

Effect of Customer Perceived Ethicality on Customer Advocacy: Mediating role of  
Customer Engagement

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**Abstract**

Utilizing the assumptions of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) present research examined the direct relationship between customer perceived ethicality and customer advocacy. Moreover, current study also investigates the mediating role of customer engagement between customer perceived ethicality and customer advocacy and moderating role of self-congruity between customer perceived ethicality and customer engagement. Employing a multi-wave time-lagged research design and using purposive sampling data was gathered from online shopping customers (N=256). Structural equation modelling through Smart PLS was applied to analyze the data. Specifically, measurement model, Structural model, mediation analysis and moderated mediation analysis were performed. Results of the study indicate significant relationship between customer perceived ethicality and customer advocacy. Also, customer engagement was found to be a significant mediator between customer perceived ethicality and customer advocacy. Lastly, self-congruity was found to moderate between customer perceived ethicality and customer engagement relationship such that relationship became stronger when individuals were high on self-congruity. At the end limitations of the study, theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** customer perceived ethicality, customer engagement, customer advocacy

**1. Introduction**

Ethical considerations have become a key issue in business in today's global economy. Consumers are becoming increasingly concerned about corporations' ethical behaviour and their influence on society and the environment. As a result, the idea of consumer perceived ethicality has emerged as an important topic of research in marketing (Xie et al., 2019). Customer perceived ethicality refers to customers' subjective perceptions or evaluations of a company's or brand's ethical practices. It shows how customers view and assess a company's or brand's ethical behaviour based on their own values, beliefs, and expectations (Brunk, 2010a, 2010b; Brunk, 2012). Customers are more interested in the ethical practices of the organizations with whom they do business in today's socially conscious and value-driven economy. They seek to understand if a company conducts itself in a responsible and ethical manner, and whether its products or services reflect their personal values (Castro-González et al., 2021). Companies that exhibit ethical conduct, such as advocating for sustainability, championing social causes, ensuring fair treatment of employees, and maintaining transparency in their operations, are more likely to be perceived positively by customers as ethical. In the modern business environment, a brand's reputation and competitive position are greatly influenced by how well it communicates its corporate-level social and ethical values (Sierra et al., 2017). The increasing occurrence of ethical consumerism, which holds that consumers expect their favourite companies to continuously preserve and advance ethical principles, is driving this trend (Huang, Wei & Ang, 2021). Hence, robust brands must convey

their dedication to social and ethical principles when engaging with their customer base (Gabler, Itani, & Agnihotri, 2023).

It is widely recognized that communication facilitated by advocates holds greater sway than any other method of communication (Shah & Khan, 2021; Mukerjee, 2018). Furthermore, advocates play a significant role in determining consumers' attitudes and general impressions of the brand (Mukerjee, 2018; Wang et al., 2023). Faced with strategic challenges, managers acknowledge the necessity not only to identify new Points of Differentiation (PoDs) but also to be socially responsible and highly innovative for achieving stability in performance (Chang & Lee, 2020; Lehoux et al., 2021). When managed effectively, investments in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and firm innovativeness can foster sustainable customer relationships by cultivating strong advocates. There is a consensus that positive CSR perceptions influence overall customer attitudes (e.g., Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023; Aramburu & Pescador, 2019; Javed & Khan, 2022; Shah and Khan, 2020). In this context, various marketing scholars have explored the impact of CPE on different outcome variables. For instance, Huang et al. (2021) looked at how consumers' perceptions of moral behaviour relate to the impact that staff rudeness has on customers' moral behaviour as well as their civic behaviour, Kumar & Kaushal (2023) explored how consumers' perceptions of a company's ethics influenced their participation in online brand communities, Batool et al. (2023) looked into the impact of customers' perceived ethics on customer loyalty.

The notion that CPE is intricately connected to customer attitudes and loyalty remains a central focus of scholarly inquiry. The concept of customer advocacy has gained increasing significance in the realms of marketing and consumer behavior, exerting a substantial influence on business success. Customer advocacy is defined as the willingness of customers to recommend a brand or product to others and to defend it against criticism or negative reviews (Sweeney et al., 2020). This behavior plays a pivotal role in fostering brand loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and enhanced sales. Advocacy serves as an indicator of brand influence and represents a significant evolution in the dynamic between brands and their customers (Bhati & Verma, 2020). Although not a novel construct, customer advocacy has been extensively explored in previous research. For instance, Quaye et al. (2022) examined the effect of consumer advocacy on brand loyalty, focusing on the quality and trust of brand relationships. Similarly, Harrigan et al. (2020) looked at value co-creation's effects on brand defense and brand advocacy through customer brand engagement and brand love. They contended that while the relationship of various individual and organizational factors with brand advocacy seems plausible, it lacks consistency in research.

