

| **Gratitude within ASEAN Higher Education: an exploratory study.**

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Abstract

Gratitude can be a powerful mediating variable within relational exchanges, with the potential to drive important relational outcomes. The cultural characteristics of countries within the ASEAN region, suggest that relational exchanges which focus on reciprocity and thus gratitude may have a particularly important role to play. This study seeks to examine evidence of gratitude within students' and academics' experiences within four HEIs within Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia. It examines the impact of gratitude on an important relational outcome, word-of-mouth communication. An understanding of the nature and evidence of gratitude amongst students has the potential to inform the development of strategies aimed to enhance word-of-mouth from students about their experiences of university within the ASEAN region.

*Keywords: gratitude, word of mouth, ASEAN, higher education*

## **Gratitude within ASEAN HEIs: an exploratory study.**

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### **Introduction**

Higher Education (HE) 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 the marketing of 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 2017a). This study examines the evidence of gratitude within the context of academics and university students who work and study within SE Asia, or the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) region. Whilst we know that reciprocity is a characteristic of all cultures (Gouldner 1960) the more feminine, collectivist and long term orientation of countries within the ASEAN region provides an environment in which reciprocal exchange and arguably gratitude is likely to be of particular importance (Beck, Chapman and Palmatier 2015).

### **Gratitude and HE**

Relational ideas have been applied to the marketing of HE over the past decade, but whereas earlier analyses focused on the nature and role of loyalty, trust and commitment (e.g. Bowden 2011; Bowden and Wood 2011; Carvalho and de Oliveira Mota 2010; Cownie 2014; Helgesen 2008; Raciti 2012; Southcombe, Fulop and Carter 2015) more recently scholars have embraced the study of gratitude and its place within HE (Cownie 2016, 2017, 2017a, Fazal-e-Hasan et al. 2017; Howells et al. 2017; Cownie and Nikolaev 2018). Such a focus reflects the arguments emerging within relationship marketing literature drawn from contexts outside Higher Education, in which gratitude has emerged as an important mediator within relational exchanges (Palmatier, Burke Jarvis, Bechkoff, and Kardes, 2009; Raggio, Walz, Godbole and Folse 2014). An increasing body of literature evidences the argument that gratitude can generate important relational outcomes (Morales 2005; Soscia 2007; Palmatier et al. 2009; Hasan, Lings, Neale, Mortimer 2014; Raggio et al. 2014; Ting and Huang 2015). Indeed, there is early evidence that gratitude can be a driver of important outcomes within HE such as student engagement (Cownie 2016; Cownie 2017; Howells 2017) and alumni's intentions to give back (Cownie and Nikolaev 2018). Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2017) found that gratitude was a strong driver of students' affective commitment which in turn drove word-of-mouth communication. Gratitude is also the focus of curriculum design within HE; recent work showed that a gratitude-based curriculum enhanced gratitude beliefs and student wellbeing (Chaung 2018).

This paper has a particular interest in gratitude's place within the ASEAN HE context. It complements extant studies within the UK (Cownie 2016, 2017a, 2017), Australia (Howells et al. 2017), Pakistan (Fazal-e-Hasan et al. 2017) and China (Chaung 2018) and is the first to explicitly examine gratitude's place within higher education in the ASEAN region. It draws from the experiences of academics and students working and studying within ASEAN HEIs and is in particular interested in whether gratitude can influence word-of-mouth communication.

### **Conceptual underpinning.**

This research draws from Dewani and Sinha (2012) and Raggio et al. (2014) to articulate gratitude as an emotional response to a perceived benefactor; a sense of appreciation which stimulates an integral desire to reciprocate. Feelings of gratitude are defined as positive emotional responses 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 (Pelsler, Ruyter, Wetzels, Grewal, Cox and van Beuningen 2015). Feelings of gratitude embrace intentions and emerging behaviours are expressions of gratitude, enactments of feelings of gratitude (Cownie and Nikolaev 2018).

Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2017), focus on feelings of gratitude within their study of gratitude within HE, and measure feelings of gratitude towards the institution, their variable 'customer gratitude' drawing on the measures developed by McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002). Feelings and expressions of gratitude form part of Morgan, Gulliford and Kristjansson's (2016) work on the development of a 'Multi-Component Gratitude Measure' (MCGM). The measure comprises four components: conceptions (or understandings) of gratitude; grateful emotions; attitudes towards gratitude; and gratitude-related behaviours. In addition to feelings and expressions of gratitude, Morgan et al. (2016) identify constructs which explain individuals' overarching attitudes and behaviours concerning gratitude: attitude of gratitude; behavioural shortcomings and rituals/noticing behaviours. These ideas allow us to better understand underpinning perceptions of gratitude, within which the feelings and expressions of gratitude in the context of HE are located or develop. Thus, feelings and expressions of gratitude related to HE may be informed by research participants' more generalized perceptions towards gratitude and gratitude-behaviours outside the world of HE.

We know that gratitude can drive important relational outcomes; this study has a particular interest in the possible relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth communication. Dewani and Sinha (2012) suggest that word-of-mouth may be an important outcome of gratitude, however the only study which has examined this relationship within the context of HE to date, is that of Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2017). This study did not find a significant relationship between 'customer gratitude' and word-of-mouth intentions; instead 'customer gratitude' was an antecedent of affective commitment, which was in turn a driver of word-of-mouth. The word-of-mouth intentions examined in Fazal-e-Hasan et al.'s (2017) research were orientated towards positive word-of-mouth only. This study seeks to explore further the possible relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth in two ways. First, Morgan et al.'s (2016) constructs will be used to measure students' gratitude. Second three forms of word-of-mouth will be 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), and will allow a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between gratitude and word-of-mouth to be studied.

This study draws from Morgan et al.'s (2016), Cownie (2016, 2017a), Cownie and Nikolaev's (2018) and Fazal-e-Hasan et al.'s (2017) work in order to examine evidence of gratitude within ASEAN HE. It will be the first study of its kind and will produce original knowledge about gratitude within the ASEAN region. Its interest in gratitude and word-of-mouth is distinctive. Thus, the aim of this research and focus of this working paper is:

*To examine students' and academics' experiences of gratitude related to their studies and work within ASEAN HEIs.*

### **Research method.**

This is a mixed method study. Online survey is used to engage with a population of undergraduate students studying within ASEAN HEIs. Semi-structured interviews with academics teaching within ASEAN HEIs provide additional perspectives on the nature and role of gratitude within higher education in the ASEAN region. Research data is drawn from four institutions: two in Thailand, one in each of Vietnam and Indonesia.

Survey measures are adapted from extant literature, principally Morgan et al. (2016) and Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2017). The survey was presented to students in English after the in-country research team had been provided with an opportunity to review the articulation of questions for comprehensibility. The interview guide was prepared within the UK, again with the opportunity for the research team to comment on its comprehensibility. The research tool invited academics to talk about their experiences of working at their university. Notions of gratitude and reciprocity were introduced and academics were given the opportunity to reflect on the relevance of these ideas to their teaching. In-depth interviews were conducted in the main by the in-country research team, but also, the UK-based researcher via Skype. All interviews were conducted in English and transcribed within the UK.

The study seeks to address four research objectives:

RO1 To explore academics' experiences of feelings and expressions of gratitude within ASEAN Higher Education.

RO2 To examine students' experiences of feelings and expressions of gratitude within ASEAN Higher Education;

RO3 To identify any variation in students' experiences of gratitude by participant characteristic;

RO4 To explore potential relationships between gratitude and word-of-mouth communication.

As a working paper, analysis is within development and will be presented within the conference presentation addressing the four research objectives. Quantitative data will be analysed using SPSS. Descriptive analysis will be followed by non-parametric tests using Mann-Whitney and Kruskal Wallis; Structural equation modelling adopting LISREL will examine possible relationships between gratitude and word-of-mouth constructs with the aim of proposing a model which can be tested within a larger and geographically broader population.

The paper acknowledges potential methodological limitations, most importantly the comprehensibility of adapted measures to ASEAN populations and the fact that only English-speaking academics and students would be able to participate in this research. The sample size from each of the ASEAN HEIs is limited.

### **Summary**

This working paper highlights a new area of research with strong conceptual underpinning and an international perspective. An understanding of the nature and role of gratitude within

ASEAN HEIs and its possible relationship with word-of-mouth communication will extend the limited and mainly western-focused scholarship within this area.

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