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**The relationship between service quality and loyalty
in higher education.**

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how a marketing and service orientation has developed in the public sector in general and its importance in higher education in particular

Current views on market orientation can be traced back to Kohli and Jaworski (1990) and Narver and Slater (1990) and even though scholars were at the same time focusing on the implementation of market orientation and the value of a service orientation in higher education, there is a dearth of research regarding the relationship between market orientation, service quality and loyalty in higher education. In this paper the focus is on the relationship between service quality and loyalty.

The research is based on the CQL model (Culture, Quality and Loyalty). That model views market orientation as a culture, as is implicit in Narver and Slater's (1990) definition, but also behavior, as Kohli and Jaworski (1990) assumed and Voon (2006) also does in his definition of service-driven market orientation. The research question is "How strong is the relationship between service quality and loyalty in higher education?"

A survey was conducted among all undergraduate students at the University of Iceland in February and March 2011. 1.683 students filled out the questionnaire which was a modified version of the SERVQUAL instrument. 16 questions were used to measure service quality, three to measure the image of the university, three to measure the service image, one to measure the overall satisfaction and two to measure loyalty.

The results show a strong relationship (based on Cohen, 1998) between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction ($r=0,635$) on the one hand and Service Quality and Loyalty ($r=0,495$) on the other. The results also show a strong relationship between Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty ($r=0,51$) and Customer Satisfaction and the Image of the Organization ($r=0,467$). There was a moderate relationship between Service Quality and the Image of the Organization ($r=0,442$) and the Image of Organization and Loyalty ($r=0,367$). From these findings it is concluded that service quality is important for loyalty in higher education, both directly and indirectly.

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the strength of the relationship between Service quality and Loyalty among undergraduate students at the University of Iceland (UofI). The research is based on the CQL model (Gudlaugsson and Eysteinnsson, 2011) which is, in part, based on models developed by, on the one hand, Voon (2006) and on the other Helgesen and Nettet (2007). In addition it incorporates variables, other than service quality, that are known to have an effect on satisfaction.

The paper starts with a discussion of the importance of a marketing and service orientation. It is pointed out that the market orientation concept often seems to be misunderstood and connected to the for-profit sector. It is also pointed out that the market orientation concept has been of limited concern in the public sector among other things because of this misunderstanding. Two other known reasons, are that on the one hand the marketing concept has not been adapted to fit the special situations of the public sector and on the other that politics can hinder a successful implementation. There is an in-depth discussion about marketing and service orientation in higher education and how it has evolved. Finally the results are discussed.

1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In the public sector the marketing concept has been of limited concern and sometimes misunderstood (Caruana, Ramaseshan and Ewing, 1997). Many have criticized that changes in the public sector have not been focused enough and overly motivated by cost-cutting and streamlining instead of focusing on the needs of those whom the operation is designed to serve (Ferlie, Ashburner, Fitzgerald and Pettigrew, 1996). And even though directors of public enterprises may be willing to implement the marketing concept, frequently those efforts have been a failure (Laing and McKee, 2001). In particular, there seems to be a fundamental misunderstanding regarding the concept of marketing in the public sector (Price and Brodie, 2001; Laing, 2003; Grönroos, 2006). This misunderstanding is rooted in defining marketing as primarily a function instead of viewing marketing as a philosophical foundation which the operation is based on (cf. Shostack, 1977; Grönroos, 1978; Donnelly and George, 1981; Hunt, 1976).

A second reason has to do with the uniqueness of public service compared to typical for-profit operations. Although the operation in question has all of the characteristics of

typical service (intangibility, heterogeneity, simultaneous production and consumption, perishability) (Kotler and Andreassen, 1991; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996), there is a fundamental difference that sets public operations apart from other operations. Public operations thus may be driven by political motivations, a community rather than consumer focus, and the targeting of markets may not be as evident as in for-profit operations (Laing, 2003). This also emphasizes a critique of the tendency to assess the performance of public enterprises in the same way as for-profit enterprises and thus overlook the social needs and community benefits that public enterprises serve (Ferlie et al., 1996; Price and Brodie, 2001).

