

Antecedents of Satisfaction Among University Students From People's Republic of China in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study presents the literature review on the basic ideas of cultural orientation, service quality, adjustment, and satisfaction issues among Mainland Chinese students studying in Malaysian HEIs. It starts with discussing the issues related to globalization, HEIs, and international students. After that the theories of cultural orientation, service quality, adjustment, and satisfaction are explained. This is followed by a depiction of the research model, some relevant research findings, and the theoretical framework of this study.

Keywords: Service quality, behavioural intention, customer satisfaction, and SERVQUAL model, Malaysia Public Universities

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Globalization and internationalization have made the world smaller and smaller, encouraging more and more people to live or work outside of their home countries (Brislin, 1981). Each year, the number of students studying in overseas HEIs is also increasing to gain advanced knowledge and various experiences. In order to attract more students from overseas, HEIs need to adjust their strategies to fulfill the requirements of international students, particularly in furnishing their service with global appeals (Bartol and Martin, 1998). It is natural that all students have their own expectations on the university that they are about to enroll in. To fulfill their expectation and satisfaction, the HEIs need to understand their perceptions comprehensively (Khan et al, 2014, Qureishi et al, 2014). To satisfy their expectations, Parasuraman et al. (1985) once stated that universities should continue to adhere and improve their universities with quality service. This view is supported based on a study on Turkish students in a Malaysian university by Rasli et al. (2014).

Based on Steele's (2008) study, most overseas students prefer to study in English speaking countries or in countries that are more similar to their home country's culture. Culture orientation is an important issue because a country's culture is what differentiates it from other countries through the unique identity created. With more unique cultures being created, a diversity of cultural development is formed (Zhong, 2012), making our world more vibrant and colorful. However, it is also this diversity that has caused cultural differences, culture crisis, or cultural shocks between nations. Therefore, it becomes crucial to study the similarities between different cultures to minimize predictable obstacles that it may bring. When the effect of globalization is taken into account together with the overseas' students issues in perceived service quality, cultural orientation, and adjustment, it becomes even more crucial for the HEIs to understand and formulate strategies that can lead to competitive improvement initiatives (Khan et al, 2014). Therefore, this paper intends to present a review on existing literature by introducing the related models and theories that are connected to the subject of this research, i.e., culture orientation, service quality, adjustment, and satisfaction.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The successful of higher education can be measure through students satisfaction if the institutions able to provide continuous excellent services. In other words, the service provided to customers (students) by a company directly impacts the company's profits as it is directly related with customers' perceptions of services and satisfaction, and thereby developing customer retention and loyalty (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000, Yusoff, R. M., and Khan, F. 2013). This is an important concept because researchers have found that it costs a lot more to attract new customers than to retain current customers (Oliver, 1999, Nazir et al, 2014) and it is more likely for repeat customers to develop steadfast loyalty toward the business (David & Annarand, 2008).

2.1 Culture Orientation

Cultural orientation is about the people's preferences in think style, sense or act driven by culture (Rosinski, 2003). It also can be defined as the degree to which individuals influenced by the norms, traditions, or other cultural elements. On the other hand, cultural orientation is defined as: "the degree of association between individuals and their community in a polarized field of discourse". Understanding the cultural

orientation in host country can help overseas students get ready mentally to face the new circumstance (Efron, 2004). In 2001, Hofstede modified the definition into: “Culture is the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others” (p. 9).

Culture is a group of people who hold a similar form of thought due to the analogous social or educative experiences. This form of thought varies according to the community’s types of group, regions or countries (Torres, 2006), and socio-cultural environment changes can also lead to alliteration in cultural orientation (Tang et al., 2013). In Hofstede’s theory, the most prominent and influential studies concerning on culture that can influence a workplace in a globalized world (Christie et al., 2003). There are four cultural dimensions theory to assess and distinguish the form of thought, expressed as the ethno cultural differences, then the fifth dimension, which is named time orientation, was added in 1991 based on the research by Bond.to develop a Hofstede (1980). In figure 1, it is a systematic framework for differentiating national cultures that has been proposed.

