

## **Mediating Effect of Relationship Appeal on Student Loyalty in Higher Education**

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**Abstract:** *The study presents the general overview of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Nigeria and its potential contribution to the Nigerian economic growth, as well as to address issues which lead to students' disloyalty, to be tackled in order to have a competitive advantage. Hence, in using relationships marketing to attract, retain and maintain the close relationship with the students. Little is understood about the role of relationship appeal and how this influences the development and maintenance of relationships appeal in the service sector. The main objective of the study was to examine how does relationship appeal mediate the relationship between affective commitment and student loyalty in Nigerian HEIs. On the other hand, a total of 100 students from federal university in Nigeria participated in the survey. The questionnaire was used as the main instrument of data collection for this study, multiple regression was used for data analysis; all correlation coefficients are significant at 0.000 levels. The regression results show that all components of affective commitment and relationship appeal significantly affect student's loyalty, and that the proposed model explains student loyalty is sound. The study limitations were discussed, and suggestions for future studies were offered.*

**Keyword:** *Relationship appeal, affective commitment, student loyalty and Higher education institutions.*

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### **I. Introduction**

This study particular focus has been made on the importance of relationship marketing in the higher education sector as an important contributor to every national economy, as a substantial amount of public spending is invested in this sector which generates a large number of employment to both developed and developing countries in the world. The study also presents the general overview of higher education institution in Nigeria and its potential contribution to the Nigerian economic growth as well as to address issues which need to be tackled in order to have a competitive advantage in using relationships marketing to attract, retain and maintain the close relationship with the students as a customer. These will enable the higher institution to sustain them in meeting the current global challenges more especially in their relationship to enhance and boost students' loyalty.

Although student performance may not be studied as a fundamental product of consumption, student behavior can certainly be studied from the perspective of consumer behavior. A student is also a consumer despite the peculiarity of this designation due to the nature of education. He/she consumes educational services just like any other and, thus, can be studied as a consumer of educational services. Although there is a strong base of literature associated with relationship marketing in the service sector, little is understood about the role of specific relational mediators such as relationship appeal and how this influences the development and maintenance of relationships in the service sector (Soomro & Ahmad, 2012; Lee & Park, 2001). In addition, research has not yet explored the way in which relationship appeal influences other key relationship marketing constructs such as affective commitment and trust. Broadly, relationship appeal relates to the level of interest a customer has in engaging in a relationship with an organization, brand or product (Cardoso, Sheth, Miller, Arnold, & Kochut, 2004). In the higher education sector, high levels of relationship appeal therefore imply that the student is keen to pursue a relationship with the tertiary provider of interest.

The main objective of the study is to examine how does relationship appeal mediate the relationship between affective commitment and student loyalty in Nigerian higher education institutions. The study which to answer the following question, does relationship appeal mediate the relationship between affective Commitment and customer student in Nigerian higher education institutions?

### **II. Literature Review**

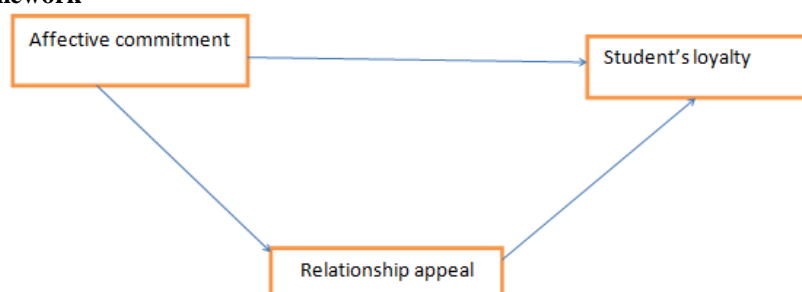
Commitment is defined as a customer's enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship (Arnett, German, & Hunt, 2003; Samaha, Beck, & Palmatier, 2014). It is an implicit or explicit pledge of relational continuity and it reflects the degree to which a service provider is entrenched as the most acceptable choice

within the service category. Such psychological attachments are important precursors to loyalty as they are indicative of an assessment of the perceived value of a loyal relationship (Evanschitzky et al., 2011; Johnson, Fogarty, Fullerton, Bluestone, & Drake, 2013). Relationship commitment is central to relationship marketing, it focuses management efforts on the development of long-term customer-provider relationships and discourages investment in short-term transactional sales (Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012; Berry, Parasuraman, & Zeithaml, 1990) contend that in services marketing, successful relationships.

