

Journal of

Business and Strategic Management

(JBSM)

The Relationship between Supply Chain Transparency and Customer Trust
in E-Commerce: Evidence from China



The Relationship between Supply Chain Transparency and Customer Trust in E-Commerce: Evidence from China

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article was to analyze the relationship between supply chain transparency and customer trust in e-commerce: evidence from China.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: The study found that supply chain transparency positively impacts customer trust in e-commerce in China. When businesses shared information about sourcing, production, and ethical practices, customer trust and loyalty increased. The findings suggest that greater transparency boosts brand credibility and customer satisfaction, recommending that e-commerce companies prioritize transparency to strengthen consumer relationships and gain a competitive edge.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Signaling theory, trust theory & the theory of planned behavior may be used to anchor future studies on the relationship between supply chain transparency and customer trust in e-commerce: evidence from China. E-commerce companies in China should invest in implementing transparent supply chain practices, such as providing clear information about product origins, sustainability practices, and delivery processes. Policymakers in China should consider developing and enforcing regulations that mandate transparency in supply chains, particularly in e-commerce platforms.

Keywords: *Supply Chain Transparency, Customer Trust*

INTRODUCTION

Customer trust refers to the belief that a business or brand will deliver on its promises, providing reliable products or services while ensuring a high level of customer satisfaction. In developed economies such as the USA, customer trust has become a key factor in driving consumer behavior, particularly in the digital age. For example, a 2020 study by Morgan (2020) found that 80% of consumers in the USA are more likely to purchase from brands they trust, with reliability and transparency cited as the top factors influencing this trust. In the UK, customer trust in financial services has also been shown to have a significant impact on consumer decisions. According to a 2021 survey, 70% of UK customers said they would choose a bank with a reputation for transparency and security, underscoring the importance of trust in financial transactions (Jones & Taylor, 2021). These examples highlight that in developed economies, customer trust is often linked to transparency, product reliability, and consistent service delivery, all of which influence customer satisfaction and loyalty.

In the United States, for instance, trust in companies is often tied to transparency, product quality, and customer service. According to a 2021 survey by Edelman, 76% of American consumers stated that they would prefer to engage with brands they trust, especially in industries like technology and healthcare (Edelman, 2021). In Japan, customer trust is closely related to the reputation and long-standing history of a brand, with many consumers showing strong loyalty to companies with a well-established track record of reliability. A 2019 study by Suzuki and Hattori found that 70% of Japanese consumers would remain loyal to brands that demonstrated trustworthiness through consistent quality and customer service (Suzuki & Hattori, 2019). These examples emphasize that in developed economies, customer trust is often built on a foundation of consistent product quality, customer service excellence, and a company's ability to maintain transparency with its customers.

In developing economies, customer trust is also essential but may be shaped by different cultural and economic factors. In countries like India, customer trust has increasingly been influenced by the growing use of digital platforms for services such as e-commerce and online banking. A 2020 study revealed that 65% of Indian consumers reported a higher level of trust in online platforms that offered secure payment systems and customer support (Sharma & Garg, 2020). Similarly, in Brazil, customer satisfaction has been linked to brands' ability to provide personalized services. According to a survey conducted in 2021, 60% of Brazilian consumers stated they would remain loyal to companies that effectively engage with their needs and respond to inquiries promptly, reflecting a trust-based relationship with businesses (Costa & Almeida, 2021). These trends suggest that in developing economies, trust in businesses is often fostered through the provision of secure, responsive services that cater to customer needs, particularly in online spaces.

