The Meanings of "Good Service Quality": Insights from a Private University Brand in the Kingdom of Bahrain

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of branding has become increasingly significant within the competitive tertiary education arena, particularly in emerging economies. Using ethnographic approach and supported by experiential and observation data collection techniques, the paper seeks to draw insights on service delivery quality of university customers' based on their experiences at a private university brand in the Kingdom of Bahrain. This study focuses on the conceptions and perceptions of service quality and brand meanings and their efficacy thereof among students and staff of a private university brand as a case of the research. The study reveals that students' service quality is associated with the benefit that they derive from this university brand - that is, attaining a degree certificate, which impacts on their satisfaction. It was also evident that the quality of lecturers' and availability of resources is seemingly of less importance. The study suggests a holistic approach that could be considered when developing a university brand.

Keywords: Brand, Private University, Service Quality
JEL Classifications: M30, M31, M37

1. INTRODUCTION

The marketisation of education institutions globally has led to increased competition in the education sector (De Jager and Gbadamosi, 2010; Gallifa and Batallé, 2010; Walker, 2009), with public and private universities competing to attract both students and academic staff. As such, educational institutions develop sources of competitive advantage in the hope of securing customers and remaining competitive (Shahin and Samea, 2010; Walker, 2009). Whilst there are many sources of competitive advantage, service quality has become one of the biggest sources of competitive advantage for higher and further education institutions (Ali et al., 2016; Annamdevula and Bellamkonda, 2016; Cheng et al., 2016; Gallifa and Batallé, 2010). Just like any other business environment and other institutions globally, academic institutions in the Kingdom of Bahrain have been facing similar pressures for example, high demand for higher education (HE) services, growing expectations and stiff competition. However, efforts are focussed on adopting more customer centric approaches with the hope of meeting the needs and wants of their customers better than competitors.

Marketisation of higher and further education and institutions has grown remarkably in the past two decades (Newman and Jahdi, 2009). Education institutions that include colleges are now being run as independent corporate bodies and are adopting private sector business concepts such as the marketing concept. Several institutions now regard themselves as brands and compete for customers who are now faced with a wider range of choices (Cook, 2002; 2008). The trend has led to a lot of competition and organisations (including educational institutions) are continuously looking for ways to differentiate themselves so as to attract customers and excel (De Jager and Gbadamosi, 2008). Thus, there is increased attention by universities on the needs and wants of customers, in this context, students or learners, thereby offering them a good service quality. More important for this study is that in the past, Bahrain has seen the importation of private university brands, thus, bringing multicultural business practices. For example, some private universities adopt USA practices, others UK practices, while others bring in Asian business practices, and so forth. Therefore, the needs and wants of the students are met with the cultural practices of staff from different countries, and some university brands that are "imported in mind." Of course,

there are also local Bahraini university brands with their own set of business practices. It is important to understand that the bottom line of these private university brands is to "make profit" at the least possible coast. We are of the view that the business centric approach to HE brings in different dynamics to the idea of customer satisfaction and service quality.

The demand for better services in both developed and developing countries has made organisations to develop ways to evaluate quality of service delivery (Brown and Bitner, 2007). Attaining good service quality requires that the organisation evaluates the customers' needs and expectations first, and then work towards meeting those stated needs (Siddiqi, 2011). According to Palmer (2008), most organisations fail at providing good service quality due to the mere fact of assuming what customers want without knowing for certain. According to extant literature, there is evidence that in the HE setting all over the globe, it seems that evaluation of service quality has remained elusive, since different methods have been implemented to assess service quality. Evaluation of service quality is important as it provides insight to the expectations and needs of customers (Quinn et al., 2009). The knowledge can then be used by organisations to meet and exceed the customers' expectations thus, gaining competitive advantage and excelling in business. In fact, the qualitative aspects of service quality have of late become of paramount importance in higher education (HE). Accordingly, the assessment of service quality in Bahrain private universities could lead to unique information that may well be implemented in quality management and enhancement. Having an understanding of how the different measures impact and connect to general quality judgement through quality assessments, universities would have the capacity to creatively formulate effective and comprehensive set of educational service delivery procedures.

