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## **Building e-loyalty for e-retailers: role of justice perception and consumer forgiveness**

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**Abstract:** This study aims at exploring e-loyalty in the e-commerce context by emphasising the mediating roles of customer forgiveness with respect to the perceived fairness of recovery efforts and customers' e-loyalty towards e-retailers. The data were collected from 380 respondents who experienced an online failure and had a recovery. This study demonstrates that the customers who experienced a service failure and received recovery evaluated functional justice (distributive, procedural and informational), and relational justice (interpersonal justice) in a different way. On the other hand, this research shows whilst emotional forgiveness mediates the relationship between functional justice and e-loyalty, forgiveness is affected by a religious commitment as well as fairness perception of customers. However, customers' empathy is not an indicator of forgiveness in e-commerce context. The results help e-commerce providers to develop effective recovery strategies and to empower the interactional role of virtual assistants to build a more empathetic relationship with the victims.

**Keywords:** empathy; religious commitment; perceived fairness; justice; Turkey; e-retailer; online shopping; online retailer.

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## **1 Introduction**

Whether it is an online or offline service that is provided by the retailers, a key determinant of customer loyalty is level of service quality. The number of online purchases and clicks and mortars has increased by 30% over the past five years, and the penetration of e-commerce worldwide has reached 22%. These increases push the boundaries of competition and increasing the importance of excellent service quality for online retailers (Marketing Türkiye, 2017). 57% of the shopping-related complaints have resulted from physical stores, and 43% of them come from online sales channels. While problems, based on e-channels of physical retailers in internet sales, create 56% of all internet-related issues; pure players based problems, which relate only to existing online companies, make up 44% of all internet-related problems (sikayetvar.com).

Of particular importance to maintaining existing customers is the e-retailer's recovery efforts to remedy a service failure. Previous research mostly focuses on justice theories in order to explore the customer response to retailers' recovery efforts which are based on four dimensions: distributive, procedural, interpersonal and informational justice (Mattila and Cranage, 2005; Weun et al., 2004; Wang and Mattila, 2011; Colquitt et al., 2001). Also, many studies (e.g., Barakat et al., 2015; Mattila and Cranage, 2005; Weun et al., 2004) adopt the concept of customer satisfaction in order to indicate the link between customer perception regarding service recovery and customer loyalty. However, there is a lack of progress in enhancing the knowledge on the role of forgiveness in this process. The study of Tsarenko and Tojib (2012) shows a link between forgiveness and e-loyalty towards the firm in the offline retailing context. Nevertheless, when conceptualising these relationships, the authors did not evaluate the role of perceived fairness of recovery.

The current study examines the mediating role of forgiveness in a perceived justice and e-loyalty relationship and makes three distinctive contributions to the service recovery literature. First, it proposes to reclassify justice perception in the two dimensions – functional and relational justice in an e-service context, determined by the obtained empirical results. Secondly, this study presents a new explanation for service recovery in online retailing by explaining the concept of e-loyalty with forgiveness and its antecedents: empathy and religious commitment. Third, this study explores the role of empathy on forgiveness in interpersonal communication, noting that this has not been effective in the e-retailing sector, which is exclusively linked to human-computer interaction.

The next section includes a review of previous literature and theoretical background that also presents hypotheses and the results of the empirical study. Then, this research concludes with a discussion and suggestions for further studies.

## **2 Theoretical background and hypothesis**

### *2.1 Perceived fairness of recovery, e-loyalty and forgiveness*

Previous studies have utilised various theoretical foundations to explain why customers remain loyal or switch to another provider after experiencing service failures (e.g., confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980) theory of exit, voice and loyalty (Hirschman, 1970), attribution theory (Kelley, 1967)). Indeed, attempts have been made to explain customer loyalty through the extent to which perceived justice of a recovery after a service failure was present, and the mediating role of customer satisfaction in this process was subjected to many studies (Barakat et al., 2015; Mattila and Cranage, 2005; Smith et al., 1999; Clemmer and Schneider, 1996). Customer loyalty is defined in various ways such as preferring one company over others, regularly purchasing from the same company, or showing an intention to buy from it in the future and spread positive WOM (Zeithaml et al., 1996). With the increase of online shopping among customers, the concept of e-loyalty has rapidly been developed. E-loyalty can be defined as “customer’s favourable attitudes such as repurchase behaviour and repetitive visits to an e-business” (Anderson and Srinivasan, 2003).

