



Winning over the sceptics: How end-consumers view the motives and authenticity of customer-entrepreneurs over time

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ABSTRACT

Customer-entrepreneurs are an emerging sales force in online retailing, combining the traditional roles of customers and entrepreneurs by using digital platforms to advertise and sell products. A handful of researchers have begun exploring the phenomenon from different perspectives. We build on this emergent literature stream by investigating the perspective of end-consumers. Integrating attribution theory and the elaboration likelihood model, we develop a conceptual model and hypotheses to explore the pathways between end-consumers' perceptions of the motives and authenticity of customer-entrepreneurs, the mediating role of consumer scepticism in this relationship and the outcomes for three customer mindset metrics (customer satisfaction, loyalty intention and perceived service quality) and resilience to negative information. Finally, we measure the moderating effect of consumers' previous experience with a customer-entrepreneur on the relationship between perceived motives and scepticism. Our time-lapse study uses structural equation modelling and longitudinal analysis of data gathered from 539 consumers in the first wave of data collection and 476 consumers in the second wave. The findings indicate that perceived intrinsic motives support perceived authenticity, perceived extrinsic motives fuel scepticism, and scepticism partially mediates the link between perceived motives and perceived authenticity. Moreover, we find that perceived authenticity significantly impacts all four studied outcomes, and that previous experience moderates the relationship between perceived intrinsic motives and scepticism. Our findings guide customer-entrepreneurs, managers, and policymakers in harnessing this new phenomenon effectively.

1. Introduction

In the digital age, some customers have cast off their traditional role as passive buyers (Liljenberg, 2005) and have begun using online platforms to undertake their own commercial activities, forming a new class of online entrepreneurs (Park et al., 2021a,b) who create and capture value by identifying and exploiting digital business openings, selling products and services with which they are familiar. Their activities include building social networks, advertising and receiving payments from end-consumers for products and services (Park et al., 2021a). This newly identified form of online commercial activity, characterised as “the entrepreneurial activities of actors conventionally categorised as end-consumers or end-users in ecosystems” (Park et al., 2021b, p. 124), is labelled customer entrepreneurship. Its practitioners, blending the traditional roles and characteristics of customers and entrepreneurs

(Biraghi et al., 2018), represent a unique, hybridised force in the online retail space.

As customer-entrepreneurs grow in number, more firms are discovering their interdependencies with these new actors, who fall outside the conventional category of formal organisations (Park et al., 2021b) but can still be valuable assets, since firms can transform customers into entrepreneurs serving as company marketers and retailers (Miao et al., 2022). In this interdependent relationship, entrepreneurial customers utilise a firm's resources to realise business opportunities for themselves, simultaneously opening a gateway to market expansion and higher profits for the firm (Park et al., 2021b). This model also represents “light entrepreneurship”, since it involves only minor investment and low risk while offering “rich variety, easy processing, and high revenue” (Miao et al., 2022, p. 1). This platform-based informal economy is flourishing as end-consumers do not have access to a similar business model in the

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formal economy (Park et al., 2021b).

While the literature on customer-entrepreneurship remains relatively underdeveloped (Miao et al., 2022), four separate research streams can already be discerned. Firstly, an economics and sociological perspective was adopted by Liljenberg (2005), viewing customer entrepreneurship through an interdisciplinary lens that emphasises the customer's active role in shaping market dynamics. In this view, customers are viewed not as mere recipients of value but as active economic agents whose decisions, behaviours and negotiation strategies can heavily influence competition among suppliers, inducing or hindering competitive forces and taking advantage of rivalries among suppliers to improve their own performance, thereby profiting from the competition they induce (Liljenberg, 2005). Secondly, an institutional perspective was used to examine how firms recognise and exploit the customer entrepreneurship phenomenon, their responses to these symbiotic relationships and the implications for organisational success and demise (Park et al., 2021b). Thirdly, a social media perspective was used to explore platforms' potential profits (Park et al., 2021a). Finally, a customer-entrepreneur perspective was adopted to investigate individuals' potential gains from promoting products and their own knowledge (Miao et al., 2022). We seek to further develop this emergent literature by exploring customer entrepreneurship from a fifth perspective, namely the perspective of end-consumers, including how they assess customer-entrepreneurs' motives.

To make this distinctive contribution, we explore key aspects of end-consumers' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours in the specific context of customer entrepreneurship, including the relationships between perceived motives, scepticism and perceived authenticity. Knowledge of these relationships is essential, given the growth in customer entrepreneurship, especially since research in related contexts, such as product endorsement, shows that consumers may consider the endorsers' motives to be intrinsic (e.g. the endorsers like the product) or extrinsic (e.g. the endorsers are gaining a monetary reward) (Folkes, 1988). Identifying whether a similar mechanism operates in customer entrepreneurship is therefore key, especially since perceptions of motives have been shown to influence consumers more than the action itself (Gilbert & Malone, 1995) and research in other contexts demonstrates that when consumers doubt others' motives, this is likely to increase their scepticism (Lins et al., 2024). The attribution of extrinsic motives has also been shown to trigger consumer scepticism (i.e. a tendency to disbelieve), while perceptions of intrinsic motives have the reverse effect, inhibiting scepticism (Chen et al., 2023; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). In other words, when consumers infer a negative motive and perceive actions and behaviours as being driven by self-interest, such attributions increase their scepticism (Vannucci et al., 2023). However, prior research on how perceived motives and consumer scepticism are inter-related has been studied mainly in the corporate social responsibility (CSR) context (e.g. Forehand & Grier, 2003; Ro & Kang, 2024; Romani et al., 2016; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013; Zhang & Hanks, 2017) and remains underexplored in entrepreneurship in general and customer entrepreneurship in particular. Moreover, prior research on scepticism has generally overlooked the perceived motives of marketers and again the few relevant studies that do exist have mostly taken place in the CSR field (e.g. Forehand & Grier, 2003; Ro & Kang, 2024; Romani et al., 2016).

The interplay that perceived motives and scepticism have with perceived authenticity also requires attention if perceptions of customer entrepreneurship are to be understood from the end-consumer's perspective. Sceptical consumers tend to question all aspects of a situation, including the motives of the agent trying to persuade them and the authenticity of the claims being presented (Lins et al., 2024). When self-serving motives are more evident, consumer scepticism intensifies the adverse effect that this perceived inauthenticity has on their attitudes (Walter et al., 2024). While the significance of authenticity in consumer behaviour and branding is widely recognised (e.g. Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Fritz et al., 2017; Leigh et al., 2006; Newman & Dhar, 2014;

Rixom & Rixom, 2023; Rose & Wood, 2005; Wallach & Popovich, 2023), numerous studies in diverse marketing contexts (e.g. Audrezet et al., 2020; Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2019; Goulding, 2000; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart et al., 2015) have largely overlooked perceptions of the authenticity of other individuals, and most focus primarily on the outcomes. Surprisingly little research has explored or empirically tested the drivers of perceived authenticity. Notwithstanding some attention in the context of human brands and celebrities (e.g. Moulard et al., 2015; Osorio et al., 2023; Zniva et al., 2023), the process by which individuals assess the authenticity of other individuals has been largely overlooked in the psychology and marketing literature streams, and, to date, very limited quantitative research has sought to identify and test the constructs that influence this process (e.g. Jung et al., 2024; Moulard et al., 2015). This study fills this gap by exploring how individuals form their perceptions of the authenticity of other individuals in the customer entrepreneurship setting and additionally investigates whether scepticism mediates the relationship between perceived motives and perceived authenticity. It thus significantly advances understanding of how people assess the authenticity of non-celebrity persona, i.e. in contexts where they do not know the person (Jung et al., 2024; Moulard et al., 2015).

Additionally, it is relevant to develop knowledge of how consumers' perceptions of customer-entrepreneurs' authenticity influence three customer mindset metrics, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty intention and perceived service quality, as well as resilience to negative information. Accordingly, our study investigates these outcomes. Finally, we explore whether the relationship between perceived motives and scepticism is affected if an end-consumer has previous experience with that particular customer-entrepreneur. The influence of previous experience has been studied mainly in the accounting and auditing spheres (Kerler III & Killough, 2009; Popova, 2013; Rose, 2007; Shaub, 1996), but we seek to extend knowledge on the topic by investigating its moderating role in the relationship between perceived motives and scepticism in the fields of marketing, entrepreneurship or customer entrepreneurship.

Our study thus offers novel insights into the relationships between perceived motives, scepticism, authenticity and prior experience, and the outcomes for consumers' attitudes and behavioural intentions in the customer entrepreneurship context, based on the perspective of end-consumers. It also has practical implications for customer-entrepreneurs, the growing number of firms partnering with them to promote and sell products, and policymakers.

The research is mainly underpinned by attribution theory, since this can help explain consumers' assessment processes regarding perceived motives and the outcomes for attitudes and behaviour (Forehand & Grier, 2003). In particular, it supports understanding of how consumers interpret others' motives as intrinsic or extrinsic and how these attributions influence their scepticism, perceptions of authenticity and subsequent outcomes such as satisfaction, loyalty and resilience to negative information. To enrich this perspective, we also use the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) to understand the degree of cognitive processing that underlies these judgments (Kitchen et al., 2014). The ELM suggests that consumers using central route processing, i.e. carefully evaluating a message's logic, evidence and believability (Petty & Cacioppo, 2012), are more likely to critically evaluate motives, tending to become more sceptical when motives are perceived to be extrinsically driven, or perceiving greater authenticity when motives are intrinsically oriented. Conversely, those adopting a peripheral route approach, i.e. relying more on surface-level signals such as symbolic relationships or reputation cues (Kitchen et al., 2014), will view authenticity differently. The ELM thus explains why different consumers may respond differently to the same set of motives, complementing the explanatory power of attribution theory.

A longitudinal study design was chosen for this research. Prior approaches, predominantly relying on cross-sectional methods or case studies to explore consumer perceptions, have failed to capture the

dynamic and evolving nature of these perceptions over time. By adopting a longitudinal perspective, this study enables a more nuanced understanding of how consumers' experiences shape their perceptions and decision-making processes in the long run. Specifically, incorporating previous experience as a variable highlights the temporal dimension of consumer behaviour, which is often overlooked in prior research. This methodological approach not only provides richer insights into the trajectory of consumer perceptions but also contributes to the literature by offering a robust framework for understanding the interplay between past experiences and evolving attitudes. Consequently, this study advances theoretical and practical knowledge, underscoring the importance of temporal analyses in consumer behaviour research.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Next, we provide a comprehensive literature review covering key constructs including perceived motives, scepticism and perceived authenticity, and the outcomes of these perceptions. Then, we present the research model and hypotheses, followed by a methods section outlining the measures, sample, data collection and analysis techniques. The analysis and results section presents the empirical findings before the discussion interprets the results in light of the existing literature. We conclude with theoretical and practical implications, limitations and future research directions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Perceived motives

Motivation has been described as the psychological condition of an individual through which their choices or behaviours are triggered (Brown & Peterson, 1994). It has attracted attention in numerous contexts (e.g. Chen et al., 2021; Good et al., 2022; Miao & Evans, 2014; Vilnai-Yavetz & Levina, 2018), demonstrating that individuals use perceptions of other people's motivations to help them make sense of behaviour (Thomas & Pondy, 1977) and that these perceptions may, in turn, influence their own behaviour (Chen et al., 2021; Lam et al., 2007). Motivation types based on different drivers or goals have been identified as key to predicting behaviour and performance outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2008). Intrinsic motivation has been described as doing something, including work (Ryan & Deci, 2000), because it is inherently valuable, interesting, enjoyable or satisfying (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). In the sales context, Miao and Evans (2012) argued that intrinsically motivated staff were "driven by a passionate interest and deep level of enjoyment in what they do" (p. 184). In contrast, extrinsic motivations have been considered as those based on external pressures or the attainment of separable consequences or rewards (Good et al., 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Prior studies found that extrinsically driven actions were motivated by instrumental value (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and expectations of external consequences (Good et al., 2022), such as gaining future value (Locke & Schattke, 2019), externally regulated rewards such as social approval (Gountas et al., 2012), attention and/or social access (Maltby et al., 2008) and social recognition or fame (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Extrinsically motivated workers in the sales context have been shown to seek rewards such as money, recognition and promotion (Amabile et al., 1994; Miao & Evans, 2012). Sansome et al. (2025) found that such extrinsic drivers could shape individuals' behaviour but lacked the deeper engagement and commitment typically associated with intrinsic motivation.

Numerous prior researchers have used attribution theory to underpin studies of the perceived motives of marketers, since it has been considered to address the evaluation processes involved and how the resultant perceptions influence attitudes and behaviour (Forehand & Grier, 2003). For Heider (1958), attribution theory suggested that individuals seeking to make sense of events would generally engage in trying to identify the causes of those events. Schmitt and Branscombe (2002) argued that people generally attributed causes to either internal

(self-triggered) or external (environmental) factors. In the marketing context, attribution theory has been used to suggest that consumers seek to understand the motives underpinning marketing communications (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Forehand & Grier, 2003). Aw and Chuah (2021) argued that public awareness of these motives had been heightened in an era in which consumers were bombarded not only by advertisements, but also by endorsements from online influencers. For example, several studies have found that consumers' perceptions of social media influencers' motivations may be harmed if the influencers partner with brands to endorse products (Audrezet et al., 2020; Aw & Chuah, 2021; Pöyry et al., 2019). Importantly, consumers' attributions of motives have also been shown to affect their responses (Boush et al., 1994; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). We seek to build on this body of knowledge by exploring perceived motives in the field of entrepreneurship and specifically end-consumers' perceived motives of customer-entrepreneurs.

