



EXAMINES ACADEMIC LIBRARY USERS' EXPERIENCE TOWARDS LIBRARY PATRONAGE IN STATE UNIVERSITIES IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract:

Libraries and information centers are service units held with the responsibility of providing varied information services based on a number of resources. It covers tangible assets, namely library building, equipment, furniture, information resources and staff. The intangible element has been the information services provided by the libraries. The tangible assets and intangible services of libraries are changing greatly due to the development and changes in the area of information technology. The purpose of this study is to empirically investigate to accomplish the relationship between Service Quality dimensions, customer experience (CE) library patronage (LP) and library user attitude (LUA) in the context of university library service quality in Sri Lanka. In addition, it investigates the mediating effect of customer experience in the relationship between dimensions of library service quality and the library patronage.

Keywords: academic library, customer experience, higher education, service quality, university library, user experience, library patronage

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1. Introduction

Libraries are part of the information sector and are considered knowledge organizations. To succeed in the changing marketplace, they must master five key activities: (a) manage information and insights; (b) adapt to new desires of customers; (c) employ skilled and highly educated staff; (d) leverage technology, new media, and social networking; and (e) outthink their direct and indirect competitors (Weinstein, & McFarlane, 2017). The role of academic libraries continues to evolve from that of information resource provider to a facilitator of learning (Steve, Zoe & Chao, 2019). Academic library landscape and services dimensions are changing rapidly. Libraries are playing a vital role in support of the academic system. It is often difficult to keep track of various tasks, resources available to them and availability of online tools. Open-source social networking tools are very useful and can be used to increase the library users' experiences (Dinesh, 2018).

Libraries may not be the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about great design. It's easy to assume the user experience of a library is limited to navigating a maze of bookshelves in reality; there has been a recent push among librarians and library professionals to apply user-experience best practices to the design of their services. Library UX professionals include librarians and library staff members who specialize in improving the user experience of their libraries through research and design. While some UX professionals design for libraries as consultants, library UX professionals work in-house as part of the library staff. The actual UX work in libraries depends on the size and type of the library; libraries are typically categorized into public, academic, government, or special libraries. The UX projects in every library will vary according to the specific needs of its audience and the resources available, although many focus UX efforts on digital experiences.

1.1 Background of the Study

Academic libraries are service institutions. They exist in order to enable users to make the most effective use of the resources and services of the library. These libraries allow access to their collections and provide services to the users. Academic libraries are expected to convert potential users into habitual users. To this end, the objective of the university library has been to increase access to resources and information, and basic access has been provided through selection, acquisition and organization of resources⁶. The role of academic library should among others broaden the resources in support of academic enquiry and discovery (Virkus & Metsar, 2004).

While many library UX professionals focus exclusively on library websites, it is essential to understand how users interact with libraries' physical spaces. Since the website is often the first stop in the user's journey, it should provide information on navigating the space prior to arrival (for example, a catalog system that displays not just the call number but also the floor on which a book can be located). Additionally, the physical library space itself must be designed to be inviting, accessible, and accommodating of a variety of purposes from studying to relaxation.

1.1.1 Sri Lanka Country Background

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is an island situated in the Indian Ocean at the base of the Indian Subcontinent. Sri Lanka is a country with a unique and a proud period of several centuries before Common Era (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, n.d.). During the recent history of Sri Lanka, the country had been under the western rule (Portuguese, Dutch and British) for several centuries. A Portuguese colonial mission, first, arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505 followed by the Dutch and British.

Sri Lanka regained independence in 1948. Still, the country remained a dominion in the British Commonwealth of Nations until 1972. In the year 1972, the country has been declared Democratic Socialist Republic. The country inherited its economic, political and administrative structures mainly from the British rule, which lasted over hundreds of years. At the time of regaining independence, Sri Lanka was mainly an agricultural economy, where largely foreign-owned, export-oriented plantation crops sector (i.e. tea, rubber and coconut) existed side by side with a predominantly small-holding peasant agricultural sector. The economy was open to free trade, and it was fully integrated into the global economic system through exports and imports (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 1998). Since the adoption of trade and investment liberalization policies in 1978, the economic growth has been driven mainly by the private sector which led the expansion of services and manufacturing industries. Sri Lanka needs to develop its intellectual and human capital to compete successfully in the knowledge-intensive world.

