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Muhammad Fazal e Hasan, S., Mortimer, G., Lings, I., Sekhon, H. & Howells, K.

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Managing Relationships: Insights from a Student Gratitude Model

Abstract

This paper develops a student relationship model which highlights the role of gratitude in impacting students' positive perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions towards their higher education providers. Using theories from services marketing and positive psychology, we develop and test a gratitude relationship model. A field survey, employing existing measures, was used to elicit data from 1,104 respondents of public, private, and semi-public Pakistani universities. The results of this current research empirically demonstrate the role of gratitude as a mediating mechanism that explains the impact of a university's relationship investments on students' positive perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions. This study contributes to higher education and services marketing literature by examining the emergent role of gratitude in students' perceptions of investments made by their universities and students' positive emotions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions, such as involvement and long-term relationship intentions, respectively. This research encourages university decision-makers to implement relationship-building strategies beyond that of the purely economic, such as scholarships, that seek to enhance the emotion of gratitude, which will lead to higher levels of perceived value of the relationship, involvement, and intentions to build long-term relationships with the university. This is the first study that highlights the role of gratitude as having an impact on students' perceptions, attitude, and behavioral intentions. Our student relationship model offers a better psychological explanation of how student gratitude may generate direct benefits for universities.

Keywords: student gratitude, service perceptions, universities, tertiary management, attitudes, behavioral intentions, long-term relationships

Introduction

To maintain their ‘customer pool,’ universities invest in a range of relationship-building activities to develop students’ long-term relationship intentions (Landry and Neubauer 2016; Blasco-Arcas et al. 2016). Students’ long-term relationship intentions refer to a student’s continuing desire to build and sustain relationships with a university for an indefinite period of time (Sung and Yang 2009). Evidence shows that students’ intentions to build a long-term relationship with the university predict students’ adjustment to university, resiliency in academic outcomes, and improvement in their social skills and academic performance (Bunce et al. 2017; Mauch and Sabloff 2018; Postareff et al. 2017; Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos 2011). Other studies report positive associations between students’ long-term relationship intentions with students’ smart decision-making, engagement and satisfaction, commitment, involvement, and positive word of mouth (Fazal-e-Hasan et al. 2017; Klem and Connell 2004; Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos 2011). Based on this evidence, building a long-term relationship with students is not an option but a priority for progressive universities, and many of them have designed relationship investments in anticipation of student–university long-term relationship outcomes (Mauch and Sabloff 2018).

At a time when students are increasingly viewed as—or are viewing themselves as—customers, these relationship-building investments, in most cases, involve incentives such as financial aid, scholarships, tuition waiver, study tours, and student exchange programs (Urban 2016; Archibald and Feldman 2016). Research shows that while a student might perceive these benefits to be a financial gain, these perceptions alone do not strongly predict students’ perceptions of a relationship with their university (Archibald and Feldman 2016; De Wulf et al. 2003). We suggest that a lens on the purely economic nature of the benefit rendered overlooks the scope of students’ affective responses and offers limited insight into students’ positive emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral reciprocal responses (Cownie 2016,

2017; Howells et al. 2017). Taking the contextual setting for this study, students' perceptions of a university's relationship investments differ from their perceptions of personal economic gain (West et al. 2015). If a student perceives a university's investment as a personal financial gain, rather than a 'relationship investment,' they are unlikely to experience positive emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral responses (West et al. 2015). While students may experience 'calculative commitment,' which is sustainable as long as the cost–benefit analysis falls in their favor, prior research (Cullen et al. 2000; Manzuma-Ndaaba et al. 2016) has demonstrated that long-term relationships may not be an outcome of this type of commitment. Consequently, a number of researchers (Howells 2004; Bye et al. 2007; Ruiz-Mafe et al. 2016) are now turning their attention to investigate possible psychological mechanisms that go beyond the traditional role of student satisfaction and commitment, such as gratitude.

This current research proposes that *gratitude*—an emotional response to a benefit received—is worthy of attention because it may provide insights into students' perceptions of, and feelings towards, relationship investments made by the university. Further, this current research builds upon recent exploratory work and responds to calls for the development and testing of a student gratitude model (Cownie 2016; Tubillejas Andrés et al. 2016; Howells et al. 2017). We posit that an examination of gratitude is valuable because it qualifies as an integral part of pro-social and personal relationships. Gratitude is, for example, a significant component of personal and social relationships (Morales 2005), and relationship management (Palmatier et al. 2009), and offers important insights into the mechanism by which students' perceptions of a university's relationship investments enhance their perceptions of the value of the relationship (Cownie 2016; Howells et al. 2017). The purpose of this current research is to provide evidence of the precise linkage between students' perceptions of relationship investments made by a university, the gratitude that the

student feels towards the university, the value that students place on their relationship with the university (perception), and students' involvement (attitude) towards the university, and intentions to build a long-term relationship (behavioral intentions) with the university. In adopting such an approach, we validate a conceptual model using student data from three Pakistani universities.