In South Africa, customer trust in online retailers has grown steadily, driven by the increasing adoption of e-commerce and digital payment methods. A 2020 study by Venter and Kruger found that 64% of South African consumers trusted online platforms that provided secure payment gateways and reliable delivery services (Venter & Kruger, 2020). Similarly, in Mexico, customer satisfaction and trust in businesses are heavily influenced by the personalized services offered by brands. A 2021 report indicated that 61% of Mexican consumers expressed high levels of satisfaction with companies that catered to their needs through tailored communication and responsive customer service (Martínez & Ríos, 2021). In these developing economies, trust is built

through secure, personalized, and responsive services, particularly in digital and e-commerce platforms.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, customer trust is still developing, with trust in businesses often impacted by the region's economic instability and access to technology. In Kenya, for instance, customer trust has been a crucial factor in the success of mobile money services such as M-Pesa. A 2021 study found that 72% of Kenyan consumers trust mobile payment systems, with security and reliability being the primary reasons for their trust (Ngugi & Kiiru, 2021). Similarly, in Nigeria, customer satisfaction is closely linked to trust in businesses' ability to deliver quality services despite challenges in the local market. According to a 2020 report, Nigerian consumers expressed a 65% higher level of satisfaction with brands that were perceived as transparent and consistent in their product offerings (Ogunleye & Aluko, 2020). These examples from Sub-Saharan Africa show that customer trust is critical in shaping consumer behavior, with security, reliability, and transparency playing key roles in building long-term customer relationships.

In Nigeria, customer trust is essential for businesses operating in sectors like mobile money and e-commerce. According to a 2021 study by Adeyemo and Olatunji, 75% of Nigerian consumers trusted mobile payment systems like PayPal and M-Pesa, primarily due to the security features and transparency these services provide (Adeyemo & Olatunji, 2021). Similarly, in Ghana, trust in businesses is closely linked to their ability to maintain transparency and ensure the reliability of their products and services. A 2020 survey by Appiah and Frimpong found that 69% of Ghanaians were willing to engage with businesses they trusted, particularly those offering quality goods and transparent policies on product sourcing (Appiah & Frimpong, 2020). These trends in Sub-Saharan Africa show that building customer trust involves focusing on transparency, security, and reliability, especially in the context of new technologies and digital services.

Supply chain transparency refers to the extent to which companies disclose information regarding their sourcing practices, production processes, and the movement of goods across the supply chain. Transparency in supply chains can enhance customer trust by providing visibility into how products are sourced, produced, and distributed. Consumers increasingly value brands that are open about the ethical and environmental aspects of their supply chains, with a strong emphasis on sustainable sourcing and fair labor practices. For instance, companies that share information about raw material sourcing, factory conditions, and product lifecycle can build a stronger connection with ethically-minded customers. Research has shown that when customers have access to this level of information, their trust in the brand and product reliability is often enhanced (Martínez-Ruiz, 2017). Therefore, transparency is not only a business strategy but also a way to foster long-term customer loyalty and satisfaction.

The visibility of product sourcing and production processes plays a crucial role in shaping customer trust. First, when companies disclose where and how products are made, it signals accountability and openness, which can increase perceived reliability (Liao, 2020). Second, transparency enables consumers to make informed decisions based on their values, such as choosing products that align with their sustainability preferences, thus boosting satisfaction (Choi & Lee, 2020). Third, by ensuring supply chain integrity, transparency helps reduce the risk of product defects or unethical practices, leading to increased trust in the brand. Fourth, transparency about production processes allows companies to demonstrate compliance with industry standards, reinforcing customer confidence. In conclusion, clear communication about supply chain practices

helps to build long-term relationships between businesses and customers, fostering both trust and satisfaction (Bai & Sarkis, 2021).

Problem Statement

In recent years, e-commerce has become a cornerstone of global trade, with customer trust playing a critical role in the success of online businesses. One of the key factors influencing customer trust is the level of transparency within the supply chain. However, in China, where e-commerce has seen explosive growth, the relationship between supply chain transparency and customer trust remains underexplored. Despite the increasing demand for greater visibility into the sourcing, production, and distribution of products, many Chinese e-commerce companies continue to face challenges in ensuring transparency (Zhao & Liu, 2021). These challenges include issues related to counterfeit products, environmental impact, and unethical labor practices, which erode consumer confidence. Previous studies suggest that customers are more likely to trust e-commerce platforms that provide transparent information about their supply chain operations (Zhu, 2019), but there is limited empirical research examining how supply chain transparency specifically affects customer trust in the context of China's rapidly growing e-commerce sector. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the relationship between supply chain transparency and customer trust in Chinese e-commerce, exploring how various dimensions of transparency, such as product origin, labor practices, and sustainability efforts, influence consumer perceptions and purchasing behavior.

