



Third Party Logistics and Customer Service of Online Shopping Firms in Rivers State

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Abstract: *This study examined the relationship between third party logistics and customer service of online shopping firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. This study adopted an explanatory survey research design and correlation investigation to establish relationship between third party logistics and customer service of online shopping firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. The target population for this study was 16 (Sixteen) online shopping firms whose offices are domiciled in Rivers State; and a sample of 64 respondents were drawn from the management cadre of the firms under study. A self-administered structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data and the data obtained were accordingly analyzed using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation. The result revealed that there is significant and positive relationship third party logistics and customer service of online shopping firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. Based on the findings of this study, the paper concludes that a positive and significant relationship exists between third party logistics and customer service. It therefore, recommends that it would be appropriate for management of online shopping firms in Rivers State to adopt third party logistics for improving customer service.*

Key words: *Third Party Logistics, Customer Service, Reliability, Assurance*

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, logistics has tremendously evolved from a simple activity that moves goods from the shipper to a consignee to include the process of planning, implementing and controlling procedures for the efficient and effective transportation and storage of goods and the related information from the point of origin to the point of consumption (Stefansson, 2006; Lucie & Hudziak, 2012). This evolution led to creation Third Party Logistics (3PL) providers. The term "3PL" was first used in the early 1970s to identify intermodal marketing companies in transportation contracts during a time of expanding globalization and an increased use of information technology (CSCMP, 2013).

Typically, a core company providing services or products is considered the first party; the customer (or customers) the second party. A third-party, then, is a firm hired to do that which neither the first or second party desires to do. A third-party logistics firm is a firm that provides outsourced or "third party" logistics services to companies for some portion or all of their supply chain management functions. Third party logistics typically specializes in integrated warehousing and transportation services that can be scaled and customized to customer needs based on

market conditions and the demand and delivery service requirements for their products and materials (Skjoett-Larson, 2007). These third party logistics firms offer a variety of logistics services which include warehousing, consolidation, packaging, goods inspection, and import and export advisory services as a package (Mathenge, Arnold, Dihel & Strychacz, 2011).

Third Party Logistics providers play vital role in cost reduction, productivity, profits as well as the improvement of the service quality of their customers and thus become important part of supply chain management and successful logistics outsourcing can provide significant benefits, both, to industries and third party logistics providers (Vishal, Nitin, Satiish, & Nishant, 2013). The objectives and concerns related to third party logistics outsourcing are cost reduction, reduction of delivery time, concentration on core competencies, increasing flexibility and concerns are loss of control, dependence on service provider and losing direct customer contact (Vishal *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, according to Ansari and Modarress (2010), apart from cost reduction, cargo security is also an important reason to outsource logistics activities to third party logistics providers. Furthermore, market knowledge, data access, improved expertise and flexibility are some other benefits (Aghazadeh, 2003).

The development of the third party logistics industry can be divided into three main stages. The first one was in the early 1980's when only traditional logistics service providers existed such as transportation companies, warehouses, forwarders, shippers and agents. The second stage was in the early 1990's when network players, mainly parcel and express companies got involved in the industry. These were companies such as DHL, UPS and TNT. The third and the last stage of evolution started in the late 1990's, when companies from different sectors such as consulting, finance and IT companies entered the third party logistics industry (Berglund, Laarhoven, Sharman & Wandel, 1999).

The emergence of third party logistics have brought some innovations in human history have dramatically transformed the way of life, it can be said that few encompass as many benefits to organizations, individuals, and society as does online shopping (Jebur, Gheysari, & Roghanian, 2012). These include: access to global markets at low costs, operational efficiency, cost reduction, mass customization, inventories reduction, business efficiency, 24 hours accessibility, lower communication costs, increases sales and profitability (to organizations). Consumers on the other hand have benefited from; more choices, 24 hours access, new markets and price comparisons, better prices due to competitive environments, convenience, time saving, access to extensive information. To the society the benefits are; improved living standards since some merchandise can be sold at lower prices, flexible working conditions, enhanced social connections and facilities delivery of public services which reduces cost and increases quality of the offered services (Wen *et al.*, 2001; Kuzic *et al.*, 2002; Marshall & McKay, 2001; Jebur *et al.*, 2012; Souter & Kerretts-Makau, 2012).

