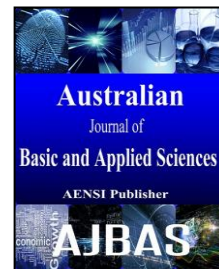




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### The Drivers of Service Loyalty in Homogeneous Market: Conceptualizing Brand Loyalty in Malaysia Public Universities

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#### ABSTRACT

The adoption of service marketing theories in to higher education consumption has changed the input, process, and output dynamism in education sector. The focus of institutions skewed in favor of students as major input despite the importance of other stakeholders (academic staff, non-academic staff, parent, community) in the consumption arena. The process has also being limited to academic interaction within or outside the learning environment neglecting other valuable knowledge enhancers like accommodation, transportation and socials. The output also focused on the degree certificate with little interest on the benefits of knowledge gain while pursuing the studies. Public universities offer uniform or similar services because of direct government involvement in the management and funding. However, the reduction in education budget world over and internationalization policy made international student's recruitment inevitable, thereby posing competitive rivalry within the sector. Therefore, this study theorized determinants of brand loyalty as driving force for sustainable competitive advantage. The conceptualized variables with the influence of marketing mix positively affects brand loyalty within the homogeneous education market in Malaysia. Empirical validation of these constructs will contribute to theory and practice in brand loyalty study.

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#### INTRODUCTION

The prevailing economic reality which shifted the burden on parents/students in financing their tertiary education has made them choosy in the selection of universities (Thomas, 2011). The greater number of students enroll at tertiary level are either sponsor by their parent or self-sponsor through loan or part-time study (Price *et al.*, 2003). With the sky-rocketed cost of education, students carefully scrutinize their choice most especially now that there is increase in supply of higher education (Thomas, 2011).

Similarly, universities are increasingly recognizing that higher education is a service industry, and are placing greater emphasis on meeting the expectations and needs of their participating customers, in this case students (Sheu, 2010). Furthermore, intense competition in today's competitive educational market forces institutions to adopt a market orientation strategy to differentiate their offerings from those of their competitors by delivering superior quality services (Sheu, 2010). In

the context of increasing competition for home-based and overseas students higher educational institutions now recognize that they need to market themselves in a climate of international competition (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006).

Student loyalty is one of the major goals of educational institutions and perceived as a consequence of service quality and other related latent constructs (Sultan & Wong, 2013). A loyal student population is a source of competitive advantage with outcomes such as positive word of mouth (WOM), retention and repeat (Thomas, 2011). The creation and the delivery of superior customer value become important in creating a sustainable advantage in the highly competitive international education market (Kotler & Keller, 2012). This constantly put pressure on universities to be concern about both the societal value in terms of skills/knowledge shared and also the feelings of the clients (students) on the overall education experience (Munteanu, Ceobanu, Bobalca & Anton, 2010). The need to survive in this atmosphere of intense competition has forced many tertiary institutions

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including public universities to design some management indices to win and retain the students in their university (Munteanu *et al.*, 2010). Extant literature shows that brand loyalty behavioral intention results on insensitivity towards price (Lai & Chen 2011) and attractiveness of competitor (Gummeson 2008).

Thus, in line with the objective of the study, service quality, satisfaction, perceived value, perceived image and personal reasons are conceptualized as antecedence of brand loyalty in homogeneous education market. A market where similar services are offered is a typical homogeneous situation. However, price differentiations inform of varying tuition fee charged by each public university in Malaysia makes it monopolistic competitive market. Therefore, to what extent does the inference that brand loyalty influence performance applicable in this market situation?

