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Understanding the impact of informative contact in Pay-What-You-Want pricing: a sequential mediation analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to enhance understanding of the Pay-What-You-Want (PWYW) pricing model by exploring how informative contact with beneficiaries (ICB) influences consumers' willingness to pay (WTP). Utilizing Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with a sample of 307 respondents, the research suggests that the impact of ICB on WTP is mediated by two factors: perceived control (PC) and reciprocity concern (RC), both individually and sequentially. Specifically, ICB increases perceived control, positively affecting reciprocity concern and leading to a higher willingness to pay. These findings highlight the significance of emphasizing the prosocial effects of consumer payments in PWYW scenarios, as this can indirectly encourage consumers to pay more. The results contribute to the literature on participative pricing models and offer practical insights for businesses by revealing the psychological mechanisms that influence payment decisions in PWYW contexts.

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1. Introduction

Pricing strategies have become crucial for thriving businesses in today's dynamic and interconnected global marketplace. The rise of e-commerce and the increasing power of consumers have shifted the focus of pricing strategies from traditional pricing models to more flexible and consumer-centric approaches. Digitalization has further accelerated this shift, allowing companies to reach global markets by engaging more with their consumers. In this evolving landscape, the Pay-What-You-Want (PWYW) pricing model has emerged as an intriguing phenomenon that allows consumers to set the final price they are willing to pay for a product or service (Kim et al., 2009). While PWYW offers potential benefits such as increased customer engagement and brand loyalty (Gneezy et al., 2012), its success relies on a deeper understanding of the complex psychological and social factors influencing consumer behavior within this unconventional framework. Although current research is increasing, it still presents limitations in fully grasping the psychological and social drivers that motivate consumers to pay different amounts in PWYW settings, such as altruism (Ma et al., 2022), social norms (Wang et al., 2022), and fairness (Güzel et al., 2025).

Research indicates that PWYW systems can enhance consumers' perceived levels of control (Wagner et al., 2022) and positively impact their satisfaction (Chao et al., 2015). However, there are also some negative consequences associated with PWYW pricing. For instance, consumers' reluctance to pay fair amounts or their decision not to pay at all can hinder the widespread adoption of this pricing model (Butz & Harbring, 2022). Studies suggest that a significant reason for these issues is that consumers often overlook reciprocity concerns in the payment process (Narwal et al., 2022; Narwal & Rai, 2022). However, it is noted that the underlying factors need to be investigated in greater depth (Tena-Sánchez et al., 2020; Vizuete-Luciano et al., 2023).

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The study aims to explore the psychological factors that influence PWYW pricing. Specifically, we investigate the relationship between Informative Contact with Beneficiaries (ICB) and PWYW pricing. Based on the idea that individuals are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior when they know the benefits of their actions for others (Grant et al., 2007), ICB involves effectively communicating how consumer payments impact the lives of sellers (Grant et al., 2007), employees (Martela & Ryan, 2016), and other stakeholders (Llopis & D'Este, 2016). Moreover, the existing literature does not provide evidence of how consumers respond to PWYW pricing in the context of ICB. In particular, the literature is silent on whether the effect is direct or indirect on PWYW pricing, given the impact of ICB on other dynamics. Furthermore, the existing literature on PWYW suggests that consumers often do not fully understand this pricing model (Falk & Fischbacher, 2006; Skinner, 1996), so it is reasonable to hypothesize a connection between ICB and PWYW. Therefore, this study empirically tests the impact of ICB when it is conveyed to consumers in conjunction with the PWYW pricing strategy.

Although ICB appears to be a motivating factor, it may not be sufficient to encourage consumers in a complex pricing system like PWYW. Existing literature highlights the significance of consumers' perceived control when adopting the PWYW pricing model. For instance, an increased sense of perceived control (PC), defined as consumers' belief in their ability to influence outcomes (Burger, 1989), can lead to a greater willingness to pay due to an enhanced sense of responsibility (Narwal & Rai, 2022). However, there are instances when consumers may choose not to pay. This behavior has been linked to a breakdown in the reciprocity concern (RC) (Falk & Fischbacher, 2006; Narwal et al., 2022), which reflects a tendency to respond to perceived courtesy or fairness in social exchanges (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Individual motivations (perceived control) and social motivations (reciprocity) seem crucial in consumer behavior within the PWYW framework. Therefore, it is beneficial to understand the mediating effects of PC and RC, individually and sequentially, to fully comprehend the dynamics that influence consumer behavior in PWYW environments. In this context, this study will examine the mediating role of PC and RC individually and sequentially in the relationship between ICB and PWYW. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a causal relationship between the ICB and PWYW pricing systems, and if so, in what direction?
2. Does PC mediate the relationship between ICB and PWYW pricing?
3. Does RC mediate the relationship between ICB and PWYW pricing?
4. Do PC and RC sequentially mediate the effect on the relationship between ICB and PWYW pricing?

This research significantly contributes to the literature by being the first to connect ICB to PWYW pricing models. Additionally, it is the first to examine the sequential mediation of two variables within the PWYW framework, offering methodological insights into such complex systems. By analyzing the sequential mediation roles of PC and RC, we reveal the intricate interactions between individual and social motivations that influence consumer behavior. From a managerial standpoint, this study offers valuable insights for businesses implementing PWYW systems, aiding their strategic decision-making processes.

This paper includes the following sections. The first section is the literature on PWYW pricing, which was comprehensively reviewed, and hypotheses were determined. The second section includes the method of the study, such as data collection and analysis. The third section presents the findings and statistical data. In the fourth section, a discussion of the study is mentioned. Finally, in the conclusion section, the theoretical and practical significance of the findings was discussed, and suggestions for future research were made.

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

This study adopts Social Cognitive Theory to explain the relationship between ICB and PWYW. Consumers are naturally inclined to pursue actions they perceive as beneficial or advantageous, which align with the principles of the SCT (Bandura, 1991). Accordingly, individuals learn by interacting with their

environment, and their behaviors are shaped according to these interactions. In the context of PWYW, if consumers can learn the positive effects of their behaviors, this can trigger positive behavior.

