Students' Satisfaction and Loyalty to Tourism Programs

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Abstract— Expansion of the tourism industry has brought benefits to tourism professions and also the development of more tourism degree programs. In a tourism-dependent country like Thailand, universities are actively promoting their tourism degree programs in the education market, where the competition arises among private universities. The question raised in this paper is how education institutions stay competitive when the products offered are similar? This paper then proposes service differentiation through the conventional concept called a service quality. This study's objectives are to assess the relationship between students' satisfaction (in service quality) and their loyalty to tourism programs (fields of study). Through a quantitative approach, respondents of this research are 280 undergraduate students in tourism-related majors. The result indicates that students' satisfaction in 'empathy' and 'responsiveness' significantly influences students' loyalty to tourism degree programs.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, Thailand's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) experienced rapid growth, which also gave rise to the establishment of more universities and colleges, including private universities [1]. Furthermore, tourism degree programs have been gaining more popularity worldwide in line with global tourism development and expansion [2]. Correspondingly, HEIs, both public and private institutions, have created more tourism-related degrees. Predominantly among the private ones, each university is proactively launching various tourism-related programs to attract potential students. Marketing campaigns to attract new students are certainly intense. While the competition is high, the challenge becomes worse with education disruption disseminated in various altering news. Universities in Thailand today are facing an immense challenge from a consequential reduction of students' enrollment due to demographic shift towards aging society [3]. Thailand now holds a large proportion of the elderly while facing a fall of the working-age population [4], [5]. Likewise, the number of college-age populations have decreased, marking a sharp reduction of college students' enrollment in Thai higher education since 2015 [6]. Demographers have also projected that the figures for college students will continue to decrease through 2040 [6]. Apart from the declining enrollment, an establishment of foreign universities in Thailand (with the Thai government's support) will critically endanger the survival of Thai universities [7]. One of the leading

international newspapers in Thailand, Bangkok Post, reports that 75% of Thai universities are likely to close down [7]. Most universities are considering downsizing or closing some programs to stay financially healthy [3]. Compared to public universities, private universities are unquestionably at a greater risk. In Thailand specifically, private institutions are always perceived as an alternative to public universities and do not receive any financial assistance from the Thai government. Among private universities themselves, it is uneasy to for any individual institute to stand competitive in the intense competitive (education) market while the market's rule is to take in as many (students) as possible. Private universities must maintain their status quo, not only in attracting new students but also retaining existing students.

With regards to tourism degree programs, most private universities also present similar Marketing Mix Strategy, which includes Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. In terms of product, each university offers similar degree programs and continue to create a new or rebranded program that sounds appealing to the young population. Examples are Event Management major by University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, Innovative Hospitality Management by Dhurakij Pundit University, Hospitality Management for Cruise Lines Business by Sripathum University, etc. For pricing, the tuition and fee charged by different private universities are not much different as they are keeping the price war at stake. In terms of place, most universities have modern and appealing facilities and infrastructure, such as mockup hotels and airplanes. For the promotion factor, each university is actively advertising its degree programs via offline and online channels. It can be said that private universities always proactively seize the opportunity to compete with each other, for example, by inviting young celebrities and social-media idols (in the Thai public known as net idols) to join their programs. To retain existing students, many universities offer special promotions to their graduates, for example, the discount rate for alumni or the 4+1

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program for senior (4th year) students who can continue one more year instead of two, to complete their master's degree. These approaches seem to be effective, however with similar strategies used across private universities, how each university can differentiate itself and stand out in the market? In this vein, HEIs perhaps can learn from other industries such as the tourism and hospitality.

Increasing competition in the tourism and hospitality industry has challenged businesses and marketers to find potential customers or retain existing ones. This thus influences the paradigm shift in marketing from product-oriented to service differentiation. Through this strategy, each business differentiates itself from other competitors by using service as a core feature to deliver satisfactory experiences and fulfill customer's demands [8]. Scholars postulate that good service can secure existing customers to stay with the same brand and also create positive Word-of-Mouth (WOM) about the brand to their peers and circle of friends who will potentially become new customers to the brand [8]. This phenomenon refers to loyalty marketing. Researchers also asserted that loyal customers are more likely to convey positive messages about their experiences compared to the non-loyal one [9], [10].

