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Master student loyalty at the University of Szeged

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Abstract

Researchers have long studied the internationalization process of the higher education era. There has been extensive research conducted among foreign students to uncover their perceived service quality and satisfaction. However, there is a relatively low number of studies that deal with foreign student loyalty in -depth. Therefore, the aim of the current study is to reveal what loyalty means for foreign master's students at the University of Szeged. This exploratory study intends to reveal factors contributing to foreign student loyalty and therefore uses qualitative in-depth interviews. Interviews were recorded at the end or towards the end of students' study programme. Results reveal that besides certain similarities between factors influencing foreign student loyalty, there are numerous factors that only appear at the individual level of international students. We can state that master students' loyalty differs almost for each examined individual and requires further analysis.

Keywords

Loyalty, international students, internationalization, higher education.

JEL Classification: I2, I23, M31

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1. Introduction

Higher education students have long been examined in the literature of marketing in higher education (Turkyilmaz et al., 2018; Rehman et al., 2020). The reforms made by universities in recent decades have led to a renewed interest in the loyalty of students (Lovemore et al., 2020). Evidence shows that loyalty has been analysed in higher education, along with the satisfaction and the possible word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations of students, they are deemed fundamental to loyalty (Moldovan et al., 2011; Reichheld, 2003).

As for the concept of loyalty, the definition of international student loyalty in marketing in higher education is not agreed upon. Diverse surveys have investigated factors affecting the satisfaction and loyalty of international students (Alves & Raposo, 2009). However, only a few studies that precisely evaluate the concept and sense of loyalty for international students have been written. Moreover, a certain degree of schooling (e.g. Masters, Post-graduate, PhD level) has rarely been studied exclusively by previous studies (Shahsavari & Sudzina, 2017). Therefore, the current study aims at uncovering what finishing master's students think and what loyalty means for them regarding their studies abroad.

The University of Szeged, has welcomed international students for over 30 years and has been the site for foreign students. Its foreign programmes, however, differ. Some faculties have well-developed international English-language programmes with a long history, while others have only been offering programmes for foreign studies for less than a decade. All in all, this university was considered appropriate for the current exploratory study. Convenience sample was drawn.

The primary research of the current paper includes in-depth interviews with foreign master's students at the University of Szeged. This methodology allows us to understand foreign students' thinking and potential loyalty-altering factors in a more in-depth way.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Loyalty

Hirschman is one of the first to describe loyalty as a concept when customers choose to purchase a given commodity regardless of a perceived decrease in quality (Hirschman, 1970). There emerged later more meanings which go beyond issues of quality. Behavioural loyalty was described as a permanent buy-back of a brand (Tellis, 1988; Neal, 1999). Yet behavioural loyalty has been questioned and the concept of attitudinal loyalty has emerged. Repurchase cannot be a positive indication of loyalty since it may be a routine shopping practice, according to Newman and Weber (1973). However, attitudinal loyalty is defined as an emotional or psychological connection to the brand (Pritchard et al., 1999). The concept of composite loyalty incorporates prior concepts. Oliver (1999) states that "composite loyalty is a strong commitment to consistently repurchase or repatronize a preferred product/service in the future, thereby causing the same or the same-brand repeated purchases". (Oliver, 1999, p. 34). Today, the most common and recognized way of researching loyalty is composite loyalty.

In the literature on loyalty, the importance of word-of-mouth recommendations has been explored. WOM was described by Ladhari (2007) as an informal after-purchase discussion on a certain product. These talks will, depending on the view of the individual purchasing the product, be positive or negative for potential purchases of the product (Arndt, 1967; Bughin et al., 2010). However, WOM has been seen to play a role in loyalty in terms of a recommendation (Buttle, 1998). The literature has also used positive WOM and advice as a loyalty factor (Dick & Basu, 1994; Reichheld, 2003).

The literature has analysed both loyalty and WOM. Loyalty is largely measured by customer indices (Fornell et al., 1996, Gronholdt, et al. 2000). The literature (Zeithaml et al., 1996), offers more evidence to research loyalty and positive WOM together, and provides a basis to explore the purpose and scale of potential future WOM recommendations (Reichheld, 2003).

