

## A Conceptual Framework for Customer Experience Towards COVID-19 Preventive Measures of Malaysian Retailers

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### Abstract

This study develops a framework on customer experience towards COVID-19 preventive measures of Malaysian retailers. Specifically, it proposes a conceptual framework of In-Store Customer Experience (ISCX) and preventive measures within the implementation of the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs concept. Eventually, the upcoming focus is to investigate the ISCX towards the preventive measures in fulfilling the customers' physiological and basic needs through the utilisation of this framework. This study used a qualitative descriptive approach utilising the thematic analysis to identify its customers' experiences on the retailer's preventive measures during COVID-19 pandemic. These measures were collected and analysed through Atlas.ti software. This study will provide insights for future researches to investigate further on how retailers' preventive measures affect ISCX; as the new coronavirus, COVID-19 is not the first threatening disease that's surged worldwide. It also will provide more suggestions to policymakers and businesses on preventive measures deemed to be suitable for future implementation of the guideline. This research will also support Sustainable Development Goal 3 for Good Health and Well-Being which helps end the COVID-19 pandemic as an infectious disease.

**Keywords:** Preventive Measures, Consumer Experience, COVID-19, Retailers, Malaysia, SDG3

### Introduction

In the early year 2020, the world was shaken with the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak which was later declared by The World Health Organization (WHO) as a pandemic. The virus that was initially started in Wuhan, China spreads very fast as it primarily spreads during close contacts between people. As an infectious person coughs, sneezes or even talks to others, droplets produced can transmit the virus to other people around. A team of Harvard scientists predicted that social distancing might be needed until the year 2022 unless the vaccine is found (AFP, 2020). For the global community as a whole, this is the first encounter where the health crisis has resulted in worldwide socioeconomic disruption in which the consumer

behaviours, organisations and supply chains are expected to shift to the “new normal” (McKinsey, 2020). Experts believe that these social distancing rules could significantly shrink the retailers’ in-store sales growth (Arcieri, 2020). As retailers are forced to implement new protocols that will limit capacity and discourage shoppers from socialising and wandering around, the spending pattern and trend is expected to be different from the pre-pandemic days (Arcieri, 2020).

To remain relevant, retailers that prioritised physical stores and face-to-face engagement has to quickly adapt to the new normal in retail (Briedis, Kronschnabl, Rodriguez, & Ungerman, 2020). In Malaysia, following the WHO recommendations, among the social distancing guidelines that have been laid out by the country’s Ministry of Health (MOH) are for people to maintain at least one-metre distance from each other, wash hand frequently with soap or hand sanitiser and wear the mask in crowded places (MOH, 2020). With regards to this study, 60% of Malaysian shopped online and offline during 2020’s Movement Control Order (statisca.com, 2020); specifically with 49% of them preferring shopping in person (Jaafar, 2020). Even though the shopping preference of Malaysian citizens has changed during this pandemic, there is still a significant number of them who choose to shop in the store. This situation should push the retailers to implement policies and processes that prioritise sanitation and cleanliness.

However, while many feel that social distancing should still be practised even after the movement control order (MCO) has been lifted (Zainal, 2020); it is still unclear how these preventive measures affect the in-store customer experience (ISCX) mainly. ISCX is significant as it influences vital performance variables such as satisfaction and store loyalty (Bustamante & Rubio, 2017). Previously, social interactions and hedonic values such as joy and leisure are essential in ICSX (Bagdare & Jain, 2013; Bustamante & Rubio, 2017). Nevertheless, with the COVID-19 pandemic, automation trend increases and human contact is minimised, if not eliminated (Arcieri, 2020). Customers tend to cut short their time in-store and providing safe customer experiences are the utmost important to ease their anxieties (Briedis *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, in fulfilling the gap, this study aims to explore customer experience towards COVID-19 preventive measures of Malaysian retailers. To do so, this study proposes a conceptual framework of ISCX and preventive measures within the implementation of the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs concept. Eventually, the upcoming focus is to investigate the ISCX towards the preventive measures in fulfilling the customers’ physiological and basic needs through the utilisation of this framework.

This study will provide insights for future researches to investigate further on how retailers’ preventive measures affect ISCX; as the new coronavirus, COVID-19 is not the first threatening disease that’s surged worldwide. It also will provide more suggestions to policymakers and businesses on preventive measures deemed to be suitable for future implementation of the guideline. This study also supports the Sustainable Development Goal 3, Good Health and Well-Being by the United Nations, that helps in ending COVID-19 pandemic as an infectious disease. The purpose of this goal is to ensure healthier lives at all ages and encourage well-being (United Nations, 2018) which is the utmost priority for COVID-19 pandemic. By implementing crucial preventive measures in all Malaysian stores, it will help reduce the risk of getting COVID-19 infection (World Health Organisation, 2020).

