

KICSS2023

Kedah International Conference on Social Science and Humanities
UiTM Kedah (Online), Malaysia, 21-22 June 2023:
2nd International Conference on Business, Finance, Management and Economics
(BIZFAME)



Mobile Touchpoint and Customer Effort: A case of a leading energy firm in Malaysia

Abdul Rahman Zahari¹, Elinda Esa¹, Nor Hazlin Nor Asshidin^{1*}, Khairul Nizam Surbaini¹, Azmer Ezwan Abdullah¹

^{1*} College of Business Management & Accounting, Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah Campus, 26700 Bandar Muadzam Shah, Pahang, Malaysia

* Corresponding Author

Rahman@uniten.edu.my; Elinda@uniten.edu.my; Hazlin@uniten.edu.my; NizamK@uniten.edu.my; Azmer@uniten.edu.my
Tel: 0139388683

Abstract

This study aims to investigate if the mobile touchpoint and customer effort were significantly different by customer types of the leading energy provider in Malaysia. The study is essential because past literature revealed a limited study on mobile touchpoint in the energy sector. 1156 respondents were captured in this study using a stratified sampling technique. The findings showed significant differences between three mobile app's variables and no differences with customer effort is recorded. Managers of energy firms may use the findings to strategize the mobile app services because it leads to better customer experience and facilitates customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Keywords: Mobile touchpoint; customer effort; energy firm

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v8iS115.5076>

1.0 Introduction

According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2023), 47.9 million registered mobile phones and 43.2 million mobile broadband subscribers were recorded in 2022. In addition, the mobile broadband penetration rate in Malaysia is at 131%, and most mobile users spend time using their phones for such activities as web browsing, video streaming, social networking, gaming, online meeting, and others. The data shows that the majority of the population in Malaysia have smartphones and are connected to the internet. This has helped the companies create the firm's mobile app and leverage it as one of the main touchpoints to engage with their customers. Many past studies (e.g., Bonfanti et al., 2023; Lei et al., 2022) mentioned the study of customer behavior using firms' mobile apps can be seen many in several sectors like retailing, banking, and transportation. However, a small study concentrated on the energy sector (Caccavale, 2019; Chapaaro-Pelaez et al., 2020).

In Malaysia, the energy sector has always been critical to national economic growth and is considered a major industry enabler. This sector has significantly contributed to RM400 billion in gross domestic product and employed a 4 million workforce in 2021 (National Energy Policy 2022-2040, 2022). Moreover, this sector also generated RM72,000 average annual income of employees and served over 10 million customers daily. With a huge number of customers, companies must prepare numerous touchpoints to serve their customers best and increase user experience using the touchpoints. Nowadays, in the digital age, many companies, including energy firms, have deployed various online touchpoints, particularly mobile apps, to engage with customers. With effective mobile touchpoints, customers can solve their problems easily, enhancing the customer experience and loyalty and driving revenue growth for the energy sector (Caccavale, 2019; Chapaaro-Pelaez et al., 2020). On another note, customers who have spent more effort tackling their concerns

have a greater intention to spread negative word of mouth (Clark & Bryan, 2013). Thus, good mobile app services will reduce the customers' effort and lead to positive customer experience and satisfaction.

Moreover, a specific study on online touchpoints with a different group of customers was inconclusive and needed more attention among scholars (Hallikainen et al., 2019; Weiger, 2023). Therefore, the current study examines the differences between groups (customer segments-government and local authorities, business, and domestic) with the mobile app provided by the largest energy provider in Malaysia. Moreover, a comparative study between the types of customers with customer effort using mobile touchpoints is also being executed in this study. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. This study first reviews the relevant literature. The following section details the method applied. The third and fourth parts are to elaborate on the findings and discussion, and the last part is the conclusion and recommendations.