Prior research has examined the impact of customer-brand identification on customer advocacy (Nguyen, Quach & Patamaporn, 2022) as well as the connection between consumer advocacy behaviours and corporate social responsibility as examined by Castro-Gonzalez et al. (2019). Customer engagement (CE) has emerged as a crucial concept in modern marketing literature, offering a new perspective for nurturing consumer value and appreciating modern marketing dynamics (Kumar et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2022). Scholars also recognize that CE bestows genuine competitive advantages upon firms, contributing to enhanced performance (Rather & Camilleri, 2019; Rather & Hollebeek, 2021). Consequently, practitioners are actively working to cultivate relationships and establish connections with customers (Rather & Camilleri, 2019). Past research has investigated factors influencing customers' sustained engagement with an organization's services, products, or brands, particularly those with a strong service or online presence, including tourism brands (Algharabat et al., 2020; Harrigan et al., 2020; Rather &

Hollebeek, 2021), virtual and social media brand communities (Kaur et al., 2020; Lima et al., 2019; Xi & Hamari, 2020), online and retail banking (Islam et al., 2020; Kosiba et al., 2018), integrated resort brands (Ahn & Back, 2018), and mobile phone service providers (Leckie et al., 2016).

Engaged customers are inclined to actively endorse the company and its products or services, driven by a strong emotional connection and loyalty to the brand. Conversely, if customers perceive a company as unethical, it can adversely affect their engagement, resulting in reduced levels of customer advocacy. The study conducted by (Demir & Yıldız, 2021) delves into the significance of customer engagement as an intermediary factor in the context of how social media marketing affects the intention to spread electronic word-of-mouth. In a parallel vein, (Cheung & To, 2021) looked at how customer participation affected co-creation. This influence was investigated both through direct pathways and indirect routes, wherein three dimensions of customer engagement—identification, interaction, and absorption were employed. The study applied the customer-dominant logic and stimulus-organism-response framework to analyze these relationships.

Panjaitan (2022) examined the mediating role that customer engagement has in the relationship between relational social media marketing and brand image. The study also examined the role that brand image plays as a mediator in the relationship between consumer involvement and relational social media marketing. In another study, (Huang & Chen, 2022) explored the mediation role of customer engagement—both cognitive and emotional—between brand experience and brand loyalty. To elucidate the detrimental effects of perceived ethicality on customer outcomes, we adopt the social cognitive theory (Bandura's, 1986) as a unique theoretical framework, explaining why, how, and when customer perceptions of ethicality manifest to elucidate the occurrence of a behavioral action. According to SCT people usually learn by observing other, that may lead to change their attitude. Particularly individual when perceive high ethicality of the product/brand/company are likely to take this as important environmental factor that is likely to trigger and shape their actions and behaviors.

With the escalating popularity of online shopping, there is a heightened apprehension regarding the ethical practices adopted by online retailers. Customers are increasingly questioning the social, environmental, and ethical implications associated with their purchasing decisions, including considerations such as material sourcing, labor practices, and the impact on local communities. Our study brings forth several additions to the body of knowledge on perceived ethicality and customer engagement by addressing the following research issues. Firstly, our investigation contributes to the expanding domain of customer engagement behaviors, providing distinctive antecedents and outcomes of customer engagement. Secondly, our research enriches the evolving field of customer perceived ethicality by establishing connections between customer perceived ethicality and customer outcomes through the underlying dynamics of customer engagement behaviors.

## **2. Theory and hypotheses development**

### **2.1 Direct effects of Customer Perceived ethicality on Customer Advocacy**

Using the social cognitive theory (SCT; Bandura, 1986), current study explains the advantageous role that customer perceived ethicality might play in encouraging customer advocacy). SCT considers a person's prior experiences and/or perceptions to elucidate the occurrence of a behavioral action. These previous encounters influence reinforcements, expectations, and anticipations, all of which together shape an individual's decision to participate in a particular

behavior and the underlying motivations for that behavior. In this study, novel psychological mechanism of customer engagement has been proposed which is developed in response to the customer perceived ethicality and thus results in increased brand advocacy. Under the mechanism of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) individual rationalize their actions and behavior through cognitive processing.

