

Construction Of International Student Satisfaction Model Under The Internationalization Of Higher Education : New Normal Perspective

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Abstract: Under the development trend of the globalization of higher education, international students' satisfaction has become an important research issue of academic circles. The purpose of this study is to develop a conceptual framework to understand the key antecedent and consequent constructs of international student satisfaction in Chinese universities. We reviewed the related research published since 1986 and analyzed 7 antecedent dimensions (student expectations, service quality, image, perceived value, educational outcomes, campus facilities, academic experience) and 1 consequent dimensions (student loyalty). Based on the expectation-disconfirmation Theory and Customer Satisfaction Theory, we identified the key factors related to satisfaction and formed a conceptual model of student satisfaction. For further research, we will use stratified sampling to select 500 international students to conduct a questionnaire survey from 5 universities in Guangxi, China. The conceptual model and possible outcome will help us better understand the main predictors of international student satisfaction and the impact of international students' satisfaction on future behavior intentions, which will provide implications for scholars and policymakers in this field.

Keywords: *international students, satisfaction, antecedents of satisfaction, consequences of satisfaction*

Introduction

In recent years, under the increasing globalization and regionalization of economics and societies, the field of higher education has also developed towards internationalization. Through international cooperation, student exchange, academic mobility, recognition of cross-border learning outcomes and international curricula, the contents and elements of internationalization are integrated into the teaching, research and social service functions of institutions of higher learning (Wende et al., 1999). In recent years, with the development of the internationalization of higher education, the scale of student mobility worldwide has become larger and larger. In 2000, the total number of international students in the world was about 2 million. However, by 2017, this number had climbed to more than 5.3 million (UNESCO, 2019). Obviously, the internationalization of higher education will drive local economic growth, promote cultural exchanges and knowledge transfer, and enhance the international competitiveness and influence of higher education institutions (HEIs).

Under such a highly competitive background, higher education is regarded as a business-like service industry, and whether it can satisfy customers has also become a highly concerned issue.

Students are viewed as consumers, because their attitudes and behaviors converge with consumers (Javed et al., 2020; Hill, 1995; Sander et al. 2000; Gremler and McCollough 2002; Sahney et al. 2004; Hossain et al., 2018; Naidoo and Jamieson 2005; Saunders 2014; San et al., 2020). Under the professional guidance of the lecturer, students take the growth of knowledge and skills and career preparation as the goal of receiving higher education (Guolla 1999; Polas et al., 2020). Paying tuition fees can be seen as purchasing the education services provided by universities. In this case, students have the rights to express dissatisfaction with the services they have received (Finney and Finney 2010). In other perspectives, the future employers of students (Reavill, 1998), families, faculty,

society (Owlia and Aspinwall,1997), state and federal governments, research sponsors (Quinn et al., 2009) are regarded as customers. In this study, we adopt the view of students as customers of higher education because this view is widely recognized by academia, industry, and officials.

Students are regarded as customers of higher education, which means the importance of student satisfaction in the management of HEIs. Satisfied students will be more loyal to the school, have a higher retention rate, and tend to choose the school again when they continue their studies, which is similar to the behavior of "repurchase" (Polas et al., 2020; Hossain et al., 2018; Elliott and Healy 2001; Schertzer and Schertzer 2004). Satisfied students are also more inclined to make word of mouth action (Khaled et al., 2019), which plays a role in enhancing the school's popularity and attracting more students (Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002; Alvis & Rapaso, 2007). Student satisfaction also have a positive influence on student motivation, fundraising and the possible work placement of recent graduates (Polas et al., 2021; Elliott and Shin, 2002, Alvis & Rapaso, 2007). On the contrary, dissatisfied students tend to complaint (Churchill and Suprenant, 1982; Webb & Jagun, 1997), or even drop out or transfer, have a negative word and mouth action, which will have a negative impact on the school's reputation (Ugolini 1999; Thomas & Galambos 2004). Therefore, based on theoretical imperfections and practical needs, many scholars have shown great concern about student satisfaction.

