

Gratitude stimulates word-of-mouth more than words of thanks.

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of feelings and expressions of gratitude on word-of-mouth communication applying a quantitative method and PLS-SEM. It is the first study evidencing the power of feelings of gratitude as a driver of positive word-of-mouth within the context of students' experience of Higher Education in ASEAN and UK contexts. The study finds that feelings of gratitude are more likely to result in positive conversations with others than in thanks to the benefactor. Feelings of gratitude may also reduce silent endurance. However, expressions of gratitude appear to have no influence on a sender's conversations about HE.

Keywords: word-of-mouth, gratitude, feelings-of-gratitude, expressions-of-gratitude, thanks, silent endurance

How can we stimulate positive conversations about Higher Education? Understanding students' conversations as part of reciprocal exchange may be key. Higher Education (HE) with its provision of academic guidance to support student engagement and assessment, is characterised by reciprocal exchange. Indeed, we see an increasing interest in the study of the emotional core of reciprocity, gratitude, within the context of HE (e.g. Fazal-e-Hasan et al. 2017 and 2021; Li et al. 2019; Cownie and Gallo 2021).

Gratitude is a positive emotion resulting from the attribution of a favourable outcome to help provided by others (Weiner 1985) and may help us understand why positive conversations might emerge within HE. The positive feeling experienced by a student following a confidence-building tutorial may be conceived as feelings of gratitude. These positive feelings may be expressed in verbal thanks as the student leaves the room, within an email to the tutor after the event, or even at the conclusion of the module, *'Thanks again for all the support over the whole unit'*. The backdrop of reciprocity informs Bock et al.'s (2021) suggestion that "a person experiencing gratitude aims to help the helping hand" (p 565).

We know that gratitude can be generated by a range of drivers. Some are particularly pertinent to the HE context and include the perceived effort (Morales 2005), benevolence (Caeser 2012; Cownie 2017) and interpersonal communication (Ting and Huang 2015) which no doubt characterized that tutorial experience. However, our student's gratitude for that tutorial may also be informed by the way they think about gratitude more generally (Morgan, Gulliford and Kristjansson 2016). This paper examines how experiences of gratitude in HE can be informed by these generalized attitudes and behaviour towards gratitude and in turn generate word-of-mouth communication.

Problem statement

HE comprises a multitude of experiences, many of which include support and help directed towards students, but students don't necessarily talk positively or share feedback about these;

how can we encourage positive conversations and feedback about HE? We don't know whether gratitude has a role to play; previous research suggests that gratitude does not directly drive word-of-mouth in the context of HE, but intuitively gratitude would encourage positive conversations and the sharing of feedback as part of reciprocal exchange.

This paper aims to examine potential relationships between gratitude and word-of-mouth communication within ASEAN and UK HE. Previous studies have established a relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth (e.g. Romani et al. 2013; Septianto and Errmann 2021), however, not within the context of HE. Whilst previous studies within HE examine either gratitude or word-of-mouth (e.g. Amani 2022), only one (Fazel-e-Hasan et al. 2017) draws together both ideas within an empirical study; but no direct relationship is evidenced. The research gap our study addresses is the absence of a multi-dimensional analysis of the relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth in HE. To fill this gap we analyse feelings and expressions of gratitude as drivers of positive word-of-mouth, negative word-of-mouth and silent endurance within the context of HE.

The key contribution of this work is to present the first evidence of a strong relationship between feelings of gratitude and positive word-of-mouth within HE; indeed, this relationship is far stronger than that between feelings and expressions of gratitude. Feelings of gratitude may reduce silent endurance (evidenced in our UK context) and thus increase student feedback, so valued in the UK HE context. Expressions of gratitude are an outcome in themselves and appear not to drive word-of-mouth. Feelings and expressions of gratitude are best treated as distinct constructs. This is the first study to examine the silent endurance construct in HE, operationalize the construct for HE and provide a new definition appropriate for HE.

Higher Education faces challenging times, exacerbated by the impacts of Covid-19, the subsequent movement of teaching online and demands to reimburse students' tuition fees (Hall 2021). Positive stories about HE - particularly to prospective students - are essential; negative

stories, or a refusal to give feedback to institutions midst these challenging times, is harmful. Indeed Amani (2022) concludes his study of word-of-mouth in HE by calling for more research about how current students might spread positive word-of-mouth to prospective students. We seek to better understand how valued benefits, set within a context of reciprocal exchange, can promote positive conversations from students and encourage student feedback. If institutions can see how the benevolence and support academics offer, directly benefits students' experiences and learning and indirectly generates positive conversations, this would support the case for more investment in the student-academic interactions many students crave.

The UK and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) contexts are chosen to provide contrasting cultures in which to study the impact of gratitude on word-of-mouth communication. Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2021) call for more cross-cultural studies of gratitude within HE. Universities within Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia are represented in this study. Whilst there are cultural variations between these three countries, the more feminine, collectivist and long-term orientation of the ASEAN region (Hofstede Insights 2021) may provide a fertile environment for reciprocity and gratitude to thrive (Beck et al. 2015). Indeed, there is a clear distinction between these ASEAN countries and the UK in these three cultural characteristics (Hofstede Insights 2021); thus, there is cultural variation between the UK and Southeast Asia. By studying gratitude and word-of-mouth communication within ASEAN and UK HE, we can better understand relationships which are sustained across cultures.

This paper presents the conceptual underpinning from which a series of hypotheses emerge. It uses quantitative survey to collect data and provides an analysis of the relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth using PLS-SEM (Hair et al. 2014) ending with a discussion of originality, contributions, limitations and implications of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Our theoretical perspective for this study is informed by an understanding of reciprocal exchange set within a Relationship Marketing paradigm (Gronroos 1994). Reciprocity highlights the positive impact of help and is a universal ‘principal component’ of moral codes found in all value systems (Gouldner 1960). Two key inter-related demands flow from reciprocity: people should help those who have helped them; people should not injure those who have helped them (Gouldner 1960). For reciprocity to be active, perceptions of benefit in the form of help, benevolence or support must be evident. Bock et al.’s (2021) study of the extended reciprocity cycle suggests that reciprocity can be seen as direct, exchange exclusively between benefactor and beneficiary, academic and student, or indirect – where help given to a benefactor may return through another party. So, support provided by an academic to a student might ultimately be returned to the institution by the student - perhaps by agreeing to speak at an open house - ultimately returning back to the academic through the recruitment of highly engaged future cohorts. Reciprocal exchange forms the backdrop to this analysis of gratitude and word-of-mouth. The student, the beneficiary of help from their tutor, (perhaps advice on a piece of assessment) values this help, experiences feelings of gratitude and responds with words of thanks to the benefactor, but also with positive conversations about that benefactor. Furthermore, having benefited from this valued help, the student is less likely to spread negative stories about the tutor and more likely share feedback when asked by that tutor.