Theoretical Review

Signaling Theory

Signaling theory focuses on how one party (the sender) conveys information to another party (the receiver) to reduce uncertainty in decision-making. In the context of e-commerce, supply chain transparency can be seen as a signal to customers about the authenticity, quality, and ethical standards of a business. By revealing clear and accessible information about sourcing, production, and logistics, companies can signal to customers that they are trustworthy and committed to quality. This can strengthen customer trust, which is particularly important in the competitive e-commerce market in China. Signaling theory is relevant because it helps explain how transparency serves as a strategic communication tool to influence customer perceptions and build trust in an online environment (Connelly et al., 2018).

Trust Theory

Trust theory emphasizes the importance of trust in relationships between parties and its effect on behavior and decision-making. In the context of e-commerce in China, trust theory suggests that the level of transparency in a company's supply chain influences the trust customers place in that company. When customers can verify a company's supply chain practices, such as fair labor, sustainable sourcing, and product quality, they are more likely to trust the company, thus enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty. This theory is particularly relevant in e-commerce, where customers cannot physically inspect products and rely heavily on information provided by the company (Mayer et al., 1995).

The Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) suggests that behavior is driven by intentions, which are influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In the context of e-commerce, customers' trust in a company's transparent supply chain can shape their attitudes toward purchasing decisions, especially in the Chinese market where consumer preferences are increasingly shaped by ethical considerations. TPB helps explain how supply chain transparency can affect customers' behavioral intentions, such as their likelihood of purchasing from an e-commerce platform based on their trust in the company's practices. This theory is significant in understanding how transparency can shape consumer attitudes and behaviors in an online environment (Ajzen, 1991).

Empirical Review

Wang and Zhang (2020) examined how supply chain transparency influences consumer trust in e-commerce platforms. The study utilized survey data from 500 Chinese e-commerce consumers and found that consumers who had access to information about product sourcing, delivery processes, and supplier relationships were more likely to trust the platform. This transparency not only increased customer trust but also positively impacted purchase intentions. Based on their findings, the authors recommended that e-commerce businesses actively disclose supply chain information, particularly about product origins and delivery practices, as it helps build trust and encourages consumer confidence. This is especially critical in China, where e-commerce is highly competitive, and consumers are increasingly demanding transparency in online transactions. Their study suggests that platforms that offer clear, verifiable supply chain information can foster long-term customer loyalty.

Li and Liu (2019) explored how digital tools, particularly blockchain technology, enhance supply chain transparency in the context of e-commerce. Using a mixed-method approach combining interviews with industry experts and consumer surveys, they found that e-commerce companies that use blockchain to ensure product traceability had higher levels of customer trust. This was particularly important for Chinese consumers, who expressed concerns about product authenticity and safety. The study revealed that transparency enabled by blockchain technology allowed consumers to trace the entire supply chain from product origin to delivery, enhancing their confidence in the purchase process. Based on their findings, the authors recommended that e-commerce businesses integrate blockchain or similar technologies to boost consumer trust, particularly for high-value goods or items with quality concerns. They also suggested that these technologies should be marketed as part of a brand's value proposition, offering customers peace of mind regarding the authenticity and quality of the products they are purchasing.

Wang (2021) examined the influence of transparency in sustainability practices on customer trust in Chinese online retailers. They surveyed 400 consumers and found that when e-commerce platforms provided clear information regarding their environmental and ethical practices, customers were more likely to trust these platforms. The study highlighted that customers were particularly concerned about the environmental impact of their purchases, with transparency in sustainability practices leading to increased loyalty and repeat purchases. The research showed that consumers, particularly in China, are becoming more conscious of sustainability and prefer to engage with businesses that share their values. As a result, the authors recommended that e-

commerce platforms make their sustainability efforts more visible through clear communication on product sourcing, environmental impact, and ethical production practices. This recommendation is significant for e-commerce businesses aiming to build long-term customer trust and attract socially conscious consumers in the competitive Chinese market.

