Determinants of Customer Service Experience among Academic Personnel in Malaysian Public Universities

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Abstract
In Malaysian public universities, managing customer service experiences has emerged as a critical concern among university policymakers. Every stakeholder in universities is now viewed as a potential source of revenue, including every student as a customer and every member of staff as an internal customer. The Academic Affairs Department (AAD) is a cornerstone of the university. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the AAD to satisfy the requirements of its customers, particularly its internal customers which is the university's academic personnel. Academic personnel service experience is directly correlated with student happiness and university success. Therefore, it is vital to comprehend the aspects that affect the service experience of academic personnel. Hence, the main objective of this study is to examine the influence of perceived market orientation and self-efficacy on academic staff members' customer service in Malaysian public universities. According to the study paradigm, perceived market orientation and self-efficacy significantly impact how well customers are treated. The study made use of the survey method and quantitative research. A self-administered questionnaire was created to collect data from the academic staff of 454 Malaysian public universities. In this investigation, proportionate stratified random sampling was used. Findings from Partial Least Square 4.0 revealed significant correlations between perceived market orientation, self-efficacy, and customer service experience. Overall, this study supported the need to emphasize perceived market orientation and self-efficacy while managing the customer service experience of academic personnel in public universities.
Keywords: Customer Service Experience, Perceived Market Orientation, Self-Efficacy, Academic Personnel, Malaysian Public Universities

Introduction

Malaysia has recently become an unexpected competitor in the global market for international students attending higher education institutions. Malaysia wants to establish itself as a hub for higher education in the area because it sees this industry as a possible new source of growth and export income. According to the guidelines established by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), which was established by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysian public universities are dedicated to becoming world-class institutions by the year 2025, and that will equip Malaysia for the final leg of its journey towards becoming a high-income nation. The issues of service experience, quality, and satisfaction are the primary concerns and attributes that cannot be compromised. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and Quality Assurance (QA) standards both emphasize how important it is to meet customer needs and deliver an enjoyable customer experience. There are very few marketing studies that highlight the customer service experience in Malaysian public universities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine how perceived market orientation and self-efficacy among academic personnel affect the way that customers are treated in public institutions in Malaysia.

Services provided by the Academic Affairs Department (AAD) in various public universities or faculties in Malaysia have slight differences (Jian and Wooi, 2022). Generally, the main responsibilities of the AAD include developing academic policies and systems of the university, ensuring and monitoring quality standards, and meeting the current needs in the country as well as internationally. In addition, the department is also managing the processes, procedures, and reviews of the academic curriculum. The AAD also provides academic development planning for the university and is also responsible for establishing and exploring academic relationships with other local universities and leading universities abroad. Although customer service experience has been researched separately in a number of studies, these variables have not been examined simultaneously in a public service context. The present study aims to fill this gap by examining the relationships between perceived market orientation and self-efficacy with customer service experience in the context of Malaysian public universities.

Literature Review
Customer Service Experience

Service organizations of all forms, including businesses, governmental organizations, and institutions of higher learning, seek to attain and maintain high levels of performance by adopting specific service marketing strategies (Zeithaml et al., 2010). Service organizations like public universities in Malaysia are competing with tremendous numbers of other universities in the world (Knight, 2011). When a university sets out to attract a student, it needs to create an educational experience that is genuinely able to satisfy the needs of the students (Zeithaml et al., 2010). The university has had to discover newer and more advanced strategies to cope with increasing competition, the complexity of society, and fast-changing needs (Ramachandran et al., 2011). To aid its progress, service marketing has tapped into disciplines such as psychology, sociology, economics, and, anthropology to become more effective. The result is a much more consumer-oriented approach to service marketing. Giving greater choices, delivering true value, and winning the hearts and minds of consumers is the key to long-term market advantage (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2014).

By focusing on consumer experience in a service setting, a consumer is highly involved in his or her purchase and consumption of a product or service (Ali and Omar, 2014). Several consumers reported that their service encounters involved many factors relating to physical and emotional comfort through personalized service and a rich physical environment (Cetin and Dince, 2014). Customer experience is frequently considered important for businesses in the entertainment industry, including theme parks (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). A survey of the literature reveals that regardless of the service or product a client purchases or receives, they will have a customer experience, which may be positive, negative, or indifferent. In other words, no matter how unremarkable the product or service may seem, all service interactions generate the possibility for all kinds of service experiences for the customers (Voss & Zomerdijk, 2007).

