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THE EXPECTATION GAP IN E-COMMERCE: HOW TRANSPARENCY SHAPES CONSUMER TRUST AND BEHAVIOUR

Anizah Zainuddin^{1*}, Sarah Addeany Ridzwan², Sarah Irdina Ridzwan³

¹Department of Entrepreneurship and Marketing Studies, Faculty of Business & Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kampus Puncak Alam, (UiTM), Malaysia.

 niz@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7664-991X>

²Faculty of Law, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

 2024404554@student.uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2314-0537>

³ Crowe KL Tax Sdn. Bhd., Level 16, Tower C, Megan Avenue II, 12, Jalan Yap Kwan Seng, 50450 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

 sarah.irdina25@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7691-3716>

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

Consumers form expectations in online shopping through product representations, delivery information, packaging disclosures, and platform-mediated communication. When actual experiences fail to match these expectations, dissatisfaction and post-purchase conflict may arise. Although prior studies have examined customer satisfaction and trust in e-commerce, limited research has explored how expectation management intersects with transparency and consumer legal awareness in shaping post-purchase outcomes. This study addresses that gap by examining how transparency and realistic communication moderate expectation–reality gaps and influence consumer dissatisfaction, behavioural responses, and awareness of consumer protection rights in Malaysia. A qualitative-dominant mixed-method exploratory approach was employed, integrating literature synthesis with primary qualitative data collected through open-ended online surveys from 40 households in Shah Alam. Thematic analysis identified five interrelated themes: representational misalignment, delivery realism gaps, packaging transparency deficits, platform-mediated expectation formation, and legal awareness. The findings demonstrate that inaccurate product representations, unrealistic delivery promises, inadequate packaging transparency, and platform-generated cues contribute significantly to expectation–reality gaps and consumer dissatisfaction. Conversely, transparent communication and realistic

expectation management reduce negative post-purchase behaviours and strengthen consumer trust. The study contributes to e-commerce and consumer behaviour literature by linking expectation management, transparency practices, and consumer protection awareness within a unified post-purchase framework. The findings provide practical guidance for retailers, digital platforms, and policymakers seeking to strengthen consumer trust, improve platform accountability, and reduce post-purchase disputes in online retail environments.

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Consumer Trust and Behaviour, E-Commerce, Transparency and Legal Exposure



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Introduction

Online shopping has become an integral part of contemporary consumer lifestyles by offering convenience, wider product selection, and continuous accessibility. Despite these advantages, consumers frequently encounter disappointment when purchased products fail to meet expectations. For example, a household in Shah Alam may order products expecting timely delivery and accurate product quality, only to receive delayed parcels, items inconsistent with online depictions, or damaged goods caused by inadequate packaging. Such experiences are increasingly reflected in official complaint statistics. Between 2021 and October 2025, Malaysian authorities recorded 51,821 complaints related to online transactions, with more than 28,000 involving misrepresented or undelivered products (The Star, 2026). Similar concerns have also been observed internationally, including in Hong Kong, where more than 17,000 online shopping complaints were reported in 2024, many involving misleading product descriptions and delivery delays (SCMP, 2024).

Expectation–disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1980) explains that dissatisfaction occurs when actual performance deviates from prior expectations. In online retail environments, the inability to physically inspect products before purchase intensifies the likelihood of expectation gaps. Existing research has primarily focused on customer satisfaction, trust, and service quality in e-commerce contexts. However, several important gaps remain insufficiently addressed. First, limited attention has been given to how multiple stages of the online consumer journey including product representation, delivery communication, packaging practices, and platform-generated cues collectively shape expectation–reality gaps. Second, prior studies rarely examine how transparency and realistic communication function as moderating mechanisms that reduce dissatisfaction. Third, insufficient research has explored the role of consumer legal awareness in influencing post-purchase responses and dispute resolution behaviour.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how expectation formation, transparency practices, and consumer protection awareness interact within Malaysian online retailing. Specifically, the study investigates how inaccurate product representations, unrealistic delivery expectations, inadequate packaging transparency, and platform-mediated signals contribute to consumer dissatisfaction and post-purchase behaviour. It further explores how transparency and legal awareness may reduce conflicts and strengthen consumer trust. By integrating expectation–disconfirmation theory with consumer trust and transparency perspectives, this study offers a broader understanding of expectation management in digital marketplaces.