2.2. Scepticism

Scepticism has been defined as the tendency for individuals to question or doubt information they are given, or to not believe what they are told (Boush et al., 1994; Forehand & Grier, 2003; Romani et al., 2016; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). Shaub (1996) viewed it as the antithesis of trust, with sceptical individuals doubting, questioning or disagreeing with statements or broadly accepted beliefs, either through instinct or by force of habit. In the business context, consumer scepticism has been described as a sense that an advertisement cannot be believed or is not reliable (Zhang & Hanks, 2017) and as a "tendency toward disbelief of advertising claims" (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998, p. 160). Boush et al. (1994) characterised sceptics as questioning the wisdom of particular decisions, relying on a full range of information to reach a conclusion and using their own personal assessment of marketing hype to separate it from truth. Sceptical consumers have not necessarily been regarded as pessimistic or prejudiced towards the firm (Brown & Krishna, 2004). Connors et al. (2017) considered that they might simply have a greater level of alertness and would therefore assess the validity of recommendations more carefully. Some studies in the consumer sphere have regarded scepticism as a personality trait, i.e. an in-built tendency to question other people's motives, also referred to as dispositional scepticism (e.g. Boush et al., 1994; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). Others have considered situational scepticism, i.e. scepticism that is context-based (Mohr et al., 1998), such as momentarily questioning the motives behind an action (e.g. Forehand & Grier, 2003; Romani et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2009; Zhang & Hanks, 2017).

Consumer scepticism of motives can be examined using attribution theory, which illuminates not only how individuals explain others' actions, but the onward effects of this perception on an individual's attitudes and behaviours (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). Since perceptions of motive have been shown to influence trust as well as suspicion (Shaub, 1996), it is necessary to understand the conditions in which end-consumers' inferences regarding customer-entrepreneurs' motivations will increase or reduce their level of scepticism. Accordingly, we examine scepticism in this context, using the term to capture the general notion of the distrust or disbelief of marketers' conduct by individual consumers, including marketers' motives, specific advertising claims and other efforts (Forehand & Grier, 2003).

2.3. Perceived authenticity

Epistemologically, authenticity has been considered to capture concepts such as "reality", "genuineness" and "truth" (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Nunes et al. (2021) noted that for marketers, consumer assessments of authenticity presented particular challenges in an industry typically considered inherently inauthentic. For consumers, perceived authenticity has been connected to transparency, honesty and openness (Molleda, 2010). Brown et al. (2003) stated that the consumer

quest for authenticity was considered “one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing”, spanning numerous fields from authentic travel experiences to retail settings (Cinelli and LeBoeuf, 2019). Bartsch et al. (2022) found that consumers assessed the authenticity of others while also seeking offers that appeared to align with their own true identity. Other researchers found that for offers to be considered authentic, they also had to match an individual’s internal image of things being as they “ought to be” (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Moreover, consumers have been shown to continue developing these perceptions despite the impossibility of knowing with absolute certainty whether or not the other party is authentic (Moulard et al., 2015). Several authors concluded that ultimately, consumers’ perception of whether something was true mattered more than whether something was objectively true (Bartsch et al., 2022; Bruner, 1994; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). In this research, we consider perceived authenticity to be defined as a consumer’s subjective belief that a person’s behaviour is in line with their true selves (Moulard et al., 2015).

Three components of authenticity, accuracy, integrity and proficiency, relate particularly to the provider rather than the product and are thus directly relevant to our study. Firstly, accuracy has been characterised as requiring something to be credible and convincing (Bruner, 1994). Nunes et al. (2021) found that it was related to a provider’s transparency regarding themselves and the product/service, which influenced whether messaging to consumers was perceived as reliable and accurate. Other elements such as truth, honesty and verifiability have also been found to drive the accuracy component of authenticity (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Morhart et al., 2015; Newman, 2019; Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2013). Next, integrity has been found to incorporate elements such as independence and consistency (Nunes et al., 2021), but other authors (e.g. Audrezet et al., 2020; Moulard et al., 2021) noted that the notion of intrinsic motivation was at its core, i.e. the perception that actors were not serving their own financial interests. For example, Nunes et al. (2021) found that consumers expected sources to be free to make their own decisions, to avoid “selling out” and to be “passionate” about their endeavours (p. 10). Trilling (1972) characterised authenticity as staying “true to oneself”. Moulard et al. (2021) defined “true-to-self authenticity” as “a consumer’s perception of the extent to which an entity’s behaviour corresponds with its intrinsic motivations as opposed to extrinsic motivations” (p. 103). Accordingly, accuracy can be considered to encompass truthfulness and honesty as they relate to other individuals, while integrity captures being true to oneself. Finally, proficiency has been shown to be linked to abilities (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009) rather than motives, relating to a quality of the source rather than that source’s accuracy or integrity. Proficiency has thus been found to encapsulate perceptions of aspects such as skill and expertise (Nunes et al., 2021).

Some studies on individual authenticity have been conducted in marketing (Arnould & Price, 2000), the celebrity context (Moulard et al., 2015) and among influencers, where Batt et al. (2021) noted the importance of demonstrating competence, as well as in diverse areas such as sociology (Peterson, 2005) and art (Fine, 2003). Overall, researchers have concluded that individual authenticity relates to whether a person remains true to themselves (Kernis & Goldman, 2004). We build on this work by exploring consumers’ judgements of the perceived authenticity of customer-entrepreneurs, and the drivers and outcomes of these perceptions.

2.4. Customer mindset metrics

Customer mindset metrics are regarded as valuable tools that seek to improve performance by gathering and analysing data on consumers’ feelings regarding their relationships with marketers, sellers, products and services (Gupta & Zeithaml, 2006; Rubera & Kirca, 2017; Srinivasan et al., 2010), thus indicating whether marketing is having the desired effect on customers (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Positive metrics have been shown in prior studies to enhance purchase intentions (e.g. Dash

et al., 2021) and behaviour (e.g. Gustafsson et al., 2005). Furthermore, Petersen et al. (2018) are among the prior scholars to highlight the importance of studying multiple customer mindset metrics rather than a single metric, since they have differing outcomes that do not have homogenous effects on a firm’s profits. Accordingly, we selected customer satisfaction, customer loyalty intention and perceived service quality, as suggested and investigated by Petersen et al. (2018), since they emphasise behavioural and profitability signals. The three outcomes correspond to the cognitive-affective-conative sequence in consumer psychology (Oliver, 1997), as perceived service quality has been characterised as a cognitive performance judgment about the service’s superiority/adequacy, satisfaction as an affective/evaluative response to (dis)confirmation of expectations and loyalty intention as a conative/behavioural propensity (e.g. repurchase, recommendation). We investigate the impact of these three metrics in the context of the relationship between end-consumers and customer-entrepreneurs. Prior knowledge of these metrics in other contexts is summarised in the following sections.

2.4.1. Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction has been considered to reflect customers’ judgments on the pleasurable fulfilment derived from a product or service (Oliver, 1997). Numerous positive outcomes have been demonstrated, including enhanced profitability (e.g. Anderson et al., 2004), purchase intentions (e.g. Kumar, 2002), positive word of mouth (WOM) (e.g. Parasuraman et al., 1988; Parasuraman et al., 1991), customer retention (e.g. Mittal & Kamakura, 2001) and firm equity and value (e.g. Aksoy et al., 2008). Moreover, Garbarino and Johnson (1999) found that customer satisfaction could foster enduring relationships between customers and brands.

2.4.2. Consumer loyalty intention

(1997) stated that customer loyalty intention represented an individual’s commitment to consistently repatronise a firm, leading to repeat purchasing “despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour” (p. 392). Busser and Shulga (2019) described loyalty intention as a consumer’s behavioural intentions and assessments of the likelihood of buying a brand. Service brand loyalty intention has meanwhile been described as an “intention to continue buying or using a service brand in the future, accompanied by a deep commitment to that service brand” (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008, p. 165).

2.4.3. Perceived service quality

Perceived service quality has been used since the 1980 s to measure customers’ perceptions of the level of service they receive from a business (e.g. Zeithaml, 1988), including whether the reality of their service experience lived up their expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1985). One of its early definitions as “a global judgment, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service” (Parasuraman et al., 1988p.143) has been widely adopted in the literature, and perceived service quality continues to be frequently used in service quality studies, including in fast-moving consumer goods (Anselmsson & Bondesson, 2015). Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of a high level of perceived service quality, including enhancements in shareholder value (Pahud de Mortanges & Van Riel, 2003) and firm value (Srinivasan, 2015). Some researchers have also demonstrated that, in investors’ eyes, perceptions of brand quality are more important than the objective reality of that quality (Frieder & Subrahmanyam, 2005).

2.5. Resilience to negative information

Resilience to negative information has been defined as “the extent to which consumers do not allow negative information to diminish their general view of a brand – thus it may indicate the strength of a consumer-firm relationship” (Eisingerich et al., 2011, p. 62).

Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) found that it involved “consumers’ willingness to overlook or even forgive a company when there was an occasional, possibly inadvertent, lapse on its part” (p. 19). Augusto et al. (2019) noted the limited research on resilience to negative information, despite its crucial role in tackling the challenges posed by social media. To extend this knowledge, we explore the interplay between perceived authenticity and resilience to negative information in the relationships between consumers and customer-entrepreneurs.

2.6. Previous experience

Prior research suggests that levels of scepticism can vary depending on previous experience. For example, an earlier relationship between the parties has been shown to affect different aspects of intention (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002), while Kerler III & Killough (2009) found that trust-building between parties could also partly depend on whether an individual’s earlier interactions with the relevant party were considered positive, using measures such as success or satisfaction. We seek to extend this knowledge by examining prior experience’s role in the motivation–scepticism relationship in the customer entrepreneurship context.

3. Research model and hypotheses

This study proposes a theoretical model to explore the relationships between end-consumers’ perceptions of the motives of customer-entrepreneurs, scepticism and perceptions of authenticity, and the effects on the selected customer mindset metrics and resilience to negative information. The moderating role of previous experience is also considered. The research model for this paper is shown in Fig. 1.

3.1. The relationship between perceived motives and scepticism

The relationship between perceived motives and scepticism has been studied in the context of endorsers, including social media influencers. If individuals believe an influencer’s brand endorsements are predominantly motivated by personal gain, whether financial or non-financial, they will ascribe self-serving motives rather than altruism to that influencer (Shan et al., 2019). Conversely, intrinsic motives such as altruism and fun may be seen as more important and socially more desirable (Vilnai-Yavetz & Levina, 2018). These complex causal

inferences heavily influence consumer scepticism (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). While individual consumers may have different predispositions to scepticism (Forehand & Grier, 2003), scepticism in consumer research is typically conceptualised as a fixed view in which marketing communications are received with greater distrust (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998) and in which attitudes towards marketers are generally negative rather than positive (Andrews, 1989; Boush et al., 1994). For example, one third of the millennials surveyed by Roth Capital Partners did not consider social media influencers were acting with consumers’ best interests at heart (Kirkpatrick, 2017), especially as influencers may receive monetary or non-monetary remuneration such as samples, discounts and commission (Miao et al., 2022; Park et al., 2021b; Vilnai-Yavetz & Levina, 2018). Scepticism may also flourish if consumers perceive that an organisation is failing to be honest about its own gains (Forehand & Grier, 2003). When consumers doubt others’ motives, this is likely to increase their scepticism (Lins et al., 2024). When they infer a negative ulterior motive and believe that a service provider seeks to exploit them for its own benefit, the company’s actions may be perceived as self-serving, which heightens consumers’ scepticism (Vannucci et al., 2023). The more the firm-benefiting motives that are inferred, the more sceptical consumers will be toward the firm’s actions, and they may, in turn, display less favourable attitudes and behaviours (Chen et al., 2023). Furthermore, consumers’ perceptions that firms have extrinsic motives have been shown to increase consumer scepticism in the CSR context, while perceived intrinsic motives have the opposite effect (Ro & Kang, 2024; Romani et al., 2016; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013).

Accordingly, we posit that end-consumers’ perceptions of motivation will also influence their scepticism towards customer-entrepreneurs and propose the following hypotheses:

H1a: The more end-consumers perceive a customer-entrepreneur’s motives as intrinsic, the less sceptical they become.

H1b: The more end-consumers perceive a customer-entrepreneur’s motives as extrinsic, the more sceptical they become.