Perceived Market Orientation

In recent decades, the environment in which academic institutions develop their operations has grown more competitive, and the industry has been exposed to market forces. Universities have therefore demonstrated an increasing interest in creating and upholding a positive and distinctive image among their stakeholders. Many of them have therefore concentrated their efforts on the revival and upgrading of training programs with a marketing orientation. Market orientation has been identified as a vital component in moulding an institution's performance and it has been extensively studied in the literature (Salas, Pozo & Fernandez-Guerrero, 2020).

Market-oriented institutions scan the market more broadly and with a longer-term perspective to find out what the consumers' actual and latent demands are, which drives generative learning. To gather data to process, they might, for instance, study how customers use products or services on a regular basis. They might also closely collaborate with lead users to anticipate future market developments (Wirtz & Daiser, 2018). The educational marketplace is the first area that the literature on higher education marketing focuses on, after which it moves on to more specific subjects like the marketing mix and educational marketing strategies, the marketization of universities, and most recently, a dynamic evolution from the marketing concept to the market orientation (Hussain et al., 2016).

Prior studies have covered university finance and enrolment concerns and underlined the need for universities to acquire a market orientation in order to effectively compete in the education market and draw in new students. Due to the increased competition in the education sector, higher education institutions are becoming more customer-oriented and spending a lot of money on marketing strategies to attract new students and boost enrolments (Ghobehei et al., 2019). Universities were forced by the fierce rivalry in the education sector to develop ways to gain and maintain a competitive advantage (Ghobehei et al., 2019; Panda et al., 2019).

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, which pertains to the task- and domain-specific beliefs people have about their capacity to manage resources and carry out the course of action to effectively complete the task, is crucial to Socio-Cognitive Theory (Rosman et al., 2021). Furthermore, Bandura explained self-efficacy as an innate belief of individuals for their behavioral capability in achieving specific goals, for instance, individuals' assessment of their own performance in

certain scenarios. The concept of self-efficacy is elaborated in the theoretical framework of the social cognitive theory developed by (Bandura, 2006). The finding from previous studies lain that individuals with high levels of self-efficacy commonly have better performance, persist more in the face of obstacles, have higher learning outcomes, and are more motivated than individuals with lower self-efficacy (Jaradat & Faqih, 2014). This is because self-efficacy affects not only performance but also cognitive processes, motivation, and feelings.

Individuals with greater self-efficacy are more likely to view difficult tasks as challenges rather than threats, fostering motivation and engagement, persistence, and more effective use of coping mechanisms (Zhu et al., 2010). In contrast, a lower sense of self-efficacy undermines performance, weakens engagement, and leads to quicker abandonment of tasks (Bandura, 2006). The role of self-efficacy has been widely studied in various disciplines. Equally important, Aoki et al (2022) found in research involving a total of 162 medical students, the ANOVA analysis revealed that self-efficacy contributes the highest points to optimizing student feedback in real-time. This evidence proves that self-efficacy is one of the crucial factors to improve people's communication skills, importantly in real-time interaction and it helps to assist necessary action in a given situation.

Methodology
This study involved academic staff in all public universities in Malaysia. Self-administered questionnaires were used in data collection. Measurements for perceived market orientation and self-efficacy were adapted from Corbitt et al (2003); Lin (2020) respectively, while customer service experience was measured by adapting the Customer Experience Index (CEI) scale which was tested for validity and reliability by (Kim et al., 2011). Thus, the total number of usable questionnaires was 454. Data were analyzed with SPSS version 28 and SmartPLS 4.0 to test the hypotheses.

