Explaining university student loyalty: theory, method, and empirical research in Chile

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explain student loyalty beyond its customary relationship with student satisfaction by including two relational variables, trust and commitment, two cognitive traits (service familiarity and communication) and one affective trait (opportunism) as moderators of the impact of trust and commitment on loyalty.

Design/methodology/approach – Two relational constructs (trust and commitment) are employed to improve the loyalty model and key comparisons are performed to know if career, cohort and sourcing school generate differences in the explanation of student loyalty.

Findings – Results show that the explanation chain that starts with student satisfaction but continues with the development of student trust and the reaching of student commitment culminates with student loyalty. The moderators (student opportunism, service familiarity, communication, age and available income for education) significantly contribute to the explanatory power of the model. Career is a meaningful differentiator in reaching student loyalty as are student cohort and the type of high school from which the student came.

Research limitations/implications – This is one of first empirical studies on university student loyalty. Future research could test the same or new hypotheses using different samples and contexts.

Practical implications – University policies may benefit from the inclusion of norms regarding relational processes and outcomes such as the value of trust in the interactions and systematic recognition and awards assigned to student commitment achievements.

Originality/value – The explanation chain of customer loyalty was successfully applied to student loyalty, and strengthened with the addition of meaningful moderating variables.

Keywords Commitment, Trust, Communication, Satisfaction, Student loyalty, GIKA-LATAM-2019

Paper type Research paper

Resumen

Propósito – Esta investigación tiene como objetivo explicar la lealtad del estudiante más allá de su relación habitual con la satisfacción del estudiante al incluir dos variables relacionales, confianza y compromiso, dos rasgos cognitivos (familiaridad con el servicio y comunicación) y un rasgo afectivo (oportunismo) como moderadores del impacto de la confianza y Compromiso de lealtad.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque – Se emplean dos construcciones relacionales (confianza y compromiso) para mejorar el modelo de lealtad y se realizan comparaciones clave para saber si la carrera, la cohorte y la escuela de recursos generan diferencias en la explicación de la lealtad de los estudiantes.

HALLAZGOS – Los resultados muestran que la cadena de explicación que comienza con la satisfacción del estudiante, pero continúa con el desarrollo de la confianza del estudiante y el logro del compromiso del estudiante culmina con la lealtad del estudiante. Los moderadores (el oportunismo de los estudiantes, la familiaridad con el servicio, la comunicación, la edad y los ingresos disponibles para la educación) contribuyen significativamente al poder explicativo del modelo. La carrera es un diferenciador significativo para alcanzar la lealtad de los estudiantes, al igual que la cohorte del estudiante y el tipo de escuela secundaria de la cual proviene el estudiante.

Limitaciones/implicaciones de la investigación – Este es uno de los primeros estudios empíricos sobre la lealtad de los estudiantes universitarios. Las investigaciones futuras podrían probar las mismas o nuevas hipótesis utilizando diferentes ejemplos y contextos.
Implicaciones prácticas – Las políticas de la universidad pueden beneficiarse de la inclusión de normas con respecto a los procesos y resultados relacionales, como el valor de la confianza en las interacciones y el reconocimiento sistemático y los premios asignados a los logros de compromiso de los estudiantes.

Originalidad/valor – La cadena de explicación de la lealtad del cliente se aplicó con éxito a la lealtad del estudiante y se fortaleció con la adición de variables moderadoras significativas.


Tipo de papel Trabajo de investigación

1. Introduction
Student loyalty does not seem to depend on student satisfaction with the received educational service and the university that provides it, but on the student relationship with the university providing educational services. It is true that student satisfaction may be an outcome of that relationship, but only one outcome (Annamdevula, 2017; Bitner, 1990; Caruana, 2002; Cronin et al., 2000; Mosahab et al., 2010; Ng, 2018; Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988; Pedro et al., 2018; Snijders et al., 2018; Tong et al., 2018). This study examines the role of two relational variables, trust and commitment, which may constitute the main drivers of student loyalty. Student satisfaction may require the addition of student trust and commitment for it to influence student loyalty in a consistent manner and in the long term.

The role of trust and commitment in B-to-B and B-to-C relationships has been widely explored in the literature (e.g. Morgan and Hunt, 1994). They were specifically included in the analysis of student loyalty by Rojas-Méndez et al. (2009). Using the explanation chain, Vásquez-Parraga et al. (2014) put to the test in their research of customer loyalty, the purpose of this study is to replicate their explanation chain in the determination of student loyalty; how trust and commitment, in this order, carry the effects of student satisfaction to the explanation of student loyalty. In addition, this research explores the moderating role that key consumer attributes (product familiarity, opportunism and communication) and relevant demographic characteristics play in the explanation chain.

What follows includes a brief literature review on the antecedents of student loyalty and the theoretical framework that is adopted, the methodology to model and test the explanation chain of student loyalty and its moderators, the results obtained, and the discussion, conclusions, and managerial implications of the findings.

2. Literature review
Student loyalty to the school has not been often considered a sought-after outcome of education delivery and administration. In emerging countries such as Chile, where this research is performed, higher education has been linked to the social, economic and cultural development of the country (Annamdevula, 2017) with the idea that education may contribute the professional competencies that are required in the economic development of the country (Castells, 2000; Levy and Murnane, 2004). This need generated a boom of universities and other institutions of higher education in many countries (UNESCO, 1995) and their influence has been felt in many industries (Shavit et al., 2007).

The opportunity also produced the entrance of institutions with low-quality education, reason why the quality of education also became an issue to address (Fernández Cruz and Gijón, 2011). As a consequence, some universities started developing strategies that focus on the customer (Fornell et al., 1996; Mazhar and Masood, 2018; Poole et al., 2000) and the student (Clancy and Goastellec, 2007), while other universities opted for economies of scale (Carvalho et al., 2010; Molesworth et al., 2009). Only the universities seeking quality in their programs adopted long-term plans (Austin and Pervaiz, 2017) that aimed at higher levels of student loyalty (Mazhar and Masood, 2018; Taecharungroj, 2014).