

Structural Equation Path Modeling of Emotional Brand Attachment

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Article Info

Volume 83

Page Number: 3161-3169

Publication Issue:

May - June 2020

Abstract

This empirical study examined the association between university image, acculturation, and emotional brand attachment, particularly in the setting of a public higher education (PubHEI) in Malaysia. Research aims to identify whether university image and acculturation have an effect on the emotional brand attachment. Data were collected from 101 international students at one of the public universities in Malaysia using a self-administrated questionnaire. Structural equation modeling (i.e. SmartPLS) was used to analyze the data. The results show that nevertheless all factors being significant to emotional brand attachment formation, the university image and acculturation are the most important predictors. As a result, this study is important for academicians and practitioners, as it exists a different approach to examine emotional brand attachment formation, it offers a new framework to assess the construct of emotional brand attachment. Besides, this research offers several recommendations for future research.

Article History

Article Received: 19 August 2019

Revised: 27 November 2019

Accepted: 29 January 2020

Publication: 12 May 2020

Keywords: university image; acculturation; emotional brand attachment, public higher education.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades there has been a rapid growth of interest in the branding of higher education institutions (HEIs) globally (Clark, Chapleo, & Suomi, 2019; Mainardes, Alves, Raposo, & de Souza Domingues, 2011; Mampaey, Schtemberg, Schijns, Huisman, & Wæraas, 2019). In Malaysia, debate in university branding has increased significantly in recent years among marketing scholars and policy makers to facilitate policy makers position the Asian region as an excellent education hub. Several authors suggested that powerful branding and unique corporate identities are crucial for HEIs to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Sreenivasan, 2020; Waeraas & Sataøen, 2019). Besides enhancing customers' market awareness, a strong brand can contribute in gaining market share (Broucker, De Wit, & Mampaey, 2020). Hence, having a strong brand helps managers and marketers to convey a meaningful message to stakeholders regarding university image, reputation and quality of teaching to ensure student

retention and loyalty (Pham, Limbu, Bui, Nguyen, & Pham, 2019; Yusof, Zaini, & Mansor, 2019).

The globalization of the higher education industry contributes to the inflow of international students to Malaysia and consequently to the growth of the Malaysian economy especially in terms of foreign exchange earnings. Malaysia is the world 11th largest exporter of educational service as it currently hosts 100 nations. However, the number of international students enrolled in Malaysia HEIs in 2011 was 93,000 (MOHE, 2013), which was much lower than the target of 100,000 set in the National Higher Education Action Plan 2007-2010 (MOHE, 2007; Ismail, Aziz, & Abdullah, 2014). In 2013, it was reported that the increase in the number of international students was small, from 26,323 in 2012 to 28,826 in 2013 students, an expansion of only 9.5 percent (MOHE, 2013). Thus, it shows that Malaysia higher education sector still not be able to attract international students as targeted.

The increasing number of international students in Malaysia has raised cultural issues (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Singh, Pandian, & Singh, 2013). Although many

international students completed their studies with relatively a few difficulties, others experienced problems such as cultural stress, poor social integration, academic stress, feeling homesick, role conflict, and difficulties in cultural adjustment due to the differences in culture (Saad, Yunus, & Embi, 2013; Yusliza & Chelliah, 2010). Most research works in this topic were conducted in the West with a few in the Middle East and Asia Pacific region like China, Singapore, Korea and Thailand. In addition, previous studies seemed to have neglected particularly the impact of acculturation on individuals and emotional brand attachment. Despite the increasing number of studies in emotional brand attachment, limited work was carried out to establish a link between various aspects of acculturation and emotional brand attachment especially in the higher educational context.

Scholars argue that the image and reputation of a university is an important element that needs further investigation (Brown & Kosovich, 2014; Suomi, Kuoppakangas, Hytti, Hampden-Turner, & Kangaslahti, 2014; Zaghloul, Hayajneh, & AlMarzouki, 2010). The university image and reputation represent the quality, campus, achievement, university mission and people in the organization, which are key elements of a student's choice of institutions (Alves & Raposo, 2010; Mainardes et al., 2011; Wilkins & Huisman, 2013; Wilkins & Huisman, 2014b). In addition to university image, another determinant of student retention that requires further investigation is emotional attachment (Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006; Wilkins & Huisman, 2014a, 2014b). In addition to these gaps, there is still a lack of research on the impact of acculturation among international students from the Middle East, South East Asian and others who come to further their studies in Malaysia. Even though acculturation has been extensively studied among Asian American and Asian residents, there is still limited research on how acculturation is conceptualized and measured in different contexts.