The purpose of this article is to develop a conceptual framework to understand the key antecedent and consequent constructs of international students' satisfaction in Chinese universities. Based on the existing research, this paper attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the main predictors of international student satisfaction?
- 2) What are the consequences of international student satisfaction?
- 3) What is the relationship between these factors related to international student satisfaction?

Student satisfaction

Regarding the definition of satisfaction, there are different opinions in academia. The cognitive constructivist view holds that satisfaction refers to the fulfilment of a certain need, desire or goal by consumers in consumption, and the result of consumption makes consumers obtain a sense of pleasure (Oliver,1999); satisfaction is an evaluation process based on consumer experience (Al Qalhatai et al., 2020; Hunt, 1977). The emotional response view believes that "satisfaction involves an emotional response that can be induced by actual product quality, service or process quality, or some combination of product and service" (Browne et al.,1998).From the combination point of view, satisfaction is a process that combines cognitive construction and emotional response (Al Qalhatai et al., 2020; Polas et al., 2020; Rust and Oliver, 1994; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1994; Aldridge and Rowley, 1998 ; Giese and Cote, 2000; Polas et al., 2019). These viewpoints all attempt to accurately describe the essential characteristics and connotation of satisfaction from a certain angle. This article believes that the third viewpoint is a more comprehensive summary of satisfaction, and therefore tends to adopt this viewpoint.

Some scholars believe that higher education is a kind of service (Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001) in which students gain the knowledge required for career preparation and other supported services in schools. Higher education has some characteristics of the service industry, such as intangible, heterogeneous, and perishable (Shank et al., 1995). However, higher education still has some unique characteristics which is different from other service. Higher education needs to take into account fairness, and the teaching process is not one-way, it requires students to have the motivation to learn and a certain amount of intellectual reserve (Thorsten Gruber, 2010). When we apply the concept of customer satisfaction in the field of higher education, we should understand the essential characteristics of the education industry. From the combination point of view, student satisfaction refers to a student's favorability of educational results and experiences based on subjective evaluation (Oliver &

DeSarbo, 1989), and also involves the emotional response formed by students in campus life, so student satisfaction is a combination of rational evaluation and perceptual evaluation.

Measurement of student satisfaction

Scholars mainly have two different perspectives on the issue of measuring student satisfaction. The first view is that satisfaction is an evaluation process (Tse and Wilton, 1988), so it can be cumulatively evaluated during a long period of time from enrollment to graduation. Another view is that student satisfaction is the result of evaluation and should be measured after students receive educational services, similar to the evaluation made by consumers after consumption (Oliver, 1981). This article will adopt the first view because it is consistent with the definition of student satisfaction.

In terms of measurement methods of satisfaction, there are mainly single-item measurement method and multi-item measurement method (Elliott & Shin, 2002). The single-item measurement method is mainly through Likert scale, according to the degree from very dissatisfied to very satisfied to understand the overall satisfaction of students to the school. The disadvantage of this method is that it is unable to measure students' satisfaction with the specific items in the education services they receive. Moreover, in the absence of specific items presentations, students may forget and lack evidence to accurately measure their satisfaction with the educational services they receive. Different from the former, the multi-item measurement method first measures the students' satisfaction with certain attributes of educational services, and then comprehensively obtains the overall satisfaction. This measurement method usually uses Oliver's expectation-disconfirmation theory paradigm, that is, customers' evaluation of goods or services is mainly based on the degree to which the goods or services meet customer expectations. Differences between expectations and actual experience can lead to disconfirmation. When the product or service exceeds the customer's expectations, the customer feels satisfied; when the product or service does not meet the customer's expectation, the customer feels dissatisfied (Oliver, 1980). Because the multi-item measurement method takes into account the various attributes of the education industry and is generally used, this article will adopt this measurement method.

