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The fast food industry, website characteristics, and the purchase intention in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Background: The marketing value of websites should be a genuine concern for businesses with an online presence. Numerous researchers have articulated beneficial website characteristics for some industries. However, in a developing economy context, limited research has been done on understanding website characteristics associated with the fast food industry.

Purpose of the study: The objective of this study was to empirically investigate how a useful, convenient, high-quality, and interactive website that offers good service can influence the purchase intention for fast food.

Method: Study participants were selected using the convenience sampling method. Approximately 202 students from a South African university in Gauteng participated in the study. The study used Structural Equation Modelling for data analysis, while the SPSS 25 and AMOS 28 statistical packages were utilised for data analysis.

Results: The outcomes reflect that some website characteristics positively impact fast food purchase intentions.

Implications: By validating the proposed research model, the study introduces new avenues for further academic scrutiny to investigate other characteristics that positively or negatively influence fast food purchase intentions. This also creates various opportunities for other industries that use the Internet as part of their business model. These outcomes should assist managers in creatively applying resources to garner a competitive edge.

Keywords

Ease of use; Interactive; Useful; Website characteristics; Website quality; Website service.

JEL classification: M31; M37; 018; O35

1. INTRODUCTION

Food serves as an intrinsic need for human beings (Ramli *et al*., 2021), supporting people's health and physical growth (Dor *et al.,* 2022). However, whenever the topic of food is raised, issues concerning the sustainability of food supply (Adam et *al.,* 2021; Krishnan *et al.,* 2020), health implications of food consumption (Rai *et al.,* 2019), and the inequitable distribution of food (D'Odorico *et al*., 2019; Roy *et al.,* 2019) also arise. Valid as these and many other concerns are, they also risk overshadowing the study of a subsector of the industry, such as the fast food industry (FFI). Generally speaking, there has been a substantial shift toward fast food (FF) consumption among young consumers, especially in developing countries (Khalid *et al.,* 2019), resulting in the industry's tremendous growth (Xue *et al.,* 2021). Accordingly, young people are more inclined to consume FF rather than a traditional meal (Ramli *et al.,* 2021). This trend can be attributed to the fact that FF is easily accessible, affordable, and attractive, whilst affording young people a degree of autonomy and agency (Shahzad *et al.,* 2022). Moreover, FF offers variety, convenience, and availability (Ehsan, 2012) and is compatible with consumers' tastes and lifestyle preferences (Akbay *et al.,* 2007). Burningham and Ven (2020) posited that the low price of FF is one of the key attractions for young people. A recent study by Shahzad *et al.* (2022) confirmed the growth in FF popularity. According to Zion Market Research (2017), the global FF market is estimated to be worth USD 900 billion by 2026.

Furthermore, the growth in FF consumption is also associated with an environment characterised by the advancement of technology-based business models (Phang *et al.,* 2021) and, more particularly, the increased use of the Internet influencing purchase decisions (Reinartz *et al.,* 2019). Hence, the role of Internet technology can no longer be ignored (Haque & Alam, 2021). Overall, this new technology has fostered new consumer habits and facilitated increased online shopping activities (Vu, 2021). More specifically, the advent of COVID-19 restricted mobility, which constrained consumers' previously unlimited ability to visit food retail outlets (Maredia *et al.,* 2022). Subsequently, Internet technology, which mitigated the threat of COVID-19 transmission, became a necessity (He *et al.,* 2021). Also, the Internet has become an indispensable platform for communication and business transactions, because online purchasing is now a viable option (Liao *et al.,* 2021). In short, people are now more reliant on Internet technology, which has transformed their shopping and consumption behaviour, prompting their increased preference to remotely access information and minimise interacting with others (Alfat *et al.,* 2021). However, this "new normal" paradigm created by the advent of COVID-19, and the development of telecommunications technology have created diverse new possibilities. Thus, fast food organisations now need to consider

technology as a new space for competition. To illustrate the point, Euromonitor International (2019) argued that technology will be a catalyst for change in the food service sector in ASEAN countries. It can be concluded that making a food purchase an enjoyable experience by using interactive technology could provide a competitive advantage (Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Phang *et al.,* 2021), which can prompt high traffic volumes and increased sales (Thaichon et al., 2019; Patel *et al.*, 2020). This advantage can be realised by introducing a well-developed website because many people use websites to make purchase decisions (Ahmed & Shaker, 2021).

Several features of well-developed websites that can assist organisations in achieving these advantages have been advanced for diverse industries. Examples of those are interactive, consistent web interfaces that target changing user behaviours and optimise customer experiences (Nkwo *et al.,* 2018; Nkwo & Orji, 2021). Nkwo & Orji (2021) further emphasised that the website should be directed towards increasing traffic or customer engagement to improve sales and the business-user interface. Nguyen (2022) opined that the message should actively attempt to change customer attitudes, which is the central goal of many marketing communications.

Obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a significant growth in the fast food industry, which was stimulated by technology. This situation provoked Chang *et al.* (2016) and Boardman and McCormick (2021) to conduct further research in an attempt to investigate what, as well as how, website characteristics affect consumers' purchase intention (PI) and its relevance. Some of the website characteristics that are likely to influence customers' PI are as follows: it should be interactive (Nasir *et al.,* 2021; Villasana *et al.,* 2020), useful (Carlos *et al.*, 2021), and of excellent quality (Akgül, 2021; Meade & Dreyer, 2021). However, the effectiveness of these factors was investigated individually (not as a set) and in contexts outside the FFI sector (see Amin *et al.,* 2021; Kalia & Paul, 2021).

Furthermore, variables that influence fast-food purchasing decisions in developing countries remain underexplored (Xue *et al.,* 2021); thus, there is a dearth of literature regarding ethnocentric consumer behaviour in developing economies (Mukucha *et al.*, (2021). Academics generally concur that marketing research context matters (Irshaidat, 2022); therefore, the same logic can be applied to developing and developed countries' contexts (Malik *et al.,* 2017). That said, developed and developing countries differ in their technological knowledge levels (Wang *et al.,* 2019), psychological factors (Kian *et al.,* 2018), and consumption behaviour (Mahapatra & Irfan, 2021; Patwa *et al.,* 2021). Also, research denotes that cultures vary when it comes to their persuasive features preference (Oyibo, 2021). In other words, persuasive features that are effective for one group of users may not be appropriate for another (Nkwo & Orji, 2021). Nkwo and Orji (2021) further conveyed that many

studies do not delve deep enough to comprehend how a set of persuasive factors identified elsewhere would fare in the African context.

For the present study, the researchers identified a limited number of studies that pinpoint website characteristics that positively influence consumers' purchase intention for FF in South Africa. It, therefore, attempts to fill these gaps by exploring the following: how perceived ease of use (PEOU); perceived usefulness (PU); website service factors (SF); website interactivity (INTV); and website service quality (WQ) affect customers' fast food purchase intention within the South African context. This study utilised the technology acceptance model (TAM) and persuasive technology theory (PTT) to validate the proposed model. It further proposes a comprehensive framework that links website characteristics with purchase intention. To the authors' knowledge, no dedicated study has comprehensively investigated this area. Therefore, our findings should provide valuable insight to both academicians and practitioners to plan for proper website strategies that increase customer engagement and purchase intentions. This extends the explanatory power of the two theories for online business operations. More importantly, clear and useful measurements that capture website performance will enable managers to improve strategies and operations. The results will prove beneficial for Internet retailers and serve as guidelines to cater to and target their customers more accurately. Moreover, it will assist them in assessing website performance, allocating resources, and evaluating various impacts on their business profitability. Palazzo *et al.* (2021) confirmed that the FFI stands to benefit from a proper website creation strategy. These benefits would also include messages that influence customers' purchase intention (Pérez-Villarreal *et al.,* 2019).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical foundation

This research synergistically combined two theories (PTT and TAM), which, individually, would not sufficiently have been able to clarify the intention to purchase FF using Internet technology (Kamal *et al.*, 2020). The PTT explains how organisations employ intentional communication to encourage customers to adopt desired behaviours (Nkwo & Orji, 2021). According to PTT, communication should be clear, persuasive, and directed to instil cognitive and emotional changes (Torning & Oinas-Kukkonen, 2009) without using coercion (Pintar & Erjavec, 2021; Orji & Moffat, 2018). This technology-mediated persuasion model has three elements: the intent (persuader and required change), event (user context and technology context), and strategy (message and routing) (Torning & Oinas-Kukkonen, 2009). Moreover, this theory is well suited to the design of website features that communicate messages that are coherent,

data-based, and logical (Guerrero & Lindgren, 2021; Pintar & Erjavec, 2021). The objective in a persuasive technology context is the acceptance of the technology and utility when purchase decisions are finalised. For the present study, this theory indirectly addresses the service level (SF) perceptions, website interactivity (INTV), and the quality (WQ) of websites that are designed to persuade customers to purchase (PI) fast food.

The choice of an individual to voluntarily welcome new technology is known as technology acceptance (Kamal *et al.,* 2020). For purposes of the present study, the PPT is supplemented by the technology acceptance model (TAM), the theory that represents the most established and significant foundation of technology acceptance (Carter & Bélanger, 2005). According to Chau and Hu (2002), this theory consists of two primary constructs: perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease (PEOU), which are the constructs under consideration in this study. Together, these two theories adequately address how websites should be designed for easy adoption while crafting them to be persuasive with regard to influencing purchase decisions.

