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Editorial: challenges and opportunities for services marketers in a culturally diverse global marketplace

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this special issue is to extend the growing research on the challenges and opportunities facing services marketers in an increasingly culturally diverse global marketplace.

Design/methodology/approach – The nine papers included in this special issue use a variety of research methods (e.g. case study, experiments and surveys), participants (e.g. customers, employees and online panel members) and service settings (e.g. fast food, post office, weight loss, bank, home loan, personal fitness and offshore outsourcing).

Findings – All the nine papers highlight the importance of studying the unique perspectives of the customers and employees involved in intercultural interactions in diverse service settings in marketplaces and societies that are either already or have recently become multicultural.

Research limitations/implications – The findings from the nine papers have useful implications for future research on services marketing in multicultural markets, although these may not always be generalisable beyond the unique context of the studies reported in each of these papers.

Practical implications – All the nine papers also present some useful directions for services marketing managers in the multicultural markets, to help them understand and manage the expectations of their culturally diverse customers, as well as employees.

Originality/value – This special issue is unique because it is one of the first attempts to understand the unique challenges and opportunities for services marketers in the growing multicultural global marketplace, from a theoretical, as well as empirical, point of view.

Keywords Service encounter, Global, Cultural diversity, Multicultural, Intercultural

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In the past few decades, globalization has led to an increase in international travel, tourism and immigration, which in turn are creating a culturally diverse and complex global marketplace by bringing together customers and employees from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Sharma *et al.*, 2009, 2012, 2017). For example, there were more than 250 million international immigrants in the world by the end of 2017, which accounts for 3.4 per cent of the global population, representing an increase of 105 million since 1990 (United Nations, 2017). In addition, number of international tourists crossed 1.3 billion in 2017 and generated revenues of about \$1.5tn, which represents about 10 per cent of global GDP, 7 per cent of global exports and 30 per cent of total services exports (UNWTO, 2018). After adding the number of people

traveling overseas for education, employment and business for relatively shorter durations, it is quite likely that more than 2 billion people (about one-fourth of world population) are currently in a country different from the one they were born in. This huge figure highlights the growing cultural and ethnic diversity around the world today (Euromonitor International, 2015).

Such a dramatic rise in the cultural and ethnic diversity offers new challenges and opportunities for services marketers because the culturally diverse customers and employees have significantly different expectations, perceptions and evaluations about service quality and its various dimensions (Etgar and Fuchs, 2011; Morales and Ladhari, 2011; Schoefer, 2010). While the increase in the number of such intercultural interactions offers additional business opportunities to both local and global services marketers, it also makes it difficult to design appropriate service offers to match the unique needs of culturally diverse customers and to deliver these through their service employees who may be used to a mono-cultural service environment (Sharma *et al.*, 2014; Sharma and Zhan, 2015). Interestingly, such intercultural interactions are already a

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regular phenomenon in most multi-cultural societies such as the USA, UK and Singapore among the developed countries and India, Brazil and South Africa among the emerging markets (Demangeot *et al.*, 2015).

Early research on multicultural markets mostly used a descriptive approach to explore the role of variables, mainly from the customers' point of view, such as culture shock (Stauss and Mang, 1999), perceived discrimination (Barker and Härtel, 2004), cross-cultural interaction comfort (Paswan and Ganesh, 2005), consumer ethnocentrism (Javalgi and Martin, 2007; Sharma *et al.*, 2005; Ueltschy *et al.*, 2007) and ethnic/cultural dissimilarity (Eitgar and Fuchs, 2011). Others explored customer reactions to service failure and recovery (de Matos *et al.*, 2011) and to employee's acculturation behaviours (Poulis *et al.*, 2013), ethnic accents (Tombs and Rao Hill, 2014) and attentiveness (Lee, 2015). Customers were also shown to indulge in some amount of cultural or national stereotyping when choosing a service provider, showing a clear preference for those from similar cultural, ethnic or national background as theirs (Hopkins *et al.*, 2005; Javalgi and Martin, 2007; Ueltschy *et al.*, 2007), whereas customers from minority cultures reported being discriminated against by the service employees from the majority culture (Barker and Härtel, 2004).