For the hospitality and other service industry, loyalty marketing has been well recognized as an ideal strategy to create a competitive advantage to businesses. With hyper-competitive and overpopulated markets, business operators start to realize the potential benefits from customer loyalty [8]. Many industries who are service providers have then shifted their marketing strategies from acquiring new customers to retaining the existing (loyal) ones [9]. For example, most airlines have launched frequent flyers and loyalty programs to protect market share and steal high-value customers from their competitors [9].

Numerous studies, both in the business and hospitality realm, have highlighted the importance and value of customer loyalty. It is recognized that customer retention would save a business's marketing cost six times lesser than acquiring new customers [10]. Hence, "retaining current passengers is more viable and profitable than searching for new customers" (p. 465) [10]. Another interesting research also discovers that a 5% increase in customer retention brings a 125% increase in profits [11]. Many studies therefore conclude that enhancing customer loyalty would lessen customer acquisition costs, save a substantial cost of advertising, and increase profit to the business entity [8], [9], [10].

From the discussed example, HEIs also can integrate and apply loyalty marketing strategy to an educational setting. First, however, education providers must change the mindset and views, in particular, to start viewing education as another service industry where universities are indeed service providers, and students are considered as customers [12], [13]. Moreover, researchers postulate that neglecting service quality in educational institutions may jeopardize the organization's competitiveness [14]. In this vein, HEIs need to gain a better understanding of the intertwined relationship among service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty, in order to execute effective marketing efforts. If increased satisfaction influences

loyalty (as shown in several studies), HEIs could then create interventions to reinforce students' loyalty to their studied programs. Based on this principle, this current study hypothesizes that students' satisfaction (in service provided by their programs) will influence students' loyalty to their respective programs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the hospitality and service industry, service is a core foundation for business operators. Consequently, it is common to see extensive uses of the service quality concept in this field. Business often evaluates service quality to improve their service and thus enhance customer satisfaction. Service quality has been accentuated in the hospitality field as an approach to enhance customers' satisfaction [9]. Various scholars have introduced the concept, yet the one commonly known worldwide is by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, who propose *Service Quality* in 1985 [15]. During its first introduction, service quality included ten different dimensions. However, the concept was revised again in 1988, when the authors narrowed down service quality into five dimensions, including Reliability, Responsiveness, Empathy, Assurance, and Tangibles. This concept becomes universally known today as the SERVQUAL model [16]. Based on their work in 1988, the idea is further evolved into the RATER framework published in their book, Delivering Quality Service in 1990. This framework is more accessible to remember as the term "RATER" is derived from the acronym of the model's constituent dimensions: Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy, and Responsiveness. Definition of each terminology follows. Reliability is the ability to provide the promised service. Assurance is the ability to inspire customers' trust and confidence. Tangibles are the visible or physical images of the service. Empathy denotes caring or individualized services to customers. Responsiveness refers to a prompt service in a timely manner. Research has noted that enhancing these five dimensions of service quality can heighten customer satisfaction [17]. It is also argued that the word "quality" can be used interchangeably with "satisfaction," and perceived service quality is a constituent of customer satisfaction [18]. After experiencing the service, the appraisal process or state of customers' affective response is satisfaction [19]. In other words, satisfaction occurs when customers reach their expectations [9].

Furthermore, customer satisfaction influences loyalty [8], [23]. It is noted that factors that influence customer loyalty are broadly categorized into two sets: internal and external [8]. Internal factors are derived directly from the brand or organization, i.e., product, promotion, service quality. However, external factors signify how customers recognize the brand, i.e., satisfaction, perceived value, trust. Hence, both service quality and satisfaction are cited here as the antecedent of customers' loyalty [8],

Some studies reveal service quality as a critical factor contributing to customers' loyalty [8], while others suggest satisfaction as a determinant of customer loyalty [23], [24], [25]. Across these studies, loyalty can be defined by various facets. It includes behaviors (revisit

and repurchasing) and a favorable attitude (emotional commitment) towards service providers [10], [26]. To fully comprehend customer loyalty, it is most important to acknowledge that loyalty is a complex construct with multi-dimensions urged by various authors. Frequently cited however, customer loyalty is a two-dimensional framework: affective and behavioral loyalty [10]. Affective loyalty (attitudinal approach) is a psychological or emotional attachment causing the cognitive process which influences consumers' behaviors towards the service provider, for example, when customers enjoy their stay and possess a sense of belonging to the service source [10]. On the contrary, behavioral loyalty is a behavioral commitment to the service provider, which can express through repurchasing and Word of Mouth (WOM) [10].