Affective commitment is defined as an emotional attachment that a customer develops toward a service provider that expresses their psychological closeness to that provider (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). It indicates a desire to remain with an exchange partner because of a sense of identification, belongingness, liking, involvement, and trust (Berry et al., 1990; Mcnaughtoni, 2001). The development of socially based bonds to a service provider is considered an important stage in the development of effective marketing relationships (Johnson et al., 2013; Mattila, 2013) suggest that the role of interpersonal bonds such as familiarity, care, friendship, and trust play a key role in the development of affective commitment. Also its defined as a personal connection between the two interact ants has also been found to have a strong influence on service evaluations (Johnson et al., 2013). Affective commitment signifies that the exchange relationship has developed within the context of free will and choice (Evanschitzky et al., 2011).

Affective commitment has been linked to a desire to continue the service provider relationship, a willingness to invest in the relationship, and a greater propensity to engage in positive word-of-mouth recommendation (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Ruyter, Wetzels, & Bloemer, 1998). A positive relationship has also been identified between affective commitment and behavioral loyalty (Evanschitzky et al., 2011), customer referrals, services purchased (Verhoef, Franses, & Hoekstra, 2002), retention, share of business, advocacy, and decreased switching intentions (Johnson et al., 2013). The impact of affective commitment on both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty has also been found to be greater than the effect of calculative commitment on loyalty (Evanschitzky et al., 2011).

### Conceptual Framework



### A Structural Model and Direction of the Research Hypothesis

*Relationship appeal mediates the relationship between affective commitment and students' loyalty in Nigerian higher education institution.*

In the higher-education sector, many retention studies have focused on the role of academic ability as a predictor of retention. However, more recent studies have suggested that academic ability and performance account for only half of the variance in student retention. Other factors such as preexisting attitudes toward the institution, social inclusion and engagement on campus, as well as commitment to and belief in the institutional brand are important for student retention (Rojas-Méndez, Vasquez-Parraga, Kara, & Cerda-Urrutia, 2009). They found that treating students as partners to the institution and adopting a customer orientation toward students were essential in instilling a sense of mutual relationship-based commitment. Indeed, commitment to the institution has been identified as influencing secondary loyalty behaviors such as alumni membership as well as donation behaviors (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007). Relationship Appeal whilst the core service provided by higher education institutions is the education itself, and it was suggested that the more intangible, social aspects of the exchange relationships are also essential to the creation of a positive educational experience. The nature of the exchange relationship in particular, is an important value-creating element of the first year experience for students. This is because first year students face a range of challenges in adjusting to the tertiary environment including; an inability to cope with the transitional phase between college and tertiary education, inability to integrate into the new environment, a lack of formal and informal support from teaching and administrative staff, and financial pressures that are associated with balancing study loads with employment. The first year of the tertiary experience is arguably therefore the most important period for student retention since it sets the tenor for the remainder of the tertiary experience (Devasagayam, Stark, & Valestin, 2013). It is important that

institutions develop and implement a series of systematic relationship marketing strategies to support a positive first year experience and improve retention into subsequent enrolment periods (Tinto, 1987).

Based on prior research, the establishment of trust and commitment in the student-institution relationship have been identified as important elements in the provision of the educational experience for the first year of tertiary study and beyond (Bowden, 2011). These more intangible aspects of the relationship exchange are created and maintained through the interactions that the students have with their institution at both an academic, administrative and social level. The highly interpersonal relationship that is formed between the student and the institution may therefore significantly impact upon not only the students' willingness to recommend the institution to others, but also their intentions to continue their study at the institution.

