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The Impact of Attitude on International Student Satisfaction and Intention To Study In Malaysia: Evidence From Unimap

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ABSTRACT

The increasing mobility of people in search of new ideas, innovations capability and concept with wide array of service providers giving homogeneous services left the students with the challenges of where to go for study. The purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of attitude towards behavior, based on the EDT using satisfaction as reference point to justify disconfirmation and its consequences on international student's evaluation of Malaysia HEIs. Most literatures uses SERVQUAL, SERVPERF or HEDPERF, this study considered attitude which is more enduring of any service performance. Any institution that wishes to engage in internationalization must be ready to cope with the challenges of measuring students' satisfaction via EDT and determining their behavioral intention via TPB in line with the dynamism of globalizing world.

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INTRODUCTION

Internationalization of higher education has taken a unique dimension in a knowledge driven economy and unlimited search for space, new idea and skills to cope with the challenges of globalization. At this particular point in time, the place of knowledge in the global affairs is ahead of physical products and manufacturing (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Country's boarder is no longer a barrier as students and faculty move freely across international boarder to acquire or share knowledge, skills and professionalism to adjust to the changing world phenomenon (Paulin & Suneson, (2012).

Interestingly, institutions of higher learning have realized the importance of this segment of market to their survival and wellbeing of their parent country economy and have since adopted various marketing strategy to maintain competitive advantage (Arambewela & Hall, 2009). The target of this study is to access two main issues in the international education industry. The first is the issue of satisfaction with educational services provided and the second is the influence of attitude on the student's intention to study in UNIMAP. Going through literatures on customer satisfaction especially in service marketing, constructs related to pre-purchase idea of the service (Perceived expectation) and post-purchase evaluation of the service (Perceived quality) are relevant in establishing the attitude and satisfaction of students (Biodun, Haji Din & Abdullateef, 2012).

Notably, relevant literatures on international education market have argued in favor of service quality dimensions in the concept of higher education, justifying the relationship between the constructs and satisfaction (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). The themes in the theoretical framework of this study are directly related to the research questions which seek to establish the intention of international student in UNIMAP considering various opportunities in other universities in Malaysia. In measuring the intention, antecedents of satisfaction such as perceived expectation, perceived value and service quality will be reviewed. Also the consequence of satisfaction and dissatisfaction which will obviously lead to behavioral intention becomes extremely important. The extent literature reviewed on satisfaction and behavioral intention relied mainly on cognitive dissonance theory to established international students' disconfirmation of expectations (Oliver, 1980; Bhattacharjee, 2001) and the theory of planned behavior to determine the intention (Ajzen, 1991). Some authors have criticized the use of customer model in higher education (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Delucchi & Smith, 1997; Eisenberg, 1997; Lim, Yap & Lee, 2011) but the emphasizes placed on student's fee by the university managers, coupled

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with increasing demand by the students to have value for money makes it inevitable (Dulucchi & Korgen, 2002). Also the competitive environment with which the institutions operate makes it challenging for sustainable profitability without constantly measuring the customers feelings (Hall, 1995; Athiyaman, 2000).

1.1 Decision making Process:

The most vital yet critical aspect of journey to study abroad starts with decision as to where to go for studies. Usually, the country choice comes before the institutional choice. At the country level, major economic indices and macroeconomic variables of destination country is in focus. The first consideration at the country level is safety and security, with the America experience of September 11, and global terrorism wind blowing across many nations, issue of security and safety becomes paramount. Then other issues like political stability, standard/cost of living, per capital income, level of technology development, social orientation etc that may pull student to the destination relative to other competing countries providing similar services will be considered (Arambewela and Hall, 2009).

