

Antecedents of Student Satisfaction: The Role of Student Perceived Service Quality

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Abstract

There is a lack of attention from past studies on the role of antecedents in the private higher education in Malaysia. Thus, this paper aims to examine the roles of reliable information and past experience on perceived service quality and satisfaction among the undergraduate students of private universities in Malaysia. A self-administered questionnaire was adopted and collected 388 valid data from the 9 private universities in Malaysia. The SERVPERF instrument was adopted to evaluate the perceived service quality among the undergraduate students. The PLS-SEM was applied to analyze the students' responses in determining the role of antecedents in improving student satisfaction by providing quality tertiary education in the private universities. The findings depicted that reliable information is significantly related with student perceived service quality. However, there is no relationships between past experience and student perceived service quality. Student perceived service quality is found significantly related to student satisfaction. This paper provides a valuable contribution in the body of knowledge of the antecedent and consequence of perceived service quality. The findings of the study help the management of the universities to improve the student satisfaction through the focus on the role of antecedents, particularly reliable information. Several implications are offered which would benefits Malaysia private universities and Ministry of Higher Education.

Keywords: Reliable information; Past experience; Student perceived service quality; Student satisfaction; Private universities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The high intense competition to attract and retain potential students has increased the pressure on the universities to be accountable in all areas of the institution (Leonnard, 2018). Many private universities are trying to improve their universities by providing higher quality service to their students (Datta & Vardhan, 2017). These efforts include improving the university world ranking, upgrading the physical facilities, hiring professional academic, collaborating with industry partners and so on. However, they are unable to recognize the perceptions and expectations of their students in the direction of the services provided (Anis, Islam, & Abdullah, 2018), especially the role of antecedents.

There is a limited studies on the antecedents of service quality among undergraduate students in private higher education sector (Khalifa, Binnawas, Alareefi, Alkathiri, Alsaadi, Alneadi & Alkhateri, 2021; Tan, Choong & Chen, 2021). According to Sultan and Wong (2011), reliable information and past experience are two critical antecedents relating to service quality for evaluating the service quality aspects and establishing the standards of service performance in the future. Past studies revealed that the formal information come from

difference communication sources such as brochures, newspapers, advertisements, and articles in magazines influence the way consumers understand about the quality based on ambiguous evidence (Filieri, McLeay, Tsui & Lin, 2018; Mathews, 1994). The reliable information gives a foundation for assessing service quality aspects in the course of service encounter. While, past experience relating to service quality is vital because service encounter helps consumers to establish the standards of service performance (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016; Tosun, Dedeoğlu, Fyall, 2018; Sultan & Wong, 2011) and influence the satisfaction in future. It is a pressing need to investigate on the connectivity of the antecedents on students' perceived service quality and satisfaction of the private universities in Malaysia.

Besides, customer satisfaction is a key success factor for an institution and perform as a crucial instrument in improving its perceived service quality (Abdullah, 2006). The service quality is evaluating how the extent of service delivery meets the expectations of customer and interrelationship between the expectations of customer with satisfaction (Kotara, 2020). The experience of consumer during the service process is important to facilitate consumer assessment of service quality and to determine consumer satisfaction on the service provided (Suyanto, Usu, & Moodoeto, 2019). Thus, the concept of satisfaction was further expanded to the higher education context.

A research framework is developed based on the underlying theory of the antecedents and consequence of service quality as an integrated-process model (Shabbir, Palihawadana & Thwaites, 2007). Therefore, the paper aim to examine the relationship between reliable information and perceived service quality, as well as past experience and perceived service quality. Seocndly, the second focal of this paper is to examine the relationship between perceived service quality and satisfaction among the undergraduate students of private universities in Malaysia.

The relationship of the antecedents and consequence of perceived service quality was proven with empirical evidence in different context (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016; Tan et al., 2021; Tosun et al., 2018). The paper provides a valuable contribution in the body of knowledge of the antecedent and consequence of perceived service quality. The findings of the study help the management of the universities to improve the student satisfaction through the focus on the role of antecedents, particularly reliable information.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Background-Integrated-Process Model

Shabbir, Palihawadana, and Thwaites (2007) have developed an integrated-process model to investigate the antecedents and consequences of service quality. They demonstrated the relationship of the donor-perceived relationship quality and its antecedents and consequences through the approach of dimensional qualitative research. The research model reflected the interdependent relationships between cognitive-based antecedent variables, such as service quality, relationship benefits, and trust, with affective-based variables, such as satisfaction and commitment on the behavioural-based consequences of donor-perceived quality, including donor loyalty and positive word-of-mouth communications (Sargeant, 2001). Sultan and Wong (2014) carried out a comprehensive service quality study by incorporating several constructs into an integrated-procees model. Their model incorporated both information and past experiences as the antecedents and behavioural intentions as the consequence of perceived service quality, as well as the mediating roles of satisfaction, trust, and university-brand performance. In general, the results suggested a strong validity of the integrated process model as proposed in their study. The research has adopted the integrated-process model to

investigate and interpret the relationship of antecedents and consequence on the student perceived service quality towards the private universities.

