A Review on the Antecedents and Precedents of International Students' Satisfaction in Malaysian Public Universities

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Abstract

Service quality is a vital feature for all successful higher education institutions, especially to improve the level of satisfaction among the international students in Malaysia due to the higher economic returns from international students. Students are constantly recognize as the prime focus in marketing activities in higher education institutions. However, the approaches of higher education institutions as the service provider varies.The quality of service will retain more foreign students to pursue their study in Malaysia. This paper will identify antecedents and precedents of the international postgraduate students' satisfaction, i.e., this study will examine the relationship between service quality and behavioral intention which is moderated by students' satisfaction. The interplay among the three constructs is based on the Resource Based View and Disconfirmation theories as well as the SERVQUAL model.

Keywords: Service quality; behavioral intention; customer satisfaction, and SERVQUAL model; Malaysia Public Universities

■1.0 AN OVERVIEW

Service quality or better known as SERVQUAL was developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) to measure the feedback regarding the quality of customers' perceptions and expectations of perceived service quality. The dimensions in the model are reliable, assurance, tangible, empathy and responsiveness. Parasuraman *et al.,* (1988) defined perceived service quality as a "a global judgement, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service".

Malaysia higher education tends to be educational excellence which is about world class branding, marketable academic programs, research activities and facilities in attracting and retaining foreign and local students (Isahak, 2007). In order to evaluate the quality of public universities in Malaysia, SERVQUAL will be used to measure the gap of quality, evaluation can be done either on an outside-in perspective or on an inside-out perspective. The students' decision to enroll in a university depends on several aspects such as facilities and infrastructure, image and marketing, academic issues, administrative issues, location and admission (Sporn, 1999; Strydom *et al.,* 1996; Woodhouse, 1996; De Jager & Gbadamosi, 2010).

Nevertheless, several adjustment issues among the international students will become an obstacle for them to adapt to the changes. According to Ang and Liamputtong (2008), international students who further studies in Malaysia will face several encounters that are related to international students' adjustment experiences. It is essential to deal with the differences between their own cultural values, norms and customs. In addition, they also will face the stressful process of adjustment in new educational system and social environment (Li & Gasser, 2005; Sumer et al., 2008), and some of them will stress on the adjusting issues regarding the new cultural values, language, and study habits in the new higher institution.

Therefore, it is very crucial for higher education in Malaysia to identify students' needs and wants, especially to those a new comer that come from abroad. At the end of semester higher education should gain opportunity to evaluate or interview some of international students regarding the student satisfaction towards their experience while study in the institutions. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to provide the learning experience for international postgraduate students at three (3) research universities in Malaysia. Data will be collected through a semi-structured interview with selective international students pursuing as postgraduate students. It is hoped that this paper may provide useful insight for higher institution and lecturers in managing international student learning in Malaysia. Moreover, this paper aim to examine the level of correlation between service quality and behavioral intention which mediating by students' satisfaction among international postgraduate students that pursue study in Public Universities in Malaysia.

■2.0 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The successful of higher education can be measured through student satisfaction if the institutions able to provide continuous excellent services. In other words, the service provided to customers (students) by a company (institution) directly impacts the company's profits as it is directly related to customers' perceptions of services and satisfaction, and thereby developing customer retention and loyalty (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). This is an important concept because researchers have found that is costing a lot more to attract new customers than to retain current customers (Oliver, 1999) and it is more likely for repeat customers to develop steadfast loyalty to the business (David & Annaraud, 2008). A review of two related theories, i.e. Theory of Planned Behaviour and Expected Disconfirmation Theory will precede the discussion.

