Elevating Academic Staff's Customer Service Experience in Malaysian Public Universities

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Competition between Malaysian public universities is rising making it imperative to understand the important role of customer service experience in today's higher education service environment. As an integral part of a university, the Academic Affairs Department (AAD) is entrusted with meeting the needs and demands of its customers, particularly, the academic staff. In organisations operating in the service industry, such as public universities, the workplace experience of academic staff in directly affects students' satisfaction and university performance. Thus, factors affecting the academic staff's internal service experience is important to be recognised. Consequently, the focus of this research is to study the relationship between involvement and familiarity in affecting the experience of academic staff towards customer service among Malaysian public universities. The research model hypothesised that there is a significant relationship between customer involvement and familiarity on customer service experience. The researcher employed a quantitative methodology for this research,. For data collection, the survey method was used by constructing a self-administered questionnaire to collect data from 454 academic staff of 20 Malaysian public universities. This study employed a proportionate stratified random sampling technique to differentiate the data. The collected data was analysed using SPSS and PLS 3.0. Findings from the Partial Least Squares revealed significant relationships between customer involvement, familiarity, and customer service experience. The findings have discovered some theoretical and practical implications for administrators of Malaysian public universities. In particular, the AAD as well as policy makers and other practitioners, mainly in planning strategies for acquiring effective customer service experience.

Key words: *customer service experience, customer involvement, familiarity, Malaysia, public university.*

Introduction

In the past few years, Malaysia has surprisingly transformed into a contender in the global market in higher education for international students. Thus, in acknowledging the potential new source of growth and export revenue this sector can offer, Malaysia is aiming to become a regional centre for higher education. Public universities in Malaysia are steadfast in their aspiration to become world-class universities by 2015 in accordance to the requirements of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) introduced by the Ministry of Education. Issues regarding service experience, quality and satisfaction are the main concerns and factors that can not be compromised. One of the key elements highlighted in both the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and Quality Assurance (QA) standards is to meet customer needs and create a satisfactory service experience. Marketing research focusing on the customer service experience at Malaysian public universities is very limited. Therefore, this study attempts to determine the influence of customers' involvement and familiarity on service experience at Malaysian public universities. Malaysian public universities should take a greater responsibility in nurturing this industry. In turn, they will acquire a larger international market share and allow Malaysia to become a successful education hub (Amatz & Idris, 2011). In this competitive environment, it is extensively accepted that higher education institutions should market themselves more openly. For this goal to be achieved, public universities should begin by offering a superior customer service experience to its stakeholders (Awang & Ahmed, 2010, Krystal and Bhuva, 2017, Kweka and Ndibalema, 2018, Kyrychenko, 2018, Liu et al., 2017, Mansoor and Sultana, 2018, Senam et al., 2017). Determining the achievement of a university, is dependent on the competence of responsible departments such as the Department of Academic Affairs (AAD), the Department of Student Affairs, the Industry Relations and Research Department, the Department of Finance, the Administration and Human Resources Department among others. It cannot be denied that the AAD is the most important department in the operation of a university. This is because the AAD is responsible for realising the mission and vision of the university (UiTM's Academic Management Manual for Administrators, 2013). The AAD is believed to encounter the current needs and professional standards in the academic world. In addition to being presented with an important role at the university, the AAD is also accountable for administering the management and development of the university. This role is crucial in ensuring that the university is in line with the educational goals set up by the Ministry of Education (MOE). Previous studies have proposed that several universities in Malaysia are experiencing a decrease in the number of students due to the quality of their services that did not meet the expectations of students (Firdaus, 2006; Jain, Abu, Akhtar, & Sapuan, 2004; Latif, Sungri, & Bahroom, 2009). Moreover, Hasan, Ilias, Rahman, & Rahman (2008), Ismail & Abiddin (2009), revealed the quality of service at Malaysian universities is moderate to slightly above the moderate levels. Hence, the management teams at universities in Malaysia encounter a significant challenge to provide distinct leaders who can ensure

academic staff's acceptance on the importance of commitment to quality of service (Amatz & Idris, 2011).

