

Jaystudent Mystery Calling Experiments in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT— *There is a strong relationship between buyers' perceived risk and their satisfaction in out-of-standard situations of services. The customer-specific feature of these situations has been modelled as jaycustomers, i.e. customers of nonstandard behaviour. In education - due to students' expectations - the control of different situations is of high importance. The purpose of our research is to study administrative staff's behaviour when they find themselves face-to-face with so called 'jaystudents'. To solve the problem of research, an interdisciplinary approach of psychology and marketing is needed.*

As far as methodology is concerned a basically qualitative experimental design has been selected with some quantifiable elements. The research process starts with a series of mystery callings followed by post-experimental focus group discussions. In service research mystery calling is usually applied for testing standards. As a new methodological approach of our research, the application of experimental techniques in exceptional service frontline situations can be mentioned.

From managerial aspects the results can provide the management with realistic information on the weaknesses of frontline personnel and of frontline standards. They can serve to improve human resource management in higher education. Based on the results we are going to extend the investigations to face-to-face contexts.

Keywords— higher education, jaystudent, experimental research

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

It is assumed that there is a close relationship between judging the quality of services and the quality of frontline since a direct message about the culture and values of the service-provider is conveyed to the customer by the behaviour perceived in the frontline (Veres, 2009). In an educational context, the service-provider (frontline) and the users (students) get involved in sorts of interaction. In best cases this happens according to the expected standards, but conflicts are rather frequent. Conflicts may be caused by the non-standard behaviour of the provider as well as unexpected user attitude (jaycustomer/jaystudent misbehaviour). For the sake of customer- satisfaction, particular stress has to be placed on handling disturbing factors and conflicts.

Constantly monitoring education and administration as well as maintaining and raising the standard of quality level in the service sector are a prerequisite for their smooth running. Quality assurance in higher education is required although it cannot properly be created if in this process students and their future employers do not play a decisive role as quality cannot adequately be stressed in higher education (Polónyi, 2007). Of course even in this sector competition is getting stronger, which should prioritise quality considerations. As a consequence, checking on the expectations and satisfaction of users is a must for the institutions that would wish to keep their positions in the long run.

Assessing satisfaction is one of the possible ways of measuring the quality of providing services. Satisfaction is determined by the difference between perceived and expected performance. If the extent of satisfaction, i.e. assessing quality indirectly can be interpreted, then the strong and weak points which characterise the service can also be identified. The market position can be ensured for the institutions of higher education that results in competitiveness and the loyalty of the students who make use of services by eliminating weaknesses and improving as well as preserving strengths. It is important for many considerations. On the one hand, satisfied students can generate and spread a positive image of the institution - assisting in acquiring new users and on the other hand, they themselves can rebuy, i. e. continue their studies in e.g. MSc courses (Reketye, Szűcs, 2002).

Quantitative satisfaction analysis is descriptive. Its critical point is that neither the expectations nor the point of

reference of the assessor can be known so although weaknesses can be identified, no information is provided on the factors in the background. Satisfaction with the services is rather subjective that depends on the psychological characteristics of the assessor, i.e. the student in the present case (preliminary experience, expectations, personality) and the impacts perceived during the examined period (personal interactions, environment). From a socio-psychological point of view assessing satisfaction is an expression of an attitude, i.e. the expression of such an opinion or view on the attitude subject that can be a person, a thought, a situation or a problem.

The present research includes managing administrative tasks in education as well as the behaviour of the front-line staff and activities in connection with the services provided by the institution. Attitudes can be examined on three components:

- cognitive component (beliefs, opinions, ideas): it includes e.g. experience of managing one's own affair in the Office of the Registrar, information gained from acquaintances and expectations for the different aspects of administration;
- affective (emotional, evaluating) component: the attitude object is accompanied by positive or negative feelings; and
- conative (intention, behaviour) component: the expression of attitude, behaviour and communication that is observable in a given situation.

