

Factors Influencing E-Retailer Choice of Courier Service Provider : A Conceptual Paper

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Abstract

The booming of e-commerce has encouraged the e-retailer to consider courier service quality as an important characteristic to gain a competitive advantage. As many studies in courier service quality focus on the perceptions of e-shoppers, studies exploring the perceptions of e-retailers are lacking. Thus, this conceptual paper attempts to fill in the gap by exploring the courier service quality from the perception of the e-retailer. A qualitative methodology has been adopted to collect the primary data from semi-structured interviews. The findings can be a reference to improve the existing theory on courier service quality. The new development framework aiming to offer a holistic approach to increase the efficiency of courier service providers by segmentizing their market as well as the need in every phase of the parcel delivery process.

Keywords: E-Commerce, Courier Service, E-Retailer, Service Quality

Introduction

Courier service performance is the support system of the e-commerce ecosystem. Courier service performance may affect one's business image and reputation, enhance profit and maintain loyal customer (Izzah et al., 2016). Online shopper value the parcel delivery as a form of e-retail attribute of success although both industry is a separate entity (Ejdys & Gulc, 2020). Therefore, the e-retailer need to choose the right courier to provide excellent parcel delivery to gaining the competitive advantage and winning the market. However, the growth of the e-commerce did not reflect in the growth of the courier industry. According to Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), the total of postal and complaints lodge by the customer in 2020 has shown an increase which in total 13,398 complaints

received compared to 2,034 complaints received in 2019 with the major complaints is regards to the late delivery (MCMC, 2020). Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI) also reported that individual customer scored higher satisfaction with Score 4.12 compared to business consumers which scored 3.78. This has shown that there is more dissatisfied customer from the business entities. In Malaysia, 98.5% business establishment is a small-medium enterprise company and play a significance role in the growth of e-commerce as well as demand for courier services. They are the majority of courier service users with the high frequency of using courier service on daily basis (MCMC, 2019). Although the increase of the parcel to be delivered is a good sign of growth and profit to courier industry, ironically the volume of parcels will overwhelm the hub capacity that may cause delay in the entire operation due to congestion, and this may lead to reduced efficiency and reliability. On that count, courier need to strategize their business operation. The online shopping has grown exponentially and urged the courier industry to keep up with the increase demand of the logistics activities such as the distribution and the delivery process. The performance of the delivery will help gain customer confidence not only to the courier company but also the customer's e-commerce experience. Last mile delivery is the crucial part as the performance has the power either to make or break the relationship with the consumer (Bopage et al., 2019). A comparison between the e-commerce and courier industry has revealed that there is lack of synergy between these industries although both are moving at a faster pace (Ducret, 2014).

In addition, most of logistics research focus on three common topics which are service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty but least addressing on intention to purchase or decision making. There are very little research addressing the issue on how customer making purchase decision regards the logistics services (Garver et al., 2012). Somehow, this has left a critical gap whereby before customer can be satisfied and retained, a purchase intention and making choice must be made. Therefore, this conceptual paper objective are:

- To understand the different segment criteria of courier customers specifically the e-retailer which are the larger segment of courier, express and parcel (CEP) industry and
- To determine the factors that influence e-retailer choice of courier service provider (CSP).

Literature Review

E-commerce Development in Malaysia

As the world economy nowadays are driven by the digitalisation so does the Malaysian economy. Malaysia e-commerce income reported has increase from RM675.4b in 2019 to RM896.4b in 2020 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Malaysia Internet User Survey 2020 that reported the percentage of people who purchase online has risen from 53.3 % in 2018 to 64.2 % in 2020 (MCMC, 2021). E-commerce in Malaysia is projected to continue grow as its capability in providing lower cost and higher convenience of doing business facilitated by the emergence of the digital technology. Government of Malaysia facilitating the e-commerce industry to foster by developing policies such as National E-Commerce Roadmap and providing incentives such as PENJANA, eUSAHAWAN and MYCYBERSALE spearhead by Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) (MDEC, 2021). Consequently, the spur of the online shopping has results in the increase of the courier traffics from 115 million parcels in 2019 to 462 million parcels handled in 2020 (MCMC, 2021).