Expectation and Disappointment in E-Commerce

Expectations in online shopping are shaped by product images, descriptions, and delivery promises. Misalignment between expected and actual product attributes leads to consumer dissatisfaction (Mokhtar, Yusoff, Asmuni, & Fauzi, 2020). Delivery performance is critical, as late or unreliable shipments intensify negative evaluations (Lee & Lin, 2005). Misleading information, such as exaggerated product imagery or unclear descriptions, further amplifies expectation gaps (Awad & Othman, 2024).

Product Representation and Packaging Transparency

Information asymmetry is inherent in online retailing. Misrepresentation of products through images, descriptions, or labels contributes to dissatisfaction and increases the likelihood of returns (Awad & Othman, 2024). Packaging transparency, including protective quality and accurate labeling, has emerged as a critical factor in shaping consumer post-purchase perceptions (Lee & Lin, 2005).

Transparency, Trust, and Legal Moderation

Transparent communication regarding product specifications, delivery timelines, and packaging reduces both consumer disappointment and potential legal risk (Gefen, 2000; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Legal Consequences of Expectation Gaps

Unmet expectations may trigger statutory or contractual liability. In Malaysia, the *Consumer Protection Act 1999* mandates that goods must match descriptions and meet acceptable quality standards (Consumer Protection Act 1999, Malaysia; Roslan et al., 2025). However, consumer awareness of legal remedies is often limited (Nurhayati Abdul Ghani, 2023).

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-method exploratory design integrating literature synthesis with primary qualitative inquiry. The qualitative emphasis enables an in-depth exploration of consumer perceptions, emotional responses, behavioural reactions, and legal awareness related to online shopping experiences. This design is particularly appropriate for examining complex and context-dependent constructs such as expectation formation, transparency, and post-purchase dissatisfaction within digital retail environments.

Theoretical Foundation

This study is primarily grounded in Expectation-Disconfirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980), which explains that consumer dissatisfaction emerges when actual product or service performance differs from prior expectations. The study also draws on consumer trust theory and online retail transparency literature, which emphasise the importance of accurate information, credible communication, and platform reliability in shaping consumer confidence and behavioural outcomes. Integrating these perspectives enables a broader explanation of how expectation gaps develop across different stages of the online shopping process and how transparency and legal awareness moderate post-purchase reactions. The study is guided by the conceptual framework (Figure 1), which highlights the moderating role of transparency and realistic communication on the expectation–reality gap and subsequent consumer outcomes.

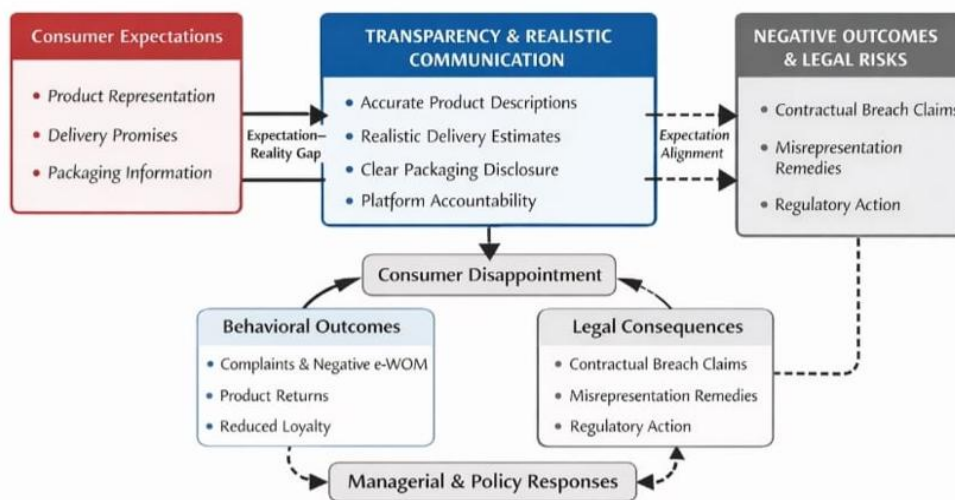


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Expectations, Transparency, and Legal Consequences in Online Shopping

Source: Author's Own Compilation

Population and Sampling

The study targets households in Shah Alam that purchased household products online within the past 12 months. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide relevant, experience-based insights into the phenomenon under study (Anizah et al., 2022). This non-probabilistic sampling method is justified given the study's exploratory nature and the need to recruit participants with direct exposure to online shopping, ensuring data richness and relevance.

