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Online student evaluations of hospitality professors: A cross-cultural comparison



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ABSTRACT

With the popularity of RateMyProfessors.com and similar online teacher-rating websites, research on online student evaluation issue has generated valuable results. Online data form a better research source for cross-cultural research than traditional survey data. Using data collected from two online teacher-rating websites: RateMyProfessors.com and PingLaoShi.com, the current study conducted cross-cultural comparisons of online student evaluations of hospitality professors in two countries, the United States and China. Twenty-one U.S. universities and 18 Chinese universities were selected, resulting in 469 professors in the U.S. and 646 professors in China. The results of multiple regressions showed that interest was the most important factor influencing overall quality of professors for both countries. However, the effects of easiness and gender on the overall quality were totally different across the two countries. The study then provided suggestions regarding hospitality education improvement in two countries.

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1. Introduction

The evaluation of faculty teaching by students has become a standard of teaching effectiveness and a major consideration for promotion, tenure and merit at most institutions of higher education (Otto, Sanford, & Ross, 2008; Silva, Silva, Quinn, Draper, Cover, & Munoff, 2008). The traditional method of student evaluation, which has become standard operating procedure around the world asks students to anonymously fill out forms (Centra, 2003; Read, Rama, & Raghunandan, 2001; Silva et al., 2008). However, the results of these traditional student evaluations are not available to students. Due to an increasing desire for students to have access to information about classes and professors, the public online teacher-rating websites have been growing in the last decade (Kindred & Mohammed, 2005; Sonntag, Bassett, & Snyder, 2009). The largest and most famous online teacher-rating site is RateMyProfessors.com. RateMyProfessors.com was founded in May 1999. It was originally launched as TeacherRatings.com and converted to RateMyProfessors.com in 2001. As of November 9, 2011, there have been over 10 million entirely student-generated comments and ratings posted on RateMyProfessors.com, representing about 1 million professors from over 6500 schools. It is the highest trafficked free site for quickly researching and rating professors from colleges and universities across the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom (About RataMyProfessors.com, 2011).

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Of course, the problem associated with traditional student evaluation not only happens in the United States and Western countries, but also appears in developing countries like China. Therefore, public online teacher-rating websites also emerged in China. A Chinese version of RateMyProfessors.com, PingLaoShi.com, was launched in November 2006. The name of the Chinese website has exactly the same meaning of RateMyProfessors. As of November 9, 2011, there were about 5 million student ratings from over 3000 schools posted on the site (About PingLaoShi.com, 2011).

The cross-cultural approach has a long history in education research. Early in 1969, Berry proposed two distinct cross-cultural approaches: the “emic” and the “etic”. The “emic” approach studies phenomena as from inside a particular culture in order to understand indigenous cultural context, while the “etic” approach studies phenomena as from outside of the culture to compare and understand universal patterns of relationships across different cultures (Berry, 1969). With the rapid expansion of international education cooperation, the “etic” approach has become the new trend of cross-cultural research in education (Chapman & Carter, 1979). However, a real “etic” approach of cross-cultural research requires complicated procedures of validity and reliability testing of the instruments developed in one culture. Thus, many cross-cultural studies that simply applied an instrument in a new culture without validity and reliability test were warned by Triandis (1972) as “pseudo etic” research.

When using an “etic” approach in student evaluation of teaching effectiveness, online teacher-rating websites act as a better research source than traditional student evaluation forms. Since traditional student evaluation forms vary across even universities, let alone countries, the cross-cultural comparison of student evaluation of teaching effectiveness across countries is hard to be accomplished using traditional student evaluation forms. However, thanks to the openness of the Internet, online teacher-rating websites use the same instrument of teaching evaluation regardless of disciplines, universities, and even countries. Therefore, the cross-cultural comparison of student evaluation can be easily realized with data collected from online teacher-rating websites in different countries. For example, Silva et al. (2008) compared online evaluations of psychology instructors between American and Canadian universities using data collected from RateMyProfessors.com and RateMyProfessors.ca.

This study focused on cross-cultural comparison of online student evaluations of hospitality professors between U.S. and Chinese universities. The hospitality higher education in the United States began in 1920s when Cornell University created the School of Hotel Management. Currently there are over 200 hospitality programs in the United States. Hospitality and tourism programs within higher education in China did not start until the 1980s. However, programs in China have made considerable progress both in terms of quantity and the size of programs (Liu, 2010). According to the list, Ranking of hospitality majors among Chinese Universities, made by the Research Center for Chinese Science Evaluation (RCCSE), there are over 70 programs offered by universities in China, and 28 universities have an individual hospitality/tourism schools (RCCSE, 2006).

With the rapid development of hospitality education in both the United States and China, it becomes necessary for researchers to understand how students evaluate their professors in order to improve the quality of hospitality education. It is also important to use an “etic” approach to discover the cross-cultural similarity and differences of students’ evaluation of hospitality professors since the hospitality industry as global industry needs international hospitality education cooperation. In existing literature, there is only limited research investigating student evaluations of hospitality professors and no cross-cultural research on comparing student evaluations of hospitality professors between the United States and China.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to use an “etic” approach to collect data from online teacher-rating websites to compare student evaluations of hospitality professors in U.S. and Chinese universities. Specifically, the main objectives of this study were (1) to summarize the hospitality education status of two countries: the United States and China; (2) to explore the differences of hospitality professors evaluations given by students between the United States and China; (3) to identify the most important factors that influence American and Chinese students’ evaluations of hospitality professors; and (4) to provide suggestions for improving hospitality teaching effectiveness in both countries and promoting cross-cultural hospitality education cooperation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Student evaluation of teaching effectiveness

The teaching effectiveness topic is an old issue in the literature that dates back to the 1920s (Wachtel, 1998). Evaluating teaching effectiveness plays an important role in ensuring high quality education (Wright, 2000). There are many different ways of conducting teaching effectiveness evaluations, including: student evaluations, peer evaluations, faculty self-evaluations, administration assessments, classroom visitations, course syllabi, exams and alumni reviews (Kay, Moncarz, Petroski, & Downey, 2008). Student evaluations are believed to be a valuable and worthwhile way of evaluating teaching effectiveness and they are commonly applied in most U.S. universities (Clayson, 1999; Kwan, 1999; Wachtel, 1998).

Researchers discussed that student evaluation of teaching effectiveness can serve two functions: there are formative and summative uses (Chen & Hoshower, 2003). On one hand, student evaluation can be used as feedback that helps to improve instructors’ teaching performance and course content (Marsh & Roche, 1993; Simpson, 1995; Theall & Franklin, 1991). On the other hand, student evaluation can provide information for administrative decisions and they have a considerable impact on faculty tenure, promotion and pay rise decisions (Cashin & Downey, 1992; Centra, 1994; Kemp & Kumar, 1990).

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