The third reason is political behavior, defined by Kohli and Jaworski (1990, p. 12) as “behavior that consists of individuals’ attempts to promote self-interests and threaten others’ interests”. Because the board members of public enterprises frequently are appointed by majority and minority political parties, political agendas often take precedence over the interests of the organization and the recipients of its services. The behavior of political board members thus is often in direct conflict with the basic premise of the marketing concept; to define people’s needs and attempt to fulfill them effectively and/or efficiently.

Converse was a leader in the field in the first half of the twentieth century (cf. Converse, 1938, 1942, 1945a, 1945b, 1958) and clearly points out that at that time the field of marketing was mainly concerned with sales, but neither service nor non-profit enterprises. However, just like Converse, more scholars were starting to explore the potential of marketing theory (Bartels, 1951; Hutchinson, 1952; Baumol, 1957; Taylor 1965). Around 1960 Drucker presented what may be called the foundation for modern marketing theory. Although Drucker is better known for his contribution to management theory, he discusses the role of marketing in strategy implementation (1958). Drucker maintains that from the viewpoint of the customer, the organization’s operation essentially is marketing. Thus it’s imperative to understand and define the customer’s needs. Furthermore, Drucker points out that marketing is more than just sales and promotion, in fact, it is one of the only two facets of the operation that generate income, the other one being innovation. In his seminal work, *Marketing Myopia*, Levitt (1960) lays the groundwork for modern marketing theory. He demonstrates the importance of defining competition based on needs – the competitor is the one who satisfies the same or similar needs. Kotler has written extensively on marketing (Kotler and Levy, 1969; Kotler, 1979; Kotler, 1992; Kotler, 2004; Kotler, 1998; Kotler and Lee, 2007) and most importantly for this work, expands the scope of marketing beyond for-profit organizations and tangible goods. He emphasizes that not-for-profit enterprises must adapt the methods of marketing to their special needs. Levy and Kotler (1969) introduced the

concept of furthering as a next step in the development of the marketing concept. The development of this new concept is necessitated by, first, increased importance of intangible goods, second, globalization, third, increased importance of the public sector, fourth, increased competition, fifth, developments in communications, and sixth, increasing criticism of the operations of firms, communities, schools and other organizations. Hunt (1976) presents an interesting model of the scope of marketing, incorporating a normative and a positive approach, both the profit and the not-for-profit sectors, and micro and macro activities. He criticizes the field for an excessive focus on the normative, micro, profit sector.

Current views on market orientation can be traced back to research published in 1990-1993 (Narver and Slater, 1990; Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Deshpandé, Farley and Webster, 1993). Even though scholars were at the same time focusing on the implementation of market orientation and the value of service orientation in higher education (Varey, 1993; DiDomenico and Bonnici, 1996; Reavill, 1998; Canic and McCarthy, 2000) there is a very limited number of studies regarding the relationship between market orientation and service quality in this area (Voon, 2006). A study of this topic thus is an important addition to the current knowledge on market orientation, service management and service measurements in higher education.

Voon (2006) emphasizes the importance of service-driven market orientation (SERVMO) and its relationship with service quality. The aim of the research was to define this type of market orientation and to explore its connection to service quality. A questionnaire was administered to 588 university students in Malaysia in order to better decipher the relationship between SERVMO and service quality. Voon points out that a key reason for difficulties in improving service quality and developing a service culture in higher education is a lack of market orientation in higher education as well as a misunderstanding of the marketing concept. Voon also identifies the importance of service quality for universities, for example in achieving competitive advantage, meeting government demands for cost-effectiveness and efficiency as well as in meeting the public's growing expectations towards higher education and the role of higher education in building a stronger community. Voon divides SERVMO into six separate components; the customer orientation, the competitor orientation, the interfunctional orientation, the performance orientation, the long-term orientation, and the employee orientation. Voon's findings indicated a strong correlation between SERVMO and service quality. To assess service quality the SERVQUAL instrument was used, but only the section on perceptions. A high score on SERVMO thus is positively related to a high score on SERVQUAL and thus it may be desirable for universities to focus

on developing the areas represented by the SERVMO orientations. These results support previous findings that non-profit organizations adopt market orientation in their effort to improve performance.