Perceived justice includes distributive justice, procedural justice, distributive justice and interactional justice (Clemmer and Schneider, 1996). Procedural justice considers how conflicts are resolved (Lind and Tyler, 1988). It reflects the perceived fairness of the rules and procedures used by a firm in the recovery process (e.g., consistency, lack of bias, the accuracy of the process). Distributive justice explains the evaluation of benefits and costs. It reflects the tangible outcomes of recovery. For example, to what extent offering refunds, discounts, exchanges or gift vouchers is perceived to be fair by customers. Interactional justice is about the information exchanged and how outcomes are treated. Interactional justice is automatically improved when the salesperson or staff member interacts with customers and treats them with respect and kindness whilst explaining the complaint process thoroughly. However, Colquitt et al. (2001) investigated interactional justice under two different headings, as interpersonal and informational justice. Interpersonal justice refers to the fairness of the behaviour of the salesperson in the recovery process, whilst informational justice is responsible for the fairness of accuracy and adequacy of the communication process. Moreover, in some studies, procedural justice and interactional justice dimensions are merged and in some others, the justice dimensions are divided into sub-dimensions (Kökalan, 2018).

Although the findings of the studies lack consistency, in many of them at least one of these sub-dimensions of justice are found to be related to customer satisfaction and loyalty. Clemmer and Schneider (1996) argued that all three of these dimensions are related to customer satisfaction after recovery. Smith et al. (1999) claim that all three aspects of justice are used to explain customer satisfaction but that distributive justice has the most significant effect. Mattila (2001) found that procedural, distributive and interactional justice after recovery are related to customer satisfaction in restaurants but that procedural justice has no effect on customer satisfaction in the context of dry cleaners and hairdressers. Weun et al. (2004) argued that only distributive and interactional justice is related to customer satisfaction. Mattila and Cranage (2005) reported that distributive, procedural, informational and interpersonal justices are all related to customer satisfaction. Wang et al. (2011) showed that only procedural and interactional justices affect on customer loyalty. Barakat et al. (2015) who replicated the

justice model for Brazil revealed that procedural justice is the most effective tool for service recovery in an emerging market. Hsu et al. (2017) also validated that, in the highest perceived justice, the highest purchase intention occurs.

However, examining the relationship between the perceived justice of recovery efforts and customers' e-loyalty via customer forgiveness has received no attention yet in the online recovery context. Forgiveness has been mostly studied by criminologists and psychologists in interpersonal contexts and has only been associated with restorative and retributive justice dimensions (Witvliet et al., 2008). Generally speaking, forgiveness is defined as "an emotion-focused coping strategy to reduce a stressful reaction to a transgression". Emotional forgiveness implies that customers' emotional defensiveness is reduced, replacing negative emotions with positive ones (Worthington and Scherer, 2004, p.385). Studies on interpersonal conflicts show that providing justice increases the likelihood of forgiveness. (Karremans and Van Lange, 2005). Strelan et al. argued that retributive justice and forgiveness are correlated negatively (2008), but that restorative justice is positively correlated with forgiveness (2011).

Tang (2005) introduced the concepts of prosocial behaviour, forgiveness into a service failure context in offline retailing and defined the consumers as the initial givers of empathy. Tsarenko and Tojib (2012, 2015) benefitted from forgiveness in order to explain switching behaviour of customers, and they stated that forgiving diminishes the likelihood of a customer switching providers. However, they do not discuss the content regarding justice theory or associate it with recovery. Casidy and Shin (2015) found that compensation and hybrid recovery (compensation and an apology) increase the likelihood of customer forgiveness. However, their study is limited to the service sector context, and the study has not been designed to incorporate experimental method associating with justice theory. Shin et al. (2018), investigated the effects of service recovery on emotional forgiveness regarding victims and observers with a quasi-experiment based on a specific scenario.

Existing studies effectively illustrate the progress in service recovery studies from offline to an online context. Despite the recent developments, there are theoretical and practical gaps in the literature on the influence of recovery strategies on consumer forgiveness and e-loyalty – particularly in an e-retailing context. Additionally, to enable the update of theories and enhance the discussion in this field, we argue customer forgiveness as a mediating variable between perceived fairness of recovery and e-loyalty. Whilst testing the model, it is assumed that forgiveness is a personal feeling which may be increased or decreased according to the empathy and religious commitment. For this reason, these two variables; empathy and religious commitment are included in the existing model. Consistent with this, Casidy and Shin (2015) provide suggestions for further studies in this context, such as; individuals' empathy towards others, in general, could be included in models.

This study adopts cognitive appraisal theory (CAT) of Lazarus (1966) for creating the proposed model. Based on the theoretical lens, a customer who has faced an adverse experience during a transaction with a company would first develop a primary cognitive appraisal for his or her potential gains, losses, opportunities or threats through the cognitive processes. Primary appraisal leads to an emotional state, and this emerged emotional state is influential on the secondary appraisal of assessment of coping strategy. Cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1966) explains that, once a dissatisfying market experience has occurred, all customers first go through a cognitive appraisal process, and, during this process, they evaluate their losses and gains. Subsequently, a positive or

negative appraisal outcome occurs which causes an emotion such as anger, fear, sadness etc. Finally, the customer chooses a coping strategy, such as action or retreat. Similarly, in our study, the customer who has encountered a service failure, first of all evaluates his gains and losses with justice measure in the cognitive stage, and then decides to forgive or not to forgive during the emotional stage and finally chooses a coping strategy the choice between remaining loyal or exiting the relationship with the store or provider.

