



BRAND LOYALTY IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION: THE EFFECTS OF BRAND AWARENESS AND BRAND ASSOCIATION MODERATED BY BRAND IDENTITY

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Abstract. This study analyzes the effects of brand awareness and brand association on brand loyalty in the higher education sector and analyzes the role of brand identity as a moderating variable. This research used 182 respondents of Universitas Terbuka (Indonesian Open University) as the sample, which the obtained data through distributing the questionnaires to respondents. Data were analyzed using the SEM-PLS method with the help of SmartPLS software. The results showed that brand awareness and associations had a positive and significant effect on brand loyalty. In addition, this study also confirms the role of brand identity as a moderating influence of brand awareness on brand loyalty. The influence of brand awareness on brand loyalty will be more substantial when higher education has a strong brand identity.

Keywords: Brand Loyalty; Brand Awareness; Brand Association; Brand Identity; Higher Education Institution

Abstrak. Penelitian ini menganalisis pengaruh kesadaran merek dan asosiasi merek terhadap loyalitas merek di sektor pendidikan tinggi dan menganalisis peran identitas merek sebagai variabel moderasi. Penelitian ini menggunakan sampel 182 responden Universitas Terbuka, yang datanya diperoleh melalui penyebaran kuesioner kepada responden. Data dianalisis menggunakan metode SEM-PLS dengan bantuan software SmartPLS. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kesadaran merek dan asosiasi berpengaruh positif dan signifikan terhadap loyalitas merek. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga menegaskan peran identitas merek sebagai pengaruh moderasi kesadaran merek terhadap loyalitas merek. Pengaruh kesadaran merek terhadap loyalitas merek akan semakin besar ketika perguruan tinggi memiliki identitas merek yang kuat.

Kata Kunci: Loyalitas Merek; Kesadaran Merek; Asosiasi Merek; Identitas Merek; Institusi Pendidikan Tinggi.



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Introduction

Brand management is an essential strategy for companies in the production sector and companies in the service sector such as Higher Education Institution (HEI) (Chapleo, 2015; Khanna et al., 2014). The competitive market environment demands higher education to design effective competitive strategies such as brand management (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). By concentrating on brand management, companies will be able to increase brand awareness

through strengthening consumer-brand relationships (Su & Chang, 2018). The HEIs used the brand as a symbol to communicate with customers, specifically students. It forms students' perceptions of schools that will influence their educational decisions (Chen, 2019).

The competition for distance learning HEIs in Indonesia is getting higher with Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture No. 24 of 2012 concerning the Implementation of Distance Education in Higher Education. As a result, universities are allowed to provide distance learning at higher education levels and become a threat to the Universitas Terbuka (UT) as a pioneer of the distance learning higher education system in Indonesia. Therefore, the Universitas Terbuka needs to design a brand management strategy to compete and maintain its brand as the best university in the distance learning higher education system.

At present, the brand is considered a vital asset that represents the core value of HE, and therefore the brand must be developed and managed with care (Pinar et al., 2014). Empirical research has proven that HEI that manages its brand well, will improve services and attract and retain students (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009; Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). In addition, branding will help parents and students identify the university services offered and ultimately attract their interest in choosing the university (Harvey, 1996). For parents and students, choosing a university is a complex decision, and a brand's presence will simplify the selection process (Judson et al., 2008).

One of the valuable assets for any brand is brand loyalty (Nguyen et al., 2011). The level of brand loyalty has been used to measure the success of marketing strategies and a partial measure of brand equity (Knox & Walker, 2001). Brand loyalty measures how loyal consumers are to a particular brand and consistently repurchase that brand (Sheth & Mittal, 2004). When brand loyalty is successfully formed, it will allow companies to apply premium prices, create barriers to entry for competitors, reduce marketing strategy costs, and protect brands from competitors' actions (Reichheld, 1996). In addition, brand loyalty will play an essential role in the company's fiscal stability, including higher education (Vander Schee, 2010). In the context of HEI, students who are loyal to the higher education brand will contribute in terms of finance, banking, and HEI resources (Lai et al., 2019). In addition, loyal students will be willing to recommend institutions or courses to others, maintain contracts with faculty, choose institutions for future study, or join alumni (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; Kaushal & Ali, 2020).