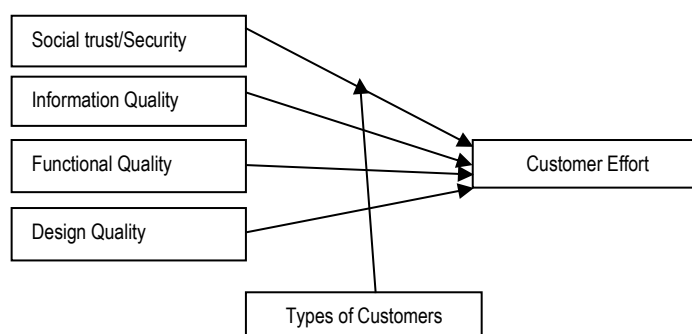
2.0 Literature Review

In the early 2010s, mobile devices became more prevalent, leading to the rise of mobile touchpoints. Companies began to create mobile-friendly websites and apps, which enabled customers to access information and engage with brands on the go (Rahman et al., 2022). This helped to create a more seamless system and convenient customer experience, as customers could engage with the firms whenever and wherever they wanted. According to Rahman et al. (2022), firms that utilized online touchpoints like mobile apps led to broader customer reach, improved customer engagement in real-time and provided personalized support, enhanced customer convenience, generated cost-effective marketing, and gathered data on customer behavior, preferences, and feedback. These can provide valuable insights that service firms can use to improve their services, enhance customer experience, drive revenue growth, and value co-creation (Ardelet & Benavent, 2023). Ardelet and Benavent (2023) highlighted that knowledge about customer effort (e.g., physical, mental, and financial resources) is crucial for organizations because it has a curvilinear effect on customer satisfaction. Even though customer effort research was established in the 1940s, but was less debatable until 2010 and upwards (Clark & Bryan, 2013). Sweeney et al. (2015) have associated customer effort with the degree of effort customers exert to integrate resources through various activities of varying levels of perceived difficulty. Importantly, fewer studies have discussed the impact of customer effort on using online touchpoints (Hensher & Xi, 2022; Rahman et al. 2022).

Evidence from past literature shows inconclusive findings about online touchpoints and customer effort with types of customers (e.g., Calza et al., 2023). Most past studies on online touchpoints have been conducted in the retailing sector more than in other industries (Bonfanti et al., 2023; Lei et al., 2022). Due to this, the current study tries to close the gap by comparing the impact of customer types on mobile apps and customer effort from the perspective of a leading energy firm in Malaysia. In view of online touchpoints, many companies use mobile apps as a major tool to engage with their customers. With this development, many scholars have studied the quality elements of mobile apps with customer experiences in various industries (Bahtar, 2018; Hallikainen et al., 2019; Wu & Ho, 2022). For instance, Wu and Ho (2022) highlighted most of the quality variables of mobile touchpoints, like information, design, and functions, have significant differences with the types of customers in Taiwan. Also, Bahtar (2018) revealed that information quality and security have helped to reduce customer effort and led to customer loyalty. Moreover, Parise et al. (2016) claimed that mobile app design and functional quality helped improve customer effort scores and customer experience. Besides, Rajaobelina et al. (2018) mentioned that trust is an important factor of mobile apps and has a significant difference with customer types. Past work by Hallikainen et al. (2019) exposed the insignificant difference between the mobile touchpoint variables and types of customers. Similarly, the finding recorded in the past work of Sands et al. (2016) also demonstrated no significant difference in customer types and factors in the mobile app.

With regard to customer effort, Ardelet and Benavent (2022), in their study, exposed low customers' effort unable to associate with customer satisfaction in various customer segments. In comparison, Sweeney et al. (2015) found a significant difference in customer effort with types of customers. Moreover, Harrington and Bryan (2013) mentioned the significant difference between customer efforts in the business-to-business segment. Finally, Hensher and Xi (2022) highlighted that firms must continue simplifying the process and reducing customer effort for loyalty. They also claimed that numerous customers have significant differences in customer effort. In light of the above arguments, this study compares the roles of mobile apps and customer effort with the three customer segments: government and local authorities, businesses, and domestics. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework used in this study.

Fig. 1: Conceptual framework



The proposed hypotheses are as follows:

- H1: There is a significant difference in the types of customers and mobile app social trust/security.
H2: There is a significant difference in the types of customers and mobile app information quality.
H3: There is a significant difference in the types of customers and mobile app functional quality.
H4: There is a significant difference in the types of customers and mobile app design quality.
H5: There is a significant difference in the types of customers and mobile app's customer effort.