He et al. (2011. p. 77) opine that service quality is one of the most important investments in the service sector. Despite the fact that products can be easily copied, service quality tends to delineate performers from non-performers. More so, it is becoming increasingly valuable to identify how service quality could drive and enable strong brand equity (He et al., 2011). Given this background and the call for the academic world to bring their attention to the significance of service quality, this paper seeks to qualitatively unravel the meanings of service quality within the context of a private university located in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main purpose of this research is to explore the meanings that university customers' give to service quality and how this is related to brand and retention among employees and students in a private university in the Kingdom of Bahrain. The study endeavors to distinguish the dimensions of service quality, meanings and define interrelationship between service quality, brand and staff retention.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Brand Meanings
Brand meanings are among the most valuable and effective symbolic resources of contemporary consumer culture (Luedicke

and Giesler, 2008). Within consumer research, the branding of universities has become a topical issue over time (Chapleo, 2006; Whisman, 2009). Research relating to the branding of universities within emerging economies remains scarce, yet it is an area of importance within consumer research. We sought to explore a private university brand, and the meanings associated with this brand within the context of the service quality delivered. It is our contention that service quality means different things to organisations of different cultural practices, and to students of different cultural backgrounds.

Previous studies have identified the complexities associated with universities within a Western context and noted the primary branding mistake as failure of the university to take an 'inside-out' approach to branding (Whisman, 2009). In fact, Chapleo (2006) suggested that there should be greater evolution in the study of the branding concept in relation to universities.

Branding entails makeing known the attributes of the organisation's identity in the form of a clearly defined branding proposition (Balmer, 2001. p. 28). Thus, it is imperative that an organisation define for itself the essence of "what," "who it is" and "what it stands for." The communication of these values precisely and consistently, will help a company to build its brand image. Wang et al. (2012) state that brand image is an important part of marketing since it acts as an information hint, which customers use to deduce product quality, and in turn elicit consumer-purchasing behaviour. Therefore, we seek to contribute to this field through the exploration of significance of a private university brand in the Kingdom of Bahrain, and understand the meanings associated with this particular brand, and how this interconnects with the service quality provided.

3.2. The Importance and Benefits of Good Service Quality
One of the determinants of success of a firm is how the customers perceive the resulting service delivery, as the perceived service quality is the key driver of perceived value and customer satisfaction (Kumar et al., 2009). Researchers (Grewal and Levy, 2010; Kasper et al., 2006) affirm that good service quality provides many benefits to service organisations that academic institutions can also enjoy.

Previous studies (Ali et al., 2016; Annamdevula and Bellamkonda, 2016; Brink and Berndt, 2008; Chui et al., 2016; Palmer, 2008) share the view that good service quality can be a source of competitive advantage for organisations as it aids in insulating an organisation's customers from competitors. Naidoo (2015. p. 14) also agree and further explain that service quality matters as a source of competitive advantage, since students have higher expectations of the university being more responsive and empathetic compared to staff. Therefore, quality can be created through better satisfaction of customer requirements and bringing costs under control through the implementation of total quality management principles which encourage doing things right the first time. Ali et al. (2016) explain that service quality has to be improved regularly in order for the organisation to maintain the competitive advantage. The aforementioned authors further posit

that a service organisation has to implement new methods of service delivery to maintain a competitive advantage (Ali et al., 2016). For instance, airlines introduced internet bookings and some education institutions introduced on-line registrations to keep improving their services to the customers and stand above the competition. The perception of the quality of an institution's service delivery is central towards creating satisfaction and allegiance (De Jager and Gbadamosi, 2010; Mantey and Naidoo, 2016). Service providers who extend their service beyond minimal expectations have a far better chance of satisfying their customers through the development of innovative and extensive service strategies. The critical differences in customer services are what often separate industry leaders from industry followers. Some adopt a differentiated strategy whilst others opt for the low cost strategy, and at the same time, keeping the costs of recruiting customers at a low level.

3.3. Low Customer Recruiting Costs

Good service quality lowers customer recruiting costs and improves customer retention due to the positive word of mouth from existing customers who provide a free recruitment service for organisations who have satisfied customers (Kasper et al., 2006). For example, in the HE, if students are made part of the process of making important organizational choices then there is guaranteed continuous quality (Stukalina, 2012). The satisfaction students would get from their education is of immense importance because students with high levels of satisfaction spread positive sentiments about an institution through word of mouth. Researchers (Kumar et al., 2009; Govender and Ramroop, 2011) affirm that provision of high quality service will result in higher customer satisfaction and enhanced customer loyalty and customer retention. McColl et al. (1998) reiterate that it costs five times more to find a new customer than to retain an existing customer. In a similar vein, Brink and Berndt (2008) suggest that improved financial performance is a natural corollary of increased customer loyalty as satisfied customers will remain in the business and recruit more customers hence improving financial performance of the organisation. It is our contention that in an organisation where customers are continuously satisfied and the internal customer (the employee) continues to serve in that organisation while reaping the rewards of offering a high service quality to the organisation's consumers, then it would mean reduced staff turnover.