While customer service experience has been studied independently in some studies, these variables are not examined concurrently in the context of public services. This study intends to fill this gap by investigating the relationship between customer engagement and familiarity with customer service experience in Malaysian public universities. According to the issues outlined above, the objectives of this study are summarised as follows:

1. To examine the significant influence of customer involvement on customer service experience among academic staff.
2. To examine the significant influence of customers' familiarity on service experience among academic staff.

Literature review
Customer service experience

The concept of experience is generally individual as every experience is developed from the quality of interaction in certain activities and can be dependent on the individual's previous state of mind. Even though the experience itself does not give any incontestable evidence, the participants value its effect since the importance of the experience rests on them, where it remains for a long period of time (Verhoef, et al., 2009). "Experience" is an event or incident that goes beyond everyday routine and the "climax" is the peak or transformative experience. Most researchers concur that "experience" is unique from routines of daily life (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Experiences in services are found to have characteristically different features than the traditional consumers' consumption experience, especially in the service industry. Shaw et al. (2010) assert that results obtained are inconsistent if the same marketing principles for physical goods and service experience are used due to the fundamental differences between them. The main difference is that core services offered are more complex and mostly comprise of processes, people, and physical facilities (McDaniel et al., 2013). This is because in the service industry, production and consumption frequently happen concurrently, and service experience paves the way for active construction of meaning related to behaviour, thoughts, and feelings that transpired during the consumption process (Sandstrom et al., 2008).

The importance of experience is apparent in evaluations of services offered. This explains the influence of experience on the perceptions of users to the service. Consequently, consumer ratings and service perceptions differ from their assessment and perceptions of consumer goods as there are elements of the experience involved. In general, the AAD is visited by academic staff to obtain two types of services. The first type is associated with support services that facilitate teaching. These support services include classroom arrangements, timetable management, teaching and learning tools in the classroom, college needs (computers, files,

stationery, etc.), reports for lecturers, special holiday applications, student status, student activities, online account activation (scoring destination) and others. The second type of services is associated with examination management which includes preparing exam schedules, managing exam scripts, reviewing student appeals for final assessment (support from lecturers is required) and other services.

Positive customer service experience among academic staff is important to the improvement of university performances . Academic staff, as internal customers of the AAD, are usually involved in service encounters at the department. These engagements establish a community of customers in "joint-production" or "joint-creation" to improve service experience of academic staff (Lu, Geng, & Money, 2015). Through the learning and knowledge-gathering process of service and service providers, customers can collaborate in the development of apositive service experience (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). Service providers should generate a service environment that offers support for the learning process and distribution of service information to their customers. This will enhance knowledge and understanding of academic staff on the delivery process of AAD services (Lu et al., 2015).

Customer service experience is deemed important to fill a primarily strategic role, which is highly regarded in the current service marketing environment. Organisations that implement customer service experience are evidently reaping the benefits of this activity. Thus, it is not surprisingly that customer service experience is seen as forming the core activity in many successful organisations around the world.

Customer involvement

Customer involvement is a psychological state that results from customer experience interactions with a focussed agent/object such as a firm or brand (Brodie et al., 2011). Involvement also relates to the psychological presence ("to be fully there"; Kahn, 1992) which is "an experiential state that accompanies personally-engaging behaviours that involves the channeling of personal energies into physical, cognitive, and emotional labors" (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 73). Involvement is different from psychological presence as it is not object-specific or moment-specific in the same way that psychological presence represents a specific time. Thus, it is crucial to recognise the relationship that surrounds the experience and contributes to the formation of a psychological state or disposition (Chandler & Vargo, 2011). As an example, customer involvement may appear after a positive service experience with a rental car service agent. The car rental service experience may happen through phone calls, face-to-face services with real people or self service kiosks, or in online internet chat applications.

Numerous studies have discussed why customers engage in behaviours unusual of buyers or consumers. Van Doorn et al. (2010) recommend customer-driven drivers for customer involvement, which also include attitudinal factors such as satisfaction, brand commitment and trust, customer goals, resources and value perceptions. Experimental studies conducted in an online context have revealed that customers are motivated to engage in non-transactional behaviours as they are anticipating benefits such as improved knowledge and reputation, social benefits and economic benefits such as cost savings (Füller, 2010). Firms are able to make customer involvement easier by offering efficient programmes for information exchange and interaction (Baron & Warnaby, 2011) and reward customers for their support (Füller, 2010; Kumar et al., 2010). Outcomes that may arise from customer involvement may take into account customer loyalty and satisfaction with the brand and community, empowerment, trust and commitment to service firms (Brodie et al., 2013).