Online shopping is a type of electronic commerce (Selvaraju & Karthikeyan, 2016). It allows consumers to buy products or services directly from internet retailers using mobile devices such as computers, smartphones and tablets. In recent years, people shop easily through internet. They might feel pleasure and convenient when they purchase products through online. Everyone is capable to click or tap on the website to browse on their favorite online shops. They can select,

compare and buy their favorable products in just a few minutes (Vegiayan, Ming & Harun, 2013). Online shopping firms in Nigeria have been experiencing problems in the performance of their logistics and operations management. One strategy of improving their performance is resorting to logistics outsourcing.

According to Alan, Phil and Peter (2006) logistics services contribute over 50 per cent of companies operating cost. Outsourcing of logistics services enables the creation of strategic and operational value and 64% of shippers are increasingly using 3PLs (Lucie & Hudziak, 2012). A lot of research on this area has been done in other parts of world especially the developed countries but in Nigeria very little/none has been done. A study by Vishal *et al.* (2013) on third party logistical obstacles in manufacturing industries in India revealed that, third party logistics provider's play a vital role in cost reduction, productivity, profits as well as the improvement of the service quality of their customers and thus become important part of logistics performance.

Therefore, this study sought to establish whether the findings and conclusions of these studies carried out in other parts of the world may be generalized in Rivers State, Nigeria by conducting a study on third party logistics and customer service of online shopping firms. However, the study on the third party logistics and customer service of online shopping firms in Rivers State, Nigeria would fill this gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Theoretical Underpinning

Transaction Cost Analysis (TCA)

For a business to choose whether to perform a particular activity, transactional cost analysis becomes very important. The theory uses transaction as the unit of analysis and divides transaction costs into production and co-ordination costs. According to the theory, transaction costs arise at contracting (drafting, negotiation and safeguarding) or at implementation (mal-adoption, haggling and establishment, operational and bonding costs). Decision makers must weigh and compare the costs associated with executing a transaction within their firms (in-house) and outsourcing. The foundations of transactional cost analysis (TCA) were laid down by Coase (1937) and were further developed by Williamson (1992; 1994). Fundamentally, TCA suggests that transaction costs related to make or buy decision impact the choice between the firm and the market. The transaction costs analysis helps in deciding whether to perform activity in-house or outsource from third party.

Network perspective Theory (NT)

The performance of a firm depends not only on how efficiently it cooperates with its direct partners, but also on how well these partners cooperate with their own business partners in cooperative relationships. The firm's continuous interaction with other players becomes an important factor in the development of new resources (Herbert *et al.*, 2007). The network theory (NT) contributes profoundly to an understanding of the dynamics of inter-organizational relations by emphasizing the importance of "personal chemistry" between the parties, the build-up of

trust through positive long-term cooperative relations and the mutual adaptation of routines and systems through exchange processes (Herbert *et al.*, 2007).

Conceptual Framework

This study conceptual framework consists of third party logistics (predictor variable), while the criterion variable is customer service as illustrated in figure 1 below:

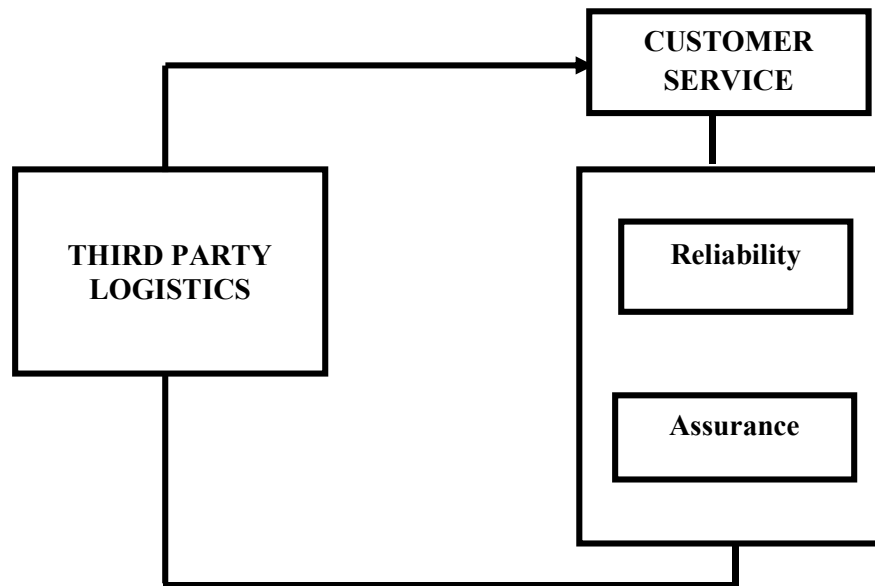


Figure 1.1: Conceptual framework of third party logistics and customer service of online shopping firms in Rivers State.

