

Factors Contributing to Brand Loyalty towards Malaysia Higher Educational Institutions

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Abstract: This study aimed at filling the gap in the current marketing literature on the driver of brand loyalty towards public higher education institutions in Malaysia. The drivers of brand loyalty studied include university image and perceived teaching and learning quality. Toward meeting the objective, a self-administrated questionnaire was employed. Smart PLS was used to analyze data from 150 international students of Universiti Utara Malaysia. The result revealed that university image and perceived teaching and learning quality were significantly linked to each other and significantly affected brand loyalty. Proximity this finding will help policy maker to design or develop new marketing strategy in higher education institution which is compatible with student perception as well as to increase the number of international student enrollment.

Keywords: *University image, perceived teaching and learning quality, brand loyalty*

1. Introduction

Branding has become a corporate strategy for many higher learning institutions (HEIs) to enable them to compete locally and internationally. With a powerful branding and unique corporate identities, HEIs can differentiate themselves among their competitors (So, Parsons, & Yap, 2013; Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). More importantly, a strong brand can enhance market awareness among potential customers as well as market share (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009). Hence, a strong brand should be recognizable and meaningful to consumers (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013) to ensure student retention and student loyalty (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007a; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Vander Schee, 2010). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001) argued that student loyalty is synonymous with student retention. Brand loyalty is becoming a major goal of many higher education institutions and not surprisingly many are using student loyalty to measure performance. In fact, successful universities are those that can develop student loyalty. For these universities, investing in student retention is better than investing in new student enrollment because student retention can enhance the survival of the institutions (Williams Jr, Osei, & Omar, 2012).

Understanding the main predictor of student loyalty will assist marketing managers and policy makers in HEIs to outline their strategies in order gain competitive advantage particularly brand creation (Fernandes, Ross, & Meraj, 2013). Service marketing literatures in education identify university image and perceived quality as the relevant antecedents of loyalty (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007a; Vander Schee, 2010). However, most of the preliminary studies in brand loyalty have only carried out in a small number of areas higher education institutions (HEIs) (Gounaris & Stathakopoulos, 2004; Bianchi, Drennan, & Proud, 2014). Therefore, this study attempted to investigate the drivers of brand loyalty in HEIs as suggested by a number of scholars (Mupemhi, 2013; Obermeit, 2012). A higher education institution with a strong brand name conveys a positive image and reputation and is capable of delivering high quality education. It has been found that a strong brand name is identifiable, enduring, and meaningful to consumers (Louis & Lombart, 2010). Further, Sean, Hyun, and Kim (2011) and Tran, Nguyen, Melewar, and Bodoh (2015) proposed that image could be derived from consumer perception, experience, and feeling towards the object (product, services, firms and brand). Accordingly, this study extended the existing work by researching international students' impressions, belief, feeling, and knowledge to identify how a university's image affects their current places of study.

Existing studies showed that a university image is the most essential factor that influence potential students to choose public universities as their study destination (Khairani & Razak, 2013; Hoyt & Brown, 2003).

However, according to Tas and Ergin (2012), literatures in the topic of university image are still lacking even though many researchers in marketing have recognized the critical roles of image and perceived quality in consumer buying behavior (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998; Milfelner, Snoj, & Pisnik Korda, 2011; Sean Hyun & Kim, 2011). These two constructs have also been shown as important in developing and maintaining customer loyalty (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007b; Lin & He, 2014; Wu, 2013). Also, literatures reveal a few empirical evidence to support the study of university image by (Jin, Lee, & Lee, 2013; Sean Hyun & Kim, 2011). Based on the gaps identified in the literatures, this study aimed at identifying international students' perception of the image and the quality of teaching and learning quality of the university, and how their perception affects their loyalty towards the university. Toward this objective, we organized this paper into four sections. First, a review on university image, perceived teaching and learning quality and brand loyalty is discussed. Then the method employed to meet the research objective is outlined. Next, the result of the study is offered. Then, a discussion of the result as well as implications for higher educational institutions, particularly marketing managers and policy makers, is presented.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Brand loyalty: According to Oliver (1999), brand loyalty is a customer commitment to consume and patronize a favorite product and services consistently in future. Loyal customer has intention to share positive experiences with other people regarding the same brand name. Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol (2002) also contended that expressed loyalty is an intention to act a diverse set of behavior such as positive word of mouth, repeat of higher purchase, and pay a premium price to a certain brand or object. Meanwhile, Jacoby and Kyrner (1973) related brand loyalty to a psychological construct, which is a result of both attitude and behavior. This is consistent with other definitions that have been proposed to measure loyalty. Essentially, brand loyalty has attitudinal and behavioral components (Baloglu, 2002; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Although there are many antecedents that affect loyalty, the objective this current study was to investigate the potential antecedents of customer loyalty towards non-profit organization (university), (Ashby, Richardson, & Woodley, 2011; Clemes, Cohen, & Wang, 2013; Richardson, Slater, & Wilson, 2007a, 2007b).

