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# Sharing Economy Platforms: An Equity Theory Perspective on Reciprocity and Commitment

## Abstract

The objective of this research is threefold: 1) to examine the underpinnings of perceived reciprocity in the sharing economy, 2) to explore cognitive and behavioural outcomes of reciprocity evaluation, and 3) to investigate how situational and personal variables regulate perceived reciprocity and subsequent cognitive and behavioural outcomes. The data were collected from 398 users of sharing economy platforms. The findings made it possible to conclude that the perception of reciprocity is conditioned by a feeling of social identity, ingroup comparison, procedural justice and a predisposition towards outcome maximisation. Relationship commitment is predicted by perceived reciprocity and coping mechanisms (i.e. emotion-focused and problem-focused) following reciprocity perception. In addition, it was found that the value of exchange, social influence, response efficacy and self-efficacy moderate the relationships between perceived reciprocity, its antecedents and its cognitive and behavioural outcomes. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are provided.

**Keywords:** *sharing economy, equity theory, reciprocity, commitment, interpersonal relations*

# Sharing Economy Platforms: An Equity Theory Perspective on Reciprocity and Commitment

## 1. Introduction

A sharing economy is a socio-economic system enabled by online platforms that makes it possible for people to collaboratively receive and redistribute resources for free or for compensation (Botsman and Rogers, 2011, Belk, 2014). The central norm regulating the redistribution of resources in collaborative exchange is the principle of reciprocity (Belk, 2014). On the one hand, the primacy of reciprocity contributes to the embeddedness of an economic value into social relations, so that the resources are redistributed to satisfy the expectations of receiving other goods/services in return (Arcidiacono et al., 2018, Arcidiacono, 2018, Becker, 1990). Reciprocity represents a rule of exchange facilitating collaborative relations in communities (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005, Davlembayeva et al., 2020). On the other hand, the dependence of the interactions of people on the actions of others makes the reciprocity mechanism socially-oriented, which fosters collective well-being and contributes to social inclusion (Laamanen et al., 2015, Llamas and Belk, 2013). Given its contribution to the continuity and the sustainability of collaborative relations, it is important to delve into the factors that affect the perception of reciprocity following exchange and explore the cognitive/behavioural outcomes of reciprocity evaluation.

More specifically, there are three gaps in the literature in the domain of reciprocity. Firstly, there is a lack of evidence about the factors contributing to perceived reciprocity in exchange. The literature on the sharing economy examines the role of expected reciprocity (Bridges and Vásquez, 2018, Cherry and Pidgeon, 2018, Hellwig et al., 2015), the degree of reciprocity in relations (Harvey et al., 2019, Harvey et al., 2017, Corciolani and Dalli, 2014) and the motives for

reciprocation, such as benefits, values and norms (Chan and Li, 2010, Decrop et al., 2018, Starr Jr et al., 2020). However, the drivers of reciprocation cannot explain the evaluation of the degree to which outcomes are reciprocated. The assessment of reciprocity is based on the relativity of rewards, whereby the results of exchange are compared with what other social actors receive (Walster et al., 1973). Such an assessment mechanism is especially important in relations with uncertain and non-fixed rewards (Festinger, 1954), which are typical in the sharing economy. The research on organisation-employee relations provides some insight into the formation of reciprocity using the equity theory perspective (Fizel et al., 2002, Spencer and Rupp, 2009). This perspective provides a rational explanation, whereby people match someone's output (received rewards) and input (efforts and costs) with the output/input of other people (Adams, 1963). However, the perception of reciprocity from the perspective of personal benefit-maximisation cannot be applied to the sharing economy context. The multiplicity of collaborative practices creates a boundary condition, making reciprocity difficult to measure. For instance, sharing and gift-giving represent exchange based on generalised reciprocity. That means that return is non-obligatory or delayed and the type/amount of compensation is not fixed (Sahlins, 1974, Belk, 2010, Belk, 2014). In contrast, market-based exchange is built upon negotiated reciprocity with an immediate, obligatory and fixed return (Belk, 2010, Blau, 1964, Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005, Roos and Hahn, 2019). It is difficult to draw the boundaries between rationalism (self-interest) and altruism, challenging the examination of reciprocity in the sharing economy (Belk, 2010). Another body of literature provides a subtle understanding of the complexity of reciprocity in social relations (Bagozzi, 1995, Belk, 2010), without, though, empirically examining the rational, individual and social determinants influencing its formation. Hence, the context of this research requires an examination of perceived reciprocity by reconciling social and rational factors. Also,

it is important to consider the individual psychometric differences that can affect the evaluation of received outcomes (Miles et al., 1994, Highhouse et al., 2008).

Secondly, individuals' behavioural and cognitive responses following reciprocity perception in the sharing economy are under-researched. It has been found that reciprocity increases the output of relations, strengthens commitment and leads to long-term collaborations (Harvey et al., 2017, Chan and Li, 2010, Wang et al., 2019b). However, it is not clear what behaviours people embark on if reciprocation brings results that do not meet expectations. Drawing on the coping and equity literature, perceived non-reciprocity may trigger coping mechanisms aimed at downplaying the negative outcomes of collaborative relations (Walster et al., 1973, Adams, 1963, Biron and De Reuver, 2013). The lack of insight into such coping mechanisms in collaborative relations hinders the understanding as to how commitment and, in turn, continuous relations, can be secured if outcomes are not consistent with inputs.

Thirdly, there is a lack of evidence about the role of situational and personal factors in the perception of reciprocity and the subsequent behavioural consequences of reciprocity evaluation. While research has found a difference in behaviour depending on the value of exchange (Küper and Edinger-Schons, 2020), it is not clear as to how this affects reciprocity evaluation in the sharing economy. Since the value of exchange shapes the perception of relational consequences (Ha and Park, 2013), the examination of its moderating role would explain the variance in the perceived outcomes of collaborative practices. In addition, the role of situational and personal factors has not been explored, although these may underpin behavioural intention and coping processes (Haney and Long, 1995, Lerner and Kennedy, 2000, Liang and Xue, 2009, Johnston and Warkentin, 2010, Floyd et al., 2000).

Given the gaps in the literature, the objective of this research is threefold. The first objective is to examine the determinants of perceived reciprocity in the sharing economy. The study adopts the equity theory framework and draws on the findings of past research to theorise the effects of three groups of factors – i.e. social factors, individual traits and justice perception - on perceived reciprocity. Social factors are represented by social identity and ingroup/outgroup comparison. They measure the degree to which people associate themselves with the community and balance their own rewards against the ones of members within the same community (Turner, 1975, Tajfel, 1974). Individual traits include the sensitivity to reward inequity and the predisposition to maximise the outcomes of relations. Justice perceptions capture the degree to which procedures of rewards distribution and the amount of rewards are perceived to be fair (Folger and Konovsky, 1989, Adams, 1963). These three groups of factors are not specific to supply-side or demand-side users, but rather explain key conditions that shape the perception of reciprocity in exchange. Such a focus is in line with the debate in the growing body of literature confirming the divergence of motives and behaviours among different sharing platform actors (Benoit et al., 2017, Gupta et al., 2019). The second objective is to examine cognitive and behavioural outcomes of perceived reciprocity. In line with this objective, the study focuses on the emotion-focused and problem-focused coping mechanisms that people employ after reciprocity evaluation. They refer to activities that are undertaken to adjust emotions, one's own behaviour or the environment to eliminate stress resulting from the unfair allocation of rewards (Folkman et al., 1986). The examination of coping constructs enables us to understand the mechanisms that precede relational commitment. The third objective of the research is to examine the effect that situational and personal factors (i.e. value of exchange, social influence, response efficacy and self-efficacy) have on the strength of perceived reciprocity and subsequent cognitive and behavioural outcomes

(Zapata-Phelan et al., 2009, Hoffman and Spitzer, 1985, Johnston and Warkentin, 2010). These factors capture the individuals' beliefs in the impact of social groups, one's ability to cope and the effectiveness of coping measures (Witte, 1992, Venkatesh et al., 2003).

By addressing the above objectives, the paper makes three contributions to the literature. First, the theorised determinants of perceived reciprocity explain reciprocity perception in the context when actors may pursue both collective and self-interests (i.e. individual rationality vs collective benefit maximisation). The examination of social identity, social comparison factors and distributive/procedural justice reconciles the social and rational perspectives on collaborative consumption. The exploration of personal traits explains the individuals' predisposition towards positive or negative outcome evaluation, which increases the explanatory power of the model. Second, the study contributes to the literature on the individuals' behavioural and cognitive responses following reciprocity perception in the sharing economy, which is still an under-researched area. The study offers an explanation of the predictive role of emotion-focused and problem-focused coping in the commitment of people to sharing economy platforms, which has not been examined before. The knowledge that the research provides is important considering evidence about the role of commitment in determining people's loyalty to relations (Dagger et al., 2011). The findings help understand what behaviours someone embarks on to ensure commitment and potentially sustain long-term collaborations on platforms. Third, the examination of moderation effects gives a richer insight into the dependence of reciprocity evaluation and commitment on situational conditions and explains possible variations in the predictive strength of the examined variables.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

### *2.1. User Behaviour in the Sharing Economy*

The literature on user behaviour in the sharing economy has focused on the determinants and outcomes of users' participation, and the role of reciprocity. The major stream of research explored the factors predicting sharing intention and actual sharing (Gupta et al., 2019, Davidson et al., 2018, Akbar et al., 2016, Benoit et al., 2017, Barnes and Mattsson, 2017). Individuals' values and norms (e.g. materialism, cultural differences, economic value, hedonic and social values, environmental benefits and utilitarian motives) were confirmed to underpin the willingness to use platforms (Benoit et al., 2017, Milanova and Maas, 2017, Barnes and Mattsson, 2017, Hwang and Griffiths, 2017, Gupta et al., 2019, Pantano and Stylos, 2020). For instance, users' intention is driven by perceived economic, social and environmental benefits mediated by perceived usefulness and enjoyment of practice. Such conditions increase the sense of belonging to platform communities and drives collaborations (Barnes and Mattsson, 2017). Social and relational factors, such as social influence, social proximity, trust and interchangeability (Nguyen et al., 2020, Wang et al., 2019b), and individuals' predisposition towards sharing (Gupta et al., 2019, Davidson et al., 2018) facilitate the individual's willingness to exchange resources through platforms. Although the above evidence identifies the behavioural drivers, they do not explain the conditions that shape a positive perception of reciprocity following an actual exchange (Walster et al., 1973). As far as the consequences of collaborative relations are concerned, empirical evidence was collected to confirm that sharing practices result in the formation of social capital, satisfaction, commitment, loyalty and intention to continuously use platforms (Lu et al., 2020, Gleim et al., 2019, Chan and Li, 2010, Akhmedova et al., 2020a). For such outcomes to take place, platform features need to foster interactivity and to be easy to use (Chan and Li, 2010, Akhmedova et al., 2020a).



