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To cite this article: Merhi, Mohammad. "Learners' Satisfaction in Online Courses."  
*Proceedings of Twenty-Fifth Americas Conference on Information Systems*,  
2019, pp. 1–5.

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# Learners' Satisfaction in Online Courses

*Emergent Research Forum Paper*

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## **Abstract**

Online education is gaining more and more attention from both learners and institutions. Many institutions are moving some of their courses or creating sections of current face-to-face courses online. The success and continuation of online courses depend on learners' satisfaction. This research in progress is an effort to understand the impact of critical factors on learners' satisfaction in online courses. This paper extends the existing literature by considering interrelationships among important factors that have been found to impact individuals' perceptions. To our best knowledge, the interrelationships and hypotheses presented in this paper have not been investigated in the literature. Thus, this study is a crucial contribution to theory and practice.

## **Keywords**

Learners' satisfaction, online courses, engagement, quality, feedback.

## **Introduction**

Online education, electronic learning, or e-learning has been growing since the 1990s and continues to dramatically increase worldwide (Panigrahi, Srivastava, and Sharma, 2018). Online education offers flexibility for learning in terms of learners' availability, financial positions, the pace of learning and other factors (Bowers and Kumar, 2015; Merhi, 2011). As a result, online educational technologies are gaining more acceptance in the educational system. Thousands of college learners use the Internet to submit their homework, quizzes, and other assignments. With the continuous technological breakthrough, online education becomes more recognizable and used. Learners can enroll in online classes offered by colleges far away from their physical locations. As online education enrollment continues to increase, it is imperative to understand the factors that drive learners' satisfaction. The availability of high-quality education has been limited geographically in the past, but with the technological innovations of recent years, it will continue to expand its reach globally. Understanding the factors that influence learners' satisfaction is a key for success and continuation. The reason is because if learners are dissatisfied with this delivery method, it will most likely not continue and expand.

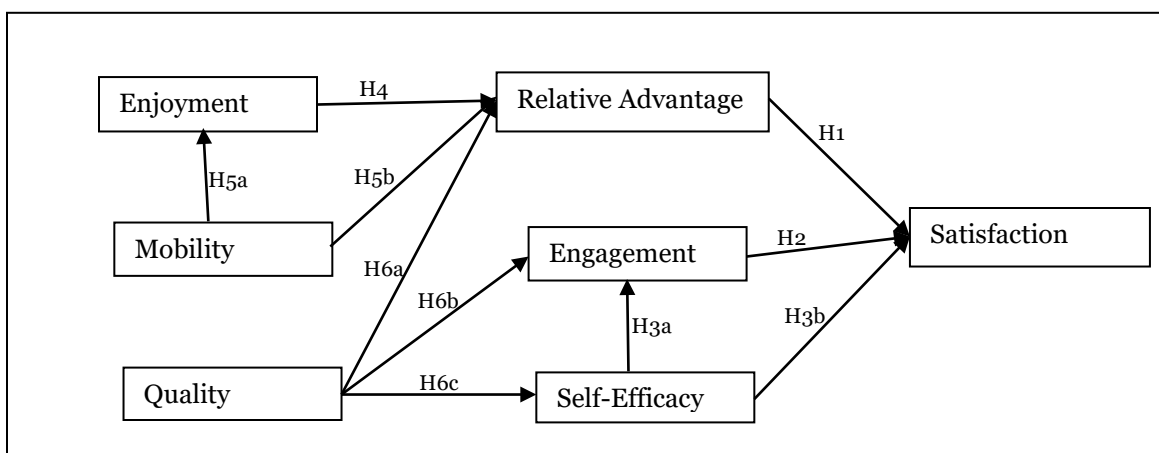
Today's learners have increasing demands on their time, and many of them have part or full time jobs (Merhi, 2015). Thus, they are often forced to study in their lunch breaks, in the evenings, and during weekends; which led institutions to offer online classes (Evans, 2008). The rapid growth of online distance education has enabled learners to access education at any time and from any place (Merhi, 2015). At the same time adult learners increasingly expect a personal or customized learning environment (Bolliger, Supanakorn, and Boggs, 2010). As online learning becomes more widespread, dedicating resources to improve current online learning resources has transformed into a necessity in higher education. However, due to the immense distances between teacher and learners requiring certain life skills already being developed, online education can be as much a testament to the persistence, time management, maturity, and self-efficacy of the learners (Cigdem and Ozturk, 2016). These factors can be referred to as learner readiness and have a direct effect on learners' satisfaction (Cigdem and Ozturk,