Gratitude has generated increasing interest within a Relationship Marketing paradigm, emerging as a mediator within relational exchanges (Palmatier et al. 2009) and generating important relational outcomes (Morales 2005; Soscia 2007; Raggio et al. 2014; Ting and Huang 2015; Fazel-e-Hasan et al. 2014, 2017, 2020 and 2021). Within the context of HE, gratitude can drive student engagement (Cownie 2016; Cownie 2017; Howells et al. 2017), generate affective commitment (Fazel-e-Hasan et al. 2017), enhance students’ behavioural intentions, positive perceptions and attitudes towards HE (Fazel-e-Hasan et al. 2021) as well as alumni’s

intentions to give back (Cownie and Nikolaev 2018). Gratitude can also encourage students' academic motivations (Nawa and Noriko 2021) and reduce anxiety about academic challenges (Wardhani et al. 2020). Gratitude is a potent idea within higher education.

This paper with a particular interest in gratitude's relationship with word-of-mouth communication, complements extant studies about gratitude in HE within Pakistan (Fazal-e-Hasan et al. 2017; Fazal-e-Hasan et al. 2021), the UK (Cownie 2016, 2017a, 2017; Cownie and Gallo 2021), Australia (Howells et al. 2017), China (Chaung 2018), South Africa (Mason 2020), Japan (Nawa and Noriko 2021) and Indonesia (Wardhani et al. 2020).

Conceptual underpinning

Reflecting the theoretical framing of this research, we draw from Dewani and Sinha (2012) and Raggio et al. (2014) to articulate gratitude as an emotional response to a perceived benefactor, i.e., a sense of appreciation that stimulates an integral desire to reciprocate. Importantly and distinctly, we make a distinction between feelings and expressions of gratitude reflecting Morgan et al.'s (2016) work on a 'Multi-Component Gratitude Measure'.

Feelings of gratitude are defined as a positive emotional response accompanied by an intention to demonstrate appreciation to the perceived giver of valued benefits (Cownie and Nikolaev 2018). The positive nature of gratitude distinguishes gratitude from obligation (Gouldner 1960) and indebtedness (Pelser et al. 2015). Feelings of gratitude embrace intentions to respond. Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2020, 2021) use a single gratitude construct revealing gratitude's role as a mediator within relational strategies in HE. Amongst student populations, gratitude towards the institution mediates the institution's relational investments and key relational outcomes of positive perceptions, attitudes and behavioral intentions (Fazal-e-Hasan et al. 2021) as well as trust, commitment and overall satisfaction (Fazal-e-Hasan et al. 2020). Fazal-e-Hasan et al.'s (2017, 2020, 2021) work appears to focus on gratitude as feelings of

gratitude, arguably neglecting its enactments. Wardhani et al. (2020) also explore gratitude within the context of HE, drawing from McCullough et al. (2002) to suggest that gratitude has four facets: intensity, frequency, span and density. Their work acknowledges that expressions of gratitude play a key role alongside an attitude of acceptance of circumstances and positive emotions, including appreciation. There is an opportunity to explicitly embrace expressions of gratitude, exploring whether they drive relational outcomes, here, word-of-mouth.

Expressions of gratitude can be seen as enactments of feelings of gratitude (Cownie and Nikolaev 2018); however, there are studies (Cownie 2016; Kumar and Epley 2018; Cownie and Gallo 2021) that indicate there can be challenges in converting feelings of gratitude into expressions of gratitude. Cownie's (2016) qualitative study within HE gave an account of grateful students' hesitancy in saying thank-you to academics, particularly within bespoke messages rather than as part of more instrumental communication. Cownie and Gallo's (2021) study of alumni again highlighted how feelings of gratitude towards academics rarely translated into visible expressions of gratitude. Indeed, Cownie and Gallo (2021 p.788) proposed that expressions of gratitude could be 'known' or 'unknown', i.e., evident or not to the benefactor. Kumar and Epley's (2018) experimental study outside the context of education found that the value and positive impact of expressions of gratitude were underestimated by the sender, and the awkwardness of receiving gratitude was overestimated. It will be interesting to examine the relationship between feelings and expressions of gratitude quantitatively in the HE context.

Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2017), publishing in the *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, provide a particular parallel for this study. Their examination of gratitude and word-of-mouth communication within HE focusses on 'customer gratitude', measuring feelings of gratitude towards the institution drawing from McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002). Thus, our study is distinctive from that of Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2017) by defining gratitude as two constructs which might separately and distinctly influence word-of-mouth communication. We

draw from Morgan et al.'s (2016) ideas of generalised gratitude behaviours to further inform our understanding of gratitude. We suggest that generalised gratitude behaviours impact the experience of gratitude within a specific context, here HE. Morgan et al. (2016) identify four constructs that explain individuals' overarching attitudes and behaviours concerning gratitude. We propose that three of these constructs may influence students' feelings and expressions of gratitude within HE. 'Attitude of gratitude' is the importance of acknowledging kindness and showing gratitude; 'Behavioural shortcomings' represents a failure to acknowledge the things one is grateful for; 'Rituals/noticing benefits' is about recognizing the good things one has (Morgan et al., 2016). The fourth factor, 'Attitude of appropriateness (of gratitude)', identified by Morgan et al. (2016), reflects whether gratitude is considered an appropriate idea.

Connecting gratitude and word-of-mouth

As a powerful mediating variable within relational exchanges, gratitude has the potential to drive important relational outcomes (Palmatier et al. 2009). However, there is limited evidence of a link between gratitude and word-of-mouth; neither Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2017) or Simon, Tossan and Guesquiere et al. (2015) found a direct relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth communication. However, recent studies based on experimental methodology (Septianto and Errmann 2021, Bock et al. 2021) have found evidence that gratitude drives positive word-of-mouth within commercial contexts. Septianto and Errmann's (2021) work within the context of sustainable luxury brands found that gratitude drives electronic word-of-mouth. Bock et al. (2021) within the context of customer experience and hospitality found that gratitude generated employee-centric word-of-mouth content, concluding that the motivation to help the firm underpinned the production of positive word-of-mouth. This finding confirms our alignment with reciprocal exchange. Finally, within the context of Corporate Social Responsibility, Romani et al. (2013) found that gratitude had a positive relationship with positive word-of-mouth intentions and a broad concept, advocacy behaviours. These studies

all focus on the relationship between gratitude and positive word-of-mouth. None considers whether gratitude reduces negative word-of-mouth. Suppression of feedback as a distinct outcome is largely disregarded although Romani et al.'s (2013) 'advocacy behaviours' do embrace the provision of helpful feedback. This study examines whether gratitude drives word-of-mouth or voice amongst students. Word-of-mouth is considered to be influential within HE, impacting students' choices of universities and modules (Taylor 2009; Li and Wang 2010; Herold and Sundqvist 2013; Greenacre et al. 2014; Sipila et al. 2017, Amani 2022). Outside HE, we know that culture influences positive word-of-mouth (Lam, Lee and Mizerski 2009).