The literature has involved some discussion about reciprocity in social exchange, though there is a dearth of research exploring the evaluation of reciprocity in sharing economy transactions. Studies tended to examine reciprocity embedded in the relational structure of membership (Krush et al., 2015). There are inconsistent insights about the degree to which reciprocity is achieved (Harvey et al., 2020, Corciolani and Dalli, 2014, Bridges and Vásquez, 2018), suggesting that reciprocation can be direct (Bridges and Vásquez, 2018), indirect (Corciolani and Dalli, 2014) or it may never take place (Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto, 2018, Harvey et al., 2020, Geiger and Germelmann, 2015). Collaborative consumption represents a prosocial exchange that rests on the principle of returning good for good. Still the lack of obligations gives room to pursue egoistic motives and not rely on the balance of rewards (Harvey et al., 2020). Another direction in research explored reciprocity as a norm and a rule of exchange (Kim et al., 2017, Davlembayeva et al., 2020, Lai et al., 2020). Expected reciprocity is confirmed to be one of the most important motivators of individuals' participation both in commercial and non-commercial relations (Guyader, 2018, Cherry and Pidgeon, 2018). The salience of the reciprocity norm is associated with a belief in the likelihood of favourable results. Consequently, the expectation of mutual exchange leads to the perception of a lower risk of opportunistic behaviour (Becker, 1990). Also, research explored the conditions that mobilise reciprocal behaviour (Chan and Li, 2010, Wang et al., 2019b). On that front, the roles of social bonds development, hedonic factors, the features of online platforms (Chan and Li, 2010), social influence (Wang et al., 2019b, Starr Jr et al., 2020), financial rationale (Wang et al., 2019b), trust (Decrop et al., 2018) and emotions were investigated (Starr Jr et al., 2020). The desire to increase and strengthen connections in the community can evoke emotions such as gratitude, empathy and enjoyment, and contribute to reciprocating behaviour (Starr Jr et al., 2020, Chan and Li, 2010). The virtual context of interactions makes the

features of websites, such as a search tool and efficiency, important for defining users' ability to interact (Chan and Li, 2010). Given that reciprocation is a sustainable behaviour, it is usually manifested under the influence of social norms and in relevant social contexts (Wang et al., 2019b). The perception that the other party in relations provides equitable returns increases commitment to communities and helps sustain the practices (Harvey et al., 2017, Chan and Li, 2010, Wang et al., 2019b).

Given the published papers, the existing literature provides limited insight into the evaluation of reciprocity and the behavioural and psychological consequences of exchange. The following section of the paper discusses the theoretical framework that guides the development of the research model and helps address the objectives of the study.

## *2.2. Equity Theory*

This study adopts equity theory as a theoretical framework, as it is used to explain the perception of reciprocity and the processes following the perception of inequity in relations between the two parties (Walster et al., 1973, Rosette and Koval, 2018, Hogueve et al., 2017). Equity theory has been widely adopted in organisational management to study the satisfaction of employees, the distribution of rewards in companies and the reaction towards the unequal distribution of rewards (Fizel et al., 2002, Spencer and Rupp, 2009). Recently, the extension of the theory has found an application in the research on individuals' behaviour in on-line settings (Rose, 2007, Cheng et al., 2018).

There are three processes referring to the perception of reciprocity in social exchange relations. The first process is the evaluation of reciprocity, which is contingent on the degree to which individuals perceive the relations to be fair. Perceived justice of relations results from the

evaluation of the output of relations against input into those relations (Walster et al., 1973, Hart et al., 2015). Input relates to the contribution that the participant in social exchange makes to initiate relations. Output refers to the amount of reward that an individual receives from the participation in relations with other individuals and organisations (Adams, 1963). The disproportion between contributions and rewards is associated with negative emotions, although a negative affective state is not always confirmed for exchange relations when rewards are bigger than contributions (Greenberg, 1987, Liu and Brockner, 2015). The perception of justice is a subjective process. The degree to which an individual perceives the value of the relationship can be partly influenced by personal factors and social norms (Walster et al., 1973, Daverth et al., 2016).

The second process which underpins the evaluation of reciprocity is social comparison. This is the comparison of individuals' input/output with the input/output of other people. In order to perceive reciprocity in relations, individuals need to receive a reward which is proportional to the amount of their input into relations and equal to the ratio of the input/output of others (Walster et al., 1973, Adams, 1963, Lastner et al., 2019). There are two comparison strategies. Individuals either refer to a "specified" referent person or a "generalised other" to draw the comparison. The specified person belongs to inner circles. When using this comparison strategy, the subject of relations has a dilemma about pursuing personal self-interest or collective goals. In other words, individuals need to find a compromise between personal benefit-maximisation and collective interests, as the interests of the two are in conflict, thus causing negative emotions. Generalised comparison assumes comparing one's input/output ratio against the commonly accepted standards or predefined social norms (Greenberg, 1987).

The last process relates to the emotional and behavioural consequences following the perception of reciprocity. It is believed that reciprocity evaluation resulting in perceived negative inequity

(the perception that an individual received less rewards compared to contributions) and positive inequity (the perception that rewards are greater than the contributions) leads to stress (Walster et al., 1973, Adams, 1963, Biron and De Reuver, 2013) and induces emotions such as guilt and anger (Katyal et al., 2019, Sherf and Venkataramani, 2015). The relations producing output that is discrepant from the input trigger behaviour such as organisational absenteeism or the redistribution of resources. Such behaviours aim to compensate or take revenge for the lack of reciprocation (Biron and De Reuver, 2013, Rosette and Koval, 2018, Malc et al., 2016).

Given the above, the proposed research model of this study suggests that: 1) the factors pertinent to social comparison, justice perception and personality positively affect perceived reciprocity, and 2) investigation of perceived reciprocity subsequently leads to emotional and behavioural consequences (Figure 1). The proposed relationships are explained in the following sections.

INSERT FIGURE 1

### **3. Hypothesis Development**

#### ***3.1. Antecedents of Reciprocity Perception***

##### **Social Comparison**

The processes of reciprocity evaluation and input/output comparison are dependent on social identity. Social identity is the belief in oneself as being part of a particular social group (Turner, 1975, Tajfel, 1974). From the perspective of social psychology, the categorisation of oneself into a certain social group increases the likelihood of cooperation with other members of the group (Anthony, 2005). Social group orientation defines an individual's propensity to embark on exchange relations (Gupta et al., 2019), while strong social identity contributes to equitable

relations and trusting behaviour (Tanis and Postmes, 2005). The likelihood of cooperation in groups in the condition of salient social identity is preconditioned by the process of comparing the outcomes of cooperation with either ingroup or outgroup members. The processes of comparing outcomes in social groups have been explained through competing theoretical stances. On one hand, the dependence of cooperation within groups on social identity can represent in-group favouritism, which is a biased evaluation of cooperation with members of the same group compared to people outside of it. The identification of oneself with the group increases self-esteem and the desire to distinguish this group from others (Tajfel, 1974). A rational explanation of the favouritism assumes that it is self-interest and awareness of the interdependency of one member of the group on another that makes people cooperate with group members rather than seek out cooperation outside of the group. The behaviour of group members is driven by the goal to maximise the chances of reciprocal relations by favouring (i.e. allocating rewards to) members within the same social group (Rabbie et al., 1989, Karp et al., 1993). However, there is an assumption that the positive outcome of cooperation in social groups cannot be accounted for by the mere motive of self-interest (Velez, 2015, Tavares et al., 2016). Irrespective of the amount of reward allocated in collective actions, social identification with a group reconfigures the cost-benefit analysis of relations in favour of the group and initiates mechanisms of compensation (Tavares et al., 2016), which can balance reciprocity in relations. By identifying themselves with social groups, individuals extend the concept of the self and think of themselves in relation to other social objects and subjects in the group (Coleman and Coleman, 1994). Moreover, perception of the behaviour of group members may be positively biased, because of the conflict that the negative perception potentially creates in individuals' cognition. Particularly, because one individual identifies other social group members with him/her self, their negative behaviour may create

internal inconsistency. To preserve internal consistency, people with stronger group identity are more likely to be positive about the outcome of social relationships, continue group membership and contribute to the relationship (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016, Tavares et al., 2016). Given the above, the first and the second hypotheses state that:

*H1: Social identity has a positive effect on the perceived reciprocity of relations in the sharing economy.*

*H2: a) The comparison of one's own outcomes with the outcomes of other members in sharing economy communities has a positive effect on perceived reciprocity, while b) the comparison with the outcomes of people outside of sharing economy communities has a negative effect on the perceived reciprocity of relations.*