Previous research provides supporting evidence. For example, Arifin et al. (2023) showed that self-efficacy is positively related to entrepreneurship when learned based on SCT. Conversely, Basaad et al. (2023) showed that exploitative leadership negatively affects followers and triggers moral hazard. Thus, learning in a specific situation can have a general effect. Moreover, this situation can be theorized positively for the PWYW and ICB relationship because in a system like PWYW that places power in the hands of the buyer (Kim et al., 2009), if consumers can learn this model better not to lose this power, the payment can be positively affected.

2.1. Informative contact with beneficiaries and PWYW pricing

In the context of pricing strategies, the PWYW model is a participatory pricing mechanism that gives consumers full autonomy over the amount they choose to pay. This flexibility empowers consumers and creates a sense of freedom and control compared to traditional fixed pricing models (Chao et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2009). However, research has shown that the nature of this model can also lead to undesirable outcomes, such as consumers underpaying or not paying at all (Roy et al., 2024) because the consequences of payments are not immediately visible to sellers and stakeholders (Wang et al., 2022). This may lead to a negative situation in which the long-term sustainability of PWYW pricing is questioned (Gupta et al., 2024).

To address this issue, ICB has been introduced as a mechanism to convey consumer payments' positive social and community impacts. Because ICB is based on the idea that individuals are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior when they know their actions have tangible benefits for others (Grant et al., 2007). In organizational settings, Grant et al. (2007) demonstrated that informing employees about the positive effects of their work on beneficiaries significantly increases their motivation to contribute meaningfully. This awareness establishes a psychological connection between individuals and the broader societal or community context in which their actions occur, promoting prosocial behavior.

Extending Grant et al. (2007) findings to the PWYW pricing context, we argue that consumers who know how their payments support sellers and relevant stakeholders, such as employees, suppliers, and the sellers' families, are more likely to feel motivated to contribute positively. The beneficiaries in this context are not limited to the sellers themselves but encompass a broader network of individuals and entities affected by the economic transactions. This notion aligns with Benefit Attribution Theory, which posits that consumers are more willing to engage in transactions when they perceive their payments as having a direct and positive impact on others (Gneezy et al., 2012; Regner, 2015).

Moreover, when consumers are exposed to information about the potential positive outcomes of their payments, they may experience heightened moral awareness and social responsibility, motivating them to pay more (Vittal et al., 2023). Prior research indicates that prosocial cues, such as ICB, can activate intrinsic motivations, leading consumers to align their payment behavior with their moral values (Martela & Ryan, 2016; Narwal et al., 2022). This effect is particularly pronounced in PWYW settings, where the absence of fixed prices shifts the responsibility of payment decisions entirely onto consumers, making the role of moral and social considerations even more critical (Tena-Sánchez et al., 2020).

Consequently, we propose that ICB is a significant determinant of consumers' WTP within the PWYW pricing system. Specifically, when consumers are informed about the positive societal and community impacts of their payments, they are likely to exhibit a higher WTP due to increased awareness of their contribution to the welfare of others.

> ***H1:*** *There is a positive relationship between informative contact with beneficiaries (ICB) and willingness to pay (WTP) within the context of the PWYW pricing system.*

2.2. The mediating role of perceived control

Perceived Control refers to an individual's belief in their ability to influence outcomes and shape their environment through personal actions (Bandura, 1996). Moreover, PC is a fundamental construct in consumer behavior research that significantly impacts consumer psychology, such as satisfaction (Burger, 1989; Richard, 2007). When consumers perceive significant control over their choices, they are more likely

to experience positive emotions such as excitement and confidence, increasing their satisfaction with the purchase experience (Chandran & Morwitz, 2005; Rohden & Espartel, 2024). Conversely, low perceived control can lead to feelings of anxiety, stress, and, ultimately, dissatisfaction (Peng et al., 2025). This construct is important in pricing contexts that offer consumers a high degree of autonomy (Wagner et al., 2022). For example, consumers' perceived control may influence their decisions and overall satisfaction (Khalid et al., 2024).

The PWYW pricing model is characterized by its customer-centric approach (Kim et al., 2009). Such autonomy is less common in traditional pricing systems, making perceived control a critical determinant in understanding consumer behavior within PWYW contexts (Rohden & Espartel, 2024). According to Gneezy et al. (2012), giving consumers the freedom to decide on prices enhances their sense of control. This sense influences their willingness to act in transactions. However, the consequences of this heightened perceived control are complex, as it can produce both positive and negative effects on payment behavior (Wagner et al., 2022).

One positive consequence is that increased perceived control can encourage prosocial behavior (Peng et al., 2025). When consumers feel that their actions can significantly impact the outcomes for sellers and other beneficiaries, they are more likely to make fair payments (Kim et al., 2009). In the context of PWYW, when consumers perceive control over their payments, they may feel an intrinsic obligation to pay a fair amount, mainly if they are aware of the positive effects of their payments on others (Wang et al., 2021).

However, there is also a paradoxical aspect to consider. While increased perceived control can lead to greater payment willingness through heightened responsibility, it may also result in reduced payment amounts if consumers feel too empowered. When consumers have excessive power, they may perceive the pricing system as an opportunity to maximize personal gain, thereby choosing to pay less (Khalid et al., 2024; Regner, 2015). Thus, this dual nature of perceived control highlights the possibility of a mediating role in the relationship between ICB and WTP.

When examining the link between ICB and PC, it is reasonable to assume that knowing that PC is a significant predictor, consumers may be more inclined to retain it. ICB may also provide additional motivation for consumers who already have control by informing them of how their payments affect vendors and stakeholders. Studies have shown that when individuals are informed about the broader impact of their actions, they are more likely to feel in control of contributing to a meaningful cause (Grant et al., 2007; Martela & Ryan, 2016). In the PWYW context, this effect is even more pronounced, as consumers are already granted decision-making power over their payments. Therefore, ICB can strengthen perceived control by making consumers feel that their decisions are meaningful and impactful (Narwal & Rai, 2022).

