A STUDY ON LIBRARY SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

FOONG PING TAN[1], LING SHING WONG[2], WALTON WIDER[3], CHOON KIT CHAN[4] and SITI SARAH MAIDIN[5]

[1, 2, 3, 4, 5] INTI International University, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.

Abstract

This study aims to identify customer satisfaction in relation to the academic library service quality of a private university in Malaysia. A conceptual framework was proposed by using the SERVQUAL model to illustrate customer satisfaction in relation to the five dimensional factors of service quality for the library of a private university in Malaysia. A total of 357 respondents, comprising students at a private university in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, were involved in this study using an online survey questionnaire. A multiple linear regression analysis was used to evaluate hypotheses. The result indicated that four service quality dimensions (tangibles, assurance, reliability, and empathy) have a significant effect on the customers' perceived service quality from the library. Empathy was the strongest predictor of customers' perceived service quality, followed by reliability, tangibles, and assurance. Additionally, the study reveals that customers' perceived service quality from the library is a significant predictor of customer satisfaction.

Keywords: customer satisfaction, service quality from the library, SERVQUAL model, academic library, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Internationalisation of the higher education sector has been identified as one of the National Key Economic Areas in Malaysia (Da Wan & Abdullah, 2021). Malaysia has taken a market-oriented approach and has ambitious plans to become a regional education hub for international education. The Malaysian higher education system has been restructured to respond to the need for nation-building in accordance with the nine challenges in Vision 2020 (Lim et al., 2021). The Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEI) Act has made Malaysian higher education more diversified in terms of modes of delivery and providers of education (Sarjit, 2008; Selvaratnam, 2022). The passage of the act also paved the way for reputable foreign universities, such as Newcastle and the Universities of Nottingham in the United Kingdom; Monash University; Swinburne University of Technology; and Curtin University in Australia (Grapragasem et al., 2014). In this context, the attraction of international students to Malaysian universities is seen as "a critical marker of a higher education institution's prestige" (Singh et al., 2014; Singh & Jamil, 2021). The number of international students in public and private HEIs has gone up every year (Omar et al., 2022). In 2022, there were about 170,000 international students in Malaysia, and that number is expected to reach 250,000 in 2025 (Ahmad & Loke, 2022).

Today, higher education institutions in Malaysia are facing intense competition imposed by economic forces resulting from the development of the global education market (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). In addition, according to Ationg et al. (2022), Malaysia's higher education

institutions are expected to be capable of educating future leaders and achieving global recognition. Not only that, with the increasing number of higher education institutions in Malaysia, the institutions have to search for an innovative way to attract and retain students because student enrolment is the main source of income for an institution. Nowadays, higher education institutions are not only concerned about the abilities and skills of their graduates; they also have to be concerned about students' campus experiences (Cheng et al., 2021). Customer's satisfaction has become the top priority for the management of higher education institutions as an alternative to the traditional areas of performance indicators of teaching and research, academic standards, and accreditation. In order to stand out from other competitors, it is important to offer good service (Ali et al., 2016; Kruja et al., 2021).

Academic libraries are a core service provider in higher education institutions, including polytechnics, colleges, and universities (Dominici et al., 2015; Osinulu, 2021). The academic libraries are under the Ministry of Education Malaysia and are governed by the Universities and Universities Colleges Act 1971. There are 20 government public universities and 452 private university libraries (National Library of Malaysia, 2018). Library services are considered social services that develop the reading habit in the academic environment. A good library is a main requirement for a university in the fulfilment of its objectives of dissemination of knowledge (Anyim, 2021). The library services should respond to the needs of their customers because they are the very important reason for the existence of the library. They have to ensure the provided services are the best. Knowing customers' needs, opinions, and perceptions helps the libraries identify the areas of weakness and improve their services. Moreover, the degree of customer satisfaction will show how effective and efficient a library is. However, academic libraries must keep improving their services and come up with new ways to get people to use their resources (Ihejirika et al., 2021).