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) has aroused the interest of researchers in consumer behaviour research for many years due to its importance. Past studies emphasized to find its antecedents, consequences and described its mediating and moderating role but current literature still lacks understanding that how social cognitive theoretical lens can be applied to explain the perceived ethicality and customer outcomes relationship. Huang, Wei & Ang (2021) explore the significance of customer perceived ethicality in elucidating the influence of employee incivility on customer unethical behavior and customer citizenship behavior. In a recent study, Manansala, Arasanmi, & Ojo (2022) examine the impact of perceived customer ethicality on brand image, affect, and equity. The impact of ethical perception on customer's outcomes has not received much attention in research on ethical decision-making (Huang et al., 2021; Manansala, Arasanmi, & Ojo, 2022).

Customer advocacy, which represents the pinnacle of acceptance in the consumer-brand relationship, entails the support or defence of a company, good, or brand from one customer to another (Walz & Celuch, 2010). According to Lawer and Knox (2006), advocacy is seen as a manifestation of market orientation, knowledge, and customer involvement, especially when it comes to the development of a close bond based on the highest level of trust, similar to a partnership. Although advocacy is the most accurate indicator of the quality of the relationship between consumers and brands, word-of-mouth (WOM) is typically thought of as informal consumer communication (Walz & Celuch, 2010). It represents a customer who is prepared to defend the brand from naysayers and critics. Proponents exhibit a strong degree of dedication to the brand, forming sentimental connections that indicate a deep level of psychological engagement. Because they feel obligated to defend their brand, they could even get into arguments with people in other brand communities (Schultz & Bailey, 2000). From the context of past research Harrigan et. al. (2020) argued that individuals' perceptions in organizations are important drivers of brand advocacy. Also, Xie et al. (2019) examined brand advocacy from the context of CSR and found that company's involvement in CSR positively impacts the customer's involvement in brand advocacy. This line of reasoning thus shows us that customer perceived ethicality makes them more informed about the company's actions being right or wrong. Thus, such individuals when perceive company brand/product to be ethical they are more likely to have a favourable opinion about the brand and indulge in advocating that product/brand/company vice versa.

According to SCT people usually learn by observing other, that may lead to change their attitude Particularly individual when perceive high ethicality of the product/brand/company are likely to take this as important environmental factor that is likely to trigger and shape their actions and behaviors. Thus, individuals perceiving organizations to be more ethical are inclined to become advocates for the brand. Based on the above arguments it is hypothesized that:

H1: Customer Perceived Ethicality has a significant positive influence on the customer advocacy.

## 2.2 Effect of Customer Perceived Ethicality on Customer Engagement

The notion of customer engagement (CE) has received increasing scholarly and practical interest in the past ten years across a range of service industries (Islam & Rahman, 2016; Kumar et al., 2019), especially in the hotel and tourist (H&T) sectors (So et al., 2016, 2021; Wei et al., 2013). Many studies have shown that CE is essential to a company's ability to succeed (Kumar et al., 2019). In comparison to non-involved customers, engaged customers are less price sensitive, actively participate in the creation of new goods and services, and are reluctant to leave providers (Hollebeek et al., 2016). Companies with a strong customer engagement experience have lower acquisition costs and higher customer lifetime value, which are critical for long-term organisational success, according to Braze (2021)'s 2021 Global Customer Engagement Review. Furthermore, nearly half of the top-ranked businesses in the Customer Engagement Index surpassed their 2020 sales targets, highlighting the competitive edge that CE offers businesses.

Marketing, organisational behaviours, consumer behaviours, and service management are just a few of the sectors where customer engagement has attracted a lot of interest (Kumar et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010; Vivek et al., 2012). As outlined by van Doorn et al. (2010), customer engagement extends beyond transactional interactions and is defined at the behavioral level, encompassing customer behavior-driven actions that are directed towards brands or companies after the point of purchase. Pansari and Kumar (2017) provide a thorough description of customer engagement, characterising it as "the mechanics of a customer's value addition to the firm, either through direct and indirect contribution," and portraying it as an outcome measure of enterprises' operations. By this definition, customer engagement is defined as an assortment of behaviours that customers engage in on social media in reaction to brand-related content. These behaviours include sharing, reacting, leaving comments, and creating user-generated content. S-D logic-informed customer engagement has been introduced in recent years, referring to "a customer's investment of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social resources during, or related to, specific brand interactions" (Hollebeek et al., 2019).