Service Quality

Service quality denotes the overall judgment of customer concerning a service performance (Zeithaml, 1988). Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1988) has proposed a famous model for assessing service quality, the SERVQUAL instrument which has been tested and applied in various industries. There are five dimensions of SERVQUAL include tangibles, responsiveness, reliability, empathy, and assurance. Parasuraman et al. (1988) suggested a gap-based SERVQUAL measurement. The service quality is evaluated by comparing the perception of customer between the expectations and actual performance on the service delivered by the service provider.

Over the past decades, the perception of service quality has been researched broadly. SERVQUAL as a popular model has been subject to numerous arguments from different researchers (Gregory, 2019; Katara, 2020; Nelwan, 2020; Nojavan, Heidary & Mohammaditabar, 2021). Cronin and Taylor (1992) and Buttle (1996) have criticised on expectation as an evaluating service quality standard. Cronin and Taylor (1992) have introduced and utilize of the SERVPERF instrument. They compared these expectation-perception gaps against perception only as they raised the query on the need of measuring consumer expectations. Cronin and Taylor (1992) proposed that the single perception of service performance is adequate for the assessment of service quality. In line with Cronin and Taylor's idea, Babakus and Boller (1992) supported that the performance-only evaluation has already considered much of this information. Besides, Carman (1990) proposed that the instrument of SERVQUAL have to be modified to suit with a particular service. While Babakus and Boller (1992) have noticed that a generalized response prone to rate expectation higher. Therefore, the score of perception is viewed as the main contributor to the gap scores. Despite a great deal of arguments from different researchers, SERVQUAL instrument has been successfully applied in diverse types of service organisations as well as multiple diverse settings in worldwide (Bello, 2020; Boay & Talavera, 2020; Furrer, Liu, & Sudharshan, 2000; Tuncer, Unusan, & Cobanoglu, 2021).

Reliable Information and Student Perceived Service Quality

Reliable information relates to service quality was a critical relationship due to it serve as a basic for assessing service quality characteristics in the course of service experience. It defined as the students search for any potential signs prior to buying including word-of-mouth from others, advertisements, the physical environment, and the delivery of quality services about the capabilities of the university. Sultan and Wong (2011) validated that the level of quality judgment was significantly influenced by the amount of information received. Bowen and Chen (2001) assured that the perceptions of service quality were influenced by variables such as social referents, interaction with salespeople, different kind of information gathered, and the credibility customers create for a service organization. Moreover, the newly released 2020 QS survey report (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2020) highlighted that the official university website, general online search, ranking, social media channels, printed university brochure/prospectus, advertisement, and phone calls with institutions are among the useful source of information for potential students to research a university. Li, Asimiran, & Suyitno (2018) acknowledged that student perspective is a critical indicator to evaluate service quality in higher education. Students are the key consumer and user of education services. Therefore, the sufficient and reliable information prior to the student enrolment shaped their perception

about service quality of a university. This information plays an important role that will affect the quality assessment of students prior, during or after the service encounter. Based on the discussion above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Reliable information is positively influence student perceived service quality towards the university.

Past Experience and Student Perceived Service Quality

According to Edvardsson (2005), past experience refers to the service experience that form the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural reactions in the consumer memories that remain on it for longer period of time. It can be operationalised as a basic cognitive standard that help to evaluate the fulfilment of service quality requirements for the present and future services (Sultan & Wong, 2011). Past experience is a brief cognitive standard, it helps to evaluate the standard of service quality for service encounters (Sultan & Wong, 2014). In addition, the QS survey report (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2020) has revealed that the experiences of discussion with admission staff, family and friends, and alumni are important to develop a general perception and expectation about a university. Thus, the role of past experiences serve as a predicator of service quality is important in the private higher education context. Based on the discussion above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2: Past experience is positively influence student perceived service quality towards the university.