3.2. The relationship between perceived motives and perceived entrepreneur authenticity

Intrinsically motivated behaviour, i.e. taking part in something because of the inherent satisfaction, enjoyment and pleasure that will be experienced, is regarded as fully authentic, while externally motivated

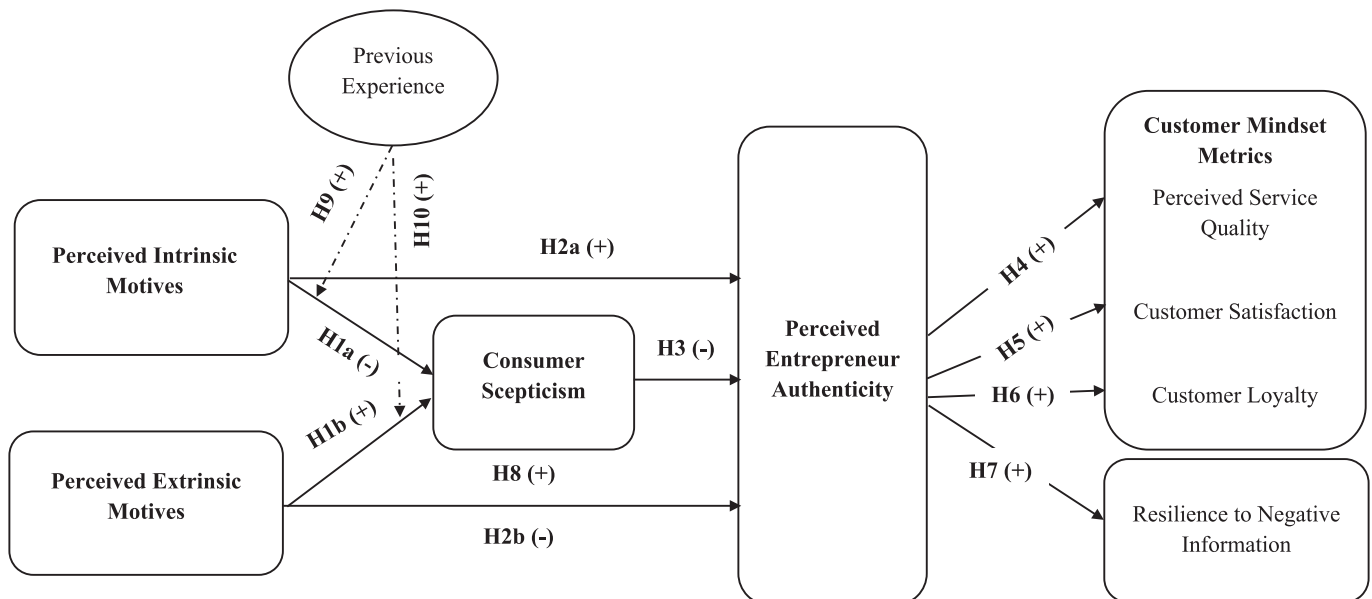


Fig. 1. Research model, showing the hypotheses. Plus and minus signs indicate whether proposed relationships are positive or negative.

behaviour driven by rewards, punishment, peer pressure, status enhancement, etc., is seen as inherently inauthentic (Jung et al., 2024; Moulard et al., 2015; Osorio et al., 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Fritz et al. (2017) linked authenticity to individuals seen as acting in line with their true selves, marked by attributes such as autonomy and self-determination. Attributions of authenticity may depend heavily on whether behaviour is perceived to be driven by internal or external motives (Cinelli & LeBoeuf 2019; Goffman, 1959). In the consumer context, customers seeking authenticity are drawn to offerings that appear to match their inner selves and whose motives are intrinsic (Bartsch et al., 2022), highlighting the need to focus on ensuring intrinsic motives are ascribed to that brand (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2019; Moulard et al., 2021). The limited prior research on the antecedents of brand authenticity has also highlighted the importance of intrinsic or extrinsic motivational attribution (e.g. Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2019; Holt, 2002; Moulard et al., 2021). Holt (2002) noted that “to be authentic, brands must be disinterested; they must be perceived as invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value” (p. 83). A positive link between perceptions of a firm’s intrinsic motivation and increased perceptions of authenticity was also found by Cinelli and LeBoeuf (2019) and Rixom and Rixom (2023). On the contrary, when profit-driven motives are more salient, this has been shown to damage brands’ authenticity (Wallach & Popovich, 2023; Zniva et al., 2023). Similarly, regarding perceptions of social media influencers’ authenticity, followers have been shown to value influencers’ intrinsic motivations and non-commercial orientation (Audrezet et al., 2020), but when consumers judge their brand endorsements to be publicity-seeking actions driven by a desire to make money, the power of the endorsement is lowered and detrimental effects are incurred not only by the endorser but also by the brand (Shan et al., 2019). Therefore, in line with the literature on brand and influencer authenticity, we propose:

H2a: The more end-consumers perceive a customer-entrepreneur’s motives as intrinsic, the higher the perceived authenticity of the customer-entrepreneur.

H2b: The more end-consumers perceive a customer-entrepreneur’s motives as extrinsic, the lower the perceived authenticity of the customer-entrepreneur.

3.3. The relationship between scepticism and perceived authenticity

Scepticism can have several effects on consumer evaluations (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Lunardo’s (2012) empirical research showed that sceptical consumers were more likely to express negative views regarding the honesty of the advertisement and the integrity of the retailer. Consumer scepticism has been shown to have a direct negative impact on perceived credibility (Román et al., 2023) and perceived brand ethicality (Sansome et al., 2024). Sceptical consumers also generally view marketing partnerships as having less authenticity than is the case with other consumers (Charlton & Cornwell, 2019). The degree of scepticism is also relevant: Septianto et al. (2023) demonstrated a lower likelihood of marketing cues and communications being regarded as authentic by highly sceptical consumers, while Romani et al. (2016) found that the greater the scepticism, the less favourable the consumer behavioural response towards a company’s CSR initiative. We therefore propose:

H3: End-consumer scepticism negatively influences perceived authenticity of the customer-entrepreneur.

3.4. The relationship between perceived authenticity and the outcomes of satisfaction, loyalty intention, perceived service quality and resilience to negative information

Consumers’ perceptions of authenticity may positively influence their cognitive and behavioural responses. For example, studies have demonstrated that perceived authenticity has a strong and positive

impact on customer loyalty (Busser & Shulga, 2019; Jones et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2015) and is a determinant of revisit intention and willingness to pay more (Kim & Baker, 2017). Authenticity also underpins customers’ assessments of whether products and experiences represent quality and value for money (Akhoondnejad, 2016; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Kovács et al., 2014). In addition, it is a predictor of perceived quality (e.g. Lu et al., 2015; Moulard et al., 2014; Moulard et al., 2016), satisfaction and loyalty (Jones et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2019) and value (Akhoondnejad, 2016; Robinson & Clifford, 2012). Kovács et al. (2014) highlighted that perceived authenticity and perceived quality were different variables, each capable of creating value independently, and more recently Liu et al. (2018) noted that the relationship between them was unclear. However, there is evidence supporting a positive relationship between authenticity and behavioural intentions, since Nunes et al. (2021) showed that this relationship could occur indirectly through attitudes as well as directly, and that authenticity was positively linked to aspects such as inclination to seek additional information, make purchases and spread positive WOM. In the context of service employees, those seen as having high authenticity, since they are conducting deep acting, have been shown to generate higher satisfaction levels and repurchase intentions than those considered to have low authenticity, since they are surface acting (Gountas et al., 2007).

Perceived brand authenticity has also been shown to affect several outcomes. Morhart et al. (2015) found a correlation with a greater degree of emotional attachment to the brand and a higher intention to spread positive WOM, and that customers were more likely to select brands with higher authenticity. Napoli et al. (2014) demonstrated a correlation with brand purchase intentions. Similarly, Spiggle et al. (2012) found that it impacted the willingness of customers to recommend the brand to others, as well as affecting their own purchase intention.

Regarding resilience to negative information, Skarmeas and Leonidou (2013) identified that CSR scepticism decreased it, while Hsu and Chen (2018) found that brand love, which implicitly involves a high level of authenticity, had a significant and positive effect on it. Other studies have identified brand knowledge and brand involvement (Elsharnouby et al., 2021), online brand experience and brand attitude (Torres & Augusto, 2019), and perceived CSR and service quality orientation (Eisingerich et al., 2011) as antecedents to resilience to negative information.

To extend the work of these previous studies, we investigate the direct impact of perceived authenticity on satisfaction, loyalty intention, perceived service quality and resilience to negative information by proposing the following hypotheses:

H4: Perceived authenticity of the customer-entrepreneur positively influences end-consumer satisfaction.

H5: Perceived authenticity of the customer-entrepreneur positively influences end-consumer loyalty intention.

H6: Perceived authenticity of the customer-entrepreneur positively influences end-consumer perceived service quality.

H7: Perceived authenticity of the customer-entrepreneur positively influences end-consumer resilience to negative information.

3.5. Scepticism as a mediator between perceived motives and perceived authenticity

If scepticism towards a firm’s motives is raised in any way, consumers’ responses are likely to reflect lower positivity than would otherwise be the case (Forehand & Grier, 2003). For example, Vlachos et al. (2009) found that consumer trust mediated the relationship between individuals’ perceptions of firms’ motives and their responses to CSR strategies. In addition to its role in the marketing context (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Vlachos et al., 2009), customer trust is also recognised as a mediator in diverse fields such as social psychology (Blau, 1964) and management (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The opposite effects of trust and scepticism (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Shaub, 1996) are

confirmed by Rahman et al. (2015), who found scepticism partially mediated the relationship between perceptions of ulterior motives and intention to participate in a reuse programme, and between ulterior motives and revisit intention; perceptions of ulterior motives evoked scepticism, making consumers less likely to intend to take part in the programme and lowering their revisit intentions. Similarly, Romani et al. (2016) found that consumers reacted sceptically to firms' perceived motives, responding more favourably to CSR efforts if the motives were perceived as intrinsic, but with the opposite effect for perceived extrinsic motivations. Sceptical consumers tend to question all aspects of a situation, including the motives of the agent trying to persuade them and the authenticity of the claims being presented (Lins et al., 2024). When self-serving motives are more evident, consumer scepticism intensifies the adverse effect that this perceived inauthenticity has on their attitudes (Walter et al., 2024).

Consumers frequently assess the motivation behind influencer endorsements, i.e. whether the influencer is acting altruistically or in their own interests, and the consumers' judgment on this question will influence how effective the communication is (Shan et al., 2019). For example, prior research suggests that if a consumer believes the motivation was not altruistic, the outcome may not only be feelings of distrust towards the influencer but also a negative assessment of the product itself and endorsers in general (Aw & Chuah, 2021). In other words, if influencers are viewed as self-serving, consumers will not trust their message, in turn triggering negative responses to the endorsement in the form of lower credibility, purchase intention and reduced persuasiveness (Lee et al., 2013; Reinhard et al., 2006). However, the role of scepticism in this process is still not fully understood, i.e. whether consumers' perceptions of influencers' motives harm their perceptions of authenticity because of the presence of scepticism. We explore its role in the customer entrepreneurship context by hypothesising that:

H8: End-consumer scepticism mediates the relationship between the perceived motives and perceived authenticity of the customer-entrepreneur.

3.6. Previous experience as a moderator between perceived motives and scepticism

Prior studies suggest that previous experience with a firm may influence customers' intentions and behaviour. After negative client-specific experiences (CSEs), customers' trust levels are likely to be lower, while those with positive CSEs may accept explanations more readily (Popova, 2013; Shaub, 1996). Kerler III & Killough (2009) show that trust among auditors is affected by their satisfaction with previous experience of the same client. Shaub (1996) finds that subjective feelings of trust or suspicion are driven by one person's perception of another's motives, and previous experience may affect these perceptions. Since we use scepticism to refer to consumers' generalised distrust of marketers' motivations and actions (Forehand & Grier, 2003) and investigate whether a consumer's previous experience with a customer-entrepreneur moderates the relationship between perceived motives and scepticism, we propose:

H9: Previous experience with the customer-entrepreneur moderates the relationship between perceived intrinsic motives and end-consumer scepticism.

H10: Previous experience with the customer-entrepreneur moderates the relationship between perceived extrinsic motives and end-consumer scepticism.

4. Methods

4.1. Measures

The variables selected for this study were operationalised using measures validated in earlier research. Perceived intrinsic motives were measured using five items adopted from Miao and Evans (2014) and Vilnai-Yavetz and Levina (2018). Perceived extrinsic motives were also

evaluated through five items drawn from Miao and Evans (2014) and Vilnai-Yavetz and Levina (2018). Consumer scepticism was measured through four items from Boush et al. (1994). Perceived customer-entrepreneur authenticity was measured using five items adopted from Nunes et al. (2021). Regarding the customer mindset metrics, consumer satisfaction was assessed through three items adopted from Eisingerich et al. (2014), loyalty intention was measured through four items adopted from Zeithaml et al. (1996) and perceived service quality was measured through two items adopted from Anderson and Sullivan (1993). Resilience to negative information was measured through four items adopted from Du et al. (2007) and Eisingerich et al. (2011). Finally, consumers' previous experience was measured through three items adopted from Jang and Namkung (2009).

The instrument was checked by four professors of marketing to ensure face validity. We also pilot-tested it with 20 consumers. To ensure its measurement adequacy, we pretested it with 50 participants via an online survey; these yielded loadings that were satisfactory and reliability and validity ratings that were acceptable. The values for internal consistency, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, were within the recommended range of 0.79 to 0.93 (Hair et al., 2021).

4.2. Sample and data collection

An online data collection agency was employed to collect the data. This enables shorter response times, a more diverse respondent pool and greater leeway in study design (Goodman & Paolacci, 2017). Most notably, this method of data collection is generally accepted in business research and results in reliable data (Hong et al., 2017; Hulland & Miller, 2018; Kumar & Pansari, 2016). The possibility of bias in the sample was minimised by selecting respondents who were demographically similar to the general population (Levay et al., 2016). Furthermore, IP addresses were cross-checked to ensure each respondent had a unique identity and to prevent duplicate responses, helping to assure response integrity. An initial series of screening questions ensured respondents could proceed only if they were familiar with the topic, while attention check items allowed the exclusion of respondents who had not paid close enough attention to all the questions.

Data were gathered at two time intervals, in January 2023 (T) and January 2024 (T + 1). This longitudinal design offered a number of significant benefits. Firstly, it enabled us to establish temporal ordering among the motives, scepticism, authenticity and downstream mindset metrics. Moreover, by tracking consumers across waves, it separated relatively stable traits (baseline scepticism or brand affinity) from within-person change induced by exposure to specific customer-entrepreneur signals. This reduced confounding from unobserved heterogeneity and clarified whether perceived intrinsic versus extrinsic motives prospectively shape authenticity, rather than simply covarying with it. Longitudinal data also permitted testing of mediation as a process (e.g. whether scepticism accumulates over time), testing for reciprocal effects (e.g. whether perceived authenticity reduces future scepticism), and the modelling of decay and persistence in the effects of authenticity. Additionally, it mitigated common-method inflation.