Given these dynamics, we posit that perceived control mediates the relationship between ICB and willingness to pay. Specifically, when consumers are informed about the positive societal impacts of their payments, their sense of perceived control increases, influencing their desire to contribute more in PWYW settings.

H2: *Perceived control mediates the relationship between informative contact with beneficiaries (ICB) and willingness to pay (WTP) in the PWYW pricing system.*

2.3. The mediating role of reciprocity concern

Reciprocity, the social norm that governs the mutual exchange of goods, services, and favors, is a fundamental principle in social interactions and economic transactions (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Falk & Fischbacher, 2006). It is rooted in the idea that people feel obligated to respond in kind when they perceive themselves as beneficiaries of others' benevolence or fairness. This principle is widely acknowledged in the pricing literature, where reciprocal behaviors have positively influenced consumers' attitudes and payment decisions in various contexts (Chow et al., 2023; Johnson, 2015). However, the effect of reciprocity in the context of PWYW pricing systems remains ambiguous and context-dependent.

Previous research has suggested that reciprocity may not always manifest as expected in PWYW settings. For instance, Narwal et al. (2022) found that consumers participating in PWYW pricing systems often overlook or disregard the RC. This finding is counterintuitive, given that RC is generally considered a strong motivator for prosocial behavior in other economic and social contexts (Chung, 2017; Narwal et al., 2022; Narwall & Rai, 2021). One possible explanation is that the high degree of consumer

autonomy in PWYW models dilutes the normative power of reciprocity, as consumers may not perceive their payment decisions as part of a reciprocal exchange (Regner, 2015). Consumers might view their payments as isolated, self-serving decisions rather than responses to seller generosity.

Despite these complexities, the reciprocity principle can still indirectly influence consumer behavior in PWYW contexts. Research indicates that when consumers perceive sellers as benevolent or provide additional information highlighting the positive effects of payments on relevant stakeholders, consumers may feel compelled to reciprocate through increased payment amounts (Grant et al., 2007; Martela & Ryan, 2016). In other words, while consumers might not consciously attribute their payment decisions to reciprocity, their perception of fairness or kindness extended by the seller can subtly shape their WTP. This notion aligns with Social Exchange Theory, which posits that reciprocity can occur even when not overtly recognized, as individuals strive to maintain social equity and mutual trust in their interactions (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

In the context of PWYW pricing systems, reciprocity operates as a subtle but powerful driver of payment decisions. Consumers may feel an implicit obligation to reciprocate when they are aware of the positive impact of their payments on sellers and other beneficiaries, particularly when sellers extend payment flexibility and transparency. This reciprocal behavior fosters a sense of mutual trust and cooperation, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the PWYW model (Falk & Fischbacher, 2006; Martela & Ryan, 2016). For example, when sellers provide detailed information about how consumer payments support local communities or contribute to the well-being of employees, consumers may be more likely to pay a fairer amount, driven by a desire to reciprocate the perceived goodwill.

However, the influence of reciprocity in PWYW settings is not always direct or observable. As scholars noted (Narwal et al., 2022; Narwall & Rai, 2021), the perception of reciprocity may operate subconsciously, where consumers' WTP is shaped by their perceived relationship with the seller and their internalized social norms. Consequently, the impact of reciprocity may manifest indirectly through changes in perceptions of fairness and social responsibility rather than through direct payment behavior.

Given these theoretical underpinnings, this study posits that RC mediates the relationship between ICB and willingness to pay. Specifically, when consumers are informed about the positive impacts of their payments, they may feel a sense of reciprocity, which in turn influences their WTP within the PWYW pricing system.

H3: *Reciprocity concern (RC) mediates the relationship between informative contact with beneficiaries (ICB) and willingness to pay (WTP) in the PWYW pricing system.*

2.4. PC & RC as sequential mediators

Sequential mediation highlights the complex pathways through which independent variables influence outcomes via multiple mediators operating in a specified order (Tofighi & Kelley, 2020). In the context of PWYW pricing systems, understanding the sequential mediating roles of PC and RC provides deeper insights into how ICB shapes consumers' WTP. This study posits that ICB influences WTP through a two-step mediation process, wherein ICB first enhances perceived control, increasing reciprocity concern, ultimately leading to a greater WTP.

Consumers' perceptions of control influence their decision-making processes and subsequent behaviors. When consumers know their payments' direct impact on beneficiaries, such as sellers or employees, their perceived control over the transaction increases (Grant et al., 2007). This heightened sense of control fosters a stronger sense of personal responsibility and agency, which can motivate consumers to act in alignment with their values and goals (Ajzen, 1991; Skinner, 1996). In the PWYW context, consumers who feel in control of their payment decisions may also become more conscious of their choice's ethical and social implications, prompting them to consider factors beyond self-interest, such as fairness and reciprocity (Wagner et al., 2022).

The increased perceived control can activate reciprocity concerns as consumers recognize that their payment decisions are self-directed and have consequences for others. In this case, reciprocity emerges as a social norm that guides consumer behavior, compelling them to respond in kind to perceived benevolence or fairness extended by the seller (Falk & Fischbacher, 2006). For example, when consumers are aware that their payments support sellers' livelihoods or contribute to the well-being of local