The current study tried to fill the existing gaps by introducing the acculturation construct to examine its effect on emotional brand attachment towards HEIs. Although previous researchers have studied image, acculturation and emotional attachment and their interrelationships, the key issue in understanding their effects of cross culture change, value and adaptation on consumer behavior still remains scarce. Therefore, this calls for further investigation (Chai, Deans, & Biggemann, 2012; Kuo, 2014).

After this section this paper will discuss a review of past studies on emotional brand attachment, university image and acculturation. It is followed by discussion on methodology, research result, discussions and finally the conclusion.

2. Literature review

2.1 Emotional brand attachment

In the context of consumer behavior, emotional brand attachment has been conceptualized as a strong connection between a consumer and the specific object, product and brand (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). However, some (Fournier, 1998; Freling, Crosno, & Henard, 2011; Stahl, Heitmann, Lehmann, & Neslin, 2012) noted that emotional attachment has been conceptualized as a metaphor where consumers form a relationship with brands as if they form a romantic relationship. Emotional attachment is complex in nature and involves a cognitive belief. Several researchers (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Lee, Moon, Kim, & Yi, 2015; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) suggested that emotional attachment is developed from commitment and trust in relationship marketing. Japutra, Ekinci, & Simkin, (2014) suggest that in their empirical work that image is a important factors which contribute to the formation of emotional brand attachment.

Generally speaking, attachment is a basic human need, defined as emotional laden of a specific object between a person and a tangible or intangible entity (Bowlby, 1977). Previous study revealed that the behaviour between an infant and a caregiver reflects an attachment the child has to someone as a specific figure (Bowlby, 1982). In the perspective of consumer behavior, attachment can be explained as a commitment to a brand (Thomson et al., 2005). The concept of emotional attachment captures a judgment and reasoning to connect to a behavior such as loyalty and willingness to pay a price premium for a brand (Hung, 2014; Manyiwa, 2020). Garanti, 2019; Park, MacInnis, & Priester, (2008) argued that commitment is an outcome of brand attachment, while a strong commitment will form attachment towards the brand. Based on a review of existing literature, a framework and corresponding hypotheses are proposed. (see Figure 1).

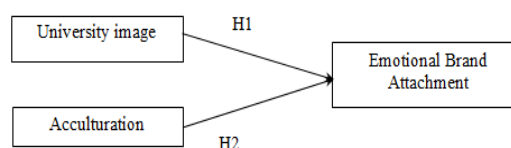


Figure 1: Proposed framework of university image, acculturation and emotional brand attachment

2.2 University image and emotional brand attachment

A university is a place of sharing knowledge, a community of scholars and a place that provides students with skills and competencies (Ali-Choudhury, Bennett, & Savani, 2009). A university image represents a university brand based on student perception (Ali-Choudhury et al., 2009; Alves & Raposo, 2010). Consequently, university image has a significant impact on student loyalty. However, this relationship has rarely been tested in the

context of study destination. Alves and Raposo found that a positive image of a college and university can attract new students to choose their place of studies, and hence student loyalty and student (Brown Robert & Mazzarol, 2009; Casidy, 2013; Theng So, Parsons, & Yap, 2013). This relationship implies that the more favorable the university image is, the more likely international students are emotionally attached to the place or destination which will result in their loyalty with a specific university. However, Thompson (2006) pointed out that a disparaging image is a warning sign that emotionally will be affected the losing sense of loyalty. Therefore it is hypothesized that:

H1: *There is a significant relationship between university image and emotional brand attachment*

2.3 Acculturation and emotional brand attachment

Acculturation is outlined as cultural changes and values of the long connection between two different ethnic groups. This scholar has been suggested that acculturation assessing by two primary dimensions, namely the maintenance of origin, culture, identity and also maintenance of a relationship with another group. Since, Malaysia becomes an international educational hub in years 2020, many of international students enroll in Malaysia universities to further their higher education here. Therefore, Malaysia facing major challenge is the growing ethnic diversity of the Malaysian market especially in HEIs context.

Past literature found that consumer acculturation affects consumer consumption behavior and decision making. In higher education, developing strong student relationships is important because of the intangible and often the interpersonal nature of the service delivery process (Tran, 2012; Williams Jr, Osei, & Omar, 2012). Nevertheless, sustaining long term relationships require deep understanding of student expectation that inspires bonding, commitment and loyalty.