At time T, we contacted 1000 participants who met the necessary criteria and received 571 responses. We excluded 32 responses with missing data, leaving us with 539 responses for analysis at T. The respondents who participated at Time T were contacted again at Time T + 1. We obtained responses from 495 participants, but 19 were excluded owing to missing data. Consequently, 476 replies were valid for the main analysis at T + 1. Of this second and final group, 48.8 % were male, and 51.2 % were female. In terms of age group, 18.5 % were aged 18–24 years, 19.2 % were 25–34, 14.8 % were 35–44, 16.7 % were 45–54, 17.9 % were 55–60, and 12.9 % were over 60. Regarding the highest level of education attained, 29.7 % held a bachelor's degree, 18.4 % held a diploma, 31.2 % held a master's or doctorate and 20.7 % were in other categories. The participants' demographics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Respondent demographics.

Demographics	T (n = 539)		T + 1 (n = 476)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Gender				
Male	255	47.30	232	48.80
Female	284	52.70	244	51.20
Age				
18–24	98	18.18	88	18.50
25–34	105	19.48	92	19.20
35–44	89	16.51	71	14.80
45–54	83	15.39	80	16.70
55–60	96	17.81	84	17.90
>60	68	12.63	61	12.90
Education				
Bachelor's degree	146	27.08	142	29.70
Diploma	92	17.07	87	18.40
Master's or doctorate	169	31.35	149	31.20
Other	132	24.50	98	20.70

4.3. Analysis technique

This study utilised path analysis through the partial least squares-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) technique. Our research employed WarpPLS v. 7 (Kock, 2020) to implement a methodology for developing and evaluating measurement and structural models to test the hypotheses. PLS-SEM was selected for this study due to the methodological requirements posed by the longitudinal and conceptually complex model under investigation. The conceptual framework incorporates multiple endogenous variables, cross-lagged relationships, mediation and moderation mechanisms, and a prediction-oriented focus, conditions under which covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) can be restrictive. CB-SEM relies on strong assumptions regarding multivariate normality, model identification, and global fit evaluation (Bollen, 1989) and is primarily suited for confirmatory theory testing rather than variance explanation or forecasting (Hair et al., 2017; Shmueli et al., 2016). In contrast, PLS-SEM is designed to estimate complex predictive models, emphasising explained variance (R^2) and predictive relevance (Q^2), making it appropriate for theory development and prediction-oriented research (Hair et al., 2021; Sarstedt et al., 2019). Its variance-based estimation procedure allows for robust modelling of non-normal data, recursive path structures, and multi-stage longitudinal relationships (Chin, 1998; Rigdon, 2016). Although PLS-SEM can be used to model directional relationships between variables, it does not in itself establish causality. Rather than treating PLS-SEM as a tool for verifying causal relationships, our application follows contemporary methodological guidance that emphasises its use for examining associations, predictive paths, and temporal precedence within structurally specified models (Rigdon, 2016; Shmueli et al., 2019). Furthermore, PLS-SEM is well suited for analysing indirect and interactive effects central to testing the mediating influence of scepticism and the moderating role of previous experience in our study (Hayes, 2018; Henseler & Chin, 2010). Prior research has also emphasised that PLS-SEM is appropriate in emergent or evolving theoretical domains where constructs and mechanisms require exploratory refinement and predictive validation rather than strict confirmatory testing (Rigdon et al., 2019; Henseler, 2018). These attributes make PLS-SEM the most suitable analytical technique for modelling the dynamic, multifaceted, and temporally ordered relationships specified in our framework, while supporting theoretical advancement in the developing field of customer entrepreneurship.

The route analysis method effectively assesses the predictive accuracy of structural models, as demonstrated in previous research (Hair et al., 2017; Kock, 2020). This approach is well suited to complex

mediated models and to studies focusing on prediction-oriented analysis. PLS-SEM is also appropriate when working with longitudinal panel structures and when the research objective emphasises variance explanation and predictive relevance rather than model fit under strict distributional assumptions (Hair et al., 2017). The analysis draws on sample sizes of 539 and 476 across the two periods and incorporates three latent factors, each with indicator loadings above 0.839. Intercorrelations among variables reach a minimum value of 0.11, supporting the robustness of the measurement model. Incorporating these qualities is crucial for developing and evaluating structural models with sufficient predictive capability (Kock, 2020).

The meanings of all the constructs used in this study are shown in Appendix A, along with the sources of these meanings. To align the model with the established customer mindset metrics sequence, we specified perceived service quality (QUL), customer satisfaction (SAT) and loyalty intention (LOY) in a temporal chain (QUL → SAT → LOY). Conceptually, QUL represents a cognitive performance assessment, SAT an affective evaluation and LOY a conative behavioural propensity (Oliver, 1997). Structurally, we added the paths QUL → SAT and SAT → LOY at each wave and across waves (e.g. QUL1 → SAT1; SAT1 → LOY1) within our cross-lagged PLS-SEM. Perceived entrepreneur authenticity (PEA) was modelled as an upstream driver of each outcome. We estimated both direct effects (PEA → QUL, PEA → SAT controlling for QUL, and PEA → LOY controlling for QUL and SAT) and indirect effects through the sequential chain (PEA → QUL → SAT → LOY), with confidence intervals obtained via bias-corrected bootstrapping. This specification ensures that effects attributed to PEA are not artifacts of the canonical QUL → SAT → LOY pipeline. We also report discriminant validity (HTMT, AVE) and longitudinal measurement invariance (MICOM) for QUL, SAT and LOY.

5. Analysis and results

This study adheres to the two-step methodology for PLS-SEM, as advocated by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). The initial stage of measurement development involved the application of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). This facilitated the assessment of the psychometric properties of the indicators at time T and time T + 1, encompassing validity and reliability (Brown, 2015). The results of the CFA of the T and T + 1 datasets are shown in Table 2. They demonstrate a substantial correlation between the computed model and the empirical data. The statistically substantial and sufficient indicator loadings on their anticipated structures for both T and T + 1 are evident. Convergent validity is demonstrated by a strong correlation between the indicators and the specified variables. The results show that the cross-loadings of the indicators on alternative constructs are negligible, indicating the presence of discriminant validity. The data in Table 2 also shows acceptable thresholds for composite dependability, specifically values over 0.70. The stated values indicate that the indicators and their associated variables exhibit an adequate degree of validity and reliability (Hair et al., 2017; Kock, 2020). The VIF values range from 1.289 to 2.520, remaining below the threshold of 3.3 established by Kock (2020). There is no evidence of multicollinearity. Table 2 also presents a comprehensive description of the descriptive statistics for the research variables. The data indicates that the mean values of the variables at T exceed those at T + 1. Table 3 shows the relationships between the studied constructs. The diagonal entries at the top of the matrix represent the average variance extracted (AVE) values, which exceed the intercorrelation coefficients. The values further substantiate the constructs' satisfactory discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2017).

5.1. Cross-lagged panel model (CLPM) of path analysis

The second phase of the PLS-SEM evaluated the predictive accuracy of the structural models proposed by H1–H8. We used a cross-lagged panel model (CLPM) to examine the longitudinal data (Laradi et al.,

Table 2
Measurement statistics of construct scale.

Construct/Indicators	Standard Loading		CR		Cronbach's α		AVE		Mean		SD		Δ
	T	T + 1	T	T + 1	T	T + 1	T	T + 1	T	T + 1	T	T + 1	
Perceived Intrinsic Motives (PIM)			0.96	0.93	0.94	0.92	0.571	0.508					0.09 (ns)
PIM1	0.95	0.96							2.95	2.39	0.88	0.79	
PIM2	0.94	0.93							2.41	2.10	0.84	0.80	
PIM3	0.90	0.89							3.09	2.05	0.86	0.79	
PIM4	0.94	0.96							2.67	2.54	0.83	0.83	
PIM5	0.89	0.89							2.23	2.11	0.81	0.81	
Perceived Extrinsic Motives (PEM)			0.93	0.92	0.91	0.90	0.693	0.684					0.07 (ns)
PEM1	0.91	0.94							2.49	2.10	0.89	0.78	
PEM2	0.89	0.92							2.21	2.53	0.82	0.84	
PEM3	0.94	0.91							2.67	2.30	0.83	0.81	
PEM4	0.89	0.95							3.20	3.06	0.87	0.82	
PEM5	0.90	0.89							3.08	2.15	0.84	0.80	
Consumer Scepticism (CSP)			0.92	0.89	0.91	0.87	0.689	0.701					0.06 (ns)
CSP1	0.94	0.90							2.23	2.05	0.80	0.89	
CSP2	0.95	0.94							2.59	2.11	0.84	0.81	
CSP3	0.91	0.89							2.17	2.19	0.83	0.84	
CSP4	0.93	0.90							2.46	2.35	0.86	0.87	
Perceived Entrepreneur Authenticity (PEA)			0.97	0.94	0.95	0.93	0.501	0.619					0.09 (ns)
PEA1	0.93	0.92							2.23	2.10	0.83	0.87	
PEA2	0.96	0.90							2.18	2.34	0.85	0.80	
PEA3	0.91	0.94							2.09	2.12	0.83	0.82	
PEA4	0.95	0.89							2.37	2.45	0.81	0.81	
PEA5	0.90	0.91							3.12	2.10	0.78	0.85	
Customer Satisfaction (SAT)			0.94	0.92	0.93	0.92	0.689	0.599					0.09 (ns)
SAT1	0.95	0.94							2.34	2.31	0.87	0.82	
SAT2	0.93	0.92							2.10	2.05	0.85	0.80	
SAT3	0.90	0.95							2.17	2.54	0.82	0.85	
Loyalty Intention (LOY)			0.93	0.92	0.92	0.91	0.619	0.703					0.08 (ns)
LOY1	0.94	0.90							2.27	2.10	0.83	0.82	
LOY2	0.93	0.94							2.02	2.25	0.87	0.81	
LOY3	0.90	0.91							2.54	2.16	0.85	0.85	
LOY4	0.91	0.95							2.12	2.10	0.79	0.81	
LOY5	0.95	0.92							2.09	2.34	0.83	0.83	
Perceived Service Quality (QUL)			0.92	0.91	0.90	0.89	0.672	0.538					0.09 (ns)
QUL1	0.89	0.90							2.76	2.10	0.86	0.80	
QUL2	0.95	0.92							2.03	2.34	0.80	0.84	
Resilience to Negative Information (RNI)			0.95	0.94	0.93	0.92	0.593	0.614					0.06 (ns)
RNI1	0.93	0.91							2.21	2.03	0.87	0.83	
RNI2	0.97	0.90							2.89	2.05	0.84	0.81	
RNI3	0.89	0.94							2.56	3.10	0.80	0.84	
RNI4	0.95	0.90							3.07	2.12	0.83	0.82	
Customer Experience (EXP)			0.94	0.93	0.92	0.90	0.691	0.718					0.07 (ns)
EXP1	0.90	0.93							2.18	2.06	0.84	0.80	
EXP2	0.95	0.95							3.02	2.10	0.86	0.82	
EXP3	0.93	0.92							2.46	2.36	0.81	0.84	

Note: PIM = Perceived Intrinsic Motives; PEM = Perceived Extrinsic Motives; CSP = Consumer Scepticism; PEA = Perceived Entrepreneur Authenticity; SAT = Customer Satisfaction; LOY = Loyalty Intention; RNI = Resilience to Negative Information; QUL = Perceived Service Quality; EXP = Customer Experience.

2024). This statistical method permitted analysis of the important direction and strength of the time order of the group of constructs in two separate time frames. It helped develop legitimate cause-effect correlations between the constructs being studied. The CLPM is a quasi-experimental methodology offering a reliable means for regularly evaluating constructs and then determining the superiority of one construct over another for temporal precedence (Martens & Haase, 2006). We modelled temporal precedence using a two-wave CLPM in which each construct was regressed on its own prior value (stability/

autoregression) and on theoretically relevant predictors from the prior wave (cross-lags), with within-wave residuals allowed to correlate. This structure asks whether, for example, X_t improves the prediction of Y_{t+1} over and above Y_t (and other controls). Following established guidance (e.g. Finkel, 1995; Kenny, 1975; Selig & Preacher, 2009), the CLPM supports inferences about temporal ordering and predictive precedence while avoiding simple cross-sectional confounding.

We made the following standard CLPM assumptions: (1) synchrony, whereby all variables are measured at the same occasions (satisfied here

Table 3
Correlations matrix.

Panel A: Time 1 (T)									
Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. PIM (T)	0.755								
2. PEM (T)	0.316	0.832							
3. CSP (T)	0.198	0.324	0.830						
4. PEA (T)	0.056	0.177	0.417	0.708					
5. SAT (T)	0.317	0.218	0.216	0.217	0.830				
6. LOY (T)	0.163	0.189	0.229	0.445	0.446	0.787			
7. RNI (T)	0.266	0.212	0.134	0.278	0.312	0.509	0.770		
8. QUL (T)	0.119	0.389	0.521	0.390	0.227	0.420	0.456	0.819	
9. EXP (T)	0.106	0.221	0.339	0.416	0.357	0.459	0.431	0.325	0.832
Mean	3.02	2.43	2.18	3.29	2.10	2.67	2.16	2.09	2.08
Standard deviation	0.73	0.78	0.81	0.72	0.76	0.72	0.78	0.79	0.82
Panel B: Time 2 (T+1)									
Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. PIM (T+1)	0.712								
2. PEM (T+1)	0.450	0.827							
3. CSP (T+1)	0.319	0.418	0.837						
4. PEA (T+1)	0.309	0.230	0.513	0.786					
5. SAT (T+1)	0.355	0.276	0.289	0.410	0.773				
6. LOY (T+1)	0.142	0.153	0.540	0.490	0.469	0.838			
7. RNI (T+1)	0.278	0.289	0.321	0.321	0.512	0.411	0.783		
8. QUL (T+1)	0.317	0.312	0.600	0.387	0.608	0.387	0.406	0.733	
9. EXP (T+1)	0.178	0.285	0.422	0.409	0.345	0.409	0.531	0.522	0.847
Mean	2.56	2.77	2.90	3.02	2.66	2.74	2.65	2.87	2.33
Standard deviation	0.82	0.83	0.80	0.79	0.74	0.77	0.82	0.75	0.80

Note: PIM = Perceived Intrinsic Motives; PEM = Perceived Extrinsic Motives; CSP = Consumer Scepticism; PEA = Perceived Entrepreneur Authenticity; SAT = Customer Satisfaction; LOY = Loyalty Intention; RNI = Resilience to Negative Information; QUL = Perceived Service Quality; EXP = Customer Experience.

by common January waves); (2) stationarity, whereby relations are comparable across waves, we assessed this by checking the equality of corresponding paths across T and T + 1 (Wald/Fisher z tests) and by testing longitudinal measurement invariance (MICOM) for the latent constructs; (3) stability, since substantive autoregressive effects were modelled via $Y_t \rightarrow Y_{t+1}$ for all the focal variables; (4) lag sufficiency, since the chosen interval (one year) was adequate to capture the temporal effect; and (5) no omitted time-varying confounders that jointly affect predictors at t and outcomes at t_{+1} . Within-wave residual correlations absorb synchronous covariation not captured by structural paths.

