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International Parcel Delivery and Return Procedures Based on Standard Operating Procedures (SOP): A Case Study of PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the implementation of Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for the delivery and return of international parcels at PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado, identify the obstacles encountered in their implementation, and formulate improvement recommendations. The study was motivated by internal data for the period November 2024–December 2025, recording 168 parcel return cases related to customs documentation, averaging 13 cases per month, indicating a gap between the established SOP and its field implementation. A qualitative case-study approach was employed, with data collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation involving six informants: counter and mobile staff, the courier and logistics operations manager, the finance manager, and a customer. Data were analyzed across four subfoci: administrative aspects, customs and regulatory aspects, customer behavior, and internal operations, using the Miles and Huberman interactive analysis model. Results show that SOP implementation is generally consistent with established guidelines, though implementation gaps persist at several points. In the administrative aspect, incomplete sender/recipient data and inconsistent invoice values are the most frequent causes of returns. In the customs and regulatory aspect, the main obstacles are prohibited or restricted goods categories in destination countries and incomplete supporting documents. In the customer aspect, understanding of destination-country requirements typically forms only after experiencing a return. In the internal operations aspect, obstacles stem from limited human resources, information systems, and facilities. These four factors were found to be interrelated within a single cause-effect chain, indicating that international parcel returns are not random events but an accumulation of mappable and preventable failure points. The study recommends strengthening layered document verification, proactive customer education, periodic updating of customs regulatory information, strengthened inter-departmental coordination, strengthened information systems and facilities, and periodic return monitoring and evaluation to reduce international parcel return rates at PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado.

Keywords: *Standard Operating Procedure, International Shipping, Parcel Return, Customs, PT Pos Indonesia*

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1. Introduction

Globalization and international trade over the past decade have significantly increased the intensity of cross-border exchange of goods and services. Advances in information technology, expanding free markets, and the rapid growth of cross-border e-commerce have created growing demand for fast, secure, and reliable international shipping services, with individuals and businesses alike increasingly dependent on logistics providers for sending and receiving goods across the globe. This condition requires shipping service providers to maintain well-organized operational systems capable of meeting customer expectations regarding timeliness, product safety, and ease of shipment and return processes.

PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) is a state-owned enterprise engaged in postal and logistics services, operating an extensive network reaching remote areas and cross-border destinations. As a long-trusted institution, PT Pos Indonesia bears significant responsibility for service quality, particularly in international registered mail/parcel delivery — a process considerably more complex than domestic shipping, encompassing document inspection, customs procedures, sorting, packaging to international standards, and shipment tracking. In practice, international shipments do not always proceed as expected: delays, damage during distribution, incorrect addresses, customs holds, and non-delivery to recipients can all necessitate returning parcels to the country of origin — a process requiring coordination among PT Pos Indonesia, foreign postal administrations, customs authorities, and carriers. Deviation from established SOP in this process can result in delayed returns, lost parcels, and diminished customer trust.

PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) Manado Main Branch Office (KCU) serves shipping and receiving needs, including international parcels, for the community of Manado City and surrounding areas of North Sulawesi. However, SOP implementation in the field does not always proceed smoothly, facing both internal constraints (limited staff fully versed in international procedures) and external constraints (varying destination-country customs policies and limited transportation infrastructure). This is substantiated by internal return-monitoring data for November 2024–December 2025, recording 168 parcel return/cancellation cases related to customs documentation (SPPBMCP), averaging 13 cases per month — 53% caused by tax-exemption status requiring re-verification, 40.5% by cancellation of already-processed shipments, and the remainder by import-duty settlement issues. This data indicates that international parcel returns are not merely incidental but a recurring monthly issue warranting in-depth examination of SOP implementation in the field.

Preliminary observation further indicated a gap between the SOP formally established by PT Pos Indonesia's central management and its implementation at the KCU Manado operational level, with delayed shipment and return processes signaling the need for deeper examination of the correspondence between designed procedures and field implementation. Given that shipping and return service quality directly affects company reputation and customer/partner trust, this study examines the delivery and return procedures for international parcels based on SOP at PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado, aiming to provide a comprehensive picture of field-level SOP implementation, identify obstacles encountered, and formulate beneficial improvement recommendations for both logistics-management scholarship and PT Pos Indonesia KCU Manado's service quality.