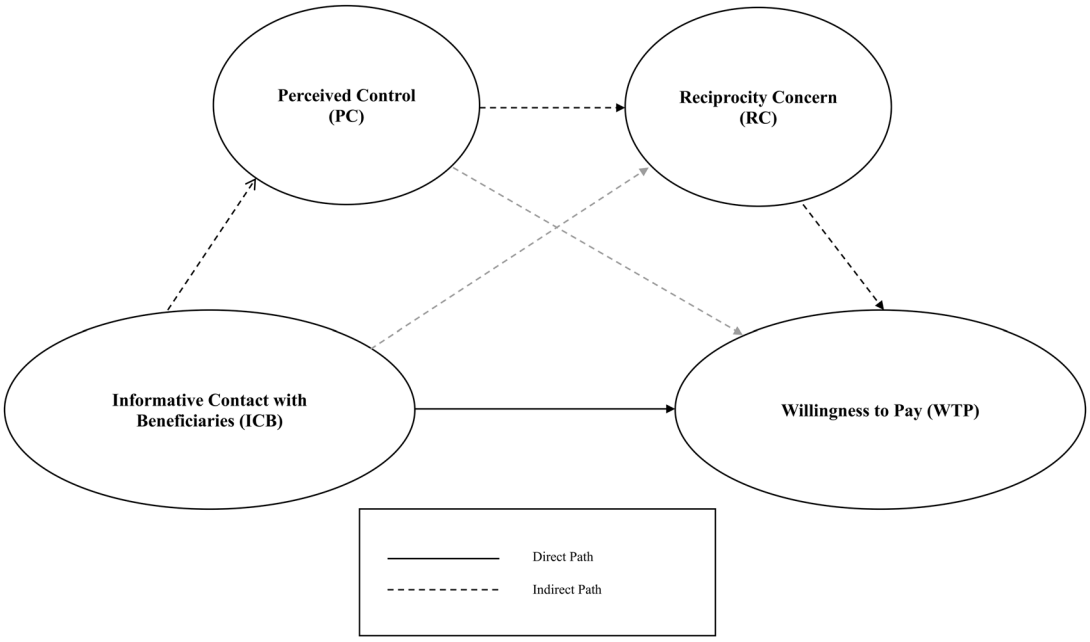

Figure 1. Conceptual model of study.

communities, they may feel a more substantial obligation to reciprocate by making higher payments (Narwal et al., 2022). This effect is consistent with the Norm Activation Model, which suggests that individuals are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors when they perceive a sense of responsibility and recognize the social impact of their actions (Schwartz, 1977).

Furthermore, the sequence in which PC and RC influence WTP is crucial for understanding how consumers process information and make payment decisions in PWYW settings. As Vizuete-Luciano et al. (2023) noted, when consumers experience a sense of control, they are more receptive to additional social cues, such as reciprocity, which can shape their behavior in prosocial ways. This sequential effect suggests that ICB initially enhances perceived control, which activates reciprocity concern and increases WTP. The order of these mediators is not arbitrary; it reflects a cognitive and affective progression where consumers first evaluate their sense of control before considering the social implications of their behavior.

Thus, perceived control and reciprocity concerns operate in a complementary and sequential manner, reinforcing each other's influence on consumer behavior. By examining these variables as sequential mediators, this study aims to uncover the nuanced mechanisms underlying how ICB shapes WTP in PWYW contexts. Specifically, we propose that ICB enhances perceived control, strengthening reciprocity concerns and ultimately resulting in higher WTP.

> ***H4:*** *Perceived control (PC) and reciprocity concern (RC) sequentially mediate the relationship between informative contact with beneficiaries (ICB) and willingness to pay (WTP) in the PWYW pricing system.*

2.5. Research framework

This study sets out to gauge the impacts of variables within the PWYW pricing system on the online shopping industry. The conceptual framework of the study is depicted in Figure 1.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and data collection

The data were collected through a structured survey among Barcelona University bachelor's and higher degree students. The choice of student sample is well-supported in the literature for consumer decision-making research, especially in experimental and scenario-based studies (Helmi et al., 2023). In

PWYW pricing, students are ideal participants due to their familiarity with digital platforms and tendency to explore unconventional pricing models (Kim et al., 2009; Narwall & Rai, 2021). Furthermore, studies have shown that student samples can yield generalizable results to broader consumer populations when the research context aligns with participants' actual consumption behaviors (Helmi et al., 2023). By employing a diverse student sample, this study seeks to balance the internal validity required for experimental control with the external validity needed for generalizing findings to similar online shopping contexts (Hair et al., 2024). The sample characteristics align with the study's objectives, providing a solid foundation for examining the effects of perceived control and reciprocity concerns within the PWYW pricing system.

The selected university is recognized for its international standing and diverse student body, with participants representing various nations, cultural backgrounds, and academic disciplines. This diversity is valuable in ensuring a broad representation of perspectives and enhancing the external validity of the findings (Peñaloza et al., 2023).

A random sampling method was employed to recruit participants, including undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students across different academic fields. Random sampling was chosen to minimize selection bias and enhance the research sample's representativeness (Ajay & Micah, 2014; Hair et al., 2024). The approach also helps ensure the generalizability of the findings to similar populations, thereby contributing to the robustness and reliability of the study (Sharma & Weathers, 2003).

Before answering the survey questions, participants were presented with a scenario to ensure contextual relevance and engagement. They were asked to imagine an online shopping experience using the PWYW pricing system at an online music store. The scenario was designed to replicate a real-world PWYW environment, allowing participants to comprehend the pricing model better and provide more accurate responses based on tangible experiences. Such scenario-based approaches are widely used in pricing research to create an experimental context that elicits genuine consumer reactions (Rhodes & Jidong, 2024).

A priori power analysis was performed using G*Power 3.1 software to determine the required sample size for this study (Opie et al., 2023). The analysis aimed to evaluate the causal relationship between one independent variable, two mediator variables, and one dependent variable through a linear regression model. The effect size for the analysis was determined, and a minimum sample size of 107 participants was required for the analysis. Furthermore, 314 responses were collected, of which seven were excluded due to incomplete or erroneous entries, resulting in 307 valid responses for analysis. The sample size exceeds the recommended minimum for robust statistical analyses, ensuring sufficient power to detect significant effects and relationships among variables (Maxwell et al., 2008). The demographic profile of the sample is presented in Table 1.

3.2. Survey instrument

The survey consisted of two stages to ensure clarity and comprehensiveness in data collection.

Table 1. Sample profiles.

