Antecedents and Consequences of Student Satisfaction in Higher Education Context

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Abstract

This paper aimed at identifying the antecedents and consequences of student satisfaction in higher education context. Service quality, institute Image, word of Mouth, trust and commitment were the variables identified in the studies which were classified into antecedents and consequences. The sample size in the study was367 students selected on the basis of non probability convenience sampling. The above identified variables were measured using existing measurement scales and SEM was used to identify the effect of antecedents of student's satisfaction and consequences of student satisfaction. It was found that among the various components service quality, faculty individual attention had the highest effect on student satisfaction. It was also found that student satisfaction has a positive effect on institute image and word of mouth which subsequently has an effect on trust and commitment towards the institute.

Keywords: *Service Quality, Higher Education, Student Satisfaction*

INTRODUCTION

As per a recent report of the human resource development ministry of India

there are total 11,669 standalone institutions, 40,026 colleges and 864 universities in India. There has been an improvement in the GER from 19.4 per cent in 2010-11 to 25.2 per cent in 2016-17, which is a significant achievement. An aggressive target of achieving 30% increase in GER has been set by the government of India. Under the Indian Education System there are 3 broad classifications of higher education institutes, they include university and university level institutions that are empowered to award degrees and colleges institutions that are not allowed to award degrees but are affiliated to Government Universities. There are 903 universities in India out of which there are 351 state public universities and 262 state private Universities. There are 101 institutes of National Importance & 80 deemed private universities. Further, of the 1,147 colleges established in 2017, 941 were private colleges and there were only 206 government colleges. Trend of privatization has increased in the higher education industry as majority of the enrolments are happening in the private colleges. There are 10,396 engineering institutions and more than 3500 management institutes in India which are expected to increase further. Source all the statistics mentioned above is a government site. (http://aishe.gov.in, 2018). As per an article in times of india dated April, 8 2018, approximately 200 engineering colleges have shut down recently and enrolment has declined coming down by 1.86 lakh. Another blow to the Indian higher education space is that a high number of students go abroad to pursue engineering draining the already scarce number of students. In a scenario where the engineering colleges are mushrooming in the country and the number of admission seekers reducing, it will be difficult for the existing colleges to recruit new students and retain exisiting students unless they have a strong institute image (Briukhanov, Kiselev, Timchenko, & Vdovin, 2010). Along with developing a strong institute image, quality of education also needs to be continuously monitored and improved. Ehrman (2006) mentioned that modern universities are facing a buyer's market and institutions have to offer a value proposition to attract students. Students are consumers of higher education services, hence their satisfaction should be monitored for them to suggest the institute to new students (Thomas and Galambos, 2004). Krentler, Appleton-Knapp (2006) suggests that student's satisfaction with their experience of education should be considered the desired outcome apart from learning. This paper investigates the antecedents of student satisfaction and desirable consequences of the same.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In a scenario where engineering institutes are going through a difficult phase due to reduced enrolments, in order to stay competitive, university image is considered to be a valuable asset (Kotler, Fox 1995; Stensaker 2007). Stensaker (2007) asserts university image today is more relevant than what it used to be in the past, it has become an area that draws vast interest from managers of all levels. Fox (1995) asserts that the image of an institute is more important than quality because image influences the consideration set of students. There are very few studies in existing literature about impact of student satisfaction on institution image and word of mouth. This study is done with an aim to fill the gap in extant literature with respect to the lack of studies that link service quality constructs to student satisfaction and word of mouth.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Service Quality and Satisfaction