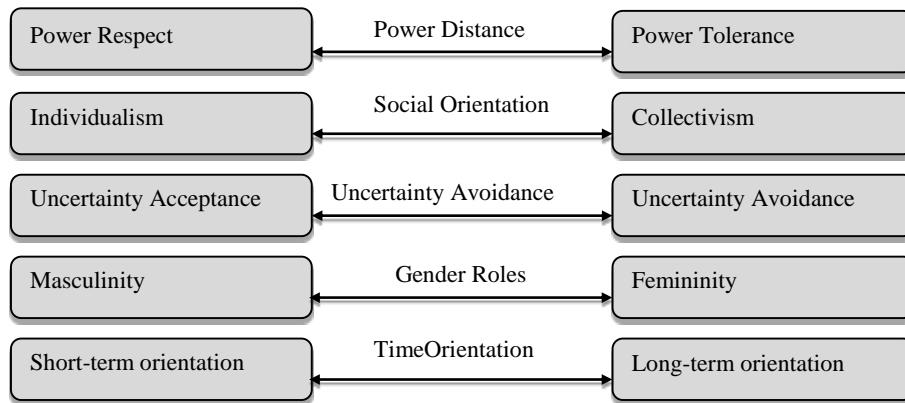


Figure 1 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions
Source: Ehrenfreund et al. (2010)

Power distance is the acceptance and expectation of unequal distribution of power in a society, especially for the powerless people (Hofstede, 1997). High PDI means that the culture is tolerant of unequal distribution of power. In lower PDI society, the members share power and are living in a more equal environment (Hofstede, 2001). Individualism (IDV) is a kind of social orientation that can be described as the degree to which individuals is integrated into community or group (Hofstede, 1980; Ehrenfreund et al., 2010). According to Stata (1992), a society is: “a collection of individuals under individualism, where the individual is the basic unit of reality, value, and achievement”. In high IDV culture, people pay more attention on taking care of their own or family. Uncertainty avoidance (UAI) is the tolerance for uncertainty, unplanned event and ambiguity in a society (Hofstede, 2001). It measures whether the people in a society are trying to control their future or just accept the fate. In a high UAI score society, people work in a structured environment under strict laws, rules, and guidelines (Hofstede, 1984).

On the contrary, a society with low UAI is not afraid of uncertainties and changes (Hofstede, 2010). Masculine (MAS) is the extent of competition, achievement and success orientation in the society. With a high score of MAS, it advocates that competition, achievement, and success are dominant value in the society compare with low MAS signifies that the society is more ‘feminine’, i.e., the people care more about the quality of life rather than success in their career (Hofstede et al., 2001). Long-term orientation (LTO) can be expressed as the extent to which the society upholds traditional values. High LTO score means that the society is tolerant of changes to their traditions or is more pragmatic and low LTO score means that the changes is only short-term or the society is more resistive to changes in their traditions. The society also treasures conventional and historical value more than pragmatic changes (Hofstede et al., 2010). Based on Brown (1994) and Tang et al. (2013), an individual’s cultural orientation varies with ethno cultural environment changes. In the context of Malaysian and Chinese’s cultural dimension index values, Figure 2 shows that the two countries’ ethno cultural difference is significant.

