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Contextual factors that influence learning effectiveness: Hospitality students' perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The need for ensuring the quality of e-learning in higher education has been growing with the rapid development and increasing popularity of e-learning. While several researchers have focused on the comparison of the effectiveness of e-learning with that of face-to-face learning, few empirical studies have been conducted on students' learning along with student satisfaction which is one of good measures of learning effectiveness. Focusing on Hospitality area, this study, investigates the relationship between the perceived quality of online learning course and student outcome as well as student satisfaction. Students of four year public research universities offering online hospitality courses will be invited for this study. The findings will help not only understand students' needs but also enhance online instructional practices and learning environments in hospitality programs.

Key words: perception, student satisfaction, student learning, effectiveness, outcome.

INTRODUCTION

The literature on marketing, especially on customer relations, has shown that customer retention and their perceived quality have a stable positive link (Reichheld, 1996). This suggests that customers' memories of quality and satisfaction live on beyond the current period to impact customer retention levels in the future. Customer retention provides repeat purchase patronage as the foundation of superior competitive edges. In the context of online learning, students' perceived service quality and satisfaction are likely to lead to word of mouth, which in turn affects the image or reputation of an institution. According to Arora & Stoner (1996), in services including education services, name familiarity, word-of-mouth, and reputation of the service institution interact with one another. Thus, enhancing students' learning experiences and having the knowledge of the level of their satisfaction become an important tool in terms not only of accomplishing the mission of the higher education institution, but also of establishing an efficient institutional marketing effect. Nevertheless, while a number of studies have discussed the online learning and several researchers have compared the effectiveness of online learning with that of traditional learning, few empirical studies have been conducted on students' perception of and satisfaction with online learning within the hospitality management education community. The purpose of the study is to examine the impact of each quality dimension of online courses on student's satisfaction, which in turn, affects student retention. In doing so, students' perception in hospitality program will be compared with the perception of those from other disciplines.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have illuminated the dimensions of students' perceived service quality (PSQ) of online learning, which exercises great effect on students' satisfaction. Young & Norgard (2006) found that timely interaction between students and professors, consistent course design, technical support, and flexibility were important aspects in online learning quality. Martinez (2006), on the other hand, categorized the dimensions into: (1) essential services, comprising teaching-related indicators (knowledge, experience, teaching capacity of the lecturer; the feedback; the speed and efficacy in solving doubts related to the teaching), (2) support services (administration services), (3) complementary services (labor pool, virtual spaces for student interaction such as forums and discussion groups), (4) user interface (navigation speed, uploading and downloading of pages, and connections with the virtual campus) (Castán & Martínez, 2006). Chen (n.d.), analyzing student evaluation surveys, found course materials, student services, and instructor's traits to be better predictors of satisfaction than library or resources. Roca, Chiu, and Martinez (2006) divided e-learning qualities into three categories: information quality, system quality, and service quality, and confirmed that the information

quality had the greatest effect on users' satisfaction. Slim (2007) proposed four e-learning critical success factors. They were instructor characteristics, student characteristics, technology, and support. Gil (2008) categorized the critical incidents affecting e-learning satisfaction into four areas: administration, functionality, instruction, and interaction. Of these, interaction and instruction were found to be the most important factors.

RESEARCH MODEL

The theoretical underpinnings of the model are based on the literature in the areas of e-learning, marketing, and Information system use. The theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Ajzen, 1991), technology acceptance model (TAM) (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989) and expectation disconfirmation theory (EDT) (Spreng, MacKenzie, & Olshavsky, 1996). will support the causal links among constructs of the perception of e-learning, satisfaction, and student retention. According to TRA, attitudes predict behavioral intentions, which in turn predict actual behaviors. In this study, it is hypothesized that perceived service quality towards an online course influences student satisfaction (dissatisfaction), and that the level of students' satisfaction with the online course influences their retention intention.

The uniqueness of the model in this study stems from applying dimensions of WebQual 4.0 (Barnes & Vidgen, 2002), which has been used to measure website quality in e-commerce, to measuring PSQ of an online hospitality course. E-learning is a technology-enhanced learning in the sense that it utilizes learning management system. For this reason, researchers have frequently adopted TAM in their studies to explain or predict online learner's adoption behaviors. In the same vein, since e-learning also falls into the category of information system, researchers have conceptualized PSQ of online learning not only in the dimension of learning/teaching environments but also in the dimension relating to information system. The study of Roca, Chiu, & Martinez (2006) is a typical example. Applying some of the components of the IS success model to conceptualizing e-learning system (service) quality, the researchers proposed an empirically proven model measuring e-learning system (service) quality. In a similar line, perceived service quality (PSQ) of an online course in this study reflects three quality dimensions of WebQual 4.0: informational quality, usability, and service interaction. In addition, given the nature of e-learning as an education tool, 'instructor interaction' is also included as a dimension of PSQ.

Measures

The four constructs measuring perceived service quality (PSQ) will be adapted from WebQual 4.0, and from education literature. Dependent variables such as overall satisfaction, student learning, and retention intentions will be drawn from the scales developed by Young

and Norgard (2006). All items will be measured on a seven point Likert scale, ranging from 1 being “strongly disagree” to 7 being “strongly agree.”

SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

Web-based survey will be administered to gather data from students at a mid-western university during the year of 2010. The survey will instruct students to provide feedback about their experiences with the online learning course. The survey will target all students at the Colleges of Human Science, and this study will assume collecting a minimum of 220 responses. According to Hoelter (1983), the critical sample size is 200, and Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black (1998) recommends the ratio of 10 cases per parameter. The registrar’s office of the target university will be contacted to obtain data on students. Complete student lists which include the hospitality program as well as other programs will be obtained in order to measure perceptions of students from the hospitality program compared to those of students from other disciplines.

Analysis: This study will be conducted using SPSS13.0 and AMOS 5.0 as the analysis tool. Maximum likelihood estimates (MLE) of the measurement and structural models will be made using AMOS. Goodness of fit will be measured by the likelihood ratio chi-square, RMR, GFI, AGFI, RMSEA, NFI, TLI and CFI (Kline, 2004).

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