Helgesen and Nettet (2007) explored the relationship between service quality, facilities, student satisfaction, image of the university, and image of the study program, with student loyalty to their study program. Student loyalty is viewed as the dependent variable and very important to the university's success. Helgesen and Nettet emphasize that although this particular study views the students as customers, they are not the only group of customers – employers, families and the community could also be defined as customers. The study used three questions to measure loyalty; how likely the student would be to recommend studies at the university, how likely the student would be to select the same program of study were s/he starting now, and how likely it is that the student would select this university for further studies in the future. Loyalty thus defined is seen as an important variable when it comes to success and thus it is important to define the aspects that contribute to students' loyalty.

Helgesen and Nettet point out that many changes in the school system may contribute to reducing student loyalty, such as the Bologna Accord, which specifically introduces a system that enables students to more easily transfer from one university to another. A unified credit system and clearly defined learning outcomes facilitate transfer between universities, both for students and for university admissions administrations as all evaluations of previous studies are simplified. A second reason for the importance of loyalty is that governments are increasingly basing decisions for university funding on their performance.

The survey was administered at a Norwegian university and responses obtained from 454 students, or 35% of the total number of students. The survey contained 25 questions on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 representing the lowest value, such as very dissatisfied, and 7 representing the highest value, such as very satisfied. Seven of the questions were used to assess facilities, five were used to assess the service quality of studies, four were used to assess overall student satisfaction, two were used to assess the image of the university college, three for assessing the image of the study program, and as mentioned before, three for assessing loyalty.

Analysis of the data was based on structural equation modeling and shows that the coefficient of determination (R^2) for loyalty is 0.8, which is considered very high and shows the strength of the model. Student satisfaction has the strongest level of association with loyalty; thus Helgesen and Nettet deduce that loyalty is driven by satisfaction at this particular university college.

2 SERVICE QUALITY AND LOYALTY IN UofI

The research question in this paper is “*how strong is the relationship between service quality and loyalty in higher education?*” The relationship can both be direct and indirect and therefore other factors, such as image and customer satisfaction are also considered. This section of the paper details the methodology used, data analysis and results.

2.1 METHODOLOGY

The research is based on the CQL model (Culture, Quality and Loyalty) (see Gudlaugsson and Eysteinnsson, 2011). That model views market orientation as a culture, as is implicit in Narver and Slater’s (1990) definition, but also behavior, as Kohli and Jaworski (1990) assumed and Voon (2006) also does in his definition of service-driven market orientation. The CQL model can be seen in figure 1.

