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TRUST OVER SPEED: SERVQUAL DIMENSIONS SHAPING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN SABAH'S E-COMMERCE LOGISTICS

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Abstract:

The rise of e-commerce has transformed customer expectations toward logistics service providers, making service quality as a crucial determinant towards satisfaction and loyalty. In Malaysia, the surge of online shopping activities has intensified competition among courier companies to deliver efficient, reliable, and customer-oriented services. Although SERVQUAL has been widely applied to evaluate service quality across various industries, evidence regarding its applicability in e-commerce logistics remains inconsistent, particularly in geographically dispersed regions such as Sabah, where logistical constraints differ substantially from those in Peninsular Malaysia. This study examines the effects of five SERVQUAL dimensions, namely tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, on customer satisfaction with e-commerce logistics services in Sabah. By integrating a quantitative research design, 192 data were collected from the e-commerce users in Sabah and was analyzed by using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The findings revealed that assurance and empathy significantly influence customer satisfaction, while tangibility, reliability, and responsiveness have no significant effects. The result of the study highlight the growing importance of trust, professionalism, and personalized care in the logistics sector, surpassing traditional operational indicators such as physical appearance or delivery speed. This study aimed to contribute

on the theoretical understanding of SERVQUAL's applicability in e-commerce logistics and offers managerial insights for improving customer-centered service strategies in emerging logistics markets.

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Keyword:

Customer Satisfaction, Logistics, E-Commerce, Operational Factors, SERVQUAL



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Introduction

The rapid development of e-commerce has significantly influenced the customers' expectations of logistics services have been increased, and the speed and reliability of logistics services are becoming an important factor of logistics service providers' (LSPs) competitive advantage and customer orientation. As online retailing continues to increase, logistics firms will be required to deliver not only efficient services, but also improve customer experiences to foster trust, confidence and long-term customer loyalty. Thus, the quality of service has emerged as a major competitive element for logistics service providers (LSPs).

The logistics industry is an important industry in the Malaysian economy, both for domestic and international trade. However, the satisfaction of customers with logistics services is not always consistent, and it can be affected by various factors such as delays in delivery, damage to parcels, or poor communication. The geographical dispersion, lack of infrastructure and accessibility issues make the situation in Sabah especially difficult as logistics operations are not always consistent. These limitations highlight the need for LSPs to pay attention to service quality dimensions that extend beyond operational efficiency, such as relational and assurance-based dimensions that build customer trust and satisfaction.

Service quality in logistics is measured by the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) based on the SERVQUAL dimensions which are tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Previous research has revealed the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction is significant (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Yuen & Thai, 2015), although the relative importance of the SERVQUAL dimensions differs according to the industry, region and customer segments.

While SERVQUAL has been applied in numerous service quality research, the findings on the relative importance of the dimensions of SERVQUAL have been inconsistent across industries and geographical settings. Reliability and responsiveness are often cited as important factors in customer satisfaction in urban logistics, with assurance and empathy being more important in geographically dispersed or developing areas (Yuen & Thai, 2015; Kassim & Abdullah, 2010; Nguyen & Luu, 2023). Although e-commerce has been growing fast in East Malaysia, there is still limited empirical evidence that investigates the applicability of SERVQUAL in Sabah. But, it remains unclear whether the traditional SERVQUAL dimensions have the significant similar impact on customer satisfaction in the rural context as compared to urban areas as the geographical dispersion, transportation constraints and infrastructure differences in Sabah presents a unique logistical environment. This inconsistency in prior findings represents an important research gap warranting further investigation.

This study is thus aimed at:

1. Examines the effects of five SERVQUAL dimensions, namely tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, on customer satisfaction with e-commerce logistics services in Sabah.
2. Determine the most important SERVQUAL dimensions that affect customer satisfaction among e-commerce users in Sabah.

This paper aims to contribute on the understanding of the determinants of service quality in regional logistics systems by providing empirical evidence that shows assurance and empathy as important predictors of satisfaction in emerging markets, addressing the objectives outlined above.

Literature Review

The SERVQUAL Model

The SERVQUAL model was developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) as a multi-dimensional framework to evaluate the service quality across five dimensions:

- i. Tangibility: Physical aspects of service such as the looks and appearance of facilities, vehicles, and personnel.
- ii. Reliability: The ability to deliver services accurately and as promised.
- iii. Responsiveness: The willingness to help customers and provide prompt services.
- iv. Assurance: The employees' competence, courtesy, and ability to convey trust and confidence.
- v. Empathy: The individualized attention and understanding toward customer needs.

