

Does gratitude increase word-of-mouth amongst students?

Higher Education is predicated upon reciprocal exchange; the giving and taking of ideas, engagement and feedback. Gratitude, as the emotional core of reciprocity, is therefore a relevant and potentially powerful idea to consider within Higher Education (HE). Indeed, there is evidence of increasing interest in the study of gratitude within the context of HE (e.g. Howells, Stafford, Guijt and Breadmore 2017; Fazal-e-Hasan, Lings, Mortimer and Neale 2017; Cownie, Haft, Vu, Sonata, Chaiveeradech and Beavis 2019). Cownie et al.'s (2019) study of academics' experiences of gratitude highlighted the positivity stimulated by an environment of gratitude.

As a powerful mediating variable within relational exchanges, gratitude has the potential to drive important relational outcomes. This study examines whether gratitude drives word-of-mouth communication or voice amongst students. We know that word-of-mouth is considered to be influential within Higher Education, impacting students' choices of universities and modules (Sipilä, Herold, Tarkiainen and Sundqvist, 2017). The study uses Cownie and Nikolaev (2018)'s conceptualization of feelings and expressions of gratitude, where feelings of gratitude are defined as positive emotional responses accompanied by an intention to demonstrate appreciation to the perceived giver of valued benefits; expressions of gratitude are enactments of feelings of gratitude.

The study develops a conceptual framework (figure 1) which is underpinned by two key ideas: students' feelings and expressions of gratitude related to HE are informed by their gratitude attitudes and behaviours outside HE; feelings and expressions of

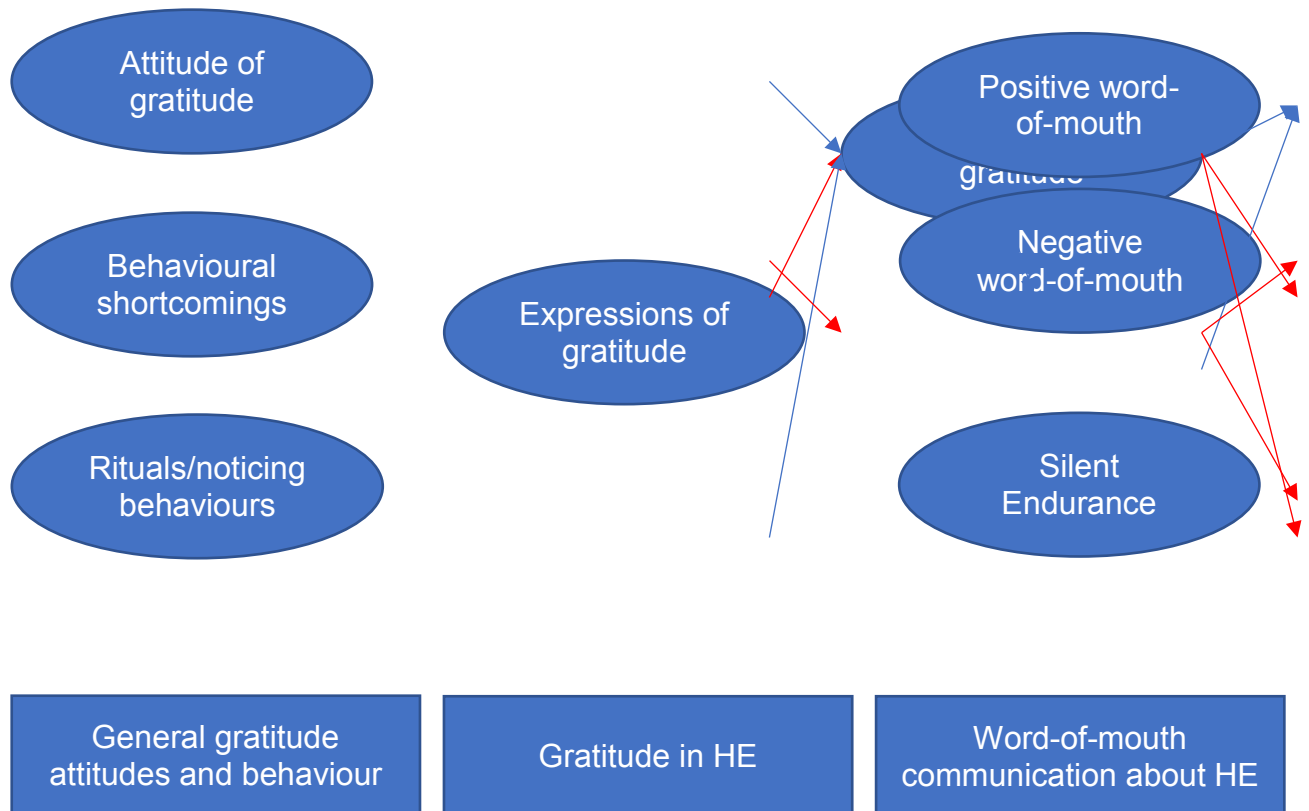
gratitude may have an influence on how students speak about HE. The framework draws from Morgan, Gulliford and Kristjansson's (2016) multi-component gratitude measure to inform generalized gratitude attitudes and behaviours. Three forms of voice are measured, positive word-of-mouth, negative word-of-mouth and silent endurance. These constructs are drawn from the work of Beatty, Reynolds, Noble and Harrison (2012). Silent endurance is an innovative construct measuring putting up with concerns quietly; not bothering to provide feedback about issues. Only one previous study has quantitatively examined the relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth communication within Higher Education. Fazal-e-Hasan, et al.'s (2017) study in Pakistan found that the relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth was fully mediated by affective commitment with no direct relationship between the independent and dependent variables. However, within Fazal-e-Hasan, et al.'s (2017) study, gratitude and word-of-mouth were each conceptualized as a single construct. This study with its multi-construct approach towards gratitude and word-of-mouth allows a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between gratitude and voice to be studied with the aim of uncovering robust relationships.