Student acculturation and relationship marketing are becoming important marketing practices directed at ethnic and student communities in higher education (Saad et al., 2013; Yusliza, 2010). Therefore, to fill the gap of acculturation in higher education branding a better understanding of the stimulus of student acculturation that affects student interpersonal behavioral is necessary. Bay and Daniel suggested social bonds as a variable for future study because they are important in developing the relationships between students and the institution of higher education. Therefore, this study investigated the influence of acculturation on interpersonal, emotional attachment to the place of studies among international students in Malaysia higher education institutions. This led to the following hypothesis:

H2: *There is a significant relationship between acculturation and emotional brand attachment*

3. Research Methodology

To test the research hypotheses, therefore, a cross-sectional survey method was employed. A self-administered questionnaire was utilized to collect the necessary data. The data were collected from a random sample of 150 international students, which representing three colleges. Data collected started in September and ended by end of October 2014. The questions asked were adapted from previous research and measured on a seven-point Likert scale. One-hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed to international students of Universiti Utara Malaysia across faculties. 101 (67.3 percent) of the distributed questionnaires were useable for analysis. Majority of the participants were male (61.4%) while 38.6% were female.. The sample size is adequate and supported the reliability and validity interpretation according to (Nunnally & Bernstein (1994).

This study used established measures for university image, acculturation and emotional brand attachment. Items to measure university image was adapted from Lyman and Mohajerani (2013), which was again modified and adapted from (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009). The measure consisted of 21 items in three dimensions: covenant (4 items), quiddity (15 items), and symbolic and external representation (2 items). The instrument to measure acculturation was adapted from Barry (2001) and Berry (1980). The acculturation scale had 29 items, representing four dimensions: assimilation was measured by eight items, separation seven items, integration five items, and marginalization nine items. Finally, emotional brand attachment was measured by 10 items adapted from (Yim, Tse, & Chan, 2008), which were adapted and modified by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), and Thomson et al. (2005). All items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Table 1 illustrates the measurement instruments of the variables.

4. Research Results and Discussion

This study utilized a Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with Smart PLS 3 (Hair, Sarstedt, Matthews, & Ringle, 2016; Ringle, C. M., Wende, S., & Will, 2005; Ringle & Sarstedt, 2016), a variance based method to estimate latent variable. Compare to usages of CBSEM (covariance-based structural equation model technique) (Chin, Marcolin, & Newsted, 2003; Hair, Joe F, M.Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2016; Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins, & Kuppelwieser, 2014), the selection of this approach are based on factors including utilization of smaller number of sample size non-requirement of normal data distribution, and applicability to complex structural equations models with large numbers of constructs.. The assessment of measurement model and the structural model using SmartPLS 3 were discussed in the following section. Prior to the measurement model, data were cleaned to ensure that they could parsimoniously explain the model.

4.1 Measurement model

Table 1 shows the research findings, including the Cronbach's alpha of each variable; university image ($\alpha = 0.0834$), acculturation ($\alpha = 0.9327$), and emotional brand attachment ($\alpha = 0.944$). The values of the internal consistency (α) were acceptable and exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally.J.C & Bernstein, 1994). The composite reliability (CR) values

ranged between 0.876 and 0.953, and the average variance extracted (AVE) ranged between 0.503 and 0.669. The CR values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7, while the AVE values exceeded the cut-off point of 0.5 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). The results support the requirement for convergent validity (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 2: Convergent validity

Construct	1	2	3	No of items	Loading	AVE	CR	R ²
Acculturation	1			29	0.608-0.767	0.503	0.938	
Emotional brand attachment	0.60	1		10	0.690-0.891	0.669	0.953	0.589
University image	0.39	0.67	1	21	0.602-0.785	0.504	0.876	

Table 2 also shows the result of the discriminant validity. The discriminant validity assessment was conducted by comparing the AVE of each construct with its communal variance shared with other constructs. The value of the construct correlations and the square roots of AVE was less than 0.85, indicating that there was no multicollinearity in the data set. This confirmed the discriminant validity of the constructs. (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The next step is to test the hypothesized relationships between the constructs in the proposed model by assessing the structural model.. The bootstrap resamples model, in the PLS analysis was used to test the proposed model. Each endogenous latent variable squared multiple correlations (R^2) were initially tested and significantly evaluated for the structural path. Figure 2 shows the results of structural model. The values in the figure show the standardized coefficients and t-values, respectively.

The path analysis showed that university image had a significant influence on emotional brand attachment ($\beta = 0.515$, $t = 7.649$). In addition, acculturation was found to have a significant influence on emotional brand attachment ($\beta = 0.403$, $t = 6.822$). Both predictors explained approximately 58.90% of brand emotional attachment ($R^2 = 0.589$). The value of R^2 was greater than 0.26 (substantial), and as was suggested by (Chin, 1998) the value it is high enough for the model to achieve a minimum level of explanatory power (Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012; Urbach & Ahlemann, 2010). These findings supported the validity of H1 and H2. Table 3 summaries of the values in structural model.