A sample size of 40 respondents was chosen based on qualitative research standards, which suggest that 30 to 50 participants typically suffice to reach thematic saturation where no new themes or insights emerge from additional data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). This sample size balances depth of data with practical considerations of accessibility and response quality, supporting robust thematic analysis.

Data Collection

The data were collected through a structured online survey featuring open-ended questions. The choice of questions was made with two objectives in mind: first, to enable broad geographic coverage within Shah Alam; second, to allow participants to respond at their convenience, and to encourage candid, detailed reflections on their experiences. The employment of open-ended inquiries was imperative in order to elicit comprehensive qualitative insights concerning consumer dissatisfaction, perceptions of transparency, and legal awareness, which might have been overlooked by close-ended formats. The survey explored the types of household products purchased online, experiences related to product quality, packaging, and delivery, specific instances of unmet expectations and resulting disappointment, consumer responses such as complaints or returns, and awareness of legal rights and protection mechanisms. This ensured a comprehensive examination of the expectation gap and its consequences.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed due to its flexibility and rigor in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. This method enables systematic coding while allowing interpretative depth, aligning well with the study's exploratory and theory-building aims. The analysis followed a five-step process. Initially, the researchers familiarised themselves with the dataset in order to gain an understanding of the full scope and depth of the participant responses. Secondly, preliminary coding systematically identified meaningful data units linked to key constructs, including representational accuracy, delivery realism, transparency in packaging, platform-mediated expectation formation, and legal awareness. Thirdly, related codes were grouped into broader themes, including the Delivery Realism Gap, Packaging Transparency, Platform-Mediated Expectations, and Legal Awareness. The fourth stage of the process involved the review and refinement of themes to ensure clarity, distinctiveness, and alignment with the dataset. Finally, the interpretation of the themes was situated within the study's conceptual framework (Figure 1) and existing literature, explaining how transparency moderates' expectation gaps and shapes behavioural and legal outcomes.

The use of thematic analysis facilitates both inductive insights grounded in participant data and deductive alignment with existing theory. A qualitative approach was selected to capture nuanced, context-dependent consumer experiences. Open-ended responses allow participants to express subjective perceptions of expectation gaps, disappointment, and legal awareness, which quantitative surveys may not fully reveal (Mokhtar et al., 2020; Awad & Othman, 2024).

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework underpinning this research. Consumer expectations shaped by product representation, delivery promises, and packaging information may result in an expectation–reality gap when transparency and communication are insufficient. Transparency and realistic communication (accurate product descriptions, realistic delivery estimates, clear packaging disclosures, and platform accountability) serve to reduce this gap and foster expectation alignment.

Persistent gaps lead to consumer disappointment, which manifests in behavioural outcomes such as complaints, product returns, and reduced loyalty, as well as legal consequences including contractual breach claims, misrepresentation remedies, and regulatory actions. Managerial and policy responses form a feedback loop that enhances transparency and communication practices, mitigating future expectation gaps and their adverse effects.

Results

The thematic analysis of 40 household responses in Shah Alam revealed five (5) primary themes, reflecting the conceptual framework of expectation–reality gaps, transparency, and legal consequences in online shopping.

Representational Misalignment

The majority of respondents ($n = 31/40$) reported dissatisfaction arising from discrepancies between product representations and the actual items received. Participants frequently identified exaggerated product images, vague descriptions, and misleading promotional content as key contributors to inflated expectations. This issue was particularly prominent in categories such as furniture, home décor, and kitchen appliances, where visual cues heavily influenced purchasing decisions.

It was reported by respondents that the quality of products appeared to be higher in online contexts than in reality. For instance, one participant explained that "the sofa looked exactly like the picture, but the fabric quality was much poorer, and the colour was darker than expected." In addition, it was observed that items designated as premium often failed to meet expectations with regard to quality and durability.

It has been demonstrated that these discrepancies frequently resulted in returns, complaints, and diminished trust in both the sellers and the platforms. The findings indicate that representational accuracy is a critical determinant of consumer satisfaction, as misalignment directly contributes to negative post-purchase experiences. This finding aligns with prior research highlighting how misleading visuals and unclear descriptions amplify expectation–reality gaps and dissatisfaction (Awad & Othman, 2024).