In other studies, customer loyalty is perceived as a three-dimensional construct which includes attitudinal, behavioral, and composite [23], [27]. In some instances, loyalty is measured through three indicators: retention, advocacy, and (re) purchasing [28]. First, retention occurs when customers are likely and willing to remain using the same product or service in the future. Second, advocacy denotes to actions when customers recommend the product and service to others. It means customers have confidence in the value of that specific brand or company. Third, repurchasing means that customers are intended to continue, increase, or make additional purchases of products which can be the same products or other products of that brand or company.

Apart from business-oriented studies that explore the interlink among service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty, there are also some research that addresses HEIs. These studies have measured service quality and/or satisfaction and also redefined five dimensions of service quality to suit the context of higher education institutions, see [14], [20], [21]. [22]. Accordingly, this research includes satisfaction (in service quality) and loyalty construct as variables in the study with its scope in education setting. Precisely, the research hypothesizes that students' satisfaction in service quality influences their loyalty to their degree programs. Apart from the practical benefits, this research has also emerged from a theoretical rationale to fill in the academic gap. As noted, there is "relatively little formal research undertaken which focuses on the drivers of customer satisfaction amongst tertiary students" (p. 81), and "a study of the factors which drive customer satisfaction and student loyalty would seem to have value" (p. 82) [29].

3. METHODOLOGY

The population in this study is undergraduate students in the School of Tourism and Services, University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce (UTCC). Within the school, there are five following departments: Tourism, Tourism Management, Hotel Management, Event Management, and Airline Business Management. This study, however, includes students only from the two following majors: Tourism Management and Hotel Management. These two programs (will be collectively referred from now in this study as HT programs) are selected due to their joint

management and structure. First, both programs grant a degree in business administration, or B.B.A. Second, both are being managed under the same regulations and administrators. Third, HT programs offer standard courses that are taught by the same group of faculty members.

Based on 2018 data from the UTCC registration system, there are 382 hotel students and 113 tourism students. Hence, the population of this study is 495 students. Based on Krejcie and Morgan (1987) [30], the sample size in this study is 280, comprising of 192 hotel students and 88 tourism students, respectively. Quota sampling (Table 1) is used to acquire a sample size that represents students from all classification (year). As shown in the table, column H exhibits numbers of hotel students, while column T displays numbers of tourism students from each classification. Convenient sampling is employed to approach respondents until reaching the total sample size.

Table 1. Quota Sampling

Class	H	Sample	T	Sample
Year 1	94	47	25	19
Year 2	97	49	27	21
Year 3	100	50	29	23
Year 4	91	46	32	25
Total	382	192	113	88

This study's design is quantitative research in which research objectives are assessed through primary data collection, precisely the use of questionnaires. Question items related to satisfaction in service quality are from a scholar [14], who adapts indicators from Hasan, Ilias, Rahman, and Razak (2008) [21]. All question items are direct to services provided by the HT programs at UTCC and evaluated in five dimensions. First, reliability refers to the accuracy of the HT' programs' promised service. Second, assurance concerns with the HT program's credit and reputation. Third, the tangibles dimension is the HT departments' physical appearance. Forth, empathy denotes caring services from the HT programs. Lastly, responsiveness means the HT programs' prompt response to students. To evaluate students' loyalty, this study incorporates affective and behavioral commitment [10]. Data analysis is first by descriptive statistics, which is to assess students' satisfaction independently from loyalty. Subsequently, the relationship between students' satisfaction and their loyalty to HT programs is analyzed through Multiple Regression.

