CUSTOMER EVALUATION OF REVERSE LOGISTICS ON E-COMMERCE PLATFORMS IN VIETNAM

PhD. Tran Thi Thu Huong* - MSc. Nguyen Thi Hong Ha*
Vu Thi Phuong Lam - Lo Thi Kim*****

Abstract: ***The e-commerce sector is experiencing significant growth in Vietnam. However, customers face difficulties in returning products, which affects the customer experience. Retailers and e-commerce platforms face internal and external operational issues. This study, analysing 309 consumer surveys, using comparative, statistical, and descriptive methods, evaluated reverse logistics in terms of return time, policy, costs, service, and exchange products. The findings aim to inform better return policies that enhance customer satisfaction and support sustainable online shopping.***

• Keywords: *reverse logistics, e-commerce, Vietnam.*

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1. Introduction

The digital economy is a phenomenon of increasing importance for nations, given estimates of double-digit annual growth worldwide (WEF 2015). Vietnam's digital economy is projected to grow 20% annually from 2023–2025 and 17% from 2025–2030. E-commerce leads the sector, making up 56% of the digital economy in 2023, equivalent to USD 24 billion, and is expected to reach USD 60 billion by 2030. Although the recent technological innovations have made it easier for e-commerce, according to a survey by Statista in 2022, 33% of respondents still feel less than satisfied with the online shopping experience in Vietnam. Therefore, the demand for improving the shopping experience needs to be addressed. Notably, in a survey of the Southeast Asian market published by McKinsey, 83% of 600 respondents responded that they would increase the order value by at least 30% if the seller made the return process easy and smooth. However, each business must face conflicts and trade-offs, especially with issues of cost and reverse logistics management in order to build a complete return policy. Therefore, reverse logistics plays an important role in increasing customer satisfaction as well as optimising profits and minimising operational costs.

Most reverse logistics research has centred on developed markets like the United States or Europe, with limited insight from developing countries such as Vietnam. The study, thereby, examines key customer concerns during returns and exchanges. It then evaluates these criteria to help businesses design effective return policies and manage reverse logistics to enhance customer satisfaction.

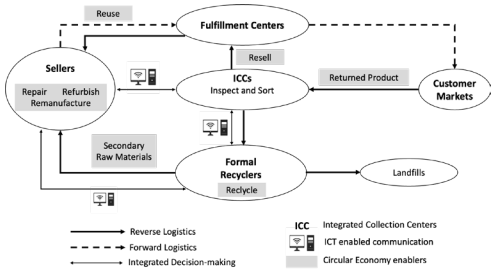
2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of reverse logistics in e-commerce

Since the early 19th century, scholars have recognised the reverse flow of goods as a business-related activity with societal impact. Guiltinan and Nwokoye (1975) introduced the terms "reverse flow" and "reverse channel" to highlight opportunities for reuse and recycling. By the 1980s, reverse logistics was understood as the movement of damaged goods counter to the traditional supply chain direction.

In the digital era, reverse logistics is vital for e-commerce. Its main goal is to maximise the value of returned items. Wang et al. (2017) describe it as encompassing return and exchange processes, often triggered by defects, maintenance needs, or shifts in consumer preferences. Some returned products may simply require repackaging or repair. Chinda (2017) further divides it into recovery, remanufacturing, reprocessing, and waste treatment. Figure 1 illustrates the reverse logistics process in e-commerce, based on Nanayakkara et al. (2022).

Figure 1. Reverse logistics model in e-commerce



Source: Based on the research of Nanayakkara et al., 2022

The model shows the return process where goods are inspected at a collection centre, then directed to a fulfilment or recycling centre. Items meeting quality standards may be resold, while others go to sellers for reuse or recycling. Recyclers may recover materials or discard waste. With

* *Thuongmai University*
** *Temas Engineering Joint Stock Company*
*** *AVC Logistics Co., Ltd*

high e-commerce volumes, businesses rely on technology to operate these activities.

2.2. Criteria for evaluating reverse logistics on e-commerce platforms

According to Retzlaff-Roberts and Frolick (1995), *Return time* is the period from the time the business receives a return request until the retailer gives a replacement product to the customer or when the e-commerce platform finishes the refund for customers. Somuyiwa and Adebayo (2014) note that quick and easy returns affect customer satisfaction. Sciarrotta (2003) suggests standardised return times improve responsiveness. Adabayo (2022) confirms that refund time and return policy directly influence performance and satisfaction, urging businesses to clearly communicate these timelines. In summary, *Return time* will be measured through the following observations: (1) Responding time to return requests, (2) Accepting time to return requests, (3) Return preparation time, (4) Return shipping time, and (5) Refund time.