Accordingly, this study aims to: (1) describe the implementation of international parcel delivery SOP at PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado; (2) describe the implementation of international parcel return-handling SOP; (3) identify obstacles encountered in SOP implementation, examined from administrative, regulatory/customs, customer-behavior, and internal-operational aspects; and (4) formulate improvement recommendations and implementation steps applicable to PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado. The study is confined to international parcel returns at PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado, examined through interview, observation, and documentation data, and does not cover detailed cost analysis, comparison with other shipping providers, or national-level shipping policy.

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2. Literature Review

Standard Operating Procedures

A Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) is a written guideline containing a sequence of instructions for tasks that employees must follow, creating work consistency and maintained service quality; well-implemented, consistent SOP minimizes human error, accelerates service processes, eases supervision and performance evaluation, and improves overall operational efficiency and effectiveness (Tathagati, 2014; Sailendra, 2015). SOP also functions as a normative benchmark for assessing the gap between designed procedure and field implementation.

International Logistics and Operations Management

International shipping involves considerably greater complexity than domestic shipping, requiring compliance with cross-border regulations and coordination among multiple parties, including standards set by the Universal Postal Union (UPU). Successful cross-border distribution depends heavily on inter-unit logistics integration and capability, not merely administrative compliance (Brdulak & Brdulak, 2021; Tukamuhabwa, Mutebi, & Kyomuhendo, 2023).

Reverse Logistics

Reverse logistics refers to the process of planning, implementing, and controlling the backward flow of goods for value recovery, involving multi-party coordination and non-trivial cost (Rogers & Tibben-Lembke, 2015; Govindan, Soleimani, & Kannan, 2015). This framework holds that returns are not random events but the accumulation of specific, mappable failure points across the shipping process.

International Customs Regulatory Framework

International customs compliance, guided by frameworks such as those of the World Customs Organization (WCO, 2022, 2023), establishes the mandatory compliance boundary that shipments must meet to avoid being held or returned, including document completeness, accurate goods classification, and compliance with destination-country prohibitions and restrictions.

Prior Research

Several prior studies inform this research. Hersanto, Adiningrum, and Sumarna (2023) identified staff human error as a leading cause of delivery failure at a postal express company, albeit in the context of domestic delivery delays. Dewi and Sudrartono (2022) analyzed factors causing failed deliveries at a PT Pos Indonesia drop center, while Tuahatu, Tutuhatunewa, and Tupan (2022) examined delivery quality control at a PT Pos Indonesia branch through Statistical Quality Control methods. Mahadi and Wandebori (2024) assessed PT Pos Indonesia's service quality using the Logistics Service Quality approach. Internationally, Hohenstein (2022) found that human-resource and system limitations constitute significant risk sources in global logistics management, while Wang, Chen, and Li (2025) and Hui et al. (2024) found that poor cross-border e-commerce logistics service quality drives customer complaints. Čižiūnienė, Šiugždinytė, and Matijošius (2025) found that various parcel-delivery problem types at a national postal company are strongly interrelated, such that addressing one problem type tends to affect the frequency of others — a finding directly relevant to this study's cross-factor synthesis. These studies collectively affirm that shipping and return failures stem from interrelated administrative, regulatory, customer, and operational sources rather than isolated causes, though few examine this interrelationship specifically within Indonesia's state postal operator at the branch level — the gap this study addresses.

Conceptual Framework

Building on SOP theory, international logistics and operations management theory, reverse logistics theory, and the international customs regulatory framework, this study examines international parcel return through four interrelated subfoci: the administrative aspect (document completeness, accuracy, and validity), the regulatory and customs aspect (compliance with international customs regulations and destination-country import requirements), the customer aspect (sender/recipient behavior, understanding, and responsiveness), and the internal operations aspect (internal operational

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processes and inter-unit coordination). The study's central proposition, following reverse logistics theory, is that these four factors are not independent but interrelated within a single cause-effect chain determining whether an international parcel is successfully delivered or returned.