According to SCT people usually learn by observing other. Specifically, when individuals perceive high ethicality of the product/brand/company, they are likely to take this as important environmental factor which is likely to shape their actions and behaviors. Thus, resulting in increased engagement. Customers are more likely to engage with a company that they perceive as being ethical because it aligns with their own values and beliefs. This engagement can help to reinforce a positive evaluation for the customer, as they feel that they are associating with a brand or company that reflects their own values and beliefs (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). When customers consider a company is socially and morally responsible, they are more likely to engage with the company and develop a sense of loyalty. As consumers grow more aware of the moral standards of the companies they do business with, they are more inclined to support companies that share their beliefs. When customers perceive that a company is ethical, they are more likely to trust the company, feel good about doing business with the company, and recommend the company to others. This positive perception can lead to increased customer engagement. Bowden (2009) characterizes Customer Engagement (CE) as a psychological process, highlighting trust as a pivotal component within this engagement framework. Consequently, the perception of ethicality establishes an environment conducive to fortifying relationships and actively involving customers. The preceding discussion culminates in the formulation of the following hypothesis. Hypothesis 2 customer Perceived ethicality is positively related to customer engagement.

### 2.3 Customer Engagement and customer Advocacy

Customers who actively support a business through spreading good word-of-mouth (WOM), recommending it to potential customers, and standing up for it in the face of criticism are said to be engaging in advocacy. In the context of restaurant relationship marketing, it is an important outcome variable (Kang and Hyun, 2012). Advocacy is manifested when customers communicate positive WOM information about a company, brand, or product in both online and offline interactions. Customers who engage in such positive WOM play the role of advocates, contributing to the co-creation of value. According to a study on online WOM communication, recommendations have a greater impact on sales than does the volume of online WOM alone (Gopinath et al., 2014, p. 241). Online word-of-mouth (WOM) has two potential outcomes: favourable WOM can help the vendor, while unfavourable WOM can have the opposite effect. The internet has amplified customers' capacity to share both positive and negative WOM, with those disseminating positive WOM emerging as effective advocates and essentially serving as the company's premier sales representatives (Kumar et al., 2013). A restaurant's overall success is significantly impacted by the flow of both positive and negative word-of-mouth (WOM) about its offerings (Bilgihan et al., 2018). Restaurateurs can enhance their understanding of customer preferences by examining online WOM (Kwok and Yu, 2013).

According to SCT people usually learn by observing others. Specifically, when individuals have high engagement, it is likely to shape their actions and behaviors. Thus, resulting in increased advocacy. Customer engagement can take many forms, including repeat purchases, positive reviews, and social media engagement. When customers engage with a company in any of these ways, they may feel a sense of connection with the company and develop a positive attitude towards the company. This positive attitude can lead to increased customer advocacy, as customers are more likely to recommend the company to others and promote the company's products or services. The above discussion leads us to the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: Customer engagement is positively related to customer advocacy.

#### **2.4 Customer Engagement as Mediator**

Ji et al. (2022) examined customer engagement as a mediator in between social media advertising features and consumption and sharing intentions, In a recent research effort, Agyei and colleagues (2022) conducted an investigation into the influence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on customer loyalty. Additionally, they explored the potential mediating role of customer engagement in this particular relationship. Prior research has underscored the importance of customer engagement as a crucial element influencing the performance and prosperity of a firm. This is achieved by establishing connections between predictor constructs and outcome variables, such as consumer advocacy. On the other hand, customer engagement is the main indicator of a customer's emotional state as a consequence of their subjective assessment of experiences associated with consumption behaviours. Expanding upon this idea, we suggest examining how customer engagement functions as a mediator in the relationship between customer support and consumer-perceived morality.

According to SCT people usually learn by observing other, that may lead to change their attitude Particularly individual when perceive high ethicality of the product/brand/company are likely to take this as important environmental factor that is likely to trigger and shape their actions and behaviors. Thus, individuals perceiving organizations to be more ethical are inclined to the organization which is reflected through increased engagement. Also, this customer engagement is further likely to trigger customer advocacy. Because high customer engagement

reflects high involvement with the organization which is often depicted through favorable propagation if the firm by its customers. Thus, social cognitive theory in explaining the interaction between person and environmental factors justifies the customer engagement as underlying proves between customer ethicality and customer advocacy. On the basis of above arguments, the following hypotheses is suggested:

Hypothesis 4. Customer engagement mediates the relationship between customer perceived ethicality and customer advocacy.