The extent literatures consulted revealed that international students are trooping to Malaysia for studies because of low tuition fee of its universities relative to what is tenable in major destination countries like the USA, UK, Australia; low risk security situation with high level safety measures in both study and living environment; cultural and religious similarity is in fact one such factor that is motivating students from the middle East and Arab countries to head to Malaysia for study; use of English language that Malaysia is changing to as teaching language is encouraging international students compared to when Bahasa Melayu was used generally; international recognition of degree certificate from Malaysia; competitive local and international job opportunities with Malaysia certificate (Mohammad, Zahiruddin, & Mohd, 2003; Rohaizat, 2004; MOHE, 2008/2009; Zeeshan, Sabbar, Bashir & Hussain, 2013). After the due consideration of these socio-economic factors, decisions are made as to where to study and Malaysia chosen as the destination.

Malaysia opened her door to multinational institutions and development of private tertiary institutions with the enactment of The Education Act of 1996 and also rapidly expanded her public institutions to world class status. As at the time of writing this exploratory study, Malaysia had 20 public universities, 53 private universities and 6 foreign university branch campuses (MOHE, 2010). Naturally, competition becomes inevitable between the private whose main target is to make profit, foreign campuses who will want to justify their existence and the public university that is fulfilling social responsibility. Even among the 20 public universities in Malaysia there is a kind of brand differentiation, some are referred to as research universities, some focus universities and some general.

Therefore, choice of university is as crucial as destination choice, considering micro-economic factors and attributes involved. A lot of studies have been done on factors determining higher institution choice, and such factors such as quality of degree, availability of field of study, teaching quality, physical environment of the institution, campus facilities, social interaction, security, technology, study environment, library, supporting staff, cost of education, reputation and image of the institution are some of their findings (Joseph and Joseph, 2000; Soutar and Turner, 2002; Pimpa, 2003; Prince *et al.*, 2003; Chen and Zimitat, 2006; Lau Sear Haur, 2009; Joseph Kee Ming Sia, 2011; Ahmad, & Nordin, 2013; Kusumawati, 2013).

1.2 Choice of University Malaysia Perlis (UNIMAP):

University Malaysia Perlis is the 17th public university established in 2002 located in the state of Perlis. The university adopted multi-campus system for strategic development of the host community. Conservatively, the student population as at 2014 was put at 10,000 with about 3,000 members of staff. The university run both graduate and post graduate studies and opened to both local and international students. However, the international student's population is less than 2,000 which is below 20% of the entire student population. Although UNIMAP is an engineering focused university, it branding its product with Business and Technopreneurship skills which makes it unique and distinct among other engineering universities. This study is aimed at investigating the expectation of international students before choosing UNIMAP and their feelings after entering the university in relation to their satisfaction, whether or not attitude has been formed to necessitate positive behavioral intention such as loyalty, retention, repurchase and recommendation to other potential students.

2.0 Literature Review:

The trend in satisfaction theory has grown beyond acquiring paper qualification only, rather holistic educational experience designed to meet or exceed students' expectations (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2009). With the adoption of service marketing principles in educational institutions, service activities should be geared towards the consumer's need and in this case student (Tan *et al.*, 2010). The universities are competing to recruit best students and the students too are competing to gain admission into best university, therefore issues of service quality become a priority for the service providers (Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml, 1988). Marketing issues in the context of higher education is viewed as process of analysis, planning, implementation and control of

beneficial programs to both the students (in terms of certification) and the service provider (Universities) targeted to achieve organizational goals (Kotler & Fox, 1985). Many empirical researches have established that between 27% and 30% of students turned to their friends, relations, neighbors and acquaintances to make decision on the choice of higher education institution for their studies (Hemsley Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Maringe, 2006). Therefore, the effect of positive word of mouth referral in the choice of UniMap by international student could be determined.

The relevant materials on satisfaction, service quality, service quality dimensions, attitudinal behaviors and intention will be reviewed particularly the relationship among these variables. When applying these constructs to international students' in UNIMAP, it will provide the university management to examine areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction of the student thereby improving on such areas that did not meet the students' expectation. Also, students have option to move to another university even after registration if not satisfied or felt shortchanged, hence the need to measure their feelings in order to keep them (retention), ensure they come again (loyalty) and recommend the university to others (WOM) should top the priorities of UniMap administrators (Arambewela & Hall, 2009).