## 2.0 Literature review:

The peculiarities involved in education service consumption made the client/service provider relationship complex (Zhou *et al.*, 2012). Prior studies avoided the use of customer for students but the reality of the relationship leaves no option (Alves & Raposo, 2010). For instance, without students what would be the need for establishing educational institutions? Hence, the need to understand the linkages among various services, psychology feelings of the students, perception about the institution and above all loyalty to Almar matar will help university management and government to align their operational strategies with the students' needs (Thomas, 2011). Brand loyalty researchers have identified service quality, satisfaction, perceived value, and perceived image as some of the latent variables that determines loyalty (Sheu, 2010, 2011). In education service context, students' involvement in all the processes (pre and post) of consumption is as important as the consumption itself (Ali, Dugger, Dobrzykowski & Balazs, 2014). Personal reasons are therefore included in the conceptual model to theorize the integration of these variables in relationship with brand loyalty. The study conceptualized the moderating effects of marketing mix variables in this type of market situation. Market mix variables comprises of the 7Ps (price, promotion, place, people, process, product and physical evidence).

## 2.1 Service Quality:

Service quality in marketing literature has many dimensionalities depending on the perception and the objective of the study. Gronroos (1983) emphasized technical and functional dimensions of service quality. While the technique is the service render, the functional relate to how it was rendered (Sheu, 2010). The process and output perception of service quality was canvassed by Bery *et al.* (1993).

However, the commonly adopted dimension is the five dimensions of SERVQUAL model from expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1999; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). Other researchers measured service quality from perception performance only SERVPERF (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Sheu, 2010). However, service quality in educational industry is defined on the basis of students overall evaluation on the services they received which is part of their educational experience (Hanaysha *et al.*, 2011). The study by Firdaus (2006) empirically justified the measurement instrument of HEDPERF (Higher Education Performance-only), a new and more comprehensive performance-based measuring scale that attempts to capture the authentic determinants of service quality within the higher education sector. Abdullah (2005, 2006) compared SERVPERF and HEDPERF measurement dimension and concluded that HEDPERF generated more accepted results. There seem to be a conflicting operational definition of service quality without any well-accepted conceptual definition and model of measuring service quality (Seth *et al.*, 2005; Sultan & Wong, 2010).

From whatever angle service quality issue is approach, the consensus among scholars remain that it generate psychological feelings like satisfaction, value, trust and commitment that result in better performance in education industry (Maheshwari *et al.*, 2014; Zhou *et al.*, 2012). These psychological perception triggered favorable behavior such as word of mouth, repurchase and referral which are the hall mark of service loyalty (Hanaysha *et al.*, 2011). But performance measurement of service quality at higher institutions is strongly embedded to the matching between students' expectation and their experience of a particular service (Sultan & Wong, 2010). This implies that measuring service quality from various services offered in tertiary institution particularly the five dimensions of Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) in form of tangible, empathy, responsive, reliable and assurance will give desired result (Hanaysha *et al.*, 2011). Although, SERVQUAL dimensions have being criticized not to be applicable in all service industries, empirical researches shown that it works in higher education industry (Hanaysha *et al.*, 2011; Biodun *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, studies suggest that service quality scales need to be adapted to suit the study context (Carrillat *et al.*, 2007).

Therefore, adapting the five dimensions of SERVQUAL to Malaysia public universities setting implies that tangibility relate to physical structures and equipment in these universities. The universities enjoyed full government funding particularly the designated research universities, which made issues of structure and equipment optimized. The empathy component referred to individualistic attention given to students as customers of the institution. Responsiveness is the prompt attention given to students' needs. Reliability is the level of confidence

built on students in terms of services provided. Finally, assurance is the measure of feedback students enjoy that their issues are being address with dispatch. These dimensions are widely used in private and public institutions to determine students' satisfaction (Baharun *et al.*, 2011; Hanaysha *et al.*, 2012; Biodun *et al.*, 2012). In addition, marketing mix variables such as price and promotion influence purchase decision (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Thus, the study hypothesized:

H1 Service quality positively influence loyalty

H2 Marketing mix moderate the relationship between service quality and loyalty

## 2.2 Satisfaction:

Satisfaction is a multidiscipline topic which has gain popularity in marketing concept for many decades ago (Lee, Lee & Yoo, 2000). It is often used in psychology, sociology, economics and marketing (Akbar & Parvez, 2009). Satisfaction has been operationalized by many researchers based on the concept of the study. However, Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) proffer a robust definition which linked satisfaction with emotional attitude when pre and post consumption feelings are evaluated. Students will be satisfied if the overall performance of the services meet or exceed expectations and vice versa (Kotler & Keller 2012). It is termed a subjective judgment of service performance when what is expected is considered with what was actually served (Hoyt & Howell, 2011).

