DEVELOPING AND TESTING A RELATIONSHIP QUALITY MODEL: THE CONTEXT OF UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS PROGRAMS IN THAILAND[1]

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to develop a concept of the dimensions of relationship quality for students and lecturers, using the Investment Theory. The determinants of relationship quality drawn from the Social Exchange Theory and their outcomes were investigated. Past studies examined relationship quality in various contexts, yet were limited in higher education. Relationship quality dimensions are evolving and mostly capture only "want to" and "ought to" stay in relationships, hence, this study added a "have to" aspect. This study adopted in-depth interviews and a self-administered questionnaire. The 459 useable data from undergraduate students of the international day-program in business of three purposively selected universities were analyzed. This empirical study has found that students' trust, gratitude, and dependence represent comprehensive dimensions, as justified by the three aspects of relationship based on the Investment Theory, of relationship quality. Effective communication was the most significant predictor of trust. Functional quality was the most significant predictor of gratitude. Mentorship was the strongest predictor of relationship quality. These findings contribute that the Social Exchange Theory can be used to explain the reasons for strong student relationships. Accordingly, higher education institutions are recommended to sustain the effective communication, functional quality, and mentorship qualities of their lecturers.

Keywords: Relationship Quality, Investment Model, Social Exchange Theory

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INTRODUCTION

This research aims to study the relationship between university students and lecturers. One of the most widely used relationship constructs is relationship quality (Wang, Hsu, & Chih, 2014; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schroder, & Lacobucci, 2001). Relationship quality is defined as an overall evaluation of how strong, deep, and good a relationship is (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). The relationship quality construct is a higher-order construct that requires at least two dimensions to be effective in measuring relationships in different relationship contexts (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles, 1990). Positive and supportive student-lecturer relationships can help support students in learning and developing academically and socially (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2015). The higher education system also places importance on the student-lecturer relationship in order to produce positive outcomes such as student retention and satisfaction and to deal more effectively with student retention. Despite the importance of the student-lecturer relationship, very few studies have been conducted on student-lecturer relationship quality from students' perspectives (Hennig-Thurau, Langer, & Hansen, 2001; Taecharungroj, 2014).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Many studies have examined relationship quality as a relationship building block in various contexts (Wang et al., 2014; Macintosh, 2007). However, very limited studies have investigated the relationship quality between college students and their lecturers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001). Relationship quality dimensions are ever-changing and mostly capture only "want to" or positive and "ought to" or neutral aspects of relationships. The most widely studied dimensions include trust, satisfaction, and commitment (Wang et al., 2014; Lin & Wu, 2011). In a relationship, students sometimes feel that they "need to" (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014) stay in the relationship with a particular lecturer because there are few alternative lecturers with whom they have a strong relationship. To comprehend the relationship quality dimensions in this study's higher education context, in those three aspects, the Investment Theory should be applied (Hocutt, 1998). Previous relationship quality studies have been concerned with various outcomes of relationship quality, mostly focusing on a positive response such as customer loyalty (Shamdasani & Balakrishnan, 2000). This study adds the long-term loyalty response to more effectively sustain the relationship.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are (1) to explore and develop a set of dimensions of relationship quality between students and their lecturers by adopting the Investment Theory, (2) to determine the factors influencing those types of relationship through the lens of Social Exchange Theory, and (3) to examine the consequences of relationship quality between students and their lecturers by incorporating loyal behavioral intentions.
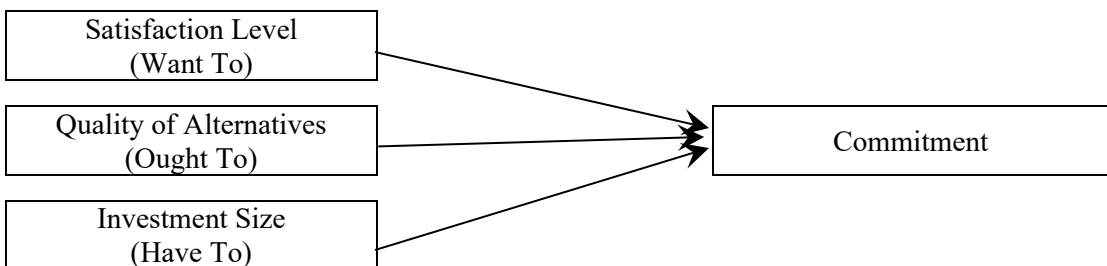
LITERATURE REVIEWS