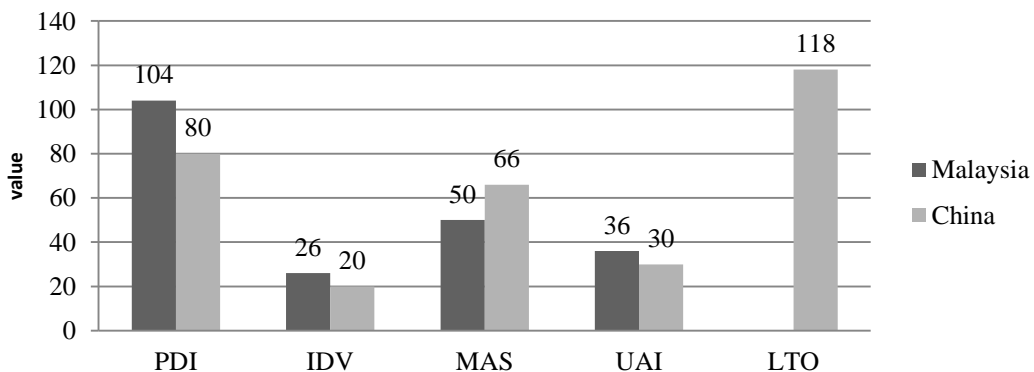


Figure 2 Comparison of China-Malaysia on hofstede's cultural dimensions
Source: <http://geert-hofstede.com/malaysia.html>
<http://geert-hofstede.com/china.html>

2.2 Adjustment

Adjustment is defined as a psychological process for individuals to adapt to a new environment through managing the problems, needs, behaviors, and requirements of daily life (Halonen & Santrock, 1997). Moreover, adjustment is the behavioral process of balancing conflicting needs and the obstacles between the individual and the circumstance (Arkoff, 1968), adjustment to adapt new environment such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Adjustment exists in two levels – the individual level and the group level. At the individual level, adjustment is a process to decrease psychological stress effectively. At the group level, it becomes a social learning process to interact with the host socio-cultural environment (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). Based on Ward and Kennedy (1994) used to relate the acculturation theory to both psychological and socio-cultural aspects of adjustment.

As a social issue, a barrage of researchers have paid attention on adjustment issues faced by overseas students (Mehdizadeh and Scott, 2005; Reynolds, 2010; Zhu, 2012), to adjust to a new environment is often a big issue for overseas students, not forgetting that this is a time-consuming process. Based on the pervious research by Fang (2010), 85% oversea students felt that the culture of the host country is different from their homeland. In that study, only 10.5% respondents were able to adjust to their host culture within three months, and 21.1% needed more than one year.

2.3 Acculturation Theory

In year 1918, cultural acculturation issue started to gain researcher attention that involve in different time periods and fields such as psychology, anthropology, and sociology. The numerous theories and definitions have been combined to describe the elements of the acculturative process (Rudmin, 2003). The acculturation theory was introduced by John Schumann in year 1978, which described on how the socio-cultural perspective affects the learner on picking up a second or target language (Schumann, 1978). This theory identifies that people need to pay more attention in the aspect of how social and psychological factors involve language teaching and learning rather than the nature of a language or psychological process necessary to acquire a language.

Acculturation plays an important role in this model because it is a cluster of social-psychological factors (Schumann, 1978, 1990). Acculturation is: “the behavior changing process in culture adoption led by social environment change and psychological change” (Sam & Berry, 2010). In other words, it involves behavioral changes in a person due to his/her union with different cultures or when he/she encounters a new culture that has been instilled into his/her thought and behavior. Figure 3 presents a relationship framework to understand acculturation between original culture A and B. It shows that acculturation starts when the cultures come into contact with each other. The influence of acculturation can be categorized into two divisional levels of change: group and individual. At group level, it involves social environment changes that can result in integration of the two cultures. Meanwhile, at the individual level, cultural integration leads to acculturative stress and individual routine behavior changes; this can bring psychological changes and complete adaption to the individual.

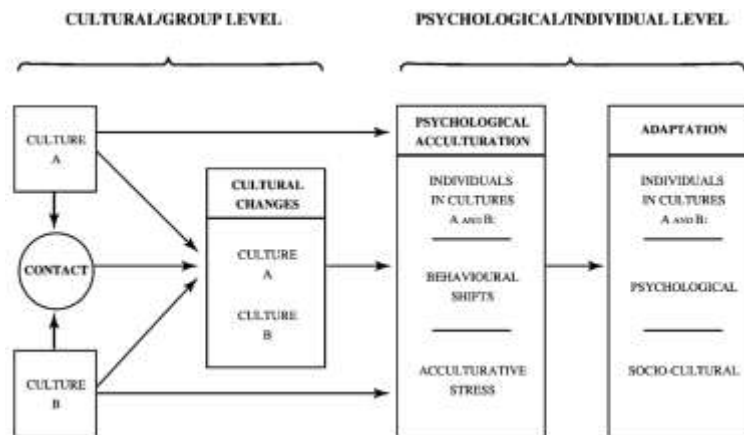


Figure 3 Framework of understanding acculturation theory
Source: Berry (2005)