The higher education system of the country should be able to produce professionals, scientists, technocrats, managers and administrators, who are well-educated, skilled, enterprising and innovative. Sri Lankans enjoy adult franchise since the early 1930s, and this has made them active participants in a multi-party democratic political process. As the welfare of the citizens played a significant role in the elections and in maintaining political stability, successive governments were relatively committed to welfare (Ahmed and Ranjan, 1995; Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 1998).

These efforts contributed to reduce the incidence of poverty, which is reflected in the achievement of outstanding human development indicators and Millennium Development Goals (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). However, country's slow growth in economic performance in the past was largely due to the 30 years of war experienced by the country until May 2009 (Ahmed and Ranjan, 1995; World Bank, 2011b). In this regard, higher education sector can play a key role in promoting democratic values, the celebration of multiple cultures and respect for diversity and social tolerance through the scholarship, teaching, research and advocacy of the universities (World Bank, 2010).

1.1.2 The Higher Education System and State Universities in Sri Lanka

Higher education institutions play a vital role in society in varied capacities, and one major contribution amongst it all is conducting research as a part of knowledge creation and dissemination. By way of raising awareness, knowledge creation, skill development and value creation, which are essential elements in achieving a sustainable future

(Cortese, 2003). Similarly, their contribution leads towards industrial innovation, and therefore economic development (Hatakenaka, 2015; Jayasundara, 2014), addressing an array of social issues such as, poverty, social disharmony, inequalities etc. (Hatakenaka, 2015; Social Science Research Council, 2016).

The Higher Education System and State Universities in Sri Lanka Education is a fundamental right in Sri Lanka, and thus the free education scheme has made a tremendous impact on social, economic and political developments in the country (Jayasundara, 2014). In the past, higher education in Sri Lanka was provided through several prominent 'Pirivenas' (training centers for Buddhist monks). The origin of the modern university system in Sri Lanka dates back to 1921. The Ceylon University College was established affiliated to the University of London. According to Jayasundara (2014), the tertiary education system in Sri Lanka began formally in 1921, with the establishment of the colonial-oriented University College. The Ceylon University College functioned as an elite institution creating a crucial need to establish new universities that were responsive to the needs of common people (Karunanayake, 2009; Jayasundara, 2014). In 1956, the government decided to establish two new universities, by elevating the Vidyodaya and Vidyalandara Pirivens into universities.

The University Grants Commission (UGC), which was established with the enactment of the Universities Act No.16 of 1978, is the buffer body between the legislative arm of the government and universities. It is empowered to act as the regulatory arm of the state university system. Thus, eight goals are identified in the areas of equitable access, quality and relevance, research and innovation, good governance, financial management and sustainability, a conducive environment, socio-economic development and international cooperation and competitiveness. There are fifteen state universities and seventeen higher educational institutions which produce around 22,000 graduates annually have a decisive role to play in creating the intellectual resources of the nation. Their knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes are vital in transforming Sri Lanka into a knowledge hub and a country with high social and economic values. In a borderless globe, the aspects of university education have to be on a par with internationally accepted higher educational norms (Fernando, 2018).

The State Universities are committed to playing the dual role of producing young men and women with knowledge and wisdom to cater to the ever-increasing demand for human resources in the country, while fulfilling the aspirations of all those who seek higher education. They undertake this noble role by designing and offering high quality, relevant and well-recognized academic and/or professional qualifications of their chosen disciplines with a basket of transferable and technical skills, with which the students could explore the boundary-less world that would provide young graduates with infinite opportunities to realize their full potential and aspirations.

Higher education institutions play a significant role in society (World Economic Forum, 2017) by way of raising awareness, knowledge creation, skill development and value creation, which are essential elements in achieving a sustainable future (Cortese, 2003). Similarly, their contribution leads towards industrial innovation, and therefore

economic development (Hatakenaka, 2015; Jayasundara, 2014), addressing an array of social issues such as, poverty, social disharmony, inequalities etc. (Hatakenaka, 2015; Social Science Research Council, 2016).

