

RESEARCH ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF ONLINE EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

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Abstract

This paper aims at investigating students' perception of the quality of the online educational services. The qualitative research was chosen by using semi-directive interviews, which reveal information from the students' affective and conative level. The research goal was to clarify aspects concerning students' perception, which subsequently determine their overall satisfaction with the online educational services they benefit from. The expected results will provide a higher degree of understanding of perception determinants and may serve as basis for the formulation of a satisfaction model of online educational services.

Keywords: *perception, educational services, online, satisfaction*

JEL classification: *M31*

1. Introduction

Among the endogenous factors which influence consumer behaviour, the perception of each person regarding the same reality may be different due to the fact that it depends not only by the physical stimuli, but also by the connection between the stimulus and the environment, as well as by the person's interior state of spirit (Kotler and Keller, 2008, p. 279). According to

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the same authors, people may perceive the same object differently due to the following perceptual processes: selective distortion, selective attention, selective memorization and subliminal perception. Following the same line of thought, individuals perceive differently the quality of the educational service they benefit from.

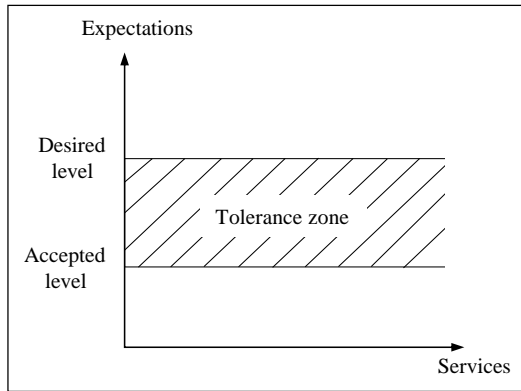
The clients are subject to numerous sensorial inputs, which reach them through their five senses and who acquire significance due to their inner perceptual process (Cătoi. 2004). According to Kotler and Keller (2006), the customer perceived value is triggered by the perceived and actual difference between their evaluation of all advantages and costs of a product or service and the evaluation of the one pertaining to the competitors. Therefore, service companies should constantly monitor their total customer value and cost and the ones of all offers of the competitors.

Zineldin (2007) argued that the measurement of students' perceptions concerning the educational service quality provided by a higher education institution can reflect their overall satisfaction degree. He measured the perceptions of the five quality dimensions pertaining to the 5Qs model, i.e. object quality, process quality, infrastructure quality, interaction and communication quality and atmosphere quality (Cardona and Bravo, 2012).

In fact, Shoemaker, Lewis and Yesawich (2007) rightfully consider that one of the greatest mistakes marketers make is to believe that what they perceive is what customers perceive. As a consequence, the only true reality is represented by consumers' perceptions and marketers should focus on influencing them, irrespective of their own.

There also exists a so-called *tolerance zone* – i.e. an interval between which the consumers perceive as satisfactory some defining element of a service – delineated by a minimum level the consumers are willing to accept and, on the other side, of a level clients think the service may and should be delivered normally (Kotler and Keller, 2008). The tolerance zone may vary from a consumer to another (sometimes even from a service delivery to another in the case of the same consumer). The personality, the education, the age, the provenience environment of the consumer are the main factors which determine the existence of a smaller or a larger tolerance zone (Dumitrescu and Apostu, 2009, p. 108), as shown in the following figure:

Figure 1: Tolerance zone of services user



Source: Dumitrescu and Apostu, 2009. *Marketingul și calitatea produselor (Marketing and products' quality)*, Bucharest: Expert Publishing House, p.107.

As a result, the determination of the students' perception concerning the online educational services is a theme of great interest by taking into account the influences exerted by the virtual environment on the educational practices of universities worldwide. The aim is to determine the aspects which need improvement so as to satisfy students' at the highest level possible regarding the quality of the provided online educational services.

2. Research purpose, objectives and hypotheses

Qualitative research refers to the data collection, analysis and interpretation by observing what subjects do and say. Observations and affirmations are in a qualitative and non-standardized form, the qualitative research being often considered as the “easy or soft” part of marketing research. However, techniques specific to qualitative research provide an ample vision on consumer behaviour (Burns and Bush, 2006, p. 201-202). Moreover, “information generated by a quantitative research may be completed by a qualitative research” (Cătoiu *et al.*, 2009, p. 89).

The purpose of the research was the investigation of the actual perception of students concerning the quality of online educational services provided by the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies. In consequence, the potential offered by these educational services in the virtual environment may be determined or identified, described and evaluated.

