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Perceived Quality and Loyalty Towards PubHEI's of International Students in Malaysia's. Understanding the Role of Emotional Attachment as a Mediator

¹Mona Fairuz Ramli, ²Dr. Abdul Rahim Othman, ³Dr. Salniza Md Salleh

¹*School of Business Management, College of Business, University Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok Kedah*

²*Center Entrepreneurship Development Intitutions, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok Kedah*

³*Marketing Department, School of Business Management, College of Business, University Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok Kedah*

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ABSTRACT

This study develops and tests a model to investigate the predictors of Brand loyalty of Public Higher Educational Institutions (PubHEI's) in Malaysia. The model considers two drivers – perceived teaching and learning quality and emotional brand attachment that are significantly linked to each other and affect the brand loyalty. Based on the evidence drawn from 150 international students in PubHEI's in Malaysia, the hypotheses, which were tested using structural equation modeling, are all supported. The results confirm that perceived teaching and learning quality aspects and emotional brand attachment is key predictors of brand loyalty. The research emphasizes the role of emotional brand attachment as mediating variables between perceived teaching and learning quality aspects and loyalty. The study also shows that a better understanding of the determinants of loyalty in PubHEI's mediated services occurs when affective evaluative constructs are taken into account in decision making to select place of study destinations by international student.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, the increasing number of international student enrollment in the higher education sector throughout the world endures major changes caused by globalization, which leads to the growing competition among institutions [17,29,30]. As a result, the higher education institutions divert their focus on quality and efficiency of education services that they are providing to their student [42,40].

In recent year, there has been increasing interest in the domain of service quality in Malaysia Public higher education institution [2,3,5]. Despite a lot of research on service quality little attention has been paid to perceived quality of teaching and learning [15].

The purpose of this study is to understand the role of perceived teaching and learning quality experience of international student articulate the decision making process of destination choice of study, to choose Malaysia PubHEIs as their place of study [42]. Malaysia is facing an increasing pressure to improve the quality and efficiency of the education services provided to be globally recognized [12,34]. But more importantly, quality of education offered can influence students' decision to enrol [44]. Sia [43] found that students selected a university because of the types of academic programs offered, management standard, quality of education, faculty qualification, and convenience and accessibility of the place of studies. One of the reasons that influences international students when deciding a PubHEI's to further their education at is that the place provides higher quality of learning and teaching [31]. Furthermore, by providing higher quality of education will directly result in satisfaction as a sources of student retention and loyalty [15,7]. Regardless of increasing interest in marketing literature studies of perceived quality, the researcher, nonetheless, neglected to focus on university performance such as emotional brand attachment. Most of previous studies only linked between perceived teaching quality and satisfaction rather than emotional attachment [36,48,51]. In recent years, a pertinent literature shown that the constitution of potent of emotional attachment leads to a better understanding the reasoning and judgment of decision making process in comparison selection on consumer consumption context.

2. Conceptual Background, proposed model hypothesis and development:

Corresponding Author: Mona Fairuz bt Ramli, School of Business Management, College of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia.

2.1 Perceived Quality and Emotional Brand attachment:

In this study, perceived quality is defined as an accepting views of overall judgment and the generally excellent or the superiority evaluate by customer on the services quality [53]. Zeithmal, Parasuraman, & Berry [55] point out that balancing customer expectation in delivering services quality influenced customer satisfaction towards services providers. However, Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman [54] stated that perceived services quality is differentiate or comparison of customer expectation with their perceptions of performance. Recently, researchers have investigated a variety of approaches to measure perceived quality however the problem essential in the implementation of such strategies have been compounded by the mysterious nature of service quality construct, making it extremely difficult to be defined and measured [1,4,6].