Based on previous theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

*H1: The relationship between perceived justice (for all dimensions) and e-loyalty is mediated by forgiveness.*

## *2.2 Religious commitment, empathy and emotional forgiveness*

Aside from justice perception, forgiveness might be explained by some other factors within the literature. As the most important of the two variables when explaining forgiveness, religious commitment (e.g., Tsarenko and Tojib, 2012; Gorsuch and Hao, 1993) and many studies adopt empathy as characteristics (e.g., Tang, 2005; Fincham and Beach, 2001). These variables reflect the personality characteristics independently of the complaint process. Religious commitment is defined as “the degree to which a person adheres to his or her religious values, beliefs and practices and uses them in daily life” by Worthington et al. (2003, p.85). Forgiveness is an act which is encouraged by major religions (Rye et al., 2000). Specifically it is clearly stated in the holy Quran as follows:

“The believers are those who spend in charity during ease and hardship and who restrain their anger and pardon the people, for Allah loves the doers of good.” (Surah Al-Hijr 15:85)

“Let them forgive and show indulgence. Yearn ye not that Allah may forgive you? Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.” (Narrated by Pickthall)

Therefore, the religious commitment of the customer and his or her emphatic orientation might affect the act of forgiving the firm regardless of the effectiveness of the recovery effort of the firm. In studies on consumer behaviour, it has been noted that differences between individuals are more related to the degree of religious commitment than to which religion they belong. (McDaniel and Burnett, 1990). According to Sheth’s (1983) integrated theory, which examines the selection of retail store and behaviours, it was found that religious values have an impact on shopping motivation. For example, although the company’s compensation efforts are less than satisfactory, the fatalistic approach of individuals who avoid conflict and adopt the forgiving recommended by their religions, might affect the complainants’ negative evaluations against the company and play a role in their forgiveness. Many researchers have found that individuals with higher religious commitment have a higher tendency toward forgiveness (Tsarenko and Tojib, 2012; Krause and Ingersoll-Dayton, 2001; Sells and Hargrave, 1998). For this reason, the religious commitment of the customer was included in the model as an antecedent of emotional forgiveness.

*H2: Religious commitment is positively correlated with emotional forgiveness.*

Empathy is defined as “other-oriented emotional response congruent with another’s perceived welfare; if the other is oppressed or in need, empathic feelings include

sympathy, compassion, tenderness, and the like” (Batson et al., 1997, p.105). The emphatic person tends to focus on other’s objectives in a fair and unselfish manner rather than focusing on one’s own experiences in a selfish manner (Baghel and Pradhan, 2014). Enright et al. (1998) defined empathy as a factor of ability to forgive and McCullough et al. (1998) conceptualised empathy as one of the “most important mediators of forgiving. Emotional empathy has been the focus of a great deal of research on forgiveness following transgressions in the context of interpersonal relations (Donovan and Priester, 2017; Baghel and Pradhan, 2014; Chung and Lee, 2014; Riek and Mania, 2012; Davis and Gold, 2011) and it is associated with reduced motivations toward relationship destructive behaviours. Although empathy receive considerable empirical support in individual relationships its role in commercial relationships has taken very little attention. Tang (2005) pointed out that the effect of empathy on forgiveness was overlooked in service failure and recovery studies. Moreover, justice perception does not always guarantee forgiveness (Tripp et al., 2007). Inspired by these preliminary studies we proposed that, regardless of the perceived justice of recovery, complainants may tend toward forgiveness by showing empathy to the company/its employees. For this reason, we hypothesised that those who are more empathic than others would be more likely to forgive the firm.

*H3: Empathy is positively correlated with emotional forgiveness.*

### 2.3 Moderating role of severity of failure

The present study suggests failure severity will act as a moderating variable in the process of perceived justice – customer forgiveness. Severity is about the perception of the customer on the seriousness of the experienced service failure. The more significant service failure causes greater perceived loss and harm. According to prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979); losses and negative experiences always have a greater impact on human feelings and decisions compared to gains and positive experiences. In other words, individuals have more capacity for losses than gains in their minds and remember them more. There are a substantial body of studies which argued that severity of failure weakens forgiveness which then loses its efficacy as a coping mechanism to curtail loyalty intention. (Kim and Ulgado, 2012; Weun et al., 2004; Tsarenko and Tojib, 2012; Wang et al., 2011; Buttle and Burton, 2002).

Individuals, who feel higher justice perception on the compensation of failure, will have more tendency to forgive. However, the higher perceived severity of the failure will weaken this relationship. For this reason, the following hypothesis has been developed:

*H4: Perceived severity of failure negatively moderates the relationship between perceived fairness (for all dimensions) of recovery and emotional forgiveness.*

Proposed model is presented in Figure 1.