Several studies have however suggested that there is a need to understand the way in which relationships are initiated within the sector (Ndubisi, 2006). Whilst prior studies have considered the broader role of relationship marketing variables in the establishment of relationships with students, these studies have not explored the antecedent factors that act to facilitate a student's trust and commitment towards an institution (e.g., Barnes, 2007; Bowden, 2011; Oly Ndubisi, 2004; Smith, 1998). Subsequently, a research question remains with regard to whether students in fact desire to have a relationship with their institution or not. If students do display a desire to form a close and continuing relationship with their institution, then relationship marketing strategies which target the development of satisfaction, commitment and trust are likely to be more effective.

This is because students seek to consciously and actively become involved with the institution and are subsequently receptive to relational appeals generated by the institution (Vivek et al., 2012) proposed a model of relationship enhancement within the relationship marketing paradigm. They suggested that two primary factors enabled a productive exchange relationship to exist. Firstly, firms needed to adopt a customer orientation that was focused on satisfying customer's needs and expectations of service provision. This is not a surprising finding, since satisfaction is considered to be a necessary condition for loyalty to occur (Moore & Bowden-Everson, 2012; Vivek et al., 2012). However, it was found that, it is necessary for customers to enter a relationship with the service provider. That is, they needed to display a desire to engage in the relationship. Relationships were then enhanced and strengthened through customer-firm interactions based on a sense of trust, friendship, emotional bonding and functionality. These findings imply that a customer's desire to form a relationship with the service provider has an important role in relational development and subsequently loyalty. The quality of the relational exchange may therefore be central to the development of student retention (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007).

Given the role of the student as a co-producer of value, and the increasing need for higher education organizations to adopt a customer orientation to promote student retention, there is a need to understand the nature of relationship appeal, and its initiating role in the development of student loyalty. It is expected that relationship appeal will act as an antecedent to the development of satisfaction, trust and affective commitment in the research model. This study therefore contributes to a deeper understanding of relationship formation and maintenance in the higher education sector.

Affective commitment is defined as a customer's enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship (Vivek et al., 2012; Samaha et al., 2014). It is an implicit or explicit pledge of relational continuity (Sánchez-Fernández, Iniesta-Bonillo, Schlesinger-Díaz, & Rivera-Torres, 2010; Sánchez-fernández, 2010), and it reflects the degree to which a service provider is entrenched as the most acceptable choice within the service category (Roos, Robitzsch, Xu, Wieland, & Schwarzbacher, 2008). Such psychological attachments are important precursors to loyalty as they are indicative of an assessment of the perceived value of a loyal relationship (Blery, Mitsi, Perdiki, Rouva, & Finitzi, 2009). Relationship commitment is central to relationship marketing. It focuses management efforts on the development of long-term customer-provider relationships and discourages investment in short-term transactional sales (Vivek et al., 2012; Berry et al., 1990) contend that in services marketing, successful relationships.

### **III. Methodology**

#### **Data Collection**

Cross-sectional study involves gathering the data for a particular study only once or at one point in time to meet the research objectives. Cross-sectional survey method was chosen for this study to avoid the long-time consumption that characterizes longitudinal research (Sekaran, 2006). With the help of the class chairman questionnaires are to be distributed to the selected sample institution.

The unit of analysis according to the nature of this study which examines the hypothesized the relationship marketing in higher education institutions, the unit of Analysis of the present study is University in Nigeria which is represented by the postgraduate students who studies in such university.

Population of the study, population refers to the entire elements which might be a group of people, events or things of interest that the researcher which to investigate (Sekaran, 2006). Accordingly, the population of this study comprises students of federal university in Nigeria.

Questionnaire was used as the main data collection technique for this study. Questionnaire technique, which involves asking individuals specific behaviors, is commonly used in social science research (Sekaran, 2006). The participating University is AbubakarTafawaBalewa University, Bauchi located in the North East of Nigeria. A total number of 100 Questionnaires were distributed and while only 72 were fully filled and returned which represent 72%. The study used multiples regression for data analysis with SPSS 22 version.

The samples consist of 65 male which represent 65%, and 25 females which represent 25% respectively. The sample size consists of 38% married, and 62% are single. The age of the respondents ranges between 15-25 years old are 74, which represent 74% and while range between the age of 26 - 35 years old are 26 of the respondents which represent 26%.