In the perceived standard of quality parameters that are regarded important by the institution communication between the students and the representatives of the institution is decisive as attitude is expressed there. In this way it can be examined together with the situations where the emotionally negative students' attitude can be observed with all the three components that deviate from standard situations of administrative tasks. The out-of-standard behaviour that breaks the rules, standards and norms in terms of the service sector are labelled by the literature as misbehaviour, dysfunctional behaviour, nonstandard behaviour, jaycustomer. The research topic must be approached from a multidisciplinary point of view where the different areas of service marketing, psychology, sociology and quality management contribute to a deeper analysis and also the present study can make use of these points of view both in methodology and in data analysis. The term used in our research is jaystudent in the case of institutions of higher education as a refinement of the typology worked out by Jäckel (2010) which derives from the jaycustomer types of Lovelock (2007) and Wirtz (2008). The objective of the research is to compare the perceived with the expected behaviour of the front-line administrative staff in the case of different forms of 'jaystudent' behaviour. The following so-called jaystudent types were differentiated:

- Violators tend to push their own interest the most by arguing and making up excuses to be treated in a special way that differs from the standard way of rules.
- Doubters doubt every word of the service provider. If regulations do not meet their interests, regulations are questioned.
- Grabbers, exigents want to reach success without making any efforts. They continuously strive to be treated in a preferential way to take advantage.
- Arguers know everything even better than others, have heard about everything and have an opinion about everything. They make references to the code of academic studies and examinations. They are better aware of rules and legal possibilities than the front-line staff.
- Idea originators can come up with a much better idea in every situation. They always make suggestions and revolutionary innovations. They are prepared with ready-made suggestions to solve problems.
- Agitators are offensive, hot-tempered, emotionally controlled, too much personal and threatening.

Nonstandard student behaviour can also generate different types of behaviour off the expected standards and patterns from the part of the front-line staff, which results in conflicts. One of the reasons for dissatisfaction is the conflict not resolved between the front-line representative and the students and the collision of different interests where both parties hold on to their own points of view. There is a significant gap between expectations and the perceived situation.

2. THE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT MODEL

According to the model of Kiesler (1983) in the psychological approach of dyadic conflict two basic dimensions can be separated: dominant-subordinate behaviour and agreeing-arguing communication. Zhenfeng Ma and Laurette Dubé (2011) also applied this model in their research on observing front-line interactions. Based on the results the subordinate behaviour of the service user generates dominance on the partner's side and hinders their being subordinated. In the case of domineering behaviour both reactions can be triggered. If both parties show subordinate behaviour repeatedly while the service is being provided, the user's satisfaction decreases and the same holds true for domineering behaviour. In the case of complementary behaviour, satisfaction changes in a positive direction. Restricting the situation to domineering-subordinate dimension the systematic model of the ways of conflict management in practice by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilman (1974) was used in the research simulation. The strive for dominance can be described as a high level of promoting one's own interests that gives a priority to satisfying own needs in a conflict. If it harms the other party's interest, it can be defined as rivalling behaviour. Subordination or conformity is emerging in high-level cooperation.

Standard student behaviour, i.e. set as a benchmark by the service provider, can be described by obeying all rules, regulations even by subordination so they conform to the domineering expectations of the institution. If there are no guidelines or behaviour does not meet the regulations 'avoidance' can be opted for, which means avoiding confrontation and not meeting their own needs. If no assistance is required in case of a problem, things just happen and the student can get stuck in the educational process, drop out of school or even dismissed when the relationship is also complementary. As a result of such a threatening situation the level of promoting one's own interest can be raised and they can act as jaystudents while thriving to meet their own requirements, which results in rivalling attitude while in the meantime the level of cooperation is low. This confronting form of behaviour even aggravates the situation accompanied by negative emotions and if both parties stick with their own points of view in interaction, rivalry is coupled by dissatisfaction from the side of both parties. According to the standardised expectations front-line staff must be capable of controlling the situation on both socio-emotional and task level (Bales, 1999). In such cases the proper 'problem solving' and 'compromising' behaviour and emotional control can suppress emotions and increase the satisfaction of both parties. Neither extremely rivalling behaviour, quick emotional reactions nor blackmailing can make front-line staff break the rules but they may be unable to follow the patterns of behaviour expected and can also be involved emotionally. To avoid this, breaking up the relationship (avoidance) is acceptable together with transferring the problematic student to a higher managerial level (conformity). In our research model the high level of promoting one's own interest was set as one of the criteria of jaystudent behaviour as its marked involvement in out-of-standard behaviour is inevitable in generating a conflict. To simulate a situation as realistic as possible volunteers were selected on the basis of the questionnaire by Thomas-Killman when at least 60% of the total number of points was gained in medium or high level of promoting one's own interest. The conflict management ways of the model were utilised in describing the behaviour of the administrative staff.