1.1.3 Historical Development from measuring service quality to customer experience

Service quality was originally conceptualized as a gap between expectations and the consumer's overall assessment of the service encounter (Parasuraman *et al.* 1988). This concept led to the popular management adage of needing to 'delight' customers by always exceeding their expectations. Service quality's most popular measure is SERVQUAL, a 22-item scale whose dimensions are: reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy and responsiveness. When implementing the measure, researchers focus on a particular service episode and ask customers to assess the dimensions versus their prior expectations using a five-point Likert scale (Morrison Coulthard, 2004). SERVQUAL has been challenged conceptually, methodologically and with respect to the validity of its dimensions. Research subsequent to Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) has failed to validate SERVQUAL's dimensions (Buttle, 1996), thus questioning its generalizability.

Experience reflects customers' overall assessment of value rather than in relation to expectations, highlighting the importance of these perceptual attributes. These attributes reflect customers' higher-order objectives leading to purchasing behavior better than technical aspects of service do, the latter subject to frequent changes due to technology and competition. Therefore, perceptual attributes are more stable as the focus of evaluation of experience (Parasuraman *et al.*, 2005). SERVQUAL focuses largely upon customers' assessment of the service process and human interactions (Mangold & Babakus 1991; Cronin Jr & Taylor, 1992; Richard & Allaway, 1993). Individual components of a service encounter may be assessed as 'good quality', but that does not automatically mean that the overall experience is judged high quality, nor does measuring the components of service quality ensure that customers achieve their desired outcomes.

The authors believe that SERVQUAL reflects the quality management origins of service quality, a manufacturing-like atomization of complex service systems and subsequent optimization of each component; it is highly contestable if this corresponds with how customers assess their overall experiences. Lemke *et al.* (2010) describe this argument as a debate between those who believe in the embedded value of a service offer versus those who believe that value is created by customers in use: co-creation.

SERVQUAL's dimensions are too limited (Sureshchandar *et al.*, 2002) to capture customer experience fully, and marketing scholars suggest a broader and more holistic conceptualization, and therefore measure, of experience (Verhoef *et al.*, 2009; Gentile Spiller and Noci (2007) suggest that 'customer experience ... is strictly personal and implies the customer's involvement at different levels (rational, emotional, sensorial, physical, and spiritual)'. While such wide reaching conceptualizations are consistent with experience, they may be too broad to defy practical measurement and risk conceptualizing customer experience as the 'theory of everything'. The existing

experience research considers specific, normally high-involvement, and contexts given its personal and contextual nature (Sharma & Patterson 2000; Chandon *et al.*, 2005). This intuitively appealing approach to experience makes it difficult to create a universal measure similar to SERVQUAL, customer satisfaction or Net Promoter Score. As most of the academic literature to date is of a conceptual nature, scholars have not fully addressed the issue of generalizability.

Responding to this challenge, (Lemke *et al.*, 2010) develop a conceptual framework for customer experience from a cross-industry study using repertory grid analysis. They find that experience is generated from three types of encounter: (1) communication, (2) service delivery and (3) usage. Service delivery is assessed on the basis of product, service and experience quality. The three encounters are moderated by the context of the experience – that is, involvement, complexity, relationships and the hedonic nature of the experience. Customers take a longitudinal perspective when assessing their experiences and will believe that they have had experience with a company even before they have bought something; this arises from advertising, promotion and word-of-mouth. Therefore, market researchers need to measure customer experience before and after the service encounter(s), and account for both direct and indirect contacts and peer influences (Berry *et al.*, 2002; Payne *et al.*, 2008).

1.1.4 A rapid evolution from product to service to experience

Marketing practice and research have undergone a series of large-scale transformations over the past 25 years, shifting focus from (1) creating fast moving consumer product brands to (2) building customer relationships through service marketing, and now to (3) creating compelling customer experiences. The authors propose that marketing research has not kept up with these changes (Gordon, 2006), generating a mismatch between what marketers are now trying to achieve and what market research measures.