University image: Kotler and Fox (1995) stated that university image can be defined in many ways. Some researchers defined university image as a set of beliefs and impression about a place, destination or organization (Chun, 2005; Mercedes Marzo-Navarro, Pedraja-Iglesias, & Rivera-Torres, 2005; Olmedo-Cifuentes, Martinez-Leon, & Davies, 2014). Literatures show that image can be developed on different things such as product, brand, and organization (Cretu & Brodie, 2007; Lemmink, Schuijf, & Streukens, 2003; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001; Tran, Nguyen, Melewar, & Bodoh, 2015). Literatures also indicate that customers who possess a good image of a product and services tend to have favorable attitude towards product or services brand as well as towards the brand's product quality (Kandampully, Juwaheer, & Hu, 2011; Sean Hyun & Kim, 2011). Consistently, Andreassen and Lindestad (1998) and Dla, Arslanagi, and Kadi (2013) believed that image influences customer perception on quality and value of the product or services. Therefore the following hypothesis was proposed.

H1: *There is a significant relationship between university image and perceived quality*

Perceived quality and brand loyalty: This study defined perceived quality as the overall judgment and the generally excellent or superior evaluation by a customer on the quality services (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1988). Also, Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry (1990) pointed out that balancing between perception and customer expectation in delivering service quality influences customer satisfaction towards service providers. Later, Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996) defined perceived service quality as a differentiation or comparison of customer expectation with their perceptions of product or services performance. In recent years, researchers have investigated a variety of approaches to measure perceived quality. However, the essential problem in the implementation of such approaches lies in the nature of service quality construct in which its representation is extremely difficult to define and measured (Abdullah & Zamhari, 2013; Ahmad, 2014; Anadol, 2013). In the context of services industry SERVQUAL could measure empirically, however it is still being debated for a number of reasons (Sultan & Wong, 2010; Nadiri et al., 2009; Lother Kreck, 1997). For example, Kreck (1997) questioned the dimensionality and items for measure of SERVQUAL in their studies. On the other hand, SERVPERF dimension only focuses on customer perception on service quality and is difficult to apply in other industries like higher education institutions (Abdullah & of

studentZamhari, 2013). Abdullah (2006) developed Higher Education Performance (HEdPERF), comprising 41 items to examine perceived quality in higher education institutions. Thus, this instrument is limited in its scope in which student expectation and services performance paradigm in HEI's (Aslam et al., 2012; Abdul Manaf, Ahmad, & Ahmad, 2013). While literatures show that studies on perceived quality and satisfaction are already matured (Ahmad, 2014; Khan, Ahmed, & Nawaz, 2011), perceived teaching and learning quality is posited to be related to creating brand loyalty in higher education (Ashby et al., 2011; Vander Schee, 2011). It is somehow dissimilar the predictors of brand loyalty. In fact, previous studies on perceived quality and brand loyalty have shown that these constructs are crucial for measuring student loyalty in context student as a consumer in HEIs (de Macedo Bergamo et al., 2012; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001). Therefore, this study attempted to minimize the gap of perceived quality in higher education institutions context. Consequently, the following hypothesis was formulated.

H2: There is a significant relationship between perceived quality and brand loyalty

3. Methodology

Data collection and sample profile: Data were collected in September 2014 and ended by mid October 2012 randomly selected of 150 undergraduate and postgraduate international students of Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). Toward meeting the objective, a self-administrated questionnaire was employed to collect data from international students. The intercept survey method was used to collect the data from three different colleges. Of 150 questionnaires distributed, 101 (67.3 percent) were valid for analysis. The majority of the respondents were male (61.4%) compare female student only (38.6%). Sample size is adequate for reliability and validity interpretation according to (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1978).

Measures: This study adapted the scales from established measures of university image, perceived teaching and learning quality, and brand loyalty. The measure of university image was adapted from Lyman and Mohajerani (2013), which was modified and adapted from Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2009b). The final measure had three dimensions with 21 items: Covenant (4 items), quiddity (15 items), and symbolic and external representation (3 items). The measure of perceived teaching and learning quality (PTQ) was adapted from Richardson et al. (2007a). The PTQ scale includes 35 items, representing nine dimensions: The teaching course was measured by five items, organization and management, personal development, career and development were measured by four items each, and feedback on submitted work, assessment on the courses, workload, support and advice were measured by three items each. Finally brand loyalty was measured by 15 items adapted from Sui and Baloglu (2003) and Hennig-Thurau, Langer, and Hansen (2001). The instruments used a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

4. Data Analysis and Results

Data analysis method: Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with Smart PLS 2.0 M3 (Ringle, Wende, & Will, 2005), was used to examine the measurement model and structural model (hypothesis). This approach was selected because fewer demand in terms of number of sample size utilized, not required normal data distribution and also can be applied to complex structural equations models with large numbers of constructs compare with employed of CBSEM (covariance-based structural equation model technique) (Chin, Marcolin, & Newsted, 2003). The following section discusses the examination of the measurement model and structural model using SmartPLS 2.0. Prior to evaluating the measurement model, preliminary data were made to ensure the data can parsimoniously explain the model and clean for further analysis.