3. THE OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

The risks of the users perceived in the extraordinary situations of providing services are strongly related to the stability of quality. The consumer-specific nature of the situations is modelled by the typology of services marketing as jaycustomer, i.e. the consumers of non-standard behaviour. In the perceived standard of quality parameters that are regarded important by the institution communication between the students and the representatives of the institution is decisive as attitude is expressed there and in this way it can be examined. In higher education quality management administration is of primary importance as routine tasks are mainly acted out there.

The objective of our research is to compare the perceived behaviour with the expected behaviour patterns from the part of the front-line administrative staff in the case of different 'jaystudent' behaviour at phone encounters. Solving the research problem requires both marketing and psychological approaches.

4. THE STAGES OF THE RESEARCH

During the research the front-line, or more precisely, administrative staff were tested in the state-owned higher education by means of telephone calls. Such a procedure was worked out to evaluate administrative processes that helped analyse the components of satisfaction in such situations when the student (client) behaved in a non-standard way in order to have a picture how administrative staff deals with students in problematic cases.

4.1 Phase I: Paving the way for mystery calling research

A qualitative examination served as the first stage of the procedure within the framework of which focus group interviews were carried out. The basic objective of the four focus group analysis was to found the following quantitative research phase and outline the questions of the standardised questionnaire.

The second step of the procedure consisted of standardised questionnaires between April and May 2012 with the participation of 145 students at a business school in Budapest.

The objective of the research was to survey how many times in general per term the Office of the Registrar or administration is visited and also in what ways (in person, by phone, e-mail) they are contacted and how long it takes. Afterwards students were asked to evaluate the staff of the Registrar's Office on the basis of different points of view (rapidity, readiness to help, well-preparedness, knowledge of the Code of Academic Studies and Examinations etc.)

4.2 Phase II: Mystery calling research

The research is based on standardised questionnaires, in 62 simulated cases with the participation of 15 researchers on the administrative staff of different higher education institutions of business studies.

Defining simulation

The volunteering students had to turn to one of the colleagues of the administrative staff with a problem made up by having chosen one of the predefined jaystudent forms of behaviour in the form of mystery calling to the higher education institution selected. The interaction was evaluated on the basis of the points of view formed during focus group discussions in the form of an observation sheet distributed beforehand.

Dealing with matters on the phone was selected for several reasons. The respondents marked dealing with matters on the phone as one of the areas to be improved during the focus group discussions. Communication restricted to the vocal channel helps students in acting out a role as fewer paraphernalia of acting are necessary than in the case of direct, face to face interaction.