The Concept of Third Party Logistics

Third Party Logistics (3PL) providers are service providers who offer logistics solutions to ensure effective and efficient performance of supply chain management. Companies outsource the services of 3PL for many reasons including; to gain access best practices, to improve service quality, to control logistics cost, to increase speed, to properly manage its resources, to spread its risks and to focus on issues that are very much crucial to their existence and future growth. Third Party Logistics (3PL) has many interpretations and definitions. Gadde & Hulthen (2009), define third party logistics provider as the external company to carry out the logistics functions that have conventionally been executed within an organization.

There are various definitions and interpretations of third party logistics. First, Council of Logistics Management defines logistics, is the process of planning, implementing, controlling the efficient and effective flow, storage of goods, services and related information from the point of origin to the point of consumption for the purpose of conforming to customer's requirements. Logistics management tries to have the "right product", in the "right quantity", at the "right place", at the

“right time”, with the “right cost. Hertz and Alfredsson (2012) define third party logistics service provider as “an external provider who manages, controls, and delivers logistics activities on behalf of a shipper”. Third Party Logistics provider is evolving from a predominately transactional role to one that is more strategic in nature (Green, Turner, Roberts, Nagendra, & Wininger, 2008; Forrest et al., 2008). The business model of third party logistics is essentially based on the creation of customized logistics services which enables third party logistics to differentiate from the traditional transportation market and access higher margins (Large, Kramer & Hartmann, 2011). The number of third party logistics providers has been increasing rapidly in both the developed and the developing economies.

Third party logistics is evolving from a predominately transactional role to one that is more strategic in nature. Some of the characteristics of third party logistics are that they perform a variety of outsourced logistics matters, provide customized services, and handle multiple activities. These may involve transportation, distribution, warehousing, material handling, inventory control, packaging and inspection (Harrison & Hoek, 2008). Global Perspective of Third Party Logistics to compete effectively, organizations must constantly improve their performance by reducing costs, lead time, enhancing quality, and differentiating their products and services (Waiganjo, 2013). The Third-Party Logistics (3PL) industry worldwide has continued its growth from 1970s and has been increasing its importance as a means of coping with rapid changes in the global competitive environment (SoonHu, 2010).

Germany and United States of America (USA) were the first countries to adopt and practice the use of third party logistics to improve supply chain performances (Boyson et al., 2009). Over time these third party logistics service providers (3PLs) expanded their services to cover specific geographies, commodities, modes of transport and integrated their existing warehousing and transportation services, becoming what we now know today as a “3PL” (Christopher, 2012). In the USA, the most renowned retail stores Wal-Mart and Bentonville Ark are best in practice firms that adopted the use of third party logistics service providers. Gibson and Cook (2011) explains that with the adoption of third party logistics services, Wal-Mart has managed to implement real-time integration of distribution system into ‘host’ system leading to accurate and timely data reporting adding value to the distribution and marketing operations of the retail store. This has also resulted in reduced inventory costs through improved management.

In the United Kingdom, Seas Holdings the acquisition of third party logistics service providers has enabled the company to improve customer service through shorter shipment times. This has also seen productive gains through logistics being managed more effectively through the application of technology. Murphy (2011) reports that Kingfisher plc (UK) flexibility to respond quickly to changing market trends, changing business environments, and peak periods without major disruptions to distribution operations all emanate from experienced and qualified 3PL service providers the company has chosen to work with. Coca cola South Africa gives credit of its supply chain performances improvement to economies of scale through sharing resources, volume shipping discounts, and increased shipment visibility by the use of third party logistics services (Rao & Young, 2013). Gibson and Cook report that this is an approach Procter and Gamble in South Africa is also exploring to improve its logistical and supply chain activities.

