


Identifying the factors that influence students' loyalty towards Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate factors influencing students' loyalty to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. In this study, five TVET colleges located in Gauteng were selected using a non-probability judgement sample. A self-administered questionnaire was handed out to 462 full-time undergraduate students at each of the five TVET colleges during class time. This study explored how factors such as brand communication, service quality and overall satisfaction affect brand loyalty. Structural equation modelling using partial least squares (PLS) was used to test the relationships. The analysis revealed that brand satisfaction and service quality significantly affect students' perceptions of brand loyalty. The results of this study, however, did not show an association between brand communication and brand loyalty. This study adds to new knowledge as it appears to be the first to examine brand loyalty in the South African TVET context, providing new insights into the literature about brand loyalty in higher education. The findings of this study have the potential to benefit TVET colleges facing challenges with student retention.

Keywords: students' perceptions, brand communication, service quality, brand satisfaction, brand loyalty, technical and vocational training, TVET, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Organisations appear concerned with brand loyalty owing to the increased investment of resources in this area. Increasing concerns about loyalty have resulted in much attention being focussed on institutions gaining insight into building brand loyalty (Chiou & Shen 2006: 18). In organisations, including the higher education sector, brand loyalty is a key component because of increasing competition among institutions (Curtis, Abratt & Minor 2009: 404; Sung & Yang 2008: 357). Research in marketing identified three important factors, namely brand communication, satisfaction and service quality, among many factors that contribute to building a relationship between a brand and its customers. A positive relationship leads to brand loyalty (Pina & Dias 2021: 99).

Brand loyalty helps to establish repetitive purchase behaviour (Abbas 2019: 47). Aaker (1991: 3) also agrees with this argument and maintains that brand loyalty is “the consumer’s conscious or unconscious decision, expressed through intention or behaviour, to repurchase a brand continually”. Intention and behaviour are thought to change over time (Gundu 2019: 94) and therefore the ability to use this knowledge to craft communication messages that resonate with the consumer’s conscious or unconscious decision seems to lead to brand loyalty (Kabiraj & Shanmugan 2011: 286), where consumers repeatedly choose a particular brand over others. A brand’s ability to establish an emotional connection with consumers is driven by how it persuades customers and maintains connections with them. Persuasion is characterised by communicating a brand to establish an emotional connection with consumers (Nikhashemi & Valaei 2018: 89). This emotional response is tied to consumers’ overall assessment of the brand throughout their purchase experience. The overall brand assessment represents brand satisfaction.

Brand satisfaction is consumers’ emotional evaluation of how the brand performed, compared with what they expected when purchasing the brand and seems to be tied to service quality. Service quality is the degree to which a service achieves the expectations of a customer (Auka, Bosire & Matern 2013: 35). Typically, when a customer experiences happiness and positive emotions after making a purchase, it shows that their expectations have been met (Alzoubi et al. 2022: 451) and meeting customers’ expectations becomes a priority in brand loyalty.

The current competitive landscape of higher education has continued to present challenges where institutions seem to compete for survival (Angelopulo 2013: 62; Qonde 2013: 29). In response to the competitive landscape, Akooje & McGrath (2008: 132) suggest building institutions that are ready to satisfy the needs of stakeholders. Satisfying needs in this sector is of particular concern because the higher education landscape is characterised by the variety of options available to students, which poses a challenge for student mobility. Building brand loyalty in this regard can help universities and colleges retain students. Kaushal & Ali (2020: 256) view the level to which students wish to remain associated with an institution as indicative of their loyalty to that institution.

While brand loyalty is a popular topic in educational research (Abbas 2019: 46; Rasoolimanesh et al. 2021: 1; Sung & Yang 2008: 357), only some studies have examined this phenomenon in TVET colleges, making this an under-researched area. Understanding the importance of brand loyalty in TVET colleges can assist these colleges in designing retention strategies that will ensure their students continue to support them after graduation, through donations or sponsorships or other means, such as offering their expertise in the form of guest lecturing, skills or time. At TVET colleges, brand loyalty may contribute to better student recruitment and retention and improved stakeholder perception. For example, if they perceive the college as a high-quality institution, it can improve its reputation and build trust with employers, industry partners and government agencies.