The Investment Theory

The Investment Model (Rusbult, 1980) explained that one commits oneself in a relationship because he or she is satisfied with that relationship, in other words, they want to stay, the alternative relationship is poor (ought to), and/or the investment in the relationship is high (have to) (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Le & Agnew, 2003). Even though the Investment Model was first investigated in the context of romantic relationships (Rusbult, 1980), the model has been examined in various kinds of relationship (Goode & Harris, 2007; Sornsri, 2015).

Satisfaction, representing the "want to persist" aspect of a relationship (Rusbult et al., 1998), is the difference between the value received and the expectation from the relationship (Rusbult, 1980). People will build a stronger relationship with the service provider when they feel very satisfied with the relationship, when there are few alternative providers, and when they have

a significant level of investment in the relationship (Moon & Bonney, 2007). The quality of alternatives represents the "ought to persist" aspect of a relationship (Rusbult et al., 1998), and is the attraction of the best available alternative to the present relationship in fulfilling a customer's need. Unless there is any choice or a better choice, a customer should persist in the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1998). Investment size represents the "have to persist" aspect of a relationship (Rusbult et al., 1998), and refers to the extent and importance of valuable inputs to the relationship. These resources will decline or disappear in value when the relationship is discontinued (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult et al., 1998).

Social Exchange Theory

This research applies the Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Cook & Emerson, 1987) to examine the determinants of relationship quality between students and lecturers. This theory explains that individuals rationally compare the actual value or cost-benefit

Source: Rusbult, C. (1980)
Figure 1: The Investment Model of Rusbult (1980)

ratio in the relationship to their expected value when they decide to build, maintain, or stop relationships with others (Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). People rationally weigh benefits with costs when they form a relationship. They are more likely to build a stronger relationship when they receive more value than they expect (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). When these two parties interact with each other several times to exchange social goods such as love, services, or information, they have an obligation to each other and they enter into interdependence (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). With these, high relationship quality can arise.

Relationship Quality

Relationship quality is defined as the level and nature of the relationship that overall provides benefit while reducing costs and risks despite the fact that there may be both positive and negative experiences from the relationship as probably occurs from several continuous interactions and transactions (Palmatier et al., 2006; Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997; Macintosh, 2007; Moliner, 2009).

To measure the relationship quality effectively, there should be at least two dimensions (Crosby et al., 1990). Among most of the dimensions, trust, satisfaction, and commitment are most widely used (Crosby et al., 1990; Henning-Tharau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002). However, these dimensions have kept changing and capture only the positive aspect of a relationship, or the "want to" reason for the relationship. Some researchers recommend adding "ought to" and "need to" reasons in order to create a stronger

and more sustainable relationship (Crosby et al., 1990; Roberts, Varki, & Brodie, 2003; Wu, 2011). However, studies in those areas are quite limited (Moliner, Javier, Rosa, & Luis, 2007; Vesel & Zabkar, 2010).

Previous studies used different theories or approaches to apply the dimensions for relationship quality. These theories, for example, include trust and satisfaction dimensions (Crosby et al., 1990), Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This study uses Investment Theory to develop the relationship quality dimensions.