### **Customer Experience (CE) During Covid-19 Pandemic**

Previous scholars had debated and theorised customer experience (CE) during the last three decades. Holbrook & Hirschman (1982) described the experience of consumption as involving

various playful leisure activities, sensory pleasures, daydreams, visual pleasure and emotional responses. It was later described as the aggregate and cumulative perception of customers generated during the learning, acquisition, usage, maintenance and disposal of a product or service (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994). Pine & Gilmore, (1998) defined experiences in a seminal work as “economic offers” which are “inherently personal responses that occur only in the mind of an individual engaged on a mental, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual basis.” These concepts were also confirmed by De Keyser, Lemon, Klaus, & Keiningham, (2015) which define customer experience as “consisting of the cognitive, mental, physical, physiological, moral, and social elements that mark the direct or indirect contact of the customer with (an) other business actors”.

Following these definitions, customer experience during COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia will be reformed due to people's awareness on curbing this virus infection within the community. The threat of contracting COVID-19 leads people to be on high alert to it and take several preventive measures such as wearing a face mask, and social distancing (Casale & Flett, 2020). Fear, anxiety, and worry among customers are now the new normal and likely to occur (Ahorsu *et al.*, 2020; Pakpour & Griffiths, 2020). Since there were some related components in the previous CE's concepts such as leisure and other pleasures, the customers might experience differently due to this pandemic; thus this new phenomenon will be reflected in this study's result.

### **In-Store Customer Experience (ISCX) Dimensions**

This study will be conducted within the retail setting of the customers' experience. To decide on its' measurements, a review of retail's customer experience was done on researches such as Bagdare & Jain, (2013); Bustamante & Rubio, (2017); Deshwal, (2016); Hermes & Riedl, (2020); Ogruk, Anderson, & Nacass, (2018). There were several theoretical developments on CE's measurements on retail settings previously.

Considering the study's setting will take place among in-store customers, this study has chosen the measurement from Bustamante & Rubio, (2017) since these researchers provide In-Store Customer Experience (ISCX) among retailers. The measurements also were not biased towards any related situations that might not occur during COVID-19 pandemic. The measurements' descriptions from these researchers were renamed to Code ISCX1 to ISCX4 to facilitate the thematic analysis of this study in the future. The ISCX's codes are as follow:

#### **Cognitive Experience (Code: ISCX1)**

Cognition is gained by experience, learned knowledge and subjective qualities to be perceived by individuals. It is what helps people to identify and address specific issues to the detriment of others (Da Silva & Syed, 2006; David, Miclea, & Opre, 2004; Dimofte, 2010). With regards to this study, the cognitive experience will be inquired of the participants on the retailers' overall environment of their stores, including their products' display, services and preventive measures taken during COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **Affective Experience (Code: ISCX2)**

The affective mechanism is conceptualised as a “valenced feeling state,” and its structure involves mood and emotion (Cohen & Areni, 1991; Erevelles, 1998; Richins, 1997). In terms of intensity, affective responses differ, from mildly positive or negative moods to extreme positive or negative feelings (Schmitt, 1999). When researching ISCX, this study

would concentrate on the emotion of consumers rather than moods, as emotions are associated with an object that activates them and is more intense, while moods are usually not correlated with an object that stimulates them and is in low of intensity (Erevelles, 1998).

**Social Experience (Code: ISCX3)**

In a social context, the experience is built together with other people. Physical retail outlets are social environments in which the customer perceives, interprets and communicates with the service elements to engage in individual and collective processes (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Concerning this study, the participants will be asked on their interactions with other people in retailers' stores, which includes other customers and staff of the retail shop.

**Physical Experience (Code: ISCX4)**

ISCX's physical aspect relates to the physiological responses of customers in their interaction with the environment (Bitner, 1992). This response can be defined as a state of well-being/comfort or lack of comfort/discomfort (De Looze, Kuijt-Evers, & Van Dieën, 2003; Kuijt-Evers, Groenesteijn, De Looze, & Vink, 2004). Through this aspect, the participants of the study will be required to explain their level of comfort towards the overall environment of the visited retailers' stores, with the inclusion of preventive measures taken by these shops.