3. Research Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case-study design, selected because international parcel returns at PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado constitute a complex, multi-factor problem requiring in-depth understanding of real field conditions rather than numerical variable measurement. The case-study design focuses on a single unit of analysis — the implementation of international shipping and return-handling procedures at PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado — examined in depth, specifically, and contextually against applicable SOP, structured around four interrelated subfoci: administrative documentation, customs and regulation, customer behavior, and internal operations (SOP implementation by PT Pos Indonesia staff).

Research Site and Duration

The study was conducted at PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado, Jl. Sam Ratulangi No. 23, Wenang Utara, Wenang, Manado, North Sulawesi, over three months (February–August 2026), covering preparation, data collection, analysis, and conclusion-drawing stages.

Informants

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on relevance to and direct involvement with the four research subfoci. Informants comprised: PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado staff directly involved in international shipping, as primary sources on administrative and customs aspects; a supervisor/section head responsible for international shipping operations, as a source on SOP implementation and internal operational aspects; and a customer (sender) who had experienced an international parcel return, as a source on customer-behavior aspects.

Table 1. Informant Profile

Code	Name	Position/Section
INF-1	Magfira Rifka Ahmad Langanawa	Counter Officer
INF-2	Umam Nurmidin	Mobile Officer
INF-3	Nurlely Syahraini Kader	Customer Service
INF-4	M. Hafizt Tapta Zani Syam	Courier & Logistics Operations Manager
INF-5	Irene Sesbania	Finance Manager
INF-6	Jeane Mangkang	Customer

Source: Field research data, 2026.

Data Types and Collection Procedures

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews (to obtain information on workflow, obstacles, and causes of international parcel returns) and direct observation (to observe the shipping and return process within the actual work environment). Secondary data were obtained from internal company documents (return reports, SOP documentation, and international shipping archives) and literature sources (books, scholarly journals, and relevant regulations).

Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive analysis model, applied continuously from data collection through study completion, comprising data reduction (selecting, simplifying, and focusing interview, observation, and documentation data in line with research objectives), data display (organizing reduced data into systematic narrative descriptions to facilitate understanding and analysis), and conclusion drawing (interpreting data to identify patterns, relationships, and the primary factors causing international parcel returns).

Data Validity

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Data validity was ensured through four techniques: credibility (source and technique triangulation, comparing interview, observation, and documentation data, plus member checking with informants), transferability (thick description enabling findings to be understood and applied in similar contexts), dependability (systematic documentation of the entire research process for traceability), and confirmability (audit trail of the research process to ensure findings are genuinely data-grounded and scientifically accountable).

4. Results and Discussion

Findings were obtained through in-depth interviews with six informants — counter and mobile staff (INF-1, INF-2, INF-3), the courier and logistics operations manager (INF-4), the finance manager (INF-5), and a customer (INF-6) — and are presented across the four research subfoci.

Administrative Aspect

Counter and mobile staff informants showed high consistency regarding mandatory sender-attached documents: customs declaration (CN22/CN23), invoice, packing list, and additional supporting documents such as health certificates, BPOM permits, or quarantine documents where required, with verification performed by matching sender, recipient, and content-description data between documents and system before processing — consistent with SOP theory's function as a normative benchmark for assessing procedure-implementation gaps (Tathagati, 2014; Sailendra, 2015). Nonetheless, informants consistently identified incomplete sender/recipient data, overly general goods descriptions, and inconsistent invoice values as the most frequent causes of returns, with two informants acknowledging that field verification is not always fully SOP-compliant due to varying staff understanding, time constraints, and sender-dependent document completeness — reinforcing reverse logistics theory's basic premise that returns stem from a mappable failure point, here located at the initial document-verification stage (Rogers & Tibben-Lembke, 2015; Govindan, Soleimani, & Kannan, 2015), and echoing Hersanto, Adiningrum, and Sumarna's (2023) identification of staff human error as a key delivery-failure cause, albeit in a different context.