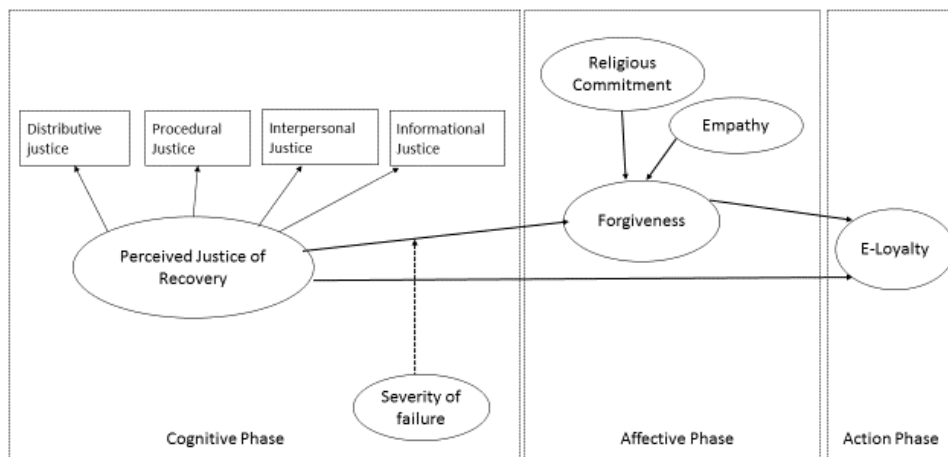
## 3 Research method

### 3.1 Sample and data collection

Our participants ( $N = 380$ ) were consumers who have encountered a service problem with an e-retailer, and who subsequently filed a complaint and had a recovery. This data

was obtained through 'www.sikayetvar.com' which is the oldest and largest website for sharing complaints with other people and the supplier involved, in Turkey. The online questionnaire was sent via the message system on the website to all members of 'sikayetvar.com' who had submitted complaints related to an online shopping disappointment. In the first instance, 4892 online shoppers were identified on the site three months ago in order to allow enough time for the complaint to be resolved. 1218 of these people were eliminated because the companies had not responded within a week. Online surveys were sent to 3674 customers within two days of the final reply from the company. 2544 people did not complete the survey. After extracting the incomplete surveys, 380 surveys remained. The data collection time was determined as two days, as it was thought that a longer amount of time might affect the evaluations of the participants (Istanbulluoglu, 2017). Consequently, 57% of the sample was men, and 43% was women. 88% of the respondents were between 25–55 years old, and 87% of them were graduates or undergraduates. Our data was comprised of all the complaints derived from click and mortars, physical stores and e-retailers which are selling their services/products exclusively via the internet. The most frequent subject of complaints was related to delivery problems. Poor and slow operations, faulty products and selling items out of stock, followed respectively. Table 1 shows demographics of the sample.

**Figure 1** Proposed model



### 3.2 Survey instrument

E-loyalty was evaluated by using scale items adapted from Zeithaml et al. (1996). All perceived justice dimensions are measured by using Colquitt et al. (2001) scale. Four items were used to measure perceived distributive justice, seven items for perceived procedural justice, five items for perceived informational justice and four items for perceived interpersonal justice. Empathy was measured with six items which were adapted from Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) and Jolliffe (2006). Religious commitment (6 items) was measured by adapting from Worthington et al. (2003) scale. Emotional forgiveness was measured by using scales adapted from Thompson et al. (2005) and McCullough et al. (1997). The scale for the perceived severity of failure (4 items) was adopted from Weun et al. (2004) and Craighead et al. (2004). All variables were

measured with a 5 point Likert scale. To provide face validity and to identify any problems regarding linguistics, all items were translated by using the back-translation method. After this process, every question within the scales became more comprehensible in Turkish. Initially, the questionnaires were sent to a conveniently selected 100 respondents through a hard copy questionnaire for the pre-test.

**Table 1** Demographics of sample

	<i>Demographics (n = 382)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>In percent (%)</i>
<i>Sex</i>	Men	218	57.4
	Women	162	42.6
<i>Age</i>	18–24	39	10.3
	25–34	255	67.1
	35–55	80	21.1
	+55	6	1.6
<i>Education</i>	Graduate	111	29.2
	Undergraduate	218	57.4
	High school	49	12.9
	Elementary	2	0.5
	<i>Total</i>	<i>380</i>	<i>100.0</i>

### 3.3 Results

#### 3.3.1 Measurement model

Before testing our hypotheses, we used exploratory factor analysis (SPSS 22.0) to assess the fit of the measures. In deciding whether to delete some items, we examined the factor loading ( $>0.60$ ) of each item on the corresponding construct (Nunnally, 1978). Total variance is explained by seven factors and reached 74%.

Perceived justice was not clustered in four dimensions as predicted. Distributive, procedural and informative justice were combined as the first dimension whereas, interpersonal justice made up the second dimension on its own. Therefore, the former dimension is recalled as ‘functional justice’ and the latter as ‘relational justice’ by the authors. These factors were also validated through CFA in AMOS 22.0. Table 2 provides the final list of items (including the standardised factor loadings and reliabilities) that were used in hypothesis analysis. The fit of the measurement model was acceptable ( $\chi^2/df = 1.85$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CFI = 0.95, GFI = 0.85, RMSEA = 0.047). Each statement under the constructs is presented in Appendix 1.