The main objectives which derive from the purpose and which are aimed at by this qualitative research done through semi-directive interviews were the following:

O₁: The determination of the students' perception on the general quality of the online educational services offered by the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies – their perception concerning the quality level of the informatics system, the quality of the Internet connection, the quality of the wireless connection;

O₂: The determination of the satisfaction level of the students regarding the electronic resources and the learning spaces with Internet access (laboratories and research spaces, software, electronic resources, the offer of the central library and of the digital library – the online access to courses);

O₃: The determination of the students' perception of the general quality of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies website, revealed by the quality of the information available on the website, its general quality, its ease of use, its degree of updating and the information organization available online.

O₄: The determination of the way the seriousness / reputation of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies is perceived – the students' real chances of getting a job after graduating from a study programme offered by the above-mentioned university, the students' satisfaction degree determined by the offered environment of professional and personal development, the reputation of the faculty they study at and their willingness to recommend it to others.

The corresponding hypotheses derived from the previously mentioned objectives were the following:

H₁: Students' perception concerning the general quality of the online educational services offered by the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies (the quality level of the informatics system, the quality of the Internet connection, the quality of the wireless connection) is positive;

H₂: The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies disposes of electronic resources and learning spaces with Internet access (laboratories and research spaces, software, electronic resources, the offer of the central library and of the digital library – the online access to courses) which are highly satisfactory;

H₃: Students' perception of the general quality of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies website (the quality of the information

available on the website, its general quality, its ease of use, its degree of updating and the information organization available online) is positive;

H₄: Students' perception of the seriousness / reputation of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies (students' real chances of getting a job after graduating, their satisfaction degree determined by the offered environment of professional and personal development, the reputation of the faculty they study at and their willingness to recommend it to others) is a positive one.

As far as the *prior estimation of the value of information obtained from the research*, with the results obtained a more realistic formulation of the way the quality of online educational services is perceived, as well as the students' satisfaction degree.

3. Data collection – subjects interviewing

The sample is not statistically representative, but it was rigorously selected in order to reflect the specificity of the studied issues and it expresses the diversity of the available cases.

The criteria for sample selection were: the year of study – Bachelor degree / Master degree / PhD and the students' gender. It was opted for an equal number of respondents of feminine and masculine gender. At the same time, the number of the interviewed students contains equal proportions according to the year of study and the level of their university studies.

The main *criterion for participants' recruiting* was that they study at the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, at Bachelor, Master or PhD level, i.e. they benefit from the online educational services provided by this higher education institution.

The recruiting took place after distributing a *recruiting questionnaire on email* to the students' representatives from all levels of the Students' Senate of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies. Then the students which met the above-mentioned criteria and thus those who were susceptible to provide as complete as possible information concerning online educational services they frequently use. Out of the 20 selected students, 16 finally were interviewed. This number was considered sufficient for the present research which had an exploratory character.

The research unit, the observation unit and the survey unit coincide, being composed of Bachelor, Master or PhD students of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies which benefit from online educational services

and which are willing to reveal information concerning their perception of the quality of these services and consequently of their satisfaction degree.

After the closing of the recruiting process, the dates and time frame of the interviews were set. Due to the location and proximity, it was opted that the interviews take place in course/seminar rooms of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, rooms which were set together with the selected students.

The interviews were registered on audio support having the approval of the interviewed persons. At the end of the interviews, the *interview sheet* was completed; the conversations registered on audio support and then transcribed in detail, and then analysed and interpreted.

As far as the way interviews took place, the time frame was from the 1st of February up to the 15th of March 2013, each interview lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviews took place in course or seminar rooms of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, which have been previously convened upon with each participant in order to facilitate a familiar environment for the students. The initial schedule set with the subjects was completely respected. In order to ensure the technological background of the qualitative research, the functioning of the voice recorder was verified before the beginning of the interviews.

The data collection was based on a *conversation guide* which comprised 11 questions.

The respondents were encouraged to provide as many details as possible and as many arguments for their answers, being ensured of the confidential character of their ideas. Therefore, the interviewer has respected the principle of the non-directivity and has encouraged respondents to develop their opinions as clearly and freely as possible. Moreover, he has provided supplementary information when needed in order to obtain responses which are as relevant as possible.

The conversations were registered with a voice recorder and then transcribed in detail, including the pauses, the moments of silence, the complex phrases etc. (Cătoiu *et al.*, 2009, p. 218) The content analysis and results interpretation were then done.

The content analysis is an observation method used in the case in which the studied phenomenon is the communication (Cătoiu *et al.*, 2009, p. 266). It is a research method used for objective, systematic and quantitative

description of the communication's actual content (Berelson, 1952, p. 55 in Cătoiș et al., 2009, p. 266).