Results
Profile of the Respondents
Based on analysis using SPSS Version 28, the demographic profile of the respondents in this study has been divided into eight (8) categories. They are gender, age, marital status, academic position, level of education, monthly salary, years with the institution, and areas of specialization. The analysis recorded those 187 respondents (41.2%) were male and 267 respondents (58.8%) were female. The majority of them or 127 respondents (28%) were aged between 25 to 30 years and 323 respondents (71.2%) were married. Meanwhile, 273 respondents (60.6%) and 106 respondents (23.3%) are lecturers and senior lecturers respectively and they hold master's degrees which 309 respondents (68.1%). In terms of monthly salary, 121 respondents (26.7%) were paid between RM3001 to RM4000 and only 30 respondents (6.6%) were paid more than RM8000. In addition, more than 50% of respondents served their institution between two to nine years. And lastly, based on the analysis, it is found that the majority of them come from business and management backgrounds.

Measurement Model Evaluation

SEM-PLS (Smart PLS 4.0) was used to analyze the measurement model (Ringle, Wende & Becker, 2015). Factor loading, composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha, average extracted variance (AVE), and discriminant validity, as well as Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) as proposed by Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2015) were evaluated.

Internal Consistency Reliability

Internal consistency reliability, which comprises Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability, is the first criterion to be determined in the measurement model. To demonstrate the modest dependability applicable to the research, the composite reliability values should be higher than 0.70 (Hair et al., 2014).

Table 1
Internal consistency reliability

Construct	Item	Loading range (>0.70)	Composite Reliability (>0.70)	Cronbach's Alpha (α) (>0.60)
Perceived Market Orientation	15	0.743 – 0.886	0.965	0.963
Self-Efficacy	7	0.758 – 0.867	0.906	0.899
Customers Service Experience	29	0.701 – 0.827	0.968	0.966

From Table 1, the composite reliability value for the perceived market orientation was 0.965, self-efficacy was 0.906, and customer service experience was 0.968. All of the constructs had strong composite reliability where values between 0.70 and 0.90 are considered strong and satisfactory (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Convergent Validity

Table 2 displays the composite reliability values, which show how well the construct indicators signal the latent construct, ranging from 0.906 to 0.968, which was higher than the recommended value of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2014). As a result, all of the AVE values at the construct level in Table 4 imply that the measurement model is convergently valid. The AVE ranged from 0.586 to 0.662.

Table 2
Convergent validity of measurement model

Construct	Loading range (>0.70)	Composite Reliability (>0.70)	AVE (>0.50)	Cronbach's Alpha (α) (>0.60)
Perceived Market Orientation	0.743 – 0.886	0.965	0.662	0.963
Self-Efficacy	0.758 – 0.867	0.906	0.628	0.899
Customers Service Experience	0.701 – 0.827	0.968	0.586	0.966

Discriminant Validity

The Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio, and the Fornell-Larcker (1981) criterion of comparing the correlations between constructs and the square root of the AVE for that construct are all common ways of assessing discriminant validity. Discriminant validity is determined using this method when an item's loading on a construct is greater than all of its cross-loading with other constructs. Henseler et al (2015) suggested the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations as a rigorous method of achieving discriminant validity. HTMT, as a criterion, involves comparing it to a predefined threshold. Gold, Malhotra, and Segars (2001) proposed that a value of 0.90 shows a lack of discriminant validity. Hence, Table 3 shows that discriminant validity has been established.

Table 3
Heterotrait– Monotrait (HTMT)

	Customer Service Experience	Perceived Market Orientation	Self-Efficacy
Customer Service Experience			
Perceived Market Orientation	0.830		
Self-Efficacy	0.458	0.357	

Table 4
Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	Customer Service Experience	Perceived Market Orientation	Self-Efficacy
Customer Service Experience	0.764		
Perceived Market Orientation	0.794	0.814	
Self-Efficacy	0.441	0.337	0.793

 Note: Diagonals (in bold) represent the average variance extracted while the other entries represent the squared correlation.

Table 4 shows the results of the Fornell-Larcker criterion assessment with the square root of the AVE on the diagonal and the correlations between the variables in the lower left triangle. Overall, the square roots of the AVEs for the construct perceived market orientation, self-efficacy, and customer service experience were above 0.50. Thus, this research paper fulfills those criteria on the HTMT ratio, and the Fornell-Larcker criterion, providing evidence for the discriminant validity of the constructs. In sum, both convergent and discriminant validity of the measures in this research were established.