Although, empirically examined of the SERVQUAL, but still had debatably, for number of reasons [46,32,25]. For example, interm of dimensionality of SERVQUAL can be questioned [25]. Similarly, the SERVPERF dimension only focuses on customer perception on services quality but it is difficult to apply it in other industry [1]. Therefore, F. Abdullah & Zamhari [3] develops the most recent measurement which comprising 41 items to measure in determining perceived services quality in higher education proposed as HEdPERF (Higher education PERFmance –only. Moreover, this instrument limits the scope when measuring student expectation and services performance paradigm [8,1]. Based on previous literature, it is shown that the study between perceived quality and satisfaction has already been established [4,24]. Perceived teaching and learning quality is posited to be related to emotional attachment to a brand, as conceptualized by Low and Lamb Jr. [27], which is a brand association dimension. Previous studies on perceived quality and emotional attachment have shown this is crucial to build student loyalty [11,21]. Therefore, this study attempts to reduce the gap. The following hypothesis is offered.

H1: There is a significant relationship between Perceived quality and Emotional Brand Attachment

2.2 Emotional Brand Attachment and Brand Loyalty:

In the last two decades, the pioneering work on attachment was conducted by Bowlby [9] in the realm of parent-child relationship to understand process of affection regulation. Bowlby argued infants are born with attachment behavior and with sense of security that the environment is their safe place. According to Bowlby, an attachment is an emotion-laden focus specific bond between a person and a specific target such as place, brand, product and people. Moreover, previous studies [9,41] showed that emotional attachment has a high motivation and behavioral effect. Those who show a strong attachment want to preserve the closeness to the attachment target and they would suffer separation when the attachment target is detached, and have a strong pro-attachment-target orientation.

As a growing marketing literature indicates, consumer emotional brand attachment and brand loyalty are interrelated [49,50,35,26,48]. Grisaffe & Nguyen [18] highlight that emotional attachment to a brand is relatively a new construct in the marketing literature especially in consumer behavior. However, recent studies [49,50], have confirmed that emotional attachment affects repatronage intentions. Correspondingly, investing in building an emotional attachment with consumers is a worthwhile effort. Park *et al.* [35] states that attachment to the brand consists of two dimensions: brand-self connection and brand prominence. International student's emotional brand attachment may indicate brand loyalty and may increase the willingness to pay more, recommend, positive WOM [22,47]. Nevertheless, there is a lack of empirical studies on consumer attachment to brand [48,33,47] and [16]. Therefore, this study attempts to reduce the gap. The following hypothesis is offered.

H2: There is a significant relationship between Emotional attachment and brand loyalty.

2.3 The mediating effect of Emotional Brand Attachment:

Theoretically model of mediating effect of emotional brand attachment has not been well established, especially in the context of higher education branding [2]. A mediating effect occurs when one part represents the relation of the exogenous variable to the mediator and when another part represents the relation of the mediator to the endogenous variable [28]. In this current study, a mediating effect emerges as a process based that formation input based like perceived teaching and learning quality and to predict brand loyalty. Therefore, this study attempts to reduce the gap. The following hypothesis is offered.

H3: Mediating effects of emotional attachment to the relationship between Perceived quality and brand loyalty are significant.

3. Methodology:

3.1 Data collection and sample Profile:

The data were collected in September 2014 employing a random sample of 150 undergraduate and postgraduate of international student in University Utara Malaysia (UUM). Employing the intercept survey method, the potential international student was asked to complete a self-administrated questionnaire. In order to improve the reliability and precision study and a more representative sample, the respondents were selected randomly to avoid bias. Of the 150 questionnaires distributed, a total 101 valid questionnaires (67.3 percent)

were available for analysis. The majority of the participants were male with the percentage of 61.4% and the female respondents with 38.6%.

3.2 Measures:

This study is adapting a scale from established measurements, namely perceived quality, Emotional brand attachment and brand loyalty. Perceived teaching and learning quality (PQ) determinants were measured using the Programme Experience Questionnaire (PEQ) instrument [38], which use the expectation minus perception score of student satisfaction. The PEQ scale includes 35 items representing nine dimensions: The teaching course measured by 5 items each, organization and management, personal development, career and development measured by 4 items, feedback on submitted work, assessment on the courses, workload, support and advice measured by 3 items each. Emotional brand attachment (EBA) was measured by 10 items representing three dimensions: affection measured by 4 items, connected measured by 3 items and passion measured by 3 items. The emotional brand attachment was using instrument [52]. Finally brand loyalty measured by 15 items was using instrument [45,21]. In this regard, each item will be measured by seven Likert scale rating from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

