

Analysis of Service Quality Dimensions: Towards a Student Satisfaction Model in the “New Normal”

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ABSTRACT

The recent pandemic compelled universities and colleges worldwide to provide services different from usual. This change and the increasing competitive intensities demand higher performance levels globally in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). To achieve the desired performance levels, universities and colleges must identify well-performing areas and areas needing improvement. One way to identify these areas is by surveying students' satisfaction. Many studies have been conducted on student satisfaction in public and private universities worldwide. However, students' satisfaction with the “new normal” has not been fully explored. This study conceptualizes student satisfaction by developing a framework that integrates the service quality dimensions in the “new normal.” Results, conclusions, and recommendations are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The recent Covid-19 pandemic compelled universities and colleges worldwide to provide services different from the normal. In normal times, interactions are done in the classrooms wherein professors and students can discuss the lessons face-to-face. However, classes and other communications are being managed online during the pandemic. According to Shahzad et al. (2020), due to the Covid-19 pandemic, approximately 120 countries have stopped face-to-face learning, and many higher educational institutions (HEIs) are operating through e-learning portals. E-learning or instruction delivered via a computer (Alshehri, 2017) is categorized into fully online, blended, or web-assisted. During the pandemic, most universities delivered classes through online platforms (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet, WebEx, etc.) (Demir et al., 2020).

The changes in nature and need for higher education services due to the Covid-19 pandemic and increased competitive intensities necessitate higher performance levels globally in HEIs. To achieve the desired performance levels, universities and colleges must identify well-performing areas and areas needing improvement. One way to identify these areas is by surveying students' satisfaction. Student satisfaction has been regarded as a measure of the overall experience in higher education (Al-Otaibi et al., 2020). Student satisfaction is most critical, specifically during these times, since students, parents, and other stakeholders monitor the implementation of the "*new normal*" in education. Satisfaction with education also indicates the educational system's success (Weerasinghe & Fernando, 2018).

Ensuring students' satisfaction with university or college is a must. One critical factor in satisfying students is the provision of high-quality services. Service quality is imperative for HEIs to remain competitive and grow (Al-Otaibi et al., 2020). As the world struggles with the Covid-19 pandemic, online learning platforms have grown exponentially. Higher education changed to digital learning, which is believed to be more practical and safer. Digital learning has got a boost as social distancing becomes a norm. The transformations mentioned above in higher education services due to the pandemic can cause modifications in how service quality is viewed in the "*new normal*."

Service quality is deemed unique (Shafiq et al., 2018). Since the challenges for higher education have increased, service quality can be a deciding factor. Only those HEIs that can cater to the diverse needs of students can survive. Service quality dimensions in the "*new normal*" context may differ from normal times since higher education services are primarily delivered via online portals during the pandemic. Many studies have been conducted on student satisfaction in public and private universities worldwide (e.g., Al-Otaibi et al., 2020; Moslehpour et al., 2020; Salles et al., 2020). However, students' satisfaction with the "*new normal*" has not been fully explored. This study contributes to the gap above in the student satisfaction literature by presenting a conceptualization of student engagement. The study develops a framework that integrates the service quality dimensions during the "*new normal*."

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Curriculum and Service Quality

The curriculum is fundamental to students' success as it permeates their learning experiences (Ambler et al., 2021). Many studies have linked the different aspects of curriculum design with student satisfaction. Course design, in particular, influences student satisfaction (Nortvig et al., 2018). Course and instructional effectiveness also affect student satisfaction with their educational experiences (Al-Sheeb et al., 2018). The quality of the degree programs or a well-established and flexible curriculum also impacts student satisfaction (Weerasinghe & Fernando, 2018). While previous studies emphasized the strong impact of curriculum on student satisfaction, earlier studies also connect curriculum to service quality. For instance, according to Osman and Saputra (2019), the curriculum was an aspect or essential quality dimension of program quality. The curriculum was also considered a prerequisite for quality education. According to Vijaya and Jiju (2018), poor curriculum design could lead to quality failure. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H1+a: *Curriculum significantly affects service quality.*

Skills Development and Service Quality

Previous studies, like that of Poon (2019), disclosed that skill development is one of the significant factors in building student satisfaction. Hence, most HEIs' goal is to produce graduates with high competencies. Skills beyond discipline knowledge and technical skills necessary and relevant to workplaces are communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, etc. Some scholars labeled these skills as employability, professional, graduate outcomes, or transferable skills (see Cotronei-Baird, 2019; Cotronei-Baird, 2020). In the career management literature, scholars agreed that career management skills are essential in finding suitable employment and further educational opportunities. However, career development is becoming more of an individual's responsibility than the university (see Bordean & Sonea, 2018). To enhance their skills, the students must exert much effort in self-exploration (i.e., exploring their values and experiences to enable them to identify an appropriate career). To help students with their future careers, it is therefore vital that universities provide quality services that would enhance students' skills and competencies. Part of the university's services should be assisting the students with self-explorations by providing appropriate avenues. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H1+b: *Skills development significantly affects service quality.*