2.1 Service Quality in Education:

The competitive environment of international student market leaves the managers without choice than to constantly improve on the quality of services provided to the student. The student's has various alternatives and thus, become more demanding and even discriminating in their selection of universities (Lim *et al.*, 2011). For any university to remain active in the international education market issues related to efficient service delivery and students' satisfaction will be imperative, since satisfied customer will guaranty profitability through loyalty and positive WOM referrals (Shank, *et al.*, 1995; Russell, 2005; Joseph, *et al.*, 2005). The need for quality services in tertiary education institutions particularly from the perspective of student has received considerable attention by researchers (Joseph & Joseph, 1998; Oldfield & Baron, 2000; Tan & Kek, 2004; Russell, 2005; Joseph, Yakhou & Stone, 2005). Their argument all centered on the theory of marketing which postulated that satisfied customers are likely going to be loyal and spread positive words of mouth which can attract more applicant with low marketing cost.

To measure service quality from customer's angle is challenging because different people with different assessment level. But the most widely used in most service marketing literatures is the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman and two other famous researchers in 1985. After initial conception and application, some modifications were made and five dimensions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy were adopted (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1988). But some authors criticized the application of SERVQUAL to higher education, insisting that if student evaluate their experience, they are likely to use different criteria with different importance (Joseph *et al.*, 2005).

Service quality in education from student perception is simply the difference between student expectation and perception against their actual experiences (Mai, 2005). Service quality in education has being regarded as antecedence to student satisfaction (Aldridge & Rowley, 2001). However, in defining SERVQUAL issues of attitude which is believed to be formed over a long assessment on the overall performance cannot be avoided (Hoffman & Bateson, 1997). Similarly, famous advocate of SERVQUAL instrument also agreed that service quality is a product of attitude formed after evaluating the expectation and perception of service (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). This implies that attitude can only be form after satisfactory service experience, with some authors arguing that the satisfaction must be repeated and consistent over time (Oliver, 1980; Bhattacharjee, 2001; Boulding *et al.*, 1993). Quality in higher educational institutions (HEI) is a dynamic ongoing matter and, to some extent, relies on the students' perception of the value being offered by the HEIs (Konting *et al.*, 2009). Such views, it is hoped, can help encourage the university authorities to understand the quality of services offered as assessed by the international students.

2.2 Student Satisfaction:

Satisfaction is generally regarded as positive feelings about service encountered or product consumed. In marketing literature, satisfaction is the most used strategy to gain competitive advantage in form of increased sales, increased profits, market share, customer retention and loyalty (Wicks & Roethlein, 2009). With the adoption of marketing principles in higher education, students who are the main customers of the institution should be satisfied with the services provided if the institution most succeeds. Although satisfaction has been argued to be consumption specific (Cronin & Taylor, 1992) or cumulative based on aggregate experience (Jones & Suh, 2000), the focus is on total evaluation of the service. The evaluation of their total experience is what gives the student desired satisfaction (Sapri *et al.*, 2009). It could also be viewed as contentment derived from intentional performance (Malik *et al.*, 2010). But Kotler and Clarke (1987) used desirable outcome of an action that pleases one's esteem to defined satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is a prerequisite to sustainable long time consumer behavior (Oliver, 1980). The sure way to guaranty customer retention is through satisfaction (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993).