Subsequent studies examined the role of employee stress and coping (Wang and Mattila, 2010), cross-cultural consumer to consumer interactions (Johnson and Grier, 2013), emotional labour (Chuapetcharasopon, 2014), preference for ethnic service staff (Baumann and Setogawa, 2014), attributions (Tam *et al.*, 2014) and intercultural communication competence (Ihtiyar and Ahmad, 2015) in intercultural service encounters. More recent studies explore the roles of moderators such as service role and outcome (Sharma *et al.*, 2015), consumer ethnocentrism and intercultural competence (Sharma and Zhan, 2015) and personal cultural orientations (Sharma *et al.*, 2016), whereas others examine the role of acculturation behaviours by frontline service employees in shaping customer satisfaction and commitment (Gaur *et al.*, 2017) and the mediating role of intercultural service quality in the influence of service climate on employee performance in multicultural service settings (Fung *et al.*, 2017).

Despite growing research on the increasingly culturally diverse global marketplace, there are still many important research gaps and unanswered questions, some of which are addressed in this special issue. Specifically, this special issue aims to extend the growing research on the challenges and opportunities facing services marketers in the multicultural global economy, with nine articles that address the unique challenges and opportunities offered by the differences in the expectations, perceptions and evaluations of customers and service employees in their intercultural interactions in today's culturally diverse global marketplace. The theoretical and empirical insights offered by these articles would help services marketing scholars look beyond the typical mono-cultural or cross-cultural views of customer–employee interactions that have been prevalent in services marketing literature. This special issue will also help services marketers recognize the importance of understanding and accepting cultural differences between and among their customers and employees in multi-

cultural societies and develop suitable strategies to manage these differences in their service design and delivery processes.

Literature review

Past few decades have seen a rapid rise in the number of interactions among customers and employees from diverse cultural backgrounds as increasing numbers of international travellers and immigrants go about their lives in their host cultures, by learning about and adjusting to the challenges posed by their unfamiliar socio-cultural environments (Kim, 2015; van Oudenhoven and Benet-Martínez, 2015; Yu and Lee, 2014). Interestingly, the customers and employees in the host cultures also experience a similar process because they too have to understand and adjust to these foreigners visiting or even making their homes in their countries (Liu and Morris, 2014). In this process, both customers and employees from diverse cultures need to overcome their perceived cultural distance with each other and learn to adjust their own behaviours, in view of the significant differences between them and in terms of language, ethnicity, physical appearance and personal and social values, as well as behavioural norms.

In this context, past research shows that intercultural interactions may help people to experience and learn about other cultures, and over time possibly even successfully acculturate (i.e. learn about and adjust with other cultures than their own). However, being forced to face intercultural interactions may also prove to be rather challenging for many people, particularly if they lack knowledge about other cultures or if they are not willing or able to learn about and accept cultural differences, which may involve changing their behaviours through acculturation (Berry, 1974, 2005) if they are immigrants and through cross-cultural adjustment (Ward and Kennedy, 2001; Ward and Rana-Deuba, 2000) if they are temporary visitors, such as students, expatriate workers, foreign tourists or business visitors.

Early research on intercultural interactions focused on the challenges faced by in the process of cross-cultural adjustment mostly by international travellers (Brein and David, 1971) in the beginning and subsequently by expatriate managers (Janssens, 1995). Researchers also examined the role played by intercultural communication (Condon and Yousef, 1975; Samovar *et al.*, 1981) in the process of cross-cultural adaptation, and identified several barriers that either inhibit the process of cross-cultural adjustment and prevent effective intercultural communications, including psychological privilege and ethnocentrism (Thomas, 1996), or promote intercultural interactions, such as intercultural competence (Lustig and Koester, 2006) and willingness to communicate (Lu and Hsu, 2008). More recent studies explore the outcomes of intercultural interactions, such as employee performance (Sanchez-Burks *et al.*, 2009), cooperation and competition (Matsumoto and Hwang, 2011) and the process by which people from diverse cultures form their unique cultural identities (Liu and Morris, 2014).