In context of this study, academic staff of Malaysian public universities is experiencing a different level of involvement with different types of services offered by the AAD. Thus, customer involvement in this research is conceptualised as a psychological process (Brodie et al., 2013) in which customer service experience is one of the important marketing outcomes that is being influenced. This research emphasises customer involvement a psychological condition resulting from certain interactive experiences. First, customer involvement reveals the psychological state that transpires based on customers' interactive experiences with a main agent/object in a particular service relationship. In addition, different customer involvement situations occur in the dynamic service relationship processes that creates shared values. Consequently, customer involvement plays a leading role in the nomological network of service relationships and is a multidimensional concept subject to stakeholder-specific expressions and/or expressions of cognitive dimensions, emotions, and related behaviors. Finally, this study also suggests that customer involvement takes place in a set of particular situations that generates different levels of customer involvement.

Familiarity

Consumer familiarity with products or services has earned attention from numerous marketing researchers. This is because familiarity presents a critical role in consumers' decision-making process (Desai & Hoyer, 2000). Product familiarity is generally influenced by the number of experiences associated with the product that consumers have accumulated. If a consumer uses a product repeatedly, they form a sense of recognition with the product which reduces uncertainties in their future purchasing situations (Flavian et al., 2005). Familiarity through repeated exposure to stimuli is likely to enhance people's affective responses, therefore, indicating positive attitudes (Patterson & Mattila, 2008).

Likewise, familiarity also offers customers with different frame of reference to evaluate decisions in consuming (Söderlund, 2002). Ecker et al. (2007) describe familiarity as a typical feeling of a person or object before having access to contextual details, such as the time or place of the meeting. Therefore, familiarity can be considered an emotional expression because it uses the term "feeling" to suggest a relationship with emotion (Lee & Kwon, 2011). Ratcliffe (2002) uses the expression "feeling of familiarity" to explain familiarity as an affective concept. It is described as a feeling of emotion related to a known subject. Familiarity is simultaneously described as both a cognitive concept and an emotional (affective) concept. This study uses the definition by Ecker et al. (2007) that considers familiarity as a concept of affective and recommends familiarity as a new affective factor that affects customer behavioural intentions. In this study, consumer's familiarity includes service familiarity. Hypothetically, consumers who are more familiar with the services offered may experience some changes related to cognition. Alba and Hutchinson (1987) assert that consumer knowledge has two components, namely: familiarity and expertise. According to this research, increased intimacy points to a more comprehensive cognitive structure due to better knowledge. Thus, an explanation for familiarity is that, as more frequently people are exposed to a stimulus, they are more positively assessing it. As a result, the consumersfeel psychologically less distant to the stimulus. Patterson and Mattila (2008) assert that it is also expected when the results of the additional meeting are positive, consumers who spend more time thinking about services are more likely to be more positive than those who have spent less time thinking about such services. In contrast, when the assessment outcome of the additional meeting is negative, consumers who spend more time thinking about services are more inclined to be more negative, compared to those who spent less time thinking about the services.

Most consumer-oriented organisations seek to express their company's positive image. Consequently, service organisations do not want to form negative attitudes among customers that will result in a decline in their sales and profits in the future. As a result, the more familiar the customers are with the organisation, the more likely it is to collect positive assessments on organisations and services (Lee & Kwon, 2011). Consumers who have lower familiarity are more prone in using extrinsic cues in assessing the quality of products because they do not have enough intrinsic cues that are based on actual experience (Idoko, Nkamnebe, Ireneus, & Okoye, 2013). When consumers are more familiar with a service, they are collecting knowledge about it, which allows them to assess the quality of services based on past experience.