Relationship Quality Dimensions in This Study

For this study, trust, gratitude, and dependence are the three dimensions reflecting the "want to", "ought to", and "need to" types of relationship. Trust is the willingness of a person to rely on the exchange partner in whom he or she has confidence (Moorman, Deshpande, & Zaltman, 1993). Trust exists when one has confidence and positive expectations for the other party (Gounaris, 2005). Customers want to build relationships with their service providers that show trust. Moreover, trust enables the two relational partners to obtain long-term benefits (Ganesan 1994). Gratitude is an important value of Thai culture. Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff, and Kardes (2009) recommended gratitude as an additional important obligation-related factor in forming a relationship. Based on Palmatier et al. (2009) and Wolfram, Mohr, and Schyns (2007), this study defines gratitude as the feelings of

students related to their expressions of gratefulness, thankfulness, appreciation, and respect towards their lecturers. Dependence is defined as ones' need to rely upon the relationship with the other party in exchange for goal achievements or valuable benefits irreplaceable in other relationships (Ganesan, 1994; Anderson & Robertson, 1995; Keith, Lee, & Lee, 2004).

Determinants of Relationship Quality in This Study

The examination of the literature, SET perspectives, and insights from the in-depth interviews revealed five factors that can help enhance the quality of the student-lecturer relationship, specifically the lecturer's technical quality, functional quality, effective communication, fairness, and mentorship. Based on the previous literature, the antecedents in this study were selected based on the facts that the variables were significantly related to relationship quality in previous studies. The present study also focused on the variables that were not found to have a significant correlation with relationship quality regarding the "want to" aspects in previous research with the hope that they would have a significant impact on this study's newly developed relationship quality dimensions with the "want to" and "have to" aspects in this study. For example, expertise (an indicator of technical quality) (Spake & Megehee, 2010; Cheng, Chen, & Chang, 2008) was found to have inconsistent significance. It is expected that the new comprehensive dimensions of relationship quality would yield a significant impact in the present study.

Outcomes of Relationship Quality in This Study

Previous empirical studies relevant to relationship quality in higher education (Bowen, 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Taecharungroj, 2014) and professional service contexts (Crosby et al., 1990; Barksdale, Johnson, & Suh, 1997) revealed several significant outcomes of relationship quality. These outcomes include customer loyalty, student loyalty, anticipation of future interaction, return intention, intention to recommend the course, to take the advanced course, and to take a course with that instructor again. For example, Bowden (2011) and Taecharungroj (2014) found that student trust had a positive impact on student loyalty. In a professional service context, trust had a positive impact on the customer's anticipation of future interaction (Crosby et al., 1990).

The intention to recommend, the intention to continue, and the long-term orientation towards the lecturers were examined. All of these outcomes are captured from the conceptualizations of loyalty related behavioral intentions in a service relationship (Chai, Malhotra, & Dash, 2015). Based on Chai et al. (2015), the intention to recommend, the social response, refers to the students' intention to recommend the lecturers with whom they have had a high quality relationship, to other students in the future. The intention to continue, the instrumental response, means an intention to continue studying with the same lecturer again next time or in the future. One can investigate long-term orientation and long-term behavioral intention interchangeably.

Ganesan (1994) found that trust and dependence were crucial in creating long-term orientation in a dyadic relationship context. These outcomes were captured to incorporate both short-term and long-term impacts of relationship quality directed at lecturers.

In summary, the dimensions of relationship quality in this study captured trust, gratitude, and dependence. Influential factors included effective communication (Sharma & Patterson), technical quality (Monferrer-Tirado et al., 2016), functional quality (Taecharungroj, 2014), fairness (Giovanis et al., 2015), and mentorship (Fuentes et al., 2014), thereby resulting in the recommendations