### 2.5 Moderating Role of Self -Congruity

Self-congruity is a concept that refers to the extent to which an individual perceives a particular brand or product as consistent with his or her self-concept or identity (Sirgy, 1985). It plays a vital role in gauging the extent to which customers engage with a brand or product. On the other hand, customer perceived ethicality is a construct that assesses the degree to which customers perceive a brand or product as ethical in terms of its behavior towards society, environment, and stakeholders (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

The concept of self-congruity has undergone thorough examination in marketing literature and has been demonstrated to have a significant impact on consumer behavior (Sirgy, 1985). Self-congruity has been found to moderate the relationship between various marketing stimuli, such as advertising, packaging, and branding, and consumer behavior, including purchase intention and brand loyalty (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Sirgy, 1985).

Similarly, self-congruity has been suggested as a potential moderator between customer perceived ethicality and customer engagement (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). The argument is that customers are more inclined to interact with a brand or product that aligns with their self-concept or identity. Therefore, when customers perceive a brand or product as ethical, they are more likely to engage with it if they also perceive it as congruent with their self-concept. Several empirical studies have supported the moderating role of self-congruity in the relationship between customer perceived ethicality and customer engagement. For example, a study by Ahluwalia and Burnkrant (2004) found that self-congruity moderated the relationship between cause-related marketing (CRM) campaigns and consumer behavior. The authors found that when consumers perceived the cause as congruent with their self-concept, the effect of CRM campaigns on purchase intention was stronger. Similarly, another study by Kim and Lee (2017) found that self congruity moderated the relationship between customer perceived ethicality and customer engagement in the context of luxury fashion brands. The authors found that when customers perceived the luxury fashion brand as ethical and congruent with their self-concept, they were more likely to engage with the brand through purchase intention and word-of-mouth recommendations.

Furthermore, considering the framework of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986); primary assumption of SCT includes mental model, environment, personal characteristics and situation, they interact with each other, they basically shape up, because individual is learning in this way that through his mental model, he uses his schema. Individuals are converting and developing their cognitive evaluation. Individuals evaluate the things, see the things consciously, basically it is individual's conscious thought process which is justified in social cognitive theory. Based on cognitive evaluation, the individual develops or modifies his/her attitude and behavior. On the first level certain individual factors and environmental factors or both or only one of these, these factors have an impact on personal disposition. We have personal factors: perceived

ethicality and self-congruity, so individual personal factors and personal disposition interact with each other, due to their interplay cognitive evaluation develops in terms of presumption. This cognitive evaluation converts into favorable or unfavorable outcomes depending on overall process is based on positive factors including ethicality and presumption, due to it individual take on outcomes positive attitude and behavior. Thus, based on above arguments, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 5: Self-congruity moderates the relationship between customer perceived ethicality and customer engagement, such that this positive relationship will be stronger in case of individual's high self-congruity.

Figure 1 depicts a model whereby Customer Engagement mediates the Perceived Customer Ethicality and Customer Advocacy; and Self Congruity moderates between Perceived Customer Ethicality and Customer Engagement.

### 3. Methods

Our study aimed to investigate a mediation-moderation model, employing a quantitative hypothetico-deductive approach to validate our hypotheses. The data were collected from online customers, and the choice of this sector was made to explore relevant variables, given the pronounced significance of ethical considerations in online shopping. For the study, we adapted established scales from the marketing literature to construct the questionnaire. Responses to the variables were gathered using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from "completely disagree" to "completely agree." The self-administered questionnaires were utilized in a field survey, preceded by pilot testing with relevant customers to ensure questionnaire effectiveness.

#### 3.2 Measures

**Customer Perceived Ethicality.** The current study used six-item scale for the measurement of Customer perceived ethicality which is developed by Walsh and Beatty (2007). The sample questions are "The brand is a socially responsible brand" and "The brand seems to make an effort to create new jobs". **Self-Congruity.** The current study used four-item scale for the measurement of self-congruity which is developed by Ryu and Lee (2013) and Yen (2013). The sample questions are "Eating organic food fits well with my image." **Customer Advocacy.** In this study, a twelve-item scale was employed to measure brand advocacy which is developed by (Sweeney et al., 2020). The sample questions are ". When discussing this service provider, I urge people to consider using it" and "If others think a competing brand is better than [my brand], I am comfortable telling them why my brand is a better choice." **Customer Engagement.** The current study used six-item scale for the measurement of customer engagement which is developed by (Carvalho & Fernandes, 2018; Dwivedi, 2015). The sample questions are ". I am enthusiastic about this brand" and "I feel very active about using ABC company's services [my brand], I am comfortable telling them why my brand is a better choice."