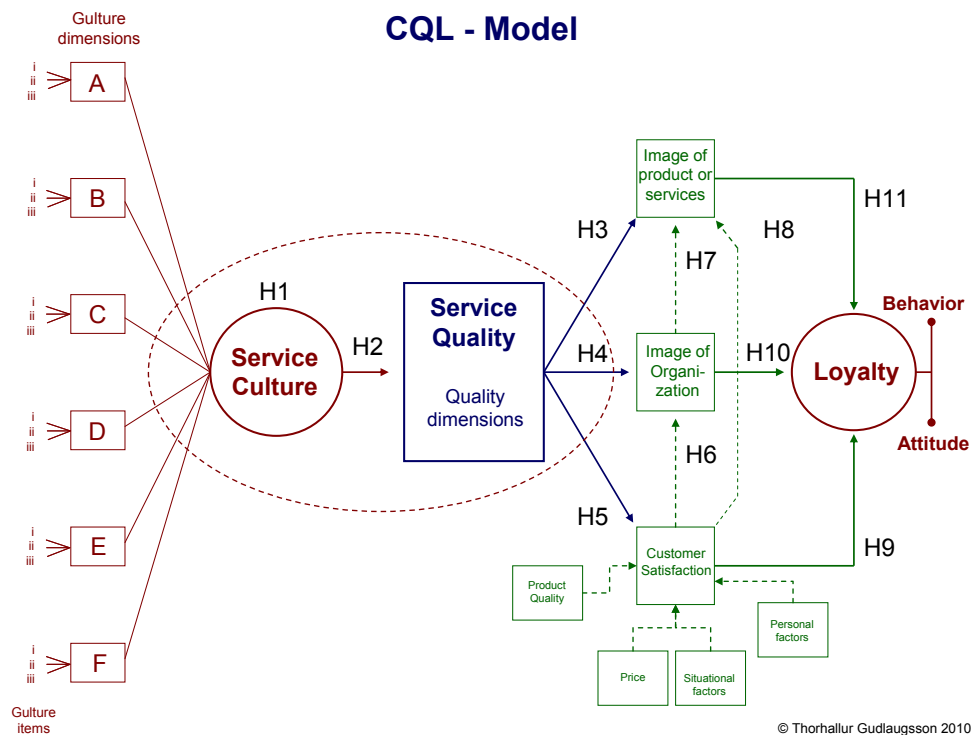


Figure 1: The CQL-model. Reference: Gudlaugsson and Eysteinnsson, 2011

A survey was conducted among all undergraduate students at the University of Iceland (UofI) in February and March 2011. 1.683 students filled out the questionnaire which was a modified version of the SERVQUAL instrument and has been used at the university since 2004. 16 questions are measure service quality, three to measure the image of the university,

three to measure the the product (the study program) image, one to measure the overall satisfaction and two to measure loyalty. In this study loyalty is assumed to have two dimensions, that is loyalty as behavior and loyalty as attitude.

2.2 DATA ANALYSIS

Coorelation analysis is used to describe the direction and strength of the relationship. Several relationships are considered and all of them have something to do with service quality and loyalty.

In this paper the relationships are considered: Service quality and Loyalty; Service quality and Customer satisfaction, Service quality and Image of organization; Service quality and Image of product or service. Few indirect relationships where also considered, that is: Customer satisfaction and loyalty, Customer satisfaction and image of organization; Customer satisfaction and Image of product; Image of organization and Loyalty; Image of Organization and Image of product and finally Image of product and Loyalty. When assessing the strength of the relationships Cohen's (1988) classifications was used are as followed; small ($r = 0,1$ to $0,29$ or $-0,1$ to $-0,29$), medium ($r = 0,3$ to $0,49$ or $-0,3$ to $-0,49$) and large ($r = 0,5$ to 1 or $-0,5$ to -1).

2.3 RESULTS

In table 1 there is a relationship matrix between those variables mentioned before. The relationship between variables was investigated using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient. As can be seen in table 1 several significant relationship are detected.

Table 1: Correlation matrix for all variables

		Correlations				
		Customer satisfaction	Service quality	Image of product	Image of organization	Loyalty
Customer satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	1	,635**	,195**	,467**	,510**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000	,000	,000	,000
	N	1678	1625	1665	1672	1675
Service quality	Pearson Correlation	,635**	1	,197**	,442**	,495**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000		,000	,000	,000
	N	1625	1628	1615	1624	1627
Image of product	Pearson Correlation	,195**	,197**	1	,315**	,274**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000		,000	,000
	N	1665	1615	1667	1662	1665
Image of organization	Pearson Correlation	,467**	,442**	,315**	1	,367**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000		,000
	N	1672	1624	1662	1675	1673
Loyalty	Pearson Correlation	,510**	,495**	,274**	,367**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	
	N	1675	1627	1665	1673	1678

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The main focus of this research is to investigate the strength of the relationship between Service quality and Loyalty. There was a strong, positive correlations between Service quality and Loyalty [$r=0,495$, $n=1.627$, $p<0,005$], with high levels of Service quality associated with high level of Loyalty. There was also a strong, positive correlations between Service quality and Customer satisfaction [$r=0,635$, $n=1.625$, $p<0,005$] with high levels of Service quality associated with high levels of Customer satisfaction and there was a strong, positive correlation between Customer satisfaction and Loyalty [$r=0,51$, $n=1.675$, $p<0,005$].

From these findings it is concluded that there is both a strong direct relationship <Service quality and Loyalty> and an indirect relationship <Service quality, Customer satisfaction, and Loyalty> and therefore both Service quality and Customer satisfaction are considered important in building loyalty among university students. In figure 2 those (and other) findings can be seen.

