

The Service Experience Equity on Repatronage Intention within Public Transportation Services

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Abstract: In a highly competitive market, service providers are often expected to enhance their profitability by delivering superior service quality. This principle is evident among many public transportation providers in Malaysia, who strive to elevate the passenger experience through refined service offerings. The objective of this study is to examine the factors influencing repatronage intentions among public transportation users in Malacca, Malaysia, using the Service Experience Equity (SEE) framework. To demonstrate the causal connections between the variables, a regression analysis has been employed. The findings reveal that service atmosphere and personnel interactions significantly impact users' willingness to continue using these services. The study emphasizes the importance for management to prioritize customer experience by investing in service environment strategies that foster user engagement and discourage customer churn. It further underscores that both the overall service experience and the quality of employee-customer interactions are critical determinants of future patronage. Consequently, it is recommended that transportation service providers leverage these elements to create a competitive edge, thereby encouraging repeat usage and building long-term customer loyalty.

Keywords: *Service Experience Equity, Patronage Intention, Public Transport Services, Customer Loyalty, Customer Equity*

1. Introduction and Background

The extant literature suggests that to maintain profitability and achieve competitive advantage, a firm to continuously invest in retaining consumers. Hence, firms are expected to deliver superior service and reduce service failure. The public transportation service providers are without exclusions. Despite continuous investments and efforts by public transportation providers to enhance service quality and engage users, customer retention remains a persistent challenge in the sector. Frequent complaints and declining repatronage rates highlight the vulnerability of users, even in the face of ongoing improvements. The existing literature predominantly addresses consumer behavior and retention in developed nations, leaving a gap in understanding these dynamics within the context of emerging markets like Malaysia. Additionally, while service environment, employee interactions, and service convenience are identified as critical factors influencing customer retention, their specific impact on public transportation users' willingness to continue using these services in Malaysia remains underexplored.

Addressing these gaps is essential for public transportation providers to formulate effective strategies that reduce customer dissatisfaction, encourage repeat usage, and build long-term loyalty. Investments in customer retention have become a main focus and have been set as a key role in measuring the firm's performance. While much of the literature focuses on consumers in developed nations, Elgheit's (2018) study emphasized the need to extend perspective to fully grasp the dynamics of shifting consumer behavior. In today's increasingly competitive climate, customer retention is an essential component of every business's strategy. The majority of past research on the variables influencing customer retention has focused on retention from the perspective of the consumer. Several academics consider customer retention to be the likelihood for consumers to remain with their service providers, and hence a behavioral component (Hwang, Kim, Park, & Kwon, 2020). According to several kinds of literature, patronage intention is the likelihood that customers will continue to patronize service providers and is thus part of a behavioral component (Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003). When a company realizes the significance of patronage intention, it will place a greater emphasis on retaining consumers. To outperform the competition and keep consumers coming back, businesses have prioritized relationship

marketing strategies that lower customer dissatisfaction. These strategies focus on better understanding and catering to customers' wants and requirements (Nasir & Mahmood, 2018). As a result, it will have a favorable effect on the performance and image of the organization. In addition, if an organization can maintain its clients, it may save a great deal of money while attempting to acquire new ones. This is backed by Ullah, Raza, Malik, Imran, Islam & Kim (2019) who noted that it may be more cost-effective to retain existing consumers than to acquire new ones. Therefore, this article aimed to explore the extent to which service experience equity would affect user retention in the public transportation sector. The three service experience equity that is identified, namely service environment, employee service, and service convenience. In designing the framework for the study, the customer equity theory has been used.