Delivery Realism Gap

A considerable proportion of respondents ($n = 27/40$) reported issues pertaining to delivery, which was identified as a primary contributor to their dissatisfaction. A significant number of participants noted delays in delivery that exceeded the stipulated timeframe, the occurrence of incomplete shipments, and the inconvenience of delivery hours that did not align with customer convenience. These issues were especially prevalent during promotional periods and peak sales events.

It was emphasised by several respondents that delivery timelines were often overly optimistic and did not reflect actual logistics conditions. One participant noted that they had expected their cleaning supplies to arrive within two days, but that they had only arrived after a week, which had resulted in a disruption to their schedule. As reported by numerous individuals, considerable frustration was experienced when essential household items failed to arrive as scheduled.

The consequences of delivery delays were far-reaching, extending beyond mere inconvenience to affect household planning and, in some cases, discourage future purchases. The findings of this study demonstrate that delivery realism plays a crucial role in managing consumer expectations. Failure to adhere to the stipulated delivery schedules has been shown to directly contribute to a decline in satisfaction and a concomitant reduction in trust (Lee & Lin, 2005; Mokhtar et al., 2020). This underscores the significance of ensuring delivery communications are both accurate and transparent.

Packaging Transparency Deficit

Approximately half of the respondents (n = 21/40) expressed concerns regarding inadequate packaging and the lack of transparency about protective measures. Participants reported that inadequate packaging frequently resulted in product damage, particularly for fragile items such as glassware and liquid containers.

The respondents further highlighted that they were often unaware of how products would be packaged prior to delivery, which limited their ability to assess potential risks. One participant stated, "The glass bottles were not wrapped properly and many arrived broken, and I was unaware that I could claim compensation." It has been reported by other parties that items were received that exhibited signs of scratching, leakage, or other visible damage.

The findings of the study indicate that packaging transparency exerts an influence not only on product protection but also on perceptions of retailer reliability. Inadequate packaging has been demonstrated to contribute directly to dissatisfaction (Smith, 2023). Conversely, clear communication regarding packaging standards has been shown to help manage expectations and reduce uncertainty (Brown et al., 2021). This finding is consistent with extant literature emphasising the role of service quality elements in influencing consumer satisfaction (Lee & Lin, 2005).

Platform-Mediated Expectation Formation

A significant proportion of respondents (n = 24/40) indicated that platform-generated cues, including ratings, reviews, "top seller" badges, and promotional labels, had a substantial impact on their expectations. A significant proportion of participants reported relying heavily on these indicators when making purchase decisions, often assuming that such cues guaranteed product quality and reliable service.

This reliance diminished the extent to which consumers critically evaluated product descriptions. One respondent elucidated that their initial assumption of the product's high quality, as evidenced by its 5-star rating and 'top seller' badge, was not substantiated by the product's actual performance. It has been demonstrated that platform cues frequently result in the establishment of unrealistic expectations, which are subsequently not aligned with the actual performance of the product.

The findings demonstrate that platform-mediated signals function as powerful extrinsic factors in shaping consumer expectations. In instances where these signals are incongruent with the subsequent actual outcomes, the level of dissatisfaction is known to increase. This underscores the necessity for enhanced platform accountability to ensure the accuracy of such indicators in reflecting product and seller performance (Gefen, 2000).

Legal Awareness

In comparison, the level of legal awareness among respondents was comparatively lower, with approximately 40% (n = 16/40) indicating that they were aware of their consumer rights. However, even among those who were aware, many expressed uncertainty about how to pursue formal remedies in cases of misrepresentation or product damage.

Participants frequently described experiencing confusion regarding complaint procedures and the allocation of responsibility between themselves and the platforms on which they trade. A respondent noted, "I was unaware of the possibility of claiming for damaged goods under the law, and so I simply returned the item and left a bad review." It has been documented that other parties have reported relying on informal actions, such as negative reviews, as an alternative to pursuing formal legal channels.

The findings reveal a significant gap in awareness of the protections afforded by the Malaysian Consumer Protection Act 1999, consistent with prior research (Nurhayati Abdul Ghani, 2023; Roslan et al., 2025). It appears that limited legal literacy exerts an influence on the manner in which consumers respond to dissatisfaction, frequently resulting in passive rather than formal action.