Past research links intercultural interactions with several problems that could potentially debilitate social cohesion and harmony, such as ethno-cultural identity conflict (Leong and Ward, 2000; Ward, 2008), misattributions, communication gaps, stereotyping, ethnocentrism, prejudice and

discrimination (Stening, 1979), intolerance, confrontation and even violence towards ethnic minorities (Johnson *et al.*, 2013). It is interesting to see these concerns raise their heads in the twenty-first century with the rise of right-wing political parties across the world, from Australia to the USA, Japan to India and UK to France, which could potentially threaten the move towards globalization and open borders, by focusing on the possible “evils” of immigration and the “ill-effects” of rising multiculturalism in their societies. However, despite the above negative associations, intercultural interactions are now being increasingly recognized as an unavoidable feature of an already globalized world economy and the resulting multicultural global marketplace (Demangeot *et al.*, 2015; Tam *et al.*, 2014), which in turn is making global services marketers and academic scholars alike, realize the urgent need to understand the challenges and opportunities offered by the wide range of cultural, ethnic, national and socio-economic differences between customers and service employees in multicultural marketplaces in both developed and emerging markets around the world (Chuapetcharasopon, 2014; Sharma *et al.*, 2015, 2017; Sharma and Zhan, 2015).

Research gaps

Notwithstanding the significant contribution of past research on the challenges and opportunities for services marketers in the culturally diverse markets, there are still many unanswered questions and unresolved research gaps. For example, most of the research in this area mainly focuses on the customers’ perspective and that too in the context of intercultural service encounters in the business-to-consumers (B2C) services (Gaur *et al.*, 2017; Sharma *et al.*, 2009, 2012, 2015; Sharma and Zhan, 2015; Sharma *et al.*, 2016; Tam *et al.*, 2014, 2016), with hardly any research on the business-to-business (B2B) contexts and intercultural interactions among employees in a multicultural workplace (Fung *et al.*, 2017), both of which constitute substantially large components of the global marketplace that has become quite multicultural in recent years and continues to grow even more. In addition, there is still no comprehensive conceptual framework that could explain the ways in which cultural differences shape customer and employee expectations and perceptions and evaluations in mono-cultural, multi-cultural and intercultural service encounters. Such a framework would be able to guide future research on this topic of growing importance.

There is hardly any research that examines the differences in the impact of individual-level personal cultural values and national cultural dimensions on customers and employees involved in intercultural service encounters. As a result, services marketers do not have enough knowledge that could help them develop appropriate processes and delivery mechanisms for their services to satisfy the widely different expectations of their culturally diverse customers and employees. Similarly, the interactions among cultural, socio-economic and demographic variables in their influence on the expectations, perceptions and evaluations of the culturally diverse groups of customers and employees also remain unexplored.

In terms of theoretical perspectives, recent research on intercultural service encounters uses theories such as role theory, social-identity theory, similarity-attraction paradigm

and attribution theory; however, there is a scope to further strengthen the conceptual foundations by exploring the role of other psychographic and socio-psychological processes such as stereotypes and acculturation (cross-cultural adjustment and adaptation) in intercultural service encounters. Moreover, we need to differentiate and investigate the role of constructs such as intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity and cultural intelligence in intercultural service encounters, which may provide insights into the cross-sectional versus developmental perspective of cross-cultural adjustment and adaptation by examining the influence of different stages of cross-cultural adjustment on culturally diverse customers and employees.

Next, in terms of managerial implications, there is a great deal of scope to make a contribution to the services marketing discipline. For example, further research on the marketing strategies used by both local and global services marketers in their markets (e.g. standardization vs customization and localization vs globalization) would help us understand and address the cultural differences among their customers and employees in the growing multicultural markets. Similarly, research on the reasons and outcomes of intercultural friction and conflict between service employees and customers, and the resolution strategies used by the service firms to avoid service failure and manager service recovery, would provide insights on how to foster trust and relationship in multicultural service settings. In this context, the role of internal marketing in creating a service culture among culturally diverse employees inside the service firms could be examined as a means to deal with culturally diverse customers in multicultural markets.