Customer Service

The word customer in marketing literature represents individual, groups or organizations involved or engaged in buying of goods services either for utilization of further production of goods and services, and customers are called current purchasers. A customer is one involved in buying or one who will buy shortly. Customers are the heart of each fruitful business and accordingly require organizations need to focus more on customer more than any time in recent memory. But for the individual who gives blood willfully, one is either a service or a product for a living. Government officials, investors, representatives, delivery people, transport conductors, funeral home specialists, ticket agents, market women and everybody who gives a trade or service has a customer. As indicated by Kotler (1996) cited in Alaegbu (2012) a consumer alluded to as a (client, purchaser or buyer). It is typically used to allude to a current or potential customer or user of the product of the individual or organization called the supplier, merchant or seller. American Marketing Association (1960) cited in Du Plessis et al. (2007:310) defines services as “activities, benefits or satisfaction which are offered for sale or are provided in connection with the sale of goods”. Businesses are normally associated with customers in the market place when selling goods or providing a specialized service and in so doing, interact with customers who want to purchase these goods or services (Du Plessis et al., 2007:310). Service is an activity that is intangible and does not result to any ownership offered by one party to another party or by a service provider to a customer in order to fulfill the customer needs (Gronroos, 2006; Kotler, 2009).

Customer service is the supply of service to customers before, during and after purchase (XU, D. Yea, 2002). According to Turban (2002), customer service is an affix of operations intended to upgrade the level of consumer loyalty – that is, the inclination that a product or service has fulfilled the client's desire. Supports as mentioned above the view of Ezirim (2007) customer services is the set of those activities (services), which a company performs to ease things for its customer as to make then buy and enjoy its products. A person might give customer service (e.g. sales and service agent), or via mechanized means called self-service. Customer service is regularly a necessary part of an organization's customer regard recommendation (Dewkins and Reichheld 1996). It is a saleable product which covers the customers' needs and expectations.

Measures of Customer Service

The study adopts measures of service performance by Kotler & Keller (2006) such as; reliability, and assurance.

Reliability

The process in which service provider remains faithful in rendering services to its customers can be considered as the reliability (Khan & Fasih, 2014). Reliability refers to the ability of service organizations to perform the promised service dependably and accurately, and thus reflects the consistency and dependability of an organization's performance (Rodrigues, Bonar & Sacchi, 2011). Reliability assures the customer of a service provider's ability to consistently provide a perceived quality of service. Reliability has an impact on trust and the overall impression left in the mind of a customer after service consumption (Abd-El-Salam et al., 2013).

Reliability is vital and perceived through the people aspect of service quality (Kaura, et al., 2012). Reliability is consistently the most important determinant of perceptions of service performance (Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2008). Reliability depends on handling customer service issues, performs the services right the first time; offers services on time, and maintain a record of error-free. Moreover, they define reliability as the most significant factor in conventional service. Reliability also consists of the right order fulfillment; accurate records; accurate quote; right in the bill; Results are more accurate than commissions; keep the promise of service.

Assurance

Assurance comprises of courtesy (concern for the customer's assets, perfect and slick appearance of the open contact work force), capability (ownership of the required aptitudes and understanding to execute the service), integrity and security of the employees and their capacity to motivate trust and certainty. As indicated by Sadek et al. (2010), in firms assurance implies the well-mannered and amicable staff, inside solace, provision of monetary counsel, instances of access to account information, well-informed and knowledgeable management team.

This incorporates workers having information to react to questions, rousing certainty, giving prompt service, willing to respond to client's requests, giving clients individual attention, demonstrating predictable kindness with customers and even conference with its customers legitimately on the telephone. A few specific studies propose that the exchange of information is necessary for both regular offering and relationship showcasing which may prompt a mutual comprehension (Lymperopoulos et al., 2006; Ndubisi, 2007).

Empirical Review of Third Party Logistics and Customer Service

Third Party Logistics (3PL) providers are service providers who offer logistics solutions to ensure effective and efficient performance of supply chain management. Companies outsource the services of 3PL for many reasons including; to gain access best practices, to improve service quality, to control logistics cost, to increase speed, to properly manage its resources, to spread its risks and to focus on issues that are very much crucial to their existence and future growth.

Solakivi, Töyli, Engblom, & Ojala, (2011) study purpose was to explore the current state of and future expectations concerning the usage of the outsourcing of logistics operations in SMEs, and to analyze and quantify the relationships between logistics outsourcing, costs and performance. The data were 223 manufacturing and trading SMEs from the Finnish logistics survey combined with detailed financial report-based data, both referring to the year 2008. In general, the findings were that management should not expect automatic gains from logistics outsourcing, and should rather analyze the company-specific characteristics that support or in some cases suffer from the outsourcing decision.