2.1 Theory of Planned Behaviour

In year 1985, theory of planned behaviour (TPB) has been developed to predict customer' behaviour on particular action. Based on Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) TPB can be categorizes into three major groups which are attitudes towards behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. There are several studies have been conducted on TPB to understand consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions that had been developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975). Researchers are using TPB in order to understand the choice decisions of students and predict their future intentions, especially for international postgraduate students that pursue their study at Public Universities in Malaysia. Therefore, TPB can be applied to understand the students' behavioral intentions and identify the levels of student satisfaction by providing useful insights into their motivations and behavioural outcomes (Gatfield & Chen, 2006). The above inter-relationship in TPB is illustrated in Figure 1.
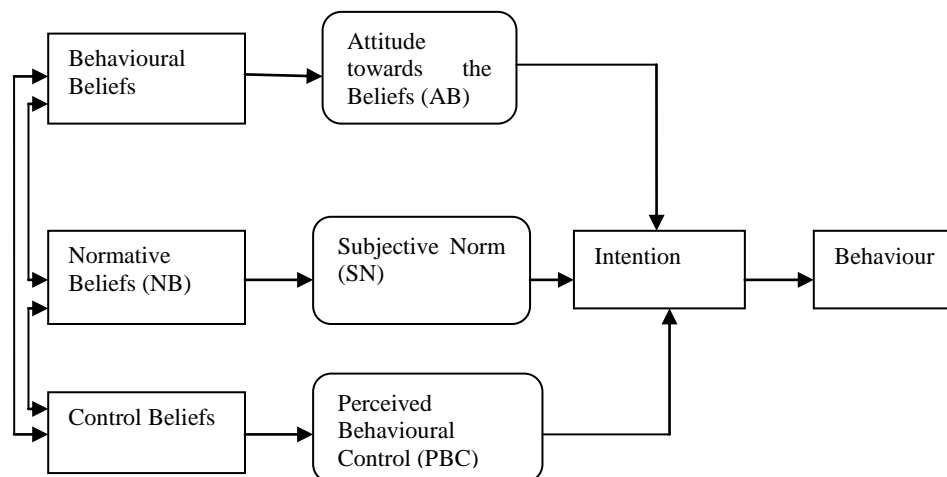

Figure 1 TPB Model. *Source:* Adopted from Siragusa L and Dixon CK (2009)

2.2 Expected Discomfirmation Theory

Disinformation is defined as a comparison between initial expectations and performance (Bhattacherjee & Premkumar, 2004; Spreng & Page 2003; Oliver 1980), when performance is better than expected is positive disconfirmation, or performance is worse than expected is negative disconfirmation (Yi, 1990). In this theory, there are three categories of disconfirmation which are positive disconfirmation, negative disconfirmation and simple disconfirmation. It will become negative disconfirmation when the product or service does not meet the customer expectation, positive disconfirmation is when customer's satisfied with the quality of services and ability to meet customer expectation. Meanwhile, simple disconfirmation is when there was no difference between customer's expectation and actual performance or equal with expectation on specific product or service (Khalifa & Liu, 2003). Therefore, this theory will help researcher to understand more on the level of student satisfaction among international postgraduate students at Public Universities in Malaysia. Below in Figure 2 is illustration on Expected Discomfirmation Theory.
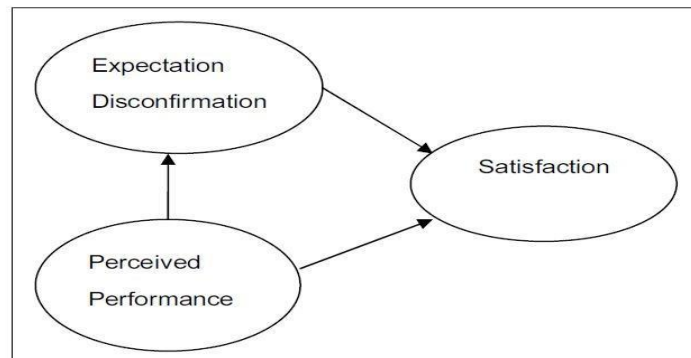
Figure 2 Disconfirmation theory. *Source:* Khalifa and Liu (2003)

2.3 Definition of Service Quality

In service quality, it is important for all kinds of business in marketing strategy as it contributes the greater performance for an organization. It is agreed by Gale (1994), in which researches also agreed that a central topic in service research is service quality (SQ) which is a critical determinant of business performance as well as firms' long term viability. This is because service quality will lead to customer satisfaction which in turn has a positive impact on customer word-of mouth, attitudinal loyalty, and purchase intentions (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000).

Based on the academic literature from previous researchers, service quality is defined in various ways. In measuring service quality, it is most importance for higher education to provide a quality service to attract and retain customers has been recognized as a strategic requirement in highly competitive business environments (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990). Service quality (SERVQUAL) is an instrument developed by Parasuraman *et al.,* (1988) to measure the service quality based on the gaps between customers' perceptions and expectations of perceived service quality. The dimensions in the model are reliable, assurance, tangible, empathy and responsiveness.

Service quality can be described based on customers' expectation for service and their perception of service performance (Gorla *et al.,* 2010) and it is driving the highest service quality results in customer satisfaction and loyalty, which reduce the customer complaints and improved customer retention. According to Parasuraman *et al*., (1988); Gronroos (1994), service quality is superficial for the customers to compare the expectations about the service that they had been received and their perceptions towards the services. Nevertheless, there are several good ways to define service quality in higher education (Becket & Brookes, 2006), education quality is depends on stakeholders (students, parents, local community, society and the government) commitment to quality and the overall culture of the university (Cheng & Tam, 1997). In addition, the service quality of the education is the uniqueness of the experiences that students had been experiencing (Roland, 2008).

