

A Proposed Framework of the Digital Supply Chain Management Implementation by a Manufacturing SME Using the Diffusion of Innovation Perspective

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Abstract

As the digitalisation becomes vital in the global business environment in this Fourth Industrial Revolution Era (IR4.0), the awareness of the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) towards the implementation of digitalisation is also concerning. Recently, the Malaysian government has expressed its resolution to propel the Malaysian SMEs into digitalisation to seize a higher national gross domestic product (GDP). In daily business operations, one of the areas that can be digitalised is the supply chain management (SCM). The digitalisation of the supply chain management (DSCM) will assist the SMEs in effectively handling the goods from the point of raw materials purchase until reaching the end customers. However, recent data showed that many SMEs are still resisting in implementing DSCM, while the rest are slowly moving towards implementing the DSCM in their businesses. Thus, it is imperative to further understand what has driven the SME towards the implementation through the perspective of the diffusion of innovation theory (DOI), as presented in this study. Through the proposed framework which is derived from the original theory itself, this study intends to prolong the existing understanding on this issue and provide a direction for future researchers who have intense captivation in the same area of study.

Keywords: Small and medium enterprises, industrial revolution 4.0, digital supply chain management, diffusion of innovation

1. INTRODUCTION

As an entity that comprises of 99% businesses in Malaysia, it is undeniable that the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are recognised as the key contributor to the country's economy due to its pivotal roles in high gross domestic product (GDP), increasing employment rates, and the availability of export activities (SME Corp, 2015). The SMEs can be categorised into manufacturing and service sectors according to the specific criteria that need to be fulfilled by each sector. From a total of 1,151,339 SMEs registered in 2020, about 58,439 or 5.1% are the manufacturers (SME Corp, 2020). Due to the important parts played by the large number of manufacturing SMEs, there is an immediate call by the government for these SMEs to shift towards digitalisation, which can potentially boost their competitiveness and at the same time, place Malaysia as the primary smart manufacturing spot that can grab the high technology investments opportunities (MITI, 2018).

In this emerging fourth industrial revolution (IR4.0) era, Malaysian organisations need to understand the technology enablers that are available and best suited for their business activities (Tarofder, 2011). Despite the massive acceptance for the IR4.0 among global businesses, a study by Teh, Idris, and Aris (2020) has revealed that majority of Malaysian SMEs are still lagging behind large corporations in embracing IR4.0 in their operations. According to the Economic Planning Unit (EPU), Malaysian SMEs' development in general, is moving slowly and less competitive than the SMEs in the neighbouring countries, with its digital implementation is still considered as embryonic (EPU, 2021a). Based on the digitalisation readiness assessment carried out among the

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Malaysian SMEs, it can be concluded that these SMEs have realised the importance of the digital technology and innovation, however, there is no urgency for them to invest in digitalisation as they are still being cautious about it (Goh & Lee, 2017; SME Corp, 2018).

In manufacturing, the supply chain management (SCM) plays a vital role as the brand owners put their reliance on the manufacturers to create their products that are getting more complicated (Weaver, 2019). In this current fast paced business environment, even the SMEs will be occupied with thousands of products, and hundreds of customers and suppliers that need to be managed daily or weekly, hence, the need of having more effective and efficient SCM (Vuolle, 2016). The rising vitality of the SCM to enhance the operational performance of businesses including the SMEs has driven the SCM to be one of the areas that can be potentially digitalised (Saryatmo & Sukhotu, 2021).

Digitalisation of SCM (DSCM) strategies provide firms with flexibility and agility that may potentially create more values (Buyukozkan & Gocer, 2018) and help the firms to attain the competitive advantage, where they will be able to efficiently address the changing needs of the customers (Seyedghorban, Tahernejad, Meriton & Graham, 2020). However, there is still a significant gap identified between the Malaysian organisations, particularly the SMEs and global brands with regards to the DSCM implementation (Rajagopal, Tan & Loo, 2018). As a comparison to the developed countries, the digitalisation in back-end business processes including the SCM among Malaysian SMEs is only 10%, leaving a question of whether the local SMEs are actually ready for the transformation (Abod, 2017). A conference discussing on the DSCM in 2017 has also concluded that Malaysia is still at the infancy part of the DSCM, considering the less participation of supply chain members in IR4.0 in Malaysia (Rajagopal et al., 2018).