In a similar vein, we need more research on the unique nature and contribution of the marketing mix elements in culturally diverse marketplaces, such as the design and delivery of the core product or service including service features and delivery process, employee selection and training, servicescape design and customer experience management to understand and manage the expectations and perceptions of culturally diverse customers and employees. To this end, it would also be important to study the role of market research, service innovation and co-creation in identifying and developing new services to cater to culturally diverse customers. In addition, researchers could identify and study the specific human resources management strategies used in these markets to recruit, train and retain culturally competent frontline service employees. Finally, we need more research on the influence of emerging themes such as corporate social responsibility, environment protection and sustainability in the multicultural global marketplace.

This special issue consists of nine papers that address some of the above research gaps and unresolved issues, such as the influence of linguistic choices, language homophily, perceived cultural distance and (mis)match on customer perceptions and behaviours, impact of intercultural competence on frontline service employees’ recognition of their customers’ faces, role of customer participation on their attributions, impact of technology readiness on young consumers’ socialization and the role of intercultural workplace behaviours and B2B interactions in multicultural service settings, as described in the next section. In addition, Table I provides a snapshot of the past and current research on a variety of topics and directions

Table I Past, present and future research

Past (before 2015)	Present (2015-2018)	Future (after 2018)
<p><i>Customer perceptions in intercultural service encounters</i> e.g. culture shock (Stauss and Mang, 1999), perceived discrimination (Barker and Härtel, 2004), cross-cultural interaction comfort (Paswan and Ganesh, 2005), consumer ethnocentrism (Javalgi and Martin, 2007; Sharma et al., 2005; Ueltschy et al., 2007), perceived cultural distance, interaction comfort, inter-role congruence, intercultural competence (Sharma et al., 2009, 2012)</p> <p><i>Customer responses in intercultural service encounters</i> e.g. customer reactions to ethnic/cultural dissimilarity with service employees (Etgar and Fuchs, 2011), service failure and recovery (de Matos et al., 2011), employee's acculturation behaviours (Poulis et al., 2013), ethnic accents (Tombs and Rao Hill, 2014); stereotyping of culturally different service employees by customers (Hopkins et al., 2005; Javalgi and Martin, 2007; Ueltschy et al., 2007), perceived discrimination by service employees (Barker and Härtel, 2004) and cross-cultural consumer to consumer interactions (Johnson and Grier, 2013)</p> <p><i>Employee perceptions and responses in intercultural service encounters</i> e.g. employee stress and coping (Wang and Mattila, 2010), emotional labour (Chuapetcharasopon, 2014), preference for ethnic service staff (Baumann and Setogawa, 2014)</p>	<p><i>Antecedents of customer and employee perceptions and behaviours in intercultural service encounters</i> e.g. attentiveness (Lee, 2015), acculturation behaviours (Gaur et al., 2017) and linguistic choices of frontline service employees (Zolfagharian et al., 2018), language homophily between customers and employees (Pezzuti et al., 2018), perceived cultural distance and customer participation (Ang et al., 2018), customer–employee (mis)match and cultural vs non-cultural attributions (Sichtmann and Micevski, 2018), Intercultural competence and customer facial recognition (Henderson et al., 2018), Technology readiness and consumer socialization of teenagers (Mishra et al., 2018), religiosity and consumer choice of fitness services (Summers et al., 2018), impact of service models and culture on work behaviours (Mathies and Wong, 2018)</p> <p><i>Moderators of customer and employee perceptions and behaviours in intercultural service encounters</i> e.g. service role and outcome (Sharma et al., 2015), consumer ethnocentrism and intercultural competence (Sharma and Zhan, 2015), intercultural communication competence (Ihtiyar and Ahmad, 2015) and personal cultural orientations (Sharma et al., 2016)</p> <p><i>Mediators of customer and employee perceptions and behaviours in intercultural service encounters</i> e.g. attributions (Tam et al., 2014; Tam et al., 2016) and intercultural service quality (Fung et al., 2017)</p> <p><i>Antecedents and outcomes of intercultural B2B relationships</i> e.g. power, resource-dependencies and capabilities (Malik et al., 2018)</p>	<p>Service employees' perspective in multicultural marketplaces in terms of the diversity in their expectations, perceptions and evaluations as well as differences with culturally close versus distant customers</p> <p>Insights into the multicultural business-to-business (B2B) contexts involving both mono and multicultural organizational units</p> <p>Unique challenges posed by multicultural service workplaces in terms of inter-cultural friction, cross-cultural adjustment, etc.</p> <p>Differences in the impact of individual-level personal cultural orientations and national-level cultural dimensions on customers and employees involved in intercultural service encounters</p> <p>Interactive impact of cultural, socio-economic and demographic variables on the expectations, perceptions and evaluations of increasingly culturally diverse customers and employees in multicultural marketplaces</p> <p>Differentiate and investigate the role of constructs such as intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity and cultural intelligence in intercultural service encounters</p> <p>Explore the differences in the cross-sectional versus developmental view of cross-cultural adjustment and adaptation process for culturally diverse customers and employees</p>