Student Perceived Service Quality and Student Satisfaction

Perceived service quality is assumed as a total assessment of consumers on the usefulness of a product or service by comparing what consumers have received and what consumers have been given (Zeithaml, 1988). Students are the key consumer and user of education services. Thus, it is essential to evaluate student feedback on the perspective of service quality (Lie, Sudirman, & Efendi, 2019). In the higher education context, the students have a tendency to attach with the same university and accomplish their educational purposes when their needs have been satisfied by their university. According to Ilias, Hasan, Rahman, and Yaso (2008) student satisfaction was accumulated persistently with the on-campus experiences within the duration of study. Later, they may become the dedicated graduates and able to assist and support to the existing students (Gregory, 2019; Low, 2000). Hence, it is predicted that student perceived service quality is significantly linked to student satisfaction. Based on the discussion above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 3: Student perceived service quality is positively influence student satisfaction towards the university.

Proposed Research Framework

This research aims to investigate the relationship of the antecedent variables which included reliable information and past experience on student perceived service quality and its consequence variable of student satisfaction in the private universities. As a result of the review of past literatures, a conceptual framework is formulated and proposed in Figure 1.

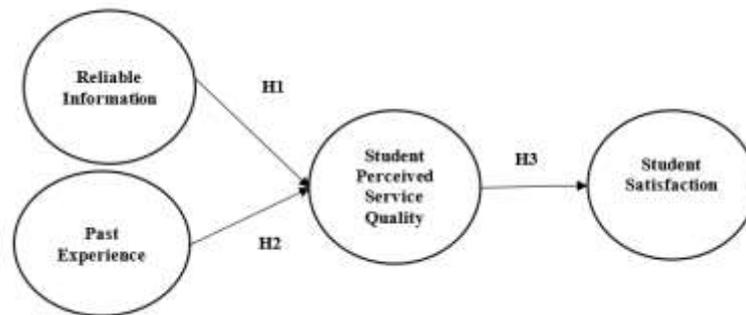


Fig 1 Proposed research framework

3.0 RESEARCH METHOD

Research Procedure and Sample

A quantitative research is applied in this research. The data are collected through self-administered questionnaire. All the numerical data were analysed using partial least square structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) to test specific hypotheses. A set of data is collected through the cross-sectional approach. The research sampling design employed in this research was a non-probability sampling technique. Two sampling methods involved both quota and judgmental sampling technique. A total of 388 usable samples were collected from August 2019 to October 2019 through face-to-face distribution from the undergraduate students who studied either science or non-science degree programme in the 9 private universities. These universities are situated in several major states: Selangor, Perak, Melaka, Sarawak, and Wilayah Persekutuan. The name of each universities were remained anonymous as to protect the reputation of the respective universities. The sampling elements for a qualified undergraduate respondent include a full-time student, an active candidacy status, study an undergraduate programme, and acquire a minimum of one semester/trimester/term service experience with his/her university.

First, most of the respondents were female (n=202, 52.06%). Next, the race characteristic was composed of 230 (59.28%) Chinese respondents, 107 (27.58%) Malay respondents, 27 (6.96%) Indian respondents, and 24 (6.19%) Others. In term of the duration of study, most of the respondents were in third year of study (n=112, 28.87%). Majority of the students were from B40 family group (n=231, 59.5%), whereas the remaining students were under M40 family group (n=125, 32.2%) and T20 family group (n=32, 8.3%).

Research Instrument

The research instrument for each of the constructs were adapted from the past literature studies. A seven-point Likert scale was used to measure the items. The reliable information with 3-item scale and past experience with 3-item scale were developed by Sultan and Wong (2014). Both constructs: reliable information and past experience scales were adapted originally from Sultan and Wong (2014). While student perceived service quality-SERVQUAL was comprised of five dimensions: tangibles, responsiveness, reliability, empathy, and assurance. These five dimensions were measured by 22-item scale adopted from Parasuraman et al. (1988). However, this research applied the SERVPERF scale that centred on the perception-only (Cronin & Taylor, 1994). For student satisfaction, 5-item scale originally developed by Ali, Zhou, Hussain, Nair and Ragavan (2016) was used in this research.

4.0 DATA ANALYSIS

In this research, PLS-SEM was employed to examine the collected data and evaluate on measurement model and structural model. While, SPSS was used to analyse descriptive and demographic profile. The measurement model was examined by both convergent and discriminant validity. The convergent validity is to measure the agreement of same concept through the multiple items (Amin, Thurasamy, Aldakhil, & Kaswuri, 2016). While the discriminant validity will be tested to assure that every latent construct is different from one another in the same measurement model. Then, the structural model examined the correlation between latent variables or constructs that were hypothesised in the research model (Sarstedt, Ringle, & Hair, 2017).