Key Factors influencing student satisfaction

Service quality

Regarding higher education as a service industry means that service quality is highly correlated with student satisfaction. Although service quality and satisfaction are similar and related, they are two different concepts. Lewis and Booms (1983) define service quality as a measure of whether the service provided meets customer expectations. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) defined service quality as an attitude of long-run overall evaluation about service provided. Due to the complexity of the higher education industry, there is no widely accepted definition of service quality in the context of higher education. Regarding the relationship between customer satisfaction and service quality, some scholars believe that customer satisfaction is the antecedent of service quality, so the direction is from customer satisfaction to service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Bitner, 1990). However, in the following research, some scholars disagree with this view (Cronin et al. 1992; Browne et al. 1998; Dabholkar et al. 2000; Farrell et al. 2001, Zeithaml et al. 2008). Cronin and Taylor (1992) and (Polas et al., 2020) used empirical research results to show that service quality is the antecedent of customer satisfaction. In view of the fact that the second viewpoint is updated in time and is confirmed by empirical research and accepted by majority of researchers, so this article will adopt this viewpoint. In addition, research shows that service quality is only one of many factors that affect satisfaction (Bashir et al., 2020; Rust and Oliver, 1994; Zeithaml et al. 2008), and service quality have a direct influence on loyalty (Bloemer & Wetzels, 1998; Lee-Kelley et al., 2002; Jose et al. 2009).

There are different opinions on the measurement of service quality. (Gronroos, 1982, 1984) uses functional and technical quality to measure service quality. (Parasuraman et al., 1985) points out SERVQUAL scale, and uses reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles as the dimensions to measure service quality. This scale is based on Oliver's "expectancy-disconfirmation" Paradigm, allowing customers to score the expected value, actual feeling value and minimum acceptable value of each question, and finally obtain the score of service quality. This scale has been used in many industries, and some scholars have also applied it to the field of higher education (Davis and Allen, 1990; Comm et al, 2000; Rodney Arambewela & John Hall, 2006). However, some scholars question the reliability and validity of the scale (Carman, 1990; Coulthard, 2004). Therefore, Cronin and Taylor (1994) propose SERVPERF instrument to measure service quality. The SERVPERF model only considers service performance and does not consider customer expectations. Two scholars use empirical research to show that SERVPERF is superior to the SERVQUAL model in reliability and validity. In addition, some scholars have developed instruments specifically suitable for measuring service quality in the field of higher education, such as HESQUAL model (Teeroovengadum et al. 2016), HiEdQUAL model (Subrahmanyam et al., 2012), PHEd model (Sultan et al. 2010), HEdPERF model (Abdullah, 2006). However, the efforts of these research have not been widely accepted, and there is still no widely recognized and most appropriate instrument to measure the quality of higher education services.

Academic experience

What is the product of educational service? Sevier (1996) thought it is the composite of students' academic, social, physical and spiritual experience. Teaching is the most important educational service that students received in universities, it occupies most of the students' campus life and has an important impact on students' campus experience. Some scholars believe that academic experience is an important factor affecting student satisfaction (Elliott & Shin, 2002; Bigne et al., 2003; Mai, 2005). However, the empirical research results of Felix et al. (2004) show that teaching quality has no significant impact on international student satisfaction, but has a significant impact on domestic students. Thomas and Galambos (2004) hold that perceived intellectual growth is a principal determinant of academic satisfaction. In other words, the educational outcomes have an impact on the student's educational experience. We still need further empirical research to confirm the relationship between academic experience and international student satisfaction.

As instructor are the most important assets of HEIs, they have played an important role in students' academic experience. Oldfield and Baron (2000) holds that lecturers' expertise and knowledge, lecturers' care to students, and lecturers' responsiveness are essential to stimulate students' learning motivation. Some scholars suggest that faculty approachability allows students to contact faculty both inside and outside class, which helps to establish a good faculty-student relationship and is critical to the success of students in university (Kuh, et al., 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). In addition, course topics, course execution (Curran and Rosen, 2006), classroom atmosphere, and quality of teaching materials, equity in student assessment (Felix et al., 2004) are also considered to have an impact on students' academic experience.