of intention, continuance intention, and long-term orientation (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Palmatier et al., 2009; Giovanis et al., 2015).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The framework in Figure 2 depicts the effects of the effective communication, technical quality, functional quality, fairness, and mentorship of lecturers on students' trust, gratitude, and dependence in respect of the lecturers, and the consequent influence on recommendation intention, continuance intention, and long-term orientation.
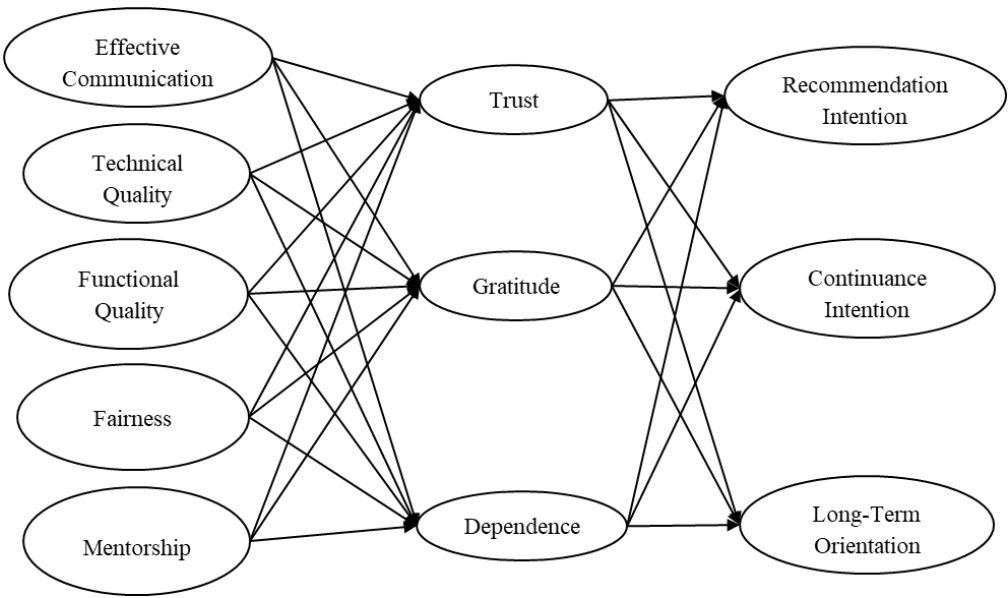

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The Effect of Effective Communication on Relationship Quality

Based on Sharma and Petterson's definition (1999), this study defined effective communication as formal and informal communication between lecturers and students, in a prompt and appropriate manner, on important and relevant knowledge or current news. Morgan and Hunt (1994) found that frequent effective communication could enhance the level of trust, helping both parties to eliminate conflicts, alleviate doubts or problems, meet expectations, and explore opportunities (Sharma & Patterson, 1999). Previous studies (Sharma & Patterson, 1999; Cheng et al., 2008; Yen, Wang, & Horng, 2011) support the idea that effective communication is positively associated with relationship quality.

The SET recommends that individuals rationally compare the actual value or cost-benefit ratio to their expected value when they decide to build, maintain, or stop a relationship with others (Ensher et al., 2001; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). This implies that students rationally weigh benefits with costs when they form a relationship. From our exploratory research, students who have benefited from the effective communication of lecturers, which can help to overcome their difficulties in learning, are more likely to maintain the relationship as a result of the trust, gratitude, and dependence developed. Therefore,

H1a: Effective communication is positively related to trust.

H1b: Effective communication is positively related to gratitude.
H1c: Effective communication is positively related to dependence.

The Effect of Technical Quality on Relationship Quality

On the basis of Sharma and Patterson's definition (1999), technical quality emphasizes the core service delivered by lecturers and is related to student outcomes. Lecturers provide knowledge and general guidance as well as produce the learning outcomes for students. Students perceive technical quality from the actual performance of lecturers. This technical quality refers to the competence of lecturers in achieving the learning outcomes for their students, helping them to reach their goals. Previous studies in a higher education context (Taecharungroj, 2014; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001) and professional services (Sharma & Patterson, 1999; Monferrer-Tirado, Estrada-Guillén, Fandos-Roig, Moliner-Tena, & Sánchez García, 2016) have given support for the idea that technical quality is positively associated with relationship quality.

Drawing on the SET, students are more likely to have a quality relationship with lecturers who provide them with greater benefits, derived from technical quality (knowledge, competence, experiences) and lower costs (e.g. opportunity cost, money, time, behavioral uncertainty, energy) (Hunt, Arnett, & Madhavaram, 2006; Cook & Emerson, 1987). Therefore,

H2a: Technical quality is positively related to trust.

H2b: Technical quality is positively related to gratitude.
H2c: Technical quality is positively related to dependence.