The service quality of a library is a key to the success of higher education institutions. Traditionally, an academic library has been measured by the size of its holdings and various counts of its customers, as well as described in terms of its collection. Nowadays, the concept of service quality has been used for library measurement to assess the gap between customers' expectations and the customers' perceived sense about how the service was actually provided and the behaviour between customers and service providers (Ntshuntshe-Matshaya, 2021; Nitecki, 1996). Academic libraries are an important support service in higher education institutions with regard to curriculum and research. However, academic libraries are facing challenges including the global digital environment, multimedia products and e-learning, online information providers, mega book stores, and other information sources that seem to be threatening the role of an academic library (Budu et al., 2021). As a result, libraries have to evolve and change their primary focus from material collections to service orientation. Stronger relationships across the university have to be developed by continuing to adapt the library's roles in order to promote their relevancy to all stakeholders. Academic libraries can strengthen their presence in institutions by embedding existing services through collaboration and outreach, as well as through roles in teaching and research (Delaney & Bates, 2015; Zanin-Yost, 2018). To improve library services, service quality measures are needed in the library to respond to the changes in customers' needs.

Generally, tuition fees are one of the most notable differences between private and public universities in Malaysia. This could be due to public universities receiving direct subsidies, funding, and research grants from the government. Moreover, some Malaysian public universities receive assistance for research equipment, study tours, seminar sponsorships, and scholarships from international agencies. On the other hand, private universities mainly rely on student funding and corporate investment under the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act (1996). The cost of tuition in private institutions is relatively higher in order to sustain their operations if compared to public universities. In terms of learning experiences, both private and public institutions have their own strengths by offering different exposures in order to attract students' enrolment. However, with regards to library facilities, public universities are better than private universities since they are partially funded by the government. The database and library in private universities are incomparable to those in public universities. The library systems of some private universities are not always comprehensive, user-friendly, and accessible.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Malaysia, there are few researchers studying customer satisfaction with the library services of universities. Rusuli et al. (2015) carried out a study on customers' satisfaction with learning space at Tunku Tun Aminah Library, Johor. Although the library is a new building, the customers were moderately satisfied with the learning space of the library. The study found that furniture is the main factor influencing customer satisfaction. However, based on the Dahan et al. (2016) study, it was found that the customers were satisfied with the academic library service quality at the University of Malaysia Pahang library. The study has found that the library staff showed individual attention, confidence, and courteous behaviour in providing services, which were the main factors that contributed to customers' satisfaction positively. According to Suki and Suki (2013), factors such as the library environment and signage in the library building had a significant impact on customer satisfaction for academic library services in the Federal Territory of Labuan.

Most of the service quality models used in the higher education sector have been adapted from those used in the commercial sector (Sultan & Wong, 2013). SERVQUAL has been popular in aspects of tertiary education as a measuring instrument of service quality (Radder & Han, 2009). The SERVQUAL model, frequently denoted as the "Gaps Model," is based on the difference or variance between the expectations that customers have and their perceptions of the service using 22 items or variables (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Customer expectations are service delivery beliefs that serve as standards on which basic performance is gauged, whilst customer perceptions are "subjective assessments of actual service experiments" through a customer's collaboration with the supplier of the service (Zeithaml et al., 2006). The dimensions of service quality as pertaining to SERVQUAL are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, resiliency, assurance, and empathy. To measure customers' perception of service quality, it is impossible for the service quality dimensions to cover all areas in the service quality model due to the differences in the meanings attributed to quality by each individual customer (Ruetzler, 2005). Consequently, researchers have only included the

important elements of dimensions in the survey (Hadikoemoro, 2002). A range of dimensions on which customers assess any service provision against their expectations is needed when determining the quality of that provision. There is no single dimension that can be used for all service sectors. Different industries are using different dimensions of service quality. However, there are some similarities in the chosen dimensions (Lagrosen et al., 2004). Researchers agreed that customers should be the determinant of service quality dimensions rather than the management of the institution's service provisions (Cronin & Taylor, 1994; Lagrosen et al., 2004; Wan-I et al., 2010). These five dimensions have been widely used by most researchers to measure library service quality (Ahmad et al., 2015; Asogwa et al., 2015; Suki & Suki, 2013). So, these five SERVQUAL dimensions are used in this study as the dimensions of library service provision that affect how customers see the quality of service.