In HE, quality is a multi-dimensional construct and consensus on one single definition does not exist (Green and Harvey, 1993). Every stakeholder of HE has his own way to define service quality. This paper takes into consideration, the viewpoint of one important stakeholder in higher education: students. Due to intense competition in HE, students are now considered as customers whereby they pay fees and avail the services of a service institution (Marzo-Navarro et al., 2005a). Other researchers such as Gremler and McCollough (1999), Sander et al. (2000) and Hill (1995) also consider students to be consumers of higher education service. There are some other perspectives too in literature that point out that students could also take roles as producers, products and clients (Guolla, 1999). O'Neill and Palmer (2004) have defined service quality in HE as 'the gap between what a student expects and perceived to have received'. There are several other definitions of satisfaction that exist in literature, Oliver (1997) defines satisfaction as fulfillment of pleasures which means that consumption fulfills some need, goal or desire and this fulfillment leads to pleasure. Consumption provides outcome against some expectation of pleasure (Oliver, 1999). There has been an attempt to apply the concept of satisfaction in higher education, but there are very few references for the same suggesting that student satisfaction is a multi-faceted concept (Richardson, 2005). Students satisfaction is students subjective evaluation of various outcomes and experiences linked with education (Elliott and Shin, 2002). Student satisfaction is an ongoing process and gets shaped continuously through campus life experiences. Several researchers are of the opinion that satisfied students engage in spreading a positive word and in the process motivate friends and acquaintances to join their university and may also undertake other courses (Helgesen and Nesset, 2007). Satisfied students also have an positive impact on student motivation and fundraising (Elliott and Shin, 2002). There exist conceptual issues in service literature regarding the order of the constructs. Authors such as Cronin et al. (2000); Dabholkar et al. (2000 and Farell et al. (2001) consider satisfaction as a consequence of perceived quality, other authors (Parasuraman et al., Bitner, 1990), consider service quality as a consequence of student satisfaction. Ziethaml et al. (2008) point out that satisfaction and service quality are different concepts and satisfaction is a bigger construct of which service quality is a component. Education Literature too supports the notion that satisfaction is a consequence of service quality (Browne et al., 1998 and Guolla, 1999). Other debate in the existing literature is with respect to how to measure service quality. Different models are developed to measure service quality, the servqual instrument developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) is the most widely used instrument, also known as the deficiency model. The SERVQUAL model has also been used in the education industry Abu Hasan et al., 2008; Atrek, Bayraktaroglu 2012; CalvoPorral et al., 2013; Dado et al., 2012; Gallifa, Batalle, 2010; Ibrahim et al., 2013; Stodnick, Rogers, 2008). However there has been a lot of criticism with respect to the applicability of the SERVQUAL instrument in the education industry. The criticism has been mainly due to dimensional instability (Cronin, Taylor, 1992; Finn, Lamb, 1991; Parasuraman et al., 1985) and with respect to

the role of expectations in the measurement instrument (Adil et al., 2013; Cronin, Taylor 1992; Gallifa, Batalle 2010; Teas 1994). These criticisms have triggered the need for alternative instruments to measure service quality.

Cronin, Taylor (1992) developed the SERVPERF instrument, that covered only perceptions of the respondents. Since our study also focuses on the higher education industry, we have taken the three factor SERVPERF instrument tm measure the service quality construct used in our research framework

On the basis of the above literature, the following hypothesis was developed:

H$_1$ Faculty Individual attention has an effect on student satisfaction.

H$_2$ Support Staff helpfulness has an effect on student satisfaction.

H$_3$ Support Staff empathy has an effect on student satisfaction.

Satisfaction and Word of Mouth

Word of mouth is the process of sharing opinions, information, ideas regarding products, services, institutions, etc., without any commercial intention (Chen et al., 2013; Kuo et al., 2013). It has the power to influence purchase decisions (Mitsis, Foley, 2012). WOM can be exchanged through social networks or through personal interactions (Kuo et al., 2013).