Albeit the previously-mentioned finding regarding the low awareness of the implementation, some of the SMEs have realised the importance of IR4.0 and start embarking on the digitalisation journey in their operations, including their SCM (Yunus, 2020). Therefore, this study attempts to understand the process of the decision-making towards the implementation and the reasons that have driven a local manufacturing SME to implement the DSCM, when most of the SMEs are still reluctant to do so. Furthermore, this study also intends to identify the SME's current stage of DSCM implementation. By using the innovation attributes from the diffusion of innovation theory (DOI), this paper proposes further study to be carried out through a qualitative case study approach.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

According to the definition provided by the SME Corporation Malaysia (SME Corp), SMEs are the registered entities that must fulfil 3 (three) conditions, such as qualifying criteria, type of establishment, and shareholding structure. Specifically, the requirements for the manufacturing SMEs are RM50 million or less for the sales turnover, comprising 200 full-time employees (SME Corp, 2020). As mentioned in earlier section, Malaysia SMEs are still way behind large firms in exploring the IR4.0, even though some of them have started shifting towards the implementation. Therefore, it is intended that more SMEs will gain the awareness through a clearer path towards the transformation, considering a number of benefits offered by the DSCM implementation, aided with various initiatives taken by the government to stimulate the efforts towards digitalising these SMEs (Lee, Azmi, Hanaysha, Alzoubi & Alshurideh, 2022).

EPU has enforced few programmes under the 11th Malaysia Plan for the SMEs, as an effort to enhance technology implementation among these businesses. This resulted in 528 SMEs went through the technology audit and assessment, while 1,159 more gained their productivity improvements from technology intervention projects under the Standard and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia (SIRIM)-Fraunhofer programme. These projects involved mechanisation and automation, technology enhancement, localisation of technology, packaging and labelling, training and consultancy for standards compliance as well as export-related technical advisory (EPU, 2021b). As for the recent 12th Malaysia Plan, it is aimed at elevating digitalisation in addition to getting the existing technology improved, to promote economy growth through the use of high technology. To put Malaysia as a key player in global supply chain, measures such as capitalising on the potential of advanced technology, boosting Research, Development, Commercialization and Innovation (R&D&C&I), integrating digitalisation for inclusive development, and enhancing digital economy are put on the list (EPU, 2021b).

2.2 Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR4.0)

Initiated by the German government in 2011, the term IR4.0 describes the technological changes in manufacturing that looks forward to having a coherent policy framework to maintain the global competitiveness of German industry (Tay, Lee, Abdul Hamid & Ahmad, 2018). The manufacturing sector can be economically benefitted from the IR4.0 through lower production costs, value creation networks, and new business models (Schroder, 2016). Malaysian SMEs are not an exception in getting the advantages from the IR4.0, including the cost effectiveness and enhanced efficiency of demand capacity management (Abod, 2017). Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA) revealed that the recent outbreak has woken up the SMEs worldwide, including in Malaysia to embrace the digitalisation as it helps them delivering better customer experience and boosting the momentum of digital implementation (MIDA, 2020).