This study uses familiarity to evaluate AAD in Malaysian public university service settings. The main purpose of visiting the AAD is usually acquiring services that are catered to academic staff. However, as the number of service experiences increase and the academic staff become more familiar with the AAD, the purpose of engaging in services from the department would be somewhat different from the main visit. An example, of this would be an academic staff is visiting a friend at the AAD. In other words, under the AAD service context, familiarity can be

a critical element in differentiating perceptions of customers on values concerning their respective service experiences and intentions of behaviour in the future (Ha & Jang, 2010).

Methodology

This study involved academic staff from all public universities in Malaysia. For the purpose of data collection, self-administered questionnaires were used. As researchers did not have direct access to the respondents, assistance from the Heads of Departments was sought. Research instruments were sent by hand to the Heads of Departments of the universities involved. They were then asked to distribute the questionnaires randomly to academic staff in their faculties. Every questionnaire is attached with a cover letter informing the participants of the objective of the study, the confidentiality of the collected data and instructions in answering the questions. Participants were assured of confidentiality and were informed that there is no correct or incorrect answer to the questions. In total, 472 questionnaires were completed for data collection, but only 454 questionnaires could be used for the study.

Measurements to determine familiarity were adapted from Johnson and Russo (1984). In order to measure customer engagement, a ten-point instrument – The Renewal of Personalized Engagement Inventory (RPII) –developed by Zaichkowsky (1987) was used. Customer service experience was measured by adjusting the Customer Experience Index (CEI) scale tested for authenticity and reliability developed by Kim et al. (2011). Each of the five scales had Cronbach's alpha coefficients above 0.70; alpha = 0.95 for benefits, alpha = 0.81 for convenience, alpha = 0.87 for accessibility, alpha = 0.70 for utiliy, and alpha = 0.84 for trust. All items used seven-point Likert-type scales with anchors of "strongly disagree" as 1 and "strongly agree" as 7. The analysis of the instrument is presented in Table 1. The following step includes the need to check the reliability of each construct. These constructs have never been explored previously in the establishment of a public university, so the primary concern is building internal consistency or the extent to which the items consisting of one another are united. The Cronbach alpha coefficient was used to test for internal consistency. The Alfa Cronbach coefficient that is suitable for internal consistency should be above 0.7 (Pallant, 2011) so items that are rated below the recommended alpha level 0.7 can be taken out so the reliability of the construction can be improved.

Table 1: Survey instruments

Part	Content	Number of Question
Part A	Customer Service Experience (CSE)	33
Part B	Customer Involvement (CInvol)	10

| Part C | Familiarity (Cfamiliar) | 6 |
| Part D | Personal Information | 11 |

Findings and discussion
Assessment of the measurement model

The validity of the measurement model was evaluated by testing the convergence validity and discriminant validity. In this model, the convergent validity was determined by calculating the factor loadings, the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) for all constructs. Hair et al., (2011) stipulated that the loading of 0.7 and above is an ideal indicator while AVE greater than 0.5 is considered adequate convergence. Composite reliability (CR) values were above 0.70 (Chin, 2010; Requelme & Rios, 2010) and the AVE values meet the minimum criteria of 0.50 (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009; Rodgers & Pavlou, 2003).

In this study, it indicates that all the factors loading are above 0.6 (see figure 2), the CR value is ranged 0.927 to 0.970 and AVE also ranged 0.529 to 0.694.

Table 2: Results of construct and discriminant validity analysis

|	CSE	CFAM	Cinvol	AVE	CR
Customer Service Experience (CSE)	**0.727**			0.529	0.970
Customer Involvement (Cinvol)	0.682	**0.749**		0.561	0.927
Customer Familiarity(CFam)	0.687	0.578	**0.833**	0.694	0.931

According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), the discriminant validity can be examined by evaluating the squared correlations between constructs and variance extracted for a construct. Table 2 shows that there is enough discriminant validity because the diagonal elements are larger than the off-diagonal elements in the corresponding rows and columns. Therefore, the measurement model is satisfactory and presents satisfactory evidence in terms of reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

Assessment of the structural model

Test hypotheses using path analysis was employed. According to Aibinu and Visit (2010), the path coefficients indicate the strengths of the relationships between the dependent and

independent variables. The path estimates and t-statistics were determined for the hypothesized relationships via bootstrapping techniques with a resampling of 500.