Customer Equity Theory

It is a framework that focuses on maximizing the total lifetime value of a firm's customer base. Developed by Rust et al (2004), this theory emphasizes that the ultimate value of a company lies not in its products or services but in its customers. The theory posits that by managing the drivers of customer equity—value equity, brand equity, and relationship equity—companies can build long-term profitability and sustain competitive advantage. Customer Equity Theory suggests that companies should strive to balance and optimize these three components to enhance overall customer equity, which is the sum of the value of current and future customer relationships. In this study, the elements of service environment, employee interactions, and service convenience all significantly contribute to shaping customer equity by influencing its three core components: value equity, brand equity, and relationship equity. These factors collectively determine how customers perceive and engage with a brand, thereby affecting their overall satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term profitability. The environment, in this context, refers to the physical and digital settings, atmospheres, and service contexts where customer interactions with a brand occur. This includes factors such as store ambiance, cleanliness, digital platform usability, and overall service atmosphere. Each of these elements can significantly impact how customers perceive the company and their subsequent decisions to continue patronizing its services. On the other hand, employee interactions are critical touchpoints in shaping customer experiences, especially in service industries. Employees act as the face of the company, and their behavior, attitude, and competence greatly influence customer perceptions. Finally, service convenience directly enhances value equity by minimizing the time, effort, and resources customers have to expend to use a service. For example, a transportation service that offers convenient digital ticketing options and seamless scheduling tools increases perceived value by making the service more user-friendly and efficient. Thus, it becomes necessary to study these variables to understand the patronage intentions of the general public in transportation usage.

2. Literature Review

Service Experience Equity

Through the process of value creation, the traditional marketing strategy centered on the product is progressively giving way to one centered on the service (Vargo and Lusch, 2003). It is driven by the criteria of quality, cost, and convenience. However, service experience goes beyond the traditional perspective of value proposition since customers want to feel emotional advantages, such as "a combination of excitement, entertainment, and adventure that assures "a genuine whole customer experience" (Mascarenhas et al., 2006). The proliferation of consumer touchpoints across media and channels has increased the complexity of customer journeys, which has led to a greater emphasis on customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Therefore, it is important to look at service experience equity components to further understand the value proposition offered.

Service Environment

The service environment represents the perceptible physical characteristics of the service encounter as perceived by the consumer. Bitner (1992) defines servicescape as the tangible aspects offered to clients in a business environment, such as the ambiance, architectural design, layout, interior décor, equipment, and signs. A well-crafted service environment is pertinent to customer experience as it provides physical and functional benefits for the customers (Patrício et al., 2011). The service environment also helps patrons to evaluate the services provided (Wong and Fong, 2012). Roy et al (2022) suggest that a service environment enhances customer experience through socioeconomic and societal exchanges. The work from Rosenbaum and colleagues also supports that a commercial built environment can serve as a third place and be used to fulfill

customer functional and emotional needs (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2007). Thus, a firm's service environment provides customers with functional and emotional experiences through the interaction of the service encounter (Chang and Horng, 2010).

Repatronage Intention

Intentions are subjective judgments about how a person will behave in the future and usually serve as dependent variables in many service research and satisfaction models (Park, 2020). Al-Adwan, Al-Debei, & Dwivedi (2022) argue that repurchase intentions and actual repurchase patterns are not necessarily the same. While Soderlund and Ohman (2003) consider repurchase intentions as intentions-as-expectations, Shamma, El Masry, & Dutot (2023) defined repurchase intention as 'the individual's judgment about buying again a designated service from the same company, taking into account his or her current situation and likely circumstances'. In short, customers tend to purchase and repurchase a product or service that can maximize their benefits (Le et al, 2023).

Employee Service

Customers receive both practical and emotional advantages as a result of their contact with members of the serving staff (Chang and Horng, 2010). This idea may be understood as the experience they have with employee service. Providing excellent customer service is the most important factor in maintaining a high level of customer satisfaction. Shagirbasha, Madhan, and Iqbal (2024) examine how employee-customer interactions influence emotional responses in service contexts. Their research found that the nature and frequency of interactions significantly affect customer emotions, which can be either positive or negative depending on the quality of the interaction. This is crucial for understanding how employee behavior shapes customer perceptions and loyalty in service industries Disse and Becker-Özcamlica (2022) in their research explore how employee behavior aligned with sustainable market orientations (SMOs) positively influences customer attitudes and behaviors, including trust and word-of-mouth, which are crucial for customer retention and satisfaction in service organization. In addition to this, strong customer service provided by employees will have a positive influence on marketers and has the potential to shape the experience of consumers, which has the potential to increase customer satisfaction and loyalty (Wong and Fong, 2010). On the other hand, Bentein et al (2022). demonstrate that to mould the customer's perception of service quality, the behavior of the employee plays a significant role. This is because employee service performance is also one of the factors that contribute to companies' profits. According to Liao Hui and Chuang (2004), having an awareness of the elements that predict the degree of service offered by employees is a necessary component. The phrase "employee service" may also be described as the behaviors of workers that need to be controlled and are relevant to the goals of the company.