WOM can be positive or negative that has the power to take consumers towards or away from brands, institutions or services (Hawkins et al., 2004; Soderlund, Rosengren, 2007). Since WOM communication is not biased and the communicators don't have any personal interest, these communications are considered to be more trustworthy and persuasive than organization initiated marketing communications (Chen et al., 2013). Literature indicates that word of mouth is a result of high customer satisfaction. Thus. A high level of satisfaction leads to positive word of mouth with respect to a product or a company (Carpenter, Fairhust, 2005; Singh, Pandya, 1991; Teo, Soutar, 2012). Further Soutar (2012) added that satisfaction raises the multiplicity with which students engage in word of mouth, and also the number of people with whom they share their positive experiences. As per a study by Ali Özdemira et al. (2016) it has been observed that word of mouth communication affects the students decision making process that includes emerging needs, gathering of information and evaluation of alternatives. They also assert that WOM affects university preferences. Satisfaction plays a major role in developing the affective component which leads to positive WOM (Teo & Soutar, 2011). On the basis of the above discussion the following hypothesis has been developed

H$_4$ Satisfaction has an effect on Word of Mouth.

Satisfaction and University Image

Institute image has been described as the sum total of individuals impressions and perceptions of an institutions products, management style, culture, communication style and global activities (Chun, 2005; Lai et al., 2009; Lovelock, Wirtz, 2007; Marken, 1990; Souiden et al., 2006). Arpan et al. (2003) defined brand image as the totality of all beliefs an individual holds towards a university. These beliefs can be formed through direct experience, media or WOM (Kantanen, 2012). As mentioned above

that direct experience plays a major role in the formation of a university image, service quality plays a moderating effect on student satisfaction and word of mouth. A positive institute image plays a dominant role in the success and survival of a university (Mackelo, 2009 in Druteikiene 2011; Feldman et al., 2014; Radomir et al., 2014; Raithel et al., 2010; Walker, 2010; Eberl, 2010). It was also found that service quality has a significant effect in the formation of University Image (Cheng et al., 2008; Clemes et al., 2013; Lai et al., 2009). Additionally it was also seen that a university's image elevates when students perceive that it offers higher service quality (Clemes et al., 2013). Furthermore it has been observed in literature that word of mouth is another important influences of university image (Barreda, Bilgihan 2013; Jansen et al., 2009; Jalilvand, Samiei 2012; Mason, 2008).

H_5 Satisfaction has an effect on University Image.

Institute Image and Trust

Institute image could have an effect on trust in the institution. Trust can be defined as the degree to which a candidate is willing to have confidence and faith in an institution through which appropriate decisions can be taken to achieve learning and career objectives (Ghosh, Whipple and Bryan, 2001). Elements such as sincerity, integrity, cooperation can affect trust in an institution (Ghosn et al., 2001). The aforementioned characteristics could be elements of an higher education institute's brand image that can affect trust.

H_6 Institute Image has an effect on trust.

Institute Image and Commitment

Commitment is manifested when a party to a relationship considers the relation to be so important that they put maximum effort in maintaining that connection (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Commitment towards an institution develops based on the degree of repurchase which in the context of education is further studies, resistance to choosing competitive alternatives and resistance to any dissatisfaction caused negative feelings (Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2007). Commitment towards an institution can also positively influence intentions to participate in events of the institute and also donate money for development causes.

H_7 Institute Image has an effect on committment.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

There is less literature in the field of branding with respect to higher education. This paper aims to study in detail the constructs of service quality, student satisfaction, word of mouth and university image. The paper will also investigate the relationships between antecedents and consequences of satisfaction. Furthermore, a model of service quality's effect on satisfaction and satisfaction on word of mouth on institutions image will be tested using Structural Equation Modeling. The following research questions will be investigated in this study:

1. To what extent does service quality have an effect on student satisfaction?
2. To what extent does student satisfaction affect word of mouth?
3. To what extent does student satisfaction affect institute image?
4. To what extent does institute image affect institute trust?
5. To what extent does the institute image affect institute commitment?

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaire Design

This study used a questionnaire to collect data with respect to the constructs identified in the proposed model. The survey instrument was divided into two parts. The initial part covered demographic information of respondents and the subsequent part covered measurements of the constructs identified in the study. Service quality was measured using Mahmoud Khalifa's (2015) instrument. University image and student satisfaction was measured using a scale sued by Alves, Raposo (2010). Word of mouth was measured using a scale adapted from Teo, Soutar (2012). Commitment and trust was measured using Jillapalli and Jillapalli (2014) scale.