Reduced staff turnover results as internal and external customers become more satisfied through improved quality (Kasper et al., 2006; Aaker et al., 2004). The aforementioned researchers state that customer satisfaction is a direct derivative of employee satisfactions and, if an organisation has low employee morale it will never achieve good customer service with the consistency required for succeeding in competitive markets. The service profit chain model supports the idea that good service quality contributes to employee satisfaction. According to Heskett et al. (1997) employee satisfaction results primarily from high-quality support services and organisational policies that enable employees to deliver results to customers. Good service quality externally is linked to good internal service quality which is attractive to employees (Heskett et al., 1997). Therefore, satisfied customers will remain in the business and recruit more customers which

in turn positively impacts on overall organizational financial performance (Brink and Berndt, 2008). In addition, satisfied customers, lead to customer loyalty and in return translate into higher profit (Chang et al., 2009; Yee et al., 2010; Siddiqi, 2011). Organisations that excel in quality service can have a distinct marketing edge since improved levels of service quality is related to higher revenues, increased cross-sell ratios, higher customer retention and expanded market shares (Dale et al., 2007). The aforementioned is best exemplified in the service profit chain (Chicu et al., 2016).
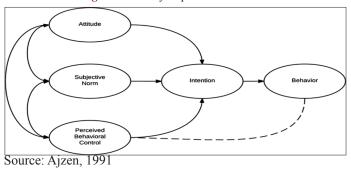
The service-profit chain provides two revelations. Firstly, the organisations that wish to be successful in financial terms, should not, contrary to common thinking, focus on profits. Instead, corporate focus should be squarely honed on the enablers of profit known as business inputs which include staff and the resources they require to do their jobs (Chicu et al., 2016; Heskett et al., 2008). Secondly, there is a discernible, manageable sequence of variables that form a chain reaction to produce the result a company eventually gets. If the organisation cares for the employees, then the employees will care for the organisation's customers who in turn, will show their loyalty by engaging in more business with the organisation and this will generate more income (Heskett et al., 2008). Therefore, we conclude that even in HE set-up, a well-taken care of employee may help organisations' gain significant benefits in the ever more competitive private HE market spaces. From this perspective, this article explores how service quality is perceived within a private university brand in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

4. THEORETICAL GUIDE

In order to capture the relationship meanings of the subject matter of this study, the study chooses to adopt the theory of planned behavior [TPB] (Ajzen, 1991. p. 2002) as a guide with the hope that the study will also contribute to knowledge and its understanding. The TPB Figure 1 is an alternative approach widely used in consumer behaviour research to predict intentions and behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen, 2002).

The theoretical underpinning of TPB denotes three conceptually independent determinants of intention: Attitude towards the behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control (Armitage et al., 2002; Armitage and Conner, 2001; Ouellette and Wood, 1998). However, the relative importance of each antecedent varies across behaviours and situations. Intentions are the immediate antecedent of behavior (Ajzen, 2002) and fully mediate the impact of attitude towards the behavior and subjective norm on behavior, and partially mediate the impact of perceived behavioral control. In the marketing context, the major applications of the TPB have tried to explain or envisage newly introduced behavior (Cook et al., 2002; Davies et al., 2002; Klöckner and Matthies, 2004). For example, the aforementioned studies have shown empirical evidence that students satisfied with the university experience will inevitably recommend the university to friends or other people. Drawing insights from the TPB as a guide, particularly the way the theory helps to predict intentions, the current study benefits since it creates the possibility of ascertaining whether or not branding (image) impact on the service quality within HE.