Demographic	Classification	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	152	50
	Female	155	50
Marriage	Married	91	30
	Single	176	57
	Other	40	13
Age	18–24 Years	68	22
	25–34 Years	116	38
	35–44 Years	72	23
	45–54 Years	27	09
	55 Years and above	24	08
Education	Undergraduate	125	41
	Postgraduate	114	37
	Ph.D.	49	16
	Other	19	06
Total (n)		307	100

3.2.1. Stage 1: Initial information and scenario presentation

In the first phase, participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose of the survey, their rights as participants, data confidentiality, and ethical issues such as the voluntary nature of participation. The Bioethics Committee of the University of Barcelona approved the study on January 11, 2024, under approval number CER012404. Participants were provided with this information in the first part of the survey. All participants gave informed consent before participating in this study. Written informed consent was obtained to understand the study objectives, procedures, and potential impact on participants. No questions were asked to reveal the participants' personal information (such as name or ID number).

Participants were then presented with a hypothetical scenario designed to simulate an online shopping experience using the PWYW pricing system.

The online shopping context, explicitly involving a digital music product, was selected for several reasons. First, the online shopping sector is frequently used in studies testing PWYW pricing models due to its ease of application and high level of consumer engagement (Chao et al., 2015; El Harbi et al., 2014). Additionally, PWYW pricing is particularly effective for lower-cost products, as consumers are more willing to experiment with unconventional pricing models (Tripathi & Pandey, 2019). Using a digital product, this study aimed to replicate a realistic shopping scenario where participants could fully engage with the pricing model.

After establishing the context, participants were informed that they would have complete control over the price they chose for the product and could even acquire it without paying. This approach aligns with standard PWYW implementations, emphasizing consumers' autonomy in determining price (Kim et al., 2009). To manipulate the independent variable (ICB), participants were presented with information highlighting the positive impacts their payment could have on sellers and stakeholders. Specifically, they were informed that their contributions could enhance employees' lives, support the business's sustainability, and promote fair trade practices. This information was provided to elicit a sense of moral responsibility and increase the salience of reciprocity concern, consistent with previous studies examining prosocial behavior in economic decision-making contexts (Grant et al., 2007; Martela & Ryan, 2016). No details regarding the actual cost of the product were disclosed to participants to avoid anchoring effects and ensure that their payment decisions were based purely on perceived control and reciprocity.

3.2.2. Stage 2: Measurement of variables and common method variance testing

In the second stage, participants answered questions about the constructs under investigation, including ICB, PC, RC, and WTP. A combination of positive and negatively worded items was used to minimize the risk of common method variance, and the order of questions was randomized (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The scales were adapted from validated instruments in previous studies, ensuring reliability and construct validity. Specifically:

> ICB was measured using an adapted version of Grant et al. (2007) scale, which assesses the extent to which consumers believe their payments positively impact the lives of beneficiaries, such as employees and suppliers.
>
> PC was measured using a scale adapted from Wagner et al. (2022), focusing on the degree of perceived autonomy and influence over the pricing decision.
>
> RC was assessed using Falk and Fischbacher (2006) scale, which captures the sense of obligation to reciprocate perceived fairness or kindness.

WTP was measured by asking participants the amount they would be willing to pay for the product, using an open-ended response format to capture their genuine willingness to contribute.

Finally, Harman's single-factor test was conducted on all survey items to assess common method variance. The results indicated that the first factor accounted for 31% of the variance, well below the threshold of 50%, suggesting that standard method variance was not a concern in this study (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This ensures that the observed relationships among variables are not artifacts of measurement bias but reflect genuine underlying constructs.

3.2.3. Control variables

Age, gender, marital status, and educational background were included as control variables to account for demographic differences that might influence payment behavior. Previous studies have suggested that demographic factors can shape consumer decisions in participative pricing contexts (Narwal et al., 2022; Torres et al., 2022). Each control variable was dummy-coded to facilitate analysis. Although no significant direct associations were found between these control variables and willingness to pay (all $p > 0.05$), their inclusion did not alter the primary relationships in the model, indicating that the effects of perceived control and reciprocity concern on willingness to pay are robust to demographic variations (Hair et al., 2019).

3.3. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using PLS-SEM, a robust statistical technique well-suited for testing complex relationships and models involving multiple mediators (Hair et al., 2024). Smart PLS version 4.0 was used as the analysis tool.

PLS-SEM was selected for several reasons: (*i*) Given the interdisciplinary nature of this research and the need to examine multiple mediating relationships simultaneously, PLS-SEM offers the flexibility required to model complex theoretical frameworks (Sarstedt et al., 2020). It is particularly effective for exploratory research where theoretical models are not yet fully established (Hair et al., 2024). (*ii*) Unlike traditional SEM methods, PLS-SEM incorporates measurement errors into the estimation of model parameters, reducing bias and increasing the reliability of the results (Sarstedt et al., 2020). (*iii*) PLS-SEM allows the simultaneous evaluation of the model's explanatory power and ability to predict new observations. This dual capability is crucial for validating and assessing the theoretical model's generalizability (Hair et al., 2024).

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics and correlation significance levels of the data used in the study are provided in Table 2. Accordingly, the study variables' descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients are ICB, RC, PC, and WTP. The mean values show that participants rated ICB the highest ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.72$), followed by RC ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.76$), PC ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.90$), and WTP ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.00$). Skewness and kurtosis values suggest that the data are not perfectly distributed. Nevertheless, they fall within acceptable ranges (–1, +1) for conducting parametric tests, indicating a relatively normal distribution (Desgagné & Lafaye De Micheaux, 2018).

Table 2 indicates that all variables are positively and significantly correlated at the 0.01 level. The strongest correlation is observed between PC and RC ($r = 0.458$, $p < 0.01$), followed by PC and ICB ($r = 0.389$, $p < 0.01$), and RC and ICB ($r = 0.474$, $p < 0.01$). These relationships suggest that higher levels of ICB are associated with increased PC and RC, which aligns with the theoretical assumptions of the study (Hair et al., 2019).