In measuring student's satisfaction in higher education different constructs were used by different researchers to determine the aspect that mostly influenced the student's satisfaction. This is because consumers (students) are sensitive to monitor the options available to them which make them discerning buyers, knowing exactly what they need. The dynamism of globalization made information easily accessible including the content of a product/service. Quality of courses and teaching was found to significantly influence students' satisfaction (Sapri *et al.*, 2009). Educational issues like quality, access and feedback also determine student's satisfaction (Arambewela & Hall, 2009). Another study conducted by Price *et al.*, (2003) also identified right course, good teaching, library facilities, reputation, computers availability, quality of transportation, friendly attitude towards students and availability of quiet study areas as the satisfaction items. A study conducted by Sohalia and Shaikh, (2004) revealed that contact personnel is the most significant satisfaction measurement.

Therefore, tertiary institutions should manage all aspects of students' interaction concerning services offered and the people administering the service to deliver high quality standard that will make student delighted. Services are delivered to people by people and the moment of truth can make or mar the reputation of the institution (Banwet & Datta, 2003). In order to deliver total students' satisfaction, all employees of the university (UNIMAP) should adhere to the principles of quality of customer service irrespective of their schedule of duties whether teaching, non-teaching, and administrative or management (Banwet & Datta, 2003).

2.3 Student Attitude:

As much as we desire satisfaction, attitude developed for a product or service is more preferred. Satisfaction is usually short live and a moment experience while attitude is form gradually from accumulated satisfaction experience which when developed becomes difficult to change. Sometimes customer could be satisfied but will not be loyal. However, a customer who has developed an emotional bond or passion for product or service will continue to patronize such even with declined satisfaction level. It is therefore very important to generate satisfaction up to attitude level in order to maintain ever lasting relationship. Once a student is in love with a particular institution, he/she will not only continue studies there but will also encourage the siblings, friends and others to follow suit. So attitude is a longer emotional attachment which is significant for a good marketing relationship.

Oliver (1980) identified two types of attitudes to services: antecedent and continuous based on the level at which the consumption was evaluated (Pre-purchased or post-purchase). The focus of our study is on post-purchase behavior which is the continuous attitude. Although, consumer's overall attitude to a service provider reflect the general reputation of that organization which can be established before or after encounter (Ekinci, Dawes & Messey, 2008). However, we will concentrate on continuous attitude in line with the study objective to investigate student's evaluation of services at UNIMAP at the post consumption level.

Consumer's overall attitude can be cognitive and affective from psychological perspectives, which implies that issue of image characteristics is critical (Ekinci *et al*, 2008). In contrast, satisfaction can only be attained after consumption experience and usually have emotional attachment and specific to a single transaction. But even without a taste or usage, consumer can develop positive attitude towards a product or service (Oliver, 1980). The impressions are usually from the marketing strategies such as advertisement/promotional materials or previous experience of others. Although, such attitude are pre-consumption and better referred to as expectations (Bhattacharjee, 2001).

To what extent has UNIMAP promotional activities motivated the study intention of the students? Also the experience with the services thus far, has it significantly changed the perception of the student to develop affective attitude to continue their study in UNIMAP and recommend the university to others? Since satisfactions usually lead to consumer's overall attitude to service at the post consumption experience, these questions are best answered by the amount of satisfaction at the university (Ekinci *et al.*, 2008).

2.4 Student Intention:

The intention to return is defined in this study as the possibility of student to continue study, return for further studies or recommend UNIMAP to others. It is similar to customer loyalty, repurchase, reused, and other positive behavior intentions in satisfaction literature (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Behavioral intention from the theory of expectancy disconfirmation is usually taken as the consequences of satisfaction (Oliver, 1980). A study conducted by Caruana (2002) on retail banking find customer loyalty (intention to reuse) as the most significant of the outcome of satisfaction variables measured in the study. It can therefore, be argued that international students will develop favorable behavioral intention to study in UniMap after attaining reasonable level of satisfaction that transform into attitude.

3.0 Relationship and hypothesis Development:

This study is a conceptual model seeking to establish the relationship between behavioral intentions and its determinants relying on the expectancy-disconfirmation theory. The determinants are: perceived expectation, perceived service quality, satisfaction and attitude.