2016). Uppal, Ali, and Gulliver (2018) argue that online courses need to be structured to impact the online learners' satisfaction. So, what factors impact learners' satisfaction in online courses? This study attempts to answer this question.

Learners' satisfaction is a key determinant in the quality and efficacy of the education (Harsasi and Sutawijaya, 2018). Researchers have examined the antecedents of learners' satisfaction with online courses. Yilmaz (2017) found that learners' e-learning readiness and its sub-components (i.e. computer self-efficacy, internet self-efficacy, online communication self-efficacy, self-directed learning, learner control and motivation towards e-learning) are significant factors impacting learners' satisfaction and motivation in online model of instruction. Engagement has also been shown to impact learners' satisfaction in both traditional and online education (Czerkawski and Lyman, 2016). Daymont, Blau, and Campbell (2011) found that flexibility influences learners' satisfaction. These and many other seminal studies have absolutely enhanced our understanding on some of the factors that may impact learners' satisfaction with online courses. However, there are still gaps in the literature. For instance, the process or the indirect impact of some factors on learners' satisfaction with online courses have not been explored. This research in progress attempts to explore indirect impact of critical factors that may impact learners' satisfaction with online courses. These factors are: enjoyment, mobility, quality, relative advantage. Engagement, and self-efficacy. To our best knowledge, these relationships and hypotheses have not been investigated in the extant literature on satisfaction of learners in online education. By doing so, we seek to contribute to the body of knowledge and practice. This research is presently a "work in progress," but we hope to present the results of empirical findings at the conference.

## Theory and Hypotheses

In this section, we discuss the research and the hypotheses that we intend to empirically assess. Figure 1 illustrates the learners' satisfaction model. It asserts that satisfaction is a function of the learners' perception of relative advantage, engagement, and self-efficacy. Mobility has a direct effect on relative advantage and enjoyment. Enjoyment influences relative advantage. Finally, quality influences relative advantage, engagement, and self-efficacy. Below is a brief description of each of these factors along with the hypotheses.



**Figure 1: Research Model**

Relative advantage is the degree to which a new technology is perceived as better than the method or technique used before the introduction of the new technology (Moore and Benbasat, 1991). Convenience is considered to be an important factor leading individuals to adopt new technology and leave the old method (Merhi, 2015). Online courses allow learners to better manage their time, study at their convenience from a distance without forcing themselves to personally come to campus. When it comes to deciding between alternatives, individuals tend to check the cost-benefit of each option. For those learners who have limited time, they will more likely see online courses as a better option than traditional courses.

The higher the perceptions of advantages, the more likely learners become satisfied. Based on this, we postulate that:

**H1:** *Perceived relative advantage has a positive effect on learners' satisfaction in online courses.*

Engagement is the extent to which learners are involved in the course. Bolliger and Martin's (2018) assert that learners' engagement increases their motivation to learn and, ultimately, improves their satisfaction in online courses. Greater level of engagement indicates a learner's willingness to satisfy some needs such as learning more, participating in the learning process, contributing to the overall class and the discussions. Thus, one can expect that the higher the engagement, the more likely the learner is satisfied in the online course. Otherwise, learners do not get engaged. Based on this, we hypothesize:

**H2:** *Engagement has a positive effect on learners' satisfaction in online courses.*

Perceived self-efficacy can be defined as the learners' judgment of their ability to perform the actions required for success (Merhi, 2015). In order to take an online class, learners should have basic level of experience in technology such as sending emails, submitting an assignment, browsing the Learning Management System, etc. The better technical skills they have, the more comfortable they will feel. Being able to comfortably use the technology will minimize the level of stress and hence might improve learners' satisfaction level with the online courses.