Measurement model: Table 1 illustrates the findings of the analysis including the Cronbach's alpha of each variable such as university image ($\alpha = 0.906$), perceived quality ($\alpha = 0.956$), and brand loyalty ($\alpha = 0.792$). As shown, the alpha values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1978). Further, the composite reliability (CR) ranged between 0.885 and 0.966, and the average variance extracted (AVE) ranged between 0.505 and 0.654. The CR values exceeded the recommended threshold of $CR \geq 0.7$, while the AVE values were more than the cut-off point of 0.5 (Hair, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). With reference to the results, the convergent validity of the measures was established (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 1: Convergent validity

Construct	1	2	3	No of items	Loadings	AVE	CR
1. Brand loyalty	1			15	0.640-0.902	0.654	0.966
2. Perceived quality	0.721	1		35	0.628-0.776	0.505	0.957
3. University image	0.512	0.719	1	21	0.656-0.794	0.525	0.885

Table 1 also shows the results of the discriminant validity assessment by investigating its average extracted AVE value. Convergent validity is acceptable when constructs have average variance extracted (AVE) value of at least more than cut off 0.5. Moreover the result also indicate the value of the constructs' correlations and the square roots of AVE was less than 0.85, it representing that there was no multicollinearity in the data set. This illustrate that the discriminant validity of the construct was confirmed (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Structural model and hypothesis testing: The SmartPLS analysis was used to test the hypothesized relationships between the constructs in the proposed model. In order to test the hypothesis path, the SmartPLS bootstrapping was employed. The function of bootstrapping is used to generate the t-statistics values. While in this study SmartPLS bootstrapping use to generate 500 samples from 101 cases to obtain t- statistic values. In assessing the PLS model, the squared multiple correlations (R^2) of each endogenous latent variable were initially tested and significantly evaluated for the structural path in the measurement model (SmartPLS Algorithm). Table 3 shows the summarized results of path coefficient and t-values. The path analysis showed that university image had a significant effect on perceived teaching and learning quality ($\beta = 0.719$, $t = 16.383$). It explained approximately 51.7% of perceived teaching and learning quality ($R^2 = 0.517$). Perceived quality also had a significant effect on brand loyalty construct ($\beta = 0.721$, $t = 12.302$), and it explained approximately 52.0% of brand loyalty ($R^2 = 0.520$). While the values of R^2 was greater than 0.26 (substantial) that was suggested by (Chin, 1998), it is high enough for the model to achieve a minimum level of explanatory power (Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012; Urbach & Ahlemann, 2010).

Table 2: Result of the structural model

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standard beta	Standard Error	t-value	R^2	Decision
H1	University Image → Perceived Quality	0.719	0.048	14.872**	0.517	Supported
H2	Perceived Quality → Brand Loyalty	0.721	0.056	12.900**	0.520	Supported

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

5. Discussion and Implication

Our results showed that the international student's perception towards HEIs was affected by information gathered from marketing communication of the university itself (Hosseini & Nahad, 2012). The favorable perception the students had might be explained by their academic performance and positive experience as students of the institution. The finding demonstrated that university image had a significant impact on perceived teaching and learning quality. This suggests that image involves the perception that is related to past experience and knowledge as an important predictor of teaching quality. In this manner, the result is consistent with previous studies (Aydin & Ozer, 2005; Milfelner et al., 2011; Sean Hyun & Kim, 2011). Our finding suggests that students are concerned with the teaching quality at the university, for instance, with the way the instructors explain the subject to make it interesting. Also, the assessment and feedback from the instructors is important to make them better understand the subject. In addition, the students expect to get support in their studies from their instructors for personal and career development.

Our finding further showed that perceived quality was a key antecedent of brand loyalty. The result is consistent with previous studies (Alves & Raposo, 2010; Liat, Mansori, & Huei, 2014; Perin, Sampaio, Simoes, & de Polvora, 2012). We also demonstrated that university image and perceived teaching and learning quality significantly predicted brand loyalty. Based on our result, a positive perception on teaching and learning

quality will impact the word-of-mouth marketing. In this context, our finding is similar to Çetin (2011) and Rubeena Cetin (2004), who asserted that a positive image of a university will facilitate the university in selecting good international students

Limitation and future research: This study makes several contributions to the marketing literature, especially to HEIs in Malaysia. However, despite these contributions, the findings must be viewed in light of the following limitations. Firstly, the sample was only taken from one public university and future research could expand the sample by including all public universities in order to reach a meaningful conclusion regarding perceived teaching and learning quality and brand loyalty path. Secondly, this study used nine dimensions of perceived quality (teaching course, organization and management, personal development, career and development, feedback on submitted work, assessment of the courses, workload, support and advice) to measure perceived quality and two dimensions to measure brand loyalty (attitudinal and behavioral). However this study did not discuss other issues that might be influencing the perception on brand image. For an example, Tran et al. (2015) argued that external communication, positive feeling, and environment are able to create a more consistent image. Therefore, future studies are recommended to investigate the interaction of such dimension to form brand image. Also, this study was cross-sectional in nature. Perhaps, a longitudinal study can be conducted to derive more enriched findings.

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