4.3 Ethical issues

Dysfunctional consumer behaviour poses a great challenge for researchers both in terms of methodology and ethics (Fisk et al 2010). In evoking, imagination or simulation participants are asked to perform such socially undesirable illegal form of behaviour that can cause trouble, stress psychologically and in extreme cases, even physically, which is in contrast with the principle of the research according to which all safety precautions must be taken so as not to do any harm to the participants of the research. Due to observation on the spot behaviour can temporarily be modified to meet the expectations of the observer so data can be distorted. In the case of field experiment (Jäckel 2010) participants must be notified afterwards and their consent is necessary while anonymity is guaranteed. Also consent must be obtained if a confidential data is to be recorded or analysed afterward. Such methodological problems those concerned in the research can act out the situation as a role-play, which can be analysed. However, this differs from the natural situation and also distorts behaviour. Our research uniquely mixes methods to simulate the most realistic situation possible under controlled circumstances so that those concerned would not know about the examination, which would otherwise have altered their 'natural' behaviour. Students contacted the administrative staff of different higher education institutions with such matters in which they had their own experience, interested them or heard about them from others. The present research does not analyse the content of the situation. Self-promoting behaviour resulting in conflicts was not far from them on the basis of the preliminary selection. Ethical issues were discussed in details. During the preparatory training session instructions stressed that creating tension must be avoided. This made the situation authentic and lifelike so deceit was excluded. Data were used anonymously and such general results, conclusions are drawn that are independent of any institutions and do not necessitate feedback. Due to ethical issues the analysis of secretly recorded calls was excluded from the research methods. The participants of the research signed a statement of secrecy.

4.4 Preparing the students for simulation

Undergraduates were prepared in person on a training course held one single occasion for the simulation and all of them were experienced in arranging matters. Beforehand, only the students whose level of promoting self interest was high on the basis of the Thomas-Killman model were selected. All the points of the data collection procedure for the thorough documentation of the process were interpreted. The content and application of the structured system of observation points worked out beforehand were reviewed together with the conflict managing model. Ethical issues were also discussed.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS

5.1 The results of the research paving the way for mystery calling research

5.1.1 Focus group interviews on four issues:

Question 1 Alongside what parameters can problematic academic study administrative situations be examined as events to be measured? Which areas are suggested for further improvement?

Primarily it is telephoning and writing e-mails that are practical to be improved for faster administration. Therefore, the professional preparedness of the staff has to be improved. The proper tone and manners must be stressed when dealing with the clients.

Question 2. What key behaviour patterns must be observed in the front-line staff which play a role in satisfaction?

By applying brainstorming technique ideas were collected, which led to the creation of the principal factors. After they were operationalised a structured list of behaviour forms was created with five main components on a four-point Likert scale. In this way neutral answers were excluded.

Question 3. What irregular forms of student behaviour were experienced that created a conflict with the front-line staff and contributed to dissatisfaction?

Same as in Question 2. After they were operationalised, six jaystudent behaviour forms were identified.

Question 4. Control. Interpreting and clarifying the structured list of behaviour forms created beforehand as well as jaystudent types.

There were no relevant changes made to the previous version.

5.1.2 The results of the standardised questionnaires

145 students took part in the survey between the end of April and the beginning of May 2012. Seventy per cent of the students who filled in the questionnaires were full-time students and 30% of them correspondent (part-time) students. Most of them (95 students) contact the Registrar's Office in person fewer than five times a year. The most typical is also 5 occasions per year in the form of phone calls or e-mails while a contact made more than 10 times annually usually characterise a few students. The students described the length of a typical process as follows: Discussing matters usually takes 5-10 minutes with the Registrar's Office and only 12-12 students mentioned half an hour or a longer period, respectively.

Several forums were listed to be marked as a place to turn if a problem has arisen. The most typical form was to contact teachers and lecturers from the department (83 and 83 students), the next most popular form is Facebook and contact the students from the higher classes/years. The last two options were given together so these options can be interrelated as the senior students may provide information on the social facility website (simple and a fast way of contacting them). The possible reason for popularity is that in this case students can receive a personal answer to their tailor-made problems in this way. The official websites of the institutions are also visited in great numbers to gather information. (They also contain official documents- that is why they are popular). The fewest students contact the Modulo (on-line application) system for information.

The satisfaction of the students was examined from several points. They could express the level of their satisfaction on a 4-point scale regarding either the process of administration or the competencies and personal characteristics of the front-line staff. In general 24% of the students are dissatisfied. The level of dissatisfaction is striking in the areas of problem solving, friendliness and accuracy. Twenty per cent of the students consider administration satisfactory while 18% of them think it is acceptable and only 12% are satisfied. This is the lowest value. They were most dissatisfied with the readiness to help and being up-to-date.