There are not many studies on the brand loyalty of universities in Indonesia. Most studies have focused on brand loyalty in the manufactured goods sector (Budi et al., 2021; Hermanus & Margaretha, 2018; Hidayanti & Nuryakin, 2018; Sugiyarti & Hendar, 2017) and banking (Laksamana, 2018; Rahmatulloh et al., 2019; Wahyuni & Fitriani, 2017). However, brand loyalty for universities is no less important than other sectors. Therefore, this research will help the Universitas Terbuka and other universities in Indonesia make decisions to manage brand loyalty strategies and the factors that influence them.

Brand awareness is one of the empirically proven variables to affect customer loyalty to a brand (Alkhalwaldeh & Eneizan, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2011; Su & Chang, 2018). Brand awareness can be formed because customers repeatedly receive exposure to products or services (Keller, 2003). Brand awareness is also the most significant determinant for students choosing a university (Astin & Solmon, 1981). When customers are aware of the brand and perceive certain brands well, there is a high tendency for these customers to become loyal customers and make the brand the primary choice (Su & Chang, 2018).

Brand awareness is the main prerequisite for brand loyalty (Pappu et al., 2006). When companies increase brand recognition, the brand will be embedded in the customer's memory, positively affecting the consumer-brand relationship and customer loyalty to the brand (Su & Chang, 2018). When customers have sufficient information about the brand, they will be aware of the products or services offered and lead to brand loyalty (Alkhalwaldeh & Eneizan, 2018). Customers repurchase the brand because they are sure of its quality (Alkhalwaldeh et al., 2017). Previous researchers have proven a positive and significant effect of brand awareness on brand loyalty (Dhurup et al., 2014; Nguyen et al., 2011; Torres et al., 2015). More specifically, Abbas (2019) and Pinar et al. (2020) found a positive effect of brand awareness on brand loyalty in the

HE sector. Based on previous empirical findings, the first hypothesis proposed is: Brand awareness has a positive effect on brand loyalty.

In addition to brand awareness, brand associations have also been found to influence the level of customer brand loyalty (Ha & John, 2010; Lu & Xu, 2015). As an essential part of consumer-based brand equity, brand association refers to the association that customers remember about a brand (Romaniuk & Nenycz-Thiel, 2013). Brand associations represent customer impressions, including customer perceptions, conclusions, beliefs, and brand knowledge (Mann & Ghuman, 2014). When customers have a strong association with a brand, it will affect perceived differentiation and encourage customer loyalty to the brand (Chun & Davies, 2006; Davies et al., 2003).

Brand associations help shape consumer commitment to buy a brand (Lu & Xu, 2015). Several previous researchers found a positive and significant effect of brand association on brand loyalty (Bae et al., 2020; Ha & John, 2010; Kwasi & Phiri, 2018). Research by Phan dan Ghantous (2013) found that functional and company-based brand associations positively affect brand loyalty. Then the study of Pradnyaputra and Chaerudin (2016) found that the dimensions of brand associations consisting of brand attributes, brand benefits, and brand attitudes affect brand loyalty. When the benefits, attributes, attitudes, and product quality meets customer needs, it will form a strong brand association, and ultimately the customer will be loyal to the brand (Phong et al., 2020). Therefore, the second hypothesis proposed is: The brand association positively affects brand loyalty.

This study will analyze brand awareness and brand association on brand loyalty in the higher education sector. The researcher uses the brand identity variable as a moderating variable of the influence of brand awareness on brand associations. Researchers and practitioners have recognized the importance of brand identity as a differentiator of a brand with other brands (Aaker, 2012; Joachimsthaler & Aaker, 1997; Keller, 2003). When customers are aware of the brand and the brand has a strong identity, it is expected to strengthen customer's brand loyalty. However, no research has used the brand identity variable as a moderating variable until now. Therefore, this research provides ideas for HEIs and provides a theoretical contribution to developing brand identity theory and brand equity.

Brand identity is a brand concept designed and presented by an organization (Geuens et al., 2009). According to Joukanen et al. (2018), brand identity is what an organization wants to defend its brand. Brand identity helps customers consider a brand from the many available brand options (Kapferer, 2008). In the education sector, various marketing communication elements such as brand names, position statements, and brand symbols are used to build brand identity (Bosch et al., 2006; Melewar et al., 2018).