The Effect of Functional Quality on Relationship Quality

In reference to Sharma and Patterson (1999) and Monferrer-Tirado et al. (2016), functional quality focuses on the process of how efficiently lecturers deliver their teaching service. It emphasizes the interaction between students and lecturers, which differentiates two lecturers. In the relationship between students and lecturers, functional quality refers to how the lecturers behave professionally, responsively, considerately, and sympathetically whenever the students interact with them.

Previous studies in a higher education context (Taecharungroj, 2014; Klincumhom & Ruengtrakul, 2014) and professional services (Sharma & Patterson, 1999; Monferrer-Tirado et al., 2016) have given support to the idea that functional quality is positively associated with relationship quality.

Drawing on the SET, students are more likely to have a quality relationship with lecturers who provide them with greater benefits, derived from functional quality (e.g. moral obligation, customization) and lower costs (e.g. opportunity cost, behavioral uncertainty, several interactions) (Hunt et al., 2006; Cook & Emerson, 1987). Therefore,

H3a: Functional quality is positively related to trust.
H3b: Functional quality is positively related to gratitude.

H3c: Functional quality is positively related to dependence.

The Effect of Fairness on Relationship Quality

Following Forret and Love's statement (2008), this study points out that a lecturer who is fair to his or her students is treating all students equally with clear and consistent processes. He applies the same set of rules to all students in class and has no bias when making a decision (e.g. fair grades). He has a system to prevent favoritism. He allows students to voice their concerns. From our in-depth interviews, fairness of the lecturer makes students feel confident and less anxious. Previous studies in the service context (Giovanis, Athanasopoulou, & Tsoukatos, 2015; Wat & Shaffer, 2005; Chen, Yu-Chih Liu, Shin Sheu, & Yang, 2012; Forret & Love, 2008) have supported the idea that fairness is positively associated with relationship quality.

Drawing on the SET, students who have benefited from the fair treatment of their lecturers, which helps them to feel more confident and less anxious to learn with their lecturers, are likely to maintain the relationship, characterized by trust, gratitude, and dependence. Benefits in this case can be in the form of risk reduction; while costs arising from behavioral uncertainty can be reduced (Hunt et al., 2006; Cook & Emerson, 1987). Therefore,

H4a: Lecturer fairness is positively related to trust.
H4b: Lecturer fairness is positively related to gratitude.

H4c: Lecturer fairness is positively related to dependence.

The Effect of Mentorship on Relationship Quality

Based on Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001) and Fuentes, Alvarado, Berdan, and DeAngelo (2014), lecturer mentorship is part of the teaching-related processes that students evaluate under the university's service quality, and it can be performed formally (as assigned) or informally (as with role commitment). Fuentes et al. (2014) explained that lecturer mentorship is one type of student-lecturer interaction, which assists students in making achievements; it generates a sense of reciprocity, interpersonal relationship, greater experience, learning development, and having a role model. Vesel and Zabkar (2010) found that personal interaction quality had a positive impact on relationship quality (satisfaction, trust, affective commitment, calculative commitment).

Drawing on the SET, students who have received these benefits from the mentorship of their lecturers are likely to main the relationship characterized by trust, gratitude, and dependence. Previous studies in a higher education context (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Fuentes et al., 2014) have supported the idea that mentorship is positively associated with relationship quality. Therefore,

H5a: Lecturer mentorship is positively related to trust.
H5b: Lecturer mentorship is positively related to gratitude.
H5c: Lecturer mentorship is positively related to dependence.

The Effect of Trust on Loyal Behavioral Intentions

Trust has been indicated as a necessary component of relationship quality in a professional service context (Jiang, Henneberg & Naude, 2012; Bowden, 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Crosby et al., 1990), which can create many positive outcomes for service providers, such as customer loyalty, student loyalty, anticipation of future interaction, long-term relationship orientation. Our exploratory research findings showed that students' trust positively influences their recommend-ation intention, continuance intention, and long-term orientation.