Services and Facilities and Service Quality

The students evaluate the quality of services of higher education institutions in terms of many aspects (e.g., educational services, physical aspects, academic services, administrative services, etc.) (Camilleri, 2021). Learning facilities are needed to achieve educational goals (Absah et al., 2021). Before the pandemic, most higher education services require person-to-person interaction. Hence, the students' perceptions of service quality were based mainly on how employees provided the services. The students' satisfaction is also based on how

services are provided (Camilleri, 2021). According to Abdulmajeed et al. (2021), during the pandemic, the school's electronic educational facilities (e.g., electronic educational tools and e-library services) bring high-quality education equivalent. These services and facilities provided by the university affect the students' learning; hence, they may also affect the quality of services. In the study of Yudiawan et al. (2021), relevant institutional services during standard times became irrelevant during the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead, the system's infrastructure (i.e., internet network infrastructure) has been deemed most significant in the success of the learning process. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H1+c: *Services and facilities significantly affect service quality.*

E-Service Quality and Service Quality

E-Service quality is considered a critical factor in e-commerce success as it is unique. It is defined as "an ability of electronic services to satisfy the needs of customers effectively and efficiently" (see Shankar & Datta, 2020, p.79). This definition is based on the concept that e-service quality differs from service quality perception. E-Service quality is the range to which a website facilitates different transactions (Demir et al., 2020). In higher education, e-Services include website design, privacy, information quality, etc. (Demir et al., 2020). According to Simbolin and Yanti (2021), the e-Service quality of online higher education mirrors the perceptions of the quality of online exchanges in different dimensions (i.e., fulfillment, agreement, information, and post-sales services. In higher education, the emergence of internet-based lecture services during the Covid-19 pandemic has changed how lecturers and students interact. As a result, their level of service is measured in a different way than before. The newest version of Service Quality is electronic service quality or e-Service quality. Electronic service quality (e-service quality) is an interactive information service. The quality of e-Service is a company's competitive advantage. Electronic service quality (e-Service quality) expands its distribution capabilities, simplifies shopping activities, and makes purchases effectively and efficiently. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H1+d: *e-Service affects service quality.*

e-Service Quality and Student Satisfaction

E-satisfaction and satisfaction are not different in general. E-Satisfaction occurs when a product or service exceeds consumer expectations. It is represented as customer satisfaction from previous purchases with certain electronic services (Jameel et al., 2020). In business, e-satisfaction is customer satisfaction with online shopping (Pham et al., 2019). Electronic satisfaction is customer satisfaction that comes from previous real purchasing experiences. Customer satisfaction is measured by the level of customer satisfaction with products or services provided by online retailers (Pham et al., 2019). The performance of websites and products provided by websites are indicators of online customer satisfaction. E-Service quality will drive e-satisfaction (Demir et al., 2020; Jameel et al., 2020; Pham et al., 2019). E-service quality is a significant antecedent of evaluating the value of online shoppers, which affects e-

satisfaction. E-service quality dimensions can be used to predict online consumer satisfaction. E-service quality is closely related to online customer satisfaction, and many studies have shown a strong positive relationship between e-service quality and e-satisfaction (e.g., Demir et al., 2020; Jameel et al., 2020; Pham et al., 2019). In online learning, e-service quality determines the e-satisfaction of students (Demir et al., 2020). Therefore, it is hypothesized that
H2+: e-Service Quality affects student satisfaction.

Service Quality and Student Satisfaction

The relationship between service quality and student satisfaction has been long investigated (Bawais et al., 2020). The findings are consistent; there is a direct and substantial relationship between service quality and student satisfaction (see Afan Suyanto et al., 2019; Al-Otaibi et al., 2020; Pedro et al., 2018; Bawais et al., 2020; Moslehpour et al., 2020; Oslan & Saputra, 2019). Service quality is an antecedent of students' satisfaction in higher education (Oslan & Saputra, 2019; Santos et al., 2020). It portrays a significant role in building student satisfaction. Increasing the service quality can increase student satisfaction (Afan Suyanto et al., 2019). Various authors agreed that service quality is positively related to student satisfaction (e.g., Afan Suyanto et al., 2019; Al-Otaibi et al., 2020; Oslan & Saputra, 2019). Service quality is essential to customer satisfaction in traditional and online environments. Service quality is the most critical purchase decision factor influencing customers' buying decisions. Students' satisfaction will increase with better service quality in the educational setting (Afan Suyanto et al., 2019). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H3+: Student satisfaction is significantly affected by service quality.