This study is underpinned by two key ideas. First, students' feelings and expressions of gratitude related to HE are formed by students' general gratitude attitudes and behaviours outside HE. Second, feelings and expressions of gratitude may influence how students speak about HE. The framework draws from Morgan et al.'s (2016) multi-component gratitude measure to inform generalized gratitude attitudes and behaviours. Three forms of voice are measured, positive word-of-mouth (PWOM), negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) and silent endurance (SILEN). These constructs are drawn from the work of Beatty et al. (2012), who had themselves drawn from Jones et al. (2007) to define negative word-of-mouth items and from Verhoef, Franses and Hoekstra (2002) to identify items for positive word-of-mouth.

Silent endurance is an innovative construct encapsulating tolerating concerns quietly and avoiding providing feedback. It has real relevance to the context of HE in which student feedback is valued and frequently solicited (Shah and Pabel 2019). We see silent endurance as a metaphorical hand over the mouth because of the risk of speaking, an un-opened mouth because you can't be bothered to speak up, a sense that providing feedback will not change anything. In essence, silent endurance implies that the effort of providing feedback is not worth expending. Beatty et al. (2012) developed this construct from Hirschman's (1970) notion of suffering in silence. Within the HE context, silent endurance may in part be the product of

concerns about the risk associated with providing negative (and even positive) feedback. Indeed Schaarschmidt et al.'s (2020) recent work sees silent endurance as non-complaining and highlights the importance of perceptions of fairness in reducing silent endurance. A student's experiences of receiving help from a tutor might suggest future fairness from the tutor towards the student which would then abate silent endurance. This study therefore seeks to advance the thoughts that word-of-mouth should embrace both valences, alongside active non-speaking which universities wish to avoid as they seek to engage with their students. This would be further exacerbated if silent endurance has negative outcomes.

Only one previous study has quantitatively examined the relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth communication within HE. Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2017) found that the relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth was fully mediated by affective commitment. Gratitude and word-of-mouth were each conceptualized as a single construct. This study is original with its multi-dimensional approach towards gratitude and word-of-mouth, allowing a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between gratitude and voice.

Generalised gratitude behaviours influence on feelings and expressions of gratitude

The conceptual framework informing this study seeks to enrich the conceptualisation of gratitude, arguing that feelings and expressions of gratitude will be influenced by generalised gratitude behaviours: positively by rituals/noticing (RITL) and attitude of gratitude (ATGRA); negatively by behavioural shortcomings (BSHRT). It suggests that feelings and expressions of gratitude are distinct but related to each other. The framework proposes that both feelings and expressions of gratitude will encourage students to speak about their HE experience, enhancing positive conversations, diminishing negative conversations and reducing silent endurance.

Rituals/noticing benefits conceptualise the recognition of and reflection upon experiences, which might prompt gratitude; measures include '*I recognize how many things I have to be grateful for*' and '*I stop and think about all the things I am grateful for*'. In essence,

this is about having one's senses attuned to picking up experiences that might generate gratitude. As students bring more recognition and attentiveness to noticing the types of experiences which demonstrate benevolent intentions or helping behaviours, we expect that such attentiveness would enhance students' feelings of gratitude towards the benefactor as awareness of benevolent intentions or actions is processed by students (Li, Luo and Fu 2019). As a result, feelings of gratitude emerge. Thus, noticing acts of benevolence generates positive emotional responses accompanied by an intention to demonstrate appreciation to the perceived giver of valued benefits. The perceived giver might be the university, academics, peers, friends; together, these positive feelings can be articulated as feelings of gratitude in the context of HE.

Attitude of gratitude conceptualizes a sense of valuing gratitude and acknowledgements of gratitude, evident in the measures *'I believe that it is important to thank people sincerely for the help they give me'* and *'I believe that gratitude is an important value to have'*. Students with a strong attitude of gratitude would see gratitude as important. As the construct ATGRA conflates measures which reflect on both the value of feeling grateful and the value of expressing gratitude, the expectation is that a strong attitude of gratitude would increase both students' feelings of gratitude and expressions of gratitude within HE. Valuing gratitude as a virtue would prompt feelings of gratitude within HE (though the direction of causality between these constructs might not be clear). An attitude of gratitude that acknowledges the importance of thanking people in general, would make it more likely that students with a high attitude of gratitude would bring that to their university setting and express thanks more readily than those with a lower attitude to gratitude. Whilst there may be barriers to delivering these thanks (Cownie 2016; Cownie and Gallo 2021), we suggest that a stronger underlying belief in the importance of thanking will result in increased expressions of gratitude.

Finally, behavioural shortcomings, the forgetfulness to be attentive to good things or indeed absence of prompting oneself to acknowledge positive experiences, is the third general

gratitude behaviour drawn from Morgan et al. (2016). With measures including '*I forget to remind myself that there is so much to be grateful for at [institution]*' and '*I overlook how much I have to be grateful for at [institution]*', it is clear that students who approach life in this manner are less likely attend to positive experiences. In turn, students will be less likely to feel positively about experiences in HE and less likely to intend to do anything about them. Thus, the presence of high levels of the behavioural shortcomings (BSRT) construct is expected to reduce students' feelings of gratitude related to their experiences of HE.

This study excluded Morgan et al.'s (2016) fourth factor, 'Attitude of appropriateness (of gratitude)', as it lacked clarity and appeared to duplicate 'Attitude of gratitude', which in our opinion more clearly captures participants' generic feelings towards gratitude. 'Attitude of appropriateness (of gratitude)' uses complex measures, for example, '*I only show gratitude for the things that are not already due to me/are mine by right*', with four of the five measures being reversed, leading to concerns about the measures' interpretation by participants, particularly those for whom English is a second language. Whilst the decision to omit this fourth variable was based on conceptual analysis and considerations related to implementation, we do acknowledge that this could be seen as a limitation of this research.

Four hypotheses emerge from this analysis, underpinned by Morgan et al. (2016):

- H1.a Rituals/noticing benefits increase feelings of gratitude;
- H1.b Behavioural shortcomings reduce feelings of gratitude;
- H1.c Attitude of gratitude increases feelings of gratitude;
- H1.d Attitude of gratitude increases expressions of gratitude.

Feelings and expressions of gratitude

We expect feelings and expressions of gratitude within the context of HE to be related to each other. The construct feelings of gratitude (FOG) is measured by items including '*There are many things that I am grateful for at [institution]*' and '*I feel appreciative of the support of*

many people in my studies at [institution]', which encapsulate the acknowledgement of aspects of the university experience valued by students. Students who experience a positive emotional response related to HE combined with an intention to enact that response may express thanks to the institution or academics. That expression of thanks is the performance of the intention to respond. The construct expression of gratitude (EOG) is reflected in measures including '*I go out of my way to thank others for their help at [institution]*' and '*I express thanks to those who help me at [institution]*'. Whilst the intention to do something about positive feelings is intrinsic to the construct FOG, the actual act resulting from that intention is distinct and encapsulated within the construct EOG, the communication of gratitude.