Based on Brown’s theory, there are four successive stages of acculturation is a dynamic process that explains the adjustment issue faced by international students during their scholastic life outside of their homeland. Better adaption to a new culture is important to reduce the students’ cultural stress and boost up their concentration on their studies (Ward, 1999). Therefore, HEIs have to provide all the necessary supports to assist international students to adapt to the host culture and surrounding. See figure 4.

At the first stage, the individual is excited over the new surroundings, this happens when a new student has just arrived at his/her host country. After a period of time, the student will experience culture shock when he/she feels that the host country’s culture is clashing with his/her own images and sense of security. As he/she continues to stay in the host country, he/she will gradually or tentatively recover and start to accept the differences in the aspects of thinking and feeling, which is generally called as culture stress. Finally, the person will accept, adapt, or assimilate with the new host culture; this shows that he/she is adjusting to the new culture (Barros, 2006; Barjesteh and Vaseghi, 2012).

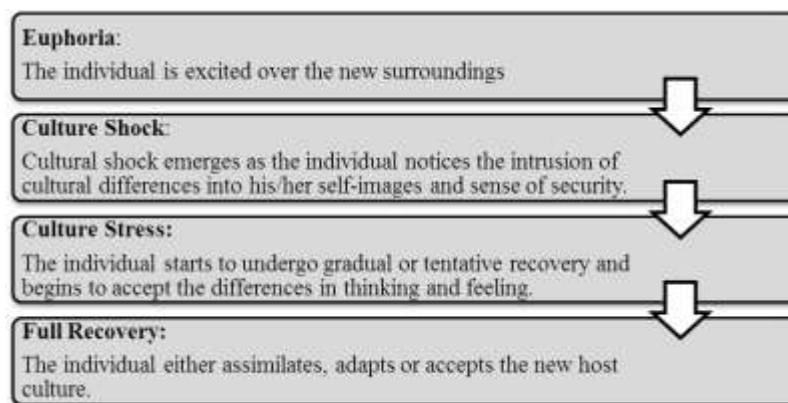


Figure 4 Brown's four successive stages of acculturation
Source: Brown (1994)

2.4 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (1943, 1954) is one of the most widely used theories of human motivation in the psychology field. Human motivation is: "a process used for arrangement of energy to maximize the satisfaction of needs" (Pritchard and Ashwood, 2008). In year 1954, Maslow identified that unsatisfied needs is the main motivating factor while the most urgent needs are the most powerful motivator driving human behavior. Researcher believes that human being can be viewed as an organized and systematic unit, and the vast majority of personal desires and impulses are interrelated. There are five stages of hierarchy needs, arranged according to the vital factors in human life from the very basic to the most complex. When the lower level needs have been satisfied, people will seek to satisfy the next level of needs, and the satisfied needs will no longer become a motivating factor.

In the 1970s, the five stages of Maslow's hierarchy of needs were transformed into seven major types of needs by adding Cognitive needs and Aesthetic needs (Gleitman, et al. 1999). This newer model recognizes people's hunt for knowledge as a general kind of needs and showed that the relationship between individuals' knowledge desire and other levels of needs. In this regard, it is viewed as a more suitable model to investigate the adjustment issue among international students.

2.5 Service Quality

Service quality is a global evaluation or attitude of overall excellence of services (Parasuraman et al., 1985). It is a dimension that measures how well a delivered service matches the customers' expectations (Lewis & Booms, 1983). Cronin and Taylor (1992) hold a different view on the significant of expectations and advocated that service quality is about how the customers think of the actual service performance and process. According to Parasuraman et al. (1985) opined that:

1. Service quality is more difficult to measure than quality of goods quality;
2. Service quality performance result is the comparison between expectations and perceptions by consumers; and
3. Service quality concerns the outcome and the process of a service.