Fig. 1: Path analysis result
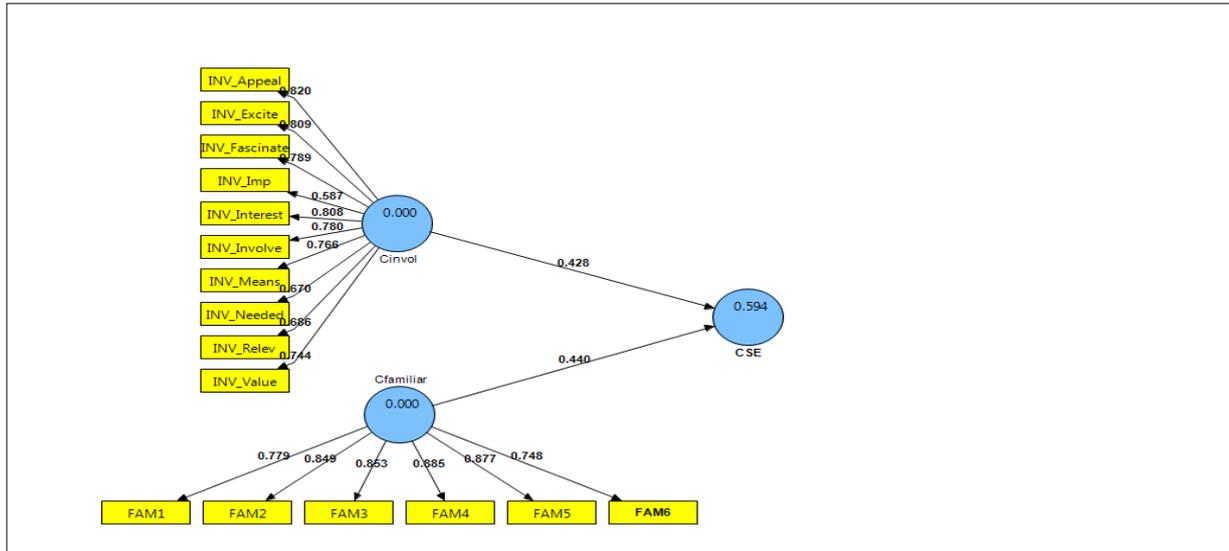
Table 3: Result of hypothesis testing

	Hypotheses	Coefficient	t-value	Decision
H1	Customer Involvement -> Customer Service Experience	0.440	10.941	Supported
H2	Customer familiarity -> Customer Service Experience	0.428	9.584	Supported

Note: p < .05, t-value greater than 1.645

Figure 1 and Table 3 show the results of the path coefficient and t-value indicate that H1 are significant (t-value = 10.941*). This shows that customer involvement has a significant relationship with customer service experience. Besides, results of the t-value reveal that H2 are significant (t-value = 9.584*). From the results, it was found that customer involvement and customer familiarity have a significant relationship with customer service experience.

Discussion

The results of this study revealed that customer involvement had a significant and positive influence on customers' experience of the services. This implies that academic staff, who are

involved in customer service at higher levels, tend to have better experiences. From this study, it was shown that the positive relationship between customer engagement and customer service experience is in line with recent research by Lin (2010) on the experience value model. This also suggests that there is a positive relationship between custom experience and the degree of customer involvement. The emphasis is on how the receiver's knowledge, motive and level of engagement influence their attitudes and approaches in processing the information (Lin, 2010). To handle customer service experience at the AAD successfully, there must be a focus on customer-centric experience in addition to the facilities offered to academic staff. Furthermore, the finding is also consistent with a research done by Tu and Zhang (2013) in non-trading virtual communities. They found that customer involvement has a significant positive effect on word-of-mouth and repeated use intentions. It is suggested that organisations should pay attention to customer involvement as it will influence customers through gaining their value and encourage customer loyalty.