Structural Model Evaluation

Path analysis was performed to evaluate the structural model. The primary evaluation criteria for the structural model are the R^2 value and the level of significance of the path coefficient (Barclay et al., 1995; Hair et al., 2014). Figure 1 illustrates the structural model of the study.
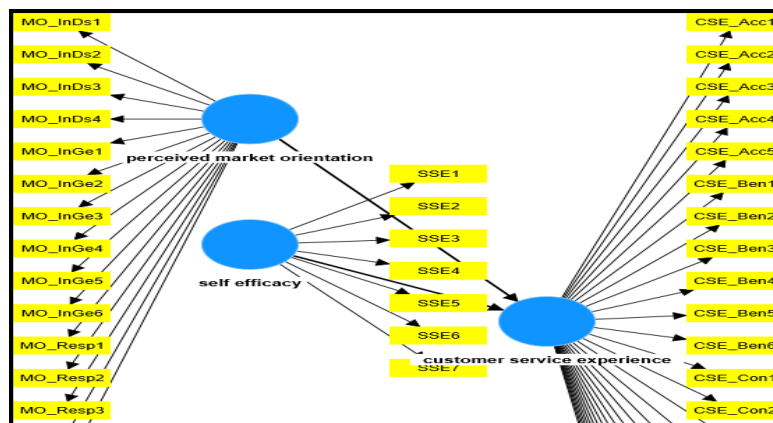
Figure 1: Structural Model

Assessment of Collinearity among the Constructs

The first step in evaluating the structural model is to examine collinearity issues between each set of constructs separately for each subpart of the structural model. Table 7 shows the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values of the analyses. VIF value for perceived market orientation and self-efficacy = 1.124824681. All the VIF outputs are clearly below the threshold of 5. Therefore, collinearity among the constructs is not an issue in the structural model. Thus, the author can continue examining the default report such as path coefficient, R^2, f^2, and Q^2.

Assessment of Path Coefficients

Path coefficients indicate that the strengths of the relationships and hypotheses are empirically supported. As seen in Table 5, it is confirmed that both paths' relationships are significant. The exogenous constructs such as the perceived market orientation and self-efficacy significantly contributed to explaining the variation in the endogenous latent variable namely the customer service experience with the β value 0.337 (34%) and 0.441 (44%) respectively. The *t*-values of the parameter indicate the strength of the relationship represented by the parameter where the higher the *t*-value, the stronger the relationship. The bootstrapping procedure using a 5000 sample was used to obtain the *t*-values of each coefficient (Tibshirani & Efron, 1993; Chin, 2010).

Table 5
Significant Testing Results of the Structural Model Path coefficients

Structural Path	Path coefficient (β)	*t*- value	P-value	Decision
Perceived Market Orientation -> Customer Service Experience	0.337	7.402	0.000	Supported
Self-Efficacy -> Customer Service Experience	0.441	10.203	0.000	Supported

* 1.645 - 2.32 ** 2.33 and above   ***p<0.01

Overall, all two (2) hypotheses were accepted and supported at a significant value of p<0.000. It can be concluded that perceived market orientation and self-efficacy constructs have strong direct relationships with customer service experience.

Assessment of Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

The R^2 value is a measure of model prediction accuracy that is determined as the squared correlation between the actual and projected values of a certain endogenous component. Chin (1998) proposed 0.67 (substantial), 0.33 (moderate), and 0.19 as threshold values for measuring R^2 value (weak). For the research model, the R^2 values = 68.3% or 0.683 of the variance in customer service experience, which is a satisfactory level of model predictability. Thus, this model is meaningful with substantial predictive capacity.

Assessment of Effect Size (f^2)

The effect size (f^2) is a metric for determining the relative impact of an exogenous (predictor) construct on an endogenous (endogenous) construct (Hair, 2014). To quantify the relative effect size of the exogenous construct on the endogenous construct, using Cohen's (1988) guidelines: f^2 values of 0.02 are regarded as small effects, 0.15 are considered medium effects, and 0.35 are considered large effects. f^2 effect size of perceived market orientation= 0.128 and f^2 effect size of self efficacy= 0.242 explain the predictive value of customer service experience construct. In summary, both constructs had a medium effect size in producing the R^2 for customer service experience.