Regulatory and Customs Aspect

Staff informants explained that SOP governs customs-document completeness and accuracy checks, goods classification, and screening for prohibited/restricted categories before customs referral, with specific destination countries — Australia (agricultural and animal products), the United States (food, cosmetics, and pharmaceuticals), Japan (health products and branded goods), and European Union countries (product safety and labeling) — identified as having particularly strict customs requirements, affirming the relevance of the international customs regulatory framework (WCO, 2022, 2023) and the view that cross-border shipping demands higher regulatory compliance than domestic shipping (Brdulak & Brdulak, 2021; Tukamuhabwa, Mutebi, & Kyomuhendo, 2023). Informants agreed that import duties or additional taxes are the recipient's responsibility, with PT Pos Indonesia holding no authority over duty amounts (a destination-country customs prerogative), and that routine customs coordination occurs, particularly for shipments requiring clarification or falling under prohibited/restricted categories. While one informant considered customs-related returns relatively less frequent than administrative causes, another noted that inconsistent goods descriptions and missing import permits trigger additional destination-country customs inspection — reinforcing that administrative and regulatory factors are not independent, as administrative failures such as imprecise goods descriptions can precipitate downstream customs problems.

Customer Aspect

The customer-behavior subfocus was explored through an informant who had experienced an international parcel return to Japan due to home-made processed food lacking BPOM (Indonesian Food and Drug Authority) approval; the shipment was only reprocessed after the product was replaced with a BPOM-approved item per staff guidance. The informant reported no issues on a prior shipment, indicating that understanding of destination-country requirements formed only after experiencing a rejection — consistent with the framework's positioning of sender understanding and recipient

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willingness to meet customs obligations as one of the four return-causing factors. The informant recommended that staff provide clearer upfront confirmation of whether an item may be shipped to the destination country, given the risk of non-refundable shipping-cost loss upon rejection — a recommendation echoed by the manager informant's emphasis on proactive customer education regarding permitted, prohibited, and restricted goods, indicating that the customer factor cannot be separated from staff's active role in providing information at the receiving stage.

Internal Operations Aspect

Manager informants confirmed that problematic-shipment handling follows a tiered process across administrative, customs, and operational sections with clear responsibility division, reflecting the inter-unit integration and logistics capability that Brdulak and Brdulak (2021) and Tukamuhabwa, Mutebi, and Kyomuhendo (2023) identify as critical to successful cross-border distribution. However, informants openly acknowledged internal obstacles hindering consistent SOP implementation: varying staff understanding of requirements, high workload during peak periods, human-error risk in inspection data entry, system disruptions, and limited inspection and storage facilities — findings consistent with Hersanto, Adiningrum, and Sumarna (2023) and reinforcing Hohenstein's (2022) view that human-resource and system limitations constitute significant risk sources in global logistics management. Return handling was described as following a tiered procedure — return receipt, data verification, physical condition inspection, recording/reporting, and follow-up determination (reprocessing versus full return to sender) — directly confirming Rogers and Tibben-Lembke's (2015) reverse logistics concept and Govindan, Soleimani, and Kannan's (2015) view that international reverse logistics involves substantial multi-party coordination and cost. Both manager informants consistently identified administrative and regulatory/customs factors as the most frequent return causes, positioning customer and internal-operational factors as the determinants of whether these primary causes can be prevented from the outset — with recommendations for stronger screening, consistent double-checking, strengthened inter-departmental coordination, and periodic return monitoring and evaluation reflecting managerial awareness that all four framework factors are interrelated and cannot be addressed in isolation.