The correlations between WTP and the other variables are statistically significant. Specifically, WTP shows a positive correlation with PC ($r = 0.293$, $p < 0.01$), RC ($r = 0.275$, $p < 0.01$), and ICB ($r = 0.220$, $p < 0.01$). These findings suggest that while ICB, PC, and RC are positively associated with WTP, the strength of

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations.

	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	ICB	RC	PC	WTP
ICB	3.74	0.72	−0.31	−0.29	1			
RC	3.71	0.76	0.15	−0.74	0.474**	1		
PC	3.68	0.90	−0.53	0.72	0.389**	0.458**	1	
WTP	2.67	1.00	−0.83	0.53	0.220**	0.275**	0.293**	1

$n = 307$.
**$p < 0.01$: Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (Pearson Correlation, 2-tailed).

these associations is moderate, reflecting the complex interplay of psychological factors in payment decisions within the PWYW pricing system (Hair et al., 2024).

Furthermore, all correlation coefficients remained below 0.75, indicating the absence of multicollinearity concerns in the dataset (Sarstedt et al., 2020). This confirms that the relationships observed among variables are not distorted by overlapping variance, thus supporting the validity of the subsequent analyses.

4.2. Measurement model

The analysis followed the methodology outlined by Rossenkhan et al. (2021). Initially, the study evaluated the reliability and validity of the measurement model. This involved assessing four key aspects: item reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, as outlined by Hair et al. (2024) and illustrated in Table 3. Additionally, internal consistency reliability was further examined using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (rC), and Rho_A coefficients (rA), as suggested by Sarstedt et al. (2020). The results in Table 3 provide insights into the study variables' convergent validity and internal consistency reliability.

Bootstrap analysis with over 5,000 replicates was conducted to estimate the standard errors of the path coefficients and assess model robustness. The model's generalizability was also tested by performing analyses on different subgroups (e.g. gender and age groups) (Sarstedt et al., 2020). The results of the bootstrap analysis showed that the model's path coefficients were statistically significant and exhibited acceptable levels of stability, suggesting a robust and reliable model (Hair et al., 2024).

The loading values indicate the strength of the relationship between each item and its respective construct. Overall, the majority of items demonstrate satisfactory loading values, with notable exceptions observed for ICB3 (0.651) and ICB4 (0.606), which fall slightly below the recommended threshold but are still considered satisfactory (Huang et al., 2013). As assessed by Cronbach's alpha and rho_a coefficients, internal consistency reliability is generally high across all constructs, indicating that the items within each scale consistently measure the underlying constructs (Hair et al., 2024). The CR values also exceed the acceptable threshold of 0.70, further confirming the reliability of the measurement model. Additionally, each construct's AVE values surpass 0.50, indicating adequate convergent validity (Sarstedt et al., 2020). These findings suggest that the measurement model effectively captures the intended constructs, providing robust support for the reliability and validity of the study's measurement instruments (Hair et al., 2024).

4.2.1. Discriminant validity

Furthermore, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) measurement was employed to assess discriminant validity. This aimed to demonstrate whether the differences between the constructs were sufficient, given the

Table 3. Convergent validity and internal consistency reliability.

Variables	Items	Loading	Cronbach's alpha	Rho_a	CR	AVE
ICB	ICB1	0.703	0.800	0.848	0.861	0.562
	ICB2	0.742				
	ICB3	0.651*				
	ICB4	0.606*				
WTP	WTP1	0.854	0.906	0.927	0.942	0.844
	WTP2	0.897				
PC	PC1	0.631*	0.847	0.884	0.894	0.633
	PC2	0.732				
	PC3	0.805				
	PC4	0.766				
RC	RC1	0.830	0.913	0.923	0.936	0.746
	RC2	0.837				
	RC3	0.819				
	RC4	0.820				

Rho_A Dijkstra–Henseler's rho, CR-Jöreskog's rho composite reliability, AVE average variance extracted.
* >0.60 significant (Huang et al., 2013).

Table 4. Discriminant validity.

	ICB	PC	RC	WTP
Heterotrait-monotrait (HTML)				
ICB				
PC	0.546			
RC	0.555	0.560		
WTP	0.246	0.380	0.320	

absence of a previous study that brought these constructs together (Sarstedt et al., 2020). Table 4 presents these results.

Accordingly, the HTMT ratios, displayed in the upper section of the table, measure the strength of correlations between different constructs relative to correlations within the same construct. All values are below the recommended threshold of 0.90, indicating that the constructs are adequately distinct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2024). The results suggest that the constructs in the study are distinct, supporting the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

4.3. Structural model (hypothesis testing)

The structural model and hypotheses were tested using PLS-SEM with SmartPLS 4.1 software (Ringle et al., 2024). Several assessment criteria were employed to ensure the structural model's validity (Hair et al., 2024).

First, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values evaluated the structural model for collinearity issues. All VIF values were below the recommended threshold of three, indicating no multicollinearity concerns (Hair et al., 2024). Additionally, the model's Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value was 0.08, suggesting an acceptable model fit (Sarstedt et al., 2020).

Next, the hypotheses were tested using a nonparametric bootstrapping procedure with 5000 subsamples, following the guidelines of Preacher and Hayes (2008). Bootstrapping was applied with a 0.05 significance level using a two-tailed test method. The results of the structural model, including direct and indirect pathways, are presented in Table 5.

The direct pathways illustrate the relationships between variables and their standard errors, t-values, and p-values, indicating the significance of these associations. The path coefficients (e.g. ICB → PC: $t = 8.278$, $p < 0.001$) suggest strong positive associations between ICB and PC, as well as between ICB and RC (e.g. ICB → RC: $t = 7.396$, $p < 0.001$).

Figure 2 visually represents the structural model's strength and direction of relationships between variables. All path coefficients are positive, indicating consistent directional influence across the model. The most robust direct relationship is observed between ICB and PC, with a path coefficient of 0.420, suggesting that ICB substantially enhances consumers' perceived control in PWYW pricing. This is followed by the relationship between ICB and RC, which has a path coefficient of 0.374, demonstrating a moderate positive effect. In contrast, the direct relationship between ICB and WTP is relatively weaker, with a coefficient of 0.170, implying that ICB alone does not substantially influence payment behavior.