Vargo and Lusch (2004) propose that marketing has evolved from bringing goods 'to market' through a stage of market and consumer targeting ('marketing to') and is now focused on 'market with': co-creating value collaboratively with customers over an extended time frame. Co-creation unites the focal company's network of relationships with customers' capabilities, enabling customers to achieve higher-order goals or objectives. These higher-order goals are termed value in-use, which is defined as 'a customer's functional outcome, purpose or objective that is directly served through the product/service consumption' (Macdonald *et al.*, 2009, p. 3). Company offers are therefore constructed as product-service-systems, bundles of products and services that fulfill an ever greater part of the customer's needs than can be addressed by product or service offers alone (Baines *et al.*, 2007).

The authors assert that this rapid evolution of marketing 'paradigms' mirrors a real-world occurrence of marketplace competition, moving from products to services to a post-product, post-service phenomenon that is still evolving and not yet fully formed. However, that the most popular expression of this emerging marketplace reality is *customer experience* (Klaus & Maklan, 2007; Gambetti & Graffigna, 2010; Lemke *et al.*,

2010). The term *experience economy* possibly originates with Pine and Gilmore (Gilmore & Pine II 1997, 2002), who make the overt claim that experience represents a move beyond products and service. Their work, echoed by many at that time, focused the discussion of experience upon immersive environments such as Starbucks, American Girl Dolls (Pine & Gilmore, 2004), Harley-Davidson outings (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) or white river rafting (Arnould & Price, 1993).

Nonetheless, this encouraged researchers to rediscover much earlier scholarship arguing that people buy goods and services as a means to fulfill deeper emotional, sensory and hedonic aspirations. With this lens, what matters to customers is how they experience the extended process of acquiring, integrating and deploying that is necessary for them to achieve their aspirations and higher-order goal – that is, value-in-use. Vargo and Lusch (2004) contrast this with traditional Goods Dominant Logic that sees value arising from economic exchange – that is, value is measured by the price paid (price premium to competitors). While many scholars and practitioners acknowledge that experience should be the new focus of managerial attention, they are less unified on both its precise definition and its measure. This creates a dilemma for market researchers. While acknowledging that organizations are increasingly competing on the basis of customer experience, the concept is defined imprecisely and, as yet, there are no widely agreed measures of it. The authors maintain that market research limited conceptualization of experience does not help organizations assess how customers evaluate their organizations' offers. Customer experience blurs traditional distinctions between products and services because of its focus on customers' value-in-use, which arises from combinations of products and services.

1.1.5 User Experience in Libraries

In the ever-more competitive world of information and document delivery channels, libraries need to focus sharply on customer satisfaction. Satisfied customers are returning customers. This has sharpened the quality of the interaction between library staff and the user or customer, although customer service is only one component in the total customer experience. Customer satisfaction depends on the total customer experience, from the moment the customer seeks to park the car or make a connection through the telephone network to the moment the customer leaves the library with the appropriate information, document or leisure experience. The total customer experience will probably be different for each customer. Compared with some other service outlets, such as restaurants, hotels or banks, there is potential for much greater diversity in libraries, because the customer may seek a wider variety of different services or products from a library (Jennifer, 1994).

The customer's experience is pervasive. If the customer does not experience for the evaluation of that customer's experience. Some aspect of a library's service, stock or functions, that aspect is redundant. Since users access libraries in order to fulfill different needs, it can be difficult to identify a set of criteria which are appropriate in every case. (Tucker, 1991) offers a list of useful criteria which contribute to customer experience in which he asserts that businesses must outperform their competitors in order to achieve

competitive advantage. Here we list these criteria and comment briefly on their application in turn to libraries:

a. Speed of service delivery

For libraries, the emphasis is on access time. This will depend on the access channel, whether it is by telephone, personal visit or computer network. For personal visits, access time will depend to some extent on location, and also on access to services and documents within the library. For documents or information not available in a specific library, the speed of inter-library loan and access to external databases will be important.

b. Convenience

Convenience is often closely associated with speed of delivery and, as with speed of delivery; location may be a significant factor in convenience. Convenience is also reflected in how well the service matches the requirements of the user, and will be influenced by opening times, range of services available from one service point and the extent to which specifically tailored services are offered for speed groups of users.

c. Age waves are concerned with responding to demographic changes

Age is possibly less relevant in other types of library and information environments.