Tangibles refers to the appearance of communication materials, personnel, equipment, and physical facilities (Naidoo & Mutinta, 2014). Certain strategies are important in managing tangibility in services, which involve taking into account the effect of the physical facilities such as furniture, equipment, interior and exterior factors, buildings, and colours; and providing tangible things to customers, such as business cards, brochures, receipts, and documentation to serve as a record of the service transaction. Reliability refers to the ability to deliver to expected standards and on time as promised. According to Mishra (2009), reliability is the very important determinant affecting customers' perceptions of service quality, and it is three times more important than having shiny new equipment or flashy uniforms, as customers want to count on their providers, so they value that reliability. Responsiveness is defined as the ability to respond to customers timely and flexibly. This dimension focuses on being attentive and prompt in responding to customers' needs, questions, complaints, or problems (Zeithaml et al., 2013). Customers are particularly concerned with the speed with which a service is delivered (Vollero et al., 2021). In this research, responsiveness refers to providing prompt service and the willingness to help customers, which includes the academic library informing students of the exact service contents and showing a willingness to support any requirements from customers. Assurance deals with the feeling of trust and confidence. Assurance may not be so important relative to other industries where the outcome of service is uncertain and the risk is higher (Bashir et al., 2022). Assurance can be developed by the level of knowledge, information, and kind treatment by the staff in offering the services and their capability to build trust and confidence in customers (Blery et al., 2009). Assurance includes the librarians' courteous behaviour and sound knowledge to improve trust and confidence among students. In this research, assurance generally means creating academic library customers' confidence. Empathy, which deals with treating customers, is defined as the caring, individualised attention from service organisations to customers (Zeithaml et al., 2013). Individuals' ability to react to others' experiences is important in developing customer relationships that ensure organizations' survival in the market (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006). This dimension includes the academic library, giving students personal attention and sympathising with their needs. In this research, empathy generally means caring for library customers individually.

It is confirmed that customers' perception of the quality of service provided by a library has become an important key for service improvement (Afthanorhan et al., 2019). Even though

researchers have looked at the service quality of academic libraries all over the world (Afthanorhan et al., 2019; Sarmah et al., 2021; Omar et al., 2021), more research is needed on academic libraries in Malaysia. Hence, this study was conducted to identify customer satisfaction in relation to the academic library services of a private university in Malaysia. The findings of this study are important to assist university management in addressing students' use of library services and resources in the academic environment. University management requires sufficient knowledge about customers' perceptions of the service quality in order to improve customer satisfaction (Afthanorhan et al., 2019). Gaining better knowledge could also help librarians to clearly know more about their weaknesses, or they can set a policy on providing library services to the customers. Additionally, this research can contribute to the academic pool of SERVQUAL and provide a better understanding of customer satisfaction in relation to the academic library service quality of a private university in Malaysia. Therefore, we hypothesised that:

H1. Assurance positively affects customers' perceived service quality from the library.

H2. Empathy positively affects customers' perceived service quality from the library.

H3. Reliability positively affects customers' perceived service quality from the library.

H4. Responsiveness positively affects customers' perceived service quality from the library.

H5. Tangibles positively affect customers' perceived service quality from the library.

H6. Perceived service quality from the library positively affects customer satisfaction.