However, despite the digitalization benefits that e-retailer can earned in doing online business, the e-commerce revolution creates a highly competitive marketplace due to the massive market that can reach global customer and the ability to compare products from one online shop to another (Thanthirige et al., 2016). As e-retailers are not immune to competition, they face a number of challenges compared to those traditional bricks-and-mortar retailers. One of the challenges is the parcel delivery quality. As the competition becoming intense, despite the products quality, it is important to the e-retailer to concentrate on the courier service performance as it may affect one's business image and reputation (Izzah et al., 2016). E-retailer that can offer superior logistics service will achieve customer satisfaction and win the competitive advantage that extends beyond the tangible products they sell (Davis & Ruth, 2006). This is because the problems experienced by the online shopping are mostly related to the delivery rather than the product itself (Morganti et al., 2014). Therefore, e-retailer need to choose the right courier service provider to provide excellent parcel delivery to gain the competitive advantage and wining the market.

Courier, Parcel and Express (CPE) Industry Overview in Malaysia

The development and the rise of e-commerce has made logistics become the backbone of e-commerce operations (Muralidharan, 2018). E-commerce has open up and expand the opportunity and market for logistics industry. Consequently, the increase of online shopping has increased the needs for the supply chain to take place especially on the number of small packages and parcels delivery. As a result, the growth of e-commerce is projected to grow in tandem with the courier, express and parcel (CEP) industry.

The Postal Services Act of 2012 (PSA 2012) has given the Malaysia Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) as the authority to regulate and control the postal and courier services in Malaysia. MCMC defined courier as delivery of parcel up to 30kg by the licensee within Malaysia to the addressee including notice duly left in the letter box if the recipient is not at the premise (MCMC, 2022). There is no uniformly definition of courier and parcel delivery service but in general their basic service offered is transportation (Palaima & Auruskeviciene, 2007). On the other hand, Morlok (2000) define courier as parcel business which define as a business consists of carrier's organization that transport shipments that typically small to be handled by a person without aid of another person or machine but larger than a letter.

Courier industry is said will rapidly growing due to the changes of manufacturer's need that require small lot sizes with highest frequencies and speed deliveries. Collaboration between e-commerce players and courier service provider is inevitable to ensure the efficient of operation of e-commerce. Courier service performance is the support system of the e-commerce ecosystem, in which it may affect one's business image and reputation, enhance profit and maintain loyal customer (Izzah et al., 2016). Online shoppers value the parcel delivery as a form of e-retail attribute of success although both of the industry is a separate entity (Ejdys & Gulc, 2020). Therefore, the e-retailer need to choose the right CSP to provide excellent parcel delivery service in order to gaining the competitive advantage and wining the market.

Unfortunately, the growth of the e-commerce did not reflect in the growth of the courier industry. In parallel with the growing number of items to be delivered, it is undeniable that it will create more challenges for courier providers to keeping up with the demand of parcel delivery due to the complexity of the operation such as difficult route planning and shortage of manpower. Hence, in this challenging scenario, courier providers need to understand the market, strategizes their operation plan, diversifying services to provide customers with reliable, secure and efficient services to achieve sustainability in business (Ejdys & Gulc, 2020). By building on the findings from the previous researcher focusing on the factors of service quality attributes, this conceptual paper aims to identify the factors that influence the decision-making process of the e-retailer in choosing their preferred courier service provider. The finding of this paper will able to help to provide important foundation to refer in formulating a market-oriented courier industry and the model can be used to implement improvements concerning the current issues facing by the courier services provider so that a symbiotic relationship between e-retailer and courier service can be established.

Courier Service Quality

Many e-commerce service quality research has largely concentrated on the consumer's engagement with the Web site, overlooking the larger picture that e-commerce service quality is made up of more than just Web site interactivity (Collier & Bienstock, 2006). Nguyen (2016) has conducted a study focusing on the factors influencing a business in 3PL selection and the analysis shows that cost of service, reputation, operation performance and long-term relationship is the key factors that influence the selection of 3PL provider. This study also another quantitative study whereby it is aiming is to test the previous theoretical framework and its attributes. In reaction to this, Gulc (2017) has conducted a study regarding the gap concerning the problem of aging of quality indicators and found out that the highly criteria are time of delivery, trust and price while the least criteria rated is comprehensive service, modern technology and modern packaging solutions. In this research, respondents also value the importance of modern technologies, such as drones or individual pick-up & delivery boxes. It can be assumed that customers will not only pay attention to price or time of delivery while choosing courier service but will also look for new technological solutions that will provide them comfort and individualised.