Previous empirical studies showed that trust had a positive impact on the anticipation of future interaction (Crosby et al., 1990). Trust was demonstrated as being essential in developing a long-term relationship orientation (Jiang et al., 2012). The effect of trust in these service contexts can be used to imply the effects of students' trust in the higher education context (Bowden, 2011). Bowden (2011) and Taecharungroj (2014) found that student trust had a positive impact on student loyalty as reflected by positive word-of-mouth from students and willingness to maintain their relationship as well as to return to their higher education provider. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001) found that student trust in the personnel of the institution, including academic staff, had a positive effect on student loyalty. Therefore,

H6a: Trust positively affects recommendation intention.
H6b: Trust positively affects continuance intention.

H6c: Trust positively affects long-term orientation.

The Effect of Gratitude on Loyal Behavioral Intentions

Based on Palmatier et al. (2009) and our in-depth interview findings, when students are grateful to their lecturers, they feel thankful and respectful to the lecturer, appreciate studying with the lecturer, and are impressed by the lecturer. Simon, Tossan, and Guesquière (2015) and Barksdale et al. (1997) suggested that gratitude has a positive effect on repurchase intention, positive word-of-mouth intention, and return intention. Students are grateful to lecturers, as they retain a positive feeling towards the kindness and support that the lecturers have provided to them. In line with this, Curran and Rosen (2006) determined that when students had a positive attitude toward the course as a result of the instructor, they had a stronger intention to recommend the course, to take the advanced course, or to take other courses with that instructor again. In addition, based on Palmatier et al. (2009), this study implied that students who are grateful to lecturers that provided them with benefits which are not easily replaced by other lecturers, would be loyal to their lecturers, as it would be costly to switch the relationship. Therefore,

H7a: Gratitude positively affects recommendation intention.
H7b: Gratitude positively affects continuance intention.
H7c: Gratitude positively affects long-term orientation.

The Effect of Dependence on Loyal Behavioral Intentions

The students' dependence on lecturers is understood as their need to maintain a relationship with and rely on their lecturers, the importance of lecturers to their future study and moral encouragement, and having non-replaceable lecturers (Ganesan, 1994). Students feel that the relationship with their lecturers is so important and valuable (Keith et al., 2004) that they depend on the lecturers as a result of the students' strong current emotional attachment coupled with their perceived unnecessity to seek out alternative viable lecturers (EvanschitzkyIyer, Plassmann, Niessing, & Meffert, 2006).

Dependence is related to switching costs (White & Yanamandram, 2007). When the switching cost is high, students will depend on their lecturers in spite of sometimes being dissatisfied; this occurs when outcomes received from the lecturers are important and very valuable, and these outcomes are greater than those offered by the best alternative lecturer, and the student has few alternative lecturers (Ganesan, 1994; Bendapudi & Berry, 1997). Findings of recent studies relevant to dependence (Giovanis et al., 2015; Jiang et al., 2012) support the idea that dependence influences behavioral and attitudinal loyalty, long-term orientation, and loyalty intention, respectively. Bowden (2011) argued that student calculative commitment (dependence-based) has a positive impact on student loyalty. Our in-depth interview findings demonstrated this accordingly. Thus,