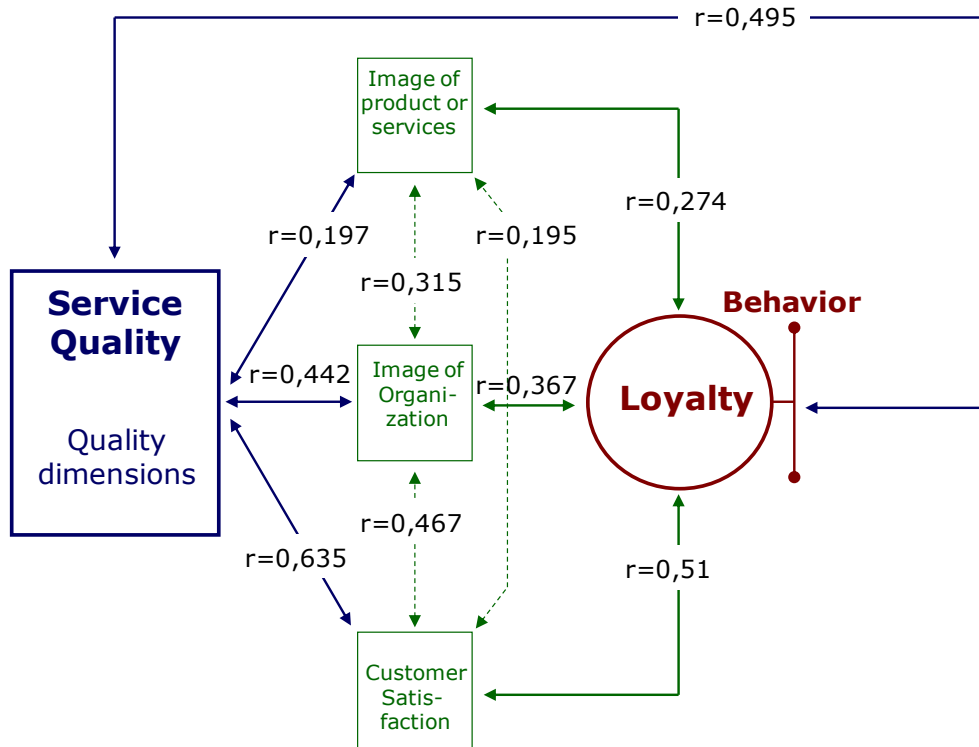


Figure 2: The correlation between Service quality and Loyalty

Findings indicate that there was a medium, positive correlation between Service quality and Image of organization [$r=0,442$, $n=1.624$, $p<0,005$], with high levels of Service quality associated with high levels of Image of organization. There was also a medium, positive correlation between Image of organization and Loyalty [$r=0,367$, $n=1.673$, $p<0,005$] and from that it is concluded that there is a medium indirect positive correlation between Service quality and Loyalty through Image of organization. On the other hand there was a weak, positive correlation between Service quality and Image of product [$r=0,197$, $n=1.655$, $p<0,005$] and there also was a weak correlation between Image of product and Loyalty [$r=0,274$, $n=1.665$, $p<0,005$]. From that it is concluded that the Image of organization is more important in building loyalty than the image of product (the field of study).

3 DISCUSSION

The paper focuses on the relationship between service quality and loyalty among university students. A survey was conducted among all undergraduate students at the University of Iceland. 1.683 students did participate in the survey. The research is based on the CQL model (Culture, Quality and Loyalty). That model is based on looking at market orientation as a culture, as is implicit in Narver and Slater's (1990) definition, but also behavior, as Kohli and Jaworski (1990) assumed and Voon (2006) also does in his definition of service-driven market orientation. The research question is "How strong is the relationship between service quality and loyalty in higher education?"

The results show a strong relationship between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction ($r=0,635$) on the one hand between Service Quality and Loyalty ($r=0,495$) on the other. The results also show also a strong relationship between Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty ($r=0,51$) and Customer Satisfaction and the Image of the Organization ($r=0,467$). There was a moderate relationship between Service Quality and the Image of the Organization ($r=0,442$) and the Image of Organization and Loyalty ($r=0,367$). From these findings it is concluded that service quality is important for loyalty in higher education, both directly and indirectly.

What is interesting here is that there was a strong direct positive relationship between service quality and loyalty but the CQL model assumed that the relationship is indirect (see figure 1. There was also a strong, positive correlation between service quality and customer satisfaction and between customer satisfaction and loyalty. From these findings it is concluded that both service quality and customer satisfaction are important for building loyalty among university students. Another interesting point is that the image of organizations seems to be more important in building loyalty than the image of product or the field of study. This is because the relationship between image of organization and loyalty are stronger than between image of product or service . This is similar to what Helgesen and Nettet (2006) found out when they explored the relationship between service quality, facilities, student satisfaction, image of the university, and image of the study program, with student loyalty to their study program.

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