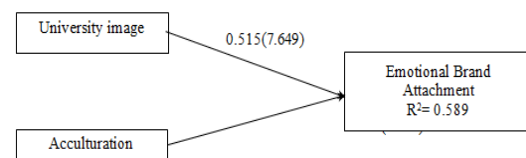


Figure 2: Path coefficient (t-value)

Table 3: Result of the structural model

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standard beta	Standard error	t-value	Decision
H1	Acculturation → Emotional brand attachment	0.403	0.059	6.822**	Supported
H2	University image → Emotional brand attachment	0.515	0.067	7.649**	Supported

Note: **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05 two tail

5. Discussion

This study showed that university image and acculturation significantly predicted emotional brand attachment in higher education institutions. The result confirms that positive image will lead to international students being attached to the place of their studies. As university image has a significant impact on emotional brand attachment, the finding suggests that emotional brand attachment can be determined by an image involving emotion that is related to past experience and knowledge. The emotional attachment may be explained by the various tangible services given by the service provider, which make the students' experiences favorable.

The findings above are similar to those by Wilkins and Huisman (2014b), Cetin (2004), Zaghoul, Hayajneh, and AlMarzouki (2010), and Alves and Raposo (2010). The findings also indicate that delivering a positive image of a university will assist the university in selecting good international students. This study found that the strong evidence that the relationship-orientation behavior of HEI's, including providing good academic support and facilities to the existing student, the geographical areas of the campus, and the excellent career prospect, have a positive impact on the international perception and expectation of the university image and reputation. Besides, A university that is characterized by being in a safe location, having a physical attractive campus, and having easy accessibility makes international students feel more comfortable, and, hence, create an emotional bond towards the place of study. It was also discovered that another reason for selecting the place of study is the probability that the graduates are likely to be employed and have good career prospects. In other words, international students prefer to study in an institution that is widely recognized. Good global rankings indicate the quality of teaching and student satisfaction. It also reflects the quality of research conducted by the faculty members. Thus, a good ranking boosts the image and reputation of the university at a higher education market. Studies found that a good ranking was significant in forming positive images of the university among potential students (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Sin & Kim, 2013).

This study also sought to explore acculturation in the higher education context in Malaysia and how consumer acculturation relates to consumer behavior. In this study, three dimensions of acculturation were captured. They were assimilation, separation and integration of cultural change. The result also indicates that as international students are able to assimilate and integrate themselves with the host culture, they are emotionally attached to the university brand. It is reasonable to expect that the international students in this study interact highly with local students in terms of language, food, customs etc. When they are assimilated, they may have low maintenance of their own culture. This finding is similar to previous works (Nur, Zainal, & Mugableh, 2013; Saad

et al., 2013). The finding also discloses the strong evidence that the ability of the social integration among international student and host country, culture will enhance emotionally attach with a place of their study. Besides, the precarious part is language proficiency as they do not find much difference by using the English language itself (e.g., writing and speaking in Malay and English language) rather than use their own language (Doria, Abd Aziz, & Mohd Ibrahim, 2014; Nur et al., 2013; Wan, Md Nordin, & Razali, 2013).

Furthermore, this current study also demonstrates that international student those who have maintain their own culture was high and at the same time adapted a low in-house culture are known as a separation. In a same vein, this study disclosed that international students who study in Malaysia have not adapted to the host culture well. They have a low ethnic identity and do not consider maintaining relationship with another group.

The finding showed that more improvement and support of university administrators are needed to minimize intercultural problems as well as cultural shocks among international students. Since Malaysia wants to increase the number of international students, therefore programs that help them to adapt to the new environment should be implemented. Offering classes of English and Malay languages is one of the acculturation activities HEIs should think of to allow the international students to adjust well.

6. Conclusions

From this research it can be concluded that the higher education sector should focus on developing the good brand image and acculturation of the international students in order to build a very strong emotional feeling towards the university. This study has made numerous contributions to the marketing literature, particularly to HEIs in Malaysia. Despite the contributions, the study also faced several limitations. Firstly, the respondents were only selected from the public universities and future research could expand the sample by including private universities to reach a meaningful conclusion regarding university image, acculturation, and emotional brand attachment paths. Secondly, university image and emotional brand attachment were examined at a specific point of time, therefore in the future could be examined in the difference of time and context. Thirdly, future researchers need to investigate the formation of a brand emotional attachment that can be done through the interaction of the dimensions. Lastly, this study was a cross-sectional in nature. Perhaps, a longitudinal study was suggested for future study for the purpose of getting more enriched findings.

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