In logistics and supply chain research, SERVQUAL has been widely used to evaluate courier and delivery performance (Yuen & Thai, 2015; Mentzer, Flint, & Kent, 1999). Each dimension contributes differently to satisfaction depending on customer expectations, cultural context, and operational environment. The conflicting empirical evidence with respect to the SERVQUAL dimensions in logistics services is one of the primary research gaps. While some studies focus on the vital role of reliability and responsiveness in determining customer satisfaction, others support the argument that tangibility and assurance are equally important (Bienstock, Royne, & Sherrell, 2007). Research in the airline industry showed that customer

satisfaction was not strongly influenced by reliability, as pricing and convenience had a greater influence (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2023). Also, in e-commerce logistics, there are studies that found customers care more about order fulfilment and delivery accuracy than service responsiveness.

SERVQUAL in E-Commerce Logistics

E-commerce logistics involves multiple service encounters from online order processing to last-mile delivery and thus requires both operational and emotional service quality. Studies in Malaysia found reliability and responsiveness to be dominant predictors in urban settings, where customers emphasize timeliness and accuracy (Kassim & Abdullah, 2010). However, findings from developing or geographically dispersed regions reveal a stronger influence of assurance and empathy dimensions that build trust and mitigate service uncertainty (Nguyen & Luu, 2023).

Ozturk (2020) pointed out that with the growth of e-commerce firms have experienced pressures to compete more closely and address consumers' demands in order to ensure satisfaction with the integration of logistics in the increase of online shopping. In order to create loyal customer, repeat purchases and overall customer retention, the logistic providers need to support the businesses in e-commerce by improving their performance metric for logistics arrangement and delivery.

The research on customer expectations for logistics service quality in the post pandemic era is scarce. Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted consumer behaviour, who have become more reliant on e-commerce and expect contactless deliveries, faster fulfilment, and real-time tracking (Nguyen & Luu, 2023). Nevertheless, most of the existing SERVQUAL studies were conducted before these changes and may not represent current consumer preferences and expectations of service quality anymore. This study hypothesized that while all five SERVQUAL dimensions are relevant, assurance and empathy will emerge as the most significant factors influencing customer satisfaction among Sabah's e-commerce users.

Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Service quality represents the degree where service performance meets or exceeds customer expectations (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2013). In the logistics sector, service quality carries a fundamental role especially in shaping customers' perceptions towards the delivery performance, reliability, and professionalism. In an extent, customer satisfaction reflects to which a customer perceives the service as fulfilling or surpassing their expectations (Oliver, 1997). A high level of service quality typically results in increased satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth advocacy (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

The hotel industry customers confirmed that the SERVQUAL reliability factor had significant effects on the overall satisfaction as mentioned by Lee and Lee (2009). It was pointed out that whenever consumers receive a homogenous service orchestration such as timely flight, consistent hotel room climate, their satisfaction is considerably boosted. Similarly, through the literature survey study conducted by Zeithaml *et al.* (1990) in the retail sector have found that the reliability of the service which involves accurate order, and timely delivery was found to be critical in customer retention as well as improvement of customer satisfaction.

Logistics service quality in e-commerce is not limited to operational efficiency, but also covers aspects like information transparency, communication responsiveness and care in handling goods. The literature has revealed that there is a strong correlation between timely delivery, effective communication, and courteous service and customer satisfaction in logistics (Rezaei et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020). But when physical and infrastructural constraints have an impact on consistency of performance, as in many areas of Sabah, psychological factors such as trust, empathy and assurance play more important role in ensuring satisfaction.

Methodology

Research Design

This study is conducted in quantitative method and adapted cross-sectional study with survey data collected from the e-commerce users in the state of Sabah. The quantitative approach allows to examine the relationship between SERVQUAL dimensions and their impact on customer satisfaction using statistical modelling techniques. A cross-sectional survey design was used, and data were obtained from 192 e-commerce users in Sabah, which was analysed by using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) in order to explore the relationships between SERVQUAL dimensions and customer satisfaction.

Sampling and Data Collection

Between January and March 2024, a structured online questionnaire was sent out via social media and e-commerce community groups. 192 valid responses were obtained from respondents aged 18-50 years from the four cities of Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan, Tawau and Tuaran. To ensure relevant experiential knowledge, respondents had to have used courier services at least twice in the last six months.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of three different sections:

- i. Section A: Demographic information.
- ii. Section B: SERVQUAL dimensions, measured with 22 adapted items (Parasuraman et al., 1988).
- iii. Section C: Customer satisfaction measured using five items adapted from Oliver (1997). A five-point Likert scale was used (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was assessed and ran by using SPSS 29 for the descriptive statistics and SmartPLS 4 for hypothesis testing via Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). Smart-PLS is commonly used for data analysis (Peng and Lai, 2012) because of its robustness. PLS-SEM was used in this study as it helps with the prediction of dependent variables, the number of samples which was $n=192$ that indicate as small, the research model entails considerable complexity with regard to the type of relationships in the hypotheses. Internal consistency reliability was verified through Cronbach's alpha (> 0.70) and composite reliability (> 0.80). Convergent validity was confirmed through average variance extracted

(AVE > 0.50). Path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values were used to test the hypothesized relationships.