Assessment of the Measurement Model

The factor loadings of all indicators are range from 0.700 to 0.928 (Table 1), exceeded the minimum requirement of 0.70 (Choong, Ng, Seow & Tan, 2020; Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins, and Ringle, 2014). Besides, the research results revealed that out of 33 indicators, 32 indicators had loadings above the threshold value of 0.70 and one indicators had loading below 0.70 (Table 1). Therefore, one indicator has been discarded from the measurement model. Moreover, all AVE values surpassed the tolerance value of 0.50 as suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Hence, the results indicated the convergent validity of the measurement model has been established in this study.

Table 1 Results of measurement model analysis

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
Reliable Information	0.692	0.750	0.826	0.615
Past Experience	0.748	0.749	0.888	0.635
Tangibles	0.839	0.839	0.892	0.675
Reliability	0.907	0.907	0.931	0.728
Responsiveness	0.916	0.916	0.941	0.798
Assurance	0.916	0.916	0.937	0.748
Empathy	0.891	0.894	0.924	0.754
Student Satisfaction	0.944	0.946	0.958	0.819

Note. INF=Reliable Information; PEX=Past Experience; TAN=Tangibles; REL=Reliability; RES=Responsiveness; ASS=Assurance; EMP=Empathy; SSA=Student Satisfaction.

Next, the HTMT values for each construct were not more than 0.90 threshold value (Choong, Jamal, Hamidah, Krishna & Seow, 2018; Sarstedt, Ringle, & Hair, 2017). It can be concluded that there are no overlapping items emerged in respondents' perception in the affected constructs (Table 2). Subsequently, the HTMT inference test involved bootstrapping procedure to construct the confidence interval. All the confidence intervals of constructs did not contained value one and the upper confidence interval was less than one (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Therefore, the model has achieved sufficient discriminant validity.

Table 2 Results of Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations

Variables	INF	PEX	TAN	REL	RES	ASS	EMP	SSA
INF								
PEX	0.828							

TAN	0.686	0.462					
REL	0.675	0.509	0.722				
RES	0.665	0.473	0.692	0.861			
ASS	0.628	0.446	0.681	0.824	0.898		
EMP	0.744	0.547	0.658	0.782	0.840	0.851	
SSA	0.706	0.495	0.518	0.469	0.501	0.486	0.515

Note. INF=Reliable Information; PEX=Past Experience; TAN=Tangibles; REL=Reliability; RES=Responsiveness; ASS=Assurance; EMP=Empathy; SSA=Student Satisfaction.

Assessment of Structural Model

The results of coefficient of determination (R^2) is presented in Table 3. Chin (1998) has recommended the R^2 value should be deliberated substantial at 0.26, moderate at 0.13, and weak at 0.02. The explained variance variables were SPSQ ($R^2=0.403$) and SSA ($R^2=0.270$). Therefore, the results showed that both INF and PEX explained 40.3% of the SPSQ and SPSQ dimensions explained 27.0% of SSA. Based on the findings, all the variables were considered to have moderate levels of explanatory power. The direct hypotheses H1 and H3 were significant. The INF ($\beta=0.573$, $p<0.001$) was positively influence the SPSQ. Thus, H1 was supported. While the dimensions of SPSQ ($\beta=0.520$, $p<0.001$) were positively influence the SSA. Therefore, H3 was supported by data. However, the PEX ($\beta=0.100$, $p<0.05$) was not positively influence the SPSQ. Hence, H2 was not supported.

Table 3 Results for hypotheses testing

H	Path	Beta	Standard Deviation	t-Statistics	Result	R^2
1	INF->SPSQ	0.573	0.048	12.006**	Yes	0.403
2	PEX->SPSQ	0.100	0.054	1.857	No	
3	SPSQ->SSA	0.520	0.045	11.657**	Yes	0.270

Note. $p<0.001$ **; $p<0.05$ *; INF=Reliable Information; PEX=Past Experience; SSA=Student Satisfaction; SPSQ=Student Perceived Service Quality

5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

The reliable information was significantly influenced the perceived service quality of the undergraduate students in the private universities. It also reflected that the facet of information is a significant antecedent to the student perceived service quality. The finding was consistent with Sultan and Wong (2014) study that information has implied promises that influence quality assessment of the student either during or after service transaction. They suggested that an adequate and trustworthy information structure were important for the students. While Austin and Pervaiz (2017) purported the senior students who shared their testimonials or presentation sessions to the potential candidates serves a very powerful marketing strategy in promoting their university. Thus, the result was obviously in accordance with the past literatures of Premkumar and Bhattacharjee (2008), and Gounaris, Stathakopoulos, and Athanassopoulos (2003).