**Preventive Measures During Covid-19**

Preventive measures among retailers during COVID-19 pandemic is essential to reduce the virus widespread in a country. For Malaysia, the Ministry of Health has urged all businesses to step up the implementation of COVID-19 preventive measures at their respective premises (Bernama, 2020b). Malaysia's Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs has come out with a standard operation procedure (SOP) for certain retailers during the movement control order in the country (KPDNHEP, 2020). However, there are several differences among preventive measures articles during COVID-19 compared to this SOP. This study gathered several other reliable articles together with SOP provided by the Malaysian ministry to come with related substantial preventive measures components.

Concerning this matter, preventive measures during COVID-19 among literature were extracted throughout 31 articles which includes past research, companies' press releases, procedures, and newspapers. These measures were collected and analysed through Atlas.ti software to give overall components of what a retailer should implement on their premises. Several codes were then identified and given the code name from Code PM5 to Code PM11. Table 2 below shows the collected preventive measures codes and quotations defined within each code.

Table 2

*Preventive Measures Codes During COVID-19*

Preventive Measure (PM) Codes	Quotation Frequency	Authors
Code PM5: Social Distance	18	Aguero <i>et al.</i> , (2011); Basile <i>et al.</i> , (2020); Bernama, (2020a); Dalton <i>et al.</i> , (2020); Harun, (2020); KPDNHEP, (2020); Ming, (2020); MOH, (2020); Pezzini, (2020); Phua, (2020); World Health Organization (WHO), (2019)
Code PM6: Hand Sanitizers	16	Aguero <i>et al.</i> , (2011); Basile <i>et al.</i> , (2020); Bernama, (2020c); Dalton <i>et al.</i> , (2020); Digi, (2020); Ming, (2020); Narain, Kumar, & Bhatia, (2009); Pezzini, (2020); Shell Malaysia, (2020); Phua, (2020); Torre <i>et al.</i> , (2009); World Health Organization (WHO), (2019); KPDNHEP, (2020)
Code PM7: Face Mask	16	Aguero <i>et al.</i> , (2011); Balkhy <i>et al.</i> , (2010); Basile <i>et al.</i> , (2020); Bernama, (2020b); Bults <i>et al.</i> , (2011); Digi, (2020); Harun, (2020); KPDNHEP, (2020); Ming, (2020); Bernama, (2020a); TheStraitsTimes, (2020); Zolkepli, (2020)
Code PM8: On-Premise Sanitation	14	Aguero, Adell, Perez Gimenez, Lopez Medina, & Garcia Continente, (2011); Bernama, (2020a, 2020b, 2020c); CDC, (2020); Dalton, Corbett, & Katelaris, (2020); Digi, (2020); Hanafiah, Azman, Jamaluddin, & Aminuddin, (2016); Harun, (2020); KPDNHEP, (2020); Pezzini, (2020); Sadique <i>et al.</i> , (2007); Shell Malaysia, (2020)
Code PM9: Temperature Detection	8	Basile <i>et al.</i> , (2020); Bernama, (2020b); Canon, (2020); Digi, (2020); Ming, (2020); Shell Malaysia, (2020)
Code PM10: Effective Store Payment Checkout	2	Phua, (2020)
Code PM11: Store Airflow	2	Dalton <i>et al.</i> , (2020); Lee <i>et al.</i> , (2008)

With regard to this study, only Code PM5 to PM8 is considered the most essential preventive measure components since their code frequency was more than ten (10) and mentioned by the formal procedure provided by Malaysia's Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs (KPDNHEP, 2020). According to this procedure, Social Distance (Code PM5) required all individuals in the store area to remain within 1 metre, and it is compulsory for the retailers to mark the gap on the floor, desk and chairs. Furthermore, Hand Sanitizer (Code PM6) are required to be placed by these retailers on the front door or related places in their stores. Moreover, wearing Face Mask (Code PM7) currently is compulsory to follow; thus, the

retailers must provide it to their employees. On the other hand, retailers must carry out On-Premises Sanitation (Code PM8) process before each of their shifts or operations following the guidelines set by the Ministry of Health Malaysia.

The participants will be asked on their overall shopping experience during COVID-19 pandemic and their perception towards the implementation of retailers' preventive measures. Even though Code PM9 to PM11 is not considered as the most essential preventive measures, they might still be taken into consideration if the participants in this study frequently mentioned them within their interviews.