OBJECTIVES

This study seeks to explore factors that influence student loyalty to TVET colleges. Despite the recent literature in higher education that identifies brand loyalty as a key to competitive advantage and highlights several factors contributing to this loyalty, there still needs to be conclusive evidence of the factors that influence brand loyalty among TVET college students. In response to the limited literature on TVET student loyalty, this study tests a conceptual model to identify factors that influence their loyalty to TVET colleges.

RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Figure 1 shows the research model. This model is based on an analysis of past studies on brand loyalty (Senel 2011: 146; Zehir et al. 2011: 1222). In previous research, service quality, brand satisfaction and brand communication have been predicted to be the components of brand loyalty. A similar prediction is made in this study.

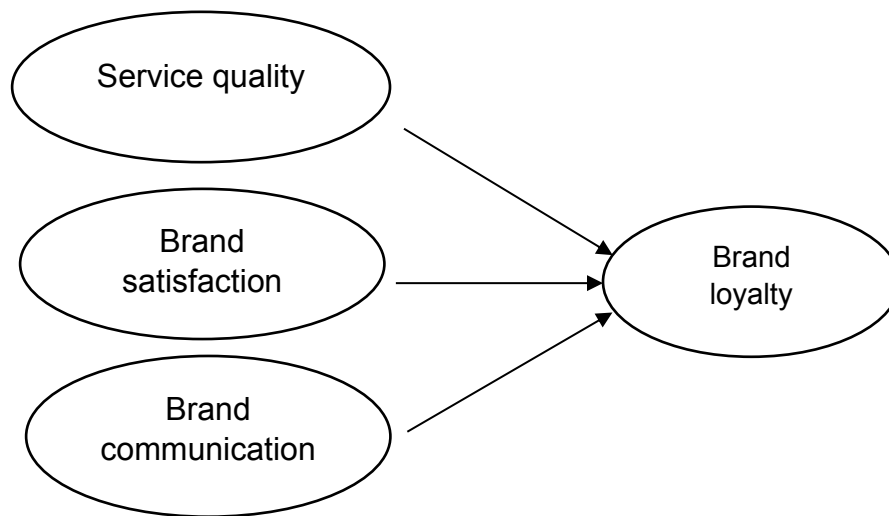


FIGURE 1: RESEARCH MODEL

Presented below is an explanation of concepts of the variables of the study and support for the hypotheses of the proposed model.

Brand communication

Brand communication is considered the most important component in managing a brand's reputation with consumers, channel members, communities, employees, regulators and the media. Brand communication can be understood as the interaction between a brand and its customers (Edmonds 2013: 105) through various communication channels. In terms of TVET colleges, brand communication may help these institutions build brand loyalty (Heaton 2014: 64) as they compete with other institutions of higher learning for students. Schivinski & Dabrowski (2015: 7) suggest that brand communication positively influences brand loyalty. In line with this, it appears that institutions that communicate their brands have more loyal students. Othman et al. (2020: 377) recommended that organisations wishing to strengthen their brands in their stakeholders' minds should use brand communication to create a more profound attachment for stakeholders towards their brands, which will strengthen the brand and enhance brand loyalty. Drawing from these arguments, the current study hypothesises the following:

- H1: Brand communication has a significant positive influence on brand loyalty towards TVET colleges.**

Service quality

Service quality describes how well a service offered meets a customer's expectations (Auka, Bosire & Matern 2013:35). It gives customers a compelling reason to choose one brand over another (Kayaman & Arasli 2007: 93). There is the opinion that TVET colleges should meet stakeholder expectations by providing quality services (Tikly 2013: 6). This underscores the importance for these colleges to link service quality with the needs of potential stakeholders (Alves & Raposo 2010: 78). In other words, the quality of services provided by TVET colleges has the potential to impact customer retention, success and satisfaction, where poor quality service could potentially result in a bad reputation that could have a negative impact on retention and recruitment (Onditi & Wechuli 2017). Hossein (2012)

adds that more and more organisations realise the importance of improving their customer service to increase brand loyalty and improve competencies and organisational performance. Ultimately, in the context of a TVET college, the extent to which students are satisfied with the quality of services that they receive may influence their loyalty to the colleges they are enrolled in (Mesta 2019: 567). As a result, it is expected that:

H₂: *The quality of service has a significant positive influence on brand loyalty towards TVET colleges.*

Brand satisfaction

The concept of brand satisfaction remains a key component in organisations, including higher education institutions. Minarti & Segoro (2014: 1016) explain that brand satisfaction is the overall attitude indicated in customer evaluations after purchasing a product or service from a particular manufacturer. Likewise, Lamb et al. (2015: 26) report that consumers are satisfied with a brand when it identifies what its customers need and meets those needs efficiently and effectively.

In this regard, in the higher education context, outcomes and experiences associated with higher education may be used to assess brand satisfaction (Elliott & Shin 2002: 198). Considering that students may choose to attend a particular institution based on their perception of what the institution offers them, Wilkins & Balakrishnan (2013: 144) report that satisfied students will likely become university alumni after completing their studies. Patel & Feng (2021: 7) posit that organisations, including TVET colleges, should pay close attention to their customers to anticipate their needs and provide suggestions for meeting those needs. In general, satisfaction is an important intervention for addressing unsatisfied needs, which may lead to customer complaints. This is because once an organisation has resolved a complaint, they are able to measure customer satisfaction (Yilmaz & Ari 2017: 67), as this can give them valuable insight into what is working and what is not so that they can make better decisions. Patel & Feng (2021: 7) opine that organisations that put the customer at the centre of their focus and strive to please them, meet their needs and value their opinions, will probably have loyal customers. As customers will remain in an organisation that meets their needs, TVET colleges should consider ways of satisfying students' needs to build loyalty and retain students (Akooje & McGrath 2008: 145). Based on these theoretical foundations, it was hypothesised:

H₃: **Brand satisfaction has a significant positive influence on brand loyalty towards TVET colleges.**

RESEARCH STRATEGY

Sampling

Statistical analysis was used to increase accuracy and reduce the subjectivity found in the qualitative approach (Du Plessis & Rousseau 2007: 21). For this study, the target population consisted of full-time Generation Y students between the ages of 18 and 26 attending TVET colleges in South Africa. From a sample of 50 publicly registered TVETs across Gauteng, a non-probability judgement selection of five TVETs was made. Owing to Gauteng comprising the largest share of the South African population, it was deemed an appropriate geographical focus area for this study. A total of 500 full-time Generation Y students were included in the study, with 100 full-time Generation Y students sampled at each TVET college.

For this study, five TVET colleges were contacted requesting permission to conduct the research. Once permission was gained, lecturers from the five TVET colleges were contacted, requesting them to ask their students to complete the questionnaire. It was made clear to the lecturers that the students had to complete the questionnaire voluntarily and could not be forced. Once permission was granted, each of the five TVET colleges distributed hand-delivered, self-administered questionnaires during class time. The lecturers handed the questionnaires out. The questionnaire included a cover letter and a consent form, which explained the study's purpose. As the researchers did not have access to a list of participants (18–26 years old) who were intended for the study, they used the convenience method. A data analysis was carried out on 462 of the 500 questionnaires that were distributed.

Research instrument

The scales used to measure the constructs in this investigation were adapted from earlier research. Each measurement item was evaluated on a Likert scale of 1 to 6 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 6 being strongly agree). While developing the study's research instrument, scales from Zehir et al. (2011) and Senel (2011) were adapted. These scales were included to examine students' perceptions of TVET colleges' brand communication (six items), service quality provided by TVET colleges (eight items), brand satisfaction associated with TVET colleges (six items) and brand loyalty towards TVET colleges (five items).