Past experience was reported to have an insignificant relationship with student perceived service quality. The finding of this research was contradicted with the findings of Sultan and Wong (2014), in which the past experience will influence the quality evaluation by the students. However, the finding was consistent with the Ghobehei, Sadeghvaziri, Ebrahimi, and Bakeshloo (2019) study that the information was found not significant with perceived service quality among the students of Kharazmi University, Iran. They discovered the students may have less previous university experiences apart from high schools. Besides, the students may also have less opportunity to contact with university staff. In the higher education context, it is implied that the component of past experience was not a significant antecedent to the student perceived service quality. Based on observation, the secondary students may have limited opportunity or no experience of interactions with staff and students from the private universities in Malaysia. Besides, it is lack of programmes or activities organised by the private universities to the secondary students. Therefore, the potential students are unable to relate their experience with the evaluation of perception of service quality on their potential private university in the future.

The student perceived service quality was reported to be significantly influenced the student satisfaction in this research. Gregory (2019) supported the perceptions of service quality improved both student satisfaction and programme image. Low (2000) believed that the satisfied students were those who were more likely to fully accomplish their academic purposes and became more loyal to the university. These loyal graduates may be able to provide support to their juniors in the same university. In the higher education context, the past studies of Alves and Raposo (2007) and Brown and Mazzarol (2009) have agreed the satisfaction was significantly affected the service quality through perceived value both directly and indirectly. As proven by this research that the student perceived service quality performed as an antecedent towards student satisfaction, this was in line with the conclusion of most past research studies.

Theoretical Implications

The research has contributed to the body of knowledge in the antecedents and consequence of perceived service quality. This research has proven the causal relationship of antecedents and consequence on the student perceived service quality towards the private universities as developed based on the underlying theory of the integrated-process model. The research focused on the antecedent components of reliable information and past experience that have received a very less attention in the private higher education, particularly in Malaysia. Based on this standpoint, this research has made contribution towards the developing of empirical investigation on the subject matter. In the management perspective, the constructs and dimensions derived out of this research contributed to a better understanding of the management team of university on the service quality role that has given a significant input to student satisfaction which will shape the future direction of the private higher education services in Malaysia.

Managerial Implications

This research has found the reliable information performed as a base of developing quality standards perception of the undergraduate students at the private universities in Malaysia. The management team of university should educate and increase knowledge of quality services for their potential student through an effective communication channel. The sufficient, up-to-date, and reliable information can be shared through the official university website, social media channels, printed university brochure/prospectus, advertisement, and

other effective channels. However, past experience was observed to have no significant influence on the student perceived service quality. This may be attributable to the potential students have a very limited experience to interact with staff and students from the private universities that could improve their cognitive judgement before enrolling to any of the private universities. Therefore, it is recommended the private universities should collaborate and build a long-term relationship with the potential students from secondary or high school. The private universities can organize open day, secondary or high school visit, career talk, and interactive activities to improve their visibility and word-of-mouth publicity towards their future potential students (Sultan & Wong, 2014). Furthermore, this research provides a significant insight that the student perceived service quality is a main antecedent to satisfaction. The management team of private university must provide high-quality services to their students. In addition, this research findings are believed to be helpful for the Ministry of Higher Education in improving the quality curriculum framework and serving as the reference point for the university rating standards.

Limitations, Future Research and Conclusion

Firstly, the data was collected from the private universities only. Future study can consider a more vigorous investigation on the relationships among the variables between private and public universities. Secondly, the current data relied on a set of self-administered questionnaires collected through the cross-sectional approach. It is recommended future researchers can consider longitudinal study that can compare the data for the variables prior and post of the service experience within their duration of study. Lastly, future research can study the impact of Covid-19 and online teaching and learning on the student satisfaction. The Pandemic has shifted the landscape of higher education by pushing forward the transformation of physical to online education in Malaysia.

In general, this research presented the relationship of antecedents and consequence of perceived service quality through the empirical evidence. The reliable information is a main antecedent with direct and significant effect on student perceived service quality. However, the influence of past experience is very limited toward the perception of student on the evaluation of service quality. The results revealed that student perceived service quality significantly influence student satisfaction. The increase of student satisfaction may possibly enhance the competitiveness of a university in the higher education marketplace in Malaysia.

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