A study using Mental Accounting Theory on the assessment of courier service quality has reveals that there are three consumer segments that show distinct preference structures which being identified as "price-oriented," a "time- and convenience-oriented," and a "value-for-money-oriented" consumer segment. The analysis shows that the most important attribute is the delivery fee, followed by nonprice delivery attributes delivery time option and convenience (Nguyen et al., 2019). However, the assessment of the quality is conducted from the perspective of the online shopper who have the opportunity to select their preferred courier service company.

Meanwhile, Sze (2012) in Malaysia setting found that the most valuable service quality determinants that customer value from Malaysia courier companies was order accuracy. Her study justified that reason of order accuracy being the most important attributes was due to the customer trust has been shifted and decrease since a high number of inefficiencies of courier services has been reported. Hence, the customer's trust towards courier companies

in Malaysia decreasing. Apart from accuracy, timeliness and quality of the service information is another important attribute that customer value in the courier service quality.

The other similar studies are by Dones & Young (2020) where top five courier companies in Philippines are being assessed and their study found that delivery speed is the most important aspect that consumers value when picking a courier, and same-day delivery is the most popular choice among participants. However, their study was focusing on the frequency of using courier service during the Covid-19 where there were restriction of movement and the closure of physical shops. Therefore, the most popular item was bought are food and groceries item where it requires to be delivered as soon as possible.

Underpinning Theories

Customer intention to purchase is not only being derived from the perceived service quality but also may influence by their behaviour (Tsoukatos, 2014). The customer behaviour is related with profitability and overall performance of the organization. The intentional behaviour was related to aspect such as word of mouth, communications, willingness to pay more and complaining behaviour (Brito et al., 2007). Customers, courier services, and retailers are the major players in last mile logistics. The efficacy of last mile distribution varies depending on the behaviour of these three parties (Bopage et al., 2019a). E-customer satisfaction and future intentions, as well as e-retailer success are influenced by courier service (Ejdys & Gulc, 2020). In the triadic setting between e-retailer, logistics provider and customer the perceived service quality is significantly complicated since multiple jobs interact with one another (Lin et al., 2016).

Logistics Service Quality (LSQ)

Mentzer et al (2001) suggested that firms are required to pay attention to their own marketing and the physical distribution service (PDS), as these elements are key to achieving customer satisfaction. This theoretical implies that part of the value of a product is created by the logistics service performance. Previous scholar use Logistics Service Quality (LSQ) theoretical and relate to customer loyalty and satisfaction, profitability and competitiveness (Kilibarda et al., 2020). There are four attributes in LSQ dimensions which are timeliness, condition or accuracy of order, quality of information and availability/quality of personnel. Timeliness refers to whether the order arrive to the customer location as promised. The next attribute is condition or accuracy of order which include the accuracy of inventory, billing and the completion of the service. The quality and the quantity of the item upon arrival should be in the top condition as it will determine the quality of the service. Quality of information is defined as the interaction between the personnel and the customers. The personnel who are creative in problem solving, presenting the information well as well as giving customized attention may results in customer satisfaction and encouraging customer loyalty. Availability or quality of contact personnel is essential to attract customer. Customer satisfaction may be influenced by giving right product information and great marketing which increase the possibility of customer to build their interest and assist them in their decision-making process.

