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An Investigation into Customer Dissatisfaction at SHEIN and its Impact on Customer Loyalty and Repurchase Intention

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1. Introduction

The global e-commerce landscape has undergone a radical transformation, primarily driven by ultra-fast fashion platforms utilizing sophisticated digital infrastructures and hyper-agile supply chains to dominate international markets (Uchańska-Bieniusiewicz & Obłój, 2023). Within this highly competitive sector, SHEIN has achieved unprecedented global scale by implementing a direct-to-consumer business model that prioritizes extreme price affordability, rapid design-to-shelf cycles, and a continuous stream of new product introductions (Zhou, 2025). Despite its growth, SHEIN's high-volume operational model frequently encounters significant service frictions. A growing body of consumer criticism and academic inquiry highlights persistent issues regarding inconsistent product quality, unpredictable cross-border delivery schedules, inadequate customer support responsiveness, and cumbersome return procedures. These operational failures raise critical concerns regarding long-term customer retention and the sustainability of SHEIN's brand equity in an increasingly crowded marketplace (Ahmad & Hameed, 2025).

In the contemporary digital retail environment, customer satisfaction serves as the primary catalyst for fostering brand loyalty and ensuring repeat patronage (Oliver, 1980; Anderson & Sullivan, 1993). Consumer evaluations in the e-commerce sector are heavily contingent upon the degree of alignment between the actual performance of products and services and the pre-purchase expectations generated by digital marketing (Bhattacharjee, 2001). When operational execution fails to meet these perceived benchmarks, dissatisfaction escalates, prompting negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and driving customer migration toward competing platforms with superior service reliability. Consequently, this research project seeks to investigate the specific operational and service dimensions that drive customer dissatisfaction at SHEIN, while evaluating their subsequent impact on long-term customer loyalty and repurchase intentions.

2. Business Problem

Since 2008, SHEIN has scaled its operations with remarkable speed by integrating data-driven trend forecasting with an ultra-responsive manufacturing network (Uchańska-Bieniusiewicz &

Oblój, 2023). While this operational agility has allowed the company to capture millions of active consumers globally, it has simultaneously introduced complex service management challenges that threaten its competitive positioning. Consumer advocacy forums and recent academic investigations consistently highlight a pattern of recurrent grievances. These include sub-standard material durability that fails to match online descriptions, opaque cross-border delivery timelines that frustrate consumers, unresponsive digital customer service channels, and rigid return policies that complicate the refund process (Ahmad & Hameed, 2025).

These systemic friction points directly erode consumer trust and diminish overall satisfaction levels. In the e-commerce context, where switching costs are exceptionally low, dissatisfied buyers can instantly defect to rival online marketplaces. According to the disconfirmation paradigm established by Oliver (1980), dissatisfaction is triggered when the perceived performance of a purchase falls short of initial consumer expectations. Furthermore, Parasuraman et al. (1988) emphasize that deficiencies in service quality dimensions—such as reliability and responsiveness—severely compromise a customer’s overall evaluation of a brand. Although extensive literature exists regarding general e-commerce satisfaction, there remains a critical lack of integrated empirical research investigating how product quality, logistical performance, customer support, and return logistics collectively generate dissatisfaction specifically within the SHEIN ecosystem. Addressing this gap is vital for formulating corrective managerial interventions that can stabilize SHEIN’s global market share.

3. Research Aim

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the multi-dimensional drivers of customer dissatisfaction at SHEIN and to evaluate their direct and indirect effects on customer loyalty and repurchase intention within the global ultra-fast fashion e-commerce sector.

4. Research Objectives

To achieve the overarching research aim, this study establishes the following specific objectives:

1. To identify and categorize the principal operational and service-related factors that contribute most significantly to customer dissatisfaction within SHEIN's global consumer base.
2. To examine the individual and collective impact of product quality, delivery reliability, customer service responsiveness, and return policy efficiency on overall customer satisfaction levels.
3. To investigate the empirical relationship between customer satisfaction, long-term brand loyalty, and future repurchase intention in the specific context of online fast fashion retail.
4. To formulate actionable, evidence-based strategic recommendations to assist SHEIN management in mitigating customer dissatisfaction and enhancing consumer retention strategies.

5. Research Questions

The study is guided by the following core research questions:

•RQ1: What are the primary operational and service-related factors contributing to customer dissatisfaction among SHEIN consumers?

•RQ2: To what extent do product quality, delivery service performance, customer service responsiveness, and return policies influence overall customer satisfaction?