Cross-Factor Synthesis

The findings across all four subfoci indicate that administrative, regulatory/customs, customer, and internal-operational factors are not independent but interrelated within a single cause-effect chain spanning the international shipping process — consistent with reverse logistics theory's basic premise that returns are not random events but an accumulation of mappable, interconnected failure points (Rogers & Tibben-Lembke, 2015; Govindan, Soleimani, & Kannan, 2015). This interrelationship follows a discernible pattern: the customer factor represents the initial risk point when senders do not yet fully understand destination-country requirements, as experienced by the customer informant regarding BPOM permit requirements; this understanding gap can progress into administrative problems (imprecise goods descriptions or incomplete supporting documents), which in turn precipitate regulatory and customs problems, as inaccurate content or value declarations form the basis for destination-country customs inspection, placing shipments at risk of being held or returned. Internal operational factors function as a moderating layer determining whether this administrative-regulatory failure chain is prevented early or allowed to progress until shipment departure — with both manager informants consistently identifying administrative and regulatory/customs factors as the most frequent causes while positioning customer and internal-operational factors as the determinants of early prevention, reinforcing that weaknesses in internal system, human resources, and inter-unit coordination amplify the impact of administrative and regulatory failures. This pattern is consistent with Čižiūnienė, Šiugždinytė, and Matijošius's (2025) finding that various parcel-delivery problem types at a national postal company are strongly interrelated, such that addressing one problem type tends to affect the frequency of others.

This synthesis can thus be summarized as a single chain: inadequate customer understanding drives administrative weaknesses in the form of incomplete or inaccurate documents and descriptions, while internal operational weaknesses — spanning staff competence, system availability, facilities, and inter-departmental coordination — function as the control factor throughout this chain, determining whether potential failure can be detected and prevented before shipment departure. This synthesis affirms the combined relevance of the study's four theoretical lenses — international operations and logistics management theory, reverse logistics theory, SOP theory, and the international customs regulatory framework — as a complementary analytical framework for understanding the root causes of international parcel returns at PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado.

5. Conclusion

This study examined international parcel delivery and return procedures based on SOP at PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado through a qualitative case study involving six informants across four subfoci. Five conclusions emerge. First, on the administrative aspect, SOP implementation generally aligns with SOP theory's document-verification requirements, though incomplete sender/recipient data, imprecise goods descriptions, and inconsistent invoice values remain the most frequent return causes, indicating a gap between procedural design and field implementation. Second, on the regulatory and customs aspect, SOP implementation references the international customs regulatory framework, with the most frequent obstacles being prohibited/restricted goods categories in destination countries (Australia, the United States, Japan, and EU countries) and incomplete supporting documents/permits, confirming that cross-border regulatory compliance demands greater precision than domestic shipping. Third, on the customer aspect, customer understanding of destination-country requirements typically forms only after experiencing a return, underscoring the need for proactive staff education and confirmation from the receiving stage onward. Fourth, on the internal operations aspect, PT Pos Indonesia KCU Manado's operational flow generally follows applicable procedure, though field implementation is not fully consistent due to human-resource constraints (varying staff understanding, human error, high workload), system and technology constraints, and facility limitations, with administrative and regulatory/customs factors identified as the most frequent return causes and customer/internal-operational factors as the determinants of early prevention. Fifth, and overall, these four factors are interrelated within a single cause-effect chain: international parcel returns at PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado are not random events but an accumulation of mappable, preventable failure points, consistent with reverse logistics theory, such that integrated strengthening across all subfoci is key to reducing international parcel return rates.

These findings suggest that PT Pos Indonesia (Persero) KCU Manado should implement layered document verification, proactive customer education on permitted, prohibited, and restricted goods, periodic updating of customs regulatory information, strengthened inter-departmental coordination, strengthened information systems and facilities, and periodic return monitoring and evaluation, applied in an integrated manner to sustainably reduce international parcel return rates. Educational institutions are encouraged to enrich international logistics management, customs regulation, and reverse logistics curricula with real case studies such as this one, and to build internship partnerships with PT Pos Indonesia and comparable shipping providers. Future research is encouraged to expand the number and variety of informants, including customers with return experiences across various destination countries, consider quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to measure each factor's contribution more precisely, and extend the study's geographic scope to other PT Pos Indonesia branches to test the consistency of these cross-factor findings.

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