2.2 Overview of the empirical studies

In the FF context and in line with sound academic practice, this study identified two categories of variables: independent variables (website characteristics of PEOU, PU, WQ, SF, INTV) and the dependent variable, which is PI (Inoni, 2021). In this subsection, constructs of interest are operationalised, and the correlations between them are hypothesised. The literature review is covered in the following sequence: fast food, website characteristics, and purchase intention. The hypotheses were developed predicated on the relationships between website characteristics and online fast food purchase intention.

2.2.1 Fast food (FF)

Fast food is often defined in diverse ways, guided by the overall context of the study. Moreover, it is sometimes described as inexpensive and simple food that is easily accessible (Purnamasar & Rozak, 2022). Some authors perceive FF as something ready-to-eat, while others view it as an out-of-home type of food (Janssen *et al.,* 2018), which is usually made to order (Jaworowska *et al.*, 2014). Fleischhacker *et al.* (2011) described FF as a convenient and inexpensive food prepared using assembly line technology and served over the counter, whilst Bahauddin *et al.* (2020) and Jaworowska *et al.* (2014) viewed FF as ready-to-eat meals associated with eating out. Huang *et al.* (2021) defined fast food as food offered by establishments that provide food service where patrons generally order or select items and pay before eating. This study adopts all the above characteristics of FF, but also provides examples of suppliers, such as McDonald's, Domino's Pizza, Subway, Burger King, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Taco Bell (Richardson *et al.,* 2011; Bauer *et al.,* 2012).

Additionally, the mode of delivery via vending machines, convenience stores, fast food outlets, takeaway food outlets, coffee shops, and schools helps provide the operational definition relevant to this study (Nago *et al.*, 2014; Janssen *et al.,* 2018).

The steady global market growth of FF has established it as the most emerging food service in the world (Xiao *et al.,* 2017; Becker *et al.,* 2018. However, numerous factors have accelerated this upward trajectory, such as a growing global population, increasing urbanisation, lifestyle changes (Inoni, 2021), the rising fast food culture amongst youngsters Mina *et al.,* (2020), time constraints (Husain & Ashkanani, 2020), and convenience (Insight, 2018; da Silva *et al.,* 2021). In an SA context, fast food is a big business that contributes to extensive franchise turnovers (Mackay *et al.,* 2013; Thomas & Eddy, 2018). However, this growth coincides with the expansion of the technology-powered information environment, increased fast food availability, and the cumulative purchasing power of consumers (Gal & Simonson, 2021).

Accordingly, within this environment, consumer decisions related to food have become both critical and complex (Junejo *et al.,* 2022). The majority of fast food consumers consist of the younger generation, who gravitate to FF outlets using the Internet and social media (Jayasinghe *et al.,* 2020). These communication platforms are interactive and utilised by many young people. Due to the interactive nature (in posts, links, conversations, hashtags, and other engagement elements) of these platforms, they have become immensely persuasive, especially among the younger generation (da Silva *et al.,* 2021). Therefore, the nature of FF, growth trends, and the market segment that increasingly consumes fast food have necessitated a discussion regarding the online purchasing of fast food.

2.2.2 Website characteristics

A website is a basic element of conducting business online, which enables different functionalities that provide an alternative venue for the buying and selling of goods and services (Cyberchimps, 2020; Setiawati *et al.,* 2021). Hence, in the current environment, a website represents the main infrastructure for conducting online transactions (Shayganmehr & Montazer, 2021). The characteristics of these websites should adequately address the requirements and perceptions of customers. Rosário and Raimundo (2021) and Shayganmehr and Montazer (2021) provided valuable characteristics of a good website, which include suitable information, quality, usability, accessibility, and service level perceptions. Rosário and Raimundo (2021) further stipulated that a good website should help organisations accurately assess customer requirements and select strategies that align with their expectations.

Abdullah *et al.* (2021) proffered that, by using websites, customers can purchase and easily track goods, make online payments, and recommend products. Websites can also enhance a business' standing within the marketplace and help vendors build a reputation by allowing customers to submit their feedback and reviews relevant to companies' products and/or services (Vu, 2021). This can be facilitated by the nature of websites that assist businesses in progressively updating and optimising their products and services (Vu, 2021). Moreover, websites offer user-friendly interaction interfaces and facilities that can promote customer engagement, social collaboration, and ease of access to potential users Nkwo & Orji, 2021). This is made possible by the interactive nature of websites (Nkwo & Orji, 2021). However, the point remains that, in order to design websites effectively, retailers must first understand consumer behaviour and the various stimuli required to capture customers' attention via their website (Boardman & McCormick, 2021).