In econometrics, X Granger-causes Y if the past values of X improve the prediction of Y beyond the history of Y (Granger, 1969). Our CLPM operationalises a Granger-type test by estimating $X_{t+1} \rightarrow Y_{t+2}$ while controlling Y_{t+1} (and other predictors) and by comparing this path with the reverse $Y_{t+1} \rightarrow X_{t+2}$. Where theoretically specified, we report both directions and formally compare magnitudes (Fisher's z), thereby strengthening the claim of temporal precedence. We refrain from strong causal claims because Granger-type evidence remains predictive and may be influenced by unmeasured shocks.

We implemented the CLPM in PLS-SEM by specifying the autoregressive and cross-lagged paths across waves, bootstrapping confidence intervals for direct and indirect effects, and reporting predictive metrics (Q^2) alongside structural R^2 . This choice is appropriate given distributional flexibility and our prediction focus. As a robustness check, we also conducted reverse-lag tests (e.g. $Y_{t+1} \rightarrow X_{t+2}$) and invariance diagnostics.

This study simultaneously assessed perceived intrinsic motives (PIM), perceived extrinsic motives (PEM), consumer scepticism (CSP), perceived entrepreneur authenticity (PEA), customer satisfaction (SAT), loyalty intention (LOY), perceived service quality (QUL) and resilience to negative information (RNI) at the two time intervals, T and T + 1, while accounting for control factors. This ensured that the data adhered to the principle of synchronisation. For the model to remain stationary, it must exhibit no significant temporal variations in the PIM–PEM–CSP–PEA structural model. Stability denotes the robust and enduring relationships among constructs over time, evidenced by the substantial autocorrelations of PIM, PEM, CSP and PEA from T to T + 1

(Kenny, 1975). Table 4 displays the findings of the CLPM investigation. Model A serves as the fundamental static model, illustrating the anticipated relationships between the study variables. The assessment was conducted separately for T and T + 1. All the route coefficients within the intratime associations of PIM, PEM, CSP and PEA were statistically significant. Stationarity was validated by Fisher's z test of variances (Diedenhofen & Musch, 2017). The assessment sought to analyse the route coefficients among the studied variables. The acquired z values were 1.4307 ($p = 0.22$) and 1.3280 ($p = 0.24$), respectively. Fisher's z test indicates negligible variances, reflecting a substantial degree of stationarity.

Model B functions as the baseline model when the variables at time T display autocorrelation with the values at T + 1. The current model demonstrates the autoregressive trajectories, signifying the stability of the constructs incorporated in the study (Selig & Preacher, 2009). The last three models are cross-lagged models that demonstrate the stability of the constructs by incrementally incorporating components to forecast the dependent variables at T + 1. The cross-lagged structural models illustrate how one construct can influence or cause another construct over time (Martens & Haase, 2006). Model E is the most sophisticated iteration within the CLPM, encompassing both baseline models and the cross-lagged influences of the constructs at T on the constructs at T + 1. The model had satisfactory goodness-of-fit indices, indicating it possessed acceptable predictive capability for evaluating the hypotheses.

5.2. Results for relationships between constructs (H1–H7)

The CLPM results indicate a statistically significant positive correlation between PIM1 and CSP2 ($b = 0.31^{**}$), with a medium effect size of 0.20. The correlation between CSP1 and PIM2 is modest and statistically insignificant, with a coefficient of 0.08. The Fisher's z value of 4.202 ($p = 0.001$) signifies that the beta coefficient for the correlation between PIM1 and CSP2 is substantially bigger than that for the relationship between CSP1 and PIM2. As H1a predicted a negative effect (i. e., reduced scepticism), this finding is contrary to expectations, and therefore H1a is not supported. Interestingly, the positive coefficient

Table 4

Baseline stationary, stability and cross-lagged models.

Model	Direct path (From → To)	β	Effect size (f^2)	r^2	Q^2
A: Baseline stationary model					
A	PIM1 → CSP1	0.23**	0.22	0.29	0.29
A	CSP1 → PEA1	0.41**	0.31	0.37	0.37
A	PIM2 → CSP2	0.52**	0.19	0.21	0.21
A	CSP2 → PEA2	0.39*	0.22	0.26	0.25
A	PEM1 → CSP1	0.44**	0.21	0.27	0.27
A	CSP1 → PEA1	0.61**	0.32	0.41	0.41
A	PEM2 → CSP2	0.57**	0.26	0.33	0.33
A	CSP2 → PEA2	0.33*	0.22	0.27	0.27
A	CSP1 → PEA1	0.51**	0.42	0.51	0.51
A	PEA1 → SAT1	0.22**	0.20	0.27	0.26
A	PEA1 → LOY1	0.41**	0.29	0.34	0.34
A	PEA1 → QUL1	0.38*	0.24	0.22	0.22
A	PEA1 → RNI1	0.33**	0.23	0.26	0.26
A	CSP2 → PEA2	0.41**	0.32	0.36	0.36
A	PEA2 → SAT2	0.57**	0.20	0.23	0.22
A	PEA2 → LOY2	0.49*	0.29	0.42	0.42
A	PEA2 → QUL2	0.21**	0.22	0.28	0.28
A	PEA2 → RNI2	0.42**	0.31	0.42	0.43
A	QUL1 → SAT	0.28*	0.23	0.22	0.26
A	QUL2 → SAT2	0.47**	0.42	0.45	0.46
A	SAT1 → LOY1	0.33**	0.28	0.31	0.32
A	SAT2 → LOY2	0.21*	0.16	0.20	0.21
APC = 0.826*; ARS = 0.618*; AVIF = 2.617; GoF = 0.792; SPR = 1.00; NLBCDR = 1.00					
B: Baseline stability model					
B	PIM1 → PIM2	0.44**	0.21	0.34	0.34
B	PEM1 → PEM2	0.47**	0.32	0.42	0.42
B	CSP1 → CSP2	0.31**	0.39	0.37	0.37
B	PEA1 → PEA2	0.33**	0.43	0.38	0.38
B	SAT1 → SAT2	0.45**	0.62	0.53	0.53
B	LOY1 → LOY2	0.32**	0.29	0.39	0.39
B	QUL1 → QUL2	0.38**	0.34	0.42	0.43
B	RIN1 → RIN2	0.52**	0.41	0.33	0.33
B		0.33**	0.28	0.49	0.49
APC = 0.693*; ARS = 0.518*; AVIF = 2.733; GoF = 0.627; SPR = 1.00; NLBCDR = 1.00					
C: Cross-lagged PIM					
C	PIM1 → PIM2	0.43**	0.19	0.22	0.22
C	CSP1 → CSP2	0.58**	0.32	0.31	0.31
C	PEA1 → PEA2	0.39**	0.21	0.30	0.30
C	PIM1 → CSP2	0.31**	0.20	0.27	0.27
C	PIM1 → PEA2	0.52**	0.41	0.43	0.43
C	PEM1 → PEM2	0.45**	0.33	0.37	0.37
C	CSP1 → CSP2	0.51**	0.21	0.44	0.44
C	PEA1 → PEA2	0.32**	0.22	0.27	0.27
C	PEM1 → CSP2	0.35**	0.24	0.24	0.24
C	PEM1 → PEA2	0.47**	0.35	0.33	0.33
APC = 0.601*; ARS = 0.499*; AVIF = 2.729; GoF = 0.618; SPR = 1.00; NLBCDR = 1.00					
D: Cross-lagged PIM and CSP					
D	PIM1 → PIM2	0.35**	0.21	0.20	0.20
D	CSP1 → CSP2	0.29**	0.20	0.18	0.18
D	PEA1 → PEA2	0.31**	0.25	0.21	0.21
D	PIM1 → CSP2	0.24**	0.20	0.19	0.19
D	PIM1 → PEA2	0.43**	0.38	0.33	0.33
D	CSP1 → PIM2	0.06 ns	0.05	0.06	0.06
D	PEM1 → PEA2	0.22**	0.19	0.18	0.18
D	PEM1 → PEM2	0.45**	0.38	0.34	0.34
D	CSP1 → CSP2	0.41**	0.35	0.32	0.32
D	PEA1 → PEA2	0.32**	0.24	0.22	0.22
D	PEM1 → CSP2	0.44**	0.33	0.26	0.26
D	PEM1 → PEA2	0.28**	0.21	0.18	0.18
D	CSP1 → PEM2	0.41**	0.36	0.31	0.31
D	PEM1 → PEA2	0.48**	0.39	0.32	0.32
APC = 0.574*; ARS = 0.421*; AVIF = 3.294; GoF = 0.582; SPR = 1.00; NLBCDR = 1.00					
E: Final cross-lagged PIM, CSP and PEA					
E	PIM1 → PIM2	0.21**	0.19	0.20	0.20
E	CSP1 → CSP2	0.22**	0.14	0.18	0.18
E	PEA1 → PEA2	0.20**	0.16	0.19	0.19
E	PIM1 → CSP2	0.42**	0.32	0.36	0.36

Table 4 (continued)

Model	Direct path (From → To)	β	Effect size (f^2)	r^2	Q^2
E	PIM1 → PEA2	0.45**	0.31	0.39	0.39
E	CSP1 → PIM2	0.08 ns	0.06	0.07	0.07
E	PEM1 → PEA2	0.33**	0.21	0.30	0.30
E	PEM1 → PEM2	0.26**	0.20	0.21	0.21
E	CSP1 → CSP2	0.31**	0.28	0.29	0.29
E	PEA1 → PEA2	0.24**	0.20	0.22	0.22
E	PEM1 → CSP2	0.41**	0.32	0.37	0.37
E	PEM1 → PEA2	0.47**	0.36	0.39	0.39
E	CSP1 → PEM2	0.23**	0.18	0.21	0.21
E	PEM1 → PEA2	0.34**	0.31	0.30	0.30
E	PEA1 → PIM2	0.11 ns	0.13	0.13	0.14
E	PEA1 → PEM2	0.09 ns	0.08	0.09	0.09
E	PEA1 → CSP2	0.08 ns	0.07	0.07	0.07
APC = 0.472*; ARS = 0.389*; AVIF = 3.28; GoF = 0.499; SPR = 1.00; NLBCDR = 1.00					

Note: APC = average path coefficients; ARS = average r-squared; AVIF = average variance inflation factor; NLBCDR = non-linear bivariate causality direction ratio; Q^2 = Stone-Geisser q-squared; r^2 = r-squared; SPR = Simpson's Paradox Ratio; Tenenhaus' GoF = goodness-of-fit. Cohen's f^2 (Cohen, 1992): small = 0.20, medium = 0.50, large = 0.80. ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ns = not significant.

suggests that higher perceived intrinsic motives are associated with higher, rather than lower, scepticism over time. This unexpected pattern is discussed in Section 6.

The CLPM results indicate a statistically significant positive correlation between PEM1 and CSP2 ($b = 0.35^{**}$), with a medium effect size of 0.24. The correlation between CSP1 and PEM2 is modest and statistically insignificant, with a coefficient of 0.06. The Fisher's z value of 3.019 ($p = 0.001$) signifies that the beta coefficient for the correlation between PEM1 and CSP2 is substantially bigger than that for the relationship between CSP1 and PEM2. This observation supports the hypothesis that PEM positively affects CSP, confirming H1b.

PIM1 demonstrates a statistically significant beneficial effect on PEA2 ($b = 0.52^{**}$), indicating a considerable effect size. In contrast, PEA1 exerts little effect on PIM2 ($b = 0.11$), indicating a minimal effect size. The Fisher's z value of 1.0627 ($p > 0.05$) substantiates the temporal superiority of PIM over PEA, hence validating hypothesis H2a. In addition, PEM1 demonstrates a statistically significant beneficial effect on PEA2 ($b = 0.28^{**}$), indicating a considerable effect size. In contrast, PEA1 exerts little effect on PEM2 ($b = 0.09$), indicating a minimal effect size. The Fisher's z value of 1.0627 ($p > 0.05$) substantiates the temporal superiority of PEM over PEA, validating hypothesis H2b.

The results indicate that CSP1 exerts a statistically significant effect on PEA2 ($b = 0.61^{**}$), reflecting a considerable effect size. No substantial connection exists between PEA1 and CSP2 ($b = 0.08$). The Fisher's z value of 1.289 ($p > 0.05$) corroborates the temporal supremacy of CSP over PEA, hence validating hypothesis H3. Moreover, the results indicate that PEA1 and PEA2 exert a statistically significant effect on SAT1 and SAT2 ($b = 0.34^{**}$, 28^{**}), respectively. In addition, they demonstrate that PEA1 and PEA2 exert a statistically significant effect on LOY1 and LOY2 ($b = 0.44^{**}$, 51^{**}), respectively. PEA1 and PEA2 exert a statistically significant effect on QUL1 and QUL2 ($b = 0.21^{**}$, 19^{**}), respectively. PEA1 and PEA2 have a significant impact on RNI1 and RNI2 ($b = 0.48^{**}$, 56^{**}), respectively. Therefore, perceived entrepreneur authenticity was found to have a significant effect on customer mindset metrics (i.e. customer satisfaction, loyalty and perceived service quality) as well as on resilience to negative information, thus supporting H4, H5, H6 and H7, respectively.