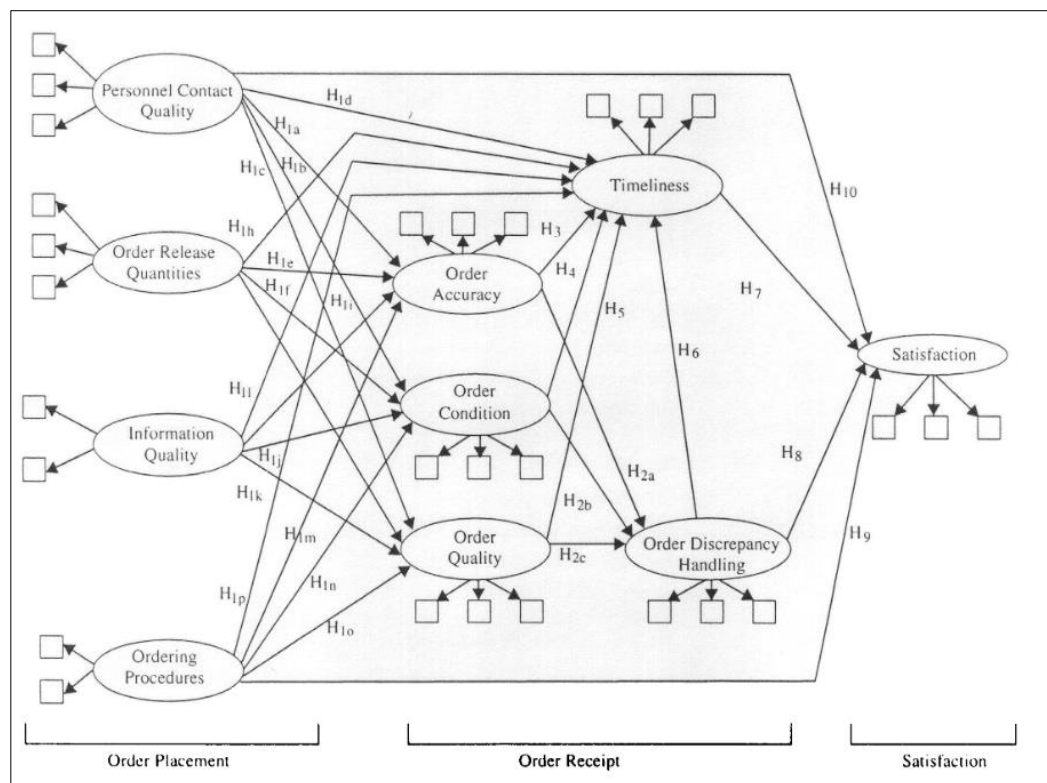


Figure 1: Logistics Service Quality Framework (Mentzer, 2001).

Mental Accounting Theory (MAT)

Mental accounting theory (MAT) is a cognitive theory that explains how people form and manage their expectations about future events (Andhini et al., 2017). The mental accounting comprises the attribute of convenience, pleasure, perceived price and perceived risk. Mental accounting describes the accounting rules that customer applies when the resources is scarce. In this e-commerce setting the scarcity may include of time that the e-retailer to deliver an urgent item or the cost that occur to prepare for the pre-delivery parcel. When making a purchase, consumers may weigh different factors such as price, quality and convenience. Mental accounting refers to the division of money into different categories based on the purpose for which they are used. Mental accounting in courier delivery refers to the fact that a consumer might value having different options for delivery based on factors such as urgency, convenience or cost (Nguyen et al., 2019). For example, a consumer that orders something from an online merchant might place a higher importance on speed and cost while ordering a gift for a loved one than for purchasing office supplies. The same consumer might be less concerned about cost and speed when ordering items for his or her own personal use.

E-retailer is different from online shopper in term of their role in using the courier service. The e-retailer focuses on managing their business while the online shopper focuses on fulfilling their needs through the online channel. However, the primary interaction for both is with the e-retailer who acts as the intermediary between them and the actual couriers. The choice that is made by the e-retailer must be cost-wise as consumers are price sensitive in online shopping. Practically, it is best to give the option for the online shopper to choose their preferred courier company. However, if the e-retailer uses multiple service providers with different pricing strategies, they may find it challenging to manage the profitability of the

delivery service due to an increase in inventory handling costs. The use of multiple couriers will lead to mishandling of the parcel not only on the courier's behalf but also from the e-retailer side. This is because they will need to handle the parcel for each of the different couriers separately. In Malaysia online retail setting, the courier service provider has been selected earlier by the e-retailer prior the purchasing process. As this courier selection has been majorly made by the e-retailer in the e-commerce scene in Malaysia, this study aims to explore the attributes that influence the selection of courier service provider among the e-retailer is relevant.