2.2.3 Online purchase intention

Researching consumer intention entails focusing on a person's view related to their execution of a particular behaviour (Piyanath & Suthawan, 2013). This is an acceptable method used to better comprehend the attitudes and feelings of customers toward a potential purchasing decision (Moghavvemi *et al.,* 2015). Bilal *et al.* (2021) defined behavioural intention toward a product or service as a subjective judgment of how customers will behave in the future. Analysts have said that consumers' positive reasons for selecting an item or brand can be equated with purchasing intentions (Vuong & Giao, 2020), a construct that is embedded within a behavioural intention (Zhang & Ahmad, 2021). That said, academics define purchase intention differently. According to Blackwell *et al*. (2001), the intention to purchase represents what consumers believe they will buy to satisfy their needs and wants in the future. More specifically, it is the desire to purchase a particular product or service within a given or predetermined period of time (Xue *et al.,* 2021). Both Abrar *et al.* (2019) and Xue *et al.* (2021) posited purchasing intentions as the buying decision of an object or administration for a company based on the study of the specific components of the decision for acquisition.

There are enormous benefits for customers' PI. According to studies by Pavlou (2003), as well as Kim and Lennon (2008), PI can be a significant predictor of actual online shopping. This can be viewed as a psychological barometer of consumers buying products to fulfil their necessary needs and predict their consuming behaviours (Herr *et al.,* 1991; Bilal *et al.,* 2021). PI is also one of the fundamental elements used to predict customer buying patterns (Kian *et al.,* 2018; Xue *et al.,* 2021). For this and many other reasons, in order for technology-based organisations to reach purchase targets, they must first ensure that their customers have the intention to purchase online (Lee *et al.,* 2016; Naseri *et al.,* 2021). The purchasing intentions

of consumers are often dependent upon business organisations' marketing strategy, customers' attitudes, and how much the organisations care about their business dealings (Wong & Tang, 2008). It is, therefore, prudent for companies' strategies to embrace proactive measures that will ensure a positive customer view of their company, products, and services (Naseri *et al.,* 2021).

2.2.4 Website characteristics and fast food purchase intention in South Africa

The website characteristics that are of paramount interest include the following: ease of use; usefulness; interactiveness; good quality; and service level perceptions.

2.2.5 Website ease of use, usefulness, and online fast food purchase intention

Not all websites are easy to understand (Cheng *et al*., 2019) and use (Talbot & Briggs, 2022). Hence, this may result in such websites being perceived as useless to some customers. A website is only useful if it can perform the task according to the client's needs (Bhattacherjee, 2001; Kian *et al*., 2018). Website usefulness, therefore, alludes to customers' recognition that utilising the website as a shopping medium provides a better shopping experience, and such recognition impacts buyers' attitudes and intentions to shop online (Perea y Monsuwé *et al*., 2004; Kian *et al*., 2018). It relies upon potential shoppers' assumptions regarding how this innovation can enhance and impact their lives for the better (Maneechot & Chirapanda, 2013; Piyanath & Suthawan, 2013). Accordingly, TAM suggests that a website that is easy to navigate implies usefulness (Bravo *et al*., 2021). In line with TAM suggestions, some technologies are not easy to use (Unwin *et al*., 2021) and are, therefore, unlikely to be useful (Bravo *et al*., 2021). For business organisations, perceived usefulness is crucial since an organisation is evaluated by its website (Charlesworth, 2014; Ye *et al*., 2019). A company's website represents its identity, facilitates communication with its customers, and affects its' online visibility (Jevremović *et al*., 2022). Thus, perceived usefulness predicts website usage and intention to transact (Kian *et al*., 2018). One of the profitable connections with customers is predicated on the use of websites (Ye *et al*., 2019; Jevremović *et al*., 2022). Numerous studies have demonstrated a positive link between perceived website usefulness and purchase intention (Ventre & Kolbe, 2020; Kripesh *et al*., 2020; Harrigan *et al*., 2021). Website information usefulness positively affects information adoption, which positively influences consumers' purchase intention (Yang *et al*., 2023). Consequently, with so many scholars in agreement concerning the importance of technology, PEOU, and PU, this study offers the first two hypotheses in the context of the South African fast-food market:

H1: *An easy-to-use website has a positive impact on the intention to purchase fast food in South Africa:* ***(PEOU-PI)***

H2: *A website perceived as useful positively influences purchase intention for fast food in South Africa:* ***(PU-PI)***

2.2.6 Website interactivity and online fast food purchase intention

Yang and Shen (2018) opined that a consistent definition of 'website interactivity' and its' conceptualisation is lacking. Brüggen *et al.* (2019) stated that interactivity is the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real-time. A useful website should, therefore, provide a platform for reciprocal communication between the following: companies and users, the system and users, or users and users. This communication should be responsive (Song & Zinkhan, 2008), provided in a timely manner (McMillan & Hwang, 2002), and offer synchronous two-way communication (Liu & Shrum, 2002; Brüggen *et al.,* 2019). Simply put, a website can be considered interactive when it allows for two-way communication (Liu & Shrum, 2002).