One hypothesis emerges from this analysis:

H2. Feelings of gratitude increase expressions of gratitude.

Feelings of gratitude and relationships to word-of-mouth communication

The relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth communication is at the heart of this study. These relationships are underpinned by reciprocity, the conceptual backdrop to this study. In essence, feelings of gratitude result in reciprocal behaviours which help and avoid harming (Gouldner 1960), the generator of those feelings of gratitude – here academics or the institution. First, it is expected that those students who have feelings of gratitude about their experience of HE will be more likely to speak positively about this experience. Positive conversations are an enactment of the intention to reward the giver of valued benefits associated with feelings of gratitude. They sit alongside enactments in the form of expressions of gratitude. Alongside this sense of active intent to reward, it is also expected that the benevolence associated with gratitude will generate authentic, enthused communication about those valued experiences, and such enthused communication is likely to take the form of positive word-of-mouth (PWOM). Such positive word-of-mouth communication may be aimed at fellow students, prospective students or family. There is a spontaneity associated with

such conversations stimulated as they are by positive feelings. It is that very spontaneity and authenticity which make such conversations so potent.

Just as feelings of gratitude stimulate positive conversations, we expect them to inhibit negative conversations. This may be because there is less to be negative about, things have gone well, there are few negative stories to tell. But it is also a function of a desire not to harm the benefactor of valued benefits – a key characteristic of reciprocity (Gouldner 1960). Thus, we expect feelings of gratitude about HE to reduce negative word-of-mouth (NWOM).

Less straightforward is the expected relationship with silent endurance. We expect those students who are feeling grateful towards the university or academics to recognise the efforts invested in valued aspects of their experience. This invested effort is likely to be reciprocated by students. Thus, silent endurance with a lack of preparedness to make effort at its heart, is likely to diminish as feelings of gratitude increase; reciprocity will enhance preparedness to make an effort. Indeed, students may feel that concerns about aspects of the HE experience are worthy of communication back to their university and academics because by feeling grateful, they will recognise the efforts previously invested and predict that future effort would be applied to addressing those concerns. There will be some confidence that communication will not just be worth the effort but also any potential risk involved. Such perceived risk might include potential conflict with academics or reduced grades for assessments. Again, feelings of gratitude would reduce these risks as the benevolence demonstrated to students (by academics or institution) would be evident and predicted to continue. We expect feelings of gratitude to diminish silent endurance (SILEN) and that grateful students will be prepared to share their ideas or criticisms with their HE provider, feeling confident they will be dealt with fairly (Schaarschmidt et al. 2020) and being prepared to engage in functional conflict (Morgan and Hunt 1994) with the aim of improving provision.

The following hypotheses emerge from this analysis, underpinned by Beatty et al. (2012) and Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2017):

- H3.a Feelings of gratitude increase positive word-of-mouth;
- H3.b Feelings of gratitude reduce negative word-of-mouth;
- H3.c Feelings of gratitude reduce silent endurance.

Expressions of gratitude and relationships to word-of-mouth communication

Our expectation is that expressions of gratitude will impact the three word-of-mouth constructs. We anticipate that words of thanks which emerge will stimulate positive conversations as an extension and confirmation of those expressions of thanks. We also expect that expressions of gratitude would limit negative word-of-mouth as they appear as contradictory forms of communication that would undermine the credibility of the sender; there is inconsistency between saying thank-you and then speaking negatively about the same experience. Finally, we expect that students who make the effort to express their gratitude (not all those who feel grateful express that gratitude) will be prepared to make efforts to communicate to their HE provider. The energy of saying thanks does not align with a sense of not being bothered or prepared to invest time in communication. We expect those who express gratitude are likely to demonstrate lower levels of silent endurance. Those who can be bothered to say thanks can also be bothered to provide feedback to enhance their own and others' experiences of HE.

These hypotheses are thus:

- H4.a Expressions of gratitude increase positive word-of-mouth;
- H4.b Expressions of gratitude reduce negative word-of-mouth;
- H4.c Expressions of gratitude reduce silent endurance.

The hypotheses are reflected in the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1. Two further hypotheses reflect the mediating role gratitude-in-HE plays between general gratitude attitudes and behaviour and word-of-mouth communication:

H5.a Feelings of gratitude act as a mediator between general gratitude behaviours and positive word-of-mouth;

H5.b Expressions of gratitude act as a mediator between general gratitude behaviours and positive word-of-mouth.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

In summary, to the researchers' knowledge, this is the first study of its kind and will produce original knowledge about gratitude and word-of-mouth in HE within the ASEAN and UK regions addressing the following aim:

To examine potential relationships between gratitude and word-of-mouth communication within ASEAN and UK Higher Education.

METHODS

The research population comprised students studying at five HEIs across the ASEAN and UK regions permitting us to examine if emerging relationships between constructs were sustained across distinct cultures (Hofstede Insights 2021). These two regions have distinct cultural characteristics including long/short-term orientation, femininity/masculinity, individualism/collectivism (Hofstede Insights 2021). Whereas HEIs in UK are independent bodies not owned by the UK government, ASEAN HEIs are government owned (public) or private. Two public institutions and two private institutions were used in the ASEAN region. A quantitative survey method addressed the research aim. PLS-SEM was the chosen analytical method, a variance-based approach to Structural Equation Modelling appropriate for theory development and estimation of path model relationships (Hair et al. 2014).

Online survey method was used for data collection. Academics in all institutions emailed the opportunity to engage with the study to student cohorts within their institution with a link to the online survey. Copy for this email was supplied and therefore consistent; its focus

was informed consent, including the nature of the study and reinforcing voluntary participation. We do not know how many students saw this information but decided not to participate.

The survey was distributed during 2018 by the research team at five institutions located in Thailand (two institutions), Vietnam, Indonesia and the UK. This reflected a convenience sampling approach within ASEAN countries accessible through institutional partnerships and judged to have highly developed HE systems by the British Council (2018).

Survey questions were adapted for the HE context drawing from the work of Morgan et al. (2016) and Beatty et al. (2012). English language was used for the survey within both ASEAN and UK contexts. The survey was designed to provide proximal separation between dependent, mediating and independent constructs to reduce potential common method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2012). Ethical approval was gained from Bournemouth University, UK – approval 19696. Students gave consent to participate at the beginning of the survey. Appendix 1 provides final items; future replication of the study could use these measures within an online survey emailed to current students with relevant ethical approval secured.

A total of 499 participants from five different institutions responded to the survey. The 128 ASEAN respondents were drawn from four institutions; the 371 UK respondents came from a single university. Of the total respondents, 72% reported to be female, 26% male (2% preferred not to say or reported ‘other’). Indeed, this dominance of females within respondents is evident in other research within this domain (e.g. Cownie 2020). ASEAN participants were drawn from across the region, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines; however, the dominant country of origin amongst all respondents was the UK. A small proportion (5%) of respondents were European, largely studying in the UK.