The research instrument included demographic questions, such as the name of the institution, the year of study, qualification, gender, ethnicity, age, province and native language. The questionnaire included a cover letter explaining the purpose and nature of the study, while simultaneously thanking respondents for their valuable contributions.

Results

The collected data were analysed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 28 and SmartPLS 4. From the 500 questionnaires distributed, 462 completed questionnaires were returned. The sample indicated a higher number of females (59,5%) compared to males (39,8%). The majority of respondents were of African descent (88,3%), followed by Coloured (9,1%), Indian (1,9%) and White (0,4%). With regard to native language, the majority of respondents indicated isiZulu (25,1%), followed by isiXhosa (16,2%) and Xitsonga (12,1%). Based on the findings, the sample included respondents from all nine South African provinces, with the majority being from Gauteng (40,7%) and the least amount from the Northern Cape (1,5%). Table 1 describes the sample.

TABLE 1: SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

Gender	%	Ethnicity	%	Language	%	Home province	%
Male	39,8	African	88,3	Afrikaans	3,7	Eastern Cape	4,8
Female	59,5	Coloured	9,1	English	2,4	Free State	6,5
		Indian	1,9	IsiNdebele	4,3	Gauteng	40,7
		White	0,4	IsiXhosa	16,2	KwaZulu-Natal	9,5
		IsiZulu	25,1	Limpopo	23,6		
		Sipedi	6,3	Mpumalanga	6,3		
		Setswana	8,4	Northern Cape	1,5		
		siSwati	9,1	North-West	4,1		
		Tshivenda	4,3	Western Cape	1,9		
		Xitsonga	8,0				
		Other	11,9				

The proposed hypotheses were tested using partial least squares (PLS) path analysis with Smart PLS. This study used a PLS-SEM two-stage approach proposed by Hair et al. (2012), which begins with the evaluation of the measurement model's validity and is followed by the evaluation of a structural model.

Measurement model assessment

As part of the evaluation process, this study employed two stages of SEM analysis. During the first stage a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed and the second stage entailed an analysis of the structural model (Hair et al. 2014). This study tested both reliability and validity. A measure of internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha, was used to evaluate measurement items' reliability. Another technique to measure reliability was composite reliability (CR). The following table presents data on reliability and validity testing.

TABLE 2: RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF A MEASUREMENT MODEL

Latent variable	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Brand communication	0.755			
	0.783			
	0.832			
	0.769			
	0.367	0.800	0.801	0.626
Service quality	0.803			
	0.832			
	0.824			
	0.760			
	0.786			
	0.775			
	0.742			
	0.614	0.901	0.905	0.629
Brand satisfaction	0.702			
	0.457			
	0.844			
	0.860			
	0.830			
	0.559	0.842	0.851	0.682
Brand loyalty	0.794			
	0.831			
	0.845			
	0.843			
	0.726	0.867	0.872	0.654

Based on the data presented in Table 2, the reliability of the instrument was found to be satisfactory. Brand communication had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.824, followed by service quality with a value of 0.850, brand satisfaction had a value of 0.873 and brand loyalty had a value of 0.881, indicating reliability. According to Malhotra (2010: 319), to achieve satisfactory reliability, the Cronbach's alpha should range between 0.6 and 1. A higher alpha value closer to 1 indicates higher reliability. In addition to calculating Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability was calculated. Hair et al. (2019: 8) recommend that items loading 0.7 or greater are accepted. As some of the items in the table above have low factor loadings and were discarded from further analysis. Brand communication items with loadings of 0.367 and 0.614, as well as brand satisfaction items with loadings of 0.457 and 0.559, were discarded from further analysis. Following this stage, the remaining items were kept since they exceeded 0.70, which indicates satisfactory reliability.

Based on the recommendations of Ringle et al. (2020: 1626), validity tests were performed using convergent and discriminant approaches. A measurement's convergent validity is determined by analysing the average variance extracted (AVE). Convergent validity is assumed when all constructs have AVEs above the required threshold of 0.5 (Malhotra et al. 2010: 641). The AVE for brand communication was 0.626, whereas service quality returned an AVE value of 0.629. The AVE values for brand satisfaction and brand loyalty were 0.682 and 0.654, respectively. As per recommendations in the literature, all variables of the study displayed convergent validity.