Most of them regarded opening hours acceptable. The majority thought the rapidity of administration changeable. Most of them also considered phone calls and e-administration changeable or of a lower standard.

Positive and negative features in the work of the Registrar's Office: Students said it was a positive feature that all programmes have a person in charge at the Registrar's and they also appreciated the system of having a ticket with a number while queuing. These two factors were mentioned by others, too. Many of them also noted rapidity and being nice – most of them among the correspondent students. It is more typical that in general correspondent students depicted a more favourable picture of the Registrar's Office. As a negative feature, unfriendly behaviour, being underinformed and being transferred to other departments were mentioned.

Students were allowed to make suggestions to a more efficient running of the Registrar's. They lacked working in line with the departments and a lot complained about the bad communication between the Registrar's and the departments. They would welcome transforming even the electronic surfaces and a lot of them would be happy to find all information on one single internet site as well as improving the Neptun (university-student interface) functions. Many of them mentioned that they would like to receive all messages /notifications in time (1 week). Moreover, filtering the messages by programmes/fields of study, years would be necessary. Many of the students also complained about the efficiency of the telephoning system while expecting a smoother running. A significant number of suggestions were made about more flexible and frequent opening hours and also the option of making an appointment via the Internet was mentioned. Some of them expressed radical opinions (secretly recorded administration, performance-based salary system).

5.2. The results of Mystery Calling research

Researchers (15) acted out all jaystudent types (6) during the research in 62 cases in total. Two colleges and two universities were contacted in different situations. In most cases the Office of the Registrar, Marketing Department, Department of Foreign Languages and Methodology were called.

The situations were the following: calling off an application to an exam, asking for information, the sum of the tuition fee to be paid during internship, and also contacts were made to ask about acknowledging credits, student grants, internship, optional subjects, dropping a subject, exam results etc. The descriptive statistics of the answers is the following:

How many calls were unsuccessful?

In 35% of the cases several calls were made as no one answered the phone call. A positive result is that in three-quarters of the cases the first call was successful to establish contact.

How many times did it ring?

In 80% 3-5 rings were made till the administrative staff answered but others remembered extreme cases with 15-20 rings.

Did the front-line staff introduce themselves?

Yes: 19 %

No: 81 %

Did they name the institution?

Yes: 34%

No: 66%

Did they identify the student (in the case of a personal problem)?

Yes: 10%

No: 90%

In what percentage was the problem solved?

Was not solved: 29%

Solved in 100%-: 27%

Partly solved: 44%

Were they transferred to somebody else said to be more competent?

Yes: 34%

No: 66%

How many minutes did it take for the person observed to perform a non-standard form of behaviour?

Stick with their standard role: 73%

Within 1-2 minutes: 15%

After 3 minutes: 12%

How long was it conflict-free?

No conflict: 73%

Within 1-2 minutes: 15%

After 3 minutes: 12%

How many conversations did it take to solve the problem?

Not solved at all: 19%

1-2: 44%

3: 37%

5.3 Structured list of behaviour forms to examine front-line staff

The behaviour of the administrative staff targeted was evaluated as follows (Q: Please evaluate the behaviour of the front-line staff following the conversation on a four-point scale. 1 means dissatisfaction while 4 expresses satisfaction.):

We can stress that clarity and loyalty to the institution were given the highest number of points when communication style was evaluated (**Table 1**). When it comes to examining sensitivity to the problem the best result was given to listening to the problem and the worst to examining the problem by means of further questions. In the case of problem solving nearly similar values were assigned and answers are spread to the greatest extent here. Regarding decision making ability on the list of behaviour forms the weakest link is bearing responsibility from the administrators' part as respondents stated. Relatively similar values were assigned to the questions on frustration tolerance, as well.

What else did you expect from the employee of the institution? Who were not satisfied with the services provided would have expected the following: 'showing interest and a positive attitude', 'not telling off rather giving information', 'if he does not know the answer offer to find it out and inform later', 'a normal tone', 'readiness to help', 'suggestions about what to do', 'greater preparedness'.