Furthermore, an interactive website provides an ideal basis for effective consumer-vendor dialogue (Jevremović *et al.,* 2022). This interactive environment increases information processing, encourages customer involvement, and improves attitudes and behavioural intentions (Sicilia *et al.*, 2005; Song & Zinkhan, 2008). Due to its ability to enhance consumers' perceptions and responses to an organisation's website (Jevremović *et al.,* 2022), two-way communication enables users to notice that the brand satisfies their needs as users, which leads to an unforgettable site usage experience (Ye *et al.,* 2019). According to Ye *et al.* (2019), if a website is interactive, it yields positive effects on brand experience and choices. It can, therefore, be stated that an interactive website can effectually shape attitudes and purchase intentions (Brüggen *et al.,* 2019). Islam *et al.* (2021) boldly affirmed that an interactive website enhances the website's perceived usefulness and purchasing intentions. After reflecting on the literature, this research hypothesises that an interactive website will positively impact FF purchase intention in South Africa.

H3: *An interactive website has a positive influence on the fast food purchase intention in South Africa:* ***(INT-PI)***

2.2.7 Website service perceptions and online fast food purchases

User interface elements are important and should be included on a website in order to positively affect perceptions of service quality (Kim *et al.,* 2021). However, as is common among important constructs, organisations and customers perceive good service levels differently. Agag and El-Masry (2017) defined it as consumers' perceptions about responsiveness, empathy, and assurance. Wu and Kim (2022) viewed a good service website as one that is interactive, controllable, and provides users with a feeling of connectedness and

responsiveness. Belanche *et al.* (2021) stated that a good service website offers accurate technical functionality. According to Chan *et al.* (2021), a good quality website is transparent and evokes perceptions of core-service accessibility, privacy protection, security protection, user-support, and support services personalisation capability. To maintain a good service level perception a website should replace outdated information and also present sufficient information (Chan *et al.,* 2021). This type of website offers value to customers (Lele & Shaw, 2021). Additionally, perceived good value leads to loyalty intentions (Nayak *et al.,* 2021). Based on the enormous amount of literature supporting the importance of website quality, this research proposes that:

> ***H4:*** *A good service website has a positive influence on the purchase intention for fast food in South Africa:* ***(WQ-PI)***

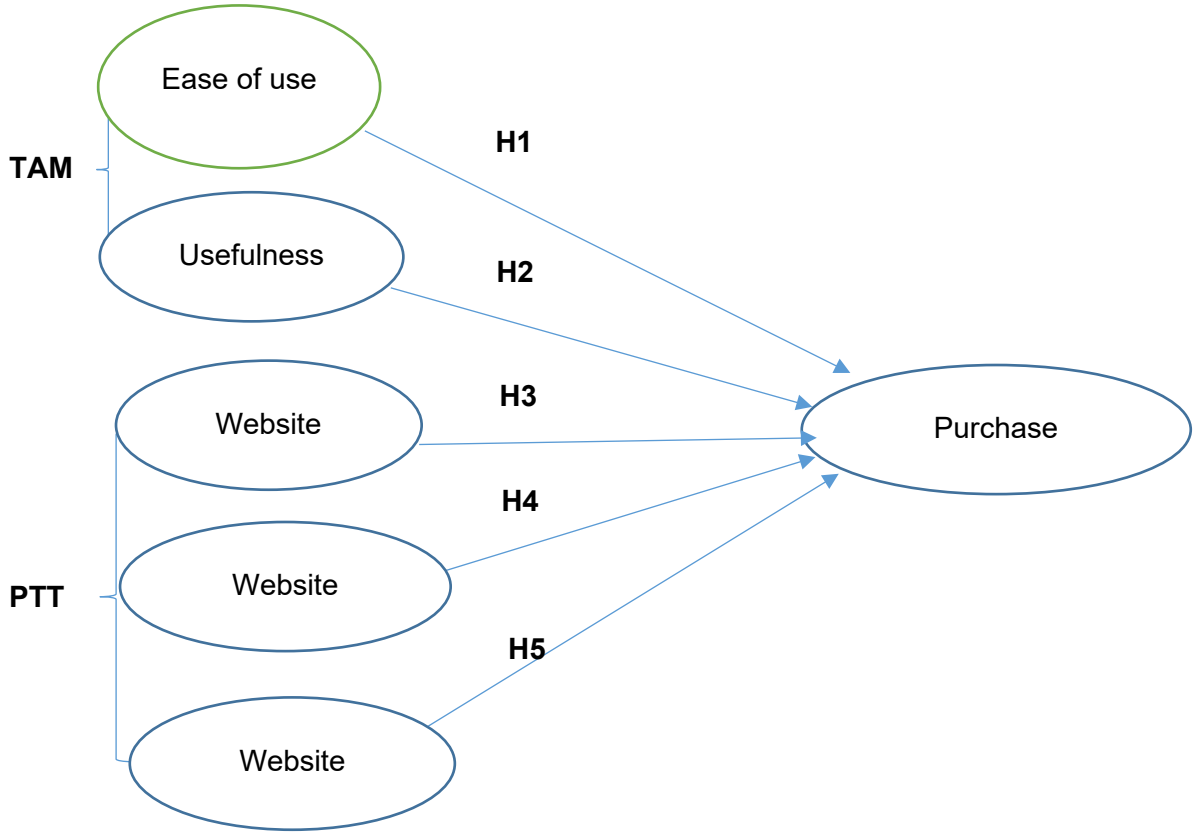
2.2.8 Website quality and online fast food purchasing intentions