We acknowledge methodological limitations, in particular recognizing the challenges of participation faced by the ASEAN participants, including the comprehensibility of adapted measures to ASEAN populations and the fact that only students capable of reading English

would be able to participate in this research. Indeed, whilst the survey questions were drawn from validated sources and the research team carefully checked the comprehensibility of the tool, there was no formal pilot study. Attempts to minimise common method bias were implemented within survey design; nevertheless, we understand the potential for common method bias to remain a limitation. We note that despite the fact that a sample of at least 100 participants was gathered from the two geographical regions, the sample size from each of the ASEAN HEIs is limited and the UK sample comes from a single institution. Furthermore, participants in the ASEAN institutions do not reflect the student body within these institutions, as they were invited to participate in the study by academic leads who were connected with communication, media, business and marketing cohorts. The UK sample was generated from across the subject areas of the institution. Whilst subject of study was not collected on the survey, we can expect that our UK sample is broader by discipline than our ASEAN sample. We note that whilst in general the ASEAN region has different cultural characteristics to UK, there is variation within the ASEAN region. For example, whereas all three ASEAN countries have low individualism, Thailand has a shorter-term orientation than Vietnam and Indonesia (Hofstede Insights 2021). However, the ASEAN dataset is too small to compare results across these three ASEAN countries. Whilst there is an imbalance of participants across the two regions, PLS-SEM can analyse structural models with the dataset size involved (Hair et al. 2014; Hair et al. 2018); however these limitations, arguably require us to keep a critical eye on the results, particularly those related to the ASEAN sample.

RESULTS

The study examined the explanatory power of the conceptual framework using PLS-SEM version 3.3.2 (Hair et al. 2014; Hair et al. 2018). The first stage was to focus on the plausibility of model fit across the entire body of participants, aiming to produce a configural model, then

checking for invariance between groups within the associated measurement model. Hypothesized relationships within the two student groups were then compared.

Developing a configural model using all respondents

Whilst the conceptual framework highlights relationships which reflect the hypotheses, the first stage of model-testing embraced all direct and mediated relationships. A total sample of 499 respondents was used, comprising the whole ASEAN and UK sample. Missing values were addressed with mean replacement. The aim was to generate a configural model, a generalized framework comprising significant relationships for the entire body of participants. The measurement model was examined. Outer loadings calculated, construct reliability and validity tested. In summary, the measurement model passed the criteria identified by Hair et al. (2014).

Attention then turned to the examination of the structural model. A series of iterations were tested, using complete bootstrapping on 5000 cases and analysing significance of t values which informed path deletion. For each iteration, one structural relationship that was problematic was removed and the model rerun. Theoretical reasoning was prioritized in phase one. Phase two examined the empirical data and hypothesized relationships which were not statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ and removed. Table 1 demonstrates the path coefficients and significance level of all remaining relationships within the configural model. Therefore, a configural model had been achieved, however it was important to understand if there was significant variance between the two groups.

INSERT TABLE 1

MICOM 2 (Hair et al. 2014) was used to test measurement invariance. Compositional invariance was not confirmed, demonstrating there was variance between the ASEAN and UK groups for four constructs (BSHRT, PWOM, RITL and SILEN). We assume therefore that the ASEAN and UK groups brought different interpretations to these ideas within the conceptual framework. Ultimately, whilst the conventional thresholds of an acceptable configural model

were reached, i.e., the model meets criteria of acceptability when applied to the pooled sample, it was not possible to produce an effective framework for the combined group.

Analysis of ASEAN sample

The 128 ASEAN respondents were then used to analyse the framework following the same process. The measurement model was run with the ASEAN dataset. Outer loadings were generally satisfactory, but a small number of items did not load sufficiently strongly on their associated latent variables. RITL1, SILEN1, SILEN 4 BHSRT4, RITL3 were thus deleted. The model was re-run; all remaining loadings were satisfactory (over 0.7). Once the items had been removed, construct reliability and validity were analysed across the constructs using the remaining items. Construct reliability and validity measures met the criteria for Cronbach's Alpha, Rho Alpha, Component Reliability and Average Variance Extracted (Table 2). Discriminant Validity was examined; Fornell Larcker, Cross Loadings and HTMT met the criteria set by Hair et al. (2014). In conclusion, there was no reason to remove any of the constructs, though we note SILEN is measured by two items.

INSERT TABLE 2

Finally, moving to the assessment of collinearity, given the reflective nature of indicators, issues were not expected. Outer VIF were satisfactory (under 10). Indeed, SILEN with two items was unproblematic, ATGRA indicators providing the highest outer VIF measures. Given that three of the ATGRA indicators were high, the indicators are probably saying the same thing using different forms of words, rather than highlighting different aspects of the factor. We note the fine line between employing reflective indicators which say something similar but not too similar to invoke collinearity. A decision was made to remove ATGRA4 – VIF 6.840.

Once the measurement model had been confirmed, the structural model was analysed using Bootstrapping with 5000 sub-samples and one-tailed tests given the directional nature of

the hypotheses. Theoretical analysis of the relationships informed by the empirical data led decision-making. Again, theoretical analysis reflected the logic of relationships between constructs. First relationships which had not been hypothesized and were mediated by FOG or EOG were deleted; Secondly hypothesized relationships which did not have empirical support were deleted. Stage 3 removed relationships which were not statistically significant. Final path coefficients for the ASEAN sample, significant at $p < 0.05$, are provided in Table 3.

INSERT TABLE 3

The final framework for the ASEAN region suggests that feelings of gratitude mediate general gratitude attitudes and behaviour relationships with positive word-of-mouth. Indeed, feelings of gratitude strongly drive positive word-of-mouth (0.656). However, whilst feelings of gratitude and expressions of gratitude do have a relationship, it is only moderately strong (0.378). Relationships were significant at $p < 0.05$ (RITL-FOG is an exception with $p = 0.051$). Expressions of gratitude have no outcomes; there is no relationship between feelings and expressions of gratitude in HE and negative word-of-mouth or silent endurance. Interestingly, the fact that all relationships between general gratitude attitudes and behaviour constructs and gratitude-in-HE constructs are positive suggests that any reflections of gratitude in a broad sense whether they be positively (RITL/ATGRA) or negatively conceived (BSHIRT) have a positive if moderate impact on gratitude-in-HE. All three constructs, even BSHRT, increase feelings of gratitude. As hypothesized, RITL and ATGRA both increase expressions of gratitude. General gratitude attitudes and behaviour have a positive impact on the gratitude felt and enacted within ASEAN HE; feelings of gratitude generate positive conversations.