**3.3 Participants and Procedures.** The present study employed a time-lag design to scrutinize the empirical findings of the proposed model. Data collection was conducted using a questionnaire method, targeting online consumers—individuals who have utilized a specific online platform or service. Online platforms provide a medium for customers to engage with businesses, brands, and each other. These interactions create opportunities for customers to express their opinions, voice concerns, and advocate for ethical practices. By studying online customers, researchers can observe and analyze these interactions to understand their perceived ethicality, engagement levels, and advocacy behaviors. This time-lagged study gathered data at three distinct time



intervals. Independent variables and the moderator (Customer perceived ethicality) were assessed at time-1, the mediator (customer engagement) was measured at time-2 (three weeks after time-1), and the dependent variables (customer advocacy) were evaluated at time-3 (three weeks after time-2).

During T1, 550 questionnaires were distributed, with 408 completed responses and a 74% response rate. Three weeks later, the same participants were engaged for a follow-up survey, resulting in 321 usable surveys and a 79% response rate. Subsequently, three weeks after T2, the participants were once again contacted for a third survey, capturing the study's outcome at T3. Across the three time intervals, 273 matched self-reported questionnaires were collected. After excluding 15 forms with missing data, the final sample comprised 256 usable responses, achieving an overall response rate of 46%.

Regarding gender, 70% of respondents were male, while 30% were female. The average age of the respondents was 37 years, and their average work experience stood at 12.47 years. In terms of education, 3% held a matriculation certificate, 25% had a higher secondary school certificate (12 school years), 45% graduated with a bachelor's degree, and the remaining 27% held a master's degree.

#### 4 Analysis and Results

In this study, the Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach to structural equation modeling was employed to examine the hypotheses. The PLS method is conventionally implemented in two sequential stages: first, the analysis of the measurement model; and second, the analysis of the structural model. The measurement model is established through confirmatory factor analysis, a process that evaluates the reliability and validity of the theoretical constructs under consideration. Simultaneously, the structural model is computed to scrutinize the hypothesized associations outlined in the research path model. To conduct these analyses, the study utilized the statistical software Smart PLS 3.3.2, which was developed by (Ringle et al. 2015).

In alignment with the methodology outlined by Hair et al. (2020), a thorough examination of the constructs' reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity was conducted. To ensure the reliability of items, it was verified that item loadings surpassed 0.70 and were statistically significant at the 5% level (Hair et al., 2020). The results, as illustrated in Table 1, indicate that both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (C.R.) for each construct are above 0.7 and below 0.95, reinforcing the reliability of the constructs (Hair et al., 2020). Additionally, convergent validity was established, with the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs exceeding 0.5 (Hair et al., 2020), as detailed in Table 1. In accordance with the methodology outlined by Hair et al. (2020), an evaluation of the discriminant validity of the constructs was conducted using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) of the correlations approach. The results presented in Table 2 indicate that the HTMT ratios for the constructs do not surpass 0.85 (Hair et al., 2020). This finding provides evidence in favor of the discriminant validity of the constructs, as it suggests that the shared variance between constructs is sufficiently lower than the variance within each individual construct.

In the evaluation of the measurement model, the second stage involved employing the Fornell and Larcker (1981) approach to scrutinize discriminant validity across all constructs in the model. According to this method, the square root values of each construct's Average Variance Extracted (AVE) must surpass the correlation coefficients between that specific construct and the other constructs. The findings, as presented in Table 2, demonstrate that the square root

values of all constructs' AVE values exceeded the correlation coefficients with other constructs. This observation signifies statistically satisfactory discriminant validity, indicating that each construct is more correlated with itself than with other constructs in the model. As a result, the model exhibits discriminant validity for all constructs.