The combination of the service performance of employees was important to produce a collective phenomenon at the organizational level. This was necessary for organizational effectiveness to be associated with service quality, customer happiness, and customer loyalty. Aside from that, Snyder et al (2022) asserted that social interactions were included in the service procedures that took place between service personnel and a consumer. Alongside customer service, staff service is one of the variables that will affect a consumer's propensity to purchase. Today, a great number of businesses are aware of this aspect, and consequently, they will work to ensure that their workers provide the highest possible level of service to fulfill the requirements of their clients and foster positive relationships with them.

Service Convenience

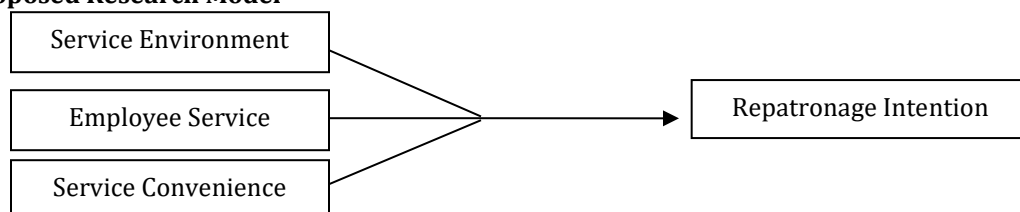
A variety of converging socioeconomic phenomena, according to Brown (1990), encouraged consumers and companies to seek convenience in the products and services they purchased in the 1980s. Bryson and Daniels (2010), emphasized that while service convenience is a critical component of service-based economies, it remains under-researched compared to other service quality dimensions. Their study, included in the *Handbook of Service Science*, argues that convenience is often taken for granted, despite its significance in influencing customer satisfaction and behavior in service-oriented markets. Kaura, Prasad, and Sharma (2015) found that service convenience plays a significant role in influencing customer satisfaction and loyalty. Their research highlights that service convenience, when combined with perceived fairness and service quality, can greatly impact customer contentment and encourage repeat patronage, making it a critical element for service providers to focus on in service-based economies. They demonstrate that convenience plays a significant role

in shaping customer experiences and satisfaction, which in turn enhances loyalty. Chang and Hsu (2010), highlight that service convenience significantly influences customer satisfaction and loyalty. They found that the convenience of service can enhance perceived service value, which in turn affects post-purchase behaviors, making service convenience a critical factor across various stages of the customer. According to the majority of the publications reviewed, simplicity of service is highly important since it impacts client purchasing behavior.

In the customer equity theory, value equity is the rational assessment of a service's value based on quality, price, and convenience. Therefore, service convenience contributes directly to value equity by reducing the effort and time required to access and benefit from the service. This is particularly critical in scenarios where customers prioritize efficiency and ease of use. As mentioned by Brown (1990) there were five dimensions concept of convenience. The first one is the time dimension. Marketers need to provide services for customers at convenient times. For example, it will be convenient for the customers to shop at the night market to get wet produce. It is due to the time constraint in which they do not have time to shop during working hours. The second-dimension concept of convenience is the place dimension. To make customers feel more convenient, service providers must provide services at convenient places. For example, it will be convenient for the customers if marketers provide home services such as facial or massage treatments at customers' houses. In addition to time and space, the third dimension is acquisition. Furthermore, internet and property purchases are excellent examples of how to make acquisition more pleasant because a simple message via Whatsapp or a phone call may finalize the transaction. The fourth dimension is the dimension of usage. This entails making sure clients are comfortable and convenient when utilizing or purchasing services.