3.0 Methodology

A total of 1156 (mobile app users) from the government and local authorities, businesses, and domestic customers of a leading energy firm in Malaysia were involved in this study. They are selected using a stratified sampling technique from the sampling frame (companies' owners or managers or officers and domestic customers) given by the energy company. The survey was e-mailed to respondents' e-mail addresses, and they answered the online survey question about customers' experiences using mobile apps from June to August 2022 via the survey sparrow platform. Table 1 presents the respondent's profile. The data presents demographic information of respondents based on gender, age, race, education level, job position, income, and customer segments. Of the total population, 51.7% are female, and 48.3% are male. Most respondents fall in the age range of 31-40 years old, accounting for 40.7% of the population, followed by 28.5% who are 30 or below. Malay is the dominant race, with 79.4%, followed by Chinese (15.2%) and Indian (5.4%). Most of the respondents have a bachelor's degree (53.7%) and are working in professional (25.0%) and middle management (20.1%) positions. Regarding income, most respondents earn between RM 3,000 to RM 6,000 per month (31.1%) and less than RM 3,000 per month (29.2%). Additionally, the data indicates that the majority of respondents (49%) belong to the business customer segment, followed by domestic customers (33.3%) and government and local authorities (17.7%).

Table 1: Respondents' profiles (n = 1156)

Profile	Sub-profile	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	558	48.30
	Female	598	51.70
Age	30-year-old and below	330	28.50
	31-40 year-old	470	40.70
	41-50 year-old	269	23.30
	51-60 year-old	75	6.50
	More than 60 year-old	12	1.00
Race	Malay	918	79.40
	Chinese	176	15.20
	Indian	62	5.40
Education	STPM/SPM and below	143	12.40
	Diploma	219	18.90
	Bachelor's Degree	621	53.70
	Master's or PhD	168	14.50
	Other	5	0.40
Job Position	Professional	289	25.00
	Top Management	114	9.90
	Middle Management	232	20.10
	Supervisory	82	7.10
	Administrative or Clerical	183	15.80
	Technical	107	9.30
	Housewife	15	1.30
	Retiree	7	0.60
	Entrepreneur	104	9.00
	Other	23	2.00
Income	Less than RM 3,000	337	29.20
	RM 3,000 - RM 6,000	360	31.10
	RM 6,001 - RM 9,000	138	11.90
	RM 9,001 - RM 12,000	92	8.00
	RM 12,001 - RM 15,000	147	12.70
	More than RM 15,000	82	7.10
Customer segments	Domestic	385	33.30
	Business	566	49.00
	Government and local authorities	205	17.70

There are two main sections in the questionnaire used in this study. The first section is about the customer's experiences using the mobile app touchpoint, carried out with 15 items adapted from Pour et al. (2021). All questions were measured with a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree). In addition, one question is designed for each touchpoint to measure the customer effort. The item is adapted from Dixon et al. (2010) and assessed using a 5-point Likert scale (1=Very Difficult; 5=Very Easy). The second part captures the characteristic of respondents. The questions were validated by four expert opinions (academics and industry managers) and pre-tested by 20 respondents. Data were analyzed using frequency, descriptive, reliability analyses, and analysis of variance (ANOVA) via IBM Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS) 27.0 for Windows.

4.0 Findings

Table 2 displays the descriptive analysis for each individual and factor items of mobile app and customer effort. The mean scores for individual and factor items of mobile app and customer effort are from 3.900 (Mobile app provides information based on the users' interest) to 4.180 (Mobile app is easy to access and easy to use) and 3.990 (functional quality) to 4.200 (customer effort). The standard deviation values for mobile app variables are also from 0.693 (information quality) to 0.739 (customer effort). Moreover, the Cronbach alpha value is recorded at 0.872 to 0.932. All variables have good internal consistency because the Cronbach alpha coefficient values were above 0.800 (Pavot et al., 1991).