Analysis of UK sample

The complete UK sample (371 respondents) was then used to perform the same analysis of the framework. Analysis of outer loadings demonstrated that all items and constructs were operating effectively. Therefore, all items were retained within the analysis. Construct

reliability and validity were robust, with Cronbach Alpha, Rho Alpha, Composite Reliability and AVE all meeting the levels required (Table 2). Whilst discriminant validity also appeared satisfactory, it was noted that PWOM and NWOM had Fornell Larcker criterion of just less than 0.2 difference. Cross loadings demonstrated that all items loaded most heavily onto their respective construct, however, loadings of PWOM items were relatively strong on FOG and (negatively) on NWOM. Heterotrait-monotrait ratio reinforced the proximity between PWOM and NWOM. Whilst this was noted, a decision was made to retain both constructs as the inclusion of negative word-of-mouth was a distinctive element of this research, in particular, in comparison with Fasal-e-Hasan et al.'s (2017) work which examined word-of-mouth intentions as a single construct conflating positive and negative word-of-mouth within items e.g. *I seldom miss an opportunity to tell others about my university*.

Finally, moving to the assessment of collinearity, outer VIFs were generally satisfactory, though six of the eight constructs included items with higher levels than Hair et al. (2014) recommend. Again, this may mean some duplication of meaning in the description of the factor, reflecting the challenge of using reflective indicators saying something similar but not invoking collinearity. A decision was taken to delete ATGRA3 (5.019), BSHRT3 (5.025), FOG5 (7.109). No deletions were made within factors with only three items. With a confirmed measurement model, the structural model was analysed in the same manner as that used for the ASEAN sample, using Bootstrapping with 5000 sub-samples and a one tailed test reflecting the directional nature of the hypotheses. Path deletion was informed by theoretical analysis supported by empirical data. Relationships not hypothesized and mediated by FOG or EOG were initially deleted, followed by hypothesized relationships without empirical support. Following an iterative process of bootstrapping, path deletion and re-calculation of path coefficients, a final framework was developed with path coefficients ($p < .05$) in Table 3.

The final framework for the UK sample demonstrated clear links between gratitude and word-of-mouth communication within students' reported experiences of HE. Again, the strongest relationship was that between feelings of gratitude and positive word-of-mouth (0.718). Consistent with the ASEAN context, feelings of gratitude act as a mediator between general gratitude attitudes and behaviour (RITL, ATGRA, BHSRT) and positive word-of-mouth. Again, consistent with the ASEAN context, feelings of gratitude do drive expressions of gratitude, but the strength of this relationship is modest (0.313). Silent endurance was found to be a robust construct, related to feelings of gratitude (-0.215) but not expressions of gratitude. Expressions of gratitude had no impact on positive word-of-mouth but were shown to have a weak, unexpectedly positive impact on negative word-of-mouth (0.097). Finally, positive word-of-mouth has a moderate negative relationship with silent endurance (-0.389) and as expected from the analysis of loadings, a strong negative relationship with positive word-of-mouth (-0.766). All relationships were significant at $p < 0.05$.

To summarise, the study sought to test 16 hypotheses. Table 4 presents a summary of findings. Eight hypotheses were fully proven ($p < 0.05$). Two were proven in the UK sample but not the ASEAN sample (the negative relationships between feelings of gratitude and silent endurance, positive word-of-mouth and silent endurance). One generated a significant relationship in the UK sample of the opposite direction hypothesised. Six were not proven in either sample. Given our note of the limitations associated with the ASEAN sample, future research using a larger ASEAN sample could revisit these hypotheses.

INSERT TABLE 4

DISCUSSION

Theoretical contributions

The originality of this study lies in the clear evidence provided that feelings of gratitude strongly drive positive word-of-mouth and that this relationship is sustained across cultures.

This challenges Fazel-e-Hasan et al. (2017) who found that gratitude's relationship with word-of-mouth within HE was mediated by affective commitment. If students feel grateful for their HE experience they are likely to speak positively about it to others (student peers, prospective students and family) reflecting the principal of reciprocity, the theoretical backdrop of this study. Whilst this seems intuitive, we present evidence of the power of this relationship within two cultural contexts, reflecting Gouldner's (1960) claims of the universality of reciprocity. We know that these positive conversations can be influential within the choice of university and modules (Greenacre et al. 2014; Sipila et al. 2017; Amani 2022). Such positivity may also enhance the student experience promoting a 'feel good' environment. Feelings of gratitude also drive expressions of gratitude; however, this relationship is weaker than that between feelings of gratitude and positive word-of-mouth. Again, this is sustained across cultures.

The awkwardness of expressing gratitude may be a factor here (Cownie 2016; Cownie 2020a, Cownie and Gallo 2021) alongside senders' under-estimation of the value of expressions of gratitude to receivers (Kumar and Epley 2018). Opportunities to speak positively about university life to friends, family and prospective students may be more plentiful and accessible than opportunities to say thank-you to the institution, academics or peers. Crucially, feelings of gratitude are more likely to result in positive conversations with others than in thanks to the benefactor. To our knowledge, this is the first study to establish this. This might be beneficial from an institutional perspective, given the power of positive word-of-mouth in supporting institutional recruitment (Amine 2022). However, this is perhaps less beneficial to individual benefactors who less frequently hear the results of their benevolent investments into students. We suggest that messages of thanks should not be treated as a measure of feelings of gratitude. Students may feel grateful but don't necessarily articulate it.

Fazal-e-Hasan et al.'s (2017, 2020, 2021) studies confirm the important role of gratitude, in essence feelings of gratitude, in mediating the relationship between relational

investments and relational outcomes, including commitment, trust and satisfaction. We can now confidently add positive word-of-mouth to that list. We suggest that future studies explicitly analyse feelings and expressions of gratitude as separate constructs. Whilst the potency of feelings of gratitude has been further established by this research, there is more work to be done to establish the role (if any) of expressions of gratitude. It may be that expressions of gratitude are not direct drivers of relational outcomes. Their role within relational strategies may be to enhance benefactors' (institution/academics') perceptions of recipients' (students') feelings of gratitude, in turn enhancing relational investment. These constructs were not included in this study but might have a distinct role within relational exchange; future studies could rectify this. Cownie and Gallo (2021) suggest that expressions of gratitude might be known and unknown; work to enhance known expressions of gratitude might be of particular value if expressions of gratitude are found to drive relational investment. Without known expressions of gratitude, feelings of gratitude may be unrecognised, resulting in practice which systematically undervalues the role of gratitude within relational exchange.

We now know that students' generalized gratitude attitudes and behaviour increase the gratitude felt and enacted within HE. These generalized attitudes and behaviours drawn from Morgan et al. (2016) generate a state which heightens the opportunities to engage with gratitude, and this impacts the likelihood of students experiencing feelings of gratitude within HE. This study suggests that culture may have an impact on these relationships, although the relationship between feelings of gratitude and positive word-of-mouth appears to sustain cultural difference. The outcomes of the study may reflect the honorific position academics assume in relation to their students within Asian cultures. Expressing thanks to those in positions of respect may be a far more natural behaviour than it would be within UK cultures in which academics are perhaps seen in a less elevated position. Future studies might systematically test culture as a moderator of relationships between generalised gratitude

attitudes and behaviours and feelings and expressions of gratitude in the way Beck et al. (2015), Samaha et al. (2014) have in other relationship marketing contexts.