Conceptual Background and Theory Development

The Role of Gratitude in Relationship-Building within Educational Settings

Gratitude is essentially a part of how social relationships are built (Bartlett and DeSteno 2006), with the relationship management literature positioning gratitude as a key mediator between relationship investments and perceptions of a relationship, which provides an emotional foundation for reciprocal behaviors (Palmatier et al. 2009). For example, greater attention to gratitude has been shown to contribute to building and maintaining healthy relationships, enhancing social behavior (Wood et al. 2010), promoting interpersonal bonds (Algoe and Haidt 2009), and promoting relational exchanges (Raggio et al. 2014). Notably, Simmel (1950) positioned gratitude as the most important cohesive element for society, the moral memory of mankind that leads to reciprocation, and the bridge connecting one human being with another. Gratitude is often heralded as being *profoundly interpersonal* (Emmons and Crumpler 2000), in that a 'grateful person' is more likely to attribute positive outcomes to the efforts of other people (McCullough et al. 2001). While gratitude has been gaining acceptance in the general literature, in recent times researchers have specifically turned their attention to exploring the role of gratitude in a number of education services settings (Bono and Froh 2009; Chan 2010; Freitas et al. 2011; Froh et al. 2011; Howells et al. 2017; Howells 2014; Howells and Cumming 2012; Layous and Lyubomirsky 2014). However, there is a paucity of empirical evidence

showing that perceptions of a university's relationship investments enhance students' perceptions of the value of this relationship.

Extant research posits gratitude as an other-directed emotional response to a person (e.g. teacher; Howells 2014), object (e.g. book), or an abstract entity or system (e.g. God, luck, government, or university; Froh et al. 2009; Raggio et al. 2014). A university, as an abstract entity, can be created by a number of social interactions between students and their professors or administrative support officers, or within residential halls or social clubs. These webs of interaction can also take place between tangible objects (e.g. computers, books, classrooms) or systems (e.g. human resources, examinations, finance). Research suggests that if a benefit is received from an interaction of benefactors, beneficiaries are likely to direct their gratitude to whom or what the balance of power favors more and the factor that is the principal cause of other factors' existence (Raggio et al. 2014). For example, the 'university' as a whole is central to the student's focus and is perceived as more powerful than teachers, societies and facilities, and is a principal reason for teachers to be at work and facilities to be in place (Howells 2004, 2012). In other words, when a benefit is received from an entity of the university, students are likely to be grateful to the university, which represents these entities. Therefore, a university, due to the perceived value of its power and representation of its employees and facilities, warrants benefits (e.g. scholarships) to its students. As such, 'the university' has been chosen as the benefactor in this study.

The Importance of Institutional Investment in Relationships

Students' perceptions of the relationship investment could precipitate their gratitude towards the university. Gratitude goes beyond the 'nice feeling' one has after receiving a benefit, to encompassing an imperative force "...that compels us to return the benefit we have received" (Komter 2004). It follows that if students believe that their university is genuinely interested

in building a relationship with them, the very fact that they are in a relationship with the university would generate their gratitude. As gratitude is a pro-social emotion, the intention to give must be genuine and exist within a caring and equal relationship (Cownie 2016; Howells 2014; Layous and Lyubomirsky 2014)—the moment it loses this quality it becomes transactional rather than relational. Thus, as impressions of the university's culture and ethos are formed from the moment of initial interaction with the university (the co-creative nature of academia), a genuine focus on relationships needs to also become evident for prospective students. We assert that a relational paradigm can be evidenced in how a university conducts itself in regard to, for example, its care of students, the way it responds to student crises, the giving spirit demonstrated on orientation and open days, the inclusion of diversity, and acceptance of a multi-faith community. However, any demonstrations need to go beyond tokenism. The impact of such initiatives could be influenced by how meaningful and targeted the relational investment is towards the individual student, so that any notions of gratitude do not decay. If there are meaningful demonstrations of student gratitude, this would enable the university to generate creative thinking about how to give back to the students in heartfelt and meaningful ways (Howells 2012). Based on this discussion, our first hypothesis proposed is:

H1: Student-perceived relationship investments by the university have a positive impact on student gratitude.

Consequences of Gratitude

Students' gratitude toward the relationship investment by the university could influence their perceptions of the value of their relationship with the university, because it would orientate students more fully to what they receive and motivate them to give back. As students have been shown to have a highly relational orientation to both the university and their learning, it stands to reason that gratitude could enhance this relational dimension (Howells 2012). The broaden-

and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson 2004) suggests that affect, such as gratitude, is likely to explain more variance in other variables, such as student *involvement* and students' *intentions to build a long-term relationship* with their university. The relationship management literature articulates that gratitude leads to trust and commitment (Palmatier et al. 2009). However, the relationship between student gratitude, student involvement, and students' intentions to build a relationship with their university is most likely to be mediated by students' perceptions of the value of their relationship with the university. We contend that the affective nature of student gratitude may have more impact on positive attitudes (e.g. involvement) and behavioral intentions (long-term relationship intentions) towards the university if the student perceives that they can derive value from the relationship, primarily in the hope that future interactions and transactions with the university will bring more benefits for them. This mechanism does not involve much information processing, problem-solving, or complicated decision-making. Thus, it is likely that student involvement and long-term relationship intentions will be channeled through students' perceptions of the value of their relationship with the university. A more detailed discussion is presented next.