2.2 Loyalty in higher education

The concepts of loyalty in general are tightly linked to loyalty in higher education, as the literature reveals the applicability of the terms of loyalty for marketing education studies (Oliver, 1999; Reichheld, 2003; Alves & Raposo, 2009; Giner & Rillo, 2016).

The use of composite loyalty in higher education has reached a consensus. Rojas Méndez and colleagues (2009) state that loyal students are those who choose an additional university programme or who, after completing the programme, offer their financial support to the university. They further argue that to have committed students, a strong partnership between the students and the university needs to be established and maintained. This relationship would be advantageous both monetarily and socially, as these students would later have positive WOM about the university. Student loyalty is the composite of repurchase and positive WOM, according to Mekic and Mekic (2016). Loyalty is a latent variable in many study models, but there are also examples where loyalty is seen as part of WOM, repurchase and recommendations.

Besides the previously uncovered reasons, loyalty in higher education has also been correlated with confidence and commitment, although its time factor has emerged, too. Carvalho and Mota (2010) argue that students' commitment is built on the trust of their students and the university. The more a student is pleased, the more likely they are to engage in a higher education institution and will not leave before the study is completed. The more they are satisfied, the more likely they are to commit to the institution. According to Giner and Rillo (2016), student loyalty appears long-term and can last even after the students have finished their studies at a specific university.

For higher education loyalty measurements, the majority of studies are focused primarily on user indices and quantitative surveys are carried out. Measurement is mostly based on repurchase intentions and potential WOM recommendations (Alves & Raposo, 2009; Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; Eurico et al., 2015; Turkyilmaz et al., 2018). Additionally, a small range of qualitative analysis approaches include, for example, focus group discussions (Sultan & Wong 2013), and thorough interviews with critical incident technique (Douglas & Davies, 2008).

We may conclude from the above research and loyalty concepts that researching loyalty according to the composite loyalty concept is a commonly used approach in higher education. In terms of methodology, mainly quantitative studies are published, with just a few qualitative studies. As a result, in the current article, loyalty is described and researched using

qualitative methods based on the concepts of composite loyalty.

2.3 Factors influencing foreign student loyalty

Several aspects have been identified in higher education marketing literature that may affect student loyalty. According to Rojas-Méndez et al. (2009), perceived service quality, satisfaction, trust, and commitment all influence student loyalty. They discovered that dedication has the greatest direct impact on student loyalty, although other aspects have only an indirect impact. Their findings are consistent with those of Schertzer and Schertzer (2004), who discovered that student commitment is influenced by satisfaction. Elliot and Healy (2001) identified student satisfaction as a critical factor, discovering that happy students are less likely to abandon their preferred higher education institution. Loyalty was found to be further influenced by trust, perceived service quality, and collaboration between staff and students (co-creation) (Carvalho & Mota, 2010; Giner & Rillo, 2016).

Furthermore, the image of the higher education institution (Pinto et al., 2013), student satisfaction (Zhang et al., 2008; Mekic & Mekic, 2016; Savitha & Padmaja, 2017; Turkyilmaz et al., 2018), and positive WOM recommendations can all influence student loyalty (Alves & Raposo, 2009). Alves and Raposo (2010) discovered that satisfied students may later become advocates for the institution by recommending it to others and spreading positive WOM advertisements about it to others. This is an important discovery because it establishes constructive WOM as a component of student loyalty.

Douglas and Davies (2008) developed a framework in which satisfaction and dissatisfaction influence student loyalty in additional qualitative research using the critical incident technique. Furthermore, Sultan and Wong (2013) used a focus group approach to identify the key determinants of student loyalty. Their results show that each particular student's loyalty is determined by variables that are unique to them. One student described their loyalty as a relationship with the university, while others equated it with recommendations. There were also students who did not believe in the existence of loyalty to a higher education institution. Their research was critical in determining and revealing gaps in students' accounts of their allegiance to the university.