#### IV. Measures

The Measure of Student's loyalty items as dependent variables were modified and measured with the assessment of using the seven-point likert scale. For instance, the main statement that focused on Student's loyalty items included;(Hishamuddin Fitri Abu Hasan, Azleen Ilias, Rahida Abd Rahman, 2008), was measured using the scales of (Plank & Newell, 2007; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1993).

The Measure of Relationship appeal as a mediating variable and student loyalty model were modified and measured with the assessment of using the seven-point likert scale. For instance, the main statement that focused on Relationship appeal items included(Lee & Park, 2001).

The Measure of affective commitment as the independent variable were modified and measured with the assessment of using the seven-point likert scale. For instance, the main statement that are focused on affective commitment was obtained from the affective commitment literature of (Verhoef et al., 2002).

#### V. Analysis And Results

The reliabilities and the Cronbach's for the seven affective commitment model scales were adequate for the sample affective commitment scale (choice =0.95;customer =0.96;committed =0.97;confidential =0.94;belonging =0.95;remain =0.96;Extra curriculum =0.95);Relationship appeal scale for five items (ranking =0.95;forming =0.96;Nonacademic =0.97;university management =0.88;colleague =0.96);students loyalty was for seven scale items (maintain =0.95;loyal =0.97;fate =0.95;positive things =0.94;recommend =0.96;encouragement =0.97;first choice 0.95).The reliability statistics by checking the Cronbach's Alpha of the measures, which should be equal to or higher than 0.6, then the measures are considered to be good and reliable to go ahead with the analysis. From the above result the Cronbach Alpha's of all the items are above 0.6 which is satisfactory.

Table 1  
*Influence effects between variables and Pearson Correlation*

Correlations		Student Loyalty	Affective Commitment	Relationship Appeal
Pearson Correlation	Student Loyalty	1.000	.841	.721
	Affective Commitment	.841***	1.000	.798
	Relationship Appeal	.721***	.798	1.000
Sig. (1-tailed)	Student Loyalty	.	.000	.000
	Affective Commitment	.000	.	.000
	Relationship Appeal	.000	.000	.

\*\*\*Significant at 0.01 (1-tailed), \*\*significant at 0.05 (1-tailed), \*significant at 0.1 (1-tailed).

The results were first examined using a Pearson correlation in table 1 above and multiple regressions as in table 2 below. The Pearson correlation shows that all correlation coefficients are significant at 0.000 levels. The regression results show that all components of affective commitment and relationship appeal significantly affect student's loyalty, and that the proposed model explains student loyalty is sound, All predictors of loyalty generate an R-squared of .56

Table 2  
*Result of regression analysis*

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>					
Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	37.213	2	18.607	86.508***	.000 <sup>b</sup>

\*\*\*Significant at 0.01 (1-tailed), \*\*significant at 0.05 (1-tailed), \*significant at 0.1 (1-tailed).

Table 2 above shows that the outcome of running the ANOVA. The F. Statistic is 86.508 and the p.value is .000, which is less than the critical value of 0.05.hence, the regression model is

significant. This means that there is a strong relationship between affective commitment as an independent variable and relationship appeal as a mediator and student loyalty as the dependent variable.

### **Conclusions And Suggestion For Further Studies**

In conclusion therefore, the study provided empirical findings to understand the relationship appeal as a mediator on the relationship between affective commitment and student's loyalty in higher education institutions in Nigeria. Also, using a literature review from education and relationship marketing, the study realized the significance of commitment toward student's loyalty in higher education institutions. Hence, the value of quality higher education is based on long term relationship student's the interest of the society and institutional goal and commitment. Thus, there is the symbiotic relationship between the students, higher education and the society as a whole, the students benefit from the education of higher institution and the society benefit from the institution. Finally, the study was limited to few sample of students in federal universities in Nigeria, andwhilefuture studies should focus on larger sample of students and other dimensions of relationship marketing in order to attract and retain students as their customer in higher education institution.

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