The next step was to test the convergent and discriminant validity. Specifically, Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability were computed as proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981). As Table 2 shows, Cronbach’s alpha for all constructs were  $\geq .70$ , because composite reliability ranged from 0.51 to 0.96, indicating the adequate reliability of all constructs.

In Table 3, the average variance extracted (AVE) shared between a construct and its measured ranges are above the threshold of 0.50 establishing convergent validity (Tajeddini et al., 2017; Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Tajeddini, 2015). Discriminant



validity of the latent constructs determines the extent to which measures of given constructs differ from those of other constructs within the model. As seen in Table 3, the square root of the AVE of each construct exceeded the correlation of that construct above any of the other constructs.

**Table 2** CFA measurement

<i>Constructs</i>	<i>Standardised factor loading</i>	<i>Reliability</i>	<i>Total item number</i>
Functional justice		0.954	13
FJ1	0.827		
FJ2	0.848		
FJ3	0.824		
FJ4	0.814		
FJ5	0.802		
FJ6	0.767		
FJ7	0.833		
FJ8	0.790		
FJ9	0.826		
FJ10	0.738		
FJ11	0.810		
FJ12	0.806		
FJ13	0.723		
Relational justice		0.916	4
RJ1	0.878		
RJ2	0.890		
RJ3	0.883		
RJ4	0.688		
Empathy		0.907	6
E1	0.843		
E2	0.871		
E3	0.860		
E4	0.512		
E5	0.815		
E6	0.901		
Emotional forgiveness		0.847	5
EF1	0.712		
EF2	0.824		
EF3	0.724		
EF4	0.782		
EF5	0.750		

**Table 2** CFA measurement (continued)

<i>Constructs</i>	<i>Standardised factor loading</i>	<i>Reliability</i>	<i>Total item number</i>
Religious commitment		0.902	4
RC1	0.693		
RC2	0.893		
RC3	0.861		
RC4	0.894		
E-loyalty		0.961	3
EL1	0.934		
EL2	0.835		
EL3	0.941		
Severity of failure		0.726	4
SF1	0.717		
SF2	0.809		
SF3	0.738		
SF4	0.698		

**Table 3** Validity check<sup>a</sup>

	<i>AVE</i>	<i>EF</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>FJ</i>	<i>RJ</i>	<i>RC</i>	<i>EL</i>
EF	0.534	0.730					
E	0.531	0.107	0.729				
FJ	0.650	0.656	0.042	0.806			
RJ	0.769	0.408	0.215	0.640	0.877		
RC	0.705	0.093	0.276	-0.001	0.008	0.839	
EL	0.796	0.715	0.063	0.690	0.372	-0.048	0.892

<sup>a</sup>The values on the diagonal correspond to the square root of the AVE in each construct. The values below the diagonal represent the correlations between pairs of construct.

### 3.3.2 Path model

Table 4 presents the test results of Hypotheses 1. All hypotheses were tested as one-tailed. The final path model to test the proposed research hypotheses demonstrates acceptable fit ( $\chi^2/df = 2.03$ , GFI = 0.895, CFI = 0.964, RMSEA = 0.05). VIF value for all variable was found below 10 the multicollinearity alert benchmark (Neter et al., 1983).

As seen in Table 4, and in line with Hypothesis 1a, perceived functional justice has strong and positive relationships with emotional forgiveness ( $\beta = 0.67$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) but, Hypothesis 1b is not supported concluding that relational justice does not have any significant effect on emotional forgiveness. In Hypothesis 1c, the effect of forgiveness on e-loyalty is supported ( $\beta = 0.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). As seen in Table 5, to test the mediating effect of forgiveness on the relationship between functional justice and e-loyalty, the direct effect of functional justice on e-loyalty was measured ( $R^2 = 0.670$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and then forgiveness was added to the model as a mediator, and we find that the effect of perceived functional justice on e-loyalty decreases when forgiveness is added to the

model ( $R^2 = 0.255$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Therefore, the partial mediating role of emotional forgiveness between functional justice and e-loyalty was validated. (H1 was supported) Due to the fact that a direct relationship between relational justice and emotional forgiveness could not be found, there is no need to test the mediating effect of emotional forgiveness for relational justice.

**Table 4** Hypothesis test results

Relationships			Standardised path coefficients	<i>p</i>
H1a Functional Justice	→	Emotional Forgiveness	0.067	0.00***
H1b Relational justice	→	Emotional Forgiveness	0.02	0.65
H2 Religious commitment	→	Emotional Forgiveness	0.08	0.04**
H3 Empathy	→	Emotional Forgiveness	-0.04	0.67

\*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 5** Mediating effect of forgiveness

Relationship	Direct effect without mediator	Direct effect with mediator	Indirect effect
FJ → EF → EL	$R^2 = 0.670$ ( $p < 0.01$ )	$R^2 = 0.255$ ( $p < 0.01$ )	Partial mediator

In line with Hypothesis 2, the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness has been found to be significant ( $\beta = 0.08$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). There is a weak but direct association between the two. Therefore, although, H2 was accepted, empathy is not found to be significantly associated with emotional forgiveness ( $p > 0.05$ ) and H3 was rejected (Table 4).

