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Critical Perspectives

Examination of student loyalty in tourism and hospitality programs: A comparison between the United States and Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Student loyalty is an important concern for higher education institutions. When an educational institution enhances student loyalty, it is expected to improve its reputation and education quality, student retention, and financial support from alumni. This study develops a model based on the relationship marketing literature to examine student loyalty. It tests the model with two university-level tourism and hospitality management programs, one in the U. S. and the other in Hong Kong. Structural equation modeling is used to test the proposed relationships and to compare the two country samples. The findings provide practical implications for educators in tourism and hospitality programs.

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1. Introduction

Student loyalty is an important concern for many educational institutions because of its practical implications for their operational success as a service provider. When an educational institution enhances student loyalty, it is also expected to improve its reputation and education quality, student retention, and financial support from alumni (Dick, & Basu, 1994; Hennig-Thurau, Langer, & Hansen, 2001). Given these practical implications, the topic of loyalty has been examined in various educational settings.

Tinto (1975) proposes a model for student dropout by assuming that commitment and integration constructs are dynamically interrelated. Higher education institutions frequently use Tinto's model as a basis for examining student loyalty. However, several studies have highlighted its limitations (see for example Bean & Metzner, 1985; Grubb, 1989; Seidman, 1996; Tierney, 1992) leading Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001) to propose “the relationship, quality-based, students' loyalties” (RQSL) model as an improvement. The RQSL model incorporates the concept of relationship quality into Tinto's model. However, it does not include any antecedents of the construct of trust. This is unfortunate because doing so would be likely to provide institutions with useful and practical information. Therefore, the current study attempts to incorporate antecedents of trust into the RQSL model to enable a more comprehensive examination on student loyalty.

In the relationship marketing literature, Morgan and Hunt (1994) propose the Commitment-Trust (CT) theory which examines several antecedents of trust and relationship commitment. Holdford, and White (1997) apply the CT theory to

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higher education, particularly a school of pharmacology. Their findings suggest a few modifications to the original CT model. [Adidam, Bingi, and Sindhav \(2004\)](#) also employ the CT model to examine business school students' antecedents of trust, and find general support for it. However, the CT model, even after revision by [Holdford et al. \(1997\)](#), does not consider multiple commitment constructs, nor does it set student loyalty as the eventual outcome.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to enhance these previous models by combining the RQSL and CT theories. The relational model for student loyalty (RMSL) proposed in this study specifically applies to university-level courses in tourism and hospitality management. Such programs are unique in the sense that students may be more sensitive to relationships in general than those in other programs, because the tourism and hospitality industry is a people-oriented business in which relationships with customers are critical ([Castellanos-Verdugo, Oviedo-Garcia, Roldan & Veerranpermal, 2009](#)). Such sensitivity may make students in such programs perceive certain relational factors differently. Therefore, the examination of the proposed model in this context may reveal that these programs have certain idiosyncratic aspects. Moreover, the study tests the proposed model in two different countries, namely the United States and Hong Kong, and compares the results.

This study uses structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships. The findings generally support most of the hypotheses when the examination is carried out with data from all students from both countries. However, some findings are inconsistent with previous studies, and discrepancies also emerge in the comparison of the two student groups. These findings enrich the literature in this area, especially in the context of commitment and trust, and also provide practical implications and suggestions for educators involved in tourism and hospitality programs. This paper, first, presents a literature review, followed by a description of the model development and data. The findings are then analyzed and their implications and discussions set out, with limitations and suggestions for future research concluding the paper.

2. Literature review

[Tinto \(1975\)](#) examines how commitment constructs (that is, goal and institutional commitment) affect students' dropout decisions in a dynamic relationship with integration constructs (such as academic and social integration). According to [Tinto \(1975\)](#), goal and institutional commitment predict and reflect individual students' experiences of disappointment and dissatisfaction with college life. They have a formative influence on students' academic and social integration, which subsequently drive new levels of commitment. Tinto's model is frequently used by academic institutions as a fundamental tool to develop certain strategies for enhancing student loyalty. However, further development of the model has been encouraged because it is not without limitations ([Bean & Metzner, 1985](#); [Brower, 1992](#); [Grubb, 1989](#); [Seidman, 1996](#); [Tierney, 1992](#)).

[Hennig-Thurau et al. \(2001\)](#) proposed the RQSL model by combining Tinto's student dropout decision model and the CT theory proposed by [Morgan and Hunt \(1994\)](#). [Hennig-Thurau et al. \(2001\)](#) basically introduce trust as a mediating variable between quality of teaching service and student loyalty. Students' trust represents "confidence in the university's integrity and reliability" ([Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001](#), p. 335). Interestingly, trust has no significant impact on student loyalty in a sample of business and law and engineering students, although it has a positive and significant influence for a sample of educational studies students. Also of note is that [Hennig-Thurau et al. \(2001\)](#) do not include any antecedents to the trust construct in their model.

In the context of relationship marketing, [Arnett, German, and Hunt \(2003\)](#) examine the impact of identity salience on marketing success in the nonprofit higher education setting. They show that it plays a mediating role between relationship-inducing factors (participation and prestige) and supportive behaviors (donating and promoting).

Another theory in the relationship marketing literature, the CT theory, proposes that commitment and trust are key variables that mediate successful relationship marketing because they promote cooperative behaviors among partners and encourage participants to maintain long-term relationships ([Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#)). The CT theory has been extended to other fields, such as supply chain management. For example, [Becerra and Gupta \(1999\)](#) classify negative outcomes from lack of trust and positive results from high-trust relationships. They show that overall performance is enhanced with the reduction of problems involving distrust. [Kwon and Suh \(2004\)](#) later confirm a positive relationship between the level of commitment and the degree of trust in a supply chain context and also show that information sharing improves the level of trust. Furthermore, [Gao, Sirgy, and Bird \(2005\)](#) find that buyers' trust can be enhanced if they perceive suppliers as trusting and highly committed to the relationship. Consequently, buyer-supplier relationships based on trust and commitment reduce buyers' decision-making uncertainties.

The CT theory has also been examined in the context of the service sector. [Gounaris \(2005\)](#) examines the role of trust and commitment on intention to maintain and invest in an existing relationship for corporate clients of professional service providers. The findings indicated that the quality of service and the bonding strategy and techniques used by providers directly influenced the degree of trust between them and customers. Superior service and bonding strategies increased customers' trust, which in turn resulted in an affective commitment to the provider.

[Friman, Gärling, Millett, Mattsson, and Johnson \(2002\)](#) examine the factors affecting the development of international business-to-business relationships in the service sector. They develop the Key Mediating Variable (KMV) model based on the CT theory, and show that all the factors (commitment, trust, relation termination cost and benefits, shared values, communication, and lack of opportunistic behavior) are significant variables in the development of business-to-business relationships.

This theory not only extends the marketing literature regarding relationships, but also the education literature because an educational institution is, on one view, a service provider similar to other commercial companies ([Dolinsky, 1994](#); [Joseph,](#)

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