2.3 Digital Supply Chain Management (DSCM) in Manufacturing

As demonstrated by MIDA, DSCM is the transformation of a conventional SCM into a digitalised form, which emphasises on the connectivity, system integration, and the utilisation of smart technologies such as big data, artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, big data analytics, and internet of things (IoT) (MIDA, 2021). An example of the application of DSCM in manufacturing sector is through the use of robot to enhance the flexibility and automation of processes. The intelligent storage locations enable an automated data transfer, which reduces the latency between product consumption and information transfer process to the manufacturers (Farahani, Meier & Wilke, 2015). 3D printing helps to mitigate the issue of location in production line due to its flexibility in producing parts anywhere, without consuming much working space. The transparency of SCM could also be improved through the existence of digital logistics systems that provide the real-time geo-located shipping, which means the real-time data of the products' whereabouts (Buyukozkan & Gocer, 2018). In Malaysia, the application of the DSCM can be seen in Music Tribe company, which has its entire supply chain digitalised; from the design, manufacturing, e-commerce marketing, and after-sale services. Another example is Smart Modular Technologies through the establishment of Smart Supply Chain Services Management Centre that effectively handles its SCM using big data, cloud computing, and real-time analytics technology. The DSCM practice of both companies has created job opportunities for the locals (MIDA, 2021).

2.4 Diffusion of Innovation Theory (DOI)

This study follows the DOI, which is developed by Everette M. Rogers as the theoretical basis to explain the diffusion of digital technologies towards the DSCM implementation by a manufacturing SME, as proposed in this study. According to Tarofder (2011), this theory has a strong theoretical background, especially on the diffusion process part. To be specific, this study utilises the decision-making process in innovation, innovation attributes, and the adopters' categories to discuss the process of DSCM implementation by the SME, reasons for the SME to implement the DSCM, and SME's stage of implementation, respectively. The flow of this study is guided by the proposed framework as depicted in Figure 1 below, which is adapted from the theory. Further discussions on each element of the DOI are presented in the next subsections.

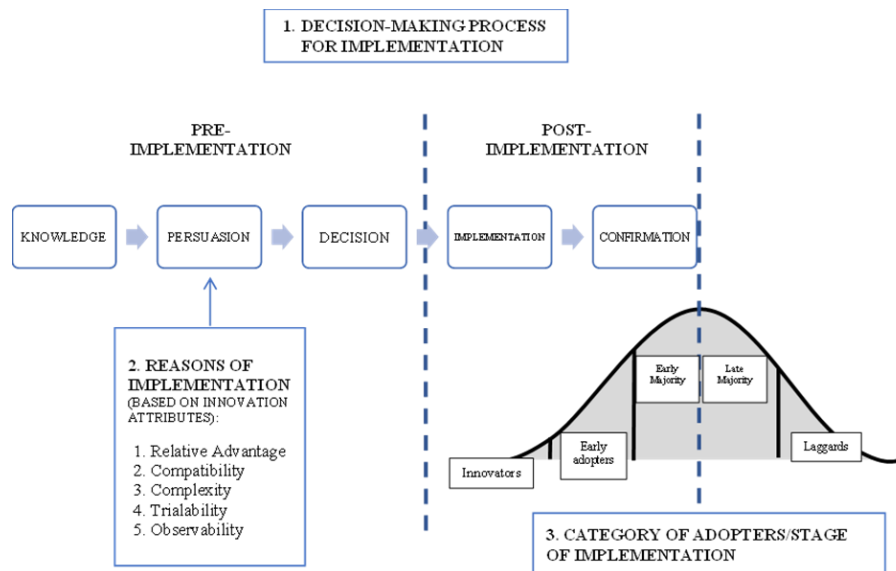


Fig. 1. Proposed framework of the study

Adapted from Rogers (1995)

2.4.1 Decision Making Process in DOI

In DOI, there are 5 (five) stages of the decision-making process, starting with knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and lastly, confirmation. These stages are also known as the communication channels that will be passed by the users at a different level of usage, according to the levels of the adopters. Precisely, the adoption levels influence the level of innovation usage or diffusion (Rogers, 1995). According to the author, the process of diffusion starts when at least one of the society members starts using new products or services, which marks the start of the diffusion of the idea. From there, any activity and decision that occur before and during the implementation will influence the diffusion process, clarifying that the process does not start only after the innovation (Rogers, 1995). The author further explained the stages of the decision-making process as featured in the DOI, as below:

- Knowledge occurs when individuals have exposure on innovation and its function
- Persuasion occurs when individuals have either favourable or unfavourable attitude towards the technology
- Decision occurs when individuals engage in activities that conclude either to implement or reject the innovation
- Implementation occurs when individuals are using the innovation
- Confirmation occurs when individuals seek for re-enforcement on a decision that has already been made, or reverse the previously made decision to adopt or reject the technology

2.4.2 DOI Attributes in DSCM Implementation

In the theory, Rogers has developed the innovation attributes that explain various rate of innovation adoption that occur before the implementation, precisely at the persuasion stage. These attributes, which are based on the expectation of the individuals comprise of 5 (five) such as relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability (Rogers, 1995). A study by Hartley, Sawaya, and Dobrzykowski (2022) has employed the innovation attributes from DOI such as relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, and trialability to understand the factors that influence an organisation's intention to implement the blockchain in SCM. The employment of the same attributes is also done to discover the determinants of the use of disruptive technologies in the DSCM, as studied by Mitra, Kapoor, and Gupta (2022). From a Malaysian context, Tarofder (2011) has carried out a study to identify the critical success factors for the successful use of Web technologies in SCM of local organisations through the application of complexity and trialability as the measurements.

Firstly, relative advantage is where the individuals perceive innovations to be better than the idea it supersedes. This study proposes that the manufacturing SME perceives the DSCM implementation could provide benefits to the company and its supply chain partners compared to not implementing it. Compatibility is where an innovation

is expected by the potential users to be consistent with current values, previous experiences, and the needs of future adopters. This study suggests that the manufacturing SME considers the DSCM to be compatible with previous usage and the needs of the SME to implement the DSCM. Complexity is when the individuals assume an innovation is difficult to understand and use, where only few innovations are easily understood by most social system members. In this study, it is proposed that the manufacturing SME is driven towards the DSCM implementation because it is less complicated to be understood and less trainings are required.

Next, trialability is explained as the innovation that can be tested on a limited basis. The proposition of this study is that the manufacturing SME becomes more certain and confident of the function and benefits of the DSCM implementation after experiencing it on the instalment plan. Observability is defined as an innovation that can be observed by individuals. This study assumes that the manufacturing SME becomes persuaded to implement the DSCM after witnessing the success of the implementation among its supply chain partners or other users.

2.4.3 Category of DSCM Adopters in DOI

In DOI, the adopters can be categorised into innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers, 1995). Firstly, the innovators are the users who usually implement the new ideas earlier than other members of a system. Next, the early adopters tend to be the group of people who tend to be the most influential ones and can potentially be the leaders to other potential adopters. However, these users may not much be the risk takers, unlike the innovators. Meanwhile, the early majority are those who typically spend wisely on products due to the limited resources. They are known as the risk averse adopters who usually seek for opinions from the thought leaders regarding the adoption decision. Late majority are a group of users who have lower social status and are often being sceptical about the adoption. These users rarely communicate with the thought leaders and they utilise their resources only for the solutions that have been tried and tested. Last but not least, the laggards, who are known as the highly risk averse and are usually the last to implement since they prefer the traditional methods to do things. Laggards rarely seek opinions because they are less familiar with the technologies (Rogers, 1995). By using the category of adopters in DOI, this study proposes to identify the current stage of the SME as the adopter in implementing the DSCM in its organisation.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Case study

The notable proponents of the case study design are Robert E. Stake, Sharan Merriam, and Robert K. Yin, whose epistemological stance on case study are different from each other. As this study leans towards the interpretivism, the viewpoints from Stake (1995) are taken into consideration. Acting as an interpreter and gatherer of the information, a case study researcher can potentially add experience to readers based on their notions of knowledge and reality that have been gathered through their investigation. The necessary and crucial steps in conducting a case study are including the research questions construction, data collection, as well as data analysis and interpretation. A case study protocol will be helpful to guide the researchers to conduct the case study (Stake, 1995).