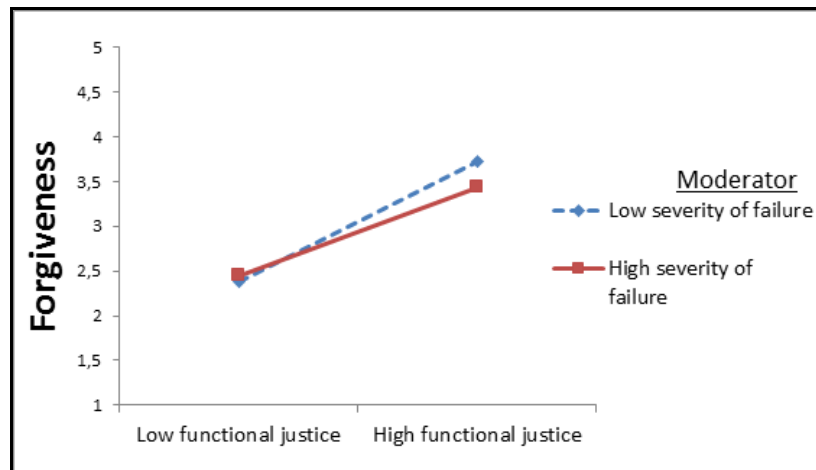
#### *Moderating effect of severity of failure*

Before testing Hypothesis 4, the method of central processing was applied. After that regression analysis was performed to assess the moderating effect of the severity of failure on the relationship between perceived justice and forgiveness. To test H4, functional justice and severity of the failure were introduced in Model 1 to regression equation and the results show that functional justice has a significantly positive impact on emotional forgiveness ( $\beta = 0.582$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) but severity does not ( $\beta = -0.08$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). In Model 2, interaction terms (FJxS) of functional justice and severity of the failure were added to Model 1, and the interaction effect was found to be significant ( $\beta = -0.09$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Therefore H4 is supported. The severity of failure weakens the relationship between perceived fairness of recovery and forgiveness. The results are reported in Table 6. Figure 2 indicates that the increase in the level of severity of failure significantly dampens the effectiveness of perceived functional justice on consumer forgiveness.

**Table 6** Results of hierarchical regression analysis

	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>	
	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	$\beta$
Functional justice	0.00***	0.582	0.00***	0.582
Severity of failure	0.122	-0.06	0.044**	-0.08
FJXSF			0.034**	-0.09
Adj $R^2$		0.344		0.334
$R^2$		0.347		0.349

\*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Figure 2** Simple slope analysis (see online version for colours)

#### 4 Discussion and practical implications

This study aims at presenting and testing a contingency framework by empirically investigating the effects of justice perception of customers after recovery regarding e-loyalty through forgiveness. The motivation of this research was to advance the current theory of justice and forgiveness in the domain of e-commerce and to develop an alternative way to explain e-loyalty in the online environment through forgiveness, rather than customer satisfaction as the previous studies have done. The reason behind this proposition is that many researchers found that just as satisfied customers are not necessarily loyal, dissatisfied customers are not always disloyal in reality (White and Yanamandram, 2007). For example, Lindberg (1997) revealed that satisfaction was not a major antecedent to predict repurchase intentions. Similarly, Kim and Uldago (2012) argued that satisfaction is not necessarily an important predictor for customer loyalty.

In the current study, perceived justice after recovery, forgiveness and other personality-related factors such as empathy and religious commitment have been proposed as an integrated model. Previous studies classified perceived justice in three (Clemmer and Schneider, 1996) or four dimensions (Tsarenko and Tojib, 2012). We believe that our study provides a valuable insight pertaining to the justice dimensions, as

we studied justice in an alternate dimension. Distributive justice, procedural justice and informational justice dimensions were integrated into one dimension and interpersonal justice into another. This reveals that customers evaluate the material, procedural and informative parts of the recovery as a whole when they judge the interaction with the salesperson/virtual salesperson separately. Therefore, distributive, procedural and informational justice dimensions are defined as 'functional justice' because they represent the rational side of the recovery and are based on more tangible judgements. The perceived functional justice dimension includes consumers' perceptions of how fair the compensation methods (i.e., refunds, replacements, gift cheques) were and, how properly applied, accurate and sufficient the flow of information was. The other new dimension which was defined in the study as 'relational justice' includes the perceived interactional and communicational success of the recovery.