2.4 *SERVQUAL*

In year 1985, SERVQUAL is the first model to measure the level of customer satisfaction. This model is the greatest popular conceptualization of service quality, which SERVQUAL model was containing ten (10) dimensions. This model widely used as a reference in research management and marketing services.

In year 1988, Parasuraman *et al.,* was reduce the numbers of element in SERVQUAL into five (5) dimensions which are a) *tangibles*-it is the state of facilitating good, physical condition of the buildings and the environment, appearance of physical facilities, tools and equipment used to provide the service; b) *reliability*-it is the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately; c) *responsiveness*-it is the willingness and/or readiness of employees to help customers and to provide prompt service, timeliness of service; d) *assurance*-the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey and confidence; and e) *empathy*-the provision of caring, individualized attention to customers. From the past research, SERVQUAL is founded on the view that the customer's assessment of service quality is vital which service quality is presented as a multidimensional concept (Buttle, 1996). Moreover, SERVQUAL is founded that service quality can be measured as the gap between the service that customers expect and the performance they perceive to have received (Landrum *et al.,* 2009).

The SERVQUAL model come out with the quality gaps between a customer's expectations and their perceptions of service performance which are 1) difference between consumer expectations and management perceptions of consumer expectations difference 2) difference between management perceptions of consumer expectations and service quality specifications 3) difference between service quality specifications and the service actually delivered and 4) difference between service delivery and what is communicated about the service to consumers (Parasuraman *et al.,* 1988).

2.5 Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction can be described in many ways (Kaldenberg & Brown, 1998). According to Grossman (1999), student satisfaction was determined the evaluation of the quality of coursework, curriculum activities and other factors related to the university and student could be treated like a customer or a client within the college and in that case, the college serve the students on a better priority to fulfill their expectations and needs.

In fact, customers are satisfied when the service fits their expectations, or very satisfied when the service is beyond their expectations, or completely satisfied when they receive more than they expect. According to Petruzzellis, D'Uggento, and Romanazze (2006), which stated that the customers are dissatisfied when service is below their expectation was delineated. At the present time, the institution of education must deduce the customer orientated principled to be friendly with the students' needs (Kara & Deshiedls, 2004). Paddle (2006) show the significance of marketers must be interest regarding the education relationship and the education quality itself with their customers in order to achieve the marketplace as well.

In order to control international education market, the quality of service has turned into an important for university purposes (Arambewela & Hall, 2009). The fundamental service delivers must fulfill students or learners by meeting their exceeding, needs and expectation and university must not enter attempt to draw inward students and keep in possession students in an environment of competition, but attempt to increase students' faithfulness through improving positive behavior and attitude. It is due to the quality of service affect and student satisfaction both indirectly and directly that connected to marketing strategy like customers' positive word of mouth communication with others (Navarro, Iglesias & Torres, 2005).

2.6 Service Quality and Students' Satisfaction

Service quality and customer satisfaction are created confusion to causal direction and the nature of the connection between consumer satisfaction and quality of service and it is approve by numerous of researchers which show the service quality in higher education lead to student satisfaction (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Teas, 1993; and Parasuraman *et al.,* 1994). According to Firdaus (2005) find out the non-academic aspects, academic aspects, program issues, access and reputation are elements of service quality in the higher education. Based on other researchers, there are eight dimensions that determine the service quality of the higher education which are Design, Delivery and Assessment, Academic facilities, Non-academic facilities, Recognition, Guidance, Student representation, Study opportunities and Group size (Afzal *et al.,* 2010). In addition, communication skills of teaching staff, the effective interaction between staff and students can help students achieve study objectives which leading to higher student satisfaction (Bitner & Zeithaml, 1996) and effective interaction between student and faculty is a strong predicator of student satisfaction (Kuh & Hu, 2001).

Kara and DeShields (2004) stated faculty performance, advising staff performance, and classes would influence students' academic experience and which in turn would influence the student satisfaction. Similarly, with Novarro *et al*. (2005), surveyed the Spanish University students and observed service quality variables to be teaching staff, teaching methods, and courses administration which the key factors to achieve student satisfaction with short-term, specific programs. They also had shown that the teaching staff, enrolment, and course organization are the elements that impact student satisfaction with summer courses, and facilities being a potential determinant of student satisfaction. This researcher also supported by Helgesen and Nesset (2007), which satisfaction have positive significant with student's perception of the university's reputation.