Recognition of and attentiveness towards gratitude builds awareness of benevolent intentions or actions. Such awareness generates the positive emotional response accompanied by an intention to respond characteristic of gratitude (Luo et al. 2019). Thus, recognition and attentiveness towards gratitude drives feelings and expressions of gratitude. The importance accorded to gratitude as a virtue prompts both feelings and expressions of gratitude. Those who value gratitude are more likely to give themselves the mental and physical space to experience and express that gratitude. The barriers to feelings and expressions of gratitude are less likely to be seen or respected by students who see gratitude as a priority. There is an underlying belief in the importance of thanking those who provide a valued act. Surprisingly, behavioural shortcomings, forgetting to be attentive to good things, increases feelings of gratitude. Perhaps those who are reflective about their forgetfulness or neglect towards gratitude, measure themselves against a high personal goal; behavioural shortcomings are relative not absolute.

The originality of this research also lies in its distinction between feelings and expressions of gratitude. Few scholars appear to do this within current research in the context of relationship marketing or HE. For example, Septianto and Errmann's (2021) recent study of gratitude related to sustainable luxury brands uses a single gratitude measure aligned to feelings of gratitude. Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2017, 2020, 2021) consistently use a single construct of gratitude drawn from McCullough et al. (2002). Whilst their conceptualisation of gratitude aligns with feelings of gratitude, we see a value in further exploring the role of expressions of gratitude within gratitude-based relational models. We saw how feelings and expressions of gratitude had very distinct relationships with word-of-mouth and how culture may be influential. In the ASEAN sample, feelings of gratitude were a powerful driver of positive word-of-mouth, but expressions of gratitude had no impact on word-of-mouth. In contrast, in

the UK sample, both feelings and expressions of gratitude had an impact on word-of-mouth but impacted different factors. Feelings of gratitude drove positive word-of-mouth and reduced silent endurance; expressions of gratitude had a small (unexpectedly positive) impact on negative word-of-mouth. Thus, we can see that culture may impact the way feelings and expressions of gratitude relate to outcomes; this is worthy of further exploration.

Importantly, we see that feelings of gratitude are a powerful motivator of positive word-of-mouth and feelings of gratitude are more likely to result in positive conversations than in expressions of thanks. Whilst expressions of gratitude are informed by feelings of gratitude, the moderate relationship evident between the two pillars of gratitude may reflect the awkwardness of authentically expressing gratitude alongside a perceived lack of opportunity to express gratitude. Students may be keen to avoid their expressions of gratitude being seen as a performance. The circumstances in which a student can express gratitude to an academic, or the institution in an authentic, private manner may be seen to be few and far between. Our key finding that feelings of gratitude drive positive word-of-mouth challenges Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2017), previously the only study to empirically test a relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth in the context of HE. This may be related to the different contexts in which the two studies were conducted (UK/ASEAN vs Pakistan) or our multi-dimensional approach.

This study started by hypothesizing that expressions of gratitude might in themselves stimulate positive word-of-mouth and reduce negative word-of-mouth and silent endurance. There is little evidence to support such thinking. Expressions of gratitude emerge as an outcome of feelings of gratitude rather than a driver of word-of-mouth communication. Expressions of thanks may be beneficial to the wellbeing of the receiver but do little to make the sender more likely to speak positively about their experiences. There is nothing to suggest that expressions of gratitude might inhibit positive word-of-mouth communication but surprisingly, the UK sample did demonstrate a weak but positive relationship between

expressions of gratitude and negative word-of-mouth. This feels counter-intuitive, but perhaps students who have a propensity to communicate with others, positively or negatively, are also those more likely to communicate messages of thanks to those involved in providing that experience. In essence, propensity to communicate is a key influence and might be usefully included within the independent variables of future studies of gratitude and word-of-mouth.

The originality of this research is evident in the inclusion of silent endurance (Beatty et al. 2012) as an outcome of gratitude. Silent endurance is an innovative construct encapsulating tolerating concerns quietly and avoiding providing feedback. A metaphorical hand over the mouth because of the risk of speaking, an un-opened mouth because you can't be bothered to speak up, a sense that providing feedback will not change anything. In essence, silent endurance means that the effort of providing feedback is not worth expending. It is the reverse of Romani et al.'s (2013) idea of 'advocacy behaviours'. Silent endurance has a particular resonance within the HE context in which student feedback is valued and frequently solicited (Shah and Pabel 2019). Yet students may envisage risks should their feedback be deemed as negative, alongside concerns about fairness (Schaarschmidt et al. 2020). This study was innovative in being the first to examine silent endurance within the HE context. Certainly, it appears that silent endurance has not previously been considered within reciprocal exchange. We link silent endurance to toleration, that is, an absence of preparedness to be involved in resolving practice which is disliked. We offer a definition of silent endurance within HE as tolerating concerns quietly and avoiding providing feedback, even when explicitly asked to do so within student voice mechanisms. Encouraging feedback is important for two reasons: to access insights which enable enhancement; and to avoid perceptions of barriers to giving feedback which in turn prompt negative conversations. We encourage future scholars to continue the inclusion of silent endurance within their thinking of relational exchange in HE, offering our definition and operationalisation (drawn from Beatty et al. 2012).

Finally, we reflect on Bock et al.'s (2021) recent work on indirect reciprocity, thinking of reciprocity within triads rather than dyads and its implications for studies of gratitude and word of mouth within HE. Referring to our items we can see that feelings of gratitude are essentially about feelings of gratitude towards people within the institution, e.g., *FOG2 - I feel appreciative of the support of many people in my studies at {institution}*, whereas positive word of mouth is about the institution, e.g., *PWOM1 - I say positive things about {institution} to people I know*. Indirect reciprocal exchange therefore appears to be a particularly relevant frame for this study and might explicitly inform the design of future studies in this context.

Limitations

Whilst the results of this study are interesting, original and sustained across the chosen cultural contexts, undoubtably limitations must be acknowledged. The data sample drawn from just one UK institution and four ASEAN HEIs is unbalanced – there are far more participants from the one UK HEI than the entire ASEAN sample. The disciplines studied by students across the two samples are not consistent. This is a result of an approach to survey distribution which was dependent upon gatekeepers within each institution and the English competency of respondents. Whilst PLS SEM can be used to analyse the data, and the key relationships emerging from the analysis appear consistent and robust, future research should seek to distribute the survey in a more systematic way enabling the evaluation and implications of non-response error. Indeed, just as Fazal-e-Hasan (2017) concluded, the study with its cross-sectional nature cannot confirm the causality of the relationships. Longitudinal research would be required to prove the central claims that feelings of gratitude generate expressions of gratitude and positive word-of-mouth. The survey was presented in English language only, which would limit the participation of students within the ASEAN region, and we acknowledge that some of the ASEAN participants may have struggled to understand some survey questions. A pilot study would have been helpful to address this concern. Whilst our attempts to structure

the survey to minimise common method bias may have been useful, we still note that common method bias may remain a limitation. Similarly, given the multi-dimensional nature of this study we acknowledge the potential overlap between variables and thus challenges of collinearity. We note that whilst there are cultural similarities within the ASEAN group, e.g., low levels of individualism, high levels of long-term orientation, there is also variation within the group; for example, Thailand has a more feminine culture than Indonesia and Vietnam (Hofstede Insights 2021). In short, we have analysed the ASEAN sample as a more homogeneous group than it is.