## **Justice Perception**

Perceived distributive and procedural justice are the two types of cognition which result from social exchange relations (Folger and Konovsky, 1989, McFarlin and Sweeney, 1992). Perceived distributive justice refers to the perception that the amount of reward for the input in exchange is fair (Folger and Konovsky, 1989, Adams, 1963). Perceived procedural justice refers to the degree to which an individual perceives the means of rewards distribution to be fair (Folger and Konovsky, 1989). Distributive and procedural justice dimensions have been confirmed as contributing to positive outcomes of relations (Rubenstein et al., 2019). For example, distributive justice was found to be a predictor of communication satisfaction (Chan and Lai, 2017), as well as the main contributor to overall user satisfaction and continuous behaviour intention (Chiu et al., 2007). If distributive injustice is not perceived, people feel emotional exhaustion as a result of relations (Piccoli and De Witte, 2015). While distributive justice is mostly associated with personal

outcomes, such as satisfaction with personal rewards, procedural justice usually reflects a more general assessment of systems or organisations. As a result, procedural justice is considered to have a more long-term effect on behaviour than distributive justice (McFarlin and Sweeney, 1992, Rubenstein et al., 2019). For example, fair procedures have positive long-term implications. Perceived procedural justice triggers a positive behaviour benefitting another party of exchange as an act of reciprocation for fair treatment (Rubenstein et al., 2019). A positive evaluation of procedures enabling relations can translate into commitment to the other party (McFarlin and Sweeney, 1992). Also, the assumption about the positive role of procedural justice in reciprocity evaluation stems from the studies postulating that service quality and interaction quality (e.g. transaction security, communication quality, compensation policy) predict loyalty to sharing platforms (Priporas et al., 2017, Akhmedova et al., 2020b, Akhmedova et al., 2020a). In addition, the perception of fair procedures gives a feeling of control over procedures to the receiving party in relations. The control over procedures mitigates any risks incurred by the relations with the providing party and increases the likelihood of continued cooperation (Zhou, 2013). Given the above, both distributive and procedural justice perceptions are important for the positive evaluation of the outcome of an exchange. Hence, we hypothesise that:

*H3: a) Distributive justice and b) procedural justice have a positive effect on reciprocity perception in the sharing economy.*

### **Personality Factors**

The perception of reciprocity is subjective and may vary from one person to another (Walster et al., 1973, Daverth et al., 2016). The equity sensitivity variable has been invariantly used to explain the deviation of the perception of rewards and inputs in relations, based on individuals'

psychometric characteristics (King Jr et al., 1993, Huseman et al., 1987, Bourdage et al., 2018). Equity sensitivity differentiates three types of people that can be placed along a continuum (Huseman et al., 1987). On the one end of the continuum are equity benevolents, who tend to accept a negative distribution of rewards in relation to oneself. For them, the likelihood of getting a satisfactory outcome of relations is high, as the input of resources that they invest in exchange relations can exceed the output (Huseman et al., 1987). The other extreme of the continuum is equity entitleds. In contrast to benevolents, they have an output-focused expectation. Entitleds are intolerant of unfair rewards allocation and prefer to receive more than they contribute to relations (King Jr et al., 1993). The middle ground between the two personalities is equity sensitive people, whose fairness perception is dependent on the proportional ratio of output against inputs contributed to relations. To achieve a satisfactory result of relations, there should not be any discrepancy in rewards allocation relative to contributions made (King Jr and Miles, 1994). Equity sensitivity has been used both as a predictor and moderator of behaviour (Shore et al., 2006, Restubog et al., 2007, Bourdage et al., 2018). For example, equity sensitivity has been used to measure the moderating role of personality in the relationship between behaviour and response (Shore et al., 2006, Restubog et al., 2007). Entitleds are significantly less satisfied with the outcome compared to benevolents when contributions exceed rewards, while the difference in satisfaction level is minimal when rewards are greater than contributions (Shore et al., 2006). Another stream of research has used equity sensitivity to investigate its role in individuals' response to inequitable relations (Bourdage et al., 2018, Westerlaken et al., 2017). It was found that the tendency towards benevolence predicts a positive attitude and voluntary commitment to the social group, while the tendency towards equity entitlement contributes to deviant behaviour



(Bourdage et al., 2018). In a similar vein, a sense of entitlement decreases the desire to reciprocate (Westerlaken et al., 2017). Given the above, the next hypothesis states that:

*H4: Equity sensitivity has an effect on reciprocity perception in the sharing economy, whereby benevolent people are more likely to perceive the reciprocal outcome of relations*

The other personality factor that can affect the perception of the outcomes of exchange relations is an individual's predisposition to maximisation. This personality trait has been widely used to illustrate individual differences in decision-making and explain individuals' variance in post-decision satisfaction, depending on the predisposition to maximise the outcome (Iyengar et al., 2006, Karimi et al., 2018). People with a tendency to maximise (maximisers) pursue the best choices, as a result of an extensive search for and analysis of alternatives. The opposite to maximisers are satisficers, who search for alternatives until they attain the option that satisfies the initial objective without questioning the choice and without engaging in counterfactual thinking about potential better options they might have (Schwartz et al., 2002). Individuals who strive for the maximisation of outcomes might achieve better results, but still feel unsatisfied due to potentially better choices that they might have missed (Iyengar et al., 2006, Schwartz, 2004). However, the contrary argument postulates that maximisers could be more satisfied with the outcome if counterfactual thinking is not involved. This condition can be achieved as a result of a rigorous analysis of choices and the elimination of other alternatives (Karimi et al., 2018). The rigorous analysis of alternatives to achieve an optimal choice is implied in utility-driven relations, underpinned by rational decision-making (Herrnstein, 1990). However, sharing economy relations can be driven by non-rational motives, such as the maximisation of the utility of products for the benefit of the society and the environment rather than oneself (Schneider, 2017). Hence, it can be assumed that sharing economy participants are not likely to make choices by ruling out all possible

alternatives. In addition, satisficers tend to improve their attitude to the choice if it does not meet their expectations in order to reduce a state of cognitive dissonance and increase satisfaction with the choice. Such a phenomenon was not observed in the cognitive processes of maximisers (Sparks et al., 2012). In line with the above findings, we state that:

*H5: Predisposition towards maximisation has a negative effect on reciprocity perception in the sharing economy.*

### ***3.2. Consequences of Reciprocity Perception***

In this study we postulate that the perceived reciprocity of relations contributes to the commitment of individuals to the community of sharing economy platforms for two reasons. First, the relations of people are built on the expectation that their contributions will be rewarded (Walster et al., 1973). For example, a recent study confirmed that the use of sharing economy platforms is driven by the expectation that the exchange in communities is reciprocated (Davlembayeva et al., 2019). People enter into social relations to be reciprocated and ensure trustworthy behaviour (Thielmann and Hilbig, 2015, Ma et al., 2019), which is an important contributor to relationship commitment (Wang et al., 2019a). Second, given that social exchange relations are driven by reciprocity norms, the success in achieving reciprocal relations is consistent with prior expectations. The consistency in cognitions drives satisfaction with the outcome and subsequent commitment (Chye Koh and Boo, 2004). The direct and indirect effect of reciprocity on the positive outcome of relations has been confirmed empirically (Myers et al., 2013, Griffin and Hepburn, 2005, Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2002). Reciprocal relations have been shown to foster commitment, contribute to satisfaction with relations and communication between the parties (Myers et al., 2013, Chan and Li, 2010). Also, reciprocity was found to have a mediating effect on commitment through trust (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2002). Reciprocation in the form of support and good treatment of social group members leads

to commitment, which is manifested by an emotional attachment to the group (Griffin and Hepburn, 2005).

*H6: Reciprocity perception has a positive effect on relationship commitment.*

The relationship between reciprocity and commitment can be indirect through coping mechanisms, as there are strategies that are used to cope with the stress arising from the inconsistency between a prior expectation of reciprocal relations and the actual outcome (Walster et al., 1973, Adams, 1963, Biron and De Reuver, 2013). Stress may trigger physical and psychological responses aimed at justifying or compensating for the lack of reciprocity to relieve stress (Watkins et al., 2006, Walster et al., 1973, Shoss et al., 2016). The perception of nonreciprocal exchange in relations may cause emotional exhaustion and a feeling of reduced personal accomplishments. Individuals tend to distance themselves from others who are being unfair in relations as a coping mechanism to alleviate an emotionally negative state (Bakker et al., 2000). Alternatively, individuals use proactive measures, such as revenge, to compensate for unequal reciprocation. Such behaviour may be in the form of negative word-of-mouth or actions aimed at causing harm to the other party of relations and relieve stress or any other form of psychological discomfort (Malc et al., 2016, Zdaniuk and Bobocel, 2012). The two mechanisms that can be used to measure the degree to which someone copes with stress are problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus, 1998). Problem-focused coping refers to deliberate and rational activities that are aimed at changing the environment and/or adjusting one's own behaviour with the purpose of eliminating the problem causing stress (Folkman et al., 1986). That means that sharing economy participants need to undertake measures to compensate the other party in the transactions for the lack of reciprocity. Emotion-focused coping refers to the cognitive and behavioural activities aimed at eliminating negative emotion, without affecting the problem causing those emotions (Folkman et al., 1986).

