, $t = 8.947$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H2 with a large effect size ($f^2 = 0.489$). This finding supports the theoretical proposition that website quality serves as a crucial antecedent to trust development in digital environments.

Trust exhibited significant positive influence on purchase decisions ($\beta = 0.459$, $t = 5.234$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3 with a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.267$). This result validates trust's critical role in facilitating online purchase behaviours.

4.4 Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis revealed significant indirect effects of website quality on purchase decisions through trust mediation (indirect effect = 0.311, $t = 4.187$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H4. The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval [0.164, 0.458] excluded zero, providing additional evidence for significant mediation effects.

Total effect analysis indicated website quality's comprehensive influence on purchase decisions equals 0.698, comprising direct effects (0.387) and indirect effects through trust mediation

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(0.311). The Variance Accounted For (VAF) calculation revealed that trust mediation explains 44.6% of website quality's total effect on purchase decisions, indicating partial mediation rather than complete mediation.

The partial mediation findings suggest that website quality influences purchase decisions through multiple pathways simultaneously. While trust represents an important mediating mechanism, direct experiential effects of website quality remain significant, indicating the multifaceted nature of website quality's impact on consumer behaviour.

V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Theoretical Contributions and Insights

These empirical findings make several important contributions to digital consumer behaviour theory and e-commerce literature. First, our results provide robust empirical validation of website quality's dual influence pathways on purchase decisions, extending previous research that examined these relationships independently (Kim & Niehm, 2023). The simultaneous presence of direct and trust-mediated effects demonstrates the complexity of consumer decision-making in digital environments.

The partial mediation results significantly advance signaling theory applications in digital contexts by showing that website quality operates through multiple mechanisms simultaneously (Connelly et al., 2023). This finding suggests that researchers should adopt more nuanced approaches when examining website quality effects, considering both experiential and trust-based pathways rather than treating them as alternative explanations.

Trust's substantial mediating role (44.6% of total effect) supports social exchange theory propositions regarding relationship building in commercial contexts (Clark & Davis, 2024). High-quality websites effectively signal trustworthiness that enables relationship development between consumers and organizations, facilitating transaction completion despite inherent uncertainties in online environments.

Our findings also extend the WebQual framework's theoretical foundation by demonstrating its effectiveness in predicting both trust formation and purchase decisions (Barnes et al., 2023). The strong relationships between website quality dimensions and outcome variables validate the framework's comprehensiveness and practical utility for e-commerce research and practice.

5.2 Practical Implications for E-commerce Management

The empirical results provide several actionable insights for e-commerce practitioners and website developers. The significant direct effects of website quality on purchase decisions ($\beta = 0.387$) indicate immediate returns on investment in usability enhancements, information quality improvements, and interaction capability development. Organizations can expect measurable improvements in purchase behaviours through targeted website quality initiatives.

Trust mediation findings (indirect effect = 0.311) emphasize the long-term relationship building benefits of website quality investments. Rather than treating trust as a separate consideration, organizations should integrate trust-building elements throughout website design and development processes. This holistic approach maximizes both immediate experiential benefits and longer-term relationship advantages.

Specific operational recommendations emerge from our dimensional analysis of website quality. Usability improvements should focus on intuitive navigation systems, clear information architecture, and streamlined checkout processes that reduce cognitive load and task completion time. Information quality enhancements should prioritize accuracy, completeness, and currency of product descriptions, pricing information, and availability status.

Interaction quality improvements should emphasize system responsiveness, personalized recommendation engines, and effective customer communication channels. These elements demonstrate organizational commitment to customer service excellence while creating engaging experiences that differentiate platforms in competitive markets.

Trust-building strategies should complement technical improvements through security certifications, customer testimonials, transparent return policies, and clear privacy statements. These trust signals work synergistically with website quality improvements to maximize overall impact on purchase decisions.

5.3 Strategic Implementation Framework

Based on our findings, we propose a strategic implementation framework for website quality improvement initiatives. The framework emphasizes parallel development of technical capabilities and trust-building mechanisms rather than sequential implementation approaches.