for further conceptual and empirical contributions that could be made in this research area of growing importance for international services marketers.

Special issue

The first paper in this special issue, titled “Customer response to service encounter linguistics” (Zolfagharian et al., 2018), investigates the impact of service employees' choice and use of language in multicultural service encounters on their customers' evaluations of interaction quality, service quality and satisfaction, as well as customer loyalty, identification with the brand and positive word-of-mouth intentions. The authors use a 3 (contexts: fast food-English; post office-English; post office-Spanish) × 4 (scenarios: customer language preference adhered to; adapted to; mixed; ignored) between-subjects scenario-based experiment with Mexican American consumers in the USA, to show that customers perceive higher or at least equal level of interaction quality when employees use their preferred language from the beginning than when the

employees switch to their preferred language after missing it initially. Both these scenarios also exhibit higher interaction quality than those in which the employee ignores customer language preference or use elements from two languages throughout the interaction. The negative impact of ignoring customer-preferred language or mixing it with another language is amplified for customers with low ethnic identification and among those with lower level of bilingualism. These findings add to the literature that examines the dynamics of intercultural service encounters and draws attention to employee choice and use of language and its impact on a host of service outcomes, with interaction quality serving as a key mediator. This study highlights the need for service firms to consider customer language preferences and train and empower employees to meet customer expectations.

The second paper, titled “Perceived cultural distance in intercultural service encounters: does customer participation matter?” (Ang et al., 2018), investigates the negative effect of perceived cultural distance on service quality and customer

satisfaction through customers' social judgements of the service providers' warmth and competence in intercultural service encounters, and the mitigation of this negative effect through customer participation. The authors use a 2×2 between-subjects experimental design with an online consumer panel and deploy a series of intercultural service encounter scenarios in a weight loss service context, to manipulate customer participation (high vs low) and pictures of service providers to induce perceived cultural distance (high vs low). As hypothesized, they find that in the context of intercultural service encounters, perceived cultural distance (PCD) negatively affects customers' social judgements of the service providers' warmth and competence, which in turn influence service quality and customer satisfaction. However, the negative impact of PCD is diminished when the level of customer participation is high. These findings may help services marketers in multicultural marketplaces improve their customers' experience by designing the service delivery process in ways that allows for more customer engagement and participation. This study is among the first attempts to highlight the importance of consumers' social judgements about culturally dissimilar service providers, which can be influenced through greater customer participation.

The third paper, titled "Attributions of service quality: immigrant customers' perspective" (Sichtmann and Micevski, 2018), investigates the impact of cultural (mis)match on immigrant customers' satisfaction and the mediating role of cultural and employee performance attributions in this relationship. In addition, the authors test the moderating effect of service delivery outcome (success vs failure) on the above process. The authors use a 2 (origin of service employee: Austria or Turkey) \times 2 (service delivery outcome: success or failure) scenario-based experiment in a financial service (bank) setting with 120 Turkish immigrant customers in Austria, to show that cultural (mis)match does not have a significant direct effect on customer satisfaction. However, for a positive service delivery outcome, immigrant customers attribute the results to the cultural background of the employees if it is the same as their home culture, but they attribute success to employees' performance if they belong to the host culture. In contrast, negative service delivery outcomes do not give rise to either cultural or performance attributions. These results challenge the predictions of social identity theory and the similarity-attraction paradigm as reported in prior research and highlight that customer attributions may play a more prominent role in influencing the satisfaction levels of immigrant customers.