Gratitude and Perceived Value of Relationship with the University

Congruent with Hogan (2001), we have defined the student-perceived value of a relationship as the student's perceptions of the cumulative worth of all the tangible and non-tangible benefits that they derive from the relationship with the university. Woodruff (1997) maintains that the perceived value should pass through various stages of value creation, necessarily involving the pre-service consumption stage (i.e. before admission or using any services rendered by the university). Previous research (e.g. Dodds 1991; Patterson and Spreng 1997) has related the perceived value of a relationship with functional and cognitive elements of (education) quality, as well as performance. Sheth et al. (1991) maintain that perceptions of

relationship value are not limited to the cognitive and functional elements of educational experience alone; rather, they are strong predictors of attitudinal and behavioral components of loyalty (i.e. involvement and long-term relationship intentions).

Emotional responses associated with specific motives influence relationship value perceptions (Wilson 1995). It is more likely that a student will prefer to build a relationship with a university where they expect a positive outcome of their relationship in terms of derived value. Researchers have recognized that receiving benefits from benefactors results in pleasure and develops feelings of gratitude in the beneficiary, as well as the desire to build a relationship with the benefactor. For example, Buck (2004) and Dahl et al. (2003) argue that both the benefactor's image and the value of the relationship are improved when the beneficiary (i.e. student) assesses the cost of the benefits derived from the relationship with the benefactor. Furthermore, attribution theorists have maintained that attributing a benefit received from an outside agent improves perceptions of relationship value, as well as the image of the outside agent in the beneficiary's eyes (Dahl et al. 2003). The improved perception of relationship value depends on a higher level of positive affective response, such as gratitude, which is stimulated by receiving or anticipating a benefit from a benefactor (McCullough et al. 2001). This means that when a student receives a benefit they attribute this benefit to the university, thus improving their perception of their relationship with the university. Ballantyne et al. (2008) and Raval and Grönroos (1996) illustrated how affect, such as the affective response of gratitude, influences perceptions of relationship value. These researchers concluded that in allowing for cognitive judgments, the student-perceived value of a relationship will be greater if their affective response favors the university and its services. Based on the discussion presented, our second hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Student gratitude has a positive impact on the student-perceived value of the relationship with the university.

Student-Perceived Relationship Value and Involvement

Student *involvement* refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to their academic experience (Astin 1984; Mittal 1989). Normally, physical and psychological energy manifests itself in the form of interest and concern that a student has in selecting a university. Student involvement may entail a two-stage process: (a) academic (education) involvement, and (b) decision involvement (Friedlander and MacDougall 1992). Academic involvement addresses the student's interest in the quality of education (Sim et al. 2018), meaning that the student perceives that the quality of education meets certain standards. In contrast, admission-decision involvement addresses the student's interest in selecting a university or its program. Student involvement thus encompasses the student's cumulative interest and concern in selecting a program or a university, ranging from pre-admission decisions to post-qualification experiences (Bienstock and Stafford 2006). Lincoln and Kalleberg (1990) argue that when students receive a benefit from a university they are emotionally charged, and cognitive responses and assessments are evoked, resulting in students' perceptions that the relationship with the university may bring further value to them. This perceived relationship value positively influences the student's interest and concern for the university's pre- and post-admission activities. For example, if a student perceives that their relationship with the university may result in an improved value (e.g. scholarship) they are more likely to show interest in the university's newer programs and courses, read more literature about the university, and participate more in activities that are generated by the university. The literature on co-creation and co-production of value also supports the view that if an exchange partner perceives that they can derive value from the mutual relationship they will show higher levels of involvement with the other's offerings and programs (Berger and Milem 1999; Bowman et al. 2015). Based on this discussion, the third hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Student-perceived relationship value has a positive impact on student involvement.

Student-Perceived Relationship Value and Long-Term Relationship Intentions

Like Sung and Yang (2009), we define student long-term relationship intentions as “a student’s desire to build a sustainable relationship with a university for an indefinite span of time.” Research suggests that students are more likely to build long-term relationships with universities that focus on relational exchanges, rather than those that rely on simple economic or transactional exchanges to maximize their profits (Ganesan 1994; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2001; Sung and Yang 2009). The prevailing theoretical perspective for explaining how student-perceived relationship value increases students’ long-term relationship intentions employs the basic tenets of social exchange theory—that students reciprocate what they receive from the other exchange partner; that is, a university (Buck 2004; Cook et al. 2013). In exchange for receiving a benefit from their university, students feel grateful, accompanied with a willingness to reciprocate that benefit due to the normative pressure of reciprocity (Emmons 2007). This willingness to reciprocate the benefit to the university can be enacted through an emotional response, such as gratitude, which further develops a perception that students can derive value from the relationship with their university. This perceived relationship value is likely to cultivate an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship with the university (Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002; Sung and Yang 2009). Studies show that students’ long-term relationship intentions develop towards organizations whose initiatives are perceived as being benevolent and valued (Friestad and Wright 1994). Thus, a university’s initiatives to win students’ loyalty should be based on sincerity and fair intentions. Several authors have suggested that gratitude compels students to consider the benevolent and sincere intentions of the benefactor and, hence, results in strong, long-term relationship intentions towards the source of the benefit (Zaslow 2009). Based on this discussion, our fourth hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Student-perceived relationship value has a positive impact on long-term relationship intentions.