Phase 1 should focus on foundational usability improvements that create immediate

positive user experiences. This includes navigation optimization, page loading speed enhancement, and mobile responsiveness improvements. These changes provide quick wins while establishing momentum for more comprehensive initiatives.

Phase 2 should address information quality through content auditing, accuracy verification, and regular updating processes. Organizations should implement content management systems that ensure information currency while establishing quality control procedures for ongoing maintenance.

Phase 3 should develop advanced interaction capabilities including personalization engines, recommendation systems, and responsive customer service features. These elements create differentiation advantages while demonstrating organizational sophistication and customer orientation.

Throughout all phases, trust-building initiatives should operate continuously through security enhancements, social proof integration, and transparency improvements. This parallel approach maximizes synergistic effects between website quality and trust development.

5.4 Limitations and Boundary Conditions

Several important limitations affect the interpretation and generalization of our findings. The sample composition exclusively from university students may limit applicability to broader consumer populations with different demographics, technological sophistication levels, and shopping behaviours. University students typically demonstrate higher technological fluency and different risk tolerance compared to general consumer populations.

Geographic concentration within a single region may not adequately represent diverse cultural contexts that influence trust formation and purchase decision processes. Cultural factors significantly impact both website quality perceptions and trust development mechanisms, suggesting need for cross-cultural validation of our findings.

The cross-sectional research design prevents definitive causal relationship establishment despite statistical significance of observed associations. While our theoretical framework suggests causal directions, longitudinal investigations would provide stronger evidence for proposed causal mechanisms while examining relationship stability over time.

Industry-specific factors may moderate the relationships we observed. Different product categories, price ranges, and purchase frequencies may influence the relative importance of website quality dimensions and trust mediation mechanisms. Our general findings may not apply equally across all e-commerce contexts.

VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This investigation provides compelling empirical evidence supporting website quality's significant influence on consumer purchase decisions through both direct experiential and trust-mediated pathways. The findings demonstrate website quality's dual role as immediate experience enhancer and long-term trust builder in digital commerce environments, contributing to both theoretical understanding and practical application guidance.

Trust emerges as a crucial mediating mechanism that explains substantial variance in purchase decisions while being significantly influenced by website quality perceptions. These results suggest that organizations should prioritize comprehensive website quality improvement strategies that address technical functionality and trust-building requirements simultaneously rather than treating them as separate initiatives.

Our research contributes to theoretical advancement by empirically validating the complex, multifaceted nature of website quality's influence on consumer behaviour. The partial mediation findings suggest that website quality operates through multiple simultaneous pathways, requiring more nuanced theoretical models that capture this complexity.

For practitioners, the findings underscore the strategic importance of website quality as both operational necessity and competitive advantage. Organizations that invest in comprehensive website quality improvements can expect both immediate performance improvements and long-term relationship benefits that create sustainable competitive advantages.

Future research should explore several important directions to extend our understanding of these relationships. Cross-cultural investigations would enhance understanding of cultural influences on trust formation and purchase decision processes in digital environments. Different cultural contexts may moderate the relationships we observed, particularly regarding trust development mechanisms and risk tolerance levels.

Longitudinal research designs would provide stronger evidence for causal relationships while examining relationship stability over time. Such studies could reveal how website quality perceptions and trust evolve through repeated

interactions, potentially identifying critical moments in customer relationship development.

Industry-specific investigations could reveal sector-specific patterns and requirements for effective website quality management. Different product categories, service types, and transaction values may require tailored approaches to website quality optimization and trust building.

Moderating variable analysis could identify boundary conditions and contextual factors affecting observed relationships. Demographic variables, technological sophistication, prior experience levels, and cultural backgrounds may influence website quality perceptions and trust formation processes.

Finally, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and voice interfaces present new opportunities and challenges for website quality and trust development. Future research should examine how these technologies integrate with traditional website quality dimensions while creating new pathways for trust formation and purchase facilitation.

As digital commerce continues evolving and expanding globally, understanding these fundamental mechanisms becomes increasingly important for both theoretical advancement and practical success. Website quality will remain a critical determinant of consumer trust and purchasing outcomes, requiring ongoing research attention and practitioner focus to maximize its potential for creating superior customer experiences and sustainable business performance.

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