The education industry's service quality is strongly affected by customer orientation like other services. However, not many HEIs can recognize this fact, and worse still, some do not see that they are providing services to their consumers, i.e., the students (Lewis and Smith, 1994). Grönroos (2000) advocated that the customers should be considered as a member in this service system. Based on Hawes and Glisan (1983) put forward that students are the customers in higher education sector, and thus, the HEIs should take care of their needs and expectations. Moreover, to a certain extent, the quality of education is reflected by the level of services. The service quality is a crucial issue in service marketing that, if done brilliantly, can distinguish a HEI from its competitors even at the global arena. The service quality of HEIs ought to be regard as a part of national development strategy, especially in developing countries such as Malaysia (Anantha & Krishnaveni, 2012). While paying for enrollment fees, the students are also paying for the institution's services such as accommodation, food, library, stadium, consulting service, shuttle bus, network service, security services, and etc. Clearly, improving these facilities and services can significantly attract highly qualified students (Taiwo, 2010; Rasli et al. 2014).

Saadiatul, Samsinar and Wong (2000) conducted a research using SERVQUAL measurement to assessing the service quality of Malaysian HEIs. SERVQUAL measurement is a standard instrument used to evaluate and identify the service quality status quo to understand the weakness before making improvement. Results generally indicated that students are not satisfied with the service quality HEIs provided because they have failed to fulfill all five dimensions used to measure students' perception. In order to survive and become outstanding in the international market competition, all HEIs need to pay particular attention to their service quality (Mishra, 2006). Parasuraman et al. (1985) found that satisfied services are the services that can meet or exceed consumers' expectation.

2.6 GAP Model

The GAP model, or service quality model, was developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in 1985. It is the most well-known model for investigating the inequalities between expected quality and perceived quality by consumers in the service sector. A gap arises when the actual perceived service does not meet expectation. Improvement of service quality can lead to competitive advantage (Gouthier and Schmid, 2003). In other words, this service quality model is used to analyze the root causes of quality issues and find the appropriate measures to eliminate

the gap. It can be implementing for any service provider (Parasuraman et al., 1988), and is also used in this research. This service quality model is shown in Figure 5.

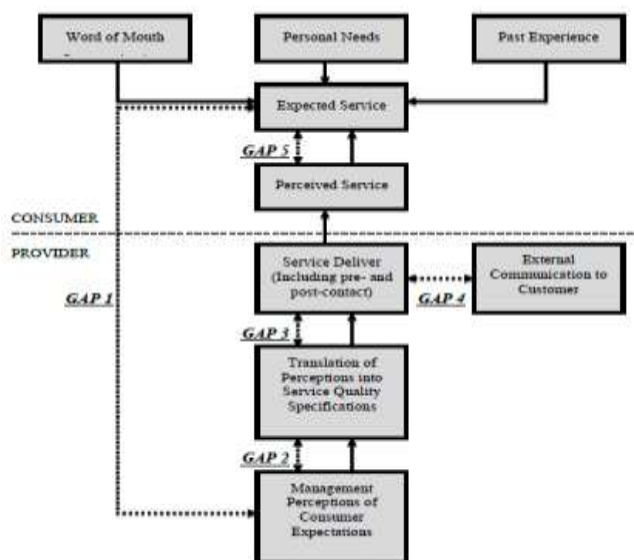


Figure 5 GAP Model

Source: Parasuraman et. al. (1985, 1988)

The GAP model identifies five main causes of unsuccessful delivery described as below (Parasuraman et al. 1985, 1988):

Gap 1: Expectation-perception gap, which is the difference between consumers' expected service and the service provider's perceptions of the expectations.

Gap 2: Quality specification gap, which is the difference between service provider's perception and the customer perception in service quality specification.

Gap 3: Service performance gap, which is the difference between the service strands and the actual delivery.