Bringing these hypotheses together, a student gratitude model has been developed (presented in Figure 1) to describe the impact of student-perceived relationship investments on student gratitude. This research further highlights the mediating role of students' perceptions of the relationship between student gratitude, student involvement, and students' long-term relationship intentions.

< Insert Figure 1 about here>

Methodology

Research Context

To empirically examine our student gratitude model, British and Australian researchers collected data from three Pakistani universities. The World Bank considers Pakistan a low-income country. Students and their parents in Pakistan perceive higher education as costly because of their low annual income (UNICEF 2011). Students do not have many financial and physical resources, so any investment in education will likely be perceived as significant. In this environment, knowledge about customer attitudes, emotions, and behaviors is important in providing high-quality services to emerging markets. A focus on customers' affective and behavioral responses will result in a more attractive proposition for universities wishing to expand their operations into countries with immense potential. Consequently, a developing economy and its higher education sector were deemed an appropriate context for this research, which is the first empirical investigation of the mediating mechanism of student gratitude between students' perceptions (i.e. students' perceptions of relationship investments), attitudes (student involvement), and behavioral intentions (student long-term relationship intentions).

Sample and Collection Method

The aim of this study was to collect evidence from a developing economy, and a pilot study was conducted in Australia to improve the face and content validity. Given that gratitude is listed among global emotions (global emotions are felt and expressed most similarly across different settings) and students' responses to university offerings are not dramatically diverse across the world, we ran the pilot study in Australia to improve the face and content validity, and presented the same items to the respondents in Pakistan. As English is an instructional language in higher education in Pakistan and the university settings are not different from those in Australia (administration and operationalization are the same), our suggested framework received no situational biases and effects. Therefore, the research team decided to pilot test the constructs' face and content validity in Australia and ran the full project in Pakistan.

The Pakistani tertiary education system is divided into private educational providers (high price), semi-public universities (relatively lower price), and public universities (very low/negligible price). Capturing data from all sectors provided a rich set of data. Pakistan provided an ideal basis for our empirical examination for a number of reasons. Researchers chose university students, those aged between 17 and 35 years, studying full-time and accordingly having access to limited incomes. As such, this cohort perceive investments (i.e. costs) in university education as high because of their currently low income and lack of access to tangible resources.

There are approximately 1.8 billion Millennials (aged 17–35 years) globally, representing 27% of the world's population, with Pakistan, along with Bangladesh, India and the Philippines, standing out as being in the 'Top 20' countries globally for Millennial populations (UNICEF 2011). In terms of consumption, Millennials will account for over half

of all spending by 2020 (Nusair et al. 2013). In the context of this work, Millennials have a high tendency to build long-term relationships with an organization if they receive a benefit from the organization without self-serving purposes. Thus, we postulate that Millennials possess appropriate contextual traits for recognizing, establishing, and sustaining a relationship with a service provider.

While data for this study were drawn from an emergent Millennial Pakistani sample, we do not seek to draw cultural comparisons, rather we examine the role of gratitude in predicting relationship quality. Yet, it remains important to recognize any underlying cultural issues at play. Most definitions of culture tend to fall within two categories: those that define culture as being objective (explicit) in nature, or subjective (implicit). Triandis (2000) defines objective culture as representing the tangible aspects of a society, such as tools, roads, and overt behaviors. Conversely, subjective culture refers to the mental processes shared by a group of people, resulting in similar beliefs, values, and norms (Smith and Schwartz 1997). While attempts have been made to conceptualize the most appropriate dimensions for studying national culture (Bond et al. 2004; Leung and Bond 1989), it is the framework initially developed by Geert Hofstede (1980) that remains the most widely used national cultural structure in psychology, sociology, management, and marketing studies (Steenkamp 2001). Schwartz (1994) conducted a multi-country cultural analysis and found a high correlation between his findings and Hofstede's. Clark (1990) concluded that most cultural typologies converge to Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Employing Hofstede's cultural dimensions, we found significant similarity between Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and other mainland South-East Asian cultures. Accordingly, this work would be generalizable to those nations.

To obtain adequate data to test the model, a paper-based survey was administered to 1,600 students attending the three universities. A response rate of 69% was achieved, resulting in 1,105 usable surveys. The sample comprised 59.9% males ($n = 661$) and 41.1% females (n

= 444). Respondents ranged in age from 17 to 30 (Mean age = 20.74). The sample indicated that 317 (28.7%), 408 (36.9%), and 380 (34.4%) students were studying in public, semi-public, and private universities respectively. Most respondents (69.1%) were enrolled in bachelor programs.

Study Measures

All constructs were measured using previously validated scales (see Table 1). Participants were asked to respond to a series of multi-item Likert measures on a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), to capture the constructs studied. In order to maximize face and content validity, previously-validated measures were pre-tested twice. Initially, the researcher adapted the wording of the measures to suit the research context.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

Study Pre-Test

A pilot questionnaire was then distributed to participants in a methodology training workshop at a public university in Australia. Three of the participants were PhD-qualified and the remaining were PhD students of different disciplines from different Australian universities. This helped the researcher identify whether the measures were able to tap into the concept of gratitude (and other constructs) adequately, check the sequencing of items, and ensure content validity. Second, a panel of experts judged the survey items and deemed all adapted items suitable for tapping into the conceptual domain. Minor modifications were made to the items and format of the survey instrument to allow for the research domain, as the original items were developed for use in a different context.