5.3. Results for mediating role of scepticism and moderating role of previous experience (H8–H10)

Models A and B in Table 5 illustrate the mediating function of CSP. These models demonstrate the direct and indirect effects of PIM and PEM on PEA. The mediating effects of CSP are investigated at both T and

Table 5
Testing for mediating effect.

Model	Effect type	Path / Effect	β	Effect size (f^2)	r^2	Q^2
A: Time 1 model						
A	Direct	PIM1 $\rightarrow$ CSP1	0.34**	0.23	0.31	0.31
A	Direct	PIM1 $\rightarrow$ PEA1	0.29**	0.22	0.24	0.24
A	Direct	PEM1 $\rightarrow$ CSP1	0.46**	0.41	0.45	0.45
A	Direct	PEM1 $\rightarrow$ PEA1	0.37**	0.32	0.33	0.33
A	Direct	CSP1 $\rightarrow$ PEA1	0.52**	0.44	0.49	0.49
A	Indirect	PIM1 $\rightarrow$ CSP1 $\rightarrow$ PEA1	0.26**	0.22	0.23	0.23
A	Indirect	PEM1 $\rightarrow$ CSP1 $\rightarrow$ PEA1	0.21**	0.19	0.21	0.20
A	Indirect	QUL1 $\rightarrow$ SAT1 $\rightarrow$ LOY1	0.18**	0.14	0.18	0.16
A	Total	PIM1 $\rightarrow$ CSP1 $\rightarrow$ PEA1	0.34**	0.31	0.29	0.29
A	Total	PEM1 $\rightarrow$ CSP1 $\rightarrow$ PEA1	0.24**	0.22	0.24	0.23
A	Total	QUL1 $\rightarrow$ SAT1 $\rightarrow$ LOY1	0.21**	0.20	0.21	0.20
APC = 0.621*; ARS = 0.516*; AVIF = 2.938; GoF = 0.517; SPR = 1.00; NLBCDR = 1.00						
B: Time 2 model						
B	Direct	PIM2 $\rightarrow$ CSP2	0.34**	0.22	0.26	0.26
B	Direct	PIM2 $\rightarrow$ PEA2	0.29**	0.21	0.23	0.23
B	Direct	PEM2 $\rightarrow$ CSP2	0.46**	0.39	0.42	0.42
B	Direct	PEM2 $\rightarrow$ PEA2	0.37**	0.30	0.32	0.32
B	Direct	CSP2 $\rightarrow$ PEA2	0.52**	0.41	0.44	0.44
B	Indirect	PIM2 $\rightarrow$ CSP2 $\rightarrow$ PEA2	0.26**	0.20	0.25	0.25
B	Indirect	PEM2 $\rightarrow$ CSP2 $\rightarrow$ PEA2	0.21**	0.16	0.19	0.19
B	Indirect	QUL2 $\rightarrow$ SAT2 $\rightarrow$ LOY2	0.16**	0.14	0.15	0.15
B	Total	PIM2 $\rightarrow$ CSP2 $\rightarrow$ PEA2	0.34**	0.23	0.30	0.30
B	Total	PEM2 $\rightarrow$ CSP2 $\rightarrow$ PEA2	0.24**	0.20	0.22	0.22
B	Total	QUL2 $\rightarrow$ SAT2 $\rightarrow$ LOY2	0.19**	0.17	0.18	0.18
APC = 0.526*; ARS = 0.499*; AVIF = 3.251; GoF = 0.473; SPR = 1.00; NLBCDR = 1.00						
C: Time 1 and 2 models						
C	Direct	PIM1 $\rightarrow$ PEA2	0.39**	0.31	0.32	0.32
C	Direct	PIM1 $\rightarrow$ CSP2	0.31**	0.28	0.29	0.29
C	Direct	PEM1 $\rightarrow$ PEA2	0.51**	0.47	0.49	0.49
C	Direct	PEM1 $\rightarrow$ CSP2	0.42**	0.35	0.32	0.35
C	Direct	CSP2 $\rightarrow$ PEA2	0.58**	0.51	0.47	0.47
C	Indirect	PIM1 $\rightarrow$ CSP2 $\rightarrow$ PEA2	0.32**	0.26	0.28	0.28
C	Indirect	PEM1 $\rightarrow$ CSP2 $\rightarrow$ PEA2	0.27**	0.24	0.27	0.27
C	Total	PIM1 $\rightarrow$ CSP2 $\rightarrow$ PEA2	0.36**	0.31	0.29	0.30
C	Total	PEM1 $\rightarrow$ CSP2 $\rightarrow$ PEA2	0.32**	0.27	0.25	0.26
APC = 0.516*; ARS = 0.463*; AVIF = 3.526; GoF = 0.469; SPR = 1.00; NLBCDR = 1.00						

Note: ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ns = not significant.

T + 1. The findings from T and T + 1 indicate that CSP exerts a considerable mediating effect on the relationship between PIM and PEM concerning PEA, but this effect is only partial. Model C exhibits partial mediating roles, as evidenced by the examination of T and T + 1, utilising the methodology established by Selig and Preacher (2009) and Cole and Maxwell (2003). Model C indicates that PIM1 has a statistically significant beneficial effect on both CSP2 and PEA2. The favourable and substantial indirect effects of PIM1 on PEA2 are demonstrated via the mediating function of CSP2. The goodness-of-fit scores demonstrate that the mediated models possess adequate predictive statistical power. Consequently, the empirical evidence supporting H8 is limited, as the data offers only partial endorsement for mediation when integrated into the structural models. This partial mediation suggests that there may be

extraneous variables outside the scope of the study that could explain the effects of PIM and PEM on PEA. Partial mediation frequently arises in the domain of social sciences and quasi-experimental research. This is mainly attributable to the intrinsic constraints in attaining total control and complete separation of the focal constructs from any potentially influencing variables. These limits are generally surmountable only in experimental laboratory environments (MacKinnon et al., 2002). Furthermore, our analysis indicated that none of the control variables influenced PEA. Moreover, the analysis also indicated that previous experience moderated the link between perceived intrinsic motives and consumer scepticism ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H9. However, previous experience did not moderate the relationship between extrinsic motives and consumer scepticism ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.109$). Therefore, H10 was rejected. Table 6 summarises the key structural paths tested in the model, including the standardised coefficients and the decision for each hypothesis. It provides a clear overview of the relationships supported by the longitudinal analysis, highlighting both significant and non-significant effects. Additionally, Fig. 2 presents the annotated structural model, displaying all hypothesised paths along with their corresponding standardised coefficients and significance levels.

5.4. Robustness tests

Several robustness checks were conducted, as shown in Table 7. First, we tested the effect of perceived entrepreneur authenticity on the customer mindset metrics and resilience to negative information with perceived motives, consumer scepticism and previous experience removed from our model. The analysis revealed the same or stronger significance levels.

6. Discussion

Studying end-consumers' perceptions of motives and authenticity has yielded valuable insights into how customer-entrepreneurs are regarded by their target consumers, rather than by themselves. Our integration of SEM and longitudinal analysis to investigate such complex relationships enables a comprehensive examination of both the structural relationships among variables and their changes over time, enhancing the robustness and validity of the findings. Significantly, our findings confirm that some of the patterns identified in prior research on celebrity endorsers and influencers, for example, that customers are increasingly aware of persuasion methods and questioning of the motives behind them (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Feijoo et al., 2023), also apply to customer-entrepreneurs. We have shed useful light on the evaluation

Table 6
Structural model results.

Hypothesis	Path / Effect	β (standardised)	Decision
H1b	PEM $\rightarrow$ CSP	0.35**	Accepted
H1a	PIM $\rightarrow$ CSP	0.31**	Rejected (direction opposite predicted)
H3	CSP $\rightarrow$ PEA	0.61**	Accepted
H2a	PIM $\rightarrow$ PEA	0.52**	Accepted
H2b	PEM $\rightarrow$ PEA	0.28**	Accepted
H4	PEA $\rightarrow$ SAT	0.34**	Accepted
H5	PEA $\rightarrow$ LOY	0.44**	Accepted
H6	PEA $\rightarrow$ QUL	0.21**	Accepted
H7	PEA $\rightarrow$ RNI	0.48**	Accepted
H8	PIM/PEM $\rightarrow$ CSP $\rightarrow$ PEA (mediation)	—	Partially supported
H9	EXP $\times$ PIM $\rightarrow$ CSP	0.12*	Supported
H10	EXP $\times$ PEM $\rightarrow$ CSP	0.08 (ns)	Rejected

Note: β values are standardised path coefficients. ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ns = not significant. H8 refers to an indirect (mediated) effect; therefore, no single β is reported, but the indirect paths via CSP were statistically significant (partial mediation).

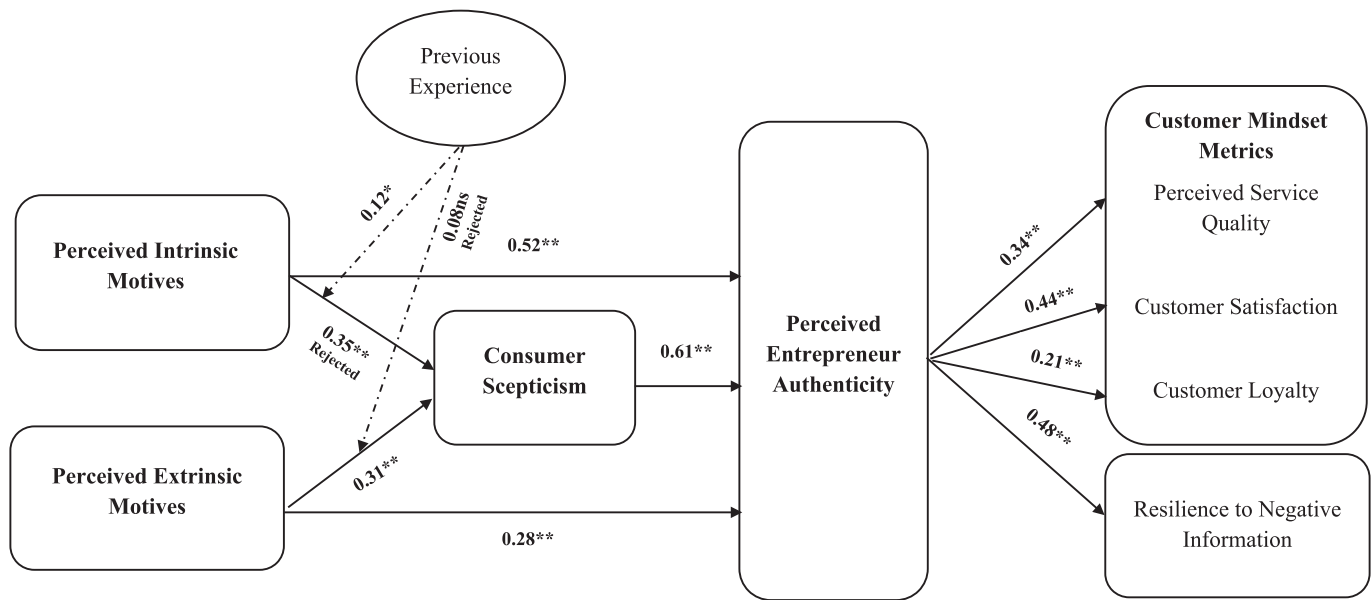


Fig. 2. Structural model results.

Table 7

Robustness check for the effect of perceived customer-entrepreneur authenticity on CMMs and RNI, with perceived motives, consumer scepticism, and previous experience removed from our model.

Predictors	Model 1: Customer satisfaction	Model 2: Customer loyalty	Model 3: Perceived service quality	Model 4: Resilience to negative information
	Coefficient (SE)	Coefficient (SE)	Coefficient (SE)	Coefficient (SE)
Perceived entrepreneur authenticity	0.291*** (0.043)	0.410*** (0.071)	0.21*** (0.023)	0.243*** (0.018)
Controls				
Age	0.108* (0.018)	0.144** (0.012)	0.071 (0.382)	0.131** (0.014)
Gender	0.194** (0.015)	0.012 (0.316)	0.127** (0.024)	0.210*** (0.038)
Education	0.062 (0.519)	0.004 (0.608)	0.038 (0.559)	0.050 (0.416)
Income	0.380*** (0.012)	0.184** (0.067)	0.319*** (0.015)	0.217*** (0.019)
	0.089 (0.316)	0.040 (0.335)	0.071 (0.228)	0.063 (0.289)
Constant	5.340*** (0.043)	0.316*** (0.072)	0.446*** (0.026)	0.237*** (0.013)
Overall R ²	0.387	0.206	0.219	0.210
-2 log likelihood	-4391.230	-3128.356	-3849.422	-3284.410

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

*** p < 0.001.

** p < 0.01.

* p < 0.05.

process by which end-consumers assess the perceived motives of customer-entrepreneurs and the outcomes for attitudes and behaviour.