The findings demonstrate that gaps between expectations and reality in online shopping are influenced by a range of factors. The most common issues are representational misalignment, delivery realism and platform-mediated expectations, followed by packaging transparency and legal awareness, which shape consumer experiences. Transparency and realistic communication play a critical role in reducing these gaps, enhancing trust and reducing dissatisfaction. The study highlights the importance of platform accountability and consumer legal literacy.

Discussion

This study examined expectation–reality gaps in online shopping among Malaysian households, focusing on product representation, delivery performance, packaging practices, platform-mediated cues, and legal awareness. The findings corroborate and extend existing e-commerce literature by demonstrating that expectation gaps are multidimensional and shaped by informational accuracy, service performance, and platform design.

Consistent with prior research, representational misalignment emerged as the primary source of dissatisfaction, reaffirming the importance of accurate product depiction in shaping expectations. However, the findings indicate that these gaps are not confined to product attributes alone. Rather, they are systemically generated across the consumer journey, spanning pre-purchase (platform cues), transaction (delivery), and post-purchase (packaging). This supports a shift from viewing expectation gaps as isolated outcomes to understanding them as a process-driven phenomenon.

A key contribution of this study is the identification of packaging transparency as a significant yet underexplored determinant of satisfaction. While existing studies have largely emphasised delivery and service quality, the results show that inadequate packaging and unclear information regarding protective measures intensify dissatisfaction. Packaging therefore serves not only a functional role but also acts as a signal of care, professionalism, and reliability,

influencing perceived quality and trust. This extends service quality frameworks by positioning packaging as a critical component of expectation management.

The findings further highlight the role of platform-mediated cues in shaping expectations. Ratings, reviews, and seller badges function as heuristic shortcuts that simplify decision-making. However, when such signals are inconsistent with actual performance, they contribute to inflated expectations and heightened disappointment. This reinforces trust-based models of e-commerce while demonstrating that platform design actively constructs expectations, thereby bearing partial responsibility for expectation–reality discrepancies.

Delivery performance also emerged as a critical factor, particularly in relation to delivery realism. Overly optimistic timelines especially during peak sales periods were found to disrupt household routines and undermine trust. These findings emphasise that accurate and transparent communication is as important as operational efficiency in managing expectations and reducing dissatisfaction.

Beyond immediate dissatisfaction, the study reveals that expectation gaps influence consumer behavioural and legal responses. While some respondents demonstrated awareness of their rights, many lacked clarity regarding formal complaint mechanisms. This suggests that legal awareness moderates post-purchase behaviour, shaping whether consumers pursue formal remedies or resort to passive responses such as negative reviews. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that legal literacy influences consumer engagement in dispute resolution.

From a regulatory perspective, the findings align with the objectives of the Consumer Protection Act 1999 and ongoing discussions on platform accountability. The results provide empirical support for strengthening enforcement related to misleading representations, improving transparency standards, and clarifying the responsibilities of digital platforms in shaping consumer expectations.

Integration with the Conceptual Framework

The findings provide strong support for the proposed conceptual framework. Consumer expectations are shaped by multiple inputs, including product representations, delivery commitments, packaging practices, and platform signals. Expectation–reality gaps arise when these elements lack transparency or realism, leading to dissatisfaction and subsequent behavioural responses such as complaints, returns, and negative word-of-mouth. In some cases, these responses may extend to legal action, particularly where misrepresentation or contractual issues are perceived.

Transparency and realistic communication emerge as key moderating factors that reduce negative outcomes and reinforce trust. Effective expectation management therefore requires an integrated approach encompassing product information, delivery communication, packaging standards, platform interface design, and consumer legal awareness.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to e-commerce and consumer behaviour literature by empirically demonstrating how expectation management, transparency practices, and consumer protection awareness interact to influence post-purchase dissatisfaction and behavioural responses in online retail environments.

Managerial and Policy Implications

The findings provide several practical implications for retailers, platforms, and policymakers. Retailers should prioritise accurate product representation, supported by detailed descriptions and realistic visuals, to minimise expectation gaps. Delivery timelines must be communicated clearly and realistically, with timely updates to manage uncertainty. Strengthening packaging standards and clearly conveying protective measures can further reduce damage-related dissatisfaction and enhance perceived reliability.