Hensler, Ringle & Sarstedt (2015: 120) recommend the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) and the Fornell-Larcker (1981) criteria for testing discriminant validity. In order to prove discriminant validity, Fornell-Larcker suggests the square root of the AVE must exceed the correlations of latent variables. Hensler et al. (2015) argued that the Fornell-Larcker method did not perform as expected and proposed the heterotrait-monotrait ratio as an alternative. Hensler et al. (2015: 120) advised that the HTMT values should not be higher than 0.85 or 0.90. Table 3 displays the results of the discriminant validity assessment.

TABLE 3: CORRELATIONS AND AVERAGE VARIANCE EXTRACTED

	Brand communication	Brand loyalty	Brand satisfaction	Service quality
Brand communication	0.791			
Brand loyalty	0.416	0.809		
Brand satisfaction	0.462	0.701	0.826	
Service quality	0.516	0.658	0.698	0.793

Table 3 presents data which shows that the discriminant validity was met. As the square root of AVE is larger than their respective correlation values, the discriminant validity of the model was proven (Hair et al. 2019: 2). According to Table 3, the bivariate correlations are lower than the HTMT of 0.85, indicating discriminant validity. After evaluating the measurement model successfully and obtaining satisfactory results, the analysis proceeded to evaluate the model structure.

The testing of hypotheses

During assessments of hypotheses representing relationships between the constructs of the structural model, a bootstrapping approach using 5000 resamples was used for significance testing (Hair et al. 2019: 9). Hypothesis testing was carried out using the conventional 0.05 p-value as the significance level. As part of the hypothesis testing stage, the path coefficients were assessed for significance and the outcome is delineated on in Table 4. In addition, the table displays the relationship between hypotheses, factor loadings, p-value and acceptance or rejection of the specific hypothesis.

TABLE 4: HYPOTHESES ANALYSIS RESULTS

Proposed hypothesis relationship	β	Factor loadings	P-value	Decision
Brand communication -> Brand loyalty	0.040	0.947	0.344	Not supported
Brand satisfaction -> Brand loyalty	0.464	8.860	0.000	Supported
Service quality -> Brand loyalty	0.314	5.417	0.000	Supported

After analysing the data provided in Table 4, it was concluded that brand communication has no association with brand loyalty. Contrary to the hypothesis (H1) that brand communication would have an impact on brand loyalty in TVET colleges, the results ($\beta = 0.040$, $p = 0.344$, $p > 0.05$) of the study did not support this hypothesis. Regarding the impact of brand satisfaction on brand loyalty, the results ($\beta = 0.464$, $p = 0.000$, $p < 0.01$) reveal an association between brand loyalty and satisfaction. The data presented in Table 4 clearly reveals a significant association between service quality and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.314$, $p = 0.000$, $p < 0.001$). Based on these results, brand satisfaction and service quality are predictors of brand loyalty, providing empirical support for Hypotheses 2 and 3.

DISCUSSION

According to the findings of this study, even when a brand has strong communication efforts, it may not necessarily result in customer loyalty. This result contradicts the findings of previous research (Schivinski & Dabrowski 2015: 7; Othman et al. 2020: 377). The type of brand communication evaluated in this study, such as advertising or promotional activities, may not be the primary factor influencing brand loyalty among students. Considering this finding, brand communication and brand loyalty may be more complex than previously thought. The study found that the commonly identified variables that determine brand loyalty, such as brand communication, do not fully explain the phenomenon of brand loyalty. The study suggests that there may be additional variables, such as social influence, that need to be considered when examining brand loyalty and that these variables may be unique to a specific target market. An individual's social circles tend to influence their brand or product information seeking (Teo, Leng & Phua 2018: 322). This suggests that individuals tend to seek information about a brand or product based on the recommendations or opinions of their social circles.