3.1 Perceived expectation and Satisfaction:

Perceived expectation is a pre-consumption attitude form from external information on service performance. The salesmen, posters, bill boards and other types of advertisement usually capture some level of service performance upon which customer form his/her opinion about the product/service. However, the relationship between expectations and satisfaction has been described as complex (Yi, 1990). This is because high expectation do result in low satisfaction and vice versa (Bhattacharjee, 2001). Therefore, measuring satisfaction from expectation could depend on the operationalization of the construct and the context to which its being applied since empirical studies have shown mixed results in the relationship (Bearden and Teel 1983; Churchill and Suprenant 1982).

This study relied on Fornell *et al.*, (1996) measurement of expectation on the American customer satisfaction index to determine the level of expectation of international student on the service provided by UniMap (both educational and non-educational services). More so, the 22 item instrument of SERVQUAL have been used to measure students expectations in higher education institutions and find expectations to be positively related to satisfaction (Hanaysha *et al.* 2011; Malik, 2012; Njie *et al.* 2012; Biodun *et al.*, 2012). We therefore hypothesises that:

H1: Perceived expectation is positively related to satisfaction

H2: Perceived expectation positively influence behavioral intentions

3.2 Perceived Service Quality and Satisfaction:

Perceived service quality is the interpretation of service performance after consumption. It tells whether the expectations are met, surpass or below expectation. However, the measurement of satisfaction is tied to the perception of the customer whose judgment is superior. Bhattacharjee, (2001) argued that perceived service quality result from the difference between expectation and performance which translate to satisfaction/dissatisfaction and its consequences. The expectancy disconfirmation theory also hold that, the perception of service quality is the post experience confirmation or disconfirmation which evaluate consumer to be delighted if the service surpass expectation, satisfied if the expectation is met or dissatisfied if below expectation.

Quality has been found to have direct and positive correlation with favorable behavioral intentions such as reuse, continuous, re-enroll, repurchase, patronize, repeat or revisit intentions in studies throughout the marketing literature (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996; Kordupleski *et al.*, 1993; Spreng *et al.*, 1996; Cronin and Morris, 1989; Dawkins and Reichheld, 1990). Since perceived service quality determine satisfaction and also influence behavioral intentions, we test the two hypotheses as follows:

H3: Perceived service quality positively influence satisfaction

H4: Perceived service quality positively influence behavioral intentions

3.3 Satisfaction and Attitude:

Satisfaction is a psychological feeling of mind and body on the experience and value of product/service resulting from disconfirmation using expectations as benchmark (Oliver, 1980). When perceived performance of a system meets or exceeds users' expectation, they will be satisfied and this may lead to continuance usage of the system and other dimensions of behavior such as retention, loyalty, price sensitivity, complaint (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996). However, satisfaction is treated as transient experience in most service literature, this made its impact short live especially at attribute level. Some authors have made case for cumulative satisfaction, evaluating the entire transaction specific and taking the overall satisfaction into consideration (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Goroons, 1983; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988).

Based on the qualitative nature of past behavior and the fact that satisfaction captures evaluative summary of consumption experience after service encounter, it is likely to have a direct impact on attitude which developed over a long consistent satisfaction. The direct positive influence of satisfaction on attitude was also empirically validated by Zeithaml *et al.*, (1996), Sheu, (2011), Bhattacharjee, (2001) and Suh & Yi, (2006). This study therefore, formulated the hypothesis as follows:

H5: Satisfaction leads to Attitude towards the behavior

3.4 Attitude Towards intention and Behavioral Intentions:

Attitude takes longer time to develop and so it takes longer time to change since it has to do with emotion and affect. Attitude towards intention developed after a reasonable level of satisfaction is attained consistently. EDT recognized the mediating role of attitude in the relationship between satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Oliver, 1980), though most of the service marketing literatures linked disconfirmation to satisfaction and intention in their empirical findings (Bhattacharjee, 2001; Spreng *et al.*, 1996; Patterson *et al.*, 1997).