4. RESULT

This research result is derived from 280 respondents who are university students with the age range of 17-23 years old. As previously displayed in Table 1, students of all classification are included in the study. The detailed result on students' satisfaction on a different dimension of service quality is shown in Table 2. When considering

across dimensions, the ranking from the most satisfied to the least is 1) tangibles (μ=4.33); 2) responsiveness (μ= 4.29); 3) reliability (μ=4.28); and 4) assurance (μ=4.13); which is rated equally to empathy (μ=4.13). When considering across all questions items, the top three services that students are most satisfied are 1) internet access and speed (μ= 4.44); 2) prompt responses to students (μ= 4.38); and 3) clean and green environment (μ= 4.34). In reverse, services that students are least satisfied with are 1) qualifications of lecturers (μ= 4.00), 2) degree recognition (μ= 4.06), and 3) attention to special requests, which is rated equally (μ= 4.11) as student-centered policy and practices.

Table 2. Students' Satisfaction

Satisfaction Dimension	Mean	SD
Reliability (μ= 4.28)		
Error-free registration system	4.30	.583
Students' accurate records	4.33	.649
Accuracy of bill	4.30	.631
Consistency of marketing	4.19	.676
Assurance (μ= 4.13)		
Safety standards of HT lab facilities	4.27	.690
Transparent rules and measures	4.20	.826
Qualifications of lecturers	4.00	.771
Degree recognition	4.06	.785
Tangibles (μ= 4.33)		
Modern infrastructure & facilities	4.30	.556
Internet access and speed	4.44	.583
Clean and green environment	4.34	.663
Professional images of faculty & staff	4.25	.679
Empathy (μ= 4.13)		
Attention to special request	4.11	.658
Faculty and staff's courteous service	4.16	.741
Fair and unbiased treatment	4.13	.738
Student-centered policy and practices	4.11	.770
Responsiveness (μ= 4.29)		
Active communication channels	4.26	.586
Prompt responses to students	4.38	.605
Students queries' management	4.30	.624
Timely correction of any issues	4.20	.699

In terms of loyalty, the construct's average is at 4.03. As shown in Table 3, items that are rated the highest (strongly agree) to the lowest (strongly disagree) are as follows: 1) I feel belonging in this department (μ= 4.13);

2) I post positive things about my major (μ= 4.09); 3) I enjoy studying this program here (μ= 4.00); 4) I recommend others to consider HT here (μ= 3.98); and 5) if to pursue my master's degree, HT at UTCC would be my first choice (μ= 3.94).

Table 3. Students' Loyalty to HT Programs

Question items	Mean	SD
I enjoy studying this program here.	4.00	.753
I feel belonging to this department.	4.13	.782
I post positive things about my major.	4.09	.842
If to pursue my master's degree, HT at UTCC would be my first choice.	3.94	.810
I recommend others to study HT here	3.98	.787

In assessing the influence of students' satisfaction (in service quality) on students' loyalty to HT programs, the result from multiple regression analysis (Table 4) reveals a significant relationship (p < .01) between students' satisfaction and their loyalty to HT programs. Precisely, 34.2 % (R^2= 0.342) of the total variance in students' loyalty is contributed by students' satisfaction. When looking across five dimensions, two factors that have a significant impact (p-value is below .01) on students' loyalty are satisfaction in empathy (sig. = 0.003) and satisfaction in responsiveness (sig = 0.000). Regarding the impact size, responsiveness is found to have a higher impact on loyalty (standardized coefficients B is 0.467) compared to empathy (standardized coefficients B is 0.169).

Table 4. Regression Analysis

Model	B	SE	ß	t	Sig.
Constant	.159	.377		.422	.674
X1	.057	.082	.050	.700	.485
X2	.049	.058	.055	.840	.402
X3.	.109	.078	.092	1.404	.162
X4	.159	.054	.169	2.957	.003
X5	.535	.062	.467	8.657	.000

R= .585

R^2= .342

Adjusted R^2 = .328

F value = 24.571

Sig. F = 0.000

Note: X1= Reliability, X2= Assurance, X3= Tangibles, X4= Empathy, and X5 = Responsiveness

5. DISCUSSION

There are existing studies proven a positive relationship

between service quality and satisfaction [14], [31], [32], [33], [34], [35]. [36], [37]. However, few studies have explored the relationship between students' satisfaction and their loyalty to the studied programs. These two interrelated variables are normally explored in marketing research, either in hospitality or business journals [8]. In other word, there are still a dearth of studies targeting educational setting. Amidst aome attempts to explore such a relationship in HEIs, the research shows a weak and indeterminate impact of perceived quality (question items are from service quality) on perceived value [29]. Rather, the research reports institutional image can a predictor of student's satisfaction, which in turn predicts student's loyalty [29].