5. Discussion

This study comprehensively examines the interplay between ICB and PWYW pricing, with the mediating roles of PC and RC individually and sequentially. Regarding hypothesis testing, the results reveal the following:

H1: The direct relationship between ICB and WTP was insignificant ($t = 1.004$, $p = 0.315$). This suggests that ICB alone does not have a direct influence on WTP.

H2: The indirect pathway through PC was supported ($t = 2.625$, $p = 0.009$), indicating that the effect of ICB on WTP is mediated by PC.

H3: The indirect pathway through RC was also significant ($t = 2.159$, $p = 0.031$), suggesting that RC mediates the relationship between ICB and WTP.

Table 5. Structural model.

	Std error	*t*-value	*p*-value	LB	UB	VIF	R^2	Q^2
Direct pathways								
ICB → PC	0.052	8.278	0.000**	0.335	0.542	1.000	0.189	0.174
ICB → RC	0.052	7.396	0.000**	0.437	0.604	1.232	0.347	0.225
ICB → WTP (*H1*)	0.066	1.004	0.315	0.125	0.336	1.458	0.112	0.044
PC → RC	0.058	5.389	0.000**	0.197	0.425	1.232		
PC → WTP	0.070	2.789	0.005**	0.102	0.362	1.380		
RC → WTP	0.066	2.199	0.028*	0.015	0.273	1.531		
Indirect pathways								
ICB → PC → RC	0.031	4.397	0.000**	0.080	0.273			
ICB → PC → WTP (*H2****)	0.032	2.625	0.009**	0.027	0.219			
ICB → RC → WTP (*H3****)	0.026	2.159	0.031*	0.015	0.113			
PC → RC → WTP	0.023	1.982	0.048*	0.012	0.132			
ICB → PC → RC → WTP (*H4****)	0.010	1.879	0.060	0.006	0.070			

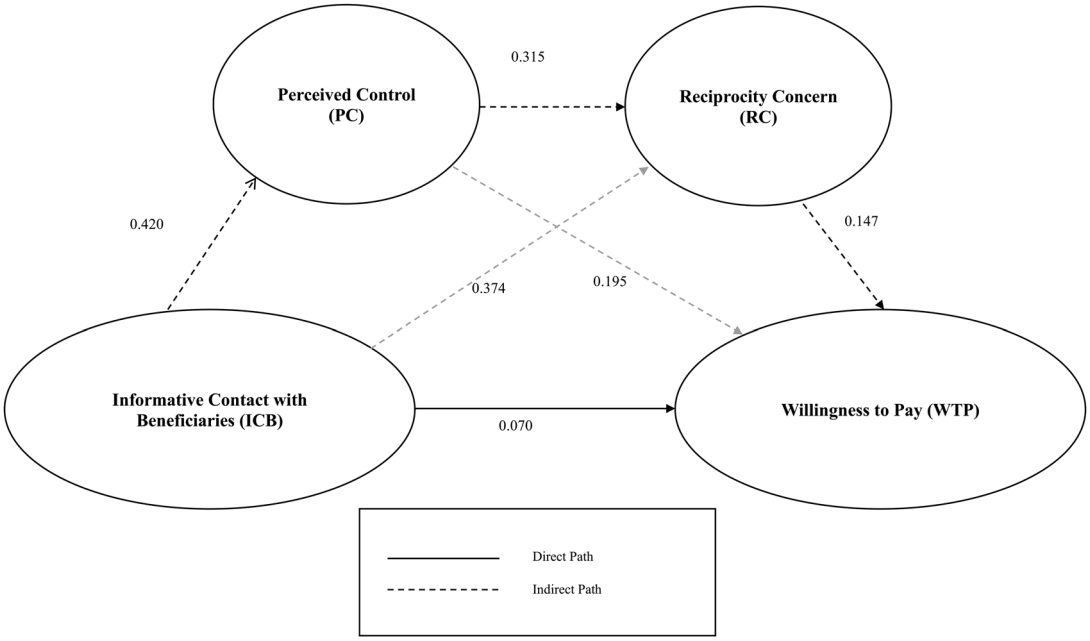

Figure 2. Result of the structural model.

H4: Although the pathway through PC and RC showed borderline significance (t = 1.879, p = 0.060), it does not provide conclusive support for a sequential mediation effect. However, it is worth mentioning that even though H4 did not achieve conventional statistical significance (p = 0.06), the results are very close to the accepted threshold (t-value of 1.9 and p-value of 0.05), suggesting that this pathway may hold practical relevance (see Table 5). This borderline significance indicates the potential presence of a meaningful relationship that may emerge more clearly with refined measurement or increased sample size (Hayes, 2017).

As illustrated in Table 5, the R^2 values reported in this study are relatively modest and below commonly accepted thresholds for explanatory power. However, the primary aim of this research is not to demonstrate the total explanatory power of the model on the dependent variable but to test the theoretical relationships between variables. R^2 values below 0.30 are often observed and considered acceptable in behavioral research (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In the context of PWYW pricing models, consumer willingness to pay is influenced by numerous unobserved factors, such as personal income, subjective perceptions of fairness, and situational influences that are difficult to capture in a single model (Gneezy et al., 2012; Regner, 2015). Thus, although the R^2 values in the present study are modest, they still provide valuable insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying consumer behavior within PWYW frameworks. Moreover, these values are consistent with those reported in similar studies, thereby supporting the robustness and validity of the findings despite the lower explanatory power (Hair et al., 2024).

When considering indirect pathways, the most potent effect is observed in the path from ICB to WTP via PC and RC, with a coefficient of 0.132. This suggests that ICB's influence on WTP is more effectively channeled through its impact on PC, subsequently enhancing RC. Conversely, the indirect pathway from ICB to WTP through RC alone exhibits a lower coefficient of 0.055, indicating a weaker mediating effect. These findings highlight the importance of PC as a primary mediator in explaining how ICB affects WTP, while RC serves as a secondary, complementary mediator (see Figure 2).