Data Management

The dataset was randomly split into two subsets: Dataset 1 (N=542) and Dataset 2 (N=563). Dataset 1 was used to test the measurement model; that is, for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Dataset 2 was employed to test the structural model using path analysis. Hansen (2000) recommends that the sample should be split into two, reducing the chance of obtaining spurious results. The use of the split sample provided valuable information about the stability of the scale (Albright and Park 2009). In the first subsample used to develop the measure there was the opportunity to confuse unstable, chance factors with reliable co-variation among items. Using a second subsample to cross-validate the findings pertaining to the structural model eliminated the opportunity for systematically assigning reliability to chance results, as this subsample did not influence the selection scale items. In accordance with the argument presented above, a split-sample strategy was used. Specifically, a random sample of approximately half of the responses was used for the measurement-development purpose. Those cases that were not selected for scale development were then used for structural validation. Second, it is generally accepted that the minimum acceptable size for structural equation modeling (SEM) is 250 (Albright and Park 2009). However, large sample sizes cause concerns about the goodness-of-fit indices because large samples cause the sample to over-estimate poor fit (Albright and Park 2009; Arbuckle 2006).

Testing the Measurement Model

Preliminary analysis and CFA using AMOS 24 revealed that measures used in this research displayed adequate psychometric properties and appeared to be free of systematic bias (see Table 2). The fit of the CFA for the research conducted was acceptable, with $\chi^2/Df = 214.885/80 = 2.686$, ($p < .01$); comparative fit index (CFI) = .965; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .056; and standard root mean square residual (SRMR) = .042, which suggested a good fit of the model to the data, and the six-factor model was well

supported by the analysis. Preliminary reliability analyses (see Table 2) revealed that the composite reliability (CR) scores of all the constructs were above the minimum threshold (CR >.70).

<Insert Table 2 about here>

All item loadings (see Table 1) were significant ($p < .01$) and the values of the average variance extracted (AVE) of student gratitude, students' perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university, student involvement, and students' long-term relationship intentions were above 0.50 (see Table 2) in support of convergent validity (Gerbing and Anderson 1988). The AVE for students' perceptions of relationship investments was slightly below the threshold (i.e. AVE=.485). The values of the square root of the AVE for students' perceptions of relationship investments, student gratitude, and student involvement were greater than the values of the correlations with another factor, suggesting discriminant validity between the two factors. However, inspection of the correlation matrix (see Table 2) revealed high correlations between students' perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university and students' long-term relationship intentions. Considering this strong correlation between the two constructs, a Chi-square difference test—an additional assessment (Bagozzi and Yi 1991) for discriminant validity—was undertaken. The main reason for using this procedure was that the assessment of discriminant validity takes into account the sampling error of the correlation. The results showed that there was a significant Chi-square difference between students' perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university and students' long-term relationship intentions ($\Delta\chi^2 = 887.008/89-893.787/90 = 6.779$, $df = 1$; $p < .05$). The result of this test and the low values of inter-factor correlations demonstrated that the constructs' measures do discriminate between the different constructs and so can be considered valid measures of the constructs that they purport to measure.

As the data were collected from three universities we wanted to identify if differences existed in the model. Accordingly, a path invariance test across the three different universities (private, semi-public, and public) was undertaken. The structural invariance was used to test for the equality of structural covariances and factor variances. The results demonstrated the difference in Chi-square was significant between the constrained and unconstrained models for the structural models ($\Delta\chi^2/df = (470.274/258)-(531.146/286) = 60.872/28$; $p = 0.00 < .05$), thus indicating that the structural model was non-equivalent across student groups of the three universities. A constraint was applied to each path to get a new Chi-square. Any Chi-square (after constraining a relationship between the constructs) which is more than the calculated threshold (275.530 for a 95% confidence interval) constitutes variance in the path-by-path analysis. Results indicated that, when using a 95% confidence interval, university group moderated the path “students’ perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university to student involvement” ($\chi^2(260) = 511.079 > 474.120$); thus, this is the only relationship which was different for students studying at private, semi-public, and public universities.

In order to test the hypothesized relationship, the adequacy of the student gratitude model was evaluated by assessing fit indices in AMOS 24. An inspection of fit indices suggested that the first structural model displayed a good model fit. The fit of the first structural model was acceptable, with $\chi^2(86) = 229.973$ ($p < .01$), $\chi^2/DF = 2.674$, CFI = .964, NFI = .943, AGFI/GFI = .948/.928, SRMR = .041 and RMSEA = .055. Path analysis (see Table 3) revealed support for all hypotheses.