Table 1: Factor Loading, Convergent Validity and Internal Consistency

| Constructs and indicators     | Convergent validity and internal consistency |      |      |             |
|-------------------------------|--|------|------|-------------|
|                               | Factor Loadings                              | AVE  | CR   | Alpha       |
| Customer Perceived Ethicality |  |      | 0.59 | 0.899 0.850 |
| CPE1                          | 0.906  |      |      |             |
| CPE2                          | 0.875  |      |      |             |
| CPE3                          | 0.653  |      |      |             |
| CPE4                          | 0.69   |      |      |             |
| CPE5                          | 0.668  |      |      |             |
| CPE6                          | 0.778  |      |      |             |
| Self-Congruity                |  | 0.67 |      | 0.889 0.939 |
| SC1                           | 0.729  |      |      |             |
| SC2                           | 0.989  |      |      |             |
| SC3                           | 0.734  |      |      |             |
| SC4                           | 0.799  |      |      |             |
| Customer Engagement           |  |      | 0.63 | 0.912 0.886 |
| CE1                           | 0.831  |      |      |             |
| CE2                           | 0.821  |      |      |             |
| CE3                           | 0.712  |      |      |             |
| CE4                           | 0.861  |      |      |             |
| CE5                           | 0.836  |      |      |             |
| CE6                           | 0.7  |      |      |             |
| Customer Advocacy             |  | 0.53 |      | 0.931 0.919 |
| CA1                           | 0.767  |      |      |             |
| CA2                           | 0.709  |      |      |             |
| CA3                           | 0.875  |      |      |             |
| CA4                           | 0.733  |      |      |             |
| CA5                           | 0.696  |      |      |             |
| CA6                           | 0.903  |      |      |             |
| CA7                           | 0.896  |      |      |             |
| CA8                           | 0.536  |      |      |             |
| CA9                           | 0.591  |      |      |             |
| CA10                          | 0.607  |      |      |             |
| CA11                          | 0.674  |      |      |             |
| CA12                          | 0.701  |      |      |             |

Table 2: Discriminant Validity

|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|--|---|---|---|---|
|--|---|---|---|---|

|                                     |       |       |       |       |
|-------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Customer Perceived Ethicality (CPE) |       |       |       | 0.768 |
| Self-Congruity                      | 0.211 |       | 0.820 |       |
| Customer Engagement                 |       | 0.538 | 0.131 | 0.796 |
| Customer Advocacy                   | 0.438 | 0.123 | 0.383 | 0.733 |

The results of the study's direct and indirect hypotheses are outlined in Table 3. The findings affirm the support for all direct study hypotheses (H1, H2, and H3). Specifically, the H1 test, investigating the direct impact of Customer Perceived Ethicality (CPE) on Customer Advocacy (CA), revealed a coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of 0.536, a t-statistic of 11.26, and a p-value of 0.000. In the H2 test, which examined the direct effect of CPE on Customer Engagement (CE), the results displayed a coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of 0.327, a t-statistic of 5.07, and a p-value of 0.000. Similarly, the H3 test, exploring the direct effect of CE on CA, yielded a coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of 0.207, a t-statistic of 3.01, and a p-value of 0.001. These statistical outcomes offer robust support for the hypothesized direct relationships in the study.

The mediating effects of Customer Engagement (CE) were examined using the non-parametric bootstrapping approach. The results reveal that Customer Perceived Ethicality (CPE) exhibited an indirect effect on Customer Advocacy (CA) through Customer Engagement (indirect effect = 0.11,  $p < 0.001$ ). In reinforcement of Hypothesis 4 (H4), the bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effects were found to be entirely above zero for customer advocacy (0.05, 0.18), providing additional statistical support for the proposed mediation.

The moderation test was conducted by introducing an interacting variable in Smart PLS, and its impact was assessed using the PLS algorithm. The analysis revealed that the interacting variable, Customer Perceived Ethicality-Self Congruity (CPE SC), exerted an effect of 0.03 on Customer Engagement (CE). The significance of this effect was further examined through bootstrapping, indicating a p-value of less than 0.05 and a t-value of 1.81. In PLS, a t-value greater than 1.64 in a one-tail test is considered significant. Thus, the findings support Hypothesis 5, affirming the acceptability of the hypothesis regarding the moderation effect.

Table 3. Unstandardized Coefficients of Path Models.

|   | Customer engagement                 |         |       | Customer advocacy |         |       |
|---|-------------------------------------|---------|-------|-------------------|---------|-------|
|   | B                                   | t-value | P     | B                 | t-value | P     |
| CPE   | 0.536                               | 11.26   | 0.000 | 0.327             | 5.07    | 0.000 |
| Customer Engagement   |                                     |         |       |                   | 0.207   | 3.01  |
| CPE * Self-Congruity  | 0.134                               | 1.89    | 0.029 |                   |         | 0.001 |
| Indirect and conditional indirect effect                      |                                     |         |       |                   |         |       |
| CPE $\square$ Customer engagement $\square$ Customer advocacy | 0.11* [ t value = 2.78; 0.05, 0.18] |         |       |                   |         |       |
| CPE * Self-congruity $\square$ Customer engagement            | 0.03* [ t value = 1.81; 0.01, 0.05] |         |       |                   |         |       |