Style of communication:	average	Std. dev
• friendly: creates an intimate relationship, congruent	2.79	1.14
• courteous: deals with the student with respect following the social standards	3.07	0.95
• clarity: clear what they say, well articulated	3.44	0.67
• ready to help: takes care, deals with the student as a peer, does not expect them to be	3.05	1.09

well informed in academic matters		
• ironic: (evaluation: 1.formal 4. ironic)	1.45	0.81
• loyalty to institution: (evaluation: 1 not loyal 4 loyal)	3.41	0.85
Sensitivity to problem		
• listens to the problem: the student can talk about the entire problem in details	3.43	0.76
• asks for information: asks questions, asks for clarification	2.36	1.12
• understands the problem: the problem is entirely or partly repeated, checks if the partner is aware of it and asks for feedback	2.45	1.11
• understands the situation: states the background and factors of arising problems	2.55	1.14
Problem solving ability		
• well-informed: knows rules, possibilities, similar cases	2.82	1.14
• suggests constructive, common brainstorming: makes and asks for suggestions	2.78	1.51
• explores interests: focuses on common interests, objectives by separating the person from the problem	2.76	1.10
• shows alternatives: considers the needs and the opportunities of the student	2.84	1.03
Decision making ability		
• argues for the best alternative: helps in selecting the most favourable solution	2.82	1.07
• suggests an action plan: the selected solution is broken down into steps	2.72	1.11
• bears responsibility: shows personal attachment, suggests further contact in problem solving	1.80	0.94
• directs communication: gets back to the point	2.97	0.91
Frustration tolerance		
• reacts with cold blood: patient, balanced, calm and does not allow to be provoked emotionally	3.11	1.02
• empathy: understands the extreme feelings of the students and calms them down, does not them off or despise them	2.87	1.12
• realises and analyses the conflict: deals with the student as a peer	2.98	0.96
• firm: not aggressive and not subordinate	3.05	0.90

Table 1. Structured list of behaviour

6. SUMMARY

On the basis of the results of mystery calling the areas that must be improved by all means can be identified. In the exploratory research students complained that the administration is difficult to be contacted, which did not show up markedly in the present research results. Another problem is that when answering the phone the employees of the administrative department do not name either the institution or themselves and only a few of them identify the student. (However, to tell the truth highly confidential situations affecting privacy were not simulated during the research).

In contrast with the qualitative research results and those of the preliminary questionnaires the present results did not justify the problem of the students, namely, that the departments and the Office of the Registrar plays 'table tennis' with the students by referring them to the authority of others. Another positive result is that there were very few conflicts although this can be due to simulating the experiment. The motivation of the student was not the solution of the problem, rather, the proper way of conducting the research, which can be seen as a moderating factor by all means.

7. PRACTICAL APPLICABILITY

The objective is to prepare front-line staff for managing all different types of jaycustomers, stabilise the quality and standard of the work of the front-line staff by continuously monitoring them as well as improve their performance at all time. According to the opinions, criticism and expectations the task of the service provider is to make the front-line processes more perfect. Nevertheless, the objective of our research was not the evaluation of the single front-line staff, rather the exploration of the possible forms of behaviour in non-standard situations.

The results can be applied in practice e.g. in the quality management of higher education on the one hand. On the other hand, they can serve as a basis for further research on front-line based services. Moreover, as a by-product of the research new points of view in the human resource management of services when selecting and controlling front-line staff are also provided. This research will be practically applicable because it can help to develop proactive provider behaviour. If conflicts are defined in an inappropriate manner, it may cause further conflicts. Exploring conflicts will make it possible to focus quality development procedure there where defects occur.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

To carry out the research such students were involved who are motivated and interested in being acquainted with the research process. Although the selected jaystudent type met their attitudes in all cases, it does not mean that they were able to act out the selected experimental problem/situation realistically. Their communication is rather motivated by role-plays than problem solving. However, chances are that different data would have been gathered had students interested in solving their own problems been included.

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