Gap 4: Market communication gap, which is the difference between the actual delivered service and the commitment to customers.

Gap 5: Perceived service quality gap, which is the difference between the actual service perception and the expectation of service by consumers.

Gap 5 depends on others four gaps and can be viewed as a function of Gap 1 to 4. One of the objectives in this research is to measure gap 5 to understand the influences of service quality on consumer satisfaction among P.R. China international students in Malaysian HEIs. This model presents how the service quality forms. The upper part of GAP model shows customer-related issues, and the main issue here is the expected service and perceived service. The expectation of service is a function of the customer's actual experience, personal needs, and the reputation of the service provider. Perceived service is the actual experience of a consumer after receiving a service, which is influenced by the provider's activities. The service provider related issue is expressed in the bottom part. During the service transaction, the managers' awareness of customer expectations plays a guiding role in determining the organizational service quality standards. In addition, it is also affected by corporate marketing communication activities with consumers (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988).

2.7 Satisfaction

Satisfied customers are more likely to respond positively and recommend the business to others. Oliver (1981) defined satisfaction as the sense responded by the disconfirmation experience of consumption, which plays a role as the base approach level. Schoepp (2010) put forward a definition in an oversea students context, which is a feeling that the international students may or may not achieve the expectations of faculty with regards to issues they faced such as university culture or living in the host country.

2.8 Globalization and the Higher Education Institution

Higher education is a level of intellectual training and social activities that intend to nurture highly qualified human resource. The definition of higher education is by far a controversial issue, but broadly, it can be defined as: "a professional education based on accomplishment of secondary education provided by HEIs which award academic degrees or professional certifications" (UNESCO, 1962) or even "a process to produce qualified human resource for a society" (Mishra, 2006). In recent years, higher education is more widely recognized as a part of served industry (Mello et al., 2001, Rasli et al, 2014). From a student's perspective, it is a learning progress to understand knowledge in depth, to develop abilities exploring the truth, to broad horizons, and to achieve higher educational qualification for a better future.

Higher education institutions are the backbone of higher education which provide specialist education, undergraduate education, and postgraduate education. HEIs include universities, academies, colleges, seminaries, institutes of technology, and certain college-level institutions such as vocational school or trade schools. These HEIs play an important role and have significant contribution to the national development of knowledge economy (NAAC, 2004). Ever since the new millennium, the effect of globalization has brought many students to study outside of their home countries. This number is continuously increasing and will continue to be so as long as: the local HEIs are not the strongest among global HEIs, and the country's economy or GDP is growing. Inflows of international students can bring vast revenue

and employment opportunities for the host country. In fact, international education is one of largest industries in some western countries such as Australia (Barron, 2005). In terms of the service sector, the consumers of HEIs are the students. In order for the HEIs to excel globally and become more diversified, the management has to pour in more efforts to attract overseas students. A method of doing so is by knowing and easing the international students' concerned issues in the host country (Choudaha and Li, 2012). This applies also to the Malaysian HEIs; the institutions ought to strive to upgrade their own service standard and competitiveness in this market. The development trends and challenges faced by Malaysian HEIs are a miniature of the world higher education (Tierney and Sirat, 2008; Qureshi et al. 2014). Nevertheless, this has not stopped the nation to set its target to become an education hub of Asian regional education and attract at least 200,000 overseas students by 2020. These have been officially reckoned in the *National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020* of the Malaysian government in 2007. According to the QS Asian University Ranking 2012, there are five Malaysian universities that are ranked in the top-100 Asian universities list.

2.9 International Students from P.R. China

The first record of Chinese studying abroad can be tracked back to the time before the existence of Christianity in India (Larbi, 1990). Some believe that it has started during the Qing Dynasty in the 1870s (Shu, 1989). Historic development started after 1978 when the P.R. China's Central Government changed the overseas policies that had allowed thousands of people to study abroad. The number of China's students who have studied abroad is over 2.25 million during the past 35 years, i.e., from year 1978 to 2011 (Li, 2012). With the dramatically development of China in the 21st century, studying abroad has been more widely practiced by the people, and international education has slowly become a mass education alternative rather than an elite education means. In the last 12 years alone, more than 1.9 million people have gone abroad to study (Miao, 2010).