For example, users of sharing economy platforms may adjust the perception of the consequences of inequitable relations, deny the seriousness of the situation or simply govern their emotions. Although emotion-focused coping can help reduce stress, it may be less effective in maintaining behaviour (Strutton and Lumpkin, 1994). Therefore:

*H7: a) Reciprocity perception positively affects problem-focused coping and b) problem-focused coping positively affects relationship commitment.*

*H8: a) Reciprocity perception positively affects emotion-focused coping and b) emotion-focused coping negatively affects relationship commitment.*

### **3.3 Moderators**

In this study, we hypothesise that the hedonic and utilitarian value of rewards have a moderating effect on the relationships between equity sensitivity, justice and reciprocity perception, as well as relationships between reciprocity perception and commitment. The rationale for hypothesising the moderation effect of values is drawn from findings suggesting that user behaviour in the sharing economy differs depending on the type of sharing activities due to underlying utilitarian and hedonic values (Akbar et al., 2016, Küper and Edinger-Schons, 2020). Prior literature suggested that the degree of satisfaction with social exchange relations depends on whether exchange brings hedonic or utilitarian benefits (Mano and Oliver, 1993, Ha and Park, 2013). The significance and strength of the effects of values on the evaluation of social relations varied depending on user groups, the resources being exchanged and the aspects of relations under consideration (Mano and Oliver, 1993, Ha and Park, 2013). The assumption that hedonic reward moderates the effect of equity sensitivity derives from studies confirming that benevolent people are more affected by hedonic values and intrinsic rewards, in contrast to entitleds, who value the extrinsic nature of outcomes (Miles et al., 1994, Foote and Harmon, 2006). The intrinsic and hedonic nature of

rewards are difficult to quantify, and this is likely to entail negative emotions, caused by nonreciprocal relations (Elmadağ and Ellinger, 2018), unless an individual is tolerant of inequitable reward distribution. The moderating effect of hedonic and utilitarian value on the relationship between procedural and distributive justice is suggested by the research confirming that procedural justice perception is contingent on a strong perception of the hedonic value of the reward, while distributive justice is underpinned by a strong perception of the reward's utility (Zapata-Phelan et al., 2009, Hoffman and Spitzer, 1985). When it comes to the moderation of the consequences of reciprocity perception by hedonic value, a strong hedonic value of social exchange relations decreases the commitment level and the need to employ coping strategies (Jones et al., 2006). Evidence about the effect of utilitarian value on outcomes is inconsistent (Jones et al., 2006, Park and Ha, 2016). However, in line with the study by Park and Ha (2016), it can be assumed that a stronger manifestation of utilitarian value strengthens the affective response after use behaviour. In addition, the findings of the research by Jones et al. (2006) suggest that utilitarian value increases the effect on loyalty manifested through the enhanced commitment. Based on the above, the following hypotheses state that:

*H9: The perceived hedonic value of an outcome a) increases the effect of equity sensitivity and procedural justice on reciprocity perception, b) decreases the effect of distributive justice on reciprocity perception, c) decreases the effect of reciprocity perception on emotion-focused and problem-focused coping, and d) decreases the effect of emotion-focused and problem-focused coping on relationship commitment.*

*H10: The perceived utilitarian value of an outcome a) decreases the effect of equity sensitivity and procedural justice on reciprocity perception, b) increases the effect of distributive justice on reciprocity perception, c) increases the effect of reciprocity perception on emotion-focused and*

*problem-focused coping, and d) increases the effect of emotion-focused and problem-focused coping on relationship commitment.*

Self-efficacy, response efficacy and social influence are the three constructs which are considered to be determinants of behavioural intention, especially in stressful situations (Liang and Xue, 2009, Johnston and Warkentin, 2010). Strong indicators of self-efficacy, response efficacy and social influence determine the inclination of people to engage in activity that is supposed to mitigate stress (Johnston and Warkentin, 2010). Self-efficacy refers to the belief in the personal ability to effectively undertake actions (aimed at balancing non-reciprocal outcomes). Response-efficacy refers to the belief that the actions will bring the expected results (Witte, 1992). Social influence relates to the impact that a social group has on the individual's decision to engage in behaviour (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Reciprocity evaluation in the sharing economy may be stressful, due to inconsistency between a prior expectation of reciprocal relations and the actual outcome (Walster et al., 1973, Adams, 1963, Biron and De Reuver, 2013). Hence, these constructs are assumed to moderate the relationship between reciprocity perception, coping mechanisms and commitment. The moderation effect of the selected constructs is drawn from the findings of previous studies suggesting that strong self-efficacy, response efficacy and social influence predict the motivation to use coping strategies (Haney and Long, 1995, Lerner and Kennedy, 2000, Liang and Xue, 2009, Johnston and Warkentin, 2010, Floyd et al., 2000). Although self-efficacy and response efficacy are positively associated with both emotion and problem-focused coping, their stronger manifestation is more correlated with problem-focused coping (Long, 1989, Liang and Xue, 2009).

*H11: a) Self-efficacy, b) response-efficacy and c) social influence increase the effect of reciprocity perception on emotion-focused and problem-focused coping, and increase the effect of both coping mechanisms on relationship commitment.*

Table 1 presents evidence supporting the proposed moderation effects.

INSERT TABLE 1

## 4. Methodology

### *4.1 Data Collection and Sampling*

The study adopted a quantitative approach, using a survey as the data collection method. Data collection took place in October 2019 using a sample from a consumer panel based in the USA. Given the objective of the research to examine the social and psychological factors underpinning the evaluation of relations in the sharing economy, the sample was not representative of the entire US population. Hence, the data was generated from a sample of the suppliers and providers participating in sharing economy transactions (e.g. accommodation sharing, carsharing, care services, clothes swapping, space renting, experience sharing etc). Access to the consumer panel was provided by an independent research company. Respondents were able to access the online survey through a URL, which ensured the anonymity of the responses. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part included a screening question that was aimed at filtering out the non-users of platforms. The second part of the questionnaire was designed to collect information about the demographic profile of the respondents, while the third part was designed to measure the constructs of the research model. The final sample comprised 398 valid responses. The profile of the respondents is presented in Table 2, which demonstrates a balanced representation of the sample based on socio-demographic characteristics.

INSERT TABLE 2

## *4.2. Measurements*

Multi-item scales were adopted from prior literature to measure the eleven constructs of the main model (Table 3). All items, except the equity sensitivity scale, were measured using a Likert scale with anchors between “1 – strongly disagree” to “7 – strongly agree”. Equity sensitivity was measured by a 10-point scale, where “1” characterised entitlement and “10” characterised benevolence. To measure the moderating effect of hedonic and utilitarian values, we used the scale developed by Babin et al. (1994). The factors moderating the relationship between reciprocity perception, coping strategies and relationship commitment included self-efficacy, response efficacy and social influence constructs. Self-efficacy and response efficacy were adopted from the study by Warkentin and Siponen (2015), while social influence originated from the study by Venkatesh et al. (2012). Moderators were measured by a 7-point Likert scale.

## **5. Results and Findings**

### *5.1. Data Analysis*

For the analysis of the data, SPSS v.25 and Amos v.25 software tools were used. As the first step, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the measurements. The reliability and validity of the constructs were confirmed by factor loadings, Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  and a construct reliability coefficient above the acceptable threshold ( $> 0.7$ ), satisfactory average variance extracted ( $AVE > 0.5$ ) and convergent validity results (Hair, 2014) (Table 4). The model showed significant  $\chi^2$  results ( $\chi^2 = 1219.18$ ,  $df = 574$ ,  $P = .000$ ). Given that the  $\chi^2$  test is sensitive to the sample size (Chen, 2007, Bentler and Bonett, 1980), other model fit indices recommended by Hair et al. (2014) were used to demonstrate the robustness of the CFA model (Table 3). To eliminate the possibility of misleading results, a collinearity test was executed.



The variance inflation factor (VIF) was  $< 5$ , which is below an acceptable threshold (Kock and Lynn, 2012). In addition, a statistical procedure using the effect of a latent method factor was performed, to confirm that the model had no issues related to common method variance (CMV) (Podsakoff et al., 2003). After rejecting the possibility of CMV, model fit in SEM and the hypothesised relationships were tested using Amos v.25.

INSERT TABLE 3

INSERT TABLE 4

## *5.2. Path analysis*

The results of the analysis of the structural model demonstrated satisfactory model fit indices (Table 5). The model explained 69% of the variance for Reciprocity Perception, 58% of the variance for Emotion-focused Coping, 47% for Problem-focused Coping and 70% for Relationship Commitment. Out of 12 proposed relationships, three paths were insignificant (H3a, H4 and H8b), namely the effects of Distributive Justice and Equity Sensitivity on Reciprocity Perception, and the effect of Emotion-focused Coping on Relationship Commitment. In contrast, the hypothesised effects of Social Identity, Ingroup Comparison, Procedural Justice and Predisposition Towards Maximisation were found to be positive and significant (H1, H2a, H3b, H5). As anticipated, the negative effect of Outgroup Comparison (H2b) on Reciprocity Perception was confirmed. The effects of Reciprocity Perception and Problem-focused Coping on Relationship Commitment were positive and moderate (H6 and H7b). The path from Reciprocity Perception to Emotion-focused and Problem-focused Coping were positive and strong (H7a and H8a). Figure 2 illustrates the structural paths of the model.

INSERT TABLE 5

INSERT FIGURE 2

### *5.3. Moderation Effects*

After conducting path analysis, the model was tested for the moderation effects of hedonic value, utilitarian value, self-efficacy, response efficacy and social influence (Table 6). To conduct the analysis of moderation effects, continuous variables were converted into categorical ones using a median split method. The median values of the variables were identified to split the values into two categories: weak (below the median) and strong (above the median). The results demonstrated that hedonic value moderates all hypothesised paths, except the relationship between procedural justice and perceived reciprocity (H9). The higher the effect of hedonic value, the lower is the strength of the relationships. The moderation effect of utilitarian value was confirmed for all hypothesised paths (H10). Utilitarian value increases the effect of perceived reciprocity on coping mechanisms and decreases the effect of problem-focused coping on relationship commitment. The moderation effect of response efficacy was in line with hypothesis 11b. Hypotheses 11a and 11c were partly supported, confirming that self-efficacy and social influence increase the effect of perceived reciprocity on coping mechanisms, but do not moderate the effect of problem-focused coping on relationship commitment.