While our study focuses specifically on end-consumers' perceptions of customer-entrepreneurs, several of our findings chime with prior results in different contexts. For example, our findings that extrinsic motive attributions trigger or heighten end consumers' scepticism towards customer-entrepreneurs, accord with earlier findings on CSR initiatives (Ro & Kang, 2024; Romani et al., 2016; Skarmas & Leonidou, 2013) that showed a positive relationship between perceived

extrinsic motives and increased scepticism. Contrary to expectations, our study indicated that intrinsic motives were associated with increased scepticism over time. One possible explanation is that consumers may interpret expressions of intrinsic enthusiasm as strategic self-presentation rather than genuine passion, especially in commercialised platform environments. This finding needs further investigation in future research. In addition, our results echo the findings of Lins et al. (2024), who found that consumers' mistrust increased when they doubted others' motives, inferring manipulative intent, and Vannucci et al. (2023), who identified increased scepticism among consumers who ascribed negative ulterior motives or exploitative intent to a firm, regarding it as self-serving. Moreover, Chen et al. (2023) found that consumers were increasingly sceptical in line with increased beliefs that the firm was acting in its own interests, resulting in less favourable attitudes and behaviours.

Similarly, our findings that end-consumers' attributions of extrinsic motives to customer-entrepreneurs lower the level of perceived authenticity, while perceived intrinsic motives increase perceived authenticity, are consistent with the results of prior studies. For example, Jung et al. (2024) found that perceived intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation enhanced perceived authenticity. Similar findings have been reported in the brand authenticity context. A positive link between perceptions of a firm's intrinsic motivation and increased perceptions of authenticity was also found by Cinelli and LeBoeuf (2019), Moulard et al. (2021) and Rixom and Rixom (2023). Conversely, when consumers infer profit-driven motives, brands' authenticity is damaged (Wallach & Popovich, 2023). Similar links have also been found in research on the perceived authenticity of social media influencers (e.g. Audrezet et al., 2020; Znova et al., 2023).

In addition, our empirical findings that end-consumer scepticism exerts a direct deleterious influence on attributions of customer-entrepreneur authenticity, and that the greater the level of the scepticism, the lower the perceived authenticity, are consistent with earlier results. For example, Lunardo (2012) found that more sceptical individuals expressed more negative beliefs about the honesty of advertising and the integrity of the retailer, while Romani et al. (2016) concluded that the greater the level of scepticism, the less favourable the consumer response towards a company's CSR initiative. Additionally, consumer scepticism has previously been shown to have a direct negative impact on perceived credibility (Román et al., 2023) and perceived brand ethicality (Sansome et al., 2024).

Another significant new finding is the mediating role of scepticism in the relationship between perceived motives and perceived authenticity, since our results suggest that end-consumers' scepticism partially mediates the relationship between the perceived motives and perceived authenticity of customer-entrepreneurs. In line with our proposed model, we demonstrate a mechanism whereby perceived extrinsic motives trigger end-consumers' scepticism, which in turn leads them to negatively perceive the authenticity of customer-entrepreneurs. Similar relationships have been noted in other studies. For example, [Lins et al. \(2024\)](#) found that sceptical consumers tended to question all aspects of a situation, including the motives of the agent trying to persuade them and the authenticity of their claims, while [Walter et al. \(2024\)](#) identified that when self-serving motives were more evident, consumer scepticism intensified the adverse effect of this perceived inauthenticity on their attitudes. Moreover, in the CSR context, [Romani et al. \(2016\)](#) found that scepticism mediated the relationship between the motives ascribed to CSR initiatives and consumer behavioural responses. Our findings build on this earlier work, demonstrating the mediating role of scepticism in the relationship between perceived motives and perceived authenticity, specifically in the field of customer entrepreneurship.

Moreover, our empirical findings demonstrating the positive effect of end-consumers' perceptions of customer-entrepreneurs' authenticity on their levels of satisfaction, loyalty intention and perceived service quality, as well as on resilience to negative information, are consistent with earlier studies. For example, [Busser and Shulga \(2019\)](#) found that perceptions of brand authenticity had a strong positive impact on consumer loyalty, [Gountas et al. \(2007\)](#) found that consumers' perception of authentic service providers positively influenced service satisfaction and [Jones et al. \(2022\)](#) found that increased authenticity drove engagement, loyalty and satisfaction. We add empirical insights in the customer entrepreneurship context, showing that perceived authenticity has a significant effect on perceived service quality and resilience to negative information.

Our analysis resulted in interesting findings regarding the moderating effect of end-consumers' previous experience of the customer-entrepreneur: that the influence of perceived intrinsic motives on scepticism is greater among consumers with previous experience. However, when it comes to the positive impact of perceived extrinsic motives on scepticism, this relationship is not affected by whether or not the end-consumer has had a previous experience. In other words, if end-consumers perceive a customer-entrepreneur's motives as purely self-serving, they will be highly sceptical towards that customer-entrepreneur, regardless of any previous experience.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that contextual factors, such as accessibility, may shape consumer decisions and consumer-seller dynamics in ways not fully captured in our model; [Park et al. \(2021a\)](#) touched on this issue as one of the variables that may influence consumers' choices of purchasing channels. These choices are influenced by a range of preference attributes, among which product accessibility plays a critical role ([Park et al., 2021a](#)). Product accessibility refers to the ease with which consumers can acquire and use products ([Sinha & Sheth, 2018](#)). When official distribution channels are unavailable or limited in certain home markets, end-consumers may turn to customer-entrepreneurs as an alternative means of obtaining desired products or services, since this accessibility may address unmet demand and enhance consumer convenience. While personal authenticity is often a valued trait in consumer-seller relationships ([Kim & Kim, 2021](#)), its influence may diminish in contexts where product accessibility is limited. In such cases, end-consumers may pragmatically opt to engage with customer-entrepreneurs who provide greater access to desired goods, even if these sellers are perceived as less personally authentic. This reflects a situational trade-off in which utilitarian attributes, such as accessibility, may outweigh relational or affective cues, particularly in low-involvement or scarcity-driven contexts ([Ostrom & Lacobucci, 1995](#)). Thus, while not originally incorporated into our model, accessibility complements the discussion of our findings by highlighting how

contextual constraints can alter the weight of relational attributes in consumer decision-making.

7. Conclusions

This research builds on the prior literature on customer entrepreneurship by exploring the topic from the perspective of end-consumers. The results yield important novel insights into the mechanisms driving consumers' perceptions of motive and authenticity, the formation or suppression of scepticism and the outcomes for desired attitudes and behaviour such as satisfaction, loyalty intention, perceived service quality and resilience to negative information. Specifically, we demonstrate that end-consumers' perceptions of customer-entrepreneurs' motives as extrinsic will trigger scepticism. Our findings also show that perceived motives have an effect on the customer-entrepreneurs' perceived authenticity. The model also sheds light on several important but previously overlooked outcomes of perceived authenticity, namely on the three key customer mindset metrics studied (customer satisfaction, loyalty intention and perceived service quality) as well as on resilience to negative information. We also show that scepticism partially mediates the relationship between perceived motives and perceived authenticity, and that end-consumers' previous experience moderates the relationship between perceived intrinsic motives and consumer scepticism. These findings have significant implications for both theory and practice.

7.1. Theoretical implications

Our research makes several contributions to the marketing, psychology and entrepreneurship literature. Firstly, the limited prior literature on customer entrepreneurship has viewed the topic from the standpoint of firms ([Park et al., 2021b](#)), customer-entrepreneurs ([Miao et al., 2022](#)) and platform providers ([Park et al., 2021a](#)), as well as using an economic and sociological perspective ([Liljenberg, 2005](#)). We build on this research by investigating the topic from a distinctive perspective, that of end-consumers.

In addition, we extend knowledge on consumer perceptions of motivation. Most prior research on perceived motives, even in the marketing literature, has focused on celebrity endorsers and social media influencers (e.g. [Aw & Chuah, 2021](#); [Shan et al., 2019](#)), with little focus on individuals' assessments of non-celebrity personas' motives and the outcomes of these perceptions. In shedding light on the previously untested mechanism of end-consumers' perceptions of customer-entrepreneurs' motivations, we also address an under exploration of perceived motivation in the general field of entrepreneurship.

We also strengthen the literature by demonstrating how consumers' attribution of intrinsic or extrinsic motives to customer-entrepreneurs impacts their level of scepticism. Consumer scepticism has been studied widely in the CSR context (e.g. [Forehand & Grier, 2003](#); [Romani et al., 2016](#); [Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013](#); [Zhang & Hanks, 2017](#)), but there is a dearth of studies exploring it in entrepreneurship, especially in customer entrepreneurship. Moreover, prior research on scepticism has paid little attention to the perceived motives of marketers as possible antecedents. The few earlier studies to broach this topic were also mainly in the CSR field (e.g. [Forehand & Grier, 2003](#); [Romani et al., 2016](#)). Additionally, this research identifies consumer scepticism as a subprocess driving the way in which ascribed motives affect perceptions of authenticity. This mediating role of scepticism is important. We thus extend knowledge on consumer scepticism by recognising its importance as an outcome and by revealing it as a previously unrecognised antecedent variable.

Our research fills another gap in knowledge on how individual authenticity is gauged in the marketing context, which has been generally overlooked in prior authenticity research. Understanding how consumers form their perceptions of the authenticity of other individuals, particularly of non-celebrity personas, i.e. when they do not

know the person, as recommended by Moulard et al. (2015), is thus a significant contribution to knowledge. Specifically, our results shed light on the constructs that shape and influence perceived authenticity in customer entrepreneurship settings.

Another distinctive contribution lies in our empirical investigation of the mechanism by which perceived authenticity may be connected to consumers' attitudes and behavioural intentions. We significantly advance understanding of this process by examining not just the antecedents of perceived authenticity (i.e. perceptions of customer-entrepreneurs' motives and end-consumers' resultant scepticism, as discussed above) but also the outcomes, namely customer satisfaction, customer loyalty intention, perceived service quality and resilience to negative information.

We also believe our study makes a novel contribution by shedding light on the moderating role of prior experience in the relationship between perceived motives and scepticism in the marketing and entrepreneurship fields. Previously, it was marketing and auditing scholars who had paid the most attention to the influence of previous experience (Kerler III & Killough, 2009; Popova, 2013; Rose, 2007; Shaub, 1996).

Another valuable theoretical contribution to consumer behaviour research lies in our adoption of a longitudinal perspective, specifically concerning the construct of perceived authenticity and its influence on pivotal outcomes such as satisfaction, loyalty and ability to withstand negative information. By analysing the temporal evolution of consumer perceptions of entrepreneurs' motives and authenticity, the research addresses the shortcomings of conventional cross-sectional methodologies that overlook changes over time. Our findings thus highlight the dynamic interplay between consumers' past experiences and changing attitudes, offering a richer understanding of how perceptions are formed and developed. This temporal approach enriches existing theoretical frameworks by integrating the dimension of time, highlighting its critical role in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviours. The longitudinal design thus advances theory in customer-entrepreneurship by establishing temporal ordering among motives, scepticism, authenticity and downstream mindset metrics. By tracking the same consumers across waves, the design separates relatively stable traits (baseline scepticism or brand affinity) from within-person change induced by exposure to specific customer-entrepreneur signals. This reduces confounding from unobserved heterogeneity and clarifies whether perceived intrinsic versus extrinsic motives prospectively shape authenticity, rather than simply covarying with it. Longitudinal data also permit tests of mediation as a process, for example, whether scepticism accumulates and partially carries the effect of motive attributions to authenticity, through cross-lagged or latent change specifications.

Moreover, time-lapse observation allows researchers to model decay and persistence, revealing whether authenticity's effects on satisfaction, loyalty intentions, service quality and resilience to negative information endure or fade. The approach further illuminates boundary conditions: prior experience can be conceptualised as a history-dependent moderator whose influence strengthens or weakens paths as consumers learn. Finally, it also enables testing for reciprocal effects, such as authenticity reducing future scepticism, enhancing theoretical precision substantively.

In addition, our exploration of the links between perceived authenticity and the selected customer mindset metrics advances theory in three complementary ways. Firstly, it repositions authenticity from a downstream label to an upstream evaluative schema that organises the canonical cognitive-affective-conative sequence: aspects such as authenticity cues, accuracy, integrity and proficiency enhance the credibility of service claims, thereby shaping cognitive judgments of quality, which enhance satisfaction and ultimately lead to loyalty intentions. Secondly, it integrates attributional and signalling accounts by showing that when entrepreneurs are perceived as intrinsically motivated, authenticity operates as a combined credibility/identity signal that dampens persuasion-knowledge activation and attributional discounting, strengthening the translation of perceived performance into

affective and conative outcomes. Thirdly, it extends brand-authenticity theorising to commerce conducted by non-celebrity persona, clarifying that the "who" behind an offer affects the formation of customer mindset metrics.

Finally, the novelty of our work is reinforced by our integration of attribution theory, selected as our core framework for its explanatory relevance, with the ELM, which clarifies how motive attributions may act as cues in low-elaboration contexts. This complementary approach better accounts for consumers' sustained judgements about motives and authenticity over time, since the ELM was designed to explain how individuals process specific persuasive messages, typically over short timeframes, and how this affects immediate attitude formation or change. While robust for understanding message-based persuasion, its scope is more limited in addressing long-term attitudinal development, relational dynamics or attributional inference processes, which are central to our study. This hybrid approach also extends the ELM's application by showing that attributional inferences act as preconditions for how consumers evaluate message sources (i.e. customer-entrepreneurs) over time. In traditional ELM use, persuasion outcomes hinge on whether individuals process messages through the central route (high involvement) or the peripheral route (low involvement) (Petty et al., 1983). Our findings develop this knowledge by demonstrating that consumers' attribution of intrinsic vs. extrinsic motives functions as a heuristic cue that influences downstream scepticism and authenticity judgements, particularly where message elaboration is minimal (peripheral processing). Moreover, our longitudinal design shows how attribution-based inferences persist and evolve, affecting consumer-entrepreneur relationships across time, extending the ELM's typically short-term focus.

7.2. Practical implications

In addition to these contributions to theory, this research provides valuable insights for customer-entrepreneurs, marketing practitioners, managers, firms, brands and policymakers, with specific implications for enhancing authenticity. These contributions are highly relevant in an environment in which the importance of authenticity is increasingly being recognised (Nunes et al., 2021).