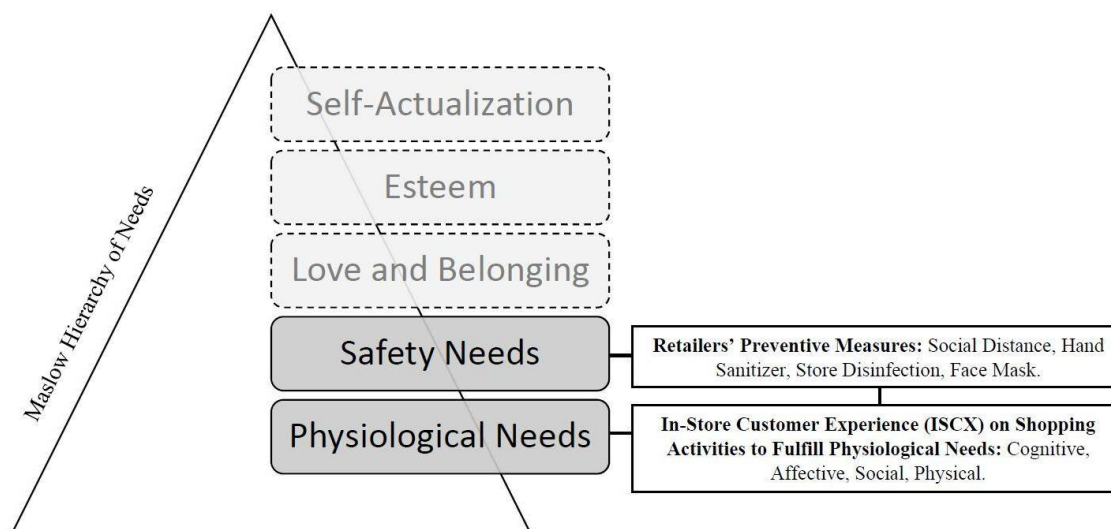
### **Conceptual Framework: Customer Experience and Covid-19 Preventive Measures in The Maslow Hierarchy of Needs**

Maslow Hierarchy of Needs was introduced by Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1962), and his concept was based on psychological needs (self-esteem, love, self-actualisation) and other basic needs (physiological and safety). According to the author, the psychological needs will only become significant after the basic needs have been fulfilled. During COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysian are focusing on buying more necessity items such as raw materials for cooking, household cleaners, and personal care items (Kong, 2020) that fulfil their physiological and safety needs. According to a survey from Ipsos Malaysia, 65% of Malaysians will stock up their food, and 53% of them will keep the food for at least one week through weekly grocery shopping. There is also an increase of 27% of total expenditures on food and non-alcoholic beverages, while other spending such as clothing and footwear, furnishings and recreation are shown a significant decrease of expenses during this pandemic (Kong, 2020).

Due to this change of consumer buying behaviour, Maslow's theory of human needs fits well in the context of COVID-19 as the basic needs are hierarchically arranged and supersedes the others when ones are satisfied. The basic physiological needs are the lowest and fundamental for the survival of individuals. In this case, these needs seem to be overlapping with safety and security needs. Such needs usually emerge from deprivation and the absence of which develops a sense of anxiety and stress. It can be attributed to the idea that people may think an empty stomach (without food, water, and other routine essentials during lockdown) would take their life away before the coronavirus (Singh, 2020).

Concerning this study, it will emphasise the basic human needs within Maslow's theory that consists of physiological and safety needs. The consumer's buying experience in the retailers' store (ISCX) on fulfilling their physiological needs will be placed on the lowest fundamental of Maslow's model, while their experience facing retailers' preventive measures as the means to ensure their safety will be in safety needs. Figure 1 illustrated the study's conceptual model to enlighten the organisation of ideas within the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs theory.

FIGURE 1: Conceptual Framework: In-Store Consumer Experience (ISCX) and Retailer's Preventive Measure in Maslow Hierarchy of Needs



Adapted from: Bustamante & Rubio, (2017) and Maslow, (1962)

## Methods

### Research Design

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach utilising the thematic analysis to identify its customers' experiences on the retailer's preventive measures during COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative descriptive approach fits within the constructivist paradigm in which learning takes place between the interviewer and the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Data gathered from qualitative descriptive research underlines the importance of presenting information as it exists in readily understood terms. For the priority placed on learning between interviewer and participant, a qualitative descriptive methodology was selected. In this study, the interviewers are Malaysian researchers and academicians, while all participants were Malaysian customers which creates a right balance and comprehensible qualitative data.