Result And Discussion

Respondent Profile

Referring to Table 1, most of the respondents (90.1%) were aged between 18 and 39, representing the core group of active online shoppers. Most respondents reported using Shopee and Lazada as their primary platforms.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	49	25.5
	Female	143	74.5
Age Group	18 – 39 years old	173	90.1
	40 years old and above	18	9.9
Location (Division)	West Coast (<i>Pantai Barat Sabah</i>)	121	63.0
	East Coast (<i>Pantai Timur Sabah</i>)	45	23.5
	Interior (<i>Pedalaman Sabah</i>)	26	13.5
e-Commerce platform used for purchase	Shopee	191	99.5
	Lazada	67	34.9
	TikTok shop	44	22.9
	Others	56	29.3

Reliability and Validity Analysis

All constructs demonstrated acceptable reliability where Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.801 to 0.912. AVE values exceeded 0.50 for all constructs, indicating strong convergent validity.

Table 2: Validity Analysis

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Tangibility	0.798	0.557
Responsiveness	0.915	0.747
Empathy	0.906	0.731
Reliability	0.882	0.682
Assurance	0.919	0.759
Customer Satisfaction	0.941	0.773

Referring Podsakoff *et al.* (2003), the study conducted Harman's single factor test to mitigate the possibility of common method variance. This approach involves using an unrotated exploratory factor analysis to test whether most of the variance is explained by a single factor which is a feature of common method bias. In this study, the total variance of 46.342% indicates as lower than the generally accepted level of 50%. This shows that the common method variance is not a concern on this study that conducted.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 3 shows the path coefficients, t-values, coefficient of determinants and significance levels for each hypothesized relationship between the SERVQUAL dimensions and customer satisfaction. The study structural model was evaluated through the bootstrapping procedure in PLS-SEM, and significance was determined at the 0.05 level.

Table 3: Structural Model Evaluation

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std. Beta	Std. Error	t-value	P Values	R ²	Decision
H1	Tangibility Customer Satisfaction ->	0.076	0.067	1.142	0.254	0.610	Not Supported
H2	Responsiveness Customer Satisfaction ->	0.021	0.077	0.278	0.781		Not Supported
H3	Empathy Customer Satisfaction ->	0.216	0.096	2.249	0.025		Supported
H4	Reliability Customer Satisfaction ->	0.124	0.078	1.594	0.111		Not Supported
H5	Assurance Customer Satisfaction ->	0.447	0.096	4.682	0.000		Supported

The testing results of the hypothesis indicate that two of the five SERVQUAL dimensions where Assurance (H5) and Empathy (H3) exhibit a statistically significant positive influence on customer satisfaction. In particular, Assurance had the highest path coefficient ($\beta = 0.447$, $t = 4.682$, $p < 0.001$), which indicated that customer trust, confidence and professionalism in logistics services were important. Empathy also had a positive impact ($\beta = 0.216$, $t = 2.249$, $p < 0.05$), highlighting the importance of personalized attention and care in resolving customer concerns.

On the other hand, Tangibility (H1), Responsiveness (H2) and Reliability (H4) were not showing statistically significant effects in this study ($p > 0.05$) and should not be interpreted as unimportant. Instead, the results indicated assurance and empathy have relatively greater impact on customer satisfaction among e-commerce users in Sabah. When customers are in a situation where there is logistical uncertainty and geographical constraints, they might value trustworthiness, professionalism and personalised attention more when assessing service experiences. Thus, the physical facilities of logistics, delivery speed, and service performance consistency are less important to customers in Sabah than interpersonal and assurance aspects of service.

The coefficient of determination (R^2) for customer satisfaction was 0.610, which means that the five dimensions of SERVQUAL accounted for 61.0% of the variance in customer satisfaction of the e-commerce logistics users in Sabah. Based on Hair et al. (2022), the R^2

value of 0.610 indicates that the model has moderate to substantial explanatory power, meaning that the proposed model is able to explain customer satisfaction in the context of this study.

Overall, this study's findings support the results where service quality aspect specifically the assurance and empathy are the most important factors that influence on the satisfaction among e-commerce users in Sabah, highlighting the importance of human interaction and emotional trust in logistics service delivery.