Chen and Xu (2018) focused on transparency in product quality and safety and how it influences customer trust in Chinese online grocery stores. Their study found that when e-commerce platforms were transparent about the sourcing, quality control, and safety standards of their products, customer trust increased, leading to greater satisfaction and repeat business. This was particularly important for consumers in the grocery sector, where product safety is a key concern. The research indicated that consumers in China were more likely to purchase from e-commerce platforms that provided detailed information about the product's quality and origin, as well as certification and inspection processes. The authors recommended that e-commerce platforms in China invest in transparent supply chain practices, particularly in the food and beverage sector, to improve customer trust and drive loyalty. Their findings emphasize that building trust through transparency is critical in a market where concerns about food safety and authenticity are paramount.

Zhang and Li (2021) explored how transparency in luxury goods e-commerce influences consumer trust in China. They surveyed 500 consumers and found that transparency regarding product authenticity, sourcing, and pricing significantly boosted customer trust in luxury brands sold online. The study highlighted that Chinese consumers are particularly cautious when purchasing high-end products online, often questioning the authenticity and quality of the goods. Transparency about the origin of the product and clear information about the brand's sourcing practices reassured consumers and fostered trust. The authors recommended that luxury e-commerce platforms in China should prioritize transparency in their marketing and sales practices, offering detailed background information about the products they sell. This approach helps overcome the skepticism that many Chinese consumers have toward online luxury goods and enhances their willingness to purchase these products.

Zhou (2017) conducted a study on cross-border e-commerce platforms in China, focusing on how transparency in delivery logistics impacts customer trust. The study surveyed 300 consumers and found that platforms providing real-time tracking information and clear delivery timelines had higher levels of customer trust. This was particularly relevant for Chinese consumers engaged in cross-border e-commerce, where delivery delays and uncertainties about customs clearance were major concerns. The study showed that transparency in delivery logistics increased consumers' confidence in the e-commerce platform, leading to higher satisfaction and repeated purchases. The authors recommended that e-commerce platforms improve the transparency of their logistics processes by offering accurate and timely tracking information, as well as clear communication regarding delivery dates and potential delays. Their findings suggest that in a cross-border e-commerce context, transparency in delivery logistics is a critical factor in building trust and ensuring positive customer experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably

because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Research Gaps: While several studies have explored the relationship between supply chain transparency and customer trust in Chinese e-commerce platforms, there remains a conceptual gap in understanding how different aspects of transparency such as product sourcing, environmental practices, and logistics interact to influence customer trust holistically. Existing research focuses on isolated factors like product authenticity, safety, or sustainability practices but lacks a comprehensive framework that integrates these various elements into a single model of supply chain transparency (Wang & Zhang, 2020). Additionally, most studies assume that transparency leads directly to trust without exploring potential moderating factors such as consumer knowledge or past experiences with e-commerce platforms (Zhang & Li, 2021). There is also limited exploration of how transparency influences other dimensions of customer behavior beyond trust, such as consumer loyalty, repeat purchases, and word-of-mouth recommendations (Li & Liu, 2019). A conceptual framework that combines these aspects of transparency and customer trust could provide a deeper understanding of the causal relationships between them, guiding more effective e-commerce strategies (Wang, 2021).

Contextual Research Gaps: Although the studies focus on China, a significant contextual gap exists in examining how supply chain transparency affects customer trust across different sectors within the e-commerce landscape. Most research has concentrated on high-value goods like luxury products (Zhang & Li, 2021) and groceries (Chen & Xu, 2018), but the effects of transparency on customer trust in other e-commerce sectors, such as electronics or fashion, remain under-explored (Wang & Zhang, 2020). Furthermore, while sustainability and product safety transparency are seen as critical in building trust in China, there is limited research on how these factors resonate in different demographic groups, such as younger versus older consumers or rural versus urban populations (Wang, 2021). Understanding the contextual nuances of how transparency impacts trust across various sectors and consumer demographics would provide more tailored recommendations for e-commerce businesses aiming to build trust in different market segments (Zhang & Li, 2021).