4. Data Analysis and results:

4.1. Data Analysis Method:

This study employed structural structural equation modeling (SEM) with Smart PLS 2.0 M3 [39] to examine the measurement model and hypothesis. This approach was selected because it has advantages in term of sample size, and residual distribution than covariance-based technique [10]. Furthermore SmartPLS 2.0 model was used to test the hypothesis. The following section discussed the assessment of measurement model and structural model using SmartPLS 2.0. Prior to evaluating the measurement model, preliminary data were made to ensure the data are parsimoniously can explain the model and clean for further analysis.

4.2 Measurement model:

Table 1, shows the results of the analysis. The Cronbach's variable are shown: Perceived quality ($\alpha=0.956$), Emotional Brand Attachment ($\alpha=0.944$) and Brand loyalty ($\alpha=0.792$), and exceed recommended threshold of 0.7 [14]. Composite reliability (CR) range from 0.937 to 0.966, and the average variance extracted (AVE) ranges between 0.518 to 0.669, all the result exceed the recommended threshold of $CR \geq 0.7$ and $AVE \geq 0.5$ [23]. Therefore, from the result it is shown that convergent validity has been established based on [23].

Table 1: Convergent validity.

Construct	1	2	3	No of items	Loadings	AVE	CR
1.BL	0.809			15	0.624-0.908	0.654	0.966
2.EBA	0.764	0.818		10	0.718-0.885	0.669	0.953
3.Perceived quality	0.636	0.725	0.720	35	0.640-0.825	0.518	0.937

Table 2 shows the result of discriminant validity assessment from comparing the AVE from each construct with its communal variance shared with other constructs. The result value of in term construct correlations and square roots of AVE not greater than 0.85 indicating that no multicollinearity in the data set of independent which show discriminant validity of the construct [14].

4.3 Structural Model and hypothesis testing:

The PLS approach was used to confirm the hypothesis relation between construct in the proposed model. The bootstrap resamples model was used to test the proposed model. In the assessment of mPLS model, the square multiple correlations (R^2) for each endogenous latent variable were initially tested and significantly evaluated for structural path. Table 3 shows the summarised results of path coefficient and t -values. The path analysis shows that perceived quality has a significant effect on Emotional brand attachment ($\beta=0.725$, $t=12.259$). Perceived quality was explained approximately 52.5% of emotional attachment ($R^2=0.525$). Emotional brand attachment has a significant effect on brand loyalty construct ($\beta=0.764$, $t=10.259$). Emotional brand attachment was an explained approximately 58.3% of brand loyalty constructs ($R^2=0.583$). While this value above than 0.26 (substantial) established to explanatory power in consumer research [19]. This finding supports the validity of H1 and H2.

To test mediating effect of emotional brand attachment, this study followed procedures suggested by [20,37]. To test H3 the indirect effect was first determined by multiplying the correspondent direct effect. The percentile bootstrap was then computed for each hypothesis, in order to at a 95% confidence interval; the null hypothesis that the corresponding parameter is zero has been tested based on that interval. Regarding H3, this

produces an indirect estimate of perceived quality on brand loyalty through emotional brand attachment, of 0.5539- i.e., 0.725×0.764 . Then through the percentile bootstrap, a confidence interval of 0.44-0.668 was determined which confirm about rejection of the null hypothesis (for significant level of 5%), meaning this present indirect effect is significant. The result shows Emotional brand attachment has mediated effect between perceived quality and brand loyalty. Therefore the result it supported the hypothesis H3.

Table 2: Result of the structural model.

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standard beta	Standard Error	t-value	R2	Decision
H1	Perceived quality -> EBA	0.725	0.057	12.627**	0.525	Supported
H2	EBA -> BL	0.764	0.07	10.885**	0.583	Supported

**p<0.01, *p< 0.05

Table 3: Result of intervening.