Platform operators should also review interface elements such as ratings, badges, and promotional cues to ensure they do not unintentionally inflate expectations beyond actual performance. At the same time, improving access to information on consumer rights and dispute resolution processes can empower users to respond more effectively to negative experiences.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need to strengthen transparency requirements, enforcement mechanisms, and platform accountability. Public education initiatives aimed at improving legal awareness are equally important, as informed consumers are more likely to engage in formal and structured dispute resolution processes. The identified themes demonstrate that expectation–reality gaps are not isolated incidents, but interconnected outcomes shaped across the entire online consumer journey. Representational misalignment influences pre-purchase expectations, delivery realism affects transaction-stage evaluations, while packaging transparency and legal awareness shape post-purchase perceptions and responses. Platform-mediated cues further amplify these effects by influencing consumer assumptions regarding quality and reliability. Together, these findings illustrate that dissatisfaction in online shopping is a systemic issue driven by informational accuracy, communication practices, and platform governance rather than by product performance alone.

The findings and discussion have resulted in an action plan to address the gaps between expectations and reality across the online consumer journey. See Table 1 for details of the recommended strategies, responsible stakeholders and expected outcomes.

Table 1: Action Plan for Improving Expectation Management in Online Retail

Issue/s	Implications	Recommended Actions	Stakeholders	Indicative Outcomes
Representational Misalignment	Inaccurate product depictions distort expectations and reduce trust	Ensure accurate images and detailed descriptions; integrate user-generated content	Sellers, Platforms	Improved expectation alignment; reduced dissatisfaction and returns
Delivery Realism Gap	Overpromising delivery timelines undermines reliability	Provide realistic delivery estimates and proactive communication	Sellers, Logistics Providers, Platforms	Enhanced trust and reduced delivery-related complaints
Packaging Transparency Deficit	Poor packaging and lack of disclosure increase perceived risk	Standardise packaging practices and communicate protective measures	Sellers, Platforms	Reduced product damage; improved perceived quality
Platform-Mediated Expectation Inflation	Platform cues can inflate expectations beyond actual performance	Improve transparency and accuracy of ratings, reviews, and badges	Platforms, Regulators	More informed decision-making; reduced expectation gaps
Low Legal Awareness	Limited awareness constrains formal dispute resolution	Enhance visibility of consumer rights and simplify complaint processes	Platforms, Government Agencies	Increased consumer empowerment and structured dispute handling
Systemic Expectation Gaps	Expectation gaps occur across the consumer journey	Adopt integrated expectation management across pre-, during-, and post-purchase stages	Sellers, Platforms	Holistic improvement in customer experience and satisfaction
Transparency (Cross-cutting)	Lack of transparency drives dissatisfaction and disputes	Strengthen disclosure standards in line with the Consumer Protection Act 1999	Regulators, Platforms	Greater accountability and trust in e-commerce

Source: Author's Own Compilation

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The qualitative sample of 40 households in Shah Alam may limit generalisability, and the reliance on self-reported experiences introduces the possibility of recall bias. Future research should incorporate larger

and more diverse samples, as well as mixed-method approaches combining survey and behavioural data.

Further studies could also explore different product categories or conduct cross-country comparisons to examine how cultural and regulatory contexts influence expectation formation and post-purchase behaviour. Expanding the methodological and contextual scope would enhance understanding of expectation management in e-commerce.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that expectation-reality gaps in online shopping are multidimensional and shaped by interactions between product representation, delivery communication, packaging transparency, platform design, and consumer legal awareness. The findings show that dissatisfaction emerges not only from product-related issues but also from unrealistic expectations created throughout the digital consumer journey.

The study further highlights that transparency and realistic communication function as critical mechanisms for reducing dissatisfaction, strengthening consumer trust, and improving post-purchase experiences. By integrating expectation management with platform accountability and consumer protection awareness, this research extends existing e-commerce literature beyond traditional satisfaction models.

From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the need for retailers, digital platforms, and regulators to adopt more transparent and consumer-oriented practices. Strengthening disclosure standards, improving delivery communication, enhancing packaging transparency, and increasing public awareness of consumer rights can collectively reduce post-purchase disputes and promote more trustworthy online retail ecosystems.

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- Author Contribution Statement:** All authors made substantial contributions to this manuscript. Anizah Zainuddin led the study's conceptualisation, methodology, and supervision. Sarah Addeany Ridzwan collected and analysed the data and interpreted the results. Sarah Irdina Ridzwan reviewed the literature and revised the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version prior to submission.
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