Bolliger and Martin's (2018) suggest that engagement can be boosted both in the interactive design of online courses and also in the facilitation of the online courses. We argue that higher levels of technical skills influence learners' engagement in the courses because if learners lack the ability of using the technology to reply to discussion boards or start a new discussion forum, the more likely they will be hesitate to engage. Based on this brief reasoning, we hypothesize:

**H3.a:** *Perceived self-efficacy has a positive effect on engagement.*

**H3.b:** *Perceived self-efficacy has a positive effect on learners' satisfaction in online courses.*

Perceived Enjoyment is the extent to which the usage of the technology is perceived to be enjoyable for the learners apart from any consequences (Merhi, 2016). It was added by Heidjen (2003) to the Technology Acceptance Model and demonstrated that it has a big influence on the intention of users to adopt technologies using website. Previous studies found that perceived enjoyment is an important factor driving technology adoption (Rouibah, Lowry, and Hwang, 2016). We argue that greater level of technology's enjoyment leads to impact learners' perceptions about online courses. Higher levels of enjoyment in using the Learning Management System and other technologies used in the course will increase the perceptions on the advantages of online courses compared to traditional courses. Based on this, we hypothesize:

**H4:** *Perceived enjoyment has a positive effect on relative advantage.*

Perceived mobility in this study is the extent to which learners can access their course material at any time and from anywhere with no restrictions. As mentioned earlier, of the advantages of online courses is the mobility. According to a survey conducted with almost two hundred business learners on reasons to take traditional face-to-face courses versus online courses, it was found that all but one learner preferred online courses because of the flexibility of the course (Daymont, Blau, and Campbell, 2011). We argue that the greater learners perceive online courses mobile, the higher they will perceive the value of it compared to the traditional courses. In addition, mobility will increase their enjoyment of using the technology used in the course. Based on this, we postulate:

**H5a:** *Perceived mobility has a positive effect on perceived enjoyment.*

**H5b:** *Perceived mobility has a positive effect on relative advantage.*

Online courses are often perceived to be easy compared to traditional courses because of low quality. Efforts have been made to improve the quality of the design of the online courses. For instance, many institutions are using the quality standards put by "Quality Matters" to improve the delivery of their courses. The higher the quality the more likely learners will enjoy the class, will see the benefits of this method compared to traditional courses, and gain more skills. We thus hypothesize:

**H6a:** *Quality of learning has a positive effect on relative advantage.*

**H6b:** Quality of learning has a positive effect on perceived enjoyment.

**H6c:** Quality of learning has a positive effect on perceived self-efficacy.

## Proposed Methodology

The survey method will be used to collect data for assessing the propositions presented in this study. IS Learners' from a public institution in the Midwest region of the United States will provide the data to analyze the model presented in this study. Participants will have experience with online education.

The measures used to assess the constructs will be adopted from extant literature in order to improve the content validity. The instrument will be pre-tested before data collection. After data collection, we will test the measurement model by examining the validity and reliability of the measures. We will finally assess the hypotheses using PLS- based Structural Equation Modeling.

## Conclusion

This research-in-progress is an effort to understand learners' satisfaction with online courses. We present a set of hypotheses among critical factors that may influence learners' satisfaction with online courses. This paper extends the existing research stream on online courses by considering interrelationships among important factors that have been found to have significant impact on individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and behavior. To our best knowledge, these interrelationships have not been investigated in any study. In doing so, we seek to contribute to a better understanding of the antecedents of learners' satisfaction with online courses. Thus, this study is a crucial contribution to theory and practice.

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