Students expectations

Some scholars believe that customer satisfaction is related to customer expectation. Zeithmal et al. (1993) holds that when performance meets or exceeds customer expectations, customer satisfaction is achieved. Similarly, Yi (1993) and Johnson (1998) believe that customer expectations will directly affect perceived performance. Empirical research by some scholars also shows that student satisfaction in colleges is strongly influenced by student expectations (Polas et al., 2019; Patterson and Johnson, 1993; Shank, Walker, and Hayes, 1995; Rolfe, 2002; Appleton-Knapp and Krentler, 2006; Voss, Gruber and Szmigin, 2007). However, some studies have reached the

conclusion that customer expectations completely act on customer satisfaction through the mediation of perceived quality (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Kristensen et al., 1999). On the contrary, some scholars suggest that students' expectations are weak and have little impact on student satisfaction (Hartman & Schmidt, 1995; Rautopuro & Vaisanen, 2000). Alvis & Rapaso (2007) show that student expectations have a direct and indirect impact on student satisfaction. This direct impact is negative, while the indirect impact acts on student satisfaction through the mediation of perceived quality.

Image

The image of an institution is also replaced by reputation and prestige in some studies. The result of customers comparing different attributes of organizations (Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001). Image only affect customer satisfaction in some industries (Bhattacharjee et al., 2019; Alshamsi, et al., 2019; Clow et al., 1997). When customers know little about services, image have a strong impact on customer satisfaction (Andressen and Lindastad, 1998). In the field of higher education, Marzo-Navarro et al. (2005) hold that the level of student satisfaction is reflected by positive comments from the surroundings, which then generates a positive impression. Some studies have confirmed the strong influence of image on student satisfaction (Alvis & Rapaso, 2007; Hossain et al., 2020; Michael, et al., 2008; Arambewela and Hall, 2009). However, there are also studies that cannot confirm the significant impact of image on satisfaction (Bloemer et al. 1998) and studies assume university image as a mediator between student satisfaction and loyalty (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Thomas, 2011). Some empirical research results show that image has a significant influence in student's expectations, student's loyalty (Alvis & Rapaso, 2007), student's perception of value (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009) and student's perceptions of service quality (Michael et al., 2008).

Perceived value

Perceived value is related to the customer's evaluation on the concerning of sacrifice and benefit after purchasing and using products and services (Spreng et al., 1993). The sacrifice includes not only money, but also time and other efforts related to consumer behavior (Cronin et al., 1997). McDougall and Levesque hold that the impact of perceived value varies among different industries (McDougall and Levesque, 2000). In the field of higher education, some research found that perceived value has a significant impact on students' satisfaction (Hartman & Schmidt, 1995; Cronin et al. 2000; Alvis & Rapaso, 2007). It means that students feel greater value in the education they receive, and their satisfaction level is higher. Some studies have shown that perceived value is affected by perceived quality, student expectations (Alvis & Rapaso, 2007), and image (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1997), while perceived value has a significant impact on student loyalty (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009).

Campus facilities

Campus facilities can be used to achieve institutional goals and therefore have important value to students (den Heijer, 2011). Price et al. (2003) believes that facilities are an important factor that students will consider when choosing an institution. Campus facilities are related to the physical environment of the school. Some scholars believe that facilities, especially which related to comfortable learning environment, has an important effect on student satisfaction (LeBlanc, & Nguyen, 1997). However, some scholars believe that it has no or little effect on student satisfaction (Marzo-Navarro et al. 2005; Douglas et al., 2006). Allen Gibson (2010) pointed out that the facility is usually a "dissatisfier", i.e., negative perceptions of services/facilities may lead to dissatisfaction, but positive perceptions do not necessarily lead to overall satisfaction. Vidalakis et al. (2013) point out that the facilities can enhance a university's image and attract more students. Kok et al. (2011) argue that some facilities have a direct and major effect on the educational outcome. Sub-dimensions for measuring facilities usually include:

library; laboratory facilities; lecture room facilities; university layouts; access to computing services and facilities; facility maintenance; outdoor areas and so on (Oldfield & Baron, 2000; Clemes et al., 2008; Julin,2014).