Websites, which serve as a conduit for consumer and business communication, are key to a firm's success (Kleinlercher *et al.,* 2018). As the virtual face of the organisation (Sharma *et al.,* (2022), and a critical success factor for organisations (Król & Zdonek, 2021), the quality perceptions of a website become crucial. Agag and El-Masry (2017) defined customers' perceived quality as consumers' perceptions involving responsiveness, empathy, and assurance. Lien *et al.* (2017) extended the definition by adding environmental quality, interaction quality, and outcome quality as the three dimensions of perceived quality. For the purposes of this study, quality perceptions will be limited to website quality only. Website quality has several indicators: performance (Dickinger & Stangl, 2013; Król & Zdonek, 2021); relevance; ease of navigation around the site; usability; accessibility; mobile-friendliness (Pongrac & Zorica, 2021); and personalisation to create a good first impression (Martínez-González & Álvarez-Albelo, 2021). Overall, organisations utilise websites to enhance customer experience and create positive service quality perceptions, because a positive website quality perception is one of the most crucial elements of trust in online shopping (Hsu *et al.,* 2018; Al-dweeri *et al.,* 2019). Qalati *et al.* (2021) further confirmed a positive association between website quality and trust when it comes to online retailing. Its impact on trust affects the acceptance of online shopping (Ibrahim *et al.,* 2019). Based on the importance of customer trust and acceptance of online shopping, most organisations' online selling platforms attempt to gain customer trust and build long-term relationships by providing high-quality services (Shafiee & Bazargan, 2018). This can attract potential customers (Qalati *et al.,* 2021), encourage first-time purchases, retain repeat purchases, and generate more revenue (King *et al.,* 2016; Kalia & Paul, 2021). Website quality plays a pivotal role in differentiating businesses with low-quality sites (Bilkova & Kopackova, 2013). However, it should be noted that

customers' perceived quality is based on an evaluative judgment of a transaction (Rajput & Gahfoor, 2020). For the FF industry in South Africa, we, therefore, hypothesise that:

> ***H5:*** *A good quality website has a positive influence on the purchase intention for fast food in South Africa:* ***(SF-PI)*** *The hypotheses (H1-H5) are diagrammatically represented by the conceptual model in* ***Figure 1****.*

Figure 1: Proposed conceptual model



3. METHODOLOGY

The researchers used a hypothetico-deductive model to verify the explanatory association between the constructs in the hypotheses. Following sound academic practice when using a hypothetico-deductive model, a 'positivist' approach was applied (Park *et al*., 2020). According to Washika *et al.* (2021), this approach is both observable and measurable. The chosen population consisted of Generation Y and Generation Z at a Johannesburg university, people who recently used websites to decide on fast food purchases. Furthermore, it was determined that these people are quite comfortable using technology, making them ideally suitable for this study (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Due to its simplicity and economical consideration, the convenience sampling method was utilised to distribute the questionnaire, as recommended by Bhat (2019). A sample size of 202 was achieved, which was considered adequate based

on the number of relationships hypothesised and the SEM quantitative analysis requirements (Kyriazos, 2018). Bhattacherjee (2012) stated that a survey is best suited for studies that have people as the unit of analysis. In line with that recommendation, this study, therefore, employed a survey approach. Following Altulaihan et al. (2023), the research instrument of this study was a purposely designed online questionnaire. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire adopted from existing literature (Shahzad *et al.,* 2022).

The research questions contained two parts: Part one contained questions about users' personal information, which sought to uncover users' demographic information and general experiences with e-commerce (specifically those who have accessed the Jumia platform). Part two contained questions about customers' user experiences while using fast food websites and deciding on whether to make a purchase. Following academic practice, the latent constructs of PEOU, PU, SF, INTV, WQ, and PI were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree"; 5 = "strongly agree") to record the responses (Nkwo & Orji, 2021; Prasetyo *et al.,* 2021). The sources for these construct indicators were gleaned from the literature review. Mao (2010), Kamalul Ariffin *et al.* (2018), and Oghazi *et al.* (2018) contributed an enormous portion of the construct indicators for the study.