In marketing research, service quality and satisfaction are autonomous constructs that enjoy linear relationship but does not solemnly depend on one another (Lee *et al.*, 2000). For example, a service with good quality may not necessarily lead to customer satisfaction, other factors such as value, price or situation factor may be required (Lim, Yap & Lee, 2011). However, an increase in service quality leads to increase in satisfaction (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988; Cronin & Taylor, 1992). As stated earlier, students are the most critical customers of universities whose satisfaction should be the outmost concern of the management (Arambewela & Hall, 2009). This is because; satisfaction triggers positive words of mouth which have been proven to be a cheap and reliable marketing strategy (Molinari *et al.*, 2008). The public universities in Malaysia are not under obligation to generate a given number of students, yet the key performance index (KPI) is usually based on students evaluation reports (Khairani & Abd Rasak, 2013). Therefore, students' satisfaction is central to loyalty determination since loyalty enhanced performance in customer to business (C2B) or business to business (B2B) relationships (Maheshwari, Lodorfos & Jacobsen, 2014; Molinari *et al.*, 2008).

Measurement of student's satisfaction at universities can be done at transaction specific level or cumulatively since students are exposed to

varieties of services simultaneously (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). Hanaysha *et al.* (2011) argued that satisfaction can be determined at each level of SERVQUAL dimensions since both service quality and satisfaction are rooted on expectancy-disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1980). Biodun *et al.* (2012) preferred cumulative assessment at post consumption level while using expectations as base line for judgment. However, the major difference between the two constructs lies on the interaction and perception of the consumer (Price *et al.*, 2003). While service quality could be perceived before consumption, satisfaction is a post consumption experience (Oliver, 1999). The influence of marketing mix on customer satisfaction for products and services was grounded on the work of kotler and Keller (2012). Thus, this study infers the moderating effect on loyalty as follow:

H3 Students' Satisfaction leads to students' loyalty

H4 Marketing mix moderate the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty

## 2.3 Perceived Value:

The place of value in marketing activities is like a fulcrum where other activities revolved (Yang & Peterson, 2004). It is assumed to be the basis of transaction since the worthiness of the product or service is measured by its value after deducting sacrifices (Sumeade *et al.*, 2014). Generally, quality is juxtaposed with price to arrive at value. In relationship marketing, value creation goes beyond what is gain and lost (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Rather mutual benefits are canvassed between the trading parties. For example, universities considered output as value while students considered benefits of the certificate as value (Hashim *et al.*, 2015).

Defining service value is complicated by different perceptions given by the partners involved (Shukla, 2010). From some of the definitions and concepts of value expressed by researchers, we may conclude that 'value is a trade-off between what the customer receives (e.g. quality, benefits, worth, utilities) and what he or she gives up to acquire and use a product or service (e.g. price, time, sacrifices)'. Therefore, 'customer value is a customer's perceived preference for and evaluation of those product attributes, attribute performances and consequences arising from use that facilitate (or block) achieving the customer's goals and purposes in use situations' (Sumeade *et al.*, 2014). When view from student's perception, value will mean weighing sacrifices made in terms of time spend, efforts, money etc and the benefits gain in terms of worth of certificate like employment, reputation, social status etc (Thomas, 2011).

Although researchers have investigated the association between perceived value and customer loyalty in various service sector, more work need to be done in education service (Hemsely-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Hashim *et al.*, 2015). Yet empirical

evidence linking perceived value and student's loyalty calls for further research especially that perceived value is seen to be a strongest determinant of student's loyalty to institution (Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010). Students tend to build confidence and prefer to remain loyal as they perceived an institution's products or services value as high or acceptable but if otherwise, viral marketing calamity of negative words of mouth could follow (Tarus & Rabach, 2013). Oftentimes students understanding of high value institutions is based on the capability of the institution to interact with public, offer excellent graduates and facilities, and conducive learning atmosphere (Hashim *et al.*, 2015). This could help build long-term loyalty among students and institution (Tarus & Rabach, 2013). Therefore, value and behavioral loyalty is linked through cognitive assessment of services offered, but its magnitude is determined by marketing mix variables.