METHODOLOGY

Following previous studies' procedure in building conceptual framework (e.g., Paulino & Castano, 2019; Paulino & Amora, 2019; Yngson & Paulino, 2023), the current study also anchored its theoretical underpinnings from the literature review. First, the relevant literature was identified from searches in prominent e-databases such as Google Scholar, Web of Science, Taylor and Francis Online, etc., using keywords such as 'service quality' and 'student satisfaction.' The search was confined to articles published in English from 2017 to the present. Then, another review was performed to eliminate similar and inappropriate papers. Then, a reflective analysis was performed to extract the relevant theories from the articles. The service quality dimensions applicable to the "new normal" were also identified. Finally, a conceptual model was developed to integrate the pre-identified and selected service quality dimensions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study is primarily based on previous findings that document the links between service quality and student satisfaction. Most recent studies on service quality confirmed earlier theories that not all specific service quality aspects significantly affect overall service quality. Accordingly, not all service quality dimensions have the same effects on overall service quality. Osman and Saputra

(2019), for instance, claimed that the results of the process (i.e., outcomes such as service quality) were not restricted to specific factors or a particular situation. Given the circumstances mentioned earlier, this current study investigated the specific dimensions of service quality that affect the overall service quality, contributing to student satisfaction in higher education in the “*new normal*.” The results show that during the pandemic, the quality of university services and student satisfaction was primarily influenced by factors related to course offerings, subject contents, facilities, technology, and electronic services. Based on the results, this study built a conceptual framework for student satisfaction in higher education that integrates service quality dimensions in the “*new normal*” (see *Figure 1*). The framework conceptualizes that student satisfaction is influenced by service quality and its dimensions in the “*new normal*.” Curriculum, skills development, and services and facilities will affect student satisfaction through overall service quality. Meanwhile, e-Service quality will, directly and indirectly, affect student satisfaction.

The proposed model is primarily drawn from the UnivQual model of Marimon et al. (2017) and the *e-Service quality* model of Kaur et al. (2020). The UnivQUAL is based on students’ experiences and the impacts of service quality dimensions on student satisfaction. The model depicts that curriculum, services and facilities, and skills development are important antecedents of service quality affecting student satisfaction. The ‘*e-Service quality*’ model of Kaur et al. (2020), on the other hand, shows dimensions that address the gap between customer expectations and perceived quality that affect customer satisfaction. ‘*e-Service quality*’ is included in the framework since Marimon et al. (2017) did not account for this dimension in the development of ‘*UnivQual*.’ Some scholars and experts have already found an association between e-Service quality, overall service quality, and student satisfaction.

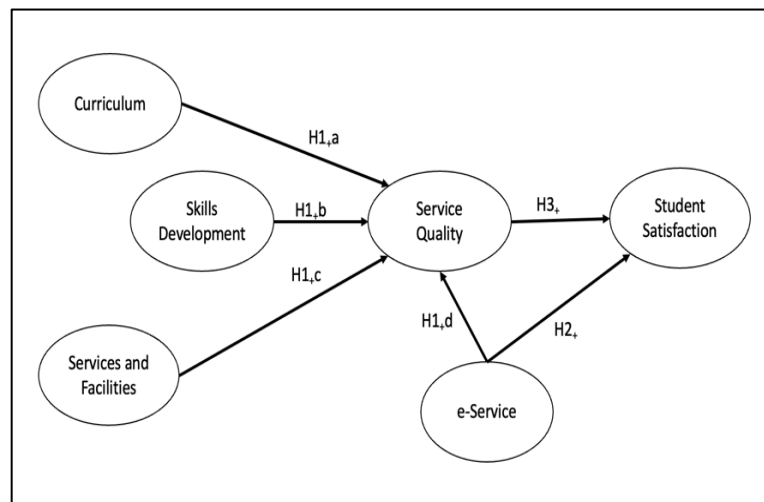


Figure 1. The Proposed Student Satisfaction Model

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Service quality and student satisfaction are vital elements of the service industry. Service quality is critical in the academe as it affects students’ learning

experiences and overall satisfaction. Most HEIs should therefore capitalize on service quality to gain a competitive advantage. Universities and colleges should do their best to meet or surpass students' service quality standards. Since students are deemed critical customers of HEIs, universities must provide superior services to this market segment. However, there has yet to be a universal agreement on how best to manage quality within higher education. The students' service experiences are complex and different from consumers' experiences in other service firms. Therefore, a continuous survey on student satisfaction is recommended. Research on customer satisfaction is often closely associated with service quality measurement.

The findings remain consistent despite lengthy investigations on the nexus between service quality and student satisfaction. There is a direct and substantial relationship between service quality and student satisfaction. Service quality is an essential antecedent of students' satisfaction in higher education. Service quality remains an essential input to customer satisfaction in a traditional environment and even in the online environment. Since service quality plays a significant role in building student satisfaction, increasing service quality means increasing student satisfaction. If the service quality improves, the students' satisfaction will also improve. In order to attain true customer satisfaction, schools need to achieve quality by eliminating the causes of direct complaints and providing their products with excellent, attractive quality to delight the student market.

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