Functional justice was found to be positively related to emotional forgiveness whereas relational justice was not. Indeed, emotional forgiveness was found to have a mediator effect between perceived justice and e-loyalty. On the other hand, findings revealed that relational justice does not effect on emotional forgiveness. The differentiated environment of e-commerce from traditional shopping can explain this result. As there is no salesperson or face to face interaction and there is a lack of oral communication between staff and customer within an online shop, the customer may not build a strong connection towards the website. A virtual shopping assistant or online forms may not be as satisfactory as a proper human interaction when it comes to the customer forgiving the supplier. Likewise, Pizzutti and Fernandes (2010) found that distributive and procedural justices are the most significant indicators of customer satisfaction rather than informational and relational justice in the online environment.

Religious commitment and the empathy level of the customer were also questioned as they are the main indicators of emotional forgiveness. The results imply that empathy does not effect on emotional forgiveness. Although in interpersonal relationships, the more empathic people are prone to be more forgiving (Tsarenko and Tojib, 2012; Fincham and Beach, 2001) in the online context, this relationship could not be validated. A possible explanation for this finding could be that individuals who are empathic in their personal life may not be so willing to show empathy to firms in which they are in a commercial relationship. Also, considering 'shopping on the web' as a mechanical process which diminishes human interaction might hinder the customers' ability to develop empathy. On the other hand, religious commitment has been found to be positively but weakly associated with emotional forgiveness. This finding can be explained in many different cases. Almost every religion promotes forgiveness and forbids revenge to protect our spiritual and mental health. Individuals with higher religious affiliation might prefer to avoid anger, and because of their fatalistic approach, they might accept the situation as "it was meant to be" and will not try to secure further justice.

Moderating role of severity of failure was also tested and the study demonstrates that functional justice has a stronger effect on forgiveness when severity of the failure is low rather than high. This findings reinforce the previous studies that found that severity of failure is negatively associated with customer loyalty (Kim and Ulgado, 2012; Weun et al., 2004; Tsarenko and Tojib, 2012; Wang et al., 2011).

Finally, recent studies demonstrate that forgiveness is positively correlated with repurchasing intention (McCullough et al., 1997; Chung and Beverland, 2006; Tang, 2005). Our findings reveal that emotional forgiveness is positively related to e-loyalty

and supports the findings of previous studies. Forgiveness provides spiritual relief and allows for repurchase. Thus, it is appropriate to include forgiveness in the e-loyalty models in further studies. Interesting implications for e-commerce managers can be derived from this study. First, it shows that recovery strategies for online shops differ from those used by traditional shops. In the online environment, functional justice is more important than relational justice in order to forgive the business after a service recovery by customers. For this reason, e-commerce managers should focus on fairness perception of customers by placing emphasis on recovery types like fair monetary compensation, giving coupons or sending gifts as well as providing accurate process and information flow. Also, the findings show that the lack of face-to-face communication in e-commerce makes the relationship mechanic and prevents the client from developing empathy toward the company. For this reason, instead of returning back to the complainant customers via email, it might help to communicate with them through virtual customer representative via a phone call in order to be more effective in their process of forgiveness. To cope with employee costs, e-commerce firms may at least put into effect chatbots that are empowered with artificial intelligence and customisation may help the firms with providing a large-scale yet personal recovery experience.

These outcomes also have significant practical implications for e-commerce managers. First, it shows that recovery strategies for online shops differ from those used by traditional shops. In the online environment, functional justice is more important than relational justice in order to forgive the business after a service recovery by customers. For this reason, e-commerce managers should focus on fairness perception of customers by placing emphasis on recovery types like fair monetary compensation, giving coupons or sending gifts as well as providing an accurate process and information flow. Also, the results show that the lack of face-to-face communication in e-commerce makes the relationship mechanic and prevents the client from developing empathy toward the company. For that reason, instead of returning to the complainant customers via email, it might help to communicate with them through virtual customer representative via a phone call in order to be more effective in their process of forgiveness. To cope with employee costs, e-commerce firms may at least put into effect chat bots that are empowered with artificial intelligence and customisation may help the firms with providing a large-scale yet personal recovery experience.

Even though forgiveness is an internal customers' mechanism yet managers can foster the recovery strategies which nurture forgiveness. After a well-managed recovery process, if the customers feel that they are able to forgive the company, their likelihood of repurchase from the company will also increase. If complainants verbally forgive the company, it might affect their future purchase behaviour. Based on the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), individuals need to stand behind their words and reactions. Thus, asking complainants the question "Can we forgive ourselves to you?" and getting a positive response might have a positive effect on the next purchasing decisions of the individuals.

Severity of failure critically damage forgiveness therefore it is crucial for the managers to identify those areas which are critical and where failure would severely challenge the tolerance level of customers. For example, in an online shopping experience most severe failures are listed by consumers as late delivery, pricing mistakes and violating customer privacy (Forbes et al., 2005; Kuo and Chen, 2011). However, these critical points may differ depending on the structure of the website and the industry.

These propositions can help the managers to restructure the recovery strategies and customer relationship management process.