This present research is diverged from other studies in the sense that students' satisfaction is evaluated directly by service quality, hence not being treated as a separate construct. Additionally, this research investigates the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty, while most studies typically explore the relationship between service quality and satisfaction, if not, among service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty. Therefore, it is quite a challenge to compare this study result simultaneously with another existing research. Nevertheless, some previous studies can still offer some values. As discussed in the result section, dimensions that are significantly associated with students' loyalty are responsiveness and empathy. These two factors are also proved to have a significant impact in previous studies. For example, empathy is shown to be the main contributing factor to students' satisfaction [14], [38], [39]. Similar to this present study, previous research, [14], preforms multiple regression analysis and reports empathy dimension as the most important factor in explaining students' satisfaction. Another study, [39], notes that empathy expressed from students' contact with their lecturers influences their satisfaction with college experience. Also, this current study reveals a significant impact of responsiveness on loyalty with a higher impact size than empathy dimension. Responsiveness is noted in the previous study [31], as having the second strongest relationship to students' satisfaction [31]. However, this present study reports responsiveness as the most crucial factor and this could be owing to respondents' profile. In this study, respondents are 17-23 years old or born from 1995- 2001. This group therefore can be categorized as Generation Z [40], who mostly concerns about speed and wish to receive an immediate response from the service provider [21]. Thus, it becomes justified to see this study reports that satisfaction in responsiveness is significantly associated with students' loyalty to HT programs. Apart from the result from a satisfaction-loyalty relationship, one interesting finding from the descriptive analysis of loyalty construct is that the lowest mean (among other question items) is: if to pursue my master's degree in HT, UTCC would be my first choice. This lowest rate could be resulted by the fact that UTCC students may prefer creating their own business or finding jobs, instead of pursuing a higher degree, after graduation. This is a popular trend among students especially in UTCC, where is recognized and widely known for its entrepreneurship culture. Besides, since UTCC has just offered a master's degree in HT programs, students may not be familiar with the program's reputation. If so, the research then offers practical implications for the HT administrators, discussed further in the next section.

6. CONCLUSION

This study is based on a premise that HEIs should be viewed as a marketplace where universities function as service providers, and students are customers [12], [13], [29]. This research has emerged from a rationale that within a competitive education market, universities must differentiate themselves in order to gain competitive advantages and stay vibrant in HEIs. This study therefore recommends university administrators to prioritize their management efforts on enhancing students' satisfaction in service quality. This research has applied the famous concept in the hospitality industry – Service Quality – to tourism education programs. Tourism degree programs cannot just provide knowledge and training on service, rather, the programs must be a living example on how to deliver services to customers, herein students.

By assessing students' satisfaction, tourism programs must improve on service that is least satisfied by students, i.e., degree recognition, attention to special request, student-first education policy, and qualifications of lecturers. For example, lecturers must communicate to students their qualified profile i.e. knowledge, skills, and experiences, etc. since the first class and continue to tie in their personal experiences throughout the course [21]. Also, a descriptive assessment of students' loyalty offers a gap of improvement; for example, universities could continue to advertise and promote a master's degree in HT programs among the public.

Furthermore, understanding the influencer of loyalty would allow HEIs administrators to alter their services that will enhance satisfaction. Universities' faculty and staff could gain a way forward in improving students' satisfaction and could, in turn, enhance their loyalty to tourism programs. While many factors influence loyalty, this present study strongly suggests satisfaction derived from service quality. Precisely, it concludes that the most contributing factor to students' loyalty to HT programs is satisfaction in responsiveness, followed by empathy. This research thus offers practical recommendations to HEIs, especially private universities. Based on the study results, university administrators should give a priority to enhancing '*responsiveness*' and '*empathy*'. Given our students being a Net Generation [21], management of degree programs should focus on delivering prompt responses to students. In addition, the empathy factor could be enhanced through faculty and staff's courteous service. The study reveals that students' satisfaction in these services can positively impact students' loyalty to their studied program, and thus worth for the university's investment of time and money. Nonetheless, this study has some limitations considering convenient sampling, whereby respondents are all from two majors in one private university. Future studies could aim to explore this topic with a more diverse population and perhaps a larger scope, for examples more universities (both public and private) to be included.

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