The author also noted that service convenience is classified into five types: choice convenience, access convenience, transaction convenience, benefit convenience, and post-benefit convenience. The author claimed that decision convenience implies that clients should spend adequate time and effort to acquire services or make decisions. The second factor is the ease of access. Consumers' perceived time and effort expenditures must be engaged to commence service delivery. Bitner, Brown, and Meuter (2000) state that the physical and temporal separation of a service might hurt its delivery capability and adaptability. Transaction convenience is the third form of service convenience. This transaction may be influenced by the consumer's perceived time and effort after purchasing the services or performing the transaction. The consumer's perceived time and effort expenditures to experience or acquire the real advantages from the service given are referred to as benefit convenience. Customers, for example, will acquire either a positive or negative experience. When the service is poor, it will cost you a lot of time and effort. Last but not least, post-benefit comfort. One of the most critical factors influencing client retention is post-benefit ease. If it's good, it'll keep more customers.

Figure 1: Proposed Research Model



3. Research Methodology

The following procedures are observed in conducting this research.

Data Collection and Measures

A total of 300 questionnaires were handed out to a wide range of relevant responders. These respondents come from a wide variety of public populations, ranging from those who use public transit regularly to those who only use it irregularly. The data for this study were collected using a sample approach called convenience sampling throughout its whole. However, only 255 of the total 300 questionnaires that were handed out were considered appropriate for further investigation. The remaining surveys were considered invalid because they included insufficient information. A structured questionnaire consisting of questions asked in a certain order was used to collect the data for this study. To tailor the questionnaire items to the needs of the study, several

sources of information were altered. On a Likert scale with seven points, responses ranged from "strongly disagree" (point 1) to "strongly agree" (point 5) for all of the items. The activity was carried out for a total of three weeks, beginning at 10 in the morning and ending at 6 in the evening, seven days a week. In this study, service experience equality (SEE) is conceived of as a latent construct that takes into consideration the perspectives of the public service experience on three dimensions: the service environment, staff service, and service convenience.

4. Findings and Discussion

Frequency Distribution

The data for the respondent's profile are obtained from the questionnaires which is in section A. Section A consists of 6 questions which comprise the respondent's gender, age, race, educational level, employment sector, and income level. The table below shows the results.

Table 1: Respondents' demographic profile

| No | Profile | Description | Responses | Percentage |
|----|-------------------|-----------------|-----------|------------|
| 1 | Gender | Male | 115 | 46% |
| | | Female | 135 | 54% |
| 2 | Age | 18 - 25 years | 75 | 30% |
| | | 26 - 33 | 60 | 24% |
| | | 34 - 41 | 65 | 26% |
| | | 42 and above | 45 | 18% |
| 3 | Race | Malay | 165 | 66% |
| | | Indian | 60 | 24% |
| | | Chinese | 25 | 10% |
| | | Others | - | - |
| 4 | Educational Level | Secondary | 15 | 6% |
| | | Undergraduate | 195 | 78% |
| | | Postgraduate | 40 | 16% |
| 5 | Income Level | Below RM1000 | 30 | 12% |
| | | RM2001 - RM3000 | 135 | 54% |
| | | RM3001 - RM4000 | 53 | 22% |
| | | RM4001 - above | 32 | 12% |
| 6 | Employment Sector | Government | 5 | 2% |
| | | Private | 170 | 67% |
| | | Self-employed | 35 | 14% |
| | | Student | 38 | 15% |
| | | Others | 2 | 2% |

In terms of age, 18–25-year-olds account for 30 percent, 26–33-year-olds account for 24 percent, 34–41-year-olds account for 26 percent, and 42-year-olds and above account for 18 percent. For respondent race, respondents were Malay, respondents were Indian, and respondents were Chinese. Based on the educational level, most of the respondents are secondary school leavers which accounts for 15 percent of the response. The most responses were received from the undergraduate level. This is mainly because most of the users are young working adults. They accounted for the largest number of users of public transport in this study. Looking at the income level, most of the respondents received an income level of RM2001- RM3000 which accounted for 54 percent of the total respondents.

Correlations Among Variables

According to the results of the study, the level of relationship between the three independent variables (service environment, staff service, and service convenience) was between moderate and strong. This outcome provides support for the hypothesis.