2.7 Service Quality and Behavioral Intention

Behavioral intentions is very import as indicator for customer loyalty, which it will motivate customer to re-purchase products or service. In higher education, service quality is an antecedent to students' satisfaction therefore the higher insttitution are advised to improve the level of services. Service quality has direct effect on behavioral intentions (Cronin *et al.,* 2000; Mohr & Bitner, 1995) and the result indicates to achieve the behavioral intentions; perceived service quality is entirely mediated by students' satisfaction which service quality perception and expectation of internatioanl postgraduate students that study in Public Universities in Malaysia.

According to Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) and Zeithaml *et al.* (1996), show that there is significant relationship between service quality and behavioral intention. Most of the customers will give positive word-of-mouth that has been clearly associated with superior service quality (Bitner, Booms & Tetreault, 1990) and it also similar with study had been done by Dabholkar *et al.* (1996), which indicate that there is positive significance between service quality and behavior intention which can retain a customer. Moreover, it also supported by Boulding *et al.* (1993), stated that university students identified a strong link between service quality and behavioral intention. In addition, it is significant correlation between service qualities in higher institution with mediated by students' satisfaction and study loyalty intentions (Ham, 2003).

2.8 Student Satisfaction and Behavioural Intention

Student satisfaction is one of the objectives for universities, which indirectly it can influence positive behavior and attitude among the students (Hall & Armabewela, 2009). Moreover, quality of service affect the students satisfaction which it as marketing strategy like customers' positive word of mouth communication with others (Navarro *et al.,* 2005). The effect on learner satisfaction is connected to loyalty and retention of student and turn into a origin of the marketing of competitive advantage outcome similar to the favorable mouth communication word therefore expanding the share of market.

In order to achieve this goal, university must improve the level of service quality and meet the students needs and expectation. Most of the researcher was found that there is significant positive relationship between overall customer satisfaction and behavioural intention. According to Boulding *et al*., (1993), find out the effect of customer satisfaction and perceived service quality on several of behavioral intentions such as loyalty, positive word of mouth, intentions toward repeat investment, and intentions toward communication to others (Liu, Sudharshan, & Hamer, 2000).

■3.0 CONCLUSION

Service quality has direct effect on behavioral intentions and the result indicate that to achieve behavioral intentions; perceived service quality is entirely mediated by students' satisfaction (Cronin *et al.,* 2000; Mohr & Bitner, 1995; Festus, Maxwell & Godwin, 2006). The interplay between the three constructs is illustrated in Figure 3.
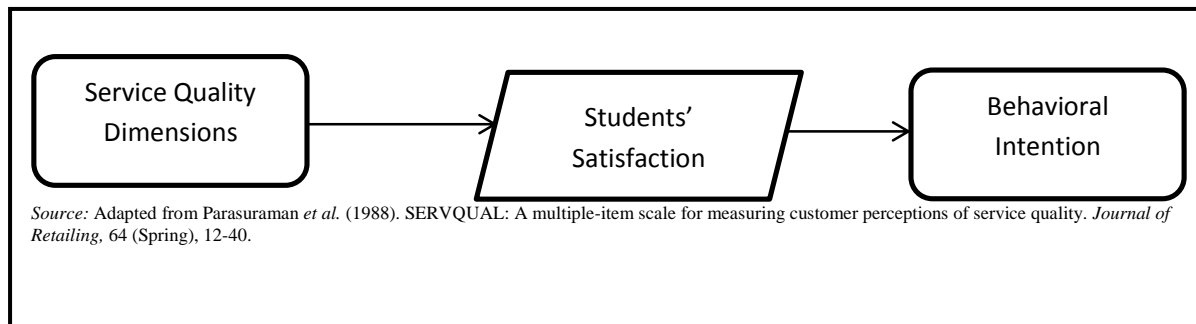
Source: Adapted from Parasuraman *et al.* (1988). SERVQUAL: A multiple-item scale for measuring customer perceptions of service quality. *Journal of Retailing,* 64 (Spring), 12-40.

Figure 3 The interplay between service quality satisfaction and behavioral intention among international postgraduate student in Malaysia Public Universities

According to Boulding *et al.* (1993), stated that university students identified strong link between service quality and behavioral intention and significant correlation between service qualities in higher institution with mediated by students' satisfaction and study loyalty intentions (Ham, 2003). Therefore, the effect on customer satisfaction and perceived service quality on several of behavioral intentions such as loyalty, positive word of mouth, intentions toward repeat investment, and intentions toward communication to others (Boulding *et al.,* 1993; Liu, Sudharshan, & Hamer, 2000). The relationship is presented in Figure 2. A recent study among Nigerian university students by Danjuma (2013) was able to validate the framework albeit the usage of students' attachment to the university as a behavioural intention the arises from satisfaction.

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