We can infer that there are several variables that can influence student loyalty in higher education (Schertzer & Schertzer, 2004; Giner & Rillo, 2016), but we must keep in mind that student loyalty can vary greatly from other students' views on loyalty (Sultan & Wong, 2013). As a result, we should state that

thoroughly investigating student loyalty at a specific higher education institution is critical, particularly in light of the marketing for higher education literature.

2.3 Approaches to foreign student loyalty

As previously stated, additional research is needed to assess international student loyalty. This procedure, however, raises a number of questions. Is it sufficient to calculate student loyalty using composite loyalty concepts, as previously done in the literature? Should loyalty-modifying considerations be clustered in such a way that they disclose and are important to the whole study abroad process? Is it sufficient to research institution-related loyalty, or should non-university-related considerations be included as well?

The present paper examines both university-related and non-university-related variables that could have an effect on international student loyalty. The aim of this paper is to decide what factors constitute and contribute to international student loyalty, regardless of the aspect of the study-abroad process to which they are linked. As previously discussed, there are various meanings of loyalty based on the location or region under review (Bandyopadhyay & Martell, 2007).

Even if the assessment of loyalty seems to be identical in the literature, in the marketing for higher education literature, a deeper interpretation is needed than a two- or three-question approach to determine whether students will recommend the institution or select it again. The subject is further complicated by the fact that there are only a few qualitative surveys that investigate international student loyalty in greater detail and through the whole study-abroad process, rather than only university-related problems (Douglas & Davies, 2008; Sultan & Wong, 2013). As a result, a more in-depth investigation is needed.

In the current research, international student loyalty is initially determined based on the concept of composite loyalty, since it is a positive attitude, dedication, and recommendation that will last through and until the completion of the study programme, in addition to a potential repurchase. However, positive WOM is an expression of loyalty that appears when a student is satisfied with certain parts of the study-abroad process.

3. Methodology

The current paper is an exploratory research including qualitative in-depth interviews to reveal what factors influence master students' satisfaction and loyalty at the University of Szeged. Previous studies in the marketing for higher education literature applied qualitative methods (Sultan & Wong, 2013). Moreo-

ver, in-depth interviews were used to get a more in-depth insight into student loyalty (Griner & Sobol, 2014).

The current research was conducted at the University of Szeged, Hungary. Internationalization is key for this university, as there is a continuously growing number of foreign s. This is the reason why investigating foreign student satisfaction and loyalty is key at this university. The sample of this research is made up of master's students from different faculties of the University of Szeged. In this paper, only master students are investigated due to the perceived differences regarding the level of studies.

The six participating master's students came from Turkey, Columbia, Algeria, Tunis, Korea and Laos, and are aged between 22 and 41. Participants were studying at different faculties and in different fields, including international relations, IT, chemistry, dentistry, English studies and international economy.

The in-depth interviews were conducted in 2018 towards the end or at the end of the respondents' study programme, which is 2 years in Hungary. During the interviews, master students' satisfaction and loyalty-altering factors were investigated in more depth. If students stated their loyalty towards the study-abroad process, they were asked to describe what loyalty means for them.

4. Empirical Results

Previous literature has stated that the intentions of customers to repurchase or recommend a certain service or product are used to measure loyalty (Oliver, 1999). This is why master's students were asked whether they would choose this university again for their studies and whether they would recommend studying here to others. Six students were interviewed, out of which six would recommend studying here, while five would choose this university again. There was only one person who said that they may choose this university again.

"Yes, I would definitely (choose it again). I don't have to think about this." – Student from Columbia

"Yes, why not, if they (who come here later to study) study hard." – Student from Tunis

"Absolutely. I have already recommended it to some of my friends." – Student from Columbia

"I have already recommended it to some Philippine students, who study in Korea." – Student from Korea

"Yes, for sure. One of my friends is in Szeged already. I recommended them to study on the same programme as I do. Another friend of mine will come

to Szeged, too. I also recommended him to study here.” – Student from Laos

We can see that all interviewed students would recommend studying in Hungary and at the University of Szeged, even though only five of them would choose it again for sure. We can also see examples of positive word-of-mouth recommendations and their effect on other foreign students, who also came or will come to Hungary because of their friend already studying here. This is evidence that positive word-of-mouth recommendations of the study-abroad process and the university further imply and increase the willingness of other students to study abroad. Recommendations and choosing it again remained even after some students faced certain difficulties. Repurchase and recommendation answers can be found in Table 1.