Educational outcomes

The outcomes are related to the benefits or damages brought about by the customer after using the product or service (Hartman and Schmidt, 1995). Some studies show that the results have significant, positive effects on customer satisfaction (Oliver and Swan, 1989; Hsee and Abelson ,1991). In the field of higher education, educational results refer to results related to educational experience under the goals of institutions, projects, and courses (Anderson et al.2005). The evaluation of educational outcomes mainly measures the growth of students' knowledge, skills, career preparation and so on (Gardiner et al. 1997; DeShields et al., 2005). Some scholars believe that educational outcomes have a significant direct impact on student satisfaction (Hartman and Schmidt, 1995; Allen Gibson, 2010). (Clemes et al.2008) also pointed out that educational outcomes have indirect effects on student satisfaction through mediator variable service quality

The Consequences of Student Satisfaction

Loyalty

The concept of loyalty is generally used in the commercial field, and it involves a process in which customer's cognition, affect, conation, and behavior take place (Oliver, 1999). Academia has different definitions of this concept, (Oliver, 1997) defines it as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or patronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior". Customer loyalty is mainly manifested in the following aspects: repurchase, brand insistence, and actively recommending the product or service to others (Duhan et al., 1997; Rust & Oliver, 2000). In the context of higher education, student loyalty can be measured by the following behaviors: retention, choosing the same university for further study, and recommending the university to others through word of mouth action (Bourke, 2000; Audhesh & Gopala, 2009; Sam Thomas, 2011). Some studies have shown that student satisfaction has a positive correlation with student loyalty (Athiyaman,1997; Marzo-Navarro et al., 2005; Alvis & Rapaso, 2007; Audhesh & Gopala, 2009). In addition, the factors mentioned above that affect student loyalty also include: perceive value (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009); service quality (Bloemer & Wetzels, 1998; Lee-Kelley et al., 2002; Jose et al. 2009); image (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Thomas,2011).

Conclusion, limitation and suggestions for Further Study

Based on the above discussion, we can outline a general picture of student satisfaction research. The conceptual framework is drawn as follows. The framework clarifies the main antecedents of student satisfaction: perceived value, service quality, educational outcomes, student expectations, campus facilities, image, and academic experience. Student loyalty is regarded as the main consequence of student satisfaction in the model. We can also observe the correlation between these variables from the model.