In addition to the established relationship between attitude and Favorable behavioral intentions, literature also examined the relationship between satisfaction and attitude and find that satisfied customer usually demonstrate willingness to repeat the action again which transient to become attitude over time. And attitude

promote emotional bond between the customer and service provide. Sheu, (2001) empirically establish satisfaction as antecedence of attitude when measuring post purchase behavior of students in higher education institution and also find attitude to positively related to behavioral intentions. We therefore, postulated that:

H6: Attitude towards behavior is positively related to behavioral intentions

4.0 Conceptual model:

In the marketing literatures, behavioral intentions are represented by constructs such as loyalty, retention, continuous, repurchase, re-used, words of mouth referrals or recommendation that are consequences of satisfaction with the service. The adoption of marketing variables in the management of higher education resulting from fee paying system and value for money demands from students, the use of service quality, value and satisfaction to determine the student's behavioral intention becomes inevitable. The under-lying premise is that individuals make decisions rationally and systematically on the basis of the information available to them (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). This follows that the selection of higher institutions by prospective student is a function of information at his/her disposal. Hence TPB can be link with constructs like perceived service quality, perceived expectation, satisfaction, behavioral intention and actual behavior as conceptualized in the theoretical model of this study (Maiyaki & Mohktar, 2012).

This study therefore conceptualized this relationship in the theoretical framework as follows:

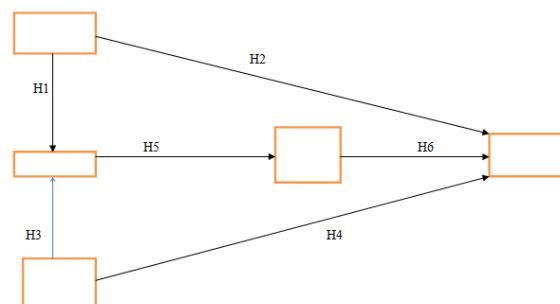


Fig. 1.1: Theoretical Framework.

5.0 Conclusion:

The marketization of higher education institutions have given students upper hand in determining the quality of service he/she is paying for. Students now have a choice and become too demanding in terms of value for money particularly students who have to cross international borders to access education. Therefore, any institution that wishes to engage in internationalization must be ready to cope with these challenges in line with the dynamism of globalizing world. University Malaysia Perlis, like any other public university in Malaysia admit international students and thus have no choice than to explore available avenue to keep these students satisfied for her to gain competitive advantage over others.

The objectives of students to seek international education are different, some for economic reasons, others to raise social status and good number for leadership responsibilities. This study conceptualize perceived expectations to satisfaction and behavioral intentions; and perceived service quality to satisfaction and behavioral intention as the measure of attitude towards behavior which can be investigated empirically to ascertain the real motives of international mobile students in Malaysia and particularly in UniMap. These will help university managers to design theoretical and practical programs in line with opportunities to improve personal abilities of her customers (students) and gain academic knowledge simultaneously.

The study attempt to gain a better insight of the dimensions that determined international students' perceptions of service quality in higher education particularly international students in University Malaysia Perlis by conceptualizing the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980; Fornell *et al.* 1996; Bhattacharjee, 2001). The competition for international students is gaining momentum in Malaysia, with each institution showcasing the percentage of internationalization as quality standard. Therefore, UniMap most constantly evaluate the perception of international students enrolled with the view to improve on the aspects that are not sufficient, this will retain the existing students and will also promote positive words of mouth referrals for potential students.

The limitations of this study are its theoretical concept, which will be validated in due course as part of the research interest of this author. Also, not all constructs that determine international student's behavioral intentions are included in this study. However, the study provides a lead way for any institution wishing to undertake international education market since students mobility has being argued to be one of the challenges of internationalization (Arambewela & Hall, 2009).

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