Table 2: Descriptive and reliability results

Constructs/Items (mobile app touchpoint)	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach Alpha
Social trust/security	4.084	0.729	0.872
Mobile app protects the customers' information and privacy	4.090	0.788	
Mobile app provides a risk-free transaction process	4.080	0.759	
Information quality	4.088	0.693	0.929
Mobile app provides helpful and important information for my energy usage	4.160	0.772	
Mobile app provides accurate and reliable information about energy usage	4.090	0.778	
Mobile app provides up-to-date information	4.130	0.772	
Mobile app provides meaningful, detailed, and understandable information	4.110	0.777	
Mobile app provides information in different formats like video, photo, text, etc.	3.950	0.828	0.881
Functional quality	3.990	0.725	
Mobile app provides the customers with personalized information	4.010	0.787	
Mobile app provides information based on the users' interest	3.900	0.844	
Mobile app helps navigate the users to utilize app functions	4.060	0.789	0.932
Design quality	4.089	0.717	
Mobile app is easy to access and easy to use	4.180	0.788	
Mobile app has ease of learning	4.120	0.788	
Mobile app has a responsive design and is compatible with mobile devices	4.090	0.792	
Mobile app has an attractive design	4.020	0.853	NA
Mobile app has an acceptable response time	4.030	0.821	
Customer effort: Overall, how easy was it to solve your problem with mobile app?	4.200	0.739	NA

Note: NA = Not available because customer effort is a single item

Next, an ANOVA test was conducted to compare the differences between the mobile app and customer effort constructs with various customer segments. The results are shown in Table 3 and Table 4. Table 3 shows that there were statistically significant differences at the $p < 0.05$ level in information quality, functional quality, and design quality with customer segments: $F(2, 1152) = 6.056$, $p = .002$, $F(2, 1152) = 3.704$, $p = 0.025$, and $F(2, 1152) = 4.224$, $p = .015$ respectively. Thus, Hypothesis 2 (H2), H3, and H4 are supported. However, the difference in mean scores reported between the groups is small. Hence, the effect sizes are considered small for all variables because all values are below 0.06 (Cohen, 1988). Conversely, H1 and H5 are not supported due to insignificant differences between the constructs (social trust/security and customer effort) with the types of customers.

Table 3: Summary of means, standard deviations, and ANOVA results

Measure	Government and Local Authorities		Business customers		Domestics customers		Sig.	η^2 *	Hypothesis	Decision
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD				
Social trust/security	3.995	0.891	4.090	0.699	4.121	0.671	0.131	0.004	H1	Not supported
Information quality	3.937	0.884	4.115	0.641	4.129	0.639	0.002*	0.010	H2	Supported
Functional quality	3.865	0.905	4.019	0.685	4.012	0.667	0.025*	0.006	H3	Supported
Design quality	3.957	0.904	4.116	0.666	4.118	0.670	0.015*	0.007	H4	Supported
Customer effort	4.110	0.742	4.220	0.739	4.210	0.737	0.161	0.003	H5	Not supported

Note: SD = Standard deviation; $F(2,1152)$; * $p < 0.05$; $N = 1156$; η^2 * = Sum of squares between-groups/Total sum of squares

Table 4 parades the post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test, which revealed that the mean scores for domestic and businesses customers ($M = 4.129$, $SD = 0.639$; $M = 4.115$, $SD = 0.641$) were significantly different from government and local authorities ($M = 3.937$, $SD = 0.884$) for the construct of information quality. Similarly, the mean scores of mobile app's functional quality for domestic and business customers ($M = 4.012$, $SD = 0.667$; $M = 4.019$, $SD = 0.685$) were significantly different from government and local authorities ($M = 3.865$, $SD = 0.905$). Furthermore, the results also demonstrated that the mean scores for domestic and business customers ($M = 4.118$, $SD = 0.670$; $M = 4.116$, $SD = 0.666$) were significantly different from government and local authorities ($M = 3.957$, $SD = 0.904$) for the construct of design quality.