INSERT TABLE 6

## 6. Discussion

### *6.1. Antecedents of Reciprocity Perception*

The established effects of ingroup and outgroup comparison factors support evidence from prior research (Anthony, 2005), suggesting that individuals with strong social identity tend to collaborate with members of the sharing economy community, rather than outside of it. The size and the direction of the effect of comparison factors (ingroup and outgroup comparisons) suggest two potential reasons that influence people's evaluation of reciprocity. The first plausible reason is that the tendency to compare input/output with those of other members of sharing economy platforms may represent a form of in-group favouritism (biased attitude), which could be manifested unconsciously (Tajfel, 1974). Such an interpretation elaborates on the findings of the research suggesting that group orientation is significant for individuals' propensity to embark on exchange relations in the sharing economy (Gupta et al., 2019). However, given that the level of collectivism differs across cultures (Hofstede, 1984), the significance of the tested variables could vary in other geographical locations. The second possible interpretation could be that ingroup comparison reflects a rational decision to favour members of the group they belong to, with the purpose of building long-term collaborative relations (Rabbie et al., 1989).

The insignificant effect of distributive justice was against the major stream of the literature (Chan and Lai, 2017, Adams, 1963, Piccoli and De Witte, 2015). The inconsistent finding could be due to the intangible nature of resources being exchanged through platforms (i.e. services, skills) that are often difficult to measure. Those resources are different from quantifiable inputs and rewards of exchange examined in the majority of published research (Ghosh et al., 2017, Folger and Konovsky, 1989, Piccoli and De Witte, 2015). This finding suggests that the role of justice can be different depending on the type of practice and the resources being exchanged. The positive effect

of procedural justice confirms the findings of prior literature suggesting that this variable contributes to the positive outcomes of relations (Folger and Konovsky, 1989, Van Dijke et al., 2019). Against the insignificant effect of distributive justice, the supported relationship between procedural justice and reciprocity confirms that users are more concerned with the degree to which the procedures of sharing economy transactions are fair, rather than focused on the fair outcome of relations. That means that procedures play a significantly more important role in regulating relations in sharing economy communities, because the sharing economy is primarily enabled by social interactions and communication between actors. This conclusion is congruous with the research confirming the importance of service and interaction quality for the users of the sharing economy and their loyalty to platforms (Priporas et al., 2017, Akhmedova et al., 2020b, Akhmedova et al., 2020a). According to prior findings, it could be that users value transaction security, communication quality, compensation policy, service reliability and platform responsiveness (Akhmedova et al., 2020a, Akhmedova et al., 2020b). In the light of evidence about the differences in users' behaviour depending on practices (Benoit et al., 2017), the role of procedural justice in the evaluation of reciprocity could be different across the service and goods-oriented platforms.

In contrast to the prior research, the effect of equity sensitivity on reciprocity perception was not supported (Huseman et al., 1987, King Jr and Miles, 1994, Westerlaken et al., 2017, Bourdage et al., 2018), suggesting that the degree to which people perceive reciprocity in relations does not depend on the degree to which people tolerate inequity. The positive effect of predisposition towards maximisation on reciprocity perception means that individuals who aim for result maximisation are more satisfied with the outcome of relations between parties in sharing economy transactions. This finding is inconsistent with the major stream of research (Iyengar et al., 2006,

Schwartz, 2004). The potential explanations of the established relationship can be drawn from the study by Karimi et al. (2018), who argued that maximisers may be more satisfied with outcomes than satisficers if they do not think about forgone alternatives. This condition may be achieved if users of sharing economy platforms conduct a rigorous evaluation of the decision prior to engaging in transactions, thus ruling out all potential alternatives. Such a scenario seemed not to be plausible, given that the use of sharing economy platforms is often associated with utility maximisation for the benefit of the society rather than oneself (Schneider, 2017). However, the finding suggests that individuals' predisposition towards maximisation may stay dormant or manifest itself differently across different sharing economy transactions. Those transactions vary greatly by the resources that are exchanged through platforms (i.e. second-hand vs new, tangible vs intangible), the payment terms and the activity sectors (transport, service, retail etc.). The examination of the personality traits brings important findings given the inconsistency in conceptual and empirical research about reciprocation in the sharing economy (Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto, 2018, Harvey et al., 2020, Geiger and Germelmann, 2015, Corciolani and Dalli, 2014, Bridges and Vásquez, 2018, Belk, 2014). From the construal point of view, generalised reciprocity implies delayed and indirect reciprocation (Sahlins, 1974, Belk, 2010, Belk, 2014), while empirical evidence found that reciprocation in some practices never happens (Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto, 2018, Harvey et al., 2020, Geiger and Germelmann, 2015). By testing the effect of equity sensitivity and predisposition towards maximisation, this research adds evidence to the existing debate. It suggests that the variance in reciprocity perception is not always due to the actual inequitable distribution of outcomes, but individual differences in aspiration towards outcome maximisations.

## *6.2. Consequences of Reciprocity Perception*

The significant effect of reciprocity perception on the commitment to sharing economy platforms demonstrates that the perception of reciprocity contributes to the development of trustworthy relations in the community, which is the condition of long-term relationships (Thielmann and Hilbig, 2015, Wang et al., 2019a). The findings contribute to the stream of research investigating the positive impact of reciprocal relations, in terms of fostering commitment, inter-personal relations and relationship satisfaction (Myers et al., 2013, Chan and Li, 2010). The significant indirect effect of perceived reciprocity and commitment complements the research which indicates that a fair outcome of relations results in cognitive and affective responses (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2002, Griffin and Hepburn, 2005). As far as the sharing economy literature is concerned, the findings bring new insight into the behaviour of platform users. They demonstrate that the principles of Equity Theory can be applied in the context of collaborative relations. In line with the theory, any inconsistency between expected and perceived outcomes may induce stress and psychological and physical responses aimed at coping with stress. The reduction of stress increases the likelihood of a positive behavioural outcome (Walster et al., 1973, Adams, 1963, Biron and De Reuver, 2013). The results add to the literature on the outcomes of equity perception by theorising the effect of reciprocity evaluation on commitment through problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Specifically, the examination of the paths showed the positive effect of reciprocity perception on problem-focused coping, which, in turn, positively correlates with commitment. The effect of the reciprocity on problem-focused coping is stronger compared to its direct effect on commitment. This means that commitment is not always secured by a mere reciprocation of exchange. People may undertake effective measures, such as adjusting behaviour or the environment, to ensure that future transactions bring fair returns. In a similar vein, the significant

strong effect of reciprocity on emotion-focused coping suggests that sharing economy users resort to emotional adjustment following the evaluation of reciprocity. Although the negative effect of emotion-focused coping on the commitment to sharing economy platforms was insignificant, the finding supports the assumption that the regulation of emotions is counter-productive in maintaining behaviour (Strutton and Lumpkin, 1994).

### *6.3. Moderation effects*

The moderation analysis suggests that procedural justice has an effect on the perception of reciprocity only if the outcome of exchange represents low utility for sharing economy users. This result is consistent with assumptions based on the prior literature (Hoffman and Spitzer, 1985), confirming the correlation of utilitarian value and distributive justice (vs procedural justice) and the mediating role of intrinsic motivation in the relationship between procedural justice and behavioural performance. This finding provides missing evidence about the moderating influence of hedonic value on the effect of procedural justice. Also, the confirmed effect explains the scenarios and situations when collaborative relations most likely end up in positive evaluation. The effect of utilitarian value on the relationships between outcome variables indicates that a stronger utilitarian value of outcomes increases the likelihood of regulating emotions as a means of coping with the unfair allocation of rewards. Given the insignificant relationship between emotion-focused coping and commitment and the established moderating effect of utilitarian value, people who perceive a high utility of relations are more likely to stop using platforms to avoid nonreciprocal outcomes in future transactions. The established moderating role of hedonic value was found to be negative, which is consistent with the assumption suggested by prior research (Jones et al., 2006). However, the difference in effect sizes between the two groups of respondents (weak hedonic value vs strong hedonic value) is very minimal, which means that the

inhibiting role of hedonic value on the relationship between reciprocity perception and emotion-focused coping is very weak. The effect of reciprocity on problem-focused coping and the commitment to sharing economy platforms is conditioned by the perception of the low hedonic outcome of relations. These findings add to the existing literature, which only tested the direct effects of value on loyalty, intention to continuous behaviour and affective state (Jones et al., 2006, Park and Ha, 2016). The results of the moderating analysis provide information about situational conditions that explain the variability of the behaviour of people following reciprocity evaluation. Finally, the insignificant effect of hedonic value on the path between procedural justice and reciprocity perception means that the fairness of procedures in the sharing economy is evaluated irrespective of the degree to which relations bring hedonic benefits. Overall, the above results complement the debate in the sharing economy literature discussing differences in user behaviour depending on the type of sharing activities due to underlying utilitarian and hedonic values (Akbar et al., 2016, Küper and Edinger-Schons, 2020). The confirmed moderation effects suggest that the evaluation of reciprocity and the ensuing responses are also contingent on the values of exchange.

The confirmed moderation effects of social influence, self-efficacy and response efficacy are in line with prior research suggesting that the constructs determine individuals' behaviour in stressful situations and intention to engage in activity mitigating stress (Long, 1989, Liang and Xue, 2009, Johnston and Warkentin, 2010). Specifically, the results of the moderation analysis suggest three main conclusions. First, people emotionally and pro-actively cope with stress when they believe in their personal ability to readdress the stress, when they expect coping behaviour to bring effective results and when they are under the influence of social groups. The role of self-efficacy and response efficacy brings new light to existing research (Long, 1989, Liang and Xue, 2009) by confirming the moderating effects of factors on coping mechanisms. The explanation of the



significant role of social influence can be drawn from the literature explaining the role of reciprocity in social exchange. The generalised norm of reciprocity in the social context induces a feeling of indebtedness and, in turn, commitment to communities (Gouldner, 1960). In other words, social pressure during exchange practices can act as a facilitating factor to embark on coping activities for the sake of further collaborations. Second, there is more probability that after pro-active coping with stress, people will commit to sharing economy communities if they have a strong belief in the effectiveness of coping measures. This finding is consistent with prior evidence (Rippetoe and Rogers, 1987, Johnston and Warkentin, 2010) supporting the idea that response efficacy has a stimulating effect on adaptive behaviour. Third, problem-focused coping results in relationship commitment irrespective of the strength of perceived social influence and self-efficacy. Although the results are not consistent with the initial assumption of the study rooted in prior literature (Liang and Xue, 2009, Han et al., 2016, Floyd et al., 2000), the insignificant effects are logical. By undertaking measures to cope with the consequences of unfair relations, people handle the social pressure and improve their self-concept. That makes these variables unimportant for further behaviour. The above findings provide new evidence to the literature on user behaviour in the sharing economy following reciprocity evaluation. They shed light on situational and personal factors that make people mitigate stress, thus enriching the body of research focusing on coping behaviours (Strutton and Lumpkin, 1994, Folkman et al., 1986).