Geographical Research Gaps: A geographical gap exists in the literature, as studies predominantly focus on China, which is a unique market with particular cultural and economic conditions. While the findings from China are highly relevant to the local e-commerce ecosystem, there is a need for comparative studies that examine how supply chain transparency impacts customer trust in e-commerce platforms in other countries with different regulatory environments, consumer behaviors, and market conditions (Li & Liu, 2019). Research comparing China with countries in other regions, such as the United States or Europe, would provide a broader understanding of the universal and culturally specific elements of trust in e-commerce (Zhou, 2017). Additionally, studies in emerging e-commerce markets, such as Southeast Asia or Africa, where supply chain transparency may be less established, could provide insights into how these markets perceive and

respond to transparency in contrast to more developed economies like China (Wang, 2021). This would contribute to global best practices in supply chain transparency for e-commerce platforms (Chen & Xu, 2018).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant relationship between supply chain transparency and customer trust in e-commerce, with evidence from China demonstrating that transparency in the supply chain positively influences customer confidence and satisfaction. As e-commerce continues to grow, especially in emerging markets like China, consumers are increasingly prioritizing transparency regarding product sourcing, production processes, and delivery practices. The findings reveal that when e-commerce businesses provide clear, accessible information about their supply chains, customers are more likely to trust the brand and engage in repeat purchases. Moreover, supply chain transparency enhances the perception of product authenticity and quality, which are critical factors in influencing purchasing decisions. Therefore, e-commerce companies should invest in improving transparency by sharing detailed information about their supply chain practices to foster stronger customer relationships and improve brand loyalty. As the competition in the e-commerce sector intensifies, fostering customer trust through transparent supply chain management will likely become a key differentiator for success in the market.

Recommendations

Theory

The relationship between supply chain transparency and customer trust in e-commerce in China can be further theorized by examining the underlying dimensions of transparency, such as information sharing, traceability, and ethical sourcing. While existing theories mainly focus on transparency as a monolithic construct, future research should disaggregate these dimensions to understand how each contributes differently to customer trust and purchasing behavior. This will refine the theoretical framework of transparency in supply chains and its role in shaping consumer confidence and loyalty. A key theoretical gap exists in integrating trust theories with the technology acceptance model (TAM) to explore how e-commerce platforms' transparency impacts customers' trust in digital systems. This would bridge the understanding of how trust in the supply chain intersects with technological trust, highlighting the role of transparent digital processes and their influence on customer decisions. By doing so, the theory can provide a more robust model for understanding consumer behavior in the e-commerce context, especially in a technologically advanced and digitally complex environment like China (Gefen, 2000).

Practice

E-commerce companies in China should invest in implementing transparent supply chain practices, such as providing clear information about product origins, sustainability practices, and delivery processes. This can build consumer trust by allowing customers to make informed decisions based on the integrity of the supply chain. Transparency initiatives, such as real-time tracking, environmental impact reports, and direct communication about sourcing and manufacturing processes, can improve customer loyalty and satisfaction. E-commerce companies should consider integrating blockchain technology to enhance the transparency and traceability of

their supply chains. Blockchain can offer customers verifiable, immutable data about product origins and manufacturing processes, which could significantly increase trust. This could also mitigate potential concerns about counterfeit products, ethical sourcing, and environmental sustainability, all of which are critical factors for Chinese consumers. E-commerce platforms could use this technology as a competitive advantage in an increasingly skeptical and informed consumer market.

Policy

Policymakers in China should consider developing and enforcing regulations that mandate transparency in supply chains, particularly in e-commerce platforms. Such regulations would require e-commerce companies to disclose more information about their supply chains, including environmental impact, working conditions, and sourcing practices. Clear policy frameworks would not only improve customer trust but also align the e-commerce sector with global standards for ethical business practices. Governments and regulatory bodies should initiate campaigns to educate consumers on the importance of supply chain transparency and how it affects trust in e-commerce. Such initiatives would empower consumers to make more informed choices and encourage e-commerce businesses to adopt transparent practices. By fostering a deeper understanding of supply chain dynamics, policy interventions could shift consumer behavior towards prioritizing transparency in their purchasing decisions, ultimately driving e-commerce companies to improve their practices.

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