<Insert Table 3 about here>

Based on the approach employed by Baron and Kenny (1986) and Hayes (2009), we tested the direct and indirect effects for a mediation effect: (1) the relationship between the independent variable (IV) and dependent variable (DV) is represented by relationship ‘c’ in Tables 4 and 5; (2) the relationship between the IV and mediator variable (MV) is represented

by relationship ‘a’; (3) the relationship between the mediator and the DV is represented by relationship ‘b’; and (4) the original relationship between the IV and the DV, when the mediator is added, is represented by relationship ‘c*’. Results show that gratitude partially, and students’ perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university fully, mediate the relationship between respective IVs and DVs. Figure 2 presents the final student gratitude model.

<Insert Tables 4 and 5 about here>

<Insert Figure 2 >

Discussion and Implications

This current research builds upon recent exploratory work and responds to calls for the development and testing of a student gratitude model (Cownie 2016; Howells et al. 2017). Overall, we find a significant and positive relationship between students’ perceptions of the university’s relationship investments and their gratitude toward their university. The results indicate a significant and positive relationship between *student gratitude* and *student-perceived relationship value*. This aligns with the literature that has shown that gratitude broadens and builds the capacity to perceive relationships through a different lens and provides evidence of the theory that gratitude plays a role in building and maintaining healthy relationships (Algoe and Haidt 2009; Wood et al. 2010; Howells 2012, 2014; Cownie 2016).

Our results further indicate a significant and positive relationship between *perceived relationship value* and *involvement*. In the case of a service interaction, as a ‘grateful person’ is more likely to attribute positive outcomes to the efforts of other people (McCullough et al. 2001), wanting to give back is an acknowledgment of this investment. Finally, our results indicate a path from *perceived relationship value* to *long-term relationship intentions*. Much of the research on the role of gratitude in long-term relationships has focused on the context of romantic relationships (Gordon et al. 2012). In such a scenario, it has been shown that when partners are grateful to each other they are more committed and likely to remain in the

relationship for a long time. Our results point to the benefits in non-intimate relationships. Researchers (Gordon et al. 2012) have demonstrated that relationships flourish because of a cycle of generosity, which in turn promotes commitment. The results demonstrate that the same may be true in cases of non-intimate relationships. When students, for example, perceive the relationship to be of value, they develop a commitment to that relationship over time. This is a significant finding because it moves the notion of gratitude to one of an immediate exchange for a favour received to that of a longer-term commitment as a result of acknowledging the relationship enhancement.

In summary, university–student literature establishes that the extant economic investment-based relationship models may ignore important mediating mechanisms that explain the impact of relationship investments on students’ perceptions of those investments and of relationship value, involvement, and long-term relationship investments (Palmatier et al. 2006). While previous models of relationship investment focus on cognitive costs and benefits of relationship investments, our findings demonstrate the key role gratitude, as a positive emotion, can play in developing students’ perceptions of relationship value, involvement, and long-term relationship intentions. Our findings also show that gratitude impacts on students’ perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university, which fully explains how gratitude indirectly influences student involvement and students’ long-term relationship intentions. Therefore, we confirm the mediating role of gratitude between the students’ perceived relationship investments and performance outcomes of these investments for students and the university. Our findings also show that student involvement is different in private, semi-public, and public universities based on the level of gratitude-based perceptions of value of the relationship with their university.

Implications for the Tertiary Services Sector and Policy-Makers

There are essentially two types of relationships in play within a university context: the *transactional* and the *transformational* (Silins 1994). One is out of necessity and the other is out of desire. One has a clear demand and request with an expectation of return and the other is open-ended, with no expectation other than to give (Judge and Piccolo 2004). This work encourages academics and policy-makers to move beyond the transactional and purely economic approach to developing relationships, and focus on the benevolent, relational exchanges that generate gratitude. If teaching and professional staff render a benefit with benevolent intentions (relationship investments), students are likely to experience gratitude, which leads to students' perceived value of their relationship with the university. This, in turn, subsequently develops their intentions to build a long-term relationship with the university. For example, a library staff member who provides students with free samples of readings or advice about assessment and exams, or a higher degree research coordinator who provides non-financial support (mentoring, support), may cultivate gratitude in students. The same applies for a teacher who develops a series of online summary tutorials for students who work full-time and cannot attend class. These added investments in developing mutually beneficial relationships are not tied to actual services being purchased—university fees for lectures and tutorials. Accordingly, students consider these investments as the extra effort a university invests into developing the relationship (Mohr and Bitner 1995).

The risk of course, is to 'over promise but under deliver'; communicating unrealistically high expectations from relationship marketing communications may result in students' disappointment or cynicism. It should be recognized that these added investments are the 'exception, rather than the norm.' When the benefit is an outcome of procedure rather than a benevolent act, it is less likely to cultivate gratitude (West et al. 2015). Further, teaching and professional staff should realize that relationship investments and resources, if not invested in a timely manner, may cause an activity to be perceived as ineffective,

depreciated, and even undervalued by the students. Investments in relationships need to be delivered immediately and at the point of interaction. Take, for instance, the case of a teaching staff member who takes an extra 30 minutes after a lecture to work through a complex problem; if the service provided (lecture) and the investment in the relationship (extra 30 minutes) are separated, then students may fail to connect the two elements. Therefore, teachers and professional staff should strive to get the maximum out of these relationship investments—resources, time, and effort—rather than focus on the activities themselves.