•RQ3: How does the resulting level of customer satisfaction subsequently influence customer loyalty and the likelihood of repurchase?

•RQ4: What specific strategic interventions can SHEIN implement to mitigate consumer dissatisfaction and foster long-term brand advocacy?

6. Critical Literature Review

6.1 Customer Satisfaction and Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT)

Customer satisfaction is widely recognized as a foundational determinant of consumer retention and organizational profitability (Oliver, 1980; Anderson & Sullivan, 1993). Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT), originally established by Oliver (1980) and later adapted into the Expectation-Confirmation Model (ECM) by Bhattacharjee (2001) for digital environments, posits that satisfaction is a function of the discrepancy between prior consumer expectations and perceived post-purchase performance. When performance meets or exceeds expectations, confirmation occurs, leading to satisfaction and continued usage. Conversely, negative disconfirmation results in dissatisfaction and brand abandonment. This framework is particularly relevant for SHEIN, where digital imagery often sets extremely high aesthetic expectations.

Recent scholarly research indicates that e-service quality plays an important role in shaping customer satisfaction and subsequent consumer behaviour in online shopping environments (Rita, Oliveira & Farisa, 2019). In the ultra-fast fashion paradigm, digital marketing campaigns often generate heightened expectations. When physical garments fail to match digital representations in terms of fit or material quality, expectation disconfirmation occurs, which severely impairs customer loyalty and trust (Ahmad & Hameed, 2025).

6.2 Service Quality (SERVQUAL) Dimensions in E-Commerce

Service quality plays an indispensable role in shaping consumer perceptions in online retail environments. Parasuraman et al. (1988) formulated the SERVQUAL framework, evaluating service encounters across five core dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. Although originally developed for traditional service sectors, SERVQUAL has provided an important foundation for evaluating service quality in different contexts, while subsequent research developed specific measures for electronic service quality in online environments (Buttle, 1996; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Malhotra, 2005).

Rust and Oliver (1994) distinguish between service quality—which evaluates specific operational touchpoints—and customer satisfaction, which represents an accumulation of overall consumption experiences. In cross-border e-commerce, digital service quality encompasses website navigation, parcel tracking reliability, customer support responsiveness, and hassle-free returns (Uchańska-Bieniusiewicz & Oblój, 2023). Failures across these dimensions, particularly in reliability and responsiveness, directly diminish perceived service quality, accelerating consumer defection to more reliable competitors.

6.3 Multi-Dimensional Sources of Customer Dissatisfaction at SHEIN

Contemporary empirical studies indicate that customer dissatisfaction at SHEIN stems from a multi-dimensional constellation of operational challenges rather than isolated service failures (Uchańska-Bieniusiewicz & Oblój, 2023). Product quality represents a primary grievance; researchers note frequent discrepancies between online imagery and delivered textile durability, directly validating Oliver's (1980) disconfirmation framework (Ahmad & Hameed, 2025). Furthermore, research into cross-border e-commerce logistics highlights the importance of delivery time, information tracking and logistics service quality in shaping customer satisfaction (Du, 2023).

Customer service and reverse logistics (return policies) further exacerbate dissatisfaction. Rita, Oliveira and Farisa (2019) observe that consumers interacting with online retailers expect responsive customer support and efficient service procedures. When refund processing is protracted or customer support relies on unhelpful automated systems, the perceived value of the transaction deteriorates, driving customer alienation and increasing negative customer responses.

6.4 Customer Loyalty and Repurchase Intention Linkages

Customer loyalty is economically critical in digital retail, where acquisition costs far exceed retention expenditures (Bhattacharjee, 2001). Satisfied consumers exhibit higher brand trust, positive word-of-mouth advocacy, and sustained repurchase intentions (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993). Conversely, unresolved service failures and persistent dissatisfaction erode brand equity and increase the “churn rate” of the consumer base. Recent evidence concerning SHEIN further indicates that negative customer experiences can generate brand hate and adverse consumer

behavioural responses, highlighting the importance of addressing sources of customer dissatisfaction (Ahmad & Hameed, 2025).

6.5 Identification of the Research Gap

While existing literature extensively explores e-commerce service quality and general consumer behavior, significant research gaps remain. Most prior studies examine sustainability, supply chain logistics, or digital marketing in isolation, with very limited empirical investigation into the combined effects of product quality, delivery, customer service, and return policies on customer dissatisfaction within platforms like SHEIN (Uchańska-Bieniusiewicz & Obłój, 2023; Zhou, 2025). Furthermore, there is a scarcity of recent (2025–2026) quantitative studies integrating Expectation Confirmation Theory and SERVQUAL to assess how dissatisfaction impacts repurchase intentions. This study addresses this theoretical and empirical gap by providing an integrated assessment of these variables.