Theoretical implications and future research directions

Drawing from our analysis we summarise the theoretical implications of our work and recommend directions for future research. We suggest that gratitude and word-of-mouth should be theorised in a multi-dimensional manner. In particular we recommend that future studies of word-of-mouth in HE embrace negative word-of-mouth and silent endurance alongside their current focus on positive word-of-mouth. We offer an updated definition of silent endurance for the context of HE and would encourage scholars to embark upon further study around this relevant concept. How can we further understand silent endurance within HE? How might silent endurance be reduced to best facilitate feedback and enhancement? We recommend that the two pillars of gratitude are included in future studies, and that work is planned which seeks to better understand why feelings of gratitude so often do not translate into words of thanks.

Future research could examine whether expressions of gratitude are solely an outcome of relational strategies, or do they mediate other valuable outcomes? Future studies could also examine the expressions of gratitude in HE in high context and low context cultures to provide in-depth explanation or comparative perspectives. Expressions of gratitude might distinguish between known and unknown expressions of gratitude (Cownie and Gallo 2021); our study does not do this, but we see value in understanding the relative relationships of relational

constructs with both forms of expressions of gratitude, given that unknown expressions of gratitude might particularly resonate within contexts such as HE. Finally, we commend indirect reciprocity (Brock et al. 2021) as appropriate framing for future relational studies within HE, including those with an interest in gratitude and word-of-mouth.

Managerial implications

As we know that feelings of gratitude drive positive outcomes, academics and HEIs might be encouraged to enhance their emotional connection with students. Higher education should be characterised by brains **and** benevolence. Universities and academics should adopt benevolent and helpful behaviours towards their students. Indeed, an absence of help and support might be particularly problematic reducing the potential for gratitude to thrive and building silent endurance amongst student cohorts. We have seen that whilst feelings of gratitude drive positive word-of-mouth, they are a less powerful driver of thanks. Arguably, this is only a problem if expressions of gratitude are used as a guide to the presence of feelings of gratitude and in turn the value of investing in student interactions. HEIs might address factors which may inhibit expressions of gratitude, concerns about awkwardness and perceived limited opportunities to express thanks. The online environment may be helpful in increasing opportunities to say thank-you (Cownie 2020a) also minimising awkwardness. Demonstrating thanks may be important; academics might place more emphasis on saying thank-you to students to stimulate more known expressions of gratitude. However, we should note Brock and Thomas (2021)'s work on brands' expressions of gratitude, which finds that expressions of gratitude must be sincere if they are to have a positive impact on the receiver.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, this original study examines the impact of feelings and expressions of gratitude on positive and negative word-of-mouth communication and silent endurance, applying a

quantitative method and PLS-SEM. It finds clear evidence that feelings of gratitude generate positive word-of-mouth. We acknowledge limitations in this study, in particular, the imbalance between ASEAN and UK samples. Indeed, Thai, Vietnamese and Indonesian students may be less likely than their UK counterparts to report negative word-of-mouth behaviours and silent endurance. Future research could take the two emerging conceptual frameworks, testing them as rival frameworks within HE and other contexts. Frameworks could be tested in a wider range of cultural contexts to establish whether the relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth communication is moderated by culture. Indirect reciprocal exchange might explicitly form the theoretical framing of the study, reflected in the chosen measures for data collection.

To conclude, this is the first study to examine potential relationships between gratitude and word-of-mouth communication within ASEAN and UK HE. Its key original contribution to knowledge is the evidence it provides of the power of feelings of gratitude as a driver of positive word-of-mouth communication. Feelings of gratitude are more likely to result in positive conversations with others than in thanks to the benefactor. Feelings of gratitude reduce silent endurance within the more individualist and short-term culture of the UK. This is particularly relevant to the HE context of this study.

Whilst feelings of gratitude have a powerful relationship with positive word-of-mouth, expressions of gratitude appear to be an outcome with little impact on word-of-mouth. This research demonstrates differences in the ways in which gratitude and word-of-mouth are enacted in ASEAN and UK cultures. The paper highlights a new area of research with strong conceptual underpinning and an international perspective. It challenges and extends the limited scholarship within this area.

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Appendix 1: Items

Item name		Adapted from
SILEN1	I don't bother to complain to {institution} if I have a problem	Beatty et al. (2012)
SILEN2	It is not worth the effort to complain to {institution}	
SILEN3	It is not worth the effort to offer suggestions for improvements	
SILEN4	I don't bother to offer suggestions to {institution}	
PWOM1	I say positive things about {institution} to people I know	Beatty et al. (2012) adapted from Verhoef, Franses, and Hoekstra (2002)
PWOM2	If somebody asks advice with regard to a good university I recommend {institution}	
PWOM3	I encourage relatives and friends to study at {institution}	
NWOM1	I have warned my friends and relatives not to study at {institution}	Beatty et al. (2012) adapted from Jones et al. (2007)
NWOM2	I have complained to my friends and relatives about {institution}	
NWOM3	I have told my friends and relatives not to study at {institution}	
EOG1	I make it a priority to thank others at {institution}	Morgan et al. 2016
EOG2	I express thanks to those who help me at {institution}	
EOG3	I notice the people who are kind to me at {institution}	
EOG4	I go out of my way to thank others for their help at {institution}	
FOG1	There are so many people at {institution} that I feel grateful for	Morgan et al. 2016
FOG2	I feel appreciative of the support of many people in my studies at {institution}	
FOG3	I feel grateful for the people at {institution}	
FOG4	Thinking about all I have to be grateful for at {institution} makes me feel happy	
FOG5	There are many things that I am grateful for at {institution}	
BSHRT1	I forget to let others at {institution} know how much I appreciate them	Morgan et al. 2016
BSHRT2	I forget to reflect on the things that I am grateful for at {institution}	
BSHRT3	I overlook how much I have to be grateful for at {institution}	
BSHRT4	I forget to remind myself that there is so much at {institution} to be thankful for	
RITL1	I stop to recognise all the good things I have in my life	Morgan et al. 2016
RITL2	I recognise how many things I have to be grateful for	
RITL3	I stop and think about all the things I am grateful for	
RITL4	I reflect on all the good things I have	
RITL5	I remind myself of the benefits I have received	
ATGRA1	I think it is necessary to show your gratitude to others**	Morgan et al. 2016
ATGRA2	I believe it is important to thank people sincerely for the help they give me	
ATGRA3	I believe gratitude is an important value to have	
ATGRA4	It is important to acknowledge the kindness of other people	

** original reversed {institution}