6. Conclusion

This study explains the relationship between ICB and PWYW with mediating variables PC and RC. With the data obtained by applying the survey, ICB's direct and indirect effects on PWYW were tested by examining both independent and sequential mediating roles of PC and RC. The results show the indirect effects of ICB on PWYW. In addition, the study showed that PC and RC have separate and sequential impacts on this effect. In this aspect, the findings contribute significantly to the literature and identify practical implications.

6.1. Theoretical implications

This study makes significant contributions to the theory. First, no image in the known literature examines PWYW pricing with an informative variable such as ICB. In this respect, the study emphasizes the interdisciplinary aspect of the PWYW pricing literature and presents a novel contribution to the literature by revealing the effects of one of the psychological motivation factors (Narwal et al., 2022; Wagner et al., 2022) that have attracted attention in previous studies. Moreover, ICB literature has been addressed more based on organizational contexts, and no image associates this variable with a pricing system. Therefore, the study effectively contributes to the ICB literature by generalizing the informative contact theory.

Previous studies point to many variables that affect consumers' payment decisions in participatory pricing systems such as PWYW (Güzel et al., 2025). However, studies have generally pointed out situations where the payment amount is less than desired, and therefore, this pricing system has sustainability problems (Bitsch et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2022). Therefore, it can be concluded that consumers do not fully understand the PWYW pricing system. The research results showed positive effects of positive information with specific mediators. Thus, the study provided evidence that if this pricing system is explained to the buyers in-depth, the payment amount can increase. The results suggest that ICB does not directly affect PWYW pricing (H1), but its effect is transmitted through PC and RC (H2 and H3). This suggests that informing consumers about the positive effects of their payments on relevant stakeholders may not be sufficient to change their payment behavior directly. This finding is consistent with and extends previous research on the motivational role of ICB in organizational settings (Martela & Ryan, 2016).

Concerning this, the study showed that providing consumers with clear information about the impact of their payments in a payment system where they have a sense of control can provide motivation. Specifically, the study showed the mediating effect of PC on the relationship between ICB and PWYW pricing. Although the impact of PC on PWYW has been addressed from different perspectives in previous studies, the findings also make a significant contribution to the PC literature due to the limited number of studies addressing the mediating effect of PC.

Additionally, this study contributes to the literature on the role of RC in PWYW environments. Contrary to some findings in the literature (Imada et al., 2023; Narwal et al., 2022), the results show that RC positively affects PWYW pricing when activated through a sense of control. This suggests that consumers' prosocial motivations, such as reciprocity, are more likely to manifest in their payment behavior when they feel a sense of initiative in the pricing decision (H3).

Finally, this study contributes to the PWYW literature by emphasizing the sequential mediation role of PC and RC (H4). From a methodological perspective, the fact that the sequential mediation model has not been previously examined in PWYW pricing, where different variables could be influential, points to an important gap in the field.

6.2. Managerial implications

This study provides valuable insights into the strategic application of PWYW pricing models. Literature indicates that the PWYW pricing strategy provides market dominance (Krämer et al., 2017). Therefore, implementing this pricing strategy seems important in a competitive business world. This study revealed the effects of ICB on PWYW pricing. An example application for managers who want to use this pricing system is as follows: the seller can provide positive information and feedback from the effects of payments to the buyers to ensure the business's sustainability. In this way, the buyer, who feels that the initiative is in his own hands, can activate the concern of reciprocity. This can lead to more payments. The research provided evidence supporting this.

When the analysis results are considered, ICB triggers PC the most, affecting the payment (see Figure 2). This shows that the positive information the seller provides makes the buyers feel they are in control even more. This way, the buyers may develop a sense of belonging and ownership. For example, consumers may take ownership of the business when the seller addresses them. This can create more adoption and increase payment.

Another important result showed that ICB is RC's most important trigger (see Figure 2). RC is a very common behavior in society. For example, if a person in society receives a favor, they feel obliged to do something similar to that favor (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The fact that ICB triggers RC in the study may also be related to this. Selling with PWYW pricing may already be perceived as a favor by the seller, and informing the buyer provides additional motivation. Perhaps the buyer feels obliged to pay more.

When all of these are put together, managers can design campaigns that first emphasize consumers' control over the payment process and then appeal to the sense of reciprocity by showing the tangible benefits of their contribution. This dual approach can increase the effectiveness of models where consumers are particularly sensitive to individual (PC) and social (RC) motivations.

6.3. Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations that warrant consideration. While suitable for capturing self-reported behaviors and perceptions, survey methodology may limit the depth of insights into the causal mechanisms at play. Future research could benefit from experimental designs. Establishing causal relationships more rigorously could be crucial. Additionally, the sample used in this study primarily consists of participants from a developed economy, which may not fully capture the diversity of consumer behaviors across different cultural and economic contexts.

Authors' contributions

Conceptualization: Oktay Güzel (lead), Emilio Vizuete Luciano (support). *Data curation*: Oktay Güzel was responsible for managing and processing the data used in the study. *Formal analysis*: Oktay Güzel conducted the data analysis and interpreted the results. *Investigation*: Oktay Güzel investigated all the research and studies. *Methodology*: Oktay Güzel (lead), Emilio Vizuete Luciano (support). *Project administration*: Oktay Güzel (lead), Emilio Vizuete Luciano (support). *Supervision*: Emilio Vizuete Luciano. *Writing – Original Draft*: Oktay Güzel (lead) drafted the initial manuscript. *Writing – Review & Editing*: Oktay Güzel (lead) and Emilio Vizuete Luciano provided critical revisions and edits to the manuscript. *Final approval of the version to be published*: Oktay Güzel. All authors have read and approved the final work.

Disclosure statement

No potential competing interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available upon request from the corresponding author. They are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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