d. Choice

Customers appreciate options – different products at different prices. Library managers possibly tend to be a little too wary about choice, and there is always the genuine concern that by offering choice the library service is not undermining the feasibility of another service or product. Taking a wider perspective, the libraria needs to recognize that the library may be only one document and information delivery channel open to the user, and so must seek to differentiate in marketing terms this service from others.

e. Lifestyle

The lifestyles of customers are important in assessing which products or services they might appreciate. Is time precious or is a leisurely experience paramount? Where do customers spend their time? What are their priorities? These are just some of the questions which might be considered.

f. Discounting

Discounting is common practice in the wider marketplace as a means of attracting new custom. Many library services are not particularly price-sensitive, since prices are low anyway and some services are free. Those parts of the information industry which offer products that are more expensive, such as the online hosts and CD-ROM producers, often have pricing structures that embrace assorted discounts for selected groups. As the marketplace in general becomes more competitive and pricing becomes an even more pressing issue, discounting is likely to need to be considered more widely.

g. Value adding

Again, the sector of the information industry concerned with electronic products has developed a number of value-added products in recent years, including electronic mail and current awareness services. The definition of value-added service depends on the initial service. How can an academic library add value to its basic reference and lending services? What would tailor these services more appropriately to the student group?

h. Customer service

Customer service focuses on the interactions between users and staff. Staff needs to be pleasant and helpful and to be empowered to respond positively to the range of requests they might receive.

i. Technology

All businesses need to embrace the opportunities technology offers to improve the basic product or service. The library and information industry has been a leader in this process, and it is important that it retains this position, while also responding flexibly to the challenges technology poses to the very existence of some sectors of the industry.

j. Quality

Quality is sufficiently important for the previous section to have singled it out for separate treatment. These ten factors embrace a multitude of facets of the customer experience. They impinge on a number of aspects of the marketing strategy of the organization, in the sense that they have an impact on the services offered as well as on the customer's experience of those services. Indeed, customer experience and marketing strategy are closely intertwined.

Table 1.1 Factors that Influence Total Customer Experience

Environmental factors	Type of library
Quietness	Public – Local branch
Cleanliness	– Mobile
Decorative condition	– Central reference
Warmth	Academic – College
Light	– School
Accessibility of stock	– University
Seating and workspace	Special – Professional body
	– Government library
	– Business and industry
Pricing/charging strategies	Size of visit group
Which services are “free”	Family
Charging strategies	Student group
	Work group
	Alone
Stock/information services	
Subject range	
Age/currency	
Condition	
Display	

Availability	Interaction with library staff
Media range	(e.g.: use of special facilities)
	Photocopier
	Toilets
Type of use	Coffee area
Multiple	OPAC
Leisure	Study carrels
Information acquisition	CD-ROM
Study time	Microcomputers
Document borrowing	Change machines
Reference	
Photocopying	
Browsing	
Database searching	

Source: Rowley, J. (1994).

1.1.6 Service Quality Measurement of Academic Library

The academic libraries are attached to their parent organizations and providing support for research and educational learning to its community. There are various methods of studying service quality and user satisfaction that has emerged in LIS (Library and Information Science). One such method is SERVQUAL, used widely in the field of marketing and later applied in other fields (Roslah and Zainab, 2007). It is a five-dimensional construct in the 22-item Likert Scale survey. The model focused on reducing the gap between customer expectations and the actual service provided. The survey instrument was based on the Gaps Model of Service Quality.

By applying this instrument, the libraries gain insights into customer's conceptualization of what a service should deliver and how well that service meets idealized expectations (Calvert and Hernon, 1996; Nitecki and Hernon, 2000 and Miller, 2008). (Edgar, 2006) stated that SERVQUAL may work in industrial settings, but not libraries. Various studies have proved that the five SERVQUAL dimensions are not recoverable in the library context, and additional dimensions of quality not measured by SERVQUAL are necessary (Nadiri and Mayboudi, 2010).

2. Conclusion

This study is an empirical research with the main objective to study the relationship amongst the key determinants of user experience towards the library patronage. The results further identify the service quality attributes which are most significant in achieving customer experience as well as library user patronage. The empirical results further reveal the importance of user experience in an academic library context and accordingly, make recommendations and insights to the top management. Enhancing service quality attributes would have a knock-on effect for user experience and library patronage. In academic library environment, promoting the user experience is of uttermost important.

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