Adebayo (2022) comments that it is recommended to set up a *Return policy* to ensure a better response to reverse logistics activities. The return policy needs to be clear, easy to understand and transparent. Customers return items for various reasons such as defects, poor quality, or unmet expectations (Bernon et al., 2011). Genchev (2007) emphasises that policies must also address exceptional cases, such as unresolved disputes or delayed seller responses. Therefore, the *Return policy* is evaluated through the following criteria: (1) A clear, easy to understand, and transparent refund policy (2) A refund policy applied to the customer in case the seller does not respond within the timeframe, (3) The e-commerce platform's responsibility to resolve in case of a dispute between the buyer and the seller, and (4) Platform's tools to analyse data to make decisions.

Mohamed et al. (2015) suggest that cost is the most important factor among the surveyed factors that determine customer satisfaction. *Return costs* are of special interest to customers and require an official announcement so that customers can consider and make a decision to return the product (Massey, 2018). Furthermore, the return shipping may not be free, so customers will have an increased cost burden (Zumbach, 2016). Therefore, customers evaluate *Return costs* through the following criteria: (1) Additional shipping costs to return, (2) Depreciated costs for customers, and (3) An amount paid lower than the product purchase amount.

Product return experience or *Return service* can influence how customers feel about the service they receive (Ogunleye, 2013). Therefore, companies need to focus on customer touchpoints such as customer support, like listening and answering questions promptly for customers and sellers. Customer service adds value by boosting satisfaction. Businesses should partner with reliable shippers and integrate top tech firms like payment providers. Strong links with logistics and payment partners, along with seller flexibility in returns, are key to service quality. Updating return status promptly also improves platform responsiveness (Sciarrotta, 2003). *Return service* is evaluated through the following criteria: (1) Answering questions promptly, (2) Updating order status during the exchange process, (3) Customer support behaviours, (4) Many payment and shipping parties linked on platforms, and (5) Supporting exchange products immediate via couriers when customer returns happen.

In addition to the service quality, the quality of the exchange product also influences customer satisfaction (Zeithaml et al., 2018). The study conducts a survey of customer reviews on *Exchange products* through the following criteria: (1) Correct quantity of products, (2) Correct quality of products and (3) Carefully packed products.

Based on an overview of previous research works, research is conducted to measure customer evaluation of reverse logistics on e-commerce platforms in Vietnam on aspects including Return time (RT), Return policy (RP), Cost Returns (CR), Customer Service (CS) and Exchange Products (EP). Table 1 illustrates in detail the evaluation criteria and observations.

Table 1: The customer's evaluation criteria and observations of reverse logistics

Encryption	Evaluation criteria and observations	Sources
RT	**Return time**	Retzlaff-Roberts and Frolick (1995); Sciarrotta (2003); Somuyiwa and Adebayo (2014); Adabayo (2022)
RT1	Responding time to return requests;	
RT2	Accepting time to return requests;	
RT3	Return preparation time;	
RT4	Return shipping time;	
RT5	Refund time.	
RP	**Return policy**	Genchev (2007); Bernon et al.,(2011); Adabayo (2022)
RP1	A clear, easy to understand, and transparent refund policy;	
RP2	A refund policy applied to the customer in case the seller does not respond within the timeframe;	
RP3	The e-commerce platform's responsibility to resolve in case of a dispute between the buyer and the seller;	
RP4	Platform's tools to analyse data to make decisions when disputes happen.	
RC	**Return costs**	Mohamed et al., (2015); Zumbach (2016); Massey (2018)
RC1	Additional shipping costs to return;	
RC2	Paying depreciated costs for customers;	
RC3	Accepting an amount paid lower than the product purchase amount.	
RS	**Return service**	Sciarrotta (2003); Ogunleye (2013)
RS1	Answering questions promptly;	
RS2	Updating order status during the exchange process	
RS3	Customer support behaviors;	
RS4	Many payment and shipping parties linked on platforms;	
RS5	Supporting exchange products immediate via couriers when customer returns happen.	
EP	**Exchange products**	Zeithaml et al., (2018)
EP1	Correct quantity of products;	
EP2	Correct quality of products;	
EP3	Carefully packed products.	