H5 Perceived value positively loyalty

H6 Marketing mix moderate relationship between perceived value and loyalty

#### 2.4 Perceived Image:

Perceived image is recognized in service marketing as an important marketing communication variable because of its effectiveness in measuring marketing communication programs (Shimp, 2010). Image is also identified as a significant over all evaluation interpretation of consumption in service marketing literature (Sumeade *et al.*, 2014). Just like other marketing constructs, scholars have different meanings and interpretation for image depending on the context (Shukla, 2010). However, there is convergence in their definition as mental picture of service consumed or reflection of the status of the service consumed which differentiate it from its competitors/rivals (Maheshwari *et al.*, 2014). Thus, in the context of higher education services, image is students' mental picture of the offering which includes symbolic meanings students associate with a specific education service (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001). Students will have positive image of higher education if they have positive mental picture toward education services consumed. On other hand, students with negative mental picture toward higher education will have negative image of education services provided (Nguyen & LeBlanc (2001).

Corporate image, brand image, institutional image, and reputation are often used interchangeably in marketing literatures to justify the perception of service evaluation in the mind of the consumer (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007). Several studies have examined the relationship between perceived image and student loyalty in the education sector (Alves & Raposo, 2010; Weiwei, 2007; Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001). These studies revealed that perception of service image/reputation has continue to generate research discussions among students and other critical stakeholders in the choice

of a country or institution instead of tangible attributes (Hashim *et al.*, 2015). However, corporate image or brand image performs a moderating influence in student's behavior at both pre and post consumption levels (Tarus & Rabach, 2013). Importantly, understanding what influence students' choice behavior in selecting university provides unique opportunity for management to develop effective loyalty strategy on the existing students (Alves & Raposo, 2010). However, managing hard earned reputation is required for sustainable competitive advantage (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007).

In the context of homogeneous market like public universities, student's choice and loyalty also depend to a large extent on the name, image, and reputation built by each of the institution (Srikatanyo & Gnoth, 2002). The scientific research break through recorded is usually a yield stick in the mind of students and parents. Related literatures have found image to have strong influence on higher education students' loyalty (Weiwei, 2007; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001; Srikatanyo & Gnoth, 2002). Hence, for efficient and effective competition amongst public universities there is need to evaluate the university image held by its students and how their perception is vital to attract and retain them at their respective institution (Alves & Raposo, 2010). Based on the above scholarly arguments, the study proposed as follows:

H7 Perceived Image positively influence loyalty

H8 Marketing mix variables influence the relationship between image and loyalty

#### 2.5 Personal Reasons:

The last millennium was characterized by government sponsorship of foreign studies in form of scholarship or education support fund to developing countries after the Second World War (Mazarol & Soutar, 2001). The land scape begin to change as middle class expand in hitherto source countries where parents could afford to sponsor their ward abroad for studies (Bourke, 2000). This phenomenon increase demand for international education globally (Mazarol & Soutar, 2001). The information and communication technology driven 21<sup>st</sup> century change the concept of study abroad from government concern to individual/parent responsibility (Ali *et al.*, 2014). This implies that potential student have a choice as to where to study and not just accepting where government sent them. The parent and student involvement in search and selection process of study destination made them critical and demanding on their choice destination (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Hennig-Thurau, Langer & Hensen, 2001).