## **7. Conclusion**

This study pursued three objectives. The study explored the conditions contributing to perceived reciprocity of exchange in the sharing economy by adopting the equity theory perspective. The main predictors of reciprocity were found to be 1) a strong feeling of social identity, 2) the tendency to compare personal outcomes of relations with the outcomes of other members of

sharing economy communities, 3) perceived procedural justice, and 4) predisposition towards outcome maximisation. The second objective of the research was to examine cognitive and behavioural outcomes following reciprocity perception. Except for the direct effect of reciprocity on relationship commitment, the study found that after evaluating reciprocity in relations, people may engage in problem-focused coping, contributing to relationship commitment. The third objective of the research was to examine how situational and personal factors (i.e. value of exchange, social influence, response efficacy and self-efficacy) affect perceived reciprocity, the cognitive and behavioural consequences of reciprocity evaluation. The study enabled us to conclude that the strength of the effect of procedural justice on perceived reciprocity is moderated by utilitarian and hedonic values. In addition, it was confirmed that the value of exchange, social influence, response efficacy and self-efficacy regulate the relationship between perceived reciprocity, coping strategies and commitment.

### *7.1. Theoretical contribution and practical implications.*

This study makes three contributions. First, the study makes a contribution to the literature, which is lacking empirical evidence about the factors underpinning the perception of reciprocity in the sharing economy. In contrast to prior research studying the drivers of transactions (Akbar et al., 2016, Benoit et al., 2017, Barnes and Mattsson, 2017, Davlembayeva et al., 2019) or reciprocation (Chan and Li, 2010, Decrop et al., 2018, Starr Jr et al., 2020), this study delves into the mechanisms that people employ for matching received rewards. By adopting the equity theory framework, this research theorised the effect of justice perceptions, the personal and social groups of factors on the perception of reciprocity in sharing economy relations. The study confirmed the insignificance of distributive justice and interpreted the findings, thus opening a new perspective on the equity theory in the sharing economy context. The study found that the main determinants of reciprocity

are strong social identity and a tendency to compare outcomes to other people within the sharing economy community. These findings explain a new application of the equity theory in the context of social dilemma, whereby actors may pursue both collective and self-interest. The reciprocation in the sharing economy is not defined and is difficult to measure (Belk, 2014). The loose structure of collaborative relations does not impose an obligation to reciprocate, yet it promotes social bonding, relationship-building (Krush et al., 2015) and can result in both social welfare and consumer surplus (Benjaafar et al., 2019). The examination of perceived justice, social and personal variables reconciles the social and rational perspectives on collaborative consumption and tests the explanatory power of personal traits. The identification of the variables defining perceived reciprocity is important, since the perception of fairly distributed rewards promotes long-term collaborations (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Given the positive impact of reciprocal relations on collective wellbeing (Laamanen et al., 2015, Llamas and Belk, 2013), an understanding of the determinants of reciprocity also helps to secure the positive outcome of relations and, in turn, facilitate collective wellbeing.

Second, this study contributes to the research on the individuals' behavioural and cognitive responses following reciprocity perception in the sharing economy (Harvey et al., 2017). The findings of the study offer an explanation of the factors determining the commitment of people to sharing economy platforms. The examination of the effect of reciprocity perception on relationship commitment through emotion-focused and problem-focused coping sheds new light on the application of equity theory. This approach is different from existing research, which examined the effect of exchange on continuous use, commitment, loyalty and satisfaction without exploring the consequences of exchange when an outcome does not meet expectations (Lu et al., 2020, Gleim et al., 2019, Chan and Li, 2010, Akhmedova et al., 2020a, Kong et al., 2020). This study examined

the behaviour following the evaluation of reciprocity to understand how it attenuates the feelings associated with non-reciprocal outcome. By exploring coping mechanisms, this study explains what facilitates people's commitment to sharing economy platforms. The knowledge that the study provides is important considering evidence about the role of commitment in determining people's loyalty to relations (Dagger et al., 2011). The findings enable us to understand what behaviours someone embarks on to potentially sustain long-term collaborations on platforms.

The third contribution is that this study explains the variance in perceived reciprocity and its consequences in sharing economy transactions depending on situational differences. While prior research differentiated the motives across different types of sharing and depending on the value of practice (Sands et al., 2020, Akbar et al., 2016, Küper and Edinger-Schons, 2020), the role of values in the evaluation of input vs output of relations and the consequent behaviour has not been evidenced. This study extends the existing body of knowledge by examining the moderating role of the value of exchange on the direct relationships between equity sensitivity, justice and reciprocity perception, as well as relationships between reciprocity perception, coping and commitment. In addition, the role of social influence, self-efficacy and response efficacy in facilitating and inhibiting behavioural and cognitive responses to perceived reciprocity were explored. Prior studies examined the direct role of those factors in perceiving relational outcomes or underpinning behavioural intention and coping mechanisms (Ha and Park, 2013, Haney and Long, 1995, Lerner and Kennedy, 2000, Liang and Xue, 2009, Johnston and Warkentin, 2010, Floyd et al., 2000). This study extends the application of the factors and explains the moderating effect they have on the relationship between perceived reciprocity, its determinants and cognitive/behavioural outcomes. An examination of moderation effects is important, as it gives a

richer insight into the dependence of reciprocity evaluation and commitment on situational conditions and explains possible variations in the predictive strength of the examined variables.

The study offers implications for practice too. On the one hand, the findings provide guidelines about potential interventions that can be developed to ensure higher satisfaction with platforms due to increased reciprocity. The findings indicate that there are three main conditions that need to be met in order to increase the likelihood of reciprocity in relations. First, users need to associate themselves with other platform members and compare the outcomes of relations with other peers. To strengthen the feeling of belonging to sharing economy communities, platforms need to facilitate the communication and interaction of users with platforms and with other members. A possible way to make the communication more effective is to analyse users' orders and search patterns, identify their interests and build communication and interaction around their preferences. Such an approach would be possible for platforms with customisable multicriteria search tools, such as accommodation or product-swapping. For example, a search for a particular type of house would make it possible to identify the preference in size, budget, location and interior and provide weekly updates with targeted offerings. Apart from strengthening social identity, targeted promotions simplify the evaluation of options, which is important for users with a tendency to maximise outcomes. The finding of the significant effect of procedural justice on reciprocity perception provides another implication for practice. Against the insignificant effect of distributive justice, the positive effect of procedural justice suggests that all parties to transactions should focus more on the clarity of procedures and the compliance with the policies of transactions, rather than the outcome. To increase the perception of the fairness of procedures, platforms should also imply the liability for any unfair treatment in exchange relations between the two parties. On the other hand, the findings inform practitioners on how to ensure the loyalty of the users of sharing

economy platforms. As perceived reciprocity is an important predictor of relationship commitment, the intermediaries of transactions (i.e. platforms) need to develop a clear policy on the reciprocation terms and conditions. This would help in the exchange of rewards that are difficult to measure and monetise. In addition, the confirmed effect of problem-focused coping on commitment suggests that receivers and suppliers on platforms may offer feedback strategies that would compensate for an insufficient degree of perceived reciprocity. The potential measures can include online blogs and communities discussing concerns and issues that users face in the exchange with each other. The interaction with other members of the community would help find a solution to a problem or provide information about potential ways of dealing with the lack of reciprocation. Such an approach ensures a stronger perception of procedural justice, by demonstrating the transparency of procedures and communication within platforms, as well as the empathy towards users.

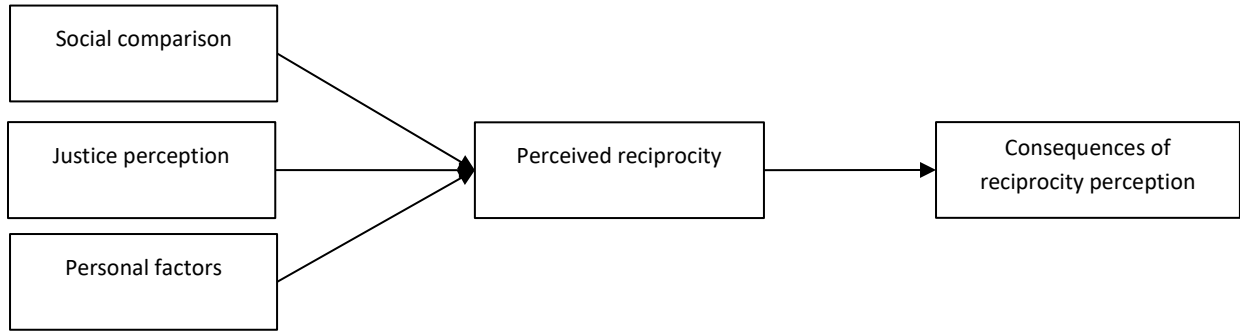
## *7.2. Limitations and Future Research Suggestions*

The study has some limitations that future research can build upon. Firstly, this study did not differentiate the degree to which perceived reciprocity, its determinants and behavioural and cognitive responses vary for users of different platforms. However, different practices (e.g. accommodation sharing, car sharing, clothes swapping) represent different interaction processes and types of reward, which, in turn, could affect individuals' perceptions. Therefore, future research needs to control for the variance in different types of sharing platforms when examining reciprocity evaluation. Secondly, given the cross-sectional design of the study, the antecedents and outcomes of reciprocity perception were not tested longitudinally. Testing the research model at several points in time would give a more robust explanation of the causal effect of the selected variables. Thirdly, the present study did not control for the effect of the type of relationship. Future