Source: Author's research results

3. Research methodology

The study uses both secondary and primary data. Secondary data is collected from academic journals, reports, and publications related to reverse logistics in e-commerce in Vietnam. Expert discussions are conducted with two lecturers and two business managers operating on e-commerce platforms to refine the evaluation criteria

for the survey. Based on a review of documents and discussion with experts, the study has identified indicators to measure and evaluate reverse logistics activities of Vietnamese e-commerce platforms.

Primary data are collected through an online survey distributed via social media platforms (Facebook, Zalo, Instagram, and Messenger). The questionnaire is built using Google Forms with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). A total of 350 surveys are distributed nationwide, and 309 valid responses are received (88% response rate). Respondents are qualified if they (1) had shopped on Vietnamese e-commerce platforms and (2) had experienced at least one return or refund. Data collection occurs between December 2022 and January 2023, and the data are analysed using Microsoft Excel with comparative and descriptive statistics.

4. Research findings

Based on 309 valid responses, the study evaluated customer satisfaction with reverse logistics on Vietnamese e-commerce platforms across five criteria.

Return time

Return time is highly significant as responding time to return requests, accepting time to return requests, return preparation time and return shipping time all make up the total return time from the time customers intend to return to the time they receive the returned goods or refund, thereby directly affecting the customer's perception.

Survey results show 61% of customers are very satisfied when they receive information and goods quickly. With average scores from 3.73 to 3.8, return time strongly influences satisfaction, especially (2) Accepting time to return requests, which has the highest impact in Table 2, as it confirms the request and initiates the process. (3) Preparation, (4) Shipping, and (5) Refund times all average around 3.75, while (1) Responding time is seen as the least important.

Return policy

Return policy is highly important to customers, with 64% agreeing or strongly agreeing on its role in evaluating reverse logistics. Table 2 shows all factors score close to 4 (agree), ranging from 3.73 to 3.87. The highest-rated factor is (2) A refund policy applied to the customer in case the seller does not respond within the timeframe (average 3.87), reflecting customer expectations for guaranteed refunds. (1) A clear, transparent refund policy ranks second, at 3.78. (3) The e-commerce platform's responsibility to resolve in case of a dispute between the buyer and the seller and (4) Platform's tools to analyse data to make decisions when disputes happen, follow with scores of 3.77 and 3.74, respectively, indicating slightly lower importance.

Return costs

Return cost is a major concern in online shopping, as customers typically don't expect extra fees at checkout. However, over 45% are willing to accept costs like return shipping, depreciation, or receiving a reduced refund. Average scores range from 3.15 to 3.26, showing a relatively high acceptance level. Both (1) Additional shipping costs to return and (3) Accepting an amount paid lower than the product purchase amount, score around 3.25, while (2) Paying depreciated costs for customers is the least significant factor.

Return service

Survey results show 67% of customers feel satisfied or very satisfied when return service elements are fulfilled. Table 2 shows all factors score close to 4, indicating high impact. (2) Updating order status during the exchange process (4) Many payment and shipping parties linked on platforms score 3.80. (3) Customer support behaviors and (5) Supporting exchange products immediately via couriers when customer returns happen, score 3.77, while (1) Answering questions promptly has the least impact.

Exchange products

The top concern for e-commerce customers is whether the received product meets expectations. When returning and exchanging items, most are willing to wait longer or pay extra to get the right product. Survey results show nearly 70% are satisfied or very satisfied when post-return products meet expectations. Table 2 indicates that (2) correct quality (3.86) and (3) correct quantity (3.84) are the biggest concerns, while (1) careful packing products has the least impact on satisfaction.

Table 2 shows that all criteria except return costs score above 3.5. Exchange products rank highest (3.84), highlighting customer focus on quality, quantity, and packaging after exchanges sellers must avoid disappointing customers twice. Return costs score lowest at 3.22, suggesting customers are willing to pay extra. Return time (3.76), return policy (3.79), and return service (3.78) show similar levels of importance.