Note: N= 256

Figure 2: PLS Path Modelling

Figure 3: Interaction Plot of CPE and Self-Congruity on Customer Engagement

### 5. Discussion

This research paper aimed to fill the gap in the existing literature by providing empirical evidence on consumers' ethical perceptions. As one of the critical stakeholders of a business, customers tend to evaluate a firm based on its ethical responsibilities (Huang, Wei & Ang 2021). The study

investigated the influence of customers' ethical perceptions on consumer advocacy, mediated by customer engagement. The results revealed that perceived ethicality positively affected customer engagement, consistent with earlier studies suggesting that such perceptions foster emotional attachment and a sense of belongingness to the company. Customers perceive the firm as a trustworthy partner, leading to positive attitudes towards it (Gong et al., 2023). Customer engagement plays a crucial role in creating advocacy, which is highly valuable for businesses as these customers are the most effective brand promoters and defenders.

The outcomes of our research have significant implications for businesses, particularly those in the online shopping customers engagement and service industries. Customer ethical perception is a crucial strategic tool that can lead to positive results for customers, such as advocacy and engagement. This practice, known as CE, is already widely accepted by practitioners. In today's market, where competition is intense, technology is rapidly advancing, and social media is ubiquitous, relationship marketing is necessary to generate value. CE is linked to revenue growth, as stated by (Kumar & Pensari (2016). Therefore, marketers are eager to discover ways to engage customers. One approach is to cultivate an ethical image that motivates customers to participate in marketing activities (Harmeling et al., 2017). We propose that companies can foster engagement by establishing a reputation for ethical conduct. When companies' ethical practices align with customers' values, customers are more likely to engage with the company. Initiatives that appeal to customers' emotions are particularly effective in inducing engagement. Thus, CSR initiatives that are responsible for customer engagement are linked to ethical practices that match customers' personalities, and they are more beneficial for businesses.

### 5.1 Limitations

Our findings offer valuable insights into the field of literature on customer perceived ethicality. Nonetheless, certain limitations in our study present opportunities for future research. The study was specifically conducted within the online shopping industry, and for increased applicability, future investigations could integrate data from various industries and products to examine how customers respond to perceived ethicality. While our study focused on the positive impact of Customer Perceived Ethicality (CPE) on Customer Engagement (CE), the potential effects of negative attributions of CPE on CE remain unexplored and warrant further exploration. Additionally, although we treated CPE as a unified construct, existing literature suggests its multidimensional nature. It may be beneficial to explore whether specific dimensions of CPE (e.g., environmental and social aspects) exert distinct influences on CE. Investigating the moderating roles of factors not addressed in our study, such as product quality, industry, and brand value, could be essential for understanding their impact on CE. The model assumes that perceived ethicality causes customer engagement, which in turn causes customer advocacy. However, causality cannot be definitively established using time-lag data. Future research could use longitudinal or experimental designs to establish causality more conclusively. The model does not consider the potential influence of other variables that may impact customer advocacy, such as customer satisfaction or loyalty. Future research could incorporate additional variables to create a more comprehensive model of customer advocacy. Moreover, it's important to highlight that our study had a sample size of 256 respondents. To enhance the strength and reliability of future research, expanding the sample size should be considered.

### 5.2 Conclusions

In this study, we employed a comprehensive approach to investigate the impact of customer engagement, covering cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Our findings reveal a significant correlation between consumer perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and customer engagement, ultimately resulting in the development of Customer Advocacy (CA). The enhancement of CA is linked with Customer Perceived Ethicality (CPE), underscoring the pivotal role of customer engagement in nurturing CA. CA, identified as a substantial outcome of customer engagement, brings significant benefits to businesses as customers' voluntary actions contribute to the company's long-term sustainability. Our results are consistent with prior research, emphasizing that CPE fosters emotional attachment and a sense of belonging among customers, thereby cultivating a positive relationship with the business. We made a valuable contribution to the literature by investigating ethical posturing within the online shopping customer involvement industry, a pivotal sector in the global economy. The proposed model delves into the intricate connections among customers' perceptions of ethicality, customer engagement, and customer advocacy. Additionally, we enhance theoretical understanding by shedding light on the mechanisms underlying these relationships through an analytical mediation approach. To our knowledge, limited studies have explored the central role of customer engagement in the interplay between customers' perceived ethicality of a online shopping brands and the equity of customer advocacy. Our findings suggest that the brand those involve in online shopping could enhance customer service quality experiences, indirectly shaping customers' perceptions of their brand and ultimately cultivating brand advocates.

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