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## Investigating the Relationship among Service Quality, Emotional Satisfaction and Favorable Behavioral Intentions in Higher Education Service Experience

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### Abstract

Most previous research has examined the direct relationship between service quality (SQ) and favorable behavioral intentions (FBI), neglecting the important role of emotional satisfaction (E-SAC). E-SAC is viewed as a crucial indicator in enhancing the relationship between SQ and FBI. It also assists the service provider in higher education to build long-term relationships with students. Thus, the main objective of this research is to examine the relationship among SQ, E-SAC and FBI. This research was conducted at Malaysian Public Universities. The online questionnaire was distributed to 381 international students following the stratified random sampling. The Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) technique using AMOS software was performed to test the relationship among SQ, E-SAC and FBI. The finding reveals that E-SAC mediates the relationships between SQ and FBI with large effects size. This research also discusses the theoretical and practical implications as well as the direction for future research.

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## 1. Introduction

Recently, Malaysia has been recognized as the international students' higher education destination (MoHE, 2011). Accordingly, the Ministry of Higher Education aims to attract 200,000 international students to study in Malaysian higher education institutions by 2020. Nevertheless, dealing with the international students creates additional responsibilities and expectations to the universities. The international students may experience different educational approaches as compared to their home country (Yee, Hazrin & Mokhtar, 2013; Richards & Abdul Aziz, 2011; Lim, Yap & Tee, 2011). Furthermore, with the increasingly emphasis of student role as the primary customers, the power in service decision making has shifted from service provider to students (Abili, et al., 2011). Therefore, a strategic tool is needed to capture the process and interactive nature of service system from the lens of students. The previous research has discussed in depth the concept of service quality (Parasuraman, et al., 1985, 1988, 1991; Gronroos, 1984; Cronin & Taylor, 1994; Sultan & Wong, 2010; Voon, 2009; Abdullah, 2005, 2006) and favorable behavior intentions (Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996; Cronin, Brady & Hult, 2000; Singh, 1990; Choi, et al., 2004; Anderson & Sullivan, 1993) to evaluate the customer experience in service context. However, these concepts are only evaluating the customer experience towards service delivery from the cognitive aspect, neglecting the emotional aspect (Ladhari, 2009; Wong, 2004; Stauss & Neuhaus, 1997; Yu & Dean, 2001).

The emotional or affective aspect refers to positive or negative feelings (Wilkie, 1994). Spreng, MacKenzie and Olshavsky (1996) narrow down the concept of customers' affective as the customers' emotional reactions, which is consistent with the concept of customer satisfaction. However, there is a debate whether customer satisfaction is a cognitive construct or emotional construct (Babin & Griffin, 1998; Bagozzi, Gopinath & Nyer, 1999). In previous research, customer satisfaction has been defined as a cognitive construct, it seems that the affective construct has been largely ignored (Stauss & Neuhaus, 1997). The Expectation-Disconfirmation Paradigm (EDP) is a well-known paradigm to explain customer satisfaction as a cognitive construct (Oliver, 1980). EDP postulates that satisfaction is a result of customers' perceptions of the discrepancy between their perceptions of service delivery performance and their expectations. However, the conceptualization of satisfaction from the EDP viewpoint has been criticized. Authors such as Westbrook and Reilly (1983) claim that customers could be satisfied by aspects for which expectation never existed. In addition, Oliver (1993 (b)) criticized the conceptualization of customer satisfaction from the EDP perspective which overlapped with service quality. Thus, there is a need to explore the concept of customer satisfaction from the view of customers' emotions. Previous research also reveals that the E-SAC could enhance the relationship between SQ and FBI (Choi, et al., 2004). Therefore, this research also aims to investigate the relationships among SQ, E-SAC and FBI where E-SAC plays a mediator role.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Cognitive-Affective-Behavioral model

The need to understand the relationships among SQ, E-SAC and FBI lead the literature search to the cognitive-affective-behavioral model (Bagozzi, 1992; Oliver, 1997). According to this model, customers evaluate the service rendered based on three phases namely, cognitive, affective and behavioral. The cognitive-affective-behavioral model claims the causal sequence of cognitive, affective and behavioral. Several empirical research has proven the causal sequence of cognitive, affective and behavioral phase in service context such as Choi, et al. (2004) empirically confirmed the causal sequence of cognitive (service quality and value)-affective (satisfaction)-behavioral (behavior intentions). Cronin, Brady and Hult (2000) reveals that an initial service evaluation (service quality) leads to satisfaction assessment, which in turn drives behavioral intentions. The literature also claims that the affective phase is presented as satisfaction construct. However, there is a debate about whether satisfaction is a cognitive or emotional construct (Babin & Griffin, 1998; Bagozzi, Gopinath & Nyer, 1999).

### 2.2. The competing theories of customer satisfaction

The concept of satisfaction has been discussed tremendously in management and marketing areas. EDP is the most widely applied theory used to assess customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction within the service context

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