Table 2: Average score of evaluation criteria surveyed

Name	Mean	Rank	Overall mean	Overall rank
Return Time				
RT1	3.74	2	3.76	3
RT2	3.80	1		
RT3	3.75	3		
RT4	3.75	3		
RT5	3.75	3		
Return Policy				
RP1	3.78	2	3.79	2
RP2	3.86	1		
RP3	3.77	3		
RP4	3,73	4		
Return Costs				
RC1	3.25	1	3.22	4
RC2	3.16	2		
RC3	3.25	1		
Return Service				
RS1	3.70	4	3.22	4
RS2	3.83	1		
RS3	3.77	3		
RS4	3.80	2		
RS5	3.77	3		
Exchange Products				
EP1	3.84	2	3.84	1
EP2	3.86	1		
EP3	3.81	3		

Source: Authors research results

5. Discussion and implications

5.1. Prospects and trends of e-commerce in Vietnam from now until 2030

According to JP Morgan (2021), Vietnam is leading global e-commerce growth, driven by a rising middle class and a young population, with an average age of 31.9. Over one-third of technology users are under 24 (WPL, 2021). The e-commerce sector is forecast to grow by 20% annually from 2024 to 2025, increasing in value from USD 24 billion to USD 60 billion by 2030. Per capita online spending is expected to rise from USD 381 in 2021 to USD 671 by 2025. Key trends shaping Vietnam's e-commerce landscape include the rapid growth of cashless payments, supported by high internet and smartphone penetration (both over 71%), and strong government and private investment. By 2024, mobile devices will account for 61% of online transactions, while banking transactions may reach 32%. "Buy now, pay later" services are also gaining traction, growing at 36.5% annually. Cross-border e-commerce is expanding, currently making up 38% of transactions, with popular markets including the US, China, and Japan. This competition is pushing local businesses to improve product quality and logistics efficiency. Meanwhile, the legal framework is evolving to enhance consumer protection and transparency. Regulations such as Decree 85/2021 and Directive 18/CT-TTg require sellers to provide clear product descriptions and contribute to stronger tax enforcement, with tax revenues reaching 83 trillion VND in 2022 and 97 trillion VND in 2023 (General Department of Taxation, 2024). Looking ahead, Vietnam may adopt policies similar to the EU, requiring easy returns and guaranteed refunds. By 2030, e-commerce is expected to become the main form of commerce in Vietnam. This shift will require businesses to enhance their competitiveness, especially in logistics, which directly shapes the customer experience. As e-commerce platforms increasingly invest in their own logistics and rely on third-party providers, the efficiency of reverse logistics will become a major competitive advantage.

5.2. Recommendations to improve customer satisfaction with reverse logistics activities of e-commerce platforms in Vietnam

Based on the research findings, several recommendations are proposed to enhance customer satisfaction with reverse logistics on Vietnam's e-commerce platforms. To reduce return time, platforms should establish clear return and exchange policies and communicate them to customers. Implementing e-wallets can accelerate refunds, while partnering with specialised return logistics providers can optimise return shipping. Returned items should be stored separately to ease classification and reduce processing time. Additionally, platforms should improve response speed by enhancing their customer service teams and censorship systems. To improve return policies, platforms must set clear response deadlines for sellers, guarantee refunds when sellers fail to respond, and conduct regular market research to revise policies accordingly. In unresolved disputes, platforms should make decisions based on transaction history to ensure fairness. To lower return costs, platforms should integrate forward and reverse logistics by using shared transport resources and storage facilities to reduce extra charges for customers. Developing return standards with logistics partners also minimises product depreciation and ensures customers receive higher refund values. In terms of return services, features like chat bubbles can enhance communication during return processes, and IT systems should be upgraded to increase cybersecurity and handle high traffic during peak periods. For exchange products, platforms should penalise sellers with high second-return rates. Exchange-for-return options can also be introduced, provided terms are clearly defined. Finally, promoting recyclable packaging not only improves reverse logistics efficiency but also protects product quality during transportation.

6. Conclusion: This study aims to comprehensively evaluate reverse logistics on Vietnamese e-commerce platforms. The research findings show that customers' highest evaluation is for the criteria of exchange product and their evaluation is gradually lower in the criteria of return policy, return time, return costs and return service. Although the evaluation criteria are based on credible sources, the survey is limited to large cities, reducing the national representativeness. In addition, due to limited resources, limited expert consultations were conducted, which may have missed aspects such as environmental and social impacts. Future research can expand the evaluation criteria and survey a wider respondent base.

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