Assessment of Predictive Relevance (Q^2) and Blindfolding

The Q^2 score in SEM-PLS is a predictive relevance metric based on the blindfolding approach (Hair, 2014). A Q^2 score > zero for a reflecting endogenous latent variable in the structural model demonstrates the path model's predictive importance for this construct. The Q^2 value = 0.216 which is higher than zero, indicating that the model is predictive of the reflecting endogenous latent variables.

Discussion and Recommendations

This study established that perceived market orientation is significantly and positively related to the customer service experience. This finding is supported by Tinaco et al (2020) stating that market orientation requires an in-depth knowledge of customers' needs, thus implying the acquisition of information about them to promote competitive advantage. Information generation, dissemination, and response to market needs are the essential elements of the concept's applicability to the public sector (Modi & Mishra, 2015). Thus, the results imply that academic staff have a higher perceived market orientation and would be more likely to have higher customer service experience which will turn into a competitive advantage for the higher education institution. Therefore, to achieve a competitive advantage in dynamic and rapidly changing environments, companies must adopt marketing orientation strategies (Ali et al., 2017). Walker et al (2011) have shown effective implementation of relationships and services in marketing by a public institution in Hong Kong, leading to excellent service delivery. Thus, adopting a business-like market orientation will significantly improve public sector service delivery. According to Coffie, & Hinson (2022) most previous studies assume that the implementation of a marketing philosophy will almost inevitably lead to superior organizational performance (Frambach et al., 2016). This implies that a market-oriented posture provides a positive atmosphere to accomplish customer needs, thus causing a positive impact on customer satisfaction (Owino & Kibera, 2015). Similarly, in the context of public universities.

It was also found that self-efficacy is significantly and positively related to the customer service experience. In addition, it appears that self-efficacy had a great effect on customer service experience (β=0.441). The implication of this is that academic staff who have high self-efficacy tend to have higher customer service experience. These findings supported by Bandura (1986) propose that customers who believe that they are more effective in the use of a certain service are more likely to appreciate that service and, subsequently, take part in the production of the service. Customers with higher self-efficacies have higher degrees of active participation and positive attitudes and behaviors, thus, will lead to a better customer service experience compared to those who have lower self-efficacies. The involvement of academic staff in a given service encounter may comprise interactions with service organization employees, service technologies, and even other customers. The point to which the AAD service employees and the academic staff engage in a suitable role script will determine what the academic staff is expected to perceive. Enhancing customer self-efficacy is also crucial because it can increase the value of a given service (McKee et al., 2006). The AAD is encouraged to put extra effort to increase the academic staff's voice in the department. Because of the role that voices play in reducing customer turnover and increasing word-of-mouth referrals, it is important for the AAD management to investigate opportunities for increasing customers' voices in the organization.

Conclusion

Customer service experience is deemed important to fill a primarily strategic role, which is highly needed in the current service marketing environment. The organizations that implement customer service experience are clearly reaping the benefits of the activity. Thus, not surprisingly, the customer service experience is seen as forming the core activity in large organizations in markets around the world nowadays. This research examined the AAD customer service experience utilizing a model which attempts to demonstrate the significant effects of perceived market orientation and self-efficacy. The results of the study have validated the inter-relationship between perceived market orientation and self-efficacy toward customer service experience in the context of public higher learning institutions in Malaysia.

The results of the study are suggestive of the role of perceived market orientation and self-efficacy in influencing academic staff's customer service experience at the AAD of Malaysian public universities. The findings also support the applicability of customer service experience through the behavioral model and social learning theory. The service experience marketing concept involves a psychologically-based theory that views customers as hedonic emotional human beings whose major concern is to achieve excellent service experience. Moreover, knowledge about customer service experience can be crucial for the AAD management team to make adequate strategic, human resources, technological, communication, and marketing decisions in order to provide a satisfying service experience, as well as enhance frequent visits among academic staff.

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