China's overseas students have great purchasing power in the international higher education industry, and has accounted about 14% of the overall market share in 2011 (UNESCO, 2012). It is the largest source country of overseas students in several countries such as the USA, the UK, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand (Wang, 2012). Undoubtedly, most Chinese students prefer to choose developed countries as their ideal place to study abroad because of their reputation as world class education institutions. However, based on Li's (2012) research, countries within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have also become the new popular choices. However, for these Chinese students studying overseas, cross-culture adjustment is most of the time the main problem (Zhu, 2008). In that study, about 45% respondents commended that it is difficult to blend into the host culture. Choudaha and Li (2012) also stated in their study that students' service is one of the important indicators that influence the Chinese student's choice in choosing their ideal international HEI.

3.0 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This study aimed to investigate the cultural orientation, adjustment, service quality and satisfaction among university students from P.R. China in Malaysia. There are four variables in this study - three independent variables (cultural orientation, adjustment and service quality) and one dependent variable (satisfaction). Cultural orientation is theoretical supported by Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (1985). Meanwhile, Parasuraman et al.'s (1985) Gap model conceptually supports service quality. The ACSI model (Fornell et al., 1996) was used to theoretically support satisfaction. Last but not least, the acculturation theory and adapted Maslow hierarchy of needs by Gleitman, et al. (1999) were used to support adjustment. The theoretical framework of this study was created based on the theories, models, and literature reviews aforementioned. According to Sekaran (2003), theoretical framework is used to elaborate the relationship among the independent variables and dependent variable. The theoretical framework of this study is as shown in Figure 6.

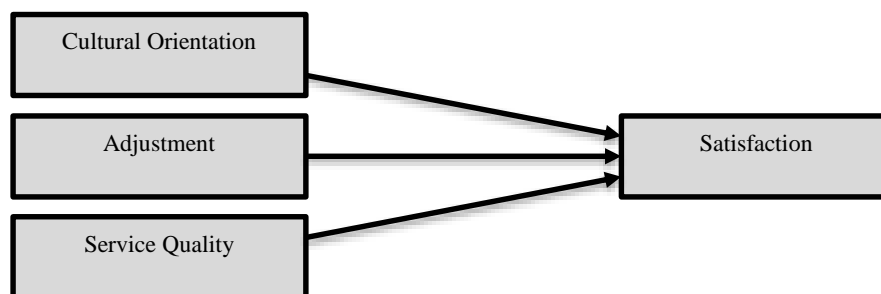


Figure 6 Theoretical framework of this study

3.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, keeping a higher reputation with international students is a way to attract more overseas students (Yang, 2009; Imran, 2011). To become a preferred education destination of the biggest overseas students market in the world, the Malaysian government has launched a pilot project geared towards this direction. In P.R. China, the nation's long-term sustainable economic growth requires a continuous development and well-educated labor force to support future knowledge-based activities. Therefore, the conditions of Mainland Chinese students studying overseas ought to be addressed since they are a vital human resource. Therefore, it is important to understand the needs of international students so that the HEIs can give related supports. Furthermore, a HEI's ability to provide quality service is vital to its reputation to attract foreign students.

3.2 Recommendations

Even this study was prepared elaborately. However, there are still a number of unavoidable limitations in this research. According these limitations in this study, the result of the present study is expected to be validated and refined in future researches. This study only examined oversea student from P.R. China in one public university (UTM) and one private university (SU). For the further study, the author suggests that it could generalize to other Malaysian HEIs, which was not covered in this study and enrolled international students from P.R. China. Moreover, the study can be viewed as a cross-sectional research. The numerical result on cultural orientation, adjustment, service quality and satisfaction among university students from P.R. China changes over time may provide new insights into their relationship. More studies are encouraged to investigate the deep antecedents of satisfaction among university students from P.R. China.

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