In agreement with previous studies, this study found that the service quality of TVET colleges promotes brand loyalty. The positive association of service quality and brand loyalty suggests the interactions, as well as experiences students had with a TVET college, fulfilled their expectations. This finding was in line with Hossein (2012: 23), who proposed that many organisations have realised the significance of service quality in increasing brand loyalty while simultaneously developing their competence and organisational performance. Kazemi, Hosseini & Moradi (2013: 424) also associate brand service quality with brand loyalty.

As previously reported (Marist, Yuliati & Najib 2014: 58), brand satisfaction has a significant influence on brand loyalty. Several respondents in their study reported increased levels of satisfaction when TVET colleges met their expectations and made them happy. Rahman (2012: 57) found that customer satisfaction can assist a brand in building long and profitable relationships with customers. These findings corroborate Russell-Bennett, Mccoll-Kennedy & Coote (2007: 1257) who claimed that if a consumer is dissatisfied with a brand, they are unlikely to remain loyal to that brand.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings contribute to brand marketing practitioners, TVET colleges and academics. The results of this study will help those who are designing marketing strategies for TVET colleges. For TVET colleges, the authors recommend including students to increase brand communication. In order to improve brand communication, it is recommended that TVET colleges utilise a variety of communication channels, such as virtual learning environments, email, text messages, websites and social media. In order to do this, they can employ social media campaigns.

Additionally, these campaigns can support traditional forms of communication and serve as a platform within which such communication mainly occurs. It is imperative that TVET colleges continuously evaluate their communication strategies and identify the relevant challenges to forge new paths for the future. These recommendations are based on this study's conclusion that there is no association between brand communication and brand loyalty.

In this study, students believe loyalty to a brand relates to satisfaction with the brand. This implies that TVET colleges must work towards strengthening their academic services. TVET colleges must also give their students the education and academic services they need to meet their own needs and deal with any problems they may face. The results show that service quality significantly affects how loyal TVET college students are to a brand. Therefore, not only should TVET colleges strive to enhance their brands, but they should also pay attention to service quality. Therefore, TVET colleges should strengthen their academic services, as these employees directly contact students and other stakeholders. TVET colleges need to provide education and academic services that provide students with the tools to meet their needs and solutions to problems students may have. Earlier research has established that providing high-quality service can increase customer satisfaction and strengthen customer loyalty (Roostika 2011: 287; Quoquab, Basiruddin & Rasid 2013:178; Ullah, Raza & Chander 2016:84).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

When interpreting these results, it is advisable to consider certain limitations. This study examined only three determinants of loyalty, namely brand communication, service quality and brand satisfaction in TVET colleges. Other factors that affect brand loyalty, such as brand functional benefits, brand trust, reputation and brand symbolism, to name a few, have yet to be investigated. Accordingly, if these conclusions are extended to the entire higher education sector in South Africa, other factors that influence brand loyalty should be examined.

Although the findings of the present study could be beneficial to the administration of TVET colleges, the study only includes a small number of TVET institutions in South Africa. Therefore, this limitation provides an opportunity to select respondents from other TVET colleges in South Africa for future research, as only respondents from Gauteng were included in the study. Lastly, students from TVET colleges participated in this study. Therefore, a similar model to that used in this study, which will incorporate moderating or mediating effects, could be explored by bringing traditional university students and parents into the study.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to add to the research on brand loyalty by testing the factors that affect brand loyalty in TVET colleges and to address the paucity of literature on brand loyalty in TVET colleges. As far as the authors are concerned, studies on brand loyalty have yet to examine the relationship between brand communication, service quality and brand satisfaction in TVET colleges. The study proposed a model of the factors influencing brand loyalty in TVET colleges. Students at TVET colleges are of the opinion that service quality and brand satisfaction are the only significant factors that influence brand loyalty. The results suggest that TVET colleges can build brand loyalty by providing better service that fosters brand satisfaction. This study could serve as a foundation for future research exploring predictors of brand loyalty in the TVET sector. As this study focussed on a limited number of factors that affect brand loyalty, future research may consider other relevant factors and explore them longitudinally.

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