Hypothesis	Path a	Path b	Indirect Effect	SE	t-value	95% LL	95% UL	Decision
H3	0.725	0.764	0.5539	0.058	9.501	0.440	0.668	Mediate

Discussion and implication:

Using SmartPLS 2.0 analysis, the result shows the sample data is a good relevant explanations to the model. The present study demonstrates that international student forms an emotional brand attachment with academician and teaching staff (services provider). This present findings illustrate with possible clarification is that customers cannot see the service, but they will feel through their experience of various tangible elements of the services given by the service provider. In higher education it is difference with other industry because the service provider was evaluated their customer with academic performance. When a student's expectation of the quality of the services and service are met, the student will delightedly makes the decision to choose the same university to further the second degree and recommend it to others. Furthermore, the PEQ scale has been tested for the first time in setting of Malaysia HEI's in order to measure perceived teaching and learning (PQ). Even though this scale is adapted and modified to suit the local context, from Western countries, but the result shows slightly positive response. The findings indicate that, perceived teaching and learning quality (PQ) of differentiating itself as being the construct with highest explanatory power in relation to emotional brand attachment (H1), showing its importance to PubHEI's as they attempt to meet their consumers' expectations and thus foster sense of emotional attachment at their places of study. This present results confirms perceived quality has significant effect on emotional brand attachment. The same result was obtained previously from [25,11]. The hypothesis suggests the direct effect of on emotional attachment on brand loyalty (H2) are confirmed, like a previous study by [49,50,35,26,48]. The indirect effects between perceived teaching quality and brand loyalty through emotional brand attachment (H3) has also been verified. The result from current study, like a previous study by [36]. Perin acknowledge that, student loyalty to HEI's is indirect influence by perceived quality.

This current study also provides the development of as well as empirically test the conceptual model of determinants of brand loyalty in PubHEI's considering two predictors: Perceived quality and Emotional brand attachment. The result shows that all the variables stated have been significantly tested. From the findings, we can justify that the teaching of the programme is more concerned by student. For example, the way teaching staffs explaining the subject and make it interesting. Furthermore, the assessment and feedback from teaching staffs important to make them improve their understanding and the quality of their homework. Anything that is suggested from teaching staff will motivate them to master the subject and perform better. Besides that, student expect to get proper advices and support during their studies. Similarly, personal development also takes into account the programme that has been taken can help to articulate the confidence level as well as improved communication skill. Therefore, in the future the service provider needs consider the factors such as a teaching staff lecturing, the assessment method for student, academic support, organization management and personal development to include in the programme offer. Among the structure of perceived quality, the teaching staff lecturing, assessment and feedback and personal development highly influence emotional attachment. In consumer behavior context, emotional brand attachment has been conceptualized as a strong connection between consumer and the specific object, product and brand [47]. In this study student foster their attachment towards their current university since they are impressed by the good quality of the teaching and learning. The teaching staff always listen to the students' voice (i.e. opinion, suggestion and complaint) as well as care about students' welfare and show their commitment to improve quality learning and teaching. In the context of HEI's, attachment theory can be demonstrated the student has an emotional bond with quality of education, an environment and community at places of their study.

As a conclusion, to implant emotional attachment towards international student, a PubHEI's must meet students' expectations in terms of the teaching staff lecturing, assessment and feedback, academic support, organization and management (all the changes communicate with effectively to their student) in order to raise strong emotional attachment strong emotional brand attachment will lead to students' being loyal to their current

place of study. Consequently, Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, and Iacobucci [35] discovered that people who are strongly attached to a brand are willing to expend personal resources (e.g., money, time and effort) to maintain their relationship with the brand.

Limitation and future research:

The present study makes a several contributions in marketing literature, especially in Malaysia HEI's industry. Despite of these contributions, the findings must be viewed in light of limitations. First, the sample only take in one public university, and future research could expand the sample to all public universities in order to reach meaningful conclusion regarding PEQ (perceived teaching and learning) and brand loyalty path. Second, this study uses nine dimensions of perceived quality (The 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 three dimensions to measure EBA (affection, passion and connection). All these dimensions may not directly apply in other contexts. This present study was conducted in cross-sectional in nature and therefore, longitudinal studies are highly recommended in future research. Moreover, the data have been collected in survey – based approach and highly recommended to use depth interview approach in order to understanding of international students' needs in future.

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