It concerns the study of a written material, divided in significant units, in order to be rigorously analysed. Therefore, the correct carrying out of the content analysis presupposes the covering of the following successive stages:

1. Transcription on paper format of the communication content;
2. Definition of the analysis unit;
3. Construction of the general grid;
4. Encoding;
5. Grid completion;
6. Vertical and horizontal analysis;
7. Use of quantification indexes;
8. Elaboration of the synthesis report (Malhotra, 1993, p. 208 in Cătoiș et al., 2009, p. 267-268).

It has to be mentioned that the vocabulary used during interviews is specific to students, which have proved a great willingness to cooperate and to express their point of view.

4. Results and discussion

The answers provided during the first discussion theme, which has targeted *students' perception on the general quality of the online educational services* offered by the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies revealed the fact that they have a positive perception and that they are generally satisfied, but that servers should be improved during exam periods. A not very expensive solution would be renting supplementary virtual servers during exam sessions. The quality of the cable Internet is very good, while the quality of the wireless connection varies in different buildings of the university and needs improvements. An advantageous solution from the costs' point of view would be the acquisition of wireless antennas which should be more powerful than the existing routers and which would emit a better signal, without the agglomeration of electric sockets and without supplementary electric consumption (as it would be in the case of supplementary routers).

Concerning the second discussion theme, i.e. *the electronic resources and the learning spaces with Internet access provided by the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies*, improvements may be done in the sense of the increase of the number of the learning spaces with Internet access, of the creation of a username and a password for every student in order to be able to

access the database and the online libraries from the locations that do not pertain to the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies. Moreover, students have manifested the wish to be able to read from the online library books written abroad, as well as of the uploading of the books corresponding to all courses they follow (of course, with the respect of the copyright legislation). As a result, students might freely download book reviews, which may be very useful for those who would like to purchase them in the case they are not present in the University's libraries.

The third discussion theme, *the general perception of the students concerning the website of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies* is also a positive one; information found on www.ase.ro is of high quality, well-organized on sections and available for every person who has access to the website; the general quality of the website also has a high level, due to the fact that it is an intuitive website, with a nice design and it is efficiently organized; the ease in use as a search engine may be improved by including a *search* function on the website. Due to the fact that the website of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies is the first one on the Google list, its SEO (Search Engine Optimization) is well-done. Information posted on the website are updated and well-structured, being a very secure (public) source of information, especially regarding information on the admission process and faculties' presentation, sometimes in the disadvantage of the information concerning the social service and certain regulations. In addition, information found on the websites of each faculty should be completed and updated in the same way as those from the website of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies are.

As far as the fourth discussion theme, i.e. *the seriousness / reputation of the institution* is concerned, the interviewed students have answered that their real employment chances after graduating the faculty are relative, in the sense that they would need more practice in their field and that their chances are enhanced after graduating the corresponding Master programme. The need of practice, innovation and creativity, as well as the closing of partnerships with companies for students' internships is also signalled in the expression of students' opinion concerning the offered professional and personal development environment. Nevertheless, the reputation of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, as well as of its faculties, is a good one and most of the students would recommend it to others.

Due to the exploratory character and to the complexity of the approached subject, the qualitative research has its limits, also determined by the continuous development of online services in general and of online educational services in particular and implicitly by students' perception on their quality. It is clear that in order to ensure a high satisfaction level of their students, universities should anticipate their expectations and to fulfil them at the highest level possible in both offline and online environment.

The measurement of the quality of online services may be better done with in-depth interviews, applied to as many respondents as possible, by also using the quantitative research methods. However, in order to obtain a higher degree of accurateness of the obtained information, the use of cognitive interviews is recommended (Condie, 2012, p. 170) for the future researches. The cognitive interviews facilitate to obtain the information referring to past actions, in a more detailed way than during classical interviews.

However, in conformity with the objectives and purpose of research, the present research has facilitated the correct identification of the way students of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies perceive the quality of the online educational services they benefit from.

The information revealed during interviews are an important basis for future quantitative researches and may serve as foundation for the construction of a satisfaction model. Therefore, following the same line of thought as Burns and Bush (2006, p. 203), the pluralistic research, i.e. the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods should be used in order to benefit from the advantages of both types of researches.

5. Conclusions

The improvement of the quality of the educational system is integrated in discussions about university management in countries all around the world. Therefore, higher education institutions are facing a tough competition and try to differentiate themselves in the eyes of their students, and the best way to do this is to provide varied and high quality educational services, which contribute to students' satisfaction and loyalty, as well as to universities' promotion and development.

As a consequence, universities should constantly search for strategies in order to become more and more competitive and to enhance the positive perception of the educational services they provide for their clients, i.e. their students. Therefore, service quality should become a key determinant of

marketing strategies applied in universities in order to insure students' satisfaction with their educational services.

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