The researchers intend to conduct the study qualitatively by using a single case study approach. The decision to do a single case study is appropriate since the researchers are focusing on understanding a case or participant (Yin, 2018) and at the same time attempting to get a deeper understanding on a particular subject through revisiting old theoretical relationships or discovering the recent ones (Gustafsson, 2017). Furthermore, a qualitative case study allows the researcher to maintain the key features of the real-life phenomenon by emphasising on the complex issues (Gaya & Smith, 2016). Furthermore, the use of qualitative method for case study offers the researchers with flexibility in data collection (Stake, 1995).

The data for this study will be collected from multiple sources such as semi-structured interview, observation, and documents review. The motivation to choose these qualitative methods is driven by the flexibility in collecting the data without having to rely on numerical data, especially to profoundly comprehend the reasons why the SME is persuaded towards the implementation of DSCM in its business. The qualitative methods also enable researchers to describe, explain, and develop the explanatory models and theories, besides observing the reality (Morse & Field, 1996). The researchers propose a food manufacturing SME located in Penang to be studied as the case, since the preliminary study conducted has shown that the SME has implemented the DSCM in its organisation.

3.2 Preliminary Study

As being previously-mentioned, the potential case for this study is a food manufacturing SME in northern region of Malaysia, specifically in Penang that has implemented the DSCM since 2014. First of all, the primary reason of selecting the food manufacturer as a potential participant is due to its large domination in the Malaysian SMEs. As of January 2022, the statistics by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) has indicated that the food and beverages industry has become the largest subsector that contributes to the sales of the manufacturing sector by 20.6% from the total value of RM139 billion (DOSM, 2022). Furthermore, food manufacturing industry is also regarded as the core contributor to the country's economy due to its promising demand (Saidon & Mat Radzi, 2015). As for the selection of the manufacturer in general, is due its high rate of employments, which constitutes a total number of employees of 2,274,146 as of January 2022 (DOSM, 2022).

The researchers have initiated a preliminary interview with the potential case for few reasons. Firstly, the visit is intended to create a good rapport, in order to make the next steps of the study become smooth. Secondly, this visit is also aimed to identify whether the activities and operations of the SME in terms of DSCM implementation suits the main objective of the study. And last but not least, the initial interview is conducted to test whether the questions asked meet the requirement of the study and the potential participant's activities. After the preliminary interview, the researchers will further enhance the interview questions for the actual data collection.

Based on the results obtained from the preliminary interview conducted for this study, the SME has become the pioneer among the SMEs in northern region resulted from its early implementation of the DSCM. To date, the SME is implementing a number of DSCM practices such as digital logistics through the use of tracking system to locate the products based on the real-time data, the application of system integration to interact and share the information with other supply chain partners. Another DSCM implementation by the SME is the digital production system through the use of automation in its machineries for faster and more accurate production process. Through this conceptual study, it is also proposed that the SME has passed the fourth stage, which is implementation stage and is currently in the confirmation stage. In this last stage, the SME decides to continue the DSCM implementation. The SME is also planning to expand the implementation into more digital technology such as cloud computing in the future once the infrastructure of the industrial area where the SME is located gets better. By revisiting these stages, further study is proposed to identify the SME's current stage of DSCM implementation and its next decision in the implementation, whether the SME still needs the implementation or chooses to revert.

4. CONCLUSION

Due to the increasing importance of the DSCM in today's businesses especially for the SMEs, this study suggests for a deeper exploration on the DSCM implementation by the manufacturing SMEs, which can be done through an empirical study. By using a qualitative case study approach, this study proposes the issue to be studied from the perspective of the DOI, as depicted in the developed framework. The decision-making process for innovation in DOI represents the process that the SME had to go through to implement the DSCM in its organisation. The employment of the attributes of innovation from DOI is ideal to understand why the SMEs are motivated to implement the DSCM is seen appropriate due to the ability of these attributes to identify the elements of either the implementation or non-execution of the DSCM by the SMEs. Lastly, this study also utilises the category of adopters in DOI to identify the SME's current stage of implementation. Further exploration on this issue is expected to produce the outcomes that may benefit both the industry and academia, specifically to boost the motivation towards the implementation and provide the direction for future studies, respectively.

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