H8a: Dependence positively affects recommendation intention.
H8b: Dependence positively affects continuance intention.
H8c: Dependence positively affects long-term orientation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted exploratory in-depth interviews and descriptive research by employing a questionnaire survey. The sample consisted of undergraduate students of the international day-program in business administration from purposively selected leading universities in Bangkok and its vicinity. 65.1 percent of our sample were female while 34.9 percent were male. 27.2 percent of the respondents major in finance, 23.1 percent of them in international business management, 15 percent in accounting, and 13.9 percent in marketing. 54.9 percent of the respondents are currently studying in year 4, while 41.6 percent are in year 3. 185 of the questionnaires collected from a private university were valid, 172 from one public university, and 102 from another public university. In total, data from 459 questionnaires was usable. This study was approved as an exemption review from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand (Certificate dated January 24, 2017). The item measures in the questionnaire, used the 1-5 Likert scale, and were adapted from established sources. The questionnaires were collected during March-May 2017.
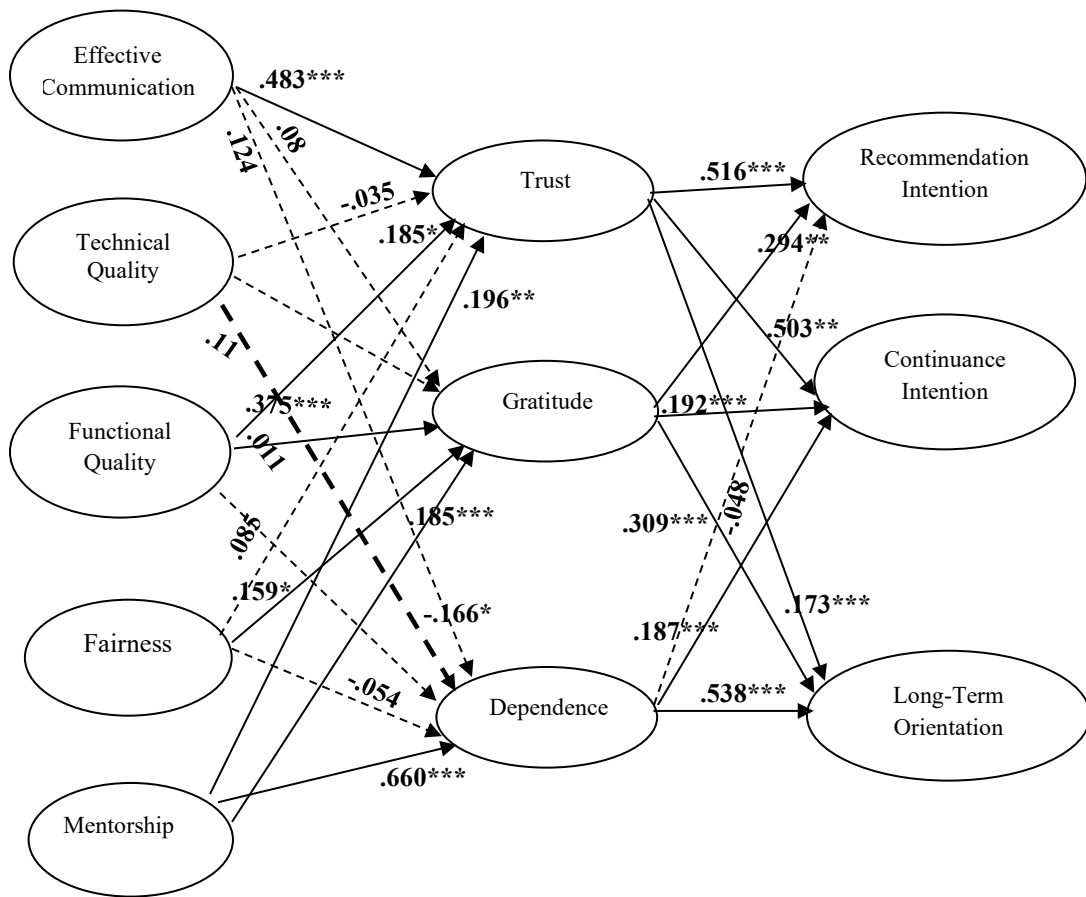
RESULTS OF HYPOTHESIS TESTING

The reliability, confirmatory factor analysis, and convergent and discriminant validity were achieved. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to test the hypotheses of the study. Fifteen hypotheses were supported. The hypothesis testing results are presented in Figure 3.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Relationship Quality Dimensions

In response to our first research objective, gratitude was found to be the most explained dimension. Dependence played the most important role in explaining long-term orientation, while trust played the second most important role in encouraging recommendation and continuance intentions. This indicates that the Investment Theory (Rusbult, 1980) could be applied to capture the dimensions of relationship quality in an educational context. This discovery has introduced new insights to the lecturers and administrators of higher education institutions. To academic researchers, this is in line with the suggestion of Hocutt (1998) who recommended the empirical testing of the three dimensions of relationship by applying this theory in the study of professional services. When students perceive a high relationship quality with their lecturers, they would not only provide positive word-of-mouth, as found in this study, but also probably become loyal to their faculty and university (Taecharungroj, 2014) and

Notes: χ^2 (N = 459, df = 1186) = 3181.52, p < 0.001; NFI = 0.794, RFI = 0.779, IFI = 0.86, TLI = 0.849, and CFI = 0.859; GFI = 0.772; RMSEA = 0.061. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05

Figure 3: Path Model

have greater confidence in the subject being taught (Micari & Pazos, 2012).