Throughout the use of Atlas.ti software on this study's literature, a qualitative approach will support its research process by identifying the same theme between; 1) the initial ISCX and PM codes found among previous articles, and 2) the participants' feedback in the data analysis phase. By comparing these initial codes to the participants' feedback, new findings might emerge and will be given codes as the data analysis of this study takes place. The initial codes from the literature were concluded as follows:

Table 3

*A Summary of Initial Codes*

No.	Codes	Study Items
1	ISCX1	Cognitive Experience
2	ISCX2	Affective Experience
3	ISCX3	Social Experience
4	ISCX4	Physical Experience
5	PM5	Social Distancing
6	PM6	Hand Sanitisers
7	PM7	Face Mask
8	PM8	On-Premise Sanitation
9	PM9	Temperature Detection
10	PM10	Effective Payment Checkout
11	PM11	Store Airflow

**Research Setting**

Malaysia is one of the 213 countries around the world which have been affected by the COVID-19 virus. With more than 60,000 positive cases in November 2020 (worldometers.info, 2020), this country is still struggling to find its way in curbing the spread of the virus. Klang Valley (Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Putrajaya) holds more than the 50% of total COVID-19 cases in Malaysia which has become the area containing the largest case numbers in the entire country (MOH, 2020).

Furthermore, this study will take place on Klang Valley customers who visited retailers for purchasing their everyday items on any Malaysian Movement Control Order period. Standard of Operation (SOP) on preventive measures had been announced by the Malaysian government for these retailers and their customers to follow its rules and regulation.

**Sample**

Purposive sampling will be used to gather participants in this study. The sampling was intentional and purposeful to incorporate the feedback of individuals who have potential to engage and enact meaningful meaning of buying experience in retailers' premises during any phases of Movement Control Order (MCO) on COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers will find and contacted ten (10) participants who fulfil the study's criteria which are as follows:

1. The participant must be a Malaysian citizen; and
2. The participant is a customer of any retailers in Klang Valley, Malaysia; and
3. The participant must have the buying experience at any retailers in Klang Valley, Malaysia during any phases of Malaysia's Movement Control Order (MCO); and
4. The participant must purchase any items within the retailers' premises without pick – up or online delivery methods; and
5. The participant can recall their experience purchasing any items inside the retailers' premise with their involvement in preventive measures applied by the store.

**Interviews**

Since the COVID-19 hits Malaysia in early 2020, the social distancing in several economic sectors has been applied as one of the preventive measures during this pandemic. Due to this restriction, the face to face interview with the participants in this study will take place through online video conferencing through Google Meet, an app used for real-time meetings on the



World Wide Web. During this online conversation, the interview will be recorded through this app with the permission of the participants; thus they will be given a consent form on the platform that includes information regarding the purpose of the study, their ability to withdraw at any point, and the right to video record interviews. They will be allowed to ask questions and were enrolled in the study upon agreeing to participate with verbal consent. The meetings are estimated to last sixty minutes for one participant.

Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews were composed of 10 open-ended statements that allowed the participant to share their knowledge on this study's topic. The initial questions (Can you describe preventive measures taken by the retailers that you frequently shop for?) will be focused on the awareness of any preventive measures utilised by the Malaysian retailers they visited during MCO. Questions will then be directed towards their experience and emotions (How do you feel about the preventive measures undertaken by the retailers during the Covid-19?) on the implementation of these measures. Upon hearing the participant's response to the leading prompt, the interviewer will then ask clarifying questions. The interviews will be conducted in English or Bahasa Malaysia, the national language of Malaysia.

### **Conclusion**

In essence, this study develops a framework on customer experience towards COVID-19 preventive measures of Malaysian retailers. Preventive measures among retailers during the COVID-19 pandemic is essential to reduce the virus widespread in a country. The study will be conducted within the retail setting of the customers' experience. Concerning the pandemic outbreak, it will emphasise the basic human needs within Maslow's theory that consist of physiological and safety needs. The consumer's buying experience in the retailers' store (ISCX) on fulfilling their physiological needs will be placed on the lowest fundamental of Maslow's model, while their experience facing retailers' preventive measures as the means to ensure their safety will be in safety needs.

Specifically, this study proposes a conceptual framework of ISCX and preventive measures within the implementation of the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs concept. Eventually, the upcoming focus is to investigate the ISCX towards the preventive measures in fulfilling the customers' physiological and basic needs through the utilisation of this framework. Thus, this study will provide insights for future researches to investigate further on how retailers' preventive measures affect ISCX; as the new coronavirus, COVID-19 is not the first threatening disease that's surged worldwide. This study can also be used by various government agencies (e.g., Ministry of Health, Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs) and retailers (Tesco, Aeon Mall, Mydin Mall) as a guideline in assessing preventive measures of retail in Malaysia. It will also provide more suggestions to policymakers and businesses on preventive measures deemed suitable for future implementation of the guideline.

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