To ensure that the participants understood the purpose of the data collection, respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, as recommended by other scholars (Malik *et al.*, 2017). An introductory letter was used to achieve that objective. They were also informed that their answers would remain anonymous and that their privacy would be protected. The collected data were stored in a password-protected computer to control access for other users. Prior to the data being collected, the researchers also obtained an ethics clearance certificate from a Johannesburg-based university; the protocol number is H21/05/41.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

In line with the quantitative approach requirements, the survey data were statistically analysed. The analysis followed the following order: descriptives; measurement model accuracy assessment; model fitness tests; and hypotheses testing. The descriptive statistics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Information		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	139	68.8
	Female	59	29.2
	Prefer not to say	4	2
Age	18-25	122	60.4
	26-35	36	17.8
	35 and older	44	21.8
Access to the Internet	Yes	201	99.5
	No	1	0.5

Source: Own compilation

According to Table 1, most of the respondents were males at 68.8%. The female respondents represented 29%, and those who preferred not to say accounted for 2%. The demographic profiles seem to correspond well with the university population numbers of more females than males, as reflected in the gender fact sheet of the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (dhet.org.za). On the age groupings, the majority of the participants fell under Generation Z (18-25 years), followed by Generation Y (26-35 years). Of those participants, about 99.5% had access to the Internet and websites. Judging from the data collected using the online approach, it can be inferred that all the respondents had some access to these communication technologies. A consumer would not be able to purchase goods online without access to the Internet.

Before the assessment of the structural model, the measurement model's accuracy had to be verified (Qalati *et al.,* 2021). This was achieved by assessing the reliability and validity of the model and model fitness (Nhlabathi *et al.,* 2022).

The measurement model accuracy discussion is based on the information from Table 2.

Table 2: Measurement model accuracy results

Construct	Number	Values		Cronbach-alpha	Item to total loadings	Factor loadings
Perceived ease of use	1 3 4 5	Mean 4.48 4.53 4.71 4.72	Standard deviation 0.74 0.71 0.54 0.53	0.83	0.55 0.65 0.79 0.74	0.57 0.70 0.92 0.88
Perceived usefulness		4.40 4.29 3.94 4.00 4.20	0.72 0.74 0.92 1.07 0.86	0.79	0.52 0.62 0.60 0.58 0.53	0.68 0.72 0.78 0.52 0.49
Interactivity		3.95 3.73 4.25 4.05 3.21	1.01 1.06 0.82 1.05 1.10	0.75	0.49 0.55 0.60 0.58 0.33	0.59 0.68 0.73 0.65 0.44
Website quality		4,15 4.50 4.54 3.70 4.46	0.89 0.60 0.63 1.11 0.73	0.73	0.40 0.59 0.60 0.27 0.50	0.55 0.78 0.83 0.32 0.61
Service factor perceptions		4.49 3.99 4.49 3.42 4.49	0.73 0.88 0.62 1.04 0.68	0.67	0.43 0.42 0.47 0.32 0.38	0.64 0.48 0.66 0.36 0.55
Purchase intention		4.17 4.14 4.42 4.51 3.8 4.22 4.19 3.98 4.15	0.75 0.68 0.67 1.02 0.90 0.79 0.75 0.82 0.78	0.87	0.46 0.61 0.52 0.50 0.53 0.61 0.72 0.67 0.57 0.64	0.47 0.61 0.53 0.53 0.53 0.65 0.79 0.70 0.63 0.74

Source: Own compilation

For the reliability of the model, the item-to-total correlation coefficient (ITT), and Cronbach-alpha values were used. ITT is the correlation between any item and the total scores without that item (Flom, 2022). If the ITT value is greater than 0.3, a good correlation is confirmed. Any item whose ITT value is below 0.3 should be removed (Hajjar, 2018). Using this logic, some items were discarded before the final model was confirmed. Also, to further confirm

reliability, the Cronbach-alpha should be greater than 0.6 (Nasution *et al*., 2019; Hair *et al.,* 2020). The values for both ITT and the Cronbach-alpha in Table 2 above confirm the reliability of the model.

An additional prerequisite for measuring model analysis is assessing the validity of the instrument (Mohajan, 2017). The validity of the model deals with the extent to which the instrument measures what it intends to assess (Mohajan, 2017). For the present study, both the convergent and discriminant validities were checked. To achieve that, factor loadings (to measure convergent validity) and the correlation matrix (to measure discriminant validity) were used. The factor loadings for the study are listed in Table 2. According to Cho and Sagynov (2015), factor loadings of 0.5 are acceptable.

The correlation matrix results are displayed in Table 3.

Discriminant validity was confirmed because the values obtained on the inter-construct correlation matrix were below 0.90 (Henseler *et al.,* 2015).

Table 3: Inter-correlation matrix analysis results.

	PEOU	PU	SF	INTAV	WQ	PI
PEOU	1.00					
PU	0.32	1.00				
SF	0.251	0.630	1.00			
INTAV	0.250	0.357	0.474	1.00		
WQ	0.434	0.415	0.578	0.523	1.00	
PI	0.251	0.592	0.685	0.456	0.640	1.00

Source: Own compilation

The model fit results reflect how well the proposed model fits the data (Garnier-Villarreal & Jorgensen, 2020). Mukucha and Jaravaza (2021) recommended that goodness-of-fit should be assessed by using at least one index from the absolute fit, incremental fit, and parsimonious fit. Van Laar and Braeken (2022) proffered the use of Chi-squared, CFI, and RMSEA. This study adopted the last-mentioned approach. The values are all depicted in Table 4.