The fourth paper, titled "Intercultural competence and customer facial recognition" (Henderson *et al.*, 2018), explores the effect of racial identification on customer-employee interactions. The authors use two experiments in the USA and South Africa to show how intercultural competence affects recognition of black and white consumer faces. They find that the respondents with higher levels of intercultural competence with blacks are better at distinguishing between black regular customers and black new shoppers in an experiment. However, there is no impact of intercultural competence on the ability of respondents to differentiate between white consumers. This study highlights the impact of frontline service employees' ability to recognize their regular customers' faces can affect the

quality of their interactions and customer satisfaction in today's increasingly multicultural marketplaces.

The fifth paper, titled "Does language homophily affect migrant consumers' service usage intentions?" (Pezzuti *et al.*, 2018), investigates the impact of language homophily between service providers and migrant consumers on the migrant consumers' intentions to engage with financial and medical service providers. The authors use three empirical studies with migrant consumers living in Chile, England and the USA, to provide the participants with information on service providers and manipulate language homophily using a between-subjects design. In the high (low) language homophily condition, service providers were described as having (not having) the ability to speak the native language of the migrant consumer. Language homophily was found to increase migrant consumers' expectation of control over a service encounter and, in turn, increase their intention to use a provider's services. Collectivism was identified as a boundary condition, wherein language homophily did not affect service usage intentions among high collectivist consumers but it did positively affect service usage intentions among low collectivist consumers. This study extends prior research on service provider language by showing a positive effect of language homophily on service usage intentions and by identifying mediating (i.e. expected control over the outcome of the service encounter) and moderating (i.e. collectivism) mechanisms for this effect.

The sixth paper, titled "Technology readiness of teenagers: A consumer socialization perspective" (Mishra *et al.*, 2018), explores the role of culture-specific socialization factors as antecedents to technology readiness index (TRI) scale to understand the adoption of cutting edge technologies among teenagers in a multicultural emerging market, India. The authors use survey data from 381 Indian teenagers to show that parent-child communication, peers, media, and self-construal have varying levels of influence on technology readiness of teenagers. The effects of parent-child interactions are mediated by self-construal that reaffirms the importance of identity during adolescence. The findings from this study highlight that culture-specific characteristics are critical antecedents to teenagers' TRI; however, the TRI 2.0 scale may need to be refined to be used in those culturally diverse marketplace in which consumers are less familiar with the technical terms used in developed countries and display low levels of technology awareness. In addition, marketers may need to tailor their communication strategies to have a strong presence on digital media to engage with teenagers. Firms could also use media to provide information and develop content that should resonate with teens and potentially enhances their online impression to increase the adoption of technology.

The seventh paper, titled "Australian Muslim women and fitness choices - myths debunked" (Summers *et al.*, 2018), explores the impact of religiosity on the attitudes of Muslim women living in Australia toward exercise and gym attendance. This is an interesting study in view of the recent anti-Islamic sentiments expressed in several Western countries in response to the rise of militancy and extremism in many Muslim countries. The findings from this study de-bunk the myth about religious oppression of Islamic women that deprives them of their basic rights to their own bodies through exercise choices. The authors highlight that, in fact, this segment

represents an untapped opportunity for the fitness industry. The results of this study add to the understanding of motivations for fitness participation of multi-cultural minority groups such as Muslim Women in Australia. In addition, the Muslim market is shown to be diverse and unbounded, concluding that whilst religion can be a useful starting point for segmentation, care is needed not to overemphasize faith at the expense of other aspects of identity.

The eighth paper, titled “Service models and culture: impact on work behaviours” (Mathies and Wong, 2018), explores the influence of the cultural values of frontline employees (FLEs) on their work behaviours. Specifically, the authors draw on the organizational behaviour literature to investigate the impact of culture and service models on emotional labour and organizational citizenship behaviour, and the resultant psychological well-being of FLEs. Findings from their study in two countries (the USA and India) may help both researchers and practitioners who seek to reap competitive advantages from good customer service. The study results contribute to the cross-cultural customer service literature by demonstrating the links between service models and work behaviours contingent on FLE’s cultural values. Practitioners in service firms may gain additional insights into managing their culturally diverse FLEs to encourage delivery of high-quality service while safeguarding their psychological well-being. This is crucial because FLEs are the face of service brands and their behaviours have a major influence on customers’ perceptions of service quality and satisfaction.