This research was carried out in the absence of information about the quality of services provided by the academic library of a private university in Malaysia. As referred to in Figure 1, the conceptual framework for this research was constructed with reference to the SERVQUAL conceptual model of service quality, which was developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) for evaluating service quality, which is a widely-used conceptual model for evaluating service quality. The same five dimensions are used to measure both service quality and customer satisfaction for the academic library, as both are related (Parasuraman et al., 1988). As suggested by Negi (2009), perceived service quality is an antecedent to satisfaction. This model is the summary for the researcher to examine the relationship between the five dimensions of service quality and perceived service quality from the library services. The five dimensions of service quality are assurance, empathy, reliability, responsiveness, and tangible. In addition, this model also examined the relationship between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction.
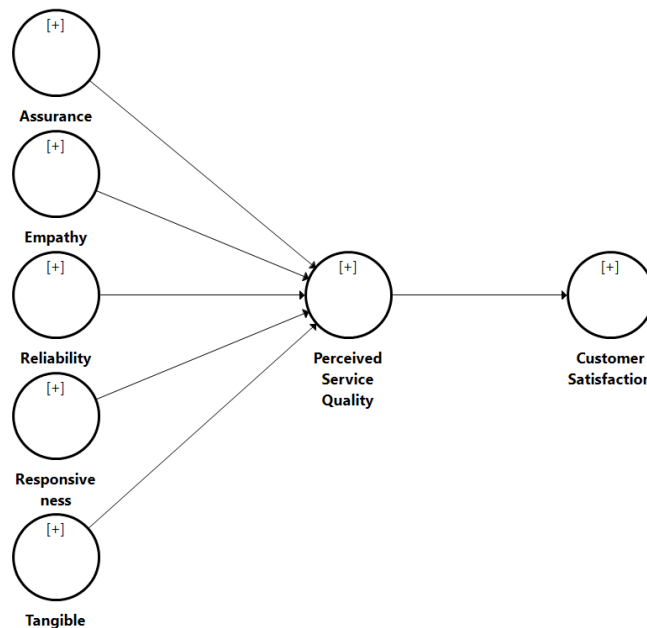
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

METHODS

Participants

This study used a cross-sectional design by utilising survey methods to investigate the relationship between service quality dimensions, perceived service quality from the library, and customer satisfaction. The study population encompassed private university students in Malaysia. Using a snowball sampling method, an online survey link was shared across various platforms, such as WhatsApp. A total of 360 sets were returned, with 3 sets being eliminated owing to being unable to pass the clarifying criteria questionnaires from the respondents. As a result, the total number of valid questionnaires is 357, with a response rate of 99.2%.

Based on the sociodemographic profile of the respondents in Table 1, it showed that 54.1 percent of the respondents were female and the remaining were males (45.9 percent). In terms of duration of study, the majority of the respondents have studied for one to two years at university (43.7%), followed by two to three years of study (26.6%), less than a year of study (23.5%), three to four years of study (5.0%), and four years above (1.1%). In terms of the level of programme study, the majority of respondents were studying degree programmes (94.1%), followed by master (3.1%), diploma (2.2%) and others such as foundation/pre-U (0.3%) and degree transfer programmes (0.3%). In terms of nationality, the majority of the respondents were local (83.8%) and the remaining were international students (16.2%).

Table 1: Socio- Demographic of the Respondents (N=357)

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	164	45.9
Female	193	54.1
Duration of study		
Less than 1 year	84	23.5
1 to 2 years	156	43.7
2 to 3 years	95	26.6
3 to 4 years	18	5.0
4 years above	4	1.1
Level of Study		
Foundation/ Pre-U	1	0.3
Diploma	8	2.2
Degree Transfer	1	0.3
Degree	336	94.1
Master	11	3.1
Nationality		
Local	299	83.8
International	58	16.2

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The research instruments were divided into three sections. The SERVQUAL questionnaires (Parasuraman et al., 1985) consisted of five service quality dimensions (tangible, Assurance, Empathy, Responsiveness, and Reliability) focusing on customer service and library facilities, which required respondents to rate using the five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). In this research, the initial 22 items of the SERVQUAL model are modified with additional items to measure the perceived service quality as well as customer satisfaction in an academic library. The second section of the questionnaire contained three questions focusing on customers' overall perceived service quality and satisfaction towards library services, respectively. The Cronbach alpha coefficient ranged between 0.50 and 0.75. In the last part of the questionnaire, there were questions about three types of demographic information: gender, level of education, length of study, and country of origin.

DATA ANALYSIS

The Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.0 was used to analyse the data. To determine the frequency distribution of the respondents' backgrounds and the understudied characteristics, descriptive analyses were used. A linear multiple regression analysis was performed to investigate the unique predictor of perceived service quality from the library and customers' satisfaction. All statistical tests had a cutoff value of 0.05, which was used as a measure of significance.