Discussion of Findings

The result indicates that the most important factors that influence the customer satisfaction in the logistics industry in Sabah are assurance and empathy. These findings indicate that customers and service providers must have trust, confidence and emotional bonding. When physical and operational reliability is limited by infrastructure or distance, the interpersonal aspects such as employee courtesy, professionalism and willingness to help become more important.

The insignificance of tangibility, reliability, and responsiveness is in contrast to the studies conducted in urban Malaysia (Kassim & Abdullah, 2010; Lim et al., 2021) but consistent with the studies in emerging economies where the quality of relationships is a substitute for infrastructural gaps (Nguyen & Luu, 2023). The customers of the Sabah seem to be more tolerant to late deliveries or small mistakes if the service staff is able to communicate clearly, reassure and be understanding.

The results also indicate that assurance, which is the sense of safety, professionalism and knowledge, is important when customers are not certain about delivery times or the security of parcels. Empathy, on the other hand, enhances customer relationships by showing individual attention and responding to complaints. To sum up, emotional and relational aspects are more important than tangible and operational aspects in geographically diverse regions in terms of customer satisfaction.

The model was highly explanatory, as the R² value was 0.610 indicating that the dimensions of SERVQUAL accounted for a substantial amount of the variance in customer satisfaction. The result of this discovery shows that SERVQUAL framework is appropriate to measure logistics service quality in the context of e-commerce in Sabah, although there are some differences in the relative importance of each dimension in some urban logistics contexts.

Implication And Conclusion

Theoretical Implications

This study aimed to contribute on the SERVQUAL model by portraying that in situations where there are logistical and infrastructural limitations, assurance and empathy from the SERVQUAL dimensions are the most important dimensions of service quality that affect satisfaction. It confirms that in certain aspects and for certain markets, reliability and responsiveness are not the key. The results help to improve the cross-context applicability of SERVQUAL, particularly in the e-commerce logistics sector in developing areas.

Practical Implications

Sabah's logistics companies should concentrate on:

- i. Employee Training: Improve soft skills, empathy and communication skills to improve assurance and interpersonal service.
- ii. Customer Engagement: Use proactive communication tools like live parcel tracking and timely customer support.
- iii. Transparency and Trust: Keep customers informed about the services, be professional, and have a clear process for dealing with issues.
- iv. Even if a company has a poor infrastructure, if they manage emotional and relational aspects they will be more satisfied and more loyal to the brand.

Limitations and Future Research

This study only targeted e-commerce users in the state of Sabah and not other stakeholders such as logistics providers and rural communities. The study could be expanded in the future with a comparative study between East and West Malaysia or by incorporating mediating variables such as perceived value and trust to enhance the theoretical framework.

Conclusion

In this study, it concludes that the customer satisfaction in Sabah's e-commerce logistics sector is primarily driven by assurance and empathy dimensions that foster trust and interpersonal connection. Tangibility, reliability, and responsiveness, though important, play secondary roles in shaping satisfaction. The findings suggest that relational aspects of service quality, particularly assurance and empathy are playing a significant role in influencing customer satisfaction within the Sabah e-commerce logistics context. These results highlight the need for logistics providers to complement operational improvements with customer-focused practices that strengthen trust, confidence, and personalised service experiences. Furthermore, the model demonstrated substantial predictive capability which explained that 61.0% of the variance in customer satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.610$), thereby supporting the relevance of SERVQUAL as a useful framework for understanding customer evaluations of e-commerce logistics services in Sabah.

Logistics service quality assessment should also shift towards a performance-based model. The SERVPERF principles can be adopted by logistics firms for evaluating service quality from the perspective of actual service execution (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). A performance driven approach enables logistics firm to monitor real time service efficiency to assure delivery accuracy and service commitments consistent with the operational capability.

A hybrid approach combining SERVPERF and LSQ would finally constitute an overall service quality assessment framework for logistics. SERVPERF ensures that evaluations are based on the performance instead of subjective expectations and LSQ captures industry specific dimensions like order fulfilment accuracy, shipment tracking, among others (Mentzer *et al.*, 2001). The integration of these models will give logistics firms a more precise and practical service quality measurement tool to deal with the changing customer expectations in e-commerce logistics.

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- Author Contribution Statement:** Nur Faizilah Rizal¹ was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of the results, as well as the initial drafting of the manuscript. Sidah Idris² contributed to the supervision, conceptual development, critical review, and revision of the manuscript. Chew Tze Cheng³ contributed to the literature review, interpretation of findings, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript and have read and approved the final version prior to submission to the *International Journal of Modern Education (IJMOE)*.
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