This study assumes that when brand information has been embedded in customers' minds and solid organizational efforts to form its brand identity, it will make customers more loyal. Customers repurchase the brand, recommend the brand to others, and say positive things about the brand since customers know well what the brand has to offer and quickly identify the brand. Therefore, the proposed hypothesis is: Brand identity strengthens the positive influence of brand awareness on brand loyalty. When higher education has a good brand identity, the influence of brand awareness on brand loyalty is more decisive.

The three hypotheses proposed are then summarized in the following research model (Figure 1).

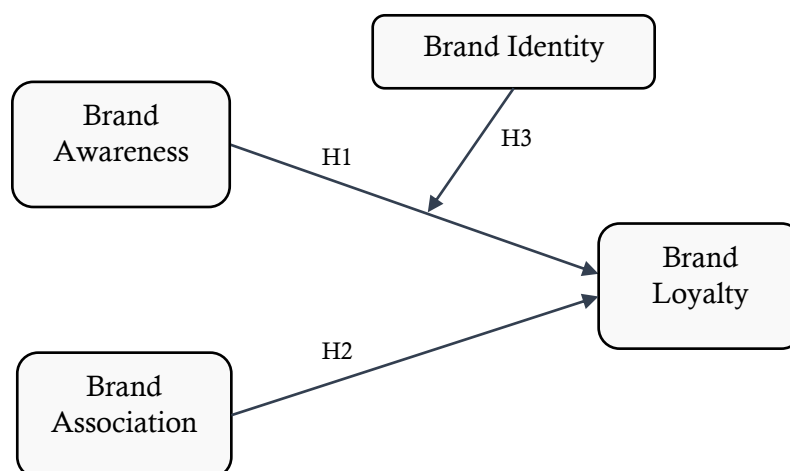


Figure 1: Research Model

Method

This research was conducted at the Distance Learning Program Unit, Jayapura Universitas Terbuka. The sample used is students spread across several areas of the Jayapura Open University and registered in 2014-2017. This study consists of two independent variables: brand awareness and brand association, one moderating variable, namely brand identity, and one dependent variable, namely brand loyalty. The research instrument used was a questionnaire distributed to 200 students, but only 182 questionnaires could be used. The questionnaire was prepared using a four-point Likert scale: 1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-agree, and 4-strongly agree. The research data were analyzed using the Structural Equation Modeling Partial Least Square (SEM-PLS) method with SmartPLS 3 software.

Results and Discussions

Characteristics of respondents were analyzed based on gender, age, last education, occupation, and income. The results of the analysis of the characteristics of the respondents in table 1 show that the respondents in this study were dominated by respondents who were female (51.80%), aged 21-30 years (59.30%), graduated from high school (72%), worked as a private employee. (43.40%) and with an income of 2.1-5 million rupiah (49.70%).

This study uses the SEM-PLS method to test the proposed research model since SEM-PLS is better at predicting models designed to provide causal explanations (Hair et al., 2019; Sarstedt et al., 2017). In evaluating the measurement model, four things must be analyzed, examining the factor loading, assessing the reliability of internal consistency with Composite Reliability, analyzing the convergent validity of AVE, and testing discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019).

Factor loading analysis is done first as the most critical step in evaluating the measurement model. Several items were removed from the research model in the initial factor loading because their values were shallow. The items that were deleted were five items from brand awareness (BAW1, BAW2, BAW3, BAW4, BAW11), six items from brand association (BAS1, BAS2, BAS3, BAS4, BAS8, BAS9), and three items from brand identity (BI1, BI2, BI3). After deleting the items with low values, a retest was undertaken. In the results (Table 2), all items had a factor loading close to or even more significant than the recommended cut-off value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019).

Next is to assess the reliability of internal consistency with composite reliability (CR). In Table 2, it can be seen that the CR values of all variables ranged from 0.896 to 0.958, exceeding the recommended level of 0.70. Convergent validity was also achieved because all variables had an AVE value greater than 0.5. After confirming the reliability and AVE value, the discriminant validity test was undertaken by looking at the heterotrait-monotrait correlation ratio (HTMT).