Figure 1: Theory of planned behaviour

Source: Ajzen, 1991

Despite the fact that studies (Shahin et al., 2012) have shown that meeting customer requirements does not ensure high customer satisfaction levels, assessing the service quality experience can provide necessary information that will inform the consumer decision making process within any contemporary organization. Customer and employee satisfactions measures are key factors to achieve competitive edge as this could vary from institution to institution. Furthermore, the extent of students satisfaction regarding service quality delivery within the HE sector is currently not common practice despite the fact that higher education institutions in the country are implementing quality improvement programs vigorously. Thus, there is clearly a need for assessment of services which the TPB affords the opportunity to study service quality within a university brand. The study findings may shed light on the conceptual meanings to service quality and interrelationships among the variables, and help the HE industry to improve the quality of their activities, thus enhancing customer satisfaction and associated benefits.

5. RESEARCH METHODS

The study adopts an exploratory sequential design approach(Creswell and Clark, 2017), with the first phase being qualitative, and the second phase quantitative. This paper focuses on the previous phase of the study. Here, qualitative data is gathered with the intention of analysing it, and then drawing insights and meanings from the findings to develop a theoretical framework that can be used to understand more deeply, the dynamics of students' satisfaction and practices of implementing service quality in HE within private universities in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Therefore, an ethnographic approach is adopted, with the first author being immersed in a Private HE institution in the Kingdom of Bahrain for a period of over 2 years. Over this period, the aforementioned author worked at the Private HE as a lecturer, interacting with students, staff, and 'immersing' himself in the daily practices of the said private HE institution. This approach helped to produce rich descriptions of the meanings associated with this private university brand, and deeper understanding of the meanings of satisfaction within the context of this private university. The intention was to gain first-hand experience on the practices adopted in meeting the needs and wants of the students, as well as employees' leading to their satisfaction. Experiences were documented as freshly as possible from email message exchanges with students and staff, of which, comprised the data sets in this study and were analysed using the principles for analyzing qualitative data as outlined by Spiggle (1998). Observations as participants go about their business were mid-term and long-term to support data gathered from emails. The system of open coding and categorization was adopted to help organize the emergent themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For the purposes of this study, ethics pertaining to confidentiality are highly regarded. However, the conversations and interactions were recorded in the 'heat' of the moment. We explore the interplay between the private university brand, satisfaction, retention and the meanings that consumers associate with this brand.

6. TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK

HE is facing pressure to improve value in its activities (Heck and Johnsrud, 2000). The present tenet for enhancing educational value is to expend effort on continuous improvement, to focus on stakeholder interests, and to increase student satisfaction. In the case of the private university brand in the Kingdom of Bahrain, student satisfaction is always improving as the needs of the students are met. Contrary to the literature that suggests that student satisfaction is often used to assess educational quality, our preliminary findings from our study suggest that student satisfaction should not be interpreted to mean educational quality. It is often said that the higher the service quality the more satisfied the customers. Thus, satisfaction is based on customer expectations and perception of service quality (Ekinci, 2004; Christou and Sigala, 2002; Sigala, 2004a, b). The relationship between service quality and students satisfaction is mapped by (Sadeh and Garkaz, 2015), which is extracted below.

De Jager and Gbadamosi (2010) investigated the predictors of student satisfaction through service quality in HE institutions, and found that a gap existed between the perceived importance of service quality by students and the actual experience. To students in this study, service quality is associated with the benefits that they derive from this private university that is attaining a degree certificate. In other words, satisfaction for the students means attaining the degree certificate. This is the practical experience of service quality within this university brand, and all other factors seem to be of less consideration. Whilst in public institutions, factors such as tangibility and empathy are the most important quality dimensions of service quality (Calvo-Porral et al., 2013), these factors seem to be of less importance in the private university brand in question.

Wilkins and Balakrishnan (2013) found that service quality also included dimensions such as quality of lecturers, quality and availability of resources, and the effective use of technology. On contrary our preliminary findings suggest that the quality of lecturers and availability of resources is of less importance, as they students just want "to get the certificate." Thus, we conclude that the meanings of service quality are dependent upon the needs of the consumers and the quality standards within that particular institution. Hence, the meanings of 'high' service quality in one institution might imply poor service quality in another institution.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, the emergent themes have enabled us to gain significant insights relating to the meanings of 'good service

quality' in some private universities in the Kingdom of Bahrain. We find that the profit motive, rather than the quality motive, is of particular concern. There is need to adopt teaching practices that are consistent with the needs of public and private sector organisations, with the intention of making prospective employers feel more connected to the university brand. We suggest that this ongoing study should act as a call for further research within this field.

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