Moreover, by reinforcing the relationship between academic staff and the AAD, it will pave the way towards better attitudes and higher levels of involvement. Thus, to develop greater customer involvement, customer satisfaction becomes the main target. This is in line with Lagrosen (2005) and Ritter and Achim (2003) who also support that customer satisfaction is an antecedent attitude toward involvement. It is, therefore, imperative for the AAD to monitor the service system more effectively. In addition, academic staff need to impart their knowledge and acquire services that are more consistent with their own needs. This creates a win-win situation. The more the academic staff acquire knowledge about the services, the better they can assist the AAD to accomplish a better new service rate of success and an increased customer satisfaction (Lamberti & Noci, 2009).

The AAD creates high-level personal interactions between customers and service personnel. This means that the AAD i is involved in a more specialised service, in contrast to other types of services on the market. Consequently, customer involvement represents an important role in influencing positive service experiences. Lamb et al. (2015) assert that businesses that have high levels of engagement and provide special services such as restaurants, hair salons, and dental treatment clinics, demand more personal communication between the service providers and their customers. Thus, special consideration is necessary in order to deliver satisfactory services. Gentile, Spiller, and Noci (2007) emphasise that services today comprise of even more contact points between a company and its customers than ever before. As the number of contact points multiplies, attention to the client reveals how important it is to monitor the many experiences gained from the contact points. They also propose the development of transaction-based concept of customer relationship to the "continuous" concept of customer service experience.

In this research, academic staff who visited the AAD should take part in the service delivery process itself to receive good quality services from the department. For example, an academic staff member needs to provide some information about a student's personal details such as metric number, courses, semester, etc. for the AAD employee to check on the student's status. The AAD can no longer be a mere supplier of the service. It needs to emphasise the importance of the co-creation of value in the process of delivering favourable customer service experience to academic staff. Services offered at AAD is a system that involves a value-creation configuration consisting of exchange parties (AAD and academic staff) and its systems that have an indirect influence on co-creation value (Edvardsson et al., 2011).

This study also found that customer service experience is considerably and positively influenced by familiarity. Consequently, the results show that the higher the level of familiarity among academic staff, the more likely they are to have higher customer service experience. This decision is in line with the study conducted by Mamat et al. (2014). This proves that habit is very much related to experience. The findings are also consistent with the investigations conducted by Churchill and Iacobucci (2002). The result is also supported by social learning theory. According to this theory, academic staff will eventually repeat certain behaviours in the future if it results in positive outcomes. To put it another way, the more familiar they are with the service environments or service encounters, the more positive outcomes would likely to occur. This is in line with research done by Rodrigues (2012). He found that familiarity has a great impact on cognitive processing and, consequently, it will influence customer behaviour. Moreover, Söderlund (2002) observed that consumers with high familiarity are inclined to buy more and spread positive feedback via word-of-mouth. Consumers who have high levels of familiarity in a service will have a more complex structure of perception in terms of their evaluative categories and this will result in repeat purchases.

These findings are congruent with previous work on the impact of familiarity in service encounter assessments (Petterson & Mattila, 2008). People's affective reactions tend to increase by always being aware of stimuli, therefore, leading to encouraging attitudes. Additionally, the positive (i.e. lessening) impact of familiarity will lead to negative behavioural response due to service failure. People are more likely to be concerned regarding any negative outcomes from their choices rather than the outcomes from positive ones. Therefore, the intention to switch and criticise service providers is unlikely to occur when customers are dealing with familiar service providers in contrast to dealing with those who are less familiar.

In term of familiarity, many providers form long-term relationships with their customers, collecting experiences and developed higher levels of familiarity. Söderlund (2002) exposes the relationship between familiarity and positive effects on evaluations of services or objects. When challenged with a familiar service/brand, consumers might detect the feeling of warmth and intimacy. Consequently, Patterson and Mattila (2008) also discovered that people acquire

stronger associations to a stimulus when their exposure increases. If the previous encounter is positive, an additional encounter may result in an increase in like. In addition, if the previous encounter was negative, an additional encounter may result in an increase in dislike.

Conclusion

Even though customer service experience is an established practice in large-scale companies in developed countries, it is still emerging in Malaysia. Customer service experience is deemed important to fill a primarily strategic role, which is highly needed in current service marketing environment. Organisations that implement customer service experience are clearly reaping the benefits of the activity. Thus it is not surprising that customer service experience is seen as forming the core activity in large organisations in markets around the world nowadays.

Acknowledgement

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