Development of Conceptual Framework

This conceptual paper attempts to identify the courier service quality factors that influence the choice of e-retailer courier service provider. The conceptual framework as depicted in Figure 1 is based on the combination of Logistics Service Quality (LSQ) and Mental Accounting Theory (MAT). The model may address the service quality factors or any cognitive biases element in customer behaviour to adequately explained the e-retailer selection of courier provider. The conceptual framework also aims to segmentized the attributes according to the phase of the delivery process.

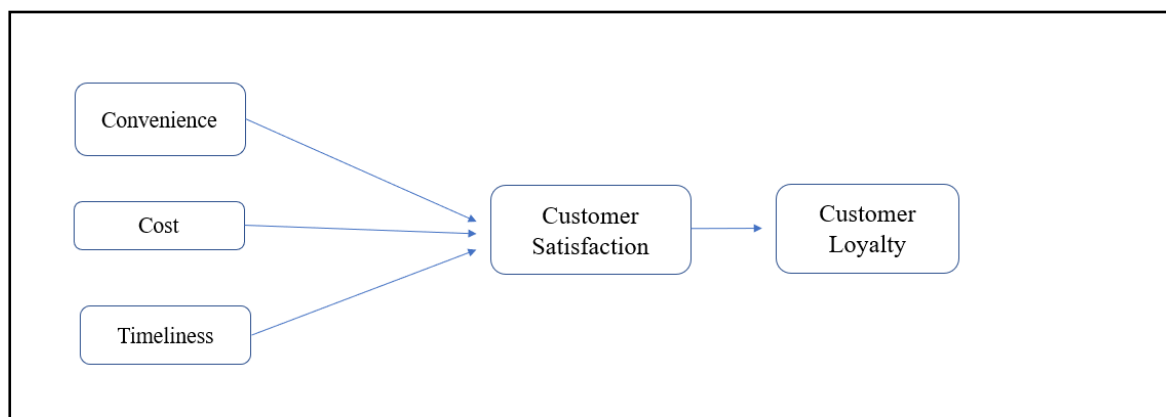


Figure 3: Courier Service Quality Conceptual Framework

Convenience

The concept of convenience is taken as the saving in times and efforts that customer spends in purchasing a product not as the attribute of the products itself (Chen et al., 2011). The greater the time saving that a service or product can offer, the greater the satisfaction and loyalty that customer will have (Hsu et al., 2010). In the perspective of logistics industry, location convenience has a positive effect on the consumer's intention to choose logistics services (Du et al., 2018) Nowadays, courier company services become more convenient by putting up satellite branches for easier access. The ease of sending the parcel will be one of factor that being consider by the e-retailer in making the decision compare to choose their delivery option. Convenience criteria also represent wider delivery coverage area, easiness of booking & tracking of the parcel as well as additional service for pick-up items at the e-retailer premises. (MCMC, 2019). Service innovation can also be considered as a convenience factor. In order to be competitive and provide convenience to the customer, most courier service offer parcel pickup services to the e-retailer premises subject with a charge. The other important attribute that provides convenience to the e-retailer is the availability to tracking and tracing the parcel.

Cost

Price is one of the factors that inducing customer to choose a product or services. Compared to offline purchasing, customer who do online purchasing are intolerant with delivery cost as it is an additional cost to the item they purchased. The main reasons that last mile delivery are costly are because the lack of economies of scale, the difficulty of finding the specific home address of the end consumer that increase the cost of fuel and the absent receiver for needs to sign a receipt confirming delivery, which results high delivery failure and empty trip rates (Bopage et al., 2019). An established retailer normally capable of using giant courier services such as FedEx, DHL and TNT, which are not affordable for most small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Therefore, most SMEs tend to choose cheaper logistic providers which also consider the small player in courier, parcel and express industry (CPE) (Parvin et al., 2021). The delivery fees are borne by the purchaser making additional cost to the total purchase amount. Therefore, study shows that offering free delivery or offer low delivery fee seems a key strategy to attract and satisfy online customer (Nguyen et al., 2019). Consumers may have perception that the shipping charge is unfair to them as it should be borne by the seller to complete the whole purchase transaction (Tsoukatos, 2014). Therefore, e-retailer need to manage their cost of doing business and the ability to absorb the delivery fee and offer free delivery may attract customer and intention to purchase. As a profit-based entity, reducing cost and maximizing profit is inevitable for the e-retailer to sustain the business. Therefore, cost that being discussed in the perspective of e-retailer are not only regards to the shipping fee but also considering the payment terms, non-official cost, extra cost during transportation and payment transaction, cost saving and other handling cost (Binh & Kien, 2016).