RESULTS

The results for multiple regression analysis in examining the predictors of perceived service quality and customers' satisfaction are presented in Table 3. Results indicated that the combination of assurance, empathy, reliability, responsiveness, and tangible was significantly explained by 56.4% of the variance in perceived service quality from the library. Empathy (beta = 0.548, p < 0.01) was found to be the strongest predictor of perceived service quality from the library, followed by reliability (beta = 0.210, p < 0.01), tangible (beta = 0.129, p < 0.01), and assurance (beta = 0.129, p < 0.01), However, responsiveness was found to be a non-significant predictor of perceived service quality from the library (beta = 0.127, p > 0.05). Thus, hypotheses H1, H2, H3, and H5 are supported, but not hypothesis H4. Furthermore, perceived service quality from the library was significantly explained by 26.2% of the variance in customers' satisfaction. The effect was significant and positive (beta = 0.512, p < 0.01)

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis (n = 357)

Criterion Variable	Predictor Variable	F	R^2	Beta	t	p
Perceived Quality from Library	Assurance	113.7**	0.564	0.129	2.636	0.00
	Reliability			0.210	4.386	0.00
	Empathy			0.548	14.330	0.00
	Responsiveness			0.127	1.272	0.21
Customer Satisfaction	Tangible			0.129	3.472	0.00
	Perceived Quality from Library	126.07**	0.262	0.512	11.23	0.00

Note: **p < .01

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The goal of this study is to determine the effect of five dimensions of service quality on perceived service quality from the library. In addition, the effect of perceived service quality from the library on customers' satisfaction was also determined. The result shows that all dimensions of service quality, except responsiveness, are significant predictors of customers' perceived quality from the library. Additionally, perceived quality from the library was also found to be a significant predictor of customers' satisfaction.

The library management therefore needs to incorporate the use of service quality dimensions into their delivery services that will promote an increase in customer perceptions of value and will also increase customer satisfaction (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Empathy was found to be the strongest predictor of customers' perceived quality from the library, followed by reliability, assurance, and tangible. As empathy has the highest strength of the relationship, with customers' perceived quality from the library. Therefore, the individualised attention that library management provides to the students is important. This includes approachability, ease of contact with the librarians, and a willingness to understand their needs. Empathy as an individual ability can be deepened and broadened by appropriate training measures. Management should foster librarians' abilities to recognise and respond to different customer

characteristics. Some researchers emphasised the importance of training to develop the librarians' abilities to understand customer feelings and thoughts (Bowen & Schneider, 2022). By offering training opportunities to the librarian, training enables them to better understand how customer interactions with the service provider affect the level of customer satisfaction and how customers perceive the service encounter, as well as personal development.

Moreover, library management should improve their physical and functional facilities from time to time because they are important in promoting effective service in the library and satisfying the students' needs. This can be done by updating the number of books; increasing journal references; adding more computers, etc. Based on the study, students found it difficult to find library materials (such as books, journals, CDs, etc.). This can be improved by putting more clear instructions or signage in the library or on the library website. In this dynamic environment, academic libraries must continuously improve their services and use innovative ways to attract customers to utilise their resources (Omeluzor et al., 2020). Library management should conduct a customer satisfaction survey annually in order to get their feedback on how well the library is meeting their information needs.

This study is an attempt to make a significant contribution to filling the knowledge gap in the context of service quality provision in the academic library of a private university in Malaysia. However, it is inevitable that the research still has the following limitations: In this research, 357 respondents are from the same private university at Nilai, Negeri Sembilan. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized. It is difficult to determine the research objective effectively based on a single source of respondents. Their views and needs may be different from those of other private universities in Malaysia. Further research should consider a bigger sample size from a wider range of private universities to get a better perspective of customer satisfaction towards the quality of private academic library services in Malaysia. In addition, the study was conducted using a survey. Therefore, the quantitative data may not be robust enough to explain complex issues. Therefore, a qualitative method is suggested for future researchers as it can provide more detailed information to explain why the library customers think in certain ways. Since not much research has been done on academic libraries in Malaysia, one suggestion for future research is to compare the quality of service at public and private universities' academic libraries.

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