## 5 Limitations and suggestions for future research

The findings of the study should be read with the following limitations in mind. First, a cross-sectional approach is employed, which is widely viewed as prone to common method variance bias and incapable of causal insight. Longitudinal data possess superior causal inference ability because the dataset has been collected over a period (Rindfleisch et al., 2008). A second issue pertains to the generalisation of the findings. Although a sample of 380 people was randomly chosen from different regions of Turkey and a greater source of demographics, its composition is quite limited in terms of representing all online customers. Furthermore, as an online complaint site, [www.sikayetvar.com](http://www.sikayetvar.com) was used in order to form the sample, it was only able to reach consumers who shared their complaints to a third-party institution. To the extent that forgiving and being loyal might differ from those who did not share their complaints with others and preferred to remain silent. However, considering how challenging it is to reach dissatisfied customers one by one, it was methodologically necessary to use an intermediary website like 'sikayetvar.com'. Finally, pursuing the research on a sample of customers who recently complained may represent only the customers whose anger is still hot and who tend to be less forgiving than usual. It should not be overlooked that the level of temper and intention of revenge may fall away over time.

This study provides an alternative model for explaining customer loyalty through forgiveness after a service failure in an online context. Future research is needed to understand the other possible factors which affect the level of forgiveness after a service recovery and investigating possible moderator effects of previous experiences with the website, price of the product and trust to seller would provide further insights. Since types of failure might be associated with the preferred recovery and perceived justice dimension, new focus on process and output failures and compare them in terms of consumers' forgiveness and e-loyalty.

Furthermore, the study might be turned into a longitudinal study, and it might be asked of the same respondents whether their forgiveness intention has changed over time and if they have subsequently bought from the same website, considering that the revenge intention may have alleviated over time. In addition, a new scale named consumer inclination to pardon (CIP) developed by Commuri and Aggarwal (2016) might be validated to measure the forgiveness intention of customers toward companies in particular.

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## Appendix 1: Descriptive statistics

	<i>N</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. dev.</i>	<i>Variance</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>		
	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Std. error</i>	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Std. error</i>
E	380	1.00	5.00	3.9631	0.67648	0.458	-1.392	0.125	2.886	0.250
EF	380	1.00	5.00	2.7447	0.99287	0.986	-0.184	0.125	-0.776	0.250
RC	380	1.00	5.00	3.0355	1.01548	1.031	-0.202	0.125	-0.421	0.250
SF	380	1.00	5.00	3.4421	0.98619	0.973	-0.401	0.125	-0.425	0.250
IJ	380	1.00	5.00	3.0803	1.07478	1.155	-0.602	0.125	-0.493	0.250
FJ	380	1.00	5.00	2.3279	1.02555	1.052	0.413	0.125	-0.775	0.250
EL	380	1.00	5.00	2.1544	1.17165	1.373	0.624	0.125	-0.879	0.250
Valid N (listwise)	380									

## Appendix 2: Constructs and items

### *Functional justice*

- Procedures have been applied consistently
- Procedures have been free of bias
- Procedures have been based on accurate information
- I have been able to appeal the resolution reached by those complaint procedures
- Procedures have upheld ethical and moral standards
- The resolution reflects the effort you have put into your complaint
- The resolution is appropriate for the complaint you have made

**Appendix 2: Constructs and items (continued)***Functional justice*


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The resolution reflects your financial contribution to the website  
 The outcome/resolution is justified, given your action  
 The customer service employee/virtual assistant of website has explained the causes of the problem thoroughly  
 The explanations of the customer service employee/virtual assistant of website regarding in the problem was reasonable  
 The customer service employee/virtual assistant of website has provided adequate and true information in a timely manner  
 The customer service employee/virtual assistant of website seemed to tailor explanation to your individual specific needs

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*Relational justice*


---

The customer service employee/virtual assistant of this website has treated you with dignity  
 The customer service employee/virtual assistant of this website has treated you politely  
 The customer service employee/virtual assistant of this website has treated you with respect  
 The customer service employee/virtual assistant of this website has refrained from improper remarks or comments

---

*Forgiveness*


---

I will not hold on to the stress and anger toward this website  
 I will not continue to hate this website  
 I am not going to get even with this website  
 I am not letting go of my negative emotions toward this website  
 My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life  
 It is important for me to spend periods of time in private religious thought and reflection  
 Religion is especially important to me because it answers many questions about the meaning of life  
 I often read books and magazines about my faith

---

*E-Loyalty*


---

How likely are you buying from this website again?  
 How likely are you buy more from this website in the near future?  
 How likely are you choosing this website as your first choice when a need arises?

---

*Empathy*


---

I tend to get emotionally involved with other's problem  
 When someone is feeling 'down' I can usually understand how they feel  
 I can often understand how people are feeling even before they tell me  
 I can usually realise quickly when a person is angry

---

*Severity of failure*


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The service problem caused by this website was very serious/severe/stressful  
 The service problem caused by this website have cost me a lot of money  
 The service problem caused by this website have cost me a lot of time  
 The service problem caused by this website have cost me a lot of inconvenience

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