Table 2: Correlations among variables

| | A | B | C | D |
|----------------------------|--------|--------|-------|------|
| Repatronage Intentions (A) | 1.00 | | | |
| Service Environment (B) | 0.569* | 1.00 | | |
| Employee Service (C) | 0.215* | 0.463* | 1.00 | |
| Service Convenience (D) | 0.111 | 0.427 | 0.656 | 1.00 |

Note: *correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

Regression Analysis

The results from the multiple regression analysis, as illustrated in Table 3, demonstrate that the three independent variables—service environment, employee service, and service convenience—collectively explain 54.7% of the variance in passenger repatronage intentions ($R = 0.547$). This indicates that more than half of passengers' decisions to continue using a specific transportation service are influenced by these factors. The analysis yielded an F value of 54.711, which is statistically significant at $p < 0.000$, affirming the model's robustness. The detailed coefficients in Table 4.12 reveal that the service environment has the highest impact on repatronage intention, with a standardized beta coefficient of 0.569 and a significance level of 0.000, making it the most influential predictor. Employee service also significantly contributes to retention ($\beta = 0.215$, $p = 0.009$), highlighting the importance of high-quality staff interactions. In contrast, service convenience shows a lower beta value ($\beta = 0.111$) and is not statistically significant ($p = 0.885$), suggesting that convenience alone does not substantially influence passengers' loyalty. The study's multicollinearity diagnostics—tolerance values above 0.1 and Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) below 10—confirm that the independent variables are not highly correlated, thereby minimizing multicollinearity concerns.

The findings suggest that creating a positive service environment is paramount for retaining passengers, as customers prioritize superior physical facilities and atmosphere over convenience. This includes well-maintained stations, comfortable seating, and aesthetically pleasing surroundings. Additionally, employee service quality is a critical factor; when personnel exhibit professionalism and attentiveness, it fosters trust and increases the likelihood of repeat business. Conversely, service conveniences, such as ease of access or straightforward scheduling, appear to be a less decisive factor in influencing repatronage intentions. This result implies that while convenience may attract initial usage, it does not ensure long-term customer loyalty if the service environment and staff interactions are lacking. In summary, the regression analysis confirms that the service environment is the most significant determinant of customer retention, followed by employee service. These insights suggest that public transport providers should prioritize investments in enhancing the physical environment and staff training to secure long-term customer loyalty.

Table 3: Summary of regression analysis

| Summary | | ANOVA | | Dimensions | β | t | p | Collinearity Statistics | |
|---------|--------------|--------|-------|---------------------|---------|-------|-------|-------------------------|-------|
| R | ΔR^2 | F | Sig. | | | | | Tolerance | VIF |
| .547 | .537 | 54.711 | 0.000 | Service Environment | 0.569 | 1.326 | 0.000 | 0.759 | 1.317 |
| | | | | Employee Service | 0.215 | 4.928 | 0.009 | 0.529 | 1.892 |
| | | | | Service Convenience | 0.111 | 1.743 | 0.885 | 0.550 | 1.819 |

Note: predictors (constant) service environment, employee service, service convenience

5. Conclusion

The service atmosphere, personnel service, and service ease—collectively explain 53.7% of the variance in repatronage intention, indicating that other factors may also significantly influence passengers' decisions to remain loyal. Future research should explore these additional determinants to gain a more comprehensive understanding of retention drivers in the public transportation sector. For transport service providers, enhancing the service atmosphere is crucial, as it not only attracts new passengers but also makes them feel more comfortable and connected to the service. A positive service environment fosters place attachment,

satisfaction, and loyalty. While traditional research has primarily focused on tangible aspects such as architectural design, layout, interior decor, equipment, and signage, other less explored elements must also be identified and developed to significantly elevate the overall service experience. In conclusion, cultivating strong, long-term customer relationships and delivering tailored high-quality service experiences are essential for ensuring repeat patronage and achieving sustainable business success. By prioritizing customer satisfaction and strategically investing in service environment enhancements, public transportation providers can strengthen user engagement, build loyalty, and create a lasting competitive advantage in the marketplace.

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