Similarly, teaching and professional staff should be mentored to demonstrate benevolent and helpful behaviors that may encourage students to feel grateful. For instance, providing a fee waiver without a penalty or directing a student to an alternative university better suited to their educational needs. While these examples demonstrate no direct benefit to the university, they show that the university is willing to engage in benevolent behavior to develop possible relationships with students or prospective students. Universities should design policies that allow the ‘rules to be bent’ reasonably by their teaching and professional staff, allowing them to flexibly offer something ‘a little extra’ to their students (Dahling et al. 2012; Mertens et al. 2016). Therefore, to truly engage with students and generate gratitude, relationship investments need to be timely, staff need be to truly compassionate, and investments should not be limited to purely economic factors, such as scholarships.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The results of this study, while important, are bound by a number of limitations which may be fruitful for future research. Due to the cross-sectional nature of this research, this study does not capture long-term feelings of student gratitude. Longitudinal research would therefore be of benefit to add to claims about causality. While student data have been demonstrated in many

studies to be reliable and valid (Mishra 2016), the collection of such data from one developing economy places some limitations on the generalization of the findings of this study for developed economies. Accordingly, a cross-cultural application of this model may elicit interesting results and again re-confirm the model's robustness. The current study has been limited in terms of focusing on the merely emotional response of gratitude. Moving forward, the student gratitude model may be extended by incorporating behaviors (see Cownie 2016). For example, students could be invited to express gratitude to their university through volunteering on open days; conversely, universities could express gratitude towards their students by honouring them with a 'spirit of gratitude' reward, a corporate gift or small memorabilia, on graduation days. Further, an understanding of the student gratitude model will help higher education practitioners to analyze what goes on 'behind the scenes' when substantial relationship investment budgets do not produce desirable outcomes.

We have chosen the university as a target of other-direct gratitude. However, students may be grateful to the benefits rendered by teachers, tutors, administrative staff, installed facilities, or even a web of interactions that may be perceived as a sole benefactor for the students. However, the scope of this research was limited to the university only. Future research may identify individuals and/or other factors, or even a number of interactions, and conduct comparative analyses of these factors' contribution to students' gratitude. Finally, considering the concept of 'feeling welcome,' many universities say that one of their key student-related objectives is to make students feel understood, welcomed, valued, and appreciated when they visit or interact with university employees on an open day. What should the university do (or what could they do) to make students feel welcome? Is feeling welcome a function of student gratitude for students' perceptions, attitude, or behaviors? Intuitively, these would seem to be important and practical questions; however, 'welcoming' research has not focused on these issues. Is student gratitude a construct that may be relevant

to this area? This is another much needed emerging avenue from the gratitude literature for future research.

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Table 1 Item loading, scale sources and adapted items used in the study

Constructs	(λ)	Scale sources	Adapted items used in the study
RMI1	0.491	De Wulf et al. (2001)	My university makes significant investments to building a relationship with me.
RMI2	0.766		My university works extra hard to improve its relationship with me.
RMI3	0.792		My university devotes special time and effort to our mutual relationship.
SG1	0.531	McCullough et al. (2002)	I am very thankful for the benefits that my university provides me.
SG2	0.872		My university gives me the benefits that are important to me.
SG3	0.792		I have got where I am today because of my own hard work, despite the lack of any help or support.
SPVR1	0.664	Ulaga and Eggert (2006)	I expect more benefits to enjoy from my university because of our mutual long-term relationships.
SPVR2	0.822		My relationship with my university creates more value for me when comparing all costs and benefits in the relationship.
SPVR3	0.718		I derive value from the relationship that I have with my university.
SI1	0.787	Zaichowsky (1994)	Means a lot to me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Nothing to me
SI2	0.683		Un-appealing 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Appealing
SI3	0.807		Fascinating 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Mundane
SLTRI	0.726	Ganesan (1994)	I really intend to have a positive long-term relationship with my university.
SLTRI	0.799		I believe that in the long run my relationship with my university will be beneficial for me.
SLTRI	0.82		I believe that my relationship with my university will be effective over the long run.

N=542, λ = item loading, all item loadings are significant at $p < .01$, RMI = Students' perceptions of relationship marketing investments, SG = Student gratitude, SPVR = Students' perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university, SI = Students involvement, SLTRI = Students' long-term relationship intentions

Table 2 Descriptive statistics

	CONSTRUCTS	Mean	SD	CR/Cronbach's alpha	AVE	RMI	SG	SPVR	SI	SLTRI
1	Students' perceptions of relationship investments	3.717	1.779	.731/.707	0.485	(0.696)				
2	Student gratitude	4.604	1.743	.784/.760	0.557	0.631	(0.746)			
3	Students' perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university	4.753	1.672	.780/.809	0.544	0.638	0.711	(0.738)		
4	Students' involvement in the university	4.928	1.466	.804/.800	0.579	0.473	0.493	0.652	(0.761)	
5	Students' long-term relationship intentions with the university	4.823	1.667	.831/.828	0.621	0.585	0.654	1.040	0.610	(0.788)

All values are significant at $p < .05$, $N=542$, Where SD = Standard Deviation, AVE = Average Variance Extracted, RMI = Students' perceptions of relationship investments, SG = Student gratitude, SPVR = Students' perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university, SI= Students involvement, SLTRI = Students' long-term relationship intentions

