Exploring the Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Student Loyalty in Higher Education – A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Student loyalty to higher education institutions plays a significant role in ensuring these institutions' long-term maintenance and development. However, it remains unclear how the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have affected the perceived loyalty of university students. This narrative review investigates how the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' perceived loyalty toward higher education institutions have been addressed in the literature from 2020 to 2023. The review is also enriched by the anecdotal information from informal focus group discussions with undergraduate students of the Faculty of Psychology at Universitas Indonesia. An examination of six relevant papers reveals that the quality of service during the pandemic is linked to student satisfaction, which indirectly predicts student loyalty. Furthermore, insights from anecdotal information suggest that the primary factor contributing to student satisfaction is the perception of a social environment that is pleasant, supportive, and provides room for growth. Student satisfaction, arising from quality services, especially through student engagement, generates a favorable university image and reputation, leading to loyalty to the university. This perception remains consistent despite various pandemic-related changes and uncertainties. In conclusion, this narrative review and anecdotal information shed light on the necessity of continued emphasis on service quality and the creation of supportive social environments in maintaining student loyalty during uncertain times. Given these findings, future research priorities should include analyzing social elements impacting satisfaction, conducting post-COVID-19 longitudinal studies on loyalty, and developing quantitative measurement tools for assessing the influence of perceived image and reputation on loyalty.

Introduction

Universities and students form a bi-directional relationship in developing and sustaining institutions. While institutions are responsible for their students' comprehensive educational experiences, students may contribute to the institution's long-term development in ways that are not restricted to the period they are formally registered. These contributions sustain a higher education institution's financial stability, increase the enrolment rate, and, by extension, induce a better reputation (Taecharungroj, 2014; Todea et al., 2022; Williams & Omar, 2014). One key component that promotes students' contribution is their attachment to the institution, often called "student loyalty."

As parties that consume services provided by institutions, defining students' loyalty often parallels consumers' loyalty to a brand. Thus, one popular iteration of defining loyalty in students toward their institution is "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or support a preferred product/service, in this case, the university's services, consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior" (Oliver, 1999, p.34).

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Student loyalty is paramount for advancing higher education institutions, emphasizing the importance of retaining students until graduation and re-engaging them thereafter. Universities, playing a vital role in the knowledge economy, contribute to developing a more educated workforce, resulting in enhanced employment prospects and higher income levels. To effectively cope with ongoing changes and stay competitive, successful universities prioritize fostering loyalty among all stakeholder groups, emphasizing students (Mutum et al., 2021; Todea et al., 2022).

The present study addresses this issue using a consumer-focused approach. Although the 'student as consumer' approach is still debated in the literature, students can be seen as the main recipients of educational services (Mazar Ali et al., 2021; Snijders et al., 2020). Student loyalty can be influenced by factors such as the quality of service, student satisfaction, and university image, among others (Cahyono et al., 2020; Mutum et al., 2021; Todea et al., 2022). These three factors interact in establishing student loyalty (Perin et al., 2012; Taecharungroj, 2014). Quality service significantly impacts students' satisfaction, which, in turn, increases loyalty. Likewise, satisfaction impacts the university's image, influencing students' loyalty. The following three paragraphs will briefly overview each factor that impacts student loyalty.

Quality service can be defined as a service that is customer-centered and focused on fulfilling customers' needs and expectations (Alfy & Bukari, 2020; Cahyono, 2020). A service is deemed satisfactory when the service received is consistent with the customer's initial expectations. Common forms of services universities provide include the quality of the instructor, administration, physical environment, social environment, and curriculum (Sharif & Lemine, 2021; Taecharungroj, 2014).

Student satisfaction is the accumulated satisfaction with the overall quality of the student-faculty relationship. This entails students' cognitive and affective evaluation of their experiences across all educational service encounters (Singh & Jasial, 2021; Santini et al., 2017; Snijders et al., 2020). Taecharungroj (2014) and Elsharnouby (2015) suggest that higher education institutions' social environment or quality of social life is the best predictor of student satisfaction. Paswan and Ganesh (2009) suggest that students require social interactions for a more holistic educational experience that is not only focused on academics. Campuses with strategic locations, diverse communities, and various extracurricular activities provide social support and promote meaningful engagement (Boone et al., 2021; Coffman & Gilligan, 2002; Paswan & Ganesh, 2009). Therefore, higher education institutions facilitating a quality social life will be rated more favorably.

The satisfaction evoked from quality services, especially through engagement, generates a favorable university image and reputation. Student satisfaction positively influences both student loyalty and the university's reputation. Both university image and reputation are seen as indispensable resources for an organization to survive (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001; Todea et al., 2022). Student and alumni endorsements play a role in maintaining a positive reputation. Through various efforts, universities engage with their students and alumni to give them a sense of belonging through lifelong membership (Curtis et al., 2009). This feeling of belongingness instills a sense of identification with the university, eliciting students' endorsing behavior such as university promotion, competition, and maintaining contact with the institution (Stephenson & Berger, 2014; Stephenson et al., 2015).

Research Question

Building upon the existing literature, this study unravels how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced factors associated with student loyalty in higher education. To steer our investigation, we have formulated a crucial research question that encapsulates our inquiry