Determinants of Relationship Quality

To meet the second research objective, effective communication was discovered to be the most significant predictor of trust. Lecturers should communicate with their students frequently, to foster a mutual trust. After

class, lecturers can discuss and exchange opinions regarding trends among students to keep themselves updated as well as strengthen students' understanding about the content being taught in class. Nevertheless, effective communication did not have an impact on gratitude and dependence. This may be due to a lack of informal communication in a higher education context (Ural, 2009).

Functional quality, fairness, and mentorship can enhance students' gratitude towards their lecturers. However, functional quality was the most significant predictor of gratitude to be performed through willingness to help, compliments, prompt support, care, and friendliness. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) maintained that the lecturers' role in developing their relationship with students is to act properly as a friendly person. Yet, functional quality did not have an effect, on the dependence of students. The findings are similar to those of Wetzels, De Ruyter, and Van Birgelen (1998). In the context of our study, it may be due to a lack of sufficient psychological support (Bowen, 2011).

Mentorship and technical quality were significant determinants of dependence. The effect of mentorship is in line with the findings of Vesel and Zabkar (2010). However, it is also noted that technical quality reduces dependence. This might be because lecturer's technical quality coupled with his or her personality may have an effect on dependence. Students may not feel dependent on a competent lecturer who does not understand them. In addition, students these days, have become more independent learners (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Students at present are becoming increasingly independent in self-learning due to the popularization of the internet. This likely reduces their dependency on the class-room mode of teaching. Unpredictably, technical quality turned out not to have a significant effect on either trust or gratitude. Mentorship was also found to be the strongest predictor of relationship quality, and thereby should be performed essentially

and sustained in undergraduate programs of study.

Consequences of Relationship Quality

In response to our third research objective, trust has the strongest effect on both recommendation intention and continuance intention. Dependence has the strongest positive effect on long-term orientation. This is consistent with the findings of Wetzels et al. (1998) and Jiang et al. (2012). The faculty should invest their effort, especially on mentorship, in cultivating students' dependence on their lecturer, to develop the student-lecturer relationship. Long-term oriented and loyal students may support their lecturers and the university in the future after they graduate (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001). The second most significant effect was between trust and recommendation intention, followed by the continuance intention. To achieve that, the first priority should be placed on efforts to improve the effective communication of lecturers.

Dependence had a positive effect on continuance intention and long-term orientation, but not on recommendation intention. This non-significant effect aligns with the findings of Verhoef, Franses, and Hoekstra (2002). A possible reason might be that the students in our study may not feel so much dependent now with their lecturers, as seen from our mean score of the dependence construct, that they would voluntarily recommend those lecturers to other students. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001) asserted that a part of students' relationship with the university is a locked-in type. Thus, their dependence on the relationship with the

lecturers may decline after they have completed the course.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our research findings, undergraduate program directors, management, and lecturers should provide support in enhancing students' trust, gratitude, and dependence to strengthen students' relationship quality with their lecturers. Higher education institutions should also monitor these three aspects. These parties should ensure that lecturers sustain their effective communication, functional quality, and mentorship qualities.

This study's findings should be interpreted with care due to some limitations. First, our findings on the effect of effective communication on gratitude and dependence were not significant, probably due to a measurement limitation. In future, researchers should consider adapting and validating the measurements of effective communication to include two-sided communication. Second, our hypothesized model was tested using the survey data based only on students' perspectives. Therefore, future research may analyze the dyadic students-lecturers relationship. Third, data were gathered from Thai students of the international BBA program of only three universities in Bangkok and its vicinity. Fourth, more public and private universities may be approached in the future as additional university contexts for the study. International students should be also studied.

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