The aim of this study is to examine potential relationships between gratitude and word-of-mouth communication.

Specifically, the research objectives are:

- To examine relationships between general gratitude attitudes and behaviour and students' gratitude in Higher Education;
- To examine relationships between students' experiences of gratitude in Higher Education and word-of-mouth communication.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



Key

Hypothesised negative relationship



Hypothesised positive relationship



The study investigates students' experiences of gratitude and word-of-mouth communication within a research sample comprising university students who study in within the UK and university students who studying within SE Asia (ASEAN region). It is interested in the ASEAN region as a comparison to the UK context as the

feminine, collectivist and long-term orientation of the ASEAN region promotes reciprocal exchange and gratitude (Beck, Chapman and Palmatier 2015).

Online survey method is used for data collection and items are adapted for the HE context from the work of Morgan et al. (2016) and Beatty et al. (2012). English language is used for the survey within both the UK and SE Asia. The survey was distributed by the five institutions involved in the study, located in the UK, Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia. Whilst the academic team located within the ASEAN region was able to provide feedback about the comprehensibility of the survey, it has to be acknowledged that there may have been some challenges for participants within the ASEAN HEIs in interpreting some of the items particularly those related to the general gratitude attitudes and behaviours and those measuring silent endurance. A total of 499 participants from five different institutions responded to the survey.

The study examines the explanatory power of the conceptual framework using Structural Equation Modelling using SMART PLS. It first examines the framework across the entire body of participants and then compares the hypothesized relationships within the two groups of students (studying in UK; studying within ASEAN region).

Full analysis of the findings will be presented at the conference however at this stage it can be reported that this is the first study to evidence the power of feelings of gratitude as a driver of positive word-of-mouth communication within the context of Higher Education. This strong relationship is evidenced within the combined sample and both the UK and ASEAN contexts. However, the study finds that whilst silent

endurance is a robust concept within the UK sample, the construct does not operate effectively amongst the ASEAN participants.

The implications of the study are that gratitude strategies are worthy of consideration within Higher Education. Gratitude builds a positive environment for learning and teaching (Cownie et al. 2019) and this study highlights that feelings of gratitude can be a powerful generator of positive stories about Higher Education. Gratitude is a central relational construct and therefore this work furthers calls for pedagogic approaches within Higher Education to place the student-academic relationship at the heart of thinking.

Future research will take the final explanatory conceptual framework and test it in a wider range of cultural contexts to enable us to generate a generalizable view on the relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth communication within Higher Education.

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