Table 4: Post hoc tests-types of customers, information quality, functional quality and design quality

Variable	Types of Customers (A)	Types of Customers (B)	Mean	SD	MD (A-B)	Std. Error	Sig.
Information quality	Domestic	Business	4.129	0.639	0.015	0.046	0.946
		GLA			0.193*	0.060	0.004
	Business	Domestic	4.115	0.641	-0.015	0.046	0.946
		GLA			0.178*	0.056	0.004
Functional quality	GLA	Domestic	3.937	0.884	-0.193*	0.060	0.004
		Business			-0.178*	0.056	0.004
	Domestic	Business	4.012	0.667	-0.007	0.048	0.987
		GLA			0.147*	0.063	0.049

Design quality	Business	Domestic	4.019	0.685	0.007	0.048	0.987
		GLA			0.154*	0.059	0.024
	GLA	Domestic	3.865	0.905	-0.147*	0.063	0.049
		Business			-0.154*	0.059	0.024
	Domestic	Business	4.118	0.670	0.002	0.047	0.999
		GLA			0.161*	0.062	0.025
	Business	Domestic	4.116	0.666	-0.002	0.047	0.999
		GLA			0.159*	0.058	0.018
	GLA	Domestic	3.957	0.904	-0.161*	0.062	0.025
		Business			-0.159*	0.058	0.018

Note: GLA = Government and local authorities; SD = Standard Deviation; MD = Mean Difference; *. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

5.0 Discussion

Findings in the current revealed that three hypotheses are supported (H2, H3, and H4), and the results are in line with past studies (Ieva & Ziliani, 2018; Pascucci et al., 2023; Weigner, 2023) that demonstrated the significant difference of variables in the mobile app (information, functional, and design quality) with customer types of a leading Malaysia energy firm. In contrast, H1 and H5 are not supported and show insignificant differences between the customers with tested constructs associated with mobile apps. The results differ from past studies of (Parise et al., 2016; Rajaobelina et al. 2018) but are similar to the past work of Hallikainen et al. (2019). Moreover, this current study is also unable to find a significant difference between customer segments and customer effort. Thus, H5 is rejected and similar to the past work of Ardelet and Benavent (2023) but not in line with Harrington and Bryan (2013), Hensher and Xi (2022), and Sweeney et al. (2015). In brief, most variables that show significant differences with the types of customers have small effect sizes.

The findings of the current study provide valuable insights to practitioners in the energy industry who are interested in improving their mobile app quality and enhancing customer satisfaction. By understanding the significant differences in information, functional, and design quality with customer types, practitioners can tailor their mobile app features and services to meet the specific needs and preferences of different customer segments. This could lead to improved customer engagement and loyalty, which can positively impact the company's bottom line. Furthermore, the study's findings on the lack of significant differences between customer segments and customer effort can help practitioners to develop more effective customer service strategies. By understanding that customer effort may not be a differentiating factor between customer segments, practitioners can focus on improving other aspects of the customer experience, such as ease of use, reliability, and responsiveness, to improve customer engagement and satisfaction.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

The objective of this study is to compare the role of customer types with online touchpoints and customer efforts of a leading energy firm in Malaysia. The results indicate that three hypotheses (H2, H3, and H4) have been supported, and two hypotheses (H1 and H5) are not supported. According to the ANOVA test, the current study confirmed that mobile app information, functional, and design quality have significant differences with numerous customer segments. On another note, even though the other elements of mobile apps (social trust/security) have no significant difference with types of customers, these variables are indeed very critical. They must be improved and redesigned to equip a better customer experience. The study is also unable to find significant differences between customer effort and customer categories, which indicates that more in-depth studies need to be conducted to ensure the outcome will lead to customer satisfaction and loyalty. The energy firm may use the findings from this study to strategize its mobile touchpoint to maximize customer satisfaction by lowering customer effort.

This study only focused on one of the energy firms in Malaysia. Therefore in the future, the researcher can expand to compare the effects of customer types with other energy or services firms. With greater sample sizes from different firms, the practitioners or managers could have benefited from the comparative study that will be conducted in the future. Besides, future work can also concentrate on adding other digital touchpoint tools rather than only selecting mobile apps. Finally, the comprehensive study of omnichannel (offline and online) provided by the firms could also be added for future research.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB) Seeding Fund under the project code U-TL-RD-21-23.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The present paper contributes to mobile touchpoint literature by examining the differences between mobile apps and customer effort constructs with numerous customer segments. Further, this study provides insight for the energy firm to manage the mobile touchpoint functions and customer effort that can improve customer experience and satisfaction among various types of customers.

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