Table 3 shows that the HTMT value is in the range of 0.638-0.884, not exceeding the set value limit of 0.9. If the HTMT value is above 0.90, there is no discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Category	Alternative Answer	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	88	48.20%
	Female	94	51.80%
Age	< 20	27	15.10%
	21-30	108	59.30%
	31-40	39	21.40%
	> 40	8	4.20%
Last Education	Senior High School	131	72%
	Diploma	33	18%
	Bachelor and Master	18	10%
Profession	Civil Servants	23	12.70%
	Private Employees	79	43.40%
	Entrepreneur	42	22.90%
	Others	38	21%
Income	< 1 million Rupiah	19	10.40%
	1,1 - 2 million Rupiah	28	15.30%
	2,1-5 million Rupiah	90	49.70%
	> 5 million Rupiah	45	24.60%

Table 2. Factor Loading and Reliability Coefficients

Variable	Loading	AVE	CR
Brand Awareness		0.665	0.922
BAW5	0.669		
BAW6	0.745		
BAW7	0.840		
BAW8	0.876		
BAW9	0.878		
BAW10	0.862		
Brand Association		0.586	0.907
BAS5	0.739		
BAS6	0.781		
BAS7	0.705		
BAS10	0.646		
BAS11	0.758		
BAS12	0.853		
BAS13	0.852		
Brand Identity		0.741	0.896
BI4	0.852		
BI5	0.902		
BI6	0.826		
Brand Loyalty		0.765	0.958
BL1	0.718		
BL2	0.807		
BL3	0.877		
BL4	0.886		
BL5	0.949		
BL6	0.928		
BL7	0.935		

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	Brand Association	Brand Awareness	Brand Identity	Brand Loyalty
Brand Association				
Brand Awareness	0.789			
Brand Identity	0.783	0.704		
Brand Loyalty	0.773	0.884	0.638	

After assessing the measurement model is satisfactory, the next step is assessing the structural model by paying attention to the coefficient of determination (R^2) (Hair et al., 2019). The R^2 value of the model is 0.823, which indicates that 82.3% of brand loyalty is explained by the brand awareness and brand association variables. This finding indicates that the explanatory power of the model is substantial. R-Square values of 0.75 are considered substantial, 0.50 moderate, and 0.25 weak (Hair et al., 2011).

Table 4. R-Square Value

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Brand Loyalty	0.823	0.819

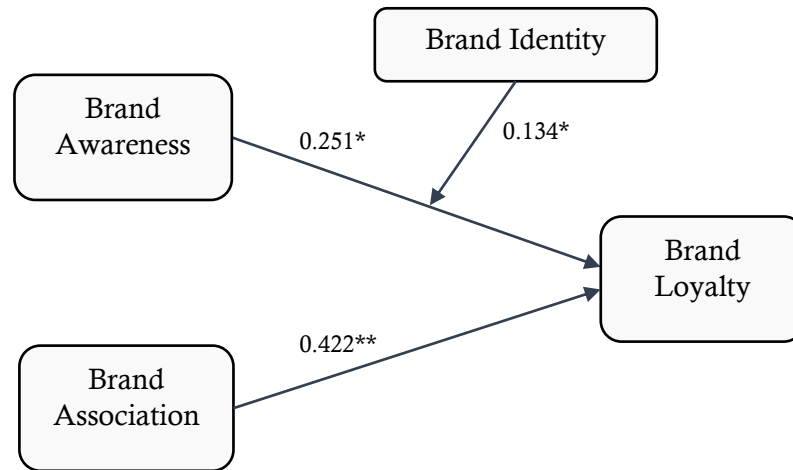
The results of hypothesis testing are summarized in Figure 2. Figure 2 shows that brand awareness positively affects brand loyalty with a path coefficient of 0.251 and p-value <0.05. Thus the first hypothesis is supported. These results support previous research, which also found a positive and significant effect of brand awareness on brand loyalty (Dhurup et al., 2014; Nguyen et al., 2011; Torres et al., 2015), especially research by Abbas (2019) and Pinar et al. (2020) in HE sector. Efforts made by the Open University to increase customer brand awareness include participating in various exhibition events, sports, arts, and other educational exhibitions as a promotional event and introducing the university. Brand awareness can be formed because customers repeatedly receive exposure to products or services (Keller, 2003). As a result, customers have good brand awareness of Universitas Terbuka Jayapura. Furthermore, customers have good information about the university that affects their loyalty to the university brand.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Results

	Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	P-Value	Hypothesis Result
Direct Effect				
H1	Brand Awareness → Brand Loyalty	0.251	0.000	Supported
H2	Brand Association → Brand Loyalty	0.422	0.026	Supported
Moderation Effect				
H3	Brand Awareness*Brand Identity → Brand Loyalty	0.134	0.017	Supported

The results of the second hypothesis testing indicate that brand association has a positive and significant effect on brand loyalty with a path coefficient of 0.422 and p-value < 0.01. Thus the second hypothesis is supported. These results support previous research, which also found a positive and significant effect of brand association on brand loyalty (Bae et al., 2020; Ha & John, 2010; Kwasi & Phiri, 2018; Phong et al., 2020). The Universitas Terbuka (UT) builds brand associations as a brand known for providing distance higher education and becomes a pioneer and example for other universities that are also developing distance education. This finding is what strengthens and differentiates the UT brand from other universities. UT is the choice of students who are busy working and cannot attend face-to-face lectures. In addition, tuition fees are affordable but still supported by standardized services and a sound learning system. Having a solid and positive university brand association leads customers to become loyal. It reflects from

the enrolled student to re-register every semester. They are voluntarily recommending other prospective students to study at UT. They also show not having doubts about the university, always following information related to UT, socializing the UT brand to the public, not being affected by costs, and still choosing UT is superior to other universities.



Notes: *p<0.05 **p<0.01

Figure 2. Hypothesis Testing Results

Next is to analyze the results of the moderation hypothesis test. The moderator variable acts as the third independent variable whose value can change the effect of independent variables on dependent ones (Hair et al., 2014). Therefore, this study examines the moderator variable, namely brand identity, in influencing the relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty. The test results in Figure 2 show that brand identity significantly affects the relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty.

Identity is a critical element in branding, and the core elements of a successful brand are understanding how brand identity is created and developed (Laforet, 2010). This finding shows that when a university has a good and strong brand identity, the relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty is getting stronger. One of UT's strong brand identities is the logo. Logos give the impression of information and ease in identifying the brand. UT has an easy-to-remember logo and is easily recognizable by customers such as students, prospective students, and alumni. The influence of brand awareness on brand loyalty will be more substantial at universities with a strong brand identity. Students choose UT again as their next study option, recommend UT to other prospective students, and convey positive things about the UT brand. Students know well what the UT brand has to offer and can quickly identify the UT brand. The moderating role of brand identity has not been studied much. This study is the first to confirm that with a strong brand identity, the stronger the relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty.

Conclusions And Suggest

This study succeeded in confirming the positive and significant influence of brand awareness and brand association on brand loyalty. The stronger the awareness and brand associations that are built, it will lead customers to become loyal customers of the brand. The results of this study provide a theoretical contribution to research on brand loyalty in higher education by examining the influence of brand awareness and brand associations. Student loyalty to higher education can be increased through increased brand awareness and brand associations. Universities need to design a branding strategy well by paying attention to how to plant information about the brand in the minds of consumers and form good associations with the brand.

This study also confirmed the brand identity as a moderating variable. However, brand identity can strengthen the influence of brand awareness on brand loyalty. Therefore, higher

education institutions must design strategies to form brand awareness and brand associations and form a strong brand identity. A strong brand identity can be built through improving visual identity, behavior, culture, and market conditions.

In addition to the value arising from this study, there are also limitations. First, this study only focuses on the Universitas Terbuka Jayapura, so that the study results may differ from Universitas Terbuka in other regions of Indonesia. Then this study was only analyzed based on quantitative data, not supported by an in-depth analysis in terms of qualitative such as interviews. Therefore, further researchers can expand the research sample and combine quantitative and qualitative research methods, so the influence between variables can be analyzed and described in detail and in-depth.

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