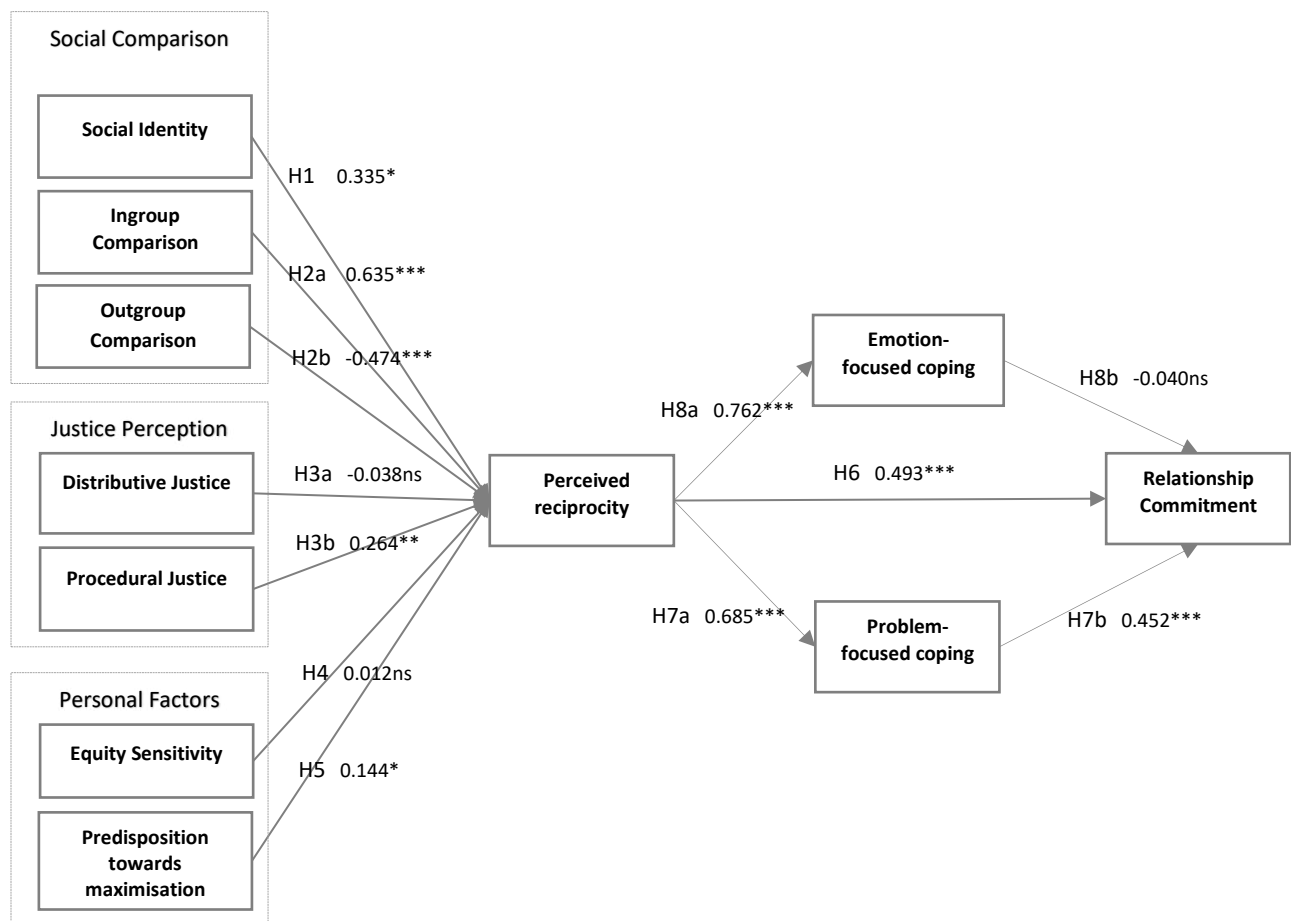
studies need to check whether the effect varies depending on the monetary or non-monetary rewards, by splitting the sample into two clusters – those who exchange resources for monetary compensation (e.g. paid accommodation sharing, carsharing and clothes exchange) or those who exchange for free and other compensation (e.g. exchange of services or gifts). Different samples may prioritise different aspects of relations, such as the quality of interaction, communication, service or products. Different priorities can affect the strength of the distributive and procedural justice perception and determine the outcomes of reciprocal behaviour. Also, the research model should be tested in other geographical locations to conclude the degree to which social identity and in-group comparison are invariant in cultures with different collectivism-individualism scores. Finally, future studies may go further and check the effect of experiential or rational decision making on the evaluation of the outcomes of collaborative relations. This would help explain the role of decision-making factors in the reciprocity evaluation.

## **Figures and Tables**

### **Figure 1: Overview of the model**



**Figure 2: Structural equation model**



Significant at  $p$ : ns  $\geq 0.05$ ; \*  $< 0.05$ ; \*\*  $< 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $< 0.001$ .

**Table 1: Supportive evidence on the moderation effects**

Moderator	Path	Positive effect	Negative effect
Hedonic Value	ES $\rightarrow$ RP	(Miles et al., 1994)	(Elmadağ and Ellinger, 2018)
	PJ $\rightarrow$ B	(Zapata-Phelan et al., 2009)	
	RP $\rightarrow$ CM		(Jones et al., 2006)



	CM → RC		(Jones et al., 2006)
<b>Utilitarian Value</b>	ES → RP	(Elmadağ and Ellinger, 2018)	(Foote and Harmon, 2006, Miles et al., 1994)
	DJ → B	(Hoffman and Spitzer, 1985)	
	RP → CM	(Park and Ha, 2016)	(Jones et al., 2006)
	CM → RC	(Park and Ha, 2016, Jones et al., 2006)	
<b>Self-efficacy</b>	RP → CM	(Haney and Long, 1995, Lerner and Kennedy, 2000)	
	RP → EFC	(Long, 1989)	(Liang et al., 2019)
	RP → PFC	(Liang et al., 2019, Long, 1989, Chwalisz et al., 1992)	
	EFC → RC		(Johnston and Warkentin, 2010)
	PFC → RC	(Han et al., 2016, Johnston and Warkentin, 2010, Floyd et al., 2000)	
<b>Response efficacy</b>	RP → EFC	(Liang and Xue, 2009)	
	RP → PFC	(Liang and Xue, 2009)	
	PFC → RC	(Floyd et al., 2000, Johnston and Warkentin, 2010)	
	EFC → RC	(Han et al., 2016)	
<b>Social influence</b>	SI → RC	(Liang and Xue, 2009, Johnston and Warkentin, 2010)	

Note: equity sensitivity (ES), reciprocity perception (RP), procedural justice (PJ), behaviour (B), distributive justice (DJ), self-efficacy (SE), coping mechanisms (CM), emotion-focused coping (EFC), problem-focused coping (PFC), relationship commitment (RC), response efficacy (RE), social influence (SI).

**Table 2: Demographic profile of respondents**

Demographic Characteristic	Type	Frequency (n=398)	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Male	189	47.5
	Female	208	52.3
	Prefer not to say	1	0.3
<b>Age</b>	under 20	9	2.3
	20 – 29	43	10.8
	30 – 39	88	22.1
	40 - 49	84	21.1
	50 – 59	83	20.9
	Over 60	91	22.9
<b>Current Employment Status</b>	Full time employed	211	53.0
	Part time employed	32	8.0
	Out of work (but looking for)	16	4.0
	Out of work (but not looking for)	2	0.5

	Homemaker	26	6.5
	Student	9	2.3
	Retired	87	21.9
	Unable to work	15	3.8
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Non-Hispanic White or Euro-American	293	73.6
	Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American	25	6.3
	Latino or Hispanic American	16	4.0
	East Asian or Asian American	38	9.5
	South Asian or Indian American	7	1.8
	Middle Eastern or Arab American	4	1.0
	Native American or Alaskan Native	3	0.8
	Other	7	1.8
	Mixed	5	1.3
<b>Education</b>	Some high school or less	7	1.8
	High school graduate or equivalent	45	11.3
	Vocational/technical school (two-year program)	23	5.8
	Some college, but no degree	68	17.1
	College graduate (four-year program)	113	28.4
	Some graduate school, but no degree	16	4.0
	Graduate degree (MSc, MBA, PhD, etc.)	89	22.4
	Professional degree (M.D., J.D., etc.)	37	9.3
<b>Area of Residence</b>	Urbanised Area (50,000 or more people)	198	49.7
	Urban Cluster (at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people)	146	36.7
	Rural (all other areas)	54	13.6
<b>Household Income</b>	\$0 - \$24,999	55	13.8
	\$25,000 - \$49,999	68	17.1
	\$50,000 - \$74,999	82	20.6
	\$75,000 - \$99,999	72	18.1
	More than \$100,000	121	30.4

**Table 3: Measurement items of main constructs**

Measurement Item	Loa- ding	C.R.	AVE	Cron- bach's $\alpha$
<b>Social Identity (Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992)</b>		0.954	0.839	0.953
<i>Overall, my membership in sharing economy platforms and the associated communities reflect the way I feel about myself</i>	0.869			
<i>The sharing economy platforms and the associated communities I belong to have been an important reflection of who I am</i>	0.930			
<i>The sharing economy platforms and the associated communities I belong to have been important to my sense of what kind of person I am</i>	0.949			