“It is a tough question. I don’t know if I would survive in Szeged.” – Student from Turkey

“Yes, but I would definitely change something. I would probably choose Szeged or Budapest and I would do some other out-of-school activities (not just studying).” – Student from Algeria

“I have already recommended it to others. There are at least three people (who came here because of me), after they saw that I am studying in Hungary.

This is like a chain.” – Student from Turkey

“I recommended it for some reasons, and I warned them about some others.” – Student from Turkey

Table 1 Repurchase and recommendation of studying at the University of Szeged, in Szeged

	Yes	No	Maybe
Repurchase	5	-	1
Recommendations	6	-	-

Source: own research

Master students were then asked if they feel loyal and how would they define their loyalty towards the institution and studying abroad. They had revealed several aspects of loyalty and almost each and every one of them mentioned different factors that contribute to their loyalty or what loyalty means for them. The Columbian student stated that upholding the traditions and making the university better and more developed mean loyalty. Similarly, the Korean student claimed that loyalty is equal to supporting the university and Hungary. Other factors were also included, such as the appropriate representation of the country.

“I think I am loyal to both the Columbian university and the University of Szeged. Loyalty means upholding traditions and such deeds that contribute to

the fact that the university will become better.” – Student from Columbia

“I am loyal to the University of Szeged and Hungary. Loyalty for me means that I support the university and Hungary, which is my second home now, anytime.” – Student from Korea

“For me loyalty means that I represent the country well in an international environment. This environment could be either a conference, a workplace, or any other place outside Hungary. In this sense, I think I am loyal to the university. I feel that I am an ambassador even after I get my degree.” – Student from Turkey

It is quite an interesting result that the student from Laos thinks that loyalty is advertising or word-of-mouth recommendations. While the Algerian student thinks that loyalty is equal to gratitude, as they will never forget what they got from the place and from a specific person. Overall results and answers from master students are shown in Table 2.

“Yes, I think I am loyal. For me, loyalty means that I advertise the university to other people and when they ask which place is the best for studies, I say the University of Szeged.” – Student from Laos

“Yes, I can say that I am loyal to the University of Szeged, as I cannot disregard the fact that I got my degree here. For me loyalty means that I do not forget what I got from a person or a place.” – Student from Algeria

Table 2 Loyalty meaning for master’s students

University related	Both university- and non-university-related
upholding traditions	support
university ambassador	WOM
gratitude	repurchase
	recommendations

Source: own research

5. Conclusions

Results regarding the loyalty of foreign master’s students reveal that some similarities and also differences shown between the factors appeared to have an influence on this loyalty. As a conclusion, we can state that there are several factors that can be the indicators of loyalty, such as gratitude, willingness to repurchase, WOM, or positive WOM, or recommendations to others.

Despite some similarities found in the individuals’ account of loyalty, there are fundamental differences

in what they believe loyalty means. Therefore, it can be concluded that loyalty may be different for each individual. Being a supporter of the country, the city and the institution, feeling like a university ambassador, and feeling gratitude can all indicate loyalty, in addition to factors previously found in the literature (e.g. positive WOM, repurchase intentions).

A novelty of this current research is that master's students also revealed some factors that contribute to their loyalty, but that these are not closely related to the university itself and can be categorized as certain out-of-school elements. The notion of composite loyalty also reflects upon the results of this current paper, as it means repurchase intentions, positive WOM recommendations and emotional attachment.

The current study also had some limitations. The sample size is relatively small and is limited to master's students at one specific institution in Hungary. The results, therefore, cannot be deemed representative. However, results provided an in-depth view into students' loyalty and this qualitative research also constituted a basis for further studies in the field of foreign student loyalty.

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