All constructs were measured using a 5 point Likert Scale (Fig. 1).

Data Collection

The study was conducted in ITM Universe, Vadodara, a technical campus in Vadodara, Gujarat. To begin with the questionnaire was tested with a sample of 50 students to see if the questionnaire was understood by the respondents. The questionnaire was found to be understandable by the students.

Convenience sampling was used to collect data from 400 students of various disciplines of engineering in ITM Universe, Vadodara. Out of 400 distributed questionnaires, 367 questionnaires were considered for data analysis.

Table 1: Information of Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	194	53%
Female	173	47%
Branch		
Mechanical Engineering	101	28%
Computer Engineering	94	26%
Electrical Engineering	75	20%
Civil Engineering	67	18%
Automobile Engineering	30	8%

RESULTS

The Measurement Model

Two tests were used to assess the measurement properties of the constructs. First Composite reliability was calculated followed by AVE of the constructs. CR of all the constructs was above .7 and AVE values of all constructs were above .5. The values for both were above the minimum required values as stated by Forner, Larker (1981).
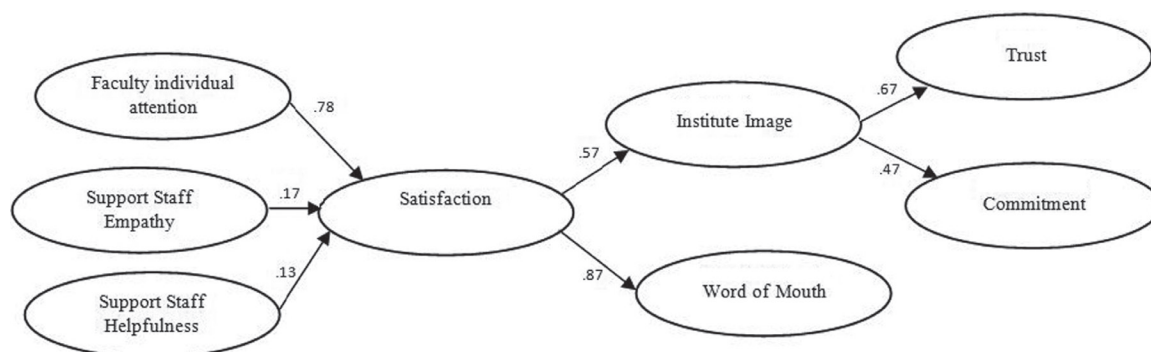

Figure 1: Proposed Research Model

Table 2: CR and AVE Values of the constructs

Construct	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Faculty Individualized Attention	.87	.63
Support Staff Empathy	.81	.77
Support Staff Helpfulness	.83	.83
Satisfaction	.91	.69
Word of Mouth	.94	.84
Institute Image	.85	.75
Trust	.92	.68
Commitment	.88	.88

Structural Model

The structural model was found to be fit with chi-square=3333, df=247, p=.000 (chi-square value was found to be higher than the minimum value, but this can be ignored considering the high sample size). Model fit was estimated using CFI and TLI, whose values were .97 and .93 respectively satisfying the minimum criteria of .90 suggested by Hu, Bentler (1999). RMSEA value was .07 satisfying the maximum criteria for .08. Figure 3 displayed all relationships between constructs, path coefficients and their significance. All hypothesis were supported except H2 and H3.