7.2.1. Implications for customer-entrepreneurs

Based on our findings, customer-entrepreneurs now have an initial roadmap regarding the process and mechanisms of how end-consumers' perceptions of motives affect their scepticism levels, the onward effect on perceptions of authenticity and the outcomes for satisfaction, loyalty intention, perceived service quality and resilience to negative information. By demonstrating this process, we show managers and customer-entrepreneurs the importance of adopting strategies to minimise scepticism (Romani et al., 2016; Skarneas & Leonidou, 2013). This is crucial, since customer-entrepreneurs can also be affected by the growing consumer awareness of the persuasion tactics used by celebrity endorsers and influencers and increasing doubts about the motives for such marketing attempts (Aw & Chuah, 2021). Our results thus demonstrate the vital importance of monitoring end-consumers' inferences of customer-entrepreneurs' motives. Customer-entrepreneurs should try to manage how their motives are being perceived as part of the efforts to avert scepticism, e.g. by striving to reduce attributions of extrinsic motives, since this may fuel scepticism. This will increase their chances of being perceived as authentic, enhancing attitudinal and behavioural outcomes.

Indeed, our findings highlight that customer-entrepreneurs should consider positive attributions of their motives and authenticity as the cornerstone for building successful marketing strategies. Relevant strategies could include exercising caution about reporting partnerships or other influences that underpin their commercial activities, while continuing to produce non-commercial content about other brands they strongly admire (Audrezet et al., 2020) as a way of communicating their

motives as not self-serving motives. They could also seek to form close relationships with end-consumers through relationship-orientated metrics such as sentiment (Arora et al., 2019) to counteract perceptions of self-serving motives, a process made possible by the unprecedented intense interactions and connections that can be formed online, for the sake of developing psychological ties with end-consumers (Aw & Chuah, 2021). Customer-entrepreneurs may thus succeed in developing a reputation for authenticity through consistent behaviours (Morhart et al., 2015) rather than by simply claiming to be authentic, which accords with our findings regarding the positive relationship between perceived authenticity and perceived intrinsic motivations. Importantly, our results also highlight the need for care in how brand marketers and customer-entrepreneurs craft social media content, their main bridge of communication with end-consumers, since the effective presentation of messages is key to perception, and excessive scepticism may deter consumers from genuine offers, especially if there is cognitive constraint (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). Our results also encourage customer-entrepreneurs to better understand the role of end-consumers' previous experience, since we show that even satisfactory prior experiences do not decrease end-users' scepticism of entrepreneurs whose motives are perceived to be highly extrinsic; this further highlights the need to manage end-consumers' inferences of motives.

Based on our findings, customer-entrepreneurs should integrate a set of proactive measures into the customer's journey to anticipate and overcome scepticism, establishing friction-free trust that maintains momentum towards purchasing. This is possible through the establishment of high-profile visibility of social proof measures like customer reviews, case studies and endorsements in order to build peer-backed credibility; honest communication by addressing common concerns directly in Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), product descriptions and videos instead of waiting for customers to ask; and visibility through live chats, video demonstrations or interactive Q&A sessions where customers can see and engage with the entrepreneur. Such tactics can reduce hesitation and enhance perceived authenticity. Customer-entrepreneurs can also use an authenticity scorecard, a transparent, open metric that they can share publicly on their website, social media or product pages, to show that they value honesty and trustworthiness. This could consist of measurable metrics such as the percentage of verified customer reviews, fulfilment accuracy and responsiveness to customer inquiries. By periodically updating this scorecard, customer-entrepreneurs would give customers a rapid, dependable glimpse at their business integrity to dampen scepticism and enhance confidence.

7.2.2. Implications for managers and firms

For managers, our findings highlight several important areas for consideration. Since we have demonstrated that end-consumers make a complex series of evaluations in order to assess a customer-entrepreneur's authenticity, based on aspects such as accuracy, integrity and proficiency, this helps managers to recognise existing gaps in their offerings and identify ideal positioning strategies. Knowledge of these components also enables customer-entrepreneurs to assess how rivals are signalling authenticity and how they can enhance their own authenticity signals (Nunes et al., 2021).

For the growing number of firms using customer-entrepreneurs to promote and sell their products, our findings provide a vital understanding of how end-consumers perceive customer-entrepreneurs' motives and the consequences, including increased scepticism towards those seen as having extrinsic motives. Based on these findings, managers should support customer-entrepreneurs in adopting measures to counter scepticism, as discussed above. Firms should consider mitigating the negative impact of scepticism by actively working to enhance consumers' positive thoughts towards customer-entrepreneurs and perceptions that they are authentic, and their claims are credible.

Moreover, given our finding that perceived motives and authenticity are linked to attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, firms should seek customer-entrepreneur partners regarded as having highly intrinsic

motives, since consumers are more likely to perceive them as authentic, leading to mutual understanding and the intention for long-term relationships. For example, firms should seek customer-entrepreneurs who appear genuinely eager in their business activities, who already enjoy an authentic image in their social media community and who can convey feelings of enjoyment, affiliation and helpfulness. Before entering a partnership, firms could create a checklist of alignment to ensure that they and customer-entrepreneurs have compatible motives and brand values and then share the findings to enhance authenticity. Managers should also encourage their customer-entrepreneur partners to express genuine views, including moderate and proportionate criticism of the brand, and to select the products they endorse, as this will increase their enthusiasm for the brand, minimise constraints and enable personalised communication aligned with the customer-entrepreneurs' style and opinions, thereby enhancing positive responses to the products (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Managers can additionally employ a longitudinal perspective to better understand and address how perceptions develop and change over time, allowing for more effective and adaptive strategies. For instance, they can implement ongoing engagement campaigns that proactively address consumer scepticism by clearly communicating their genuine motives and demonstrating consistent authenticity. Regular feedback loops, trust-building initiatives and transparency in operations can further mitigate scepticism and enhance perceptions of authenticity. Moreover, managers should monitor changes in consumer attitudes and authenticity perceptions over time to identify early signs of scepticism and address them before they escalate. Longitudinal insights also enable businesses to assess the long-term impact of marketing initiatives on customer mindset metrics, ensuring strategies are designed to sustain satisfaction, loyalty and resilience to negative information. This approach not only enhances customer trust but also positions the business to better withstand market challenges and foster lasting customer relationships. By recognising the temporal dynamics of these relationships, managers can craft more resilient and adaptive strategies that align with consumers' evolving expectations.

7.2.3. Implications for policymakers

Policymakers can also draw on our findings in a number of ways to ensure that public policy safeguards consumers while supporting entrepreneurship on digital platforms. Firstly, our results support the use of simplifying and standardising disclosure standards across platforms. Hashtags such as #ad or #gifted are applied inconsistently on Instagram and TikTok; a cross-platform, icon-based "material connection" badge (analogous to nutrition labels) would make commercial intent clear, reducing scepticism born of ambiguity. This aligns with the spirit of existing regimes (e.g. the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Endorsement Guides and the UK Advertising Standards Authority/Committees of Advertising Practice (ASA/CAP) codes) but lowers compliance friction for small sellers.

Secondly, policymakers can encourage platforms to operationalise authenticity cues that matter to consumers, such as accuracy (truthfulness), integrity (intrinsic motivation) and proficiency (competence). Online marketplaces such as Amazon already display "Verified Purchase" and on-time delivery metrics; regulators could require a lightweight, standardised "entrepreneur transparency card" for sellers and creators that shows fulfilment accuracy, complaint resolution time and disclosure compliance, akin to restaurant hygiene ratings displayed at the door, so buyers on platforms such as TikTok Shop or Instagram Shops can instantly assess trustworthiness.

Thirdly, based on our results, policymakers should prioritise review integrity, since the proliferation of review farms inflates perceived quality and can mask low authenticity. Regulators could mandate platform-level detection and labelling of incentivised or AI-generated reviews, require clear separation of "incentivised" from "organic" content and impose penalties for undisclosed paid endorsements. The UK Competition and Markets Authority's actions against fake reviews and

the EU’s platform duties under the Digital Services Act represent a feasible toolkit; similar expectations could be extended to live-commerce streams where hosts sell during broadcasts. Fourthly, policymakers should introduce universal dispute pathways and payment protection (such as PayPal-style chargeback rules), while portable reputation scores would let genuine entrepreneurs carry their credibility from platform to platform, e.g. from Etsy to Shopify, preserving hard-won authenticity. Fifthly, because prior positive experience strengthens the effect of intrinsic-motive signals, policymakers should back low-cost, high-reach education methods such as templated disclosure widgets, one-minute compliance micro-lessons inside creator tools and starter packs for first-time sellers.

Finally, emerging risks warrant anticipatory rules: undisclosed synthetic endorsements (voice/face clones) should be prohibited; platforms should watermark AI-generated promotional media; and short-form video ads should auto-pause unless a material connection badge is present. Our results indicate that, when taken together, these steps would align market design with how consumers actually form trust, making authenticity legible and rewarding intrinsically motivated, competent entrepreneurs while deterring opportunistic, low-integrity practices that drive scepticism.

7.3. Limitations and future research

Despite these numerous theoretical and practical contributions, our study has limitations that suggest directions for future investigation. It would be useful to explore qualitatively and quantitatively the effects of customer-entrepreneurs’ efforts to convince end-consumers that they are authentic and genuine, and the impacts on their own success and of the brands they endorse. This would add further knowledge on the possible strategies open to customer-entrepreneurs wishing to signal authenticity. This would also offer additional guidance to managers, who may require increasingly imaginative but low-key techniques to communicate a sense of authenticity to consumers who are aware of their traditional strategies (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2019). Therefore, future studies exploring the most effective strategies for promoting customer-entrepreneurs would be highly valuable in research terms. Future research could also investigate the effect of the model on financial outcomes.

Further work could also be undertaken to shed more light on the role of authenticity for non-celebrity personas and other domains where authenticity is significant; Moulard et al. (2015) have previously suggested more research on the potential outcomes of perceived

authenticity in consumers’ experiences with non-celebrity personas. Moreover, while we explored the effect of only one previous experience, future research could investigate whether varying experiences with a single entrepreneur could influence consumers’ level of trust or scepticism regarding the entrepreneur’s extrinsic motives; in other words, whether one poor experience could negate the influence of several positive encounters.

Moreover, given our discussion on the possible relevance of accessibility to consumers’ relationships with customer-entrepreneurs, future studies could examine this construct systematically, both independently and in interaction with relational attributes. Since accessibility can heavily influence buyers’ channel preferences (Park et al., 2021a), it would be very valuable to add this construct to the research model to understand how convenience and product scarcity, as well as authenticity, affect end-consumers’ relationships with customer-entrepreneurs. The situational trade-off (Ostrom & Lacobucci, 1995) of scarcity versus authenticity makes accessibility a valuable part of future research on customer entrepreneurship.

In addition, this study employs only a survey for data collection, whereas a mixed-method approach using a qualitative study with interviews to investigate the hypothesised relationships from a dyadic perspective (e.g. entrepreneurs versus customers) would offer a more holistic view of the subject. Future research could also investigate whether other factors, such as consumers’ personal characteristics and traits, affect their level of trust or scepticism towards an entrepreneur. Finally, future research could replicate this study in different countries.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Marwa Tourky: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Maha Ebeid:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Conceptualization. **Ahmed Shaalan:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Gomaa Agag:** Software, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Appendix A:. Constructs, meanings and sources

Construct	Meaning and sources
Motivation	Motivation is the psychological state or predisposition that explains an individual’s choices in terms of the direction, intensity, and persistence of behaviour (Brown & Peterson, 1994; Good et al., 2022).
Intrinsic Motivation	Intrinsic motivation refers to the extent to which individuals engage in activities because they are inherently interesting, enjoyable and satisfying, reflecting a passionate interest and deep sense of fulfilment in what they do (Good et al., 2022; Miao & Evans, 2012).
Extrinsic Motivation	Extrinsic motivation refers to behaviour driven by anticipated external consequences, reflecting the extent to which individuals view work as a means to obtain rewards such as money, recognition, or promotion (Good et al., 2022; Miao & Evans, 2012).
Scepticism	Scepticism refers to an individual’s tendency to doubt, disbelieve and question, often manifested as consumer distrust toward marketers and their actions (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Skarmetas & Leonidou, 2013).
Authenticity	Authenticity refers to a consumer’s perception that an individual or brand is acting in accordance with their true self, assessed through multiple dimensions such as accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality and proficiency, with the relative importance of these dimensions varying by context (Nunes et al., 2021; Moulard et al., 2015).
Customer Satisfaction	Customer satisfaction is the consumer’s evaluative response reflecting feelings of pleasure or disappointment that arise when a product or service’s perceived performance is compared with expectations, representing the degree of consumption-related fulfilment, whether under-, adequately or over-fulfilled (Oliver, 1997; Kotler & Keller, 2016).
Consumer Loyalty Intention	Consumer loyalty intention refers to a consumer’s strong and enduring commitment to continue purchasing or using a preferred product or service in the future, despite potential situational influences or competing marketing efforts (Oliver, 1997; Zhang & Bloemer, 2008).

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Construct	Meaning and sources
Perceived Service Quality	Perceived service quality is the consumer's overall judgment or attitude regarding the excellence and superiority of a service offering (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml, 1988).
Resilience to Negative Information	Resilience to negative information refers to consumers' willingness to overlook or even forgive occasional lapses by a company and their tendency to maintain a favourable overall perception despite exposure to negative information (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Skarmetas & Leonidou, 2013).

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Glossary

AVE: Average variance extracted
 CFA: Confirmatory factor analysis
 CLPM: Cross-lagged panel model

CSE: Client-specific experience

CSR: Corporate social responsibility

PLS-SEM: Partial least squares–structural equation modelling

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Winning over the sceptics: how end-consumers view the motives and authenticity of customer-entrepreneurs over time

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