A study by Qureshi, Dinesh & Pradeep, (2007) purpose was to model the key variables of logistics outsourcing relationship between shippers and logistics service providers (LSPs) and to study their influence on productivity and competitiveness of the shipper company. An interpretive structural modeling based approach was used to model the variables of logistics outsourcing relationship, These variables were classified as enablers; those which boost the "relationship

bond” between shippers and LSP and outcome variables arising out of outsourcing relationship between shippers and LSPs. Findings were that a numbers of enablers influence the shipper’s relationship with LSP, that results into productivity enhancement and competitiveness.

Kimulu, (2014) did a study on logistics outsourcing and performance of banks in Kenya. A descriptive research design was used based on the population of 43 banks in Kenya and data collected through a standard questionnaire. The data was analyzed by the use of descriptive statistics and regression analysis. The findings were that logistics outsourcing was well established and endowed in these institutions, add value to the banks overall competitive margins in the industry they operate in.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an explanatory survey research design and correlation investigation to establish relationship between third party logistics and customer service of online shopping firms in Rivers State, in a non-contrived setting. The target population for this study was 16 (Sixteen) online shopping firms whose offices are domiciled in Rivers State; and a sample of 64 respondents were drawn from the management cadre of the firms under study. A structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data; and the questionnaire was designed in Likert scale five-point form, ranging from Strongly Disagree (SD) to Strongly Agree (SA). The testing of hypotheses was done using Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation, via the SPSS version 23.0.

H₀₁: Third party logistics has no significant relationship with reliability.

Table 1: Correlation Analysis on Third Party Logistics and Reliability

Correlation

			Third Party Logistics	Reliability
Pearson Correlation r	Third Party Logistics	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.944**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	54	54
	Reliability	Correlation Coefficient	.944**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
		N	54	54

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: (SPSS Output 2023).

Table 1 above shows that the Pearson Correlation Coefficient ($r = 0.944^{**}$), this value is very high, implying that a very strong relationship exists between third party logistics and reliability. The positive sign of the correlation coefficient indicates a positive relationship. This implies that the organization is able to meet her third party obligations, as an increase in third party logistics in her operation would lead to a high level of reliability in her operations and commitments to her client. As shown in Table 1 also, the probability value is $(0.000) < (0.05)$ level of significance; hence

the researcher rejects the null hypothesis and concludes that there is a significant relationship between third party logistics and reliability.

H₀₂: Third party logistics has no significant relationship with assurance.

Table 2: Correlation Analysis on Third Party Logistics and Assurance Correlation

			Third Party Logistics	Assurance
Pearson Correlation r	Third Party Logistics	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.952**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	54	54
	Assurance	Correlation Coefficient	.952**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
		N	54	54

****.** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: (SPSS Output 2023).

Table 2 above shows that the Pearson Correlation Coefficient ($r = 0.952^{**}$), this value is very high, implying that a very strong relationship exists between third party logistics and assurance. The positive sign of the correlation coefficient indicates a positive relationship. This implies that the organization is able to meet her third party obligations, as an increase in third party logistics in her operation would lead to a high level of assurance of service delivery in her operations and commitments to her client. Also shown in Table 2, the probability value is $(0.000) < (0.05)$ level of significance; hence the researcher rejects the null hypothesis and concludes that there is a significant relationship between third party logistics and assurance.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study examined the relationship between third party logistics and customer service of online shopping firms in Rivers State. It specifically investigated the relationship between third party logistics and customer service. The findings of this study revealed that there is significant and positive relationship between third party logistics and customer service. This position is consistent with House and Stank, (2001) who found that third-party provider achieved its four major operational objectives: reduce total logistics cost, reduce transit time, improve information, and improve pipeline reliability. Also Khan and Fasih (2014), states that the process of acquired knowledge being showcased by staffs in executing their term of preferences during service delivery can be highly assuring to customers. This gives customers the confidence that the service delivery representative will perform his/her duty professionally and ethically.

CONCLUSION

This study reestablished that there exists relationship between third party logistics and customer service, and that third party logistics relationally influence customer service of online shopping

firms in Rivers State. Conclusively, this study has bridged a gap in literature. Based on the theoretical and empirical findings, the researcher therefore, recommends that it would be appropriate for management to adopt third party logistics for improving customer service of online shopping firms in Rivers State. Also, online shopping firms should consider services of third party logistics providers who are capable of providing timely and accurate services as this would enable companies to improve service quality. Hence, service quality could make companies differentiate themselves from the others and gain competitive advantage and thus improve their overall organizational effectiveness.

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