Finally, the ninth paper in this special issue, titled “Power, resource-dependencies and capabilities in intercultural B2B relationships” (Malik *et al.*, 2018), explores the impact of organizational resources and capabilities on relationship quality and firm performance in the context of high-technology offshore outsourcing service vendors. The authors use a qualitative case study design to collect and analyse data from four offshore business process and information technology outsourcing firms based in India. Findings highlight that resource dependence, cultural orientation and the vendor’s resources and capabilities strengthen relationship quality and affect firm performance. This study identifies key organizational mechanisms that improve relationship quality and firm performance and helps understand the adverse effects of ethnocentricity and power faced by vendors and subsidiaries within diverse intercultural contexts. This study is one of the first to examine intercultural interactions in a B2B context, which are quite common in multicultural workplaces and yet have somehow been ignored in the past research on intercultural service encounters. We hope that it would trigger interest among academic researchers to further explore this phenomenon.

Discussion and future research directions

This special issue is one of the few attempts to extend the growing research on the challenges and opportunities facing services marketers in the increasingly culturally diverse global marketplaces. While most of the past research in this area focused on the socio-psychological process underlying intercultural service encounters, the guest editors of this special issue specifically called for fresh theoretical perspectives and

empirical approaches to provide both broader and deeper insights into the factors that drive the expectations, perceptions and evaluations of consumers in multicultural societies in developed as well as emerging markets. The papers included in this special issue address a variety of topics, including the impact of linguistic choices and language homophily as well as perceived cultural distance and (mis)match between culturally diverse customers and service employees on their service experience, the effects of intercultural competence on frontline employees’ recognition of their regular culturally diverse customers and technology readiness on teenage customers in a multicultural market. Besides the above topics, the last two papers in this special issue also explore intercultural workplace behaviours and B2B interactions, in multicultural service settings.

All the papers included in this special issue make a useful contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the services customers and service employees in multicultural markets; however, there are still many unaddressed issues and unanswered questions that future research may address. First, most current research on this topic is still restricted to only a few countries, such as Australia (Summers *et al.*, 2018), India (Malik *et al.*, 2018; Mathies and Wong, 2018; Mishra *et al.*, 2018) the and USA (Ang *et al.*, 2018; Mathies and Wong, 2018; Zolfagharian *et al.*, 2018), with some exceptions such as Austria (Sichtmann and Micevski, 2018) and Chile (Pezzuti *et al.*, 2018). Hence, we need more studies in other countries that have traditionally been multi-cultural, such as Brazil, the UK, Singapore and Malaysia as well as those that have become multi-cultural more recently as a result of the rise in immigration, such as Germany, France and Italy. Second, most studies on this topic still continue to focus on the customers’ perspective in B2C services although some have begun to investigate the service employees’ point-of-view (Henderson *et al.*, 2018; Mathies and Wong, 2018) and B2B services (Malik *et al.*, 2018). We clearly need more research in a wider variety of multicultural and cross-cultural service settings, representing a broader range of perspectives, including service customers, frontline employees, salespeople and after-sales service providers.

Finally, the papers in this special issue examine the impact of several important variables, such as language (e.g. linguistic choices and language homophily), cultural distance (e.g. perceived cultural distance and cultural (mis)match), intercultural competence, customer attributions and customer participation, customer technology readiness, intercultural workplace behaviours and B2B interactions in multicultural environments. However, these are clearly by no means an exhaustive set of variables that could influence the expectations, perceptions and evaluations of customers and employees in multicultural marketplaces. Hence, future research should aim to identify and explore the roles of other relevant variables, such as cultural stereotypes, perceived discrimination and consumer ethnocentrism, to pave the way for a more comprehensive conceptual framework.

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