The above complexity in decision making process of international students made personal reasons a strong determinant of selection and loyalty behavior (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006). Thus, when the prospective student chooses a country in which to study, he is not only buying the education service but

he is also acquiring an important pack of services jointly provided with the core service (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006). Thus, in order to determine their preferences, prospective students consider what is important for them, and then make a conscious/unconscious trade-off among the attributes (Soutar & Turner, 2002). Previous studies show various mindset of international students in various countries, for instance African students in UK saw their sojourn as a leadership training ground (Maringe & Carter, 2007), Chinese student saw it as investment in terms of earning after studies (Wang, Taplin T Brown, 2011), Arab students considered learning foreign language particularly English as a priority (Morshidi,

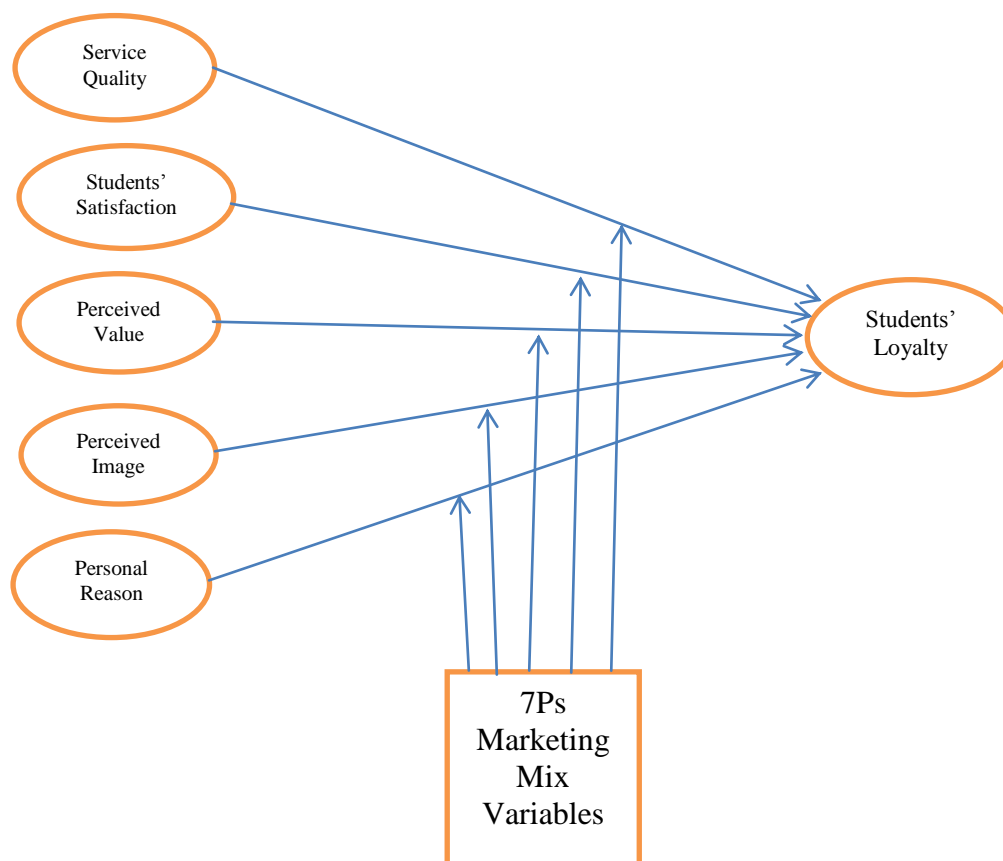
2008).

The involvement of potential student crystalize the target of buying the degree and the benefits that comes with the certificate such as employment and social status (Binsardi & Ekwulugo (2003). Therefore, students' justification of own reason determine whether or not to continue study, recommend or reenroll at the university. Thus, the study proposed that;

H9 Personal reason determines loyalty

H10 Personal reason is moderated by marketing mix variables

### 3.0 Theoretical Framework:



### 4.0 Conclusion and Recommendation:

The application of marketing theories into education settings have to be done with caution, because of the peculiarities that extend beyond buying and selling of education services. Undergoing higher education transform individual mental capability aside the certificate earned. However, literatures consulted revealed the possibility of determining students' loyalty in homogeneous market like the case of public universities in Malaysia. Therefore, the study recommends the testing and validation of these relationships as hypothesized in future study.

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