Table 4: Model fitness analysis results

Indices	Threshold	Current study value	Decision
Chi-square	Less than 3	1.830	Acceptable
CFI	0.8	0.8	Acceptable
RMSEA	0.08	0.064	Acceptable

Source: Own compilation

According to the results, it can be determined that the model fits the data. It was only after confirming the model fitness that the structural model analysis was undertaken. This yielded the results shown in Table 5. All hypotheses were confirmed after consulting the table at the chosen significance level.

Table 5: Structural model analysis

Relationship	Hypotheses	Path coefficient	P-value	Decision
PEOU-PI	H1	0.258	**	Supported and significant
PU-PI	H2	0.110	**	Supported and significant
INTV-PI	H3	0.176	**	Supported and significant
WQ-PI	H4	0.140	**	Supported and significant
SF-PI	H5	0.211	**	Supported and significant

Key: Level of significance: **=p less or equal to 0.05 is considered significant (Shrestha, 2019).

4.2 Discussion

This study was conceptualised to utilise TAM and PTT as lenses to investigate the relationships between the following: perceived ease of use, website usefulness, website interactiveness, website service, website quality (all independent variables), and purchase intention (dependent variable) for FF in the South African context. The path analysis results show support for all the hypothesised relationships. These results confirm a string of other recent finds and also contradict some, albeit for diverse contexts, industries, and economies, as will be shown below. Arifah and Juniarti (2021) ascertained that perceived usefulness positively influences purchase decisions for Smartwatches. Additionally, Nasidi *et al.* (2022) empirically demonstrated that perceived usefulness positively affects online shopping. Nasidi *et al.* (2022) also confirmed that perceived ease of use positively impacts purchase intention. Concerning the impact of service perception and purchase intention, the results confirm the hypothesised relationship. This is also in line with other research findings: Qalati *et al.* (2021)

confirmed the relationship between online shopping and Shah *et al.* (2021) for repeat purchase intention. Furthermore, the hypothesised relationship between website quality and purchase intention also confirms other recent studies' outcomes. To illustrate, website quality was positively linked to purchase intention for tourism destinations (Alianto *et al.*, 2021), online shopping (Mittal *et al.,* 2021), and brand website characteristics (Nikbin *et al.,* 2022). However, the present confirmation (of website quality and purchase intention) contradicts the findings of Perpiña *et al.* (2021) and Maslim and Pasaribu (2021). These studies determined that the relationship between website quality and PI was insignificant. This study also confirmed a positive relationship between a fast food website's interactivity and customers' intention to purchase fast food. The result is also in line with earlier studies. For example, platform interactivity was shown to affect purchase intention for social commerce (Alsoud *et al.,* 2022 and Airbnb services (Kim *et al.,* 2021). All these findings extend the application of the grounding theories of TAM and PTT to the fast food industry in a developing economy.

4.3 Implications of the study and direction for future research

The research quantitatively studied the impact of some website characteristics on the purchase intentions of the FFI in South Africa. It empirically tested and confirmed the hypothesised relationships between the variables and proposed a conceptual model based on these hypotheses. The outcomes offer a new framework that provides practical pointers for researchers who work within the fast food industry in a developing economy. The use of the two grounding theories (TAM and PTT) extends their application to the often-overlooked fast food industry. In light of the study's findings, research can also be conducted on factors that simplify customer use of websites, provide useful information, improve interaction in the websites, lead to positive website quality perceptions, and offer high service levels. Moreover, the proposed model can form a strong base for future academic investigations on the influence of website characteristics in other industries. Lastly, the context of the research (data sources) provides opportunities for future comparative analysis of the effectiveness of website characteristics between developed economies and emerging ones, which in itself has academic merit (Prentice *et al*., 2019). For fast food businesses, the framework can be used to predict the impact that website features would have on customers' when they introduce new menus. Fast food businesses should focus on the features that influence purchasing intention in their website messages.

The study sample consisted of students from an SA university, which limits the study's generalizability to the SA public. It is recommended that the model be tested with a wider representative sample to enhance its generalizability. Furthermore, the number of

respondents is small compared to the country's population. Caution should, therefore, be exercised when interpreting the results of this study.

5. CONCLUSION

This study was conceptualised to quantitatively examine the influence that website characteristics have on consumer behaviour in the context of the South African fast food industry. In order to achieve that, two grounding theories and extant literature were used to hypothesise the relationships between the selected characteristics and customers' purchase intention. The results confirmed all the hypotheses. Additionally, these results emphasise the importance of proper website development and should assist restaurant managers in making informed decisions involving their online marketing strategies. The study concludes that for businesses that use websites, future investment in creating appealing website features is justified.

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