7. Research Methodology and Design

7.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a positivist research paradigm and a deductive, quantitative research approach. Positivism is appropriate because the study seeks to objectively measure relationships between predefined variables using numerical data and statistical analysis. Quantitative methodology is ideally suited for examining causal relationships between distinct variables and testing established theoretical frameworks (Bhattacharjee, 2001) such as ECT and SERVQUAL within large consumer populations. By utilizing numerical data, the researcher can identify broader patterns and correlations that are generalizable to the wider SHEIN consumer base. This approach allows for an objective assessment of how specific operational failures contribute to the overall sentiment of dissatisfaction.

7.2 Research Design and Data Collection

A cross-sectional research design utilizing a structured online questionnaire will be executed. Primary data collection will target verified past and present consumers of SHEIN. The questionnaire will employ closed-ended items anchored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Survey constructs will measure product quality, delivery service, customer service responsiveness, return policy efficiency, overall satisfaction, and repurchase intention, utilizing adapted scales validated in prior e-commerce and marketing literature (e.g., Parasuraman et al., 1988; Bhattacharjee, 2001).

7.3 Sampling Strategy

A non-probability convenience sampling strategy will be utilized, deploying survey links across digital consumer forums, social media interest groups (such as Reddit and Facebook SHEIN groups), and retail communities where SHEIN shoppers actively engage. A target sample size of approximately 150 – 200 respondents will be pursued, ensuring sufficient statistical power for regression analysis while remaining achievable within the time constraints of a university research project. While convenience sampling has limitations regarding representativeness, it is highly effective for reaching niche digital communities.

7.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data collected from survey responses will be analyzed using statistical software such as SPSS. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequencies) will be used to summarize demographic profiles and response distributions. Pearson correlation analysis will be conducted to evaluate preliminary associations between independent variables (product quality, delivery, service, returns) and dependent variables (satisfaction and repurchase intention). Finally, multiple linear regression analysis will be performed. This advanced technique will allow the researcher to determine which operational factors exert the most significant predictive influence on customer dissatisfaction, helping to isolate the primary “pain points” for the consumer.

7.5 Reliability, Validity, and Ethical Considerations

To ensure measurement reliability, internal consistency will be evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, with a threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ required for established construct acceptance. Construct and content validity will be secured by grounding survey items in peer-reviewed literature and aligning them directly with the research objectives. Ethical standards will be rigorously maintained: informed consent will be presented on the survey landing page, participation will be entirely voluntary, and complete respondent anonymity and data confidentiality will be guaranteed in accordance with University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) institutional guidelines. No personal identifying information will be collected, and data will be stored securely.

7.6 Methodological Limitations

Several limitations inherent to this research design must be acknowledged. First, the reliance on convenience sampling limits statistical generalizability across the entire global consumer population of SHEIN. Second, cross-sectional surveys capture data at a single point in time, restricting the ability to make definitive causal inferences compared to longitudinal designs. Finally, self-reported survey responses are susceptible to common method variance and subjective recall bias (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Despite these limitations, the study provides a valuable empirical foundation for understanding the drivers of dissatisfaction in the fast-fashion sector.

8. Business Relevance, Practical Implications, and Personal Reflection

The findings of this proposed research could hold substantial practical and strategic value for SHEIN management and comparable ultra-fast fashion enterprises. By empirically identifying which operational failure points—whether product variance, logistical delay, or return friction—contribute most severely to customer dissatisfaction, executive leadership could allocate resources more effectively. Targeted interventions, such as upgrading fabric quality inspection protocols, partnering with localized fulfillment hubs to reduce delivery times, and streamlining automated refund workflows, could enhance customer satisfaction and help

defend market share. Improving the return process, in particular, could potentially boost trust among first-time buyers who may be hesitant due to perceived risks.

From a personal development perspective, conducting this research proposal has significantly enhanced the author's comprehension of applied business research methodologies. Transitioning an ambiguous, real-world organizational challenge into a rigorously structured academic investigation demonstrated the vital necessity of bridging theoretical frameworks (such as ECT and SERVQUAL) with quantitative empirical design. The process of identifying a research gap and selecting appropriate statistical tools has reinforced critical analytical competencies. These skills are essential for future managerial, operational consultancy, and strategic decision-making roles within modern business environments. This assignment has also highlighted the importance of data-driven decision-making in the fast-paced retail sector, providing a solid foundation for future professional practice.

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