Table 3 Results summary

Hypothesized paths	Hypothesized mediated model		
	Hypotheses	B	z- value
Students' perceptions of relationship investments from the university → Student gratitude	H1	.738**	7.788
Student gratitude → Students' perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university	H2	.743**	9.860
Students' perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university → Student involvement	H3	.592**	10.630
Students' perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university → Students' long-term relationship intentions	H4	.992**	15.425
Student gratitude – Variance explained	.545		
Students' perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university – Variance explained	.553		
Student involvement – Variance explained	.350		
Students' long-term relationship intentions	98.4		

** $P < .01$, N=563

Table 4 Mediation results of student gratitude

Hypotheses	Dependent variable (DV)	a RMI→SG	b SG→DV	c PRMI→DV	C* PRMI→DV (Mediator Controlled)	Type of Mediation
SG mediates the relationship between RMI and SPRV	SPVR	.697**	.738**	.680**	.315**	Partial mediation

** $P < .01$, N=563, RMI = Students' perceptions of relationship investments, SG = Student gratitude, SPVR = Students' perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university,

Table 5 Mediation results of students' perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university

Hypotheses	Dependent variable (DV)	a SG→SPRV	b SPRV→DV	c SG→DV	C* SG→DV (Mediator Controlled)	Type of Mediation
PRV mediates the relationship between SG and INV	INV	.738**	.628**	.446**	-.029 (NS, $p=.729$)	Full mediation
PRV mediates the relationship between SG and SLTRI	SLTRI	.738**	.1.003**	.692**	.089 (NS, $p=.127$)	Full mediation

** $P<.01$, N=563, Where SG = Student gratitude, SPVR = Students' perceptions of the value of a relationship with the university, SI = Students' involvement, SLTRI= Students' long-term relationship intentions

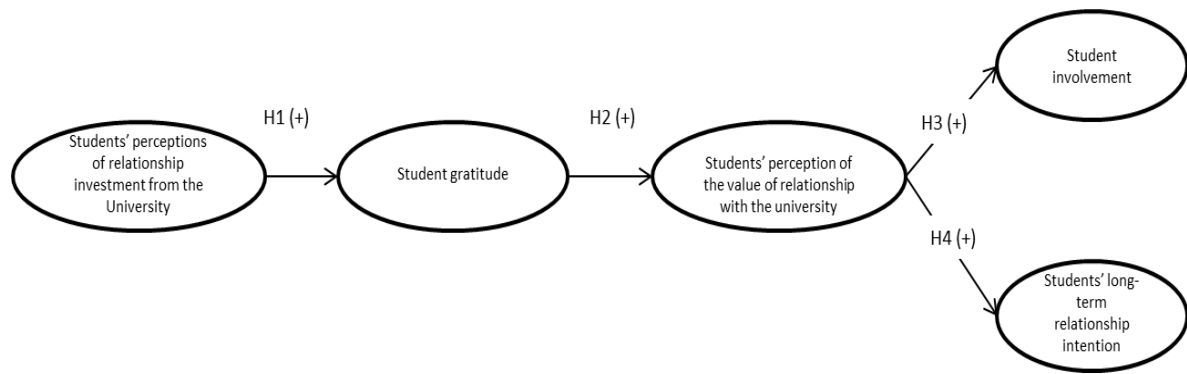
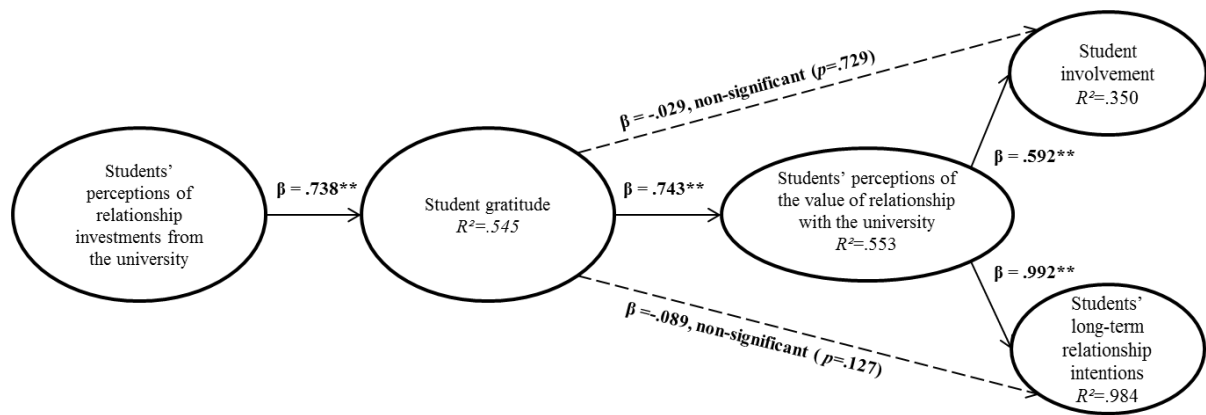


Figure 1. Conceptual student gratitude model.



$N=563$, $^{**}P<0.01$

Figure 2. Final student gratitude model.