Table 3: Model Fit Indices

Model	NPAR	CMIN	DF	P	CMIN/DF
Default model	53	3333.437	247	.000	13.496
Saturated model	300	.000	0		
Independence model	24	7980.494	276	.000	28.915
Model	NFI1	RFI	IFI	TLI	CFI
Default model	.834	.875	.912	.927	.966
Saturated model	1.000		1.000		1.000
Independence model	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Model	RMSEA	LO 90	HI 90		PCLOSE
Default model	.073	.059	.107		.015
Independence model	.206	.189	.224		.000
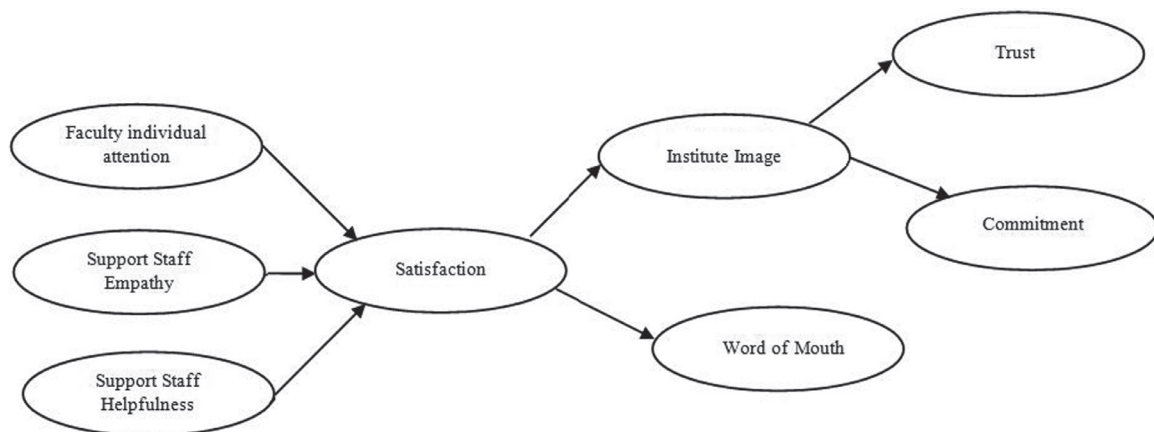
Figure 2: Path Model

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to develop and test a model in which service quality is an antecedent to satisfaction and institute image, word of mouth, trust and commitment are consequences of student satisfaction. The model was tested using Structural Equation Modeling and the results have shown a good model fit. The results have shown a partial effect of service quality on student satisfaction. This is in line with previous research (Clemes et al., 2013; Dado et al., 2012; Gruber et al., 2010; Kuo, Ye, 2009; Sultan, Wong, 2013; Teo, Soutar, 2012; Wei, Ramalu, 2011). Out of the constructs it was observed that faculty individual attention has a positive effect on student satisfaction, β = .78, p < .05. It goes on to prove that students who receive more individual faculty attention are more satisfied. No significant effect of support staff empathy and helpfulness was found on satisfaction. It was found that satisfaction has a positive effect on institute image, β = .57, p < .05, and also on word of mouth, β = .87, p < .05. This indicates that satisfied students are more likely to promote a positive word of mouth of the institute and also help in developing a positive image of the institute. Additionally it was also found that institute image has a positive effect on institute trust, β = .67, p < .05 and commitment β = .47, p < .05. Based on the above we recommend ITM Universe to pay close attention to the working environment, whereby the faculty members can give their best and perform up to or exceed the expectations of students. This in return will increase the satisfaction of students which will encourage them to spread a positive word among their friends, relatives and prospective students. Satisfied students are helpful in developing a positive university image and positive university image can have a positive effect for developing institute trust and commitment.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of this research study, we conclude that in order to develop a good university image, trust and commitment, university administrators have to pay close attention to student satisfaction. They have to spend substantial resources in improving the faculty quality, because it was found that individual faculty attention has a positive influence on student satisfaction. Faculty development programs should be conducted so that faculties remain updated on the latest development in their respective fields. Teacher training programs should be conducted in which teachers should be trained to understand student's needs and respond accordingly. More importantly institutes should also invest in recruiting the right number of faculty resources in order to maintain individual faculty attention to students. It has been observed that most of the colleges involve teaching faculty in other activities like marketing, administration, events, etc, due to which the faculties are not able to focus on their core job which is teaching. It is therefore recommended that teaching faculty should be allowed to focus only on their teaching and for other tasks additional employees should be recruited.

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