<i>In general, belonging to sharing economy platforms and the associated communities is an important part of my self-image</i>	0.915			
<b>Outgroup Comparison (Hess et al., 2010)</b>		0.935	0.826	0.934
<i>The overall benefits of using sharing economy platforms are greater than the benefits one receives when using traditional providers</i>	0.896			
<i>Overall, using sharing economy platforms is more beneficial compared to when using traditional providers</i>	0.928			
<i>The overall impact of using sharing economy platforms is more favourable than when using other traditional providers</i>	0.903			
<b>Ingroup Comparison (Hess et al., 2010)</b>		0.910	0.835	0.909
<i>My overall benefits of using sharing economy platforms are greater than the benefits experienced by other users</i>	0.891			
<i>Overall, sharing economy platforms have been more beneficial to me compared to other users</i>	0.936			
<b>Procedural Justice (Colquitt, 2001, Leventhal, 1980)</b>		0.912	0.776	0.912
<i>The procedures of engaging in transactions are free of bias</i>	0.886			
<i>The procedures of engaging in transactions are based on accurate information</i>	0.889			
<i>Users are able to appeal the outcomes of procedures when engaging in transactions</i>	0.868			
<b>Distributive Justice (Colquitt, 2001, Leventhal, 1976)</b>		0.903	0.823	0.903
<i>The outcomes are appropriate for what users undertake to complete a transaction</i>	0.907			
<i>The outcomes reflect what users have contributed into the transactions, in terms of money, effort or time spent</i>	0.907			
<b>Predisposition towards maximisation (Lai, 2010, Schwartz et al., 2002, Highhouse et al., 2008)</b>		0.897	0.687	0.894
<i>Whenever I'm faced with a choice, I try to imagine what all the other possibilities are, even ones that aren't present at the moment.</i>	0.861			
<i>My decisions are well thought through</i>	0.868			
<i>I am uncomfortable making decisions before I know all my options.</i>	0.699			
<i>Before making a choice, I consider many alternatives thoroughly</i>	0.874			
<b>Equity Sensitivity (Huseman et al., 1987, King Jr et al., 1993)</b>		0.858	0.548	0.855
<i>When having exchange relationships with people it is important ...</i> <i>(1) to receive ....(10) to give</i>	0.659			
<i>(1) I am concerned with what I receive ....(10) I am concerned with what I contribute</i>	0.689			
<i>(1) I watch out for my own good ....(10) I help others</i>	0.788			
<i>(1) my hard work should benefit me ....(10) my hard work should benefit others</i>	0.737			
<i>(1) to look out for myself ....(10) to give than to receive</i>	0.816			
<b>Reciprocity Perception (Bakker et al., 2000)</b>		0.928	0.811	0.928
<i>How often do you feel you invest more in the relationship with other parties of sharing economy transactions than you receive in return?</i>	0.894			

<i>How often do you feel you lay out yourself too much in view of what you achieve?</i>	0.913			
<i>How often do you feel you give sharing economy platforms and associated communities a lot of time and attention, but meet with little appreciation?</i>	0.895			
<b>Emotion-focused coping (Billings and Moos, 1981)</b>		0.712	0.553	0.712
<i>I prepare for the worst</i>	0.736			
<i>Sometimes, I take it out on other people when I feel angry or depressed</i>	0.751			
<b>Problem-focused coping (Billings and Moos, 1981)</b>		0.875	0.700	0.874
<i>I talk about the situation with other people who have been using sharing economy platforms</i>	0.825			
<i>I talk with a spouse or other relative about the problem</i>	0.808			
<i>I talk with a friend about the situation</i>	0.875			
<b>Relationship Commitment (Anderson and Weitz, 1992)</b>		0.961	0.804	0.960
<i>I have a strong sense of loyalty to sharing economy platforms and associated communities</i>	0.844			
<i>I am very committed to sharing economy platforms and associated communities</i>	0.898			
<i>I am quite willing to make long-term investments in using sharing economy platforms</i>	0.930			
<i>My relationship with sharing economy platforms and associated communities is a long-term alliance</i>	0.933			
<i>I am patient with sharing economy platforms and associated communities when they make mistakes that cause me trouble</i>	0.874			
<i>I am willing to dedicate whatever people and resources it takes to make sharing economy platforms and associated communities prosper</i>	0.897			

CFA: Model fit:  $\chi^2(574) = 1219.18$ ,  $P = .000$ ,  $CMIN/DF = 2.124$ ,  $CFI = 0.956$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.053$

**Table 4: Convergent validity test**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
<b>1 Equity Sensitivity</b>	0.740										
<b>2 Social Identity</b>	0.348	0.916									
<b>3 Outgroup Comparison</b>	0.370	0.823	0.909								
<b>4 Ingroup Comparison</b>	0.355	0.865	0.872	0.914							
<b>5 Procedural Justice</b>	0.337	0.769	0.841	0.805	0.881						
<b>6 Distributive Justice</b>	0.356	0.710	0.857	0.768	0.860	0.907					
<b>7 Reciprocity Perception</b>	0.287	0.698	0.582	0.729	0.639	0.556	0.901				
<b>8 Emotion-focused Coping</b>	0.134	0.637	0.629	0.636	0.650	0.598	0.723	0.744			

<b>9 Problem-focused Coping</b>	0.330	0.712	0.758	0.713	0.788	0.777	0.613	0.715	0.836		
<b>10 Relationship Commitment</b>	0.353	0.792	0.788	0.830	0.821	0.754	0.709	0.646	0.766	0.897	
<b>11 Maximisation Predispos.</b>	0.355	0.554	0.733	0.608	0.729	0.803	0.461	0.564	0.735	0.677	0.829

Notes: Diagonal figures represent the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) and the figures below represent the between-constructs correlations

**Table 5: The results of the test of hypotheses**

<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Path</i>			<i>Coef.</i>	<i>(t-test)</i>
H1	Social Identity	→	Reciprocity Perception	0.335	(3.854***)
H2a	Ingroup Comparison	→	Reciprocity Perception	0.635	(5.351***)
H2b	Outgroup Comparison	→	Reciprocity Perception	-0.474	(-3.797***)
H3a	Distributive Justice	→	Reciprocity Perception	-0.038	(-0.333 ns)
H3b	Procedural Justice	→	Reciprocity Perception	0.264	(2.665**)
H4	Equity Sensitivity	→	Reciprocity Perception	0.012	(-0.296 ns)
H5	Maximisation Predisposition	→	Reciprocity Perception	0.144	(1.983*)
H6	Reciprocity Perception	→	Relationship Commitment	0.493	(6.645***)
H7a	Reciprocity Perception	→	Problem-focused Coping	0.685	(12.867***)
H7b	Problem-focused Coping	→	Relationship Commitment	0.452	(7.889***)
H8a	Reciprocity Perception	→	Emotion-focused Coping	0.762	(13.078***)
H8b	Emotion-focused Coping	→	Relationship Commitment	-0.040	(-0.568 ns)

Method: ML; SEM Model fit:  $\chi^2(596) = 1622.9$ ,  $CMIN/DF = 2.723$ ,  $CFI = 0.931$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.066$

Significant at  $p$ : ns $\geq 0.05$ ; \* $< 0.05$ ; \*\* $< 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $< 0.001$ .

**Table 6: The results of moderation analysis**

<b>H9: Hedonic value</b>				
<b>Path</b>	$\Delta\chi^2$	<b>Sig</b>	<b>Weak hedonic value Coef. (t-test)</b>	<b>Strong hedonic value Coef. (t-test)</b>
Procedural Justice ---> Reciprocity	1.133	ns	0.214 (0.044ns)	0.237 (2.467*)
Reciprocity ---> Emotion-Focused Coping	33.269	***	0.564 (10.253***)	0.563 (3.004**)
Reciprocity ---> Problem-Focused Coping	16.993	***	0.554 (8.095***)	0.371 (1.815ns)
Problem-Focused Coping ---> Relationship Commitment	11.891	**	0.589 (6.904***)	0.436 (3.815***)

<b>H10: Utilitarian value</b>				
<b>Path</b>	$\Delta\chi^2$	<b>Sig</b>	<b>Weak utilitarian value Coef. (t-test)</b>	<b>Strong utilitarian value Coef. (t-test)</b>
Procedural Justice → Reciprocity	4.807	*	0.261 (3.212**)	0.195 (-0.296ns)
Reciprocity → Emotion-Focused Coping	19.046	***	0.624 (3.488***)	0.669 (10.539***)
Reciprocity → Problem-Focused Coping	3.971	*	0.427 (3.637***)	0.660 (8.837***)

Problem-Focused Coping → Relationship Commitment	5.391	*	0.386 (3.664***)	0.365 (5.697***)
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#### H11a: Self-efficacy

Path	$\Delta\chi^2$	Sig	Weak self-efficacy Coef. (t-test)	Strong self-efficacy Coef. (t-test)
Reciprocity ---> Emotion-Focused Coping	34.573	***	0.604 (2.834**)	0.682 (11.535***)
Reciprocity ---> Problem-Focused Coping	3.900	*	0.445 (4.442***)	0.654 (8.038***)
Problem-Focused Coping ---> Relationship Commitment	3.624	ns	0.407 (4.701***)	0.430 (5.576***)

#### H11b: Response efficacy

Path	$\Delta\chi^2$	Sig	Weak response efficacy Coef. (t-test)	Strong response efficacy Coef. (t-test)
Reciprocity ---> Emotion-Focused Coping	13.856	***	0.471 (3.662***)	0.706 (9.951***)
Reciprocity ---> Problem-Focused Coping	12.089	**	0.371 (1.840ns)	0.692 (9.313***)
Problem-Focused Coping ---> Relationship Commitment	9.316	**	0.321 (3.968***)	0.549 (6.032***)

#### H11c: Social Influence

Path	$\Delta\chi^2$	Sig	Weak social influence Coef. (t-test)	Strong social influence Coef. (t-test)
Reciprocity ---> Emotion-Focused Coping	28.000	***	0.597 (2.840**)	0.609 (9.339***)
Reciprocity ---> Problem-Focused Coping	25.699	***	0.404 (1.159ns)	0.627 (8.802***)
Problem-Focused Coping ---> Relationship Commitment	3.802	ns	0.420 (4.143***)	0.412 (5.473***)

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