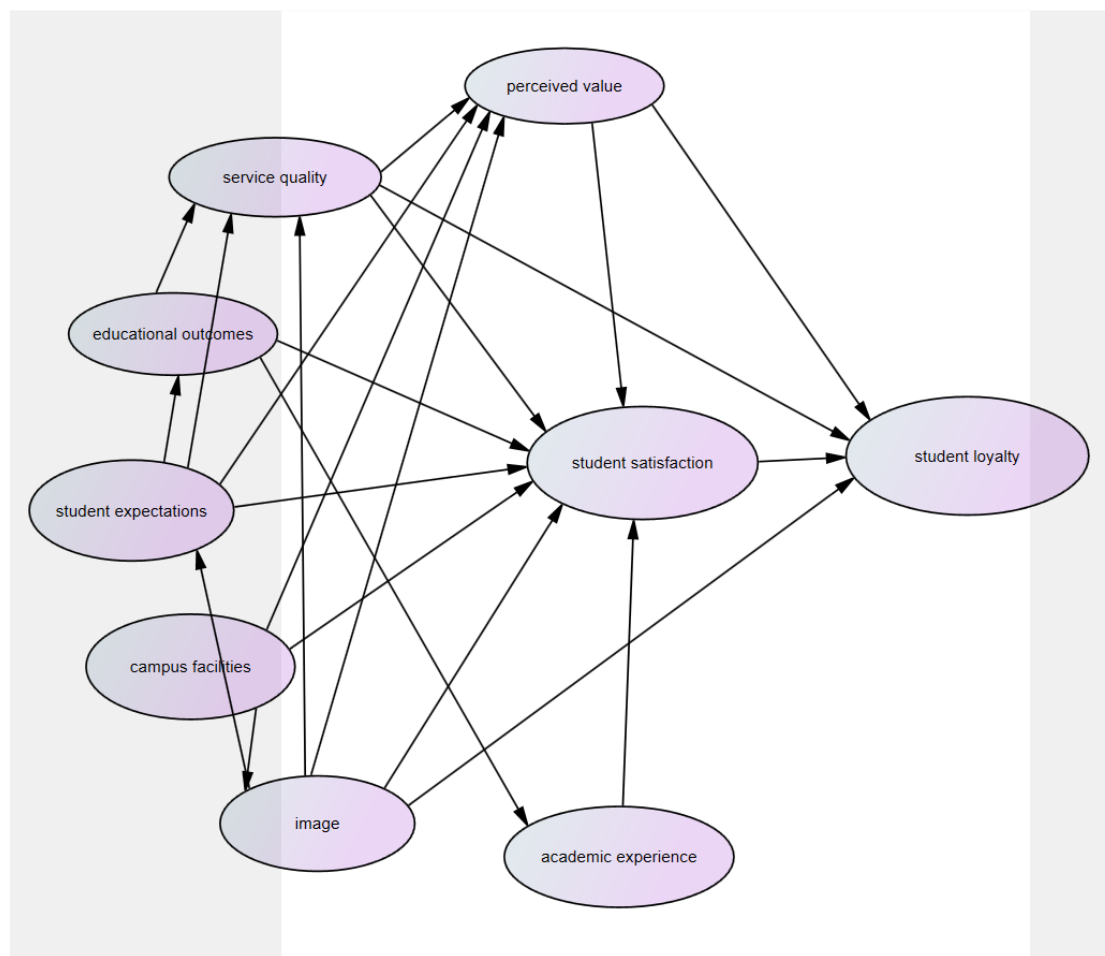


Figure 1. Conceptual model

This theoretical framework has laid the foundation for empirical research design, so as to deeply understand the generation mechanism of student satisfaction and student loyalty. Combining the above explanations, we can understand the development status of this research field, and start with the weaker areas of current research to further promote the progress of research.

In the next step, the authors will conduct a questionnaire survey of 500 international students from 5 universities in Guangxi, China. The survey will adopt a stratified sampling method and the population will be limited to the largest group of international students in Guangxi, that is, students from ASEAN countries. The empirical research will further verify this conceptual framework.

It is worth noting that when we apply the theoretical framework of student satisfaction to the study of international students, we should also consider cultural conflicts and adaptation issues. Judging from the existing research, some studies compare the satisfaction of local and foreign students (Felix et al., 2004), and some compare the satisfaction of international students from different countries (Rodney and Hall, 2009). This grouping comparison method can provide us with new research ideas and allow us to identify moderating variables in the model of student satisfaction.

Although this article provides original value for research in this field, this research still has certain limitations. The biggest limitation is that this article fails to provide a complete set of factors affecting student satisfaction.

Some factors are considered to be the main predictors of student satisfaction, such as "student centeredness" (Elliott and Healy, 2001; Elliott and Shin, 2002; Gibson, 2010), "campus climate" (Elliott and Shin, 2002; Thomas and Galambos, 2004), "social integration" (Hartman and Schmidt, 1995; Gibson, 2010), "student sense of belonging" (Thomas and Galambos, 2004; Gibson, 2010), "economic considerations" (Michael et al., 2008; Rodney and Hall, 2009), "support services" (Elliott and Healy, 2001; Roberts and Styron, 2010). However, due to space limitations, this article fails to discuss these factors one by one. Future research can focus on these factors to make in-depth demonstrations, identify which factors are main predictors, incorporate them into the conceptual framework of student satisfaction, and further promote the development of research.

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