Timeliness

The average delivery performance generally depends on the overall capacity and the workload, while the actual delivery time of a service order depends on the system status at the time when the order is placed. That's why larger and well-established courier company able to provide better service as they have large capacity because delivery performance and cost are closely related. On-time delivery factor from courier company can be accepted by consumers even though they have to pay more for shipping costs (Rahman, 2006; Mentzer et al., 2001). Research done by Dones & Young (2020) found that delivery speed is the most important aspect that consumers evaluate when picking a courier, and same-day delivery is the most popular choice among participants. Study by Lewis (2006) showed that shipping is the most significant impact on customer's decision to purchase while Rao (2011) found that the most significant factors that decrease consumer loyalty and returning customer is the delivery delays. This is supported by Collier and Bienstock (2006) where they claimed that online purchaser is sensitive to the delivery time and it has been the factor that has a significant impact to customer satisfaction and intention to repurchase. Xing (2010) also in the same perspective whereby their research findings are the consumers highly appreciate and value the delivery punctuality including vary options of delivery in term of choice of delivery date, timing and quick delivery or also known as express item.

Methodology

This research adopts qualitative method. The reason is historically positivist techniques have dominated logistics study to date, whereas qualitative and interpretive research has been uncommon (Kovacs & Spens, 2005). Qualitative inquiry is viewed as one of the methods for revealing things we did not know in a more in-depth manner while yet allowing for flexibility in the study process. This study is adopting qualitative method where it aims to study the situation to develop a new theory or whether a general theory is borne out by specific condition. The qualitative method allows the exploration on the well-established determinants found by previous scholar but also giving opportunity to other emerging determinants to be found while conducting the study. Further, this research employed case study approach. The reason is because case study allows the exploration of events, activities, processes one or more individual which in this study referring to the e-commerce last mile delivery process (Crescentini & Mainardi, 2009).

Since research addressing the issue on how customer making purchase decision regards the logistics services is lacking (Garver et al., 2012), this study used document analysis (MCMC documents and reports) and semi-structured interviews to collect the data. The literature review is made from the review of government publication, national strategic plan, academic journal articles, online database as well as online sources. Five semi-structured interview sessions were carried out through virtual meeting due to the pandemic Covid-19 that hit the world and the Control Movement Order has been imposed by the government. This research uses purposive sampling method. The participants are known as informants are selected from the e-retailers who selling their products at e-commerce platform and outsource the delivery service to the courier service company. Their role of the customer for the courier service suits the research objectives. The sample are also being chosen taking into criteria that they are selling different products between one to another to reduce biasness and to achieve the similarities, dissimilarities and diversity criteria in the findings. All informants also had been selling online for more than three (3) years and this profile showing that they have vast experience in using the courier service to deliver their parcel.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper provides an understanding about the demand and needs of the e-retailers in the process that involved in delivering the parcel. The insight is relevant in addressing the challenges of the courier industry is facing in order to keep up with the growth of e-commerce in Malaysia. Serving the online shoppers is challenging as they are often making one-off purchase and minimal item so their loyalty is relatively low yet their expectations grow all the time (Kawa & Swiatowiec-Szczepanska, 2021). Therefore, while the e-shopper demanding is growing, e-retailer need to pay much attention to the whole e-commerce processes especially on the delivery process as it is the crucial part to determine the success of the online purchasing. The courier industry needs to keep up with this demand as e-commerce characteristics requires a collective behaviour from all companies and parties that involved. Both courier personnel and e-retailer not only have to act more than a customer and a service provider but rather as a business strategic alliance that work hand in hand to sustain their business and win the competitive advantage. This research findings are hope to supports the holistic planning for the synchronization development between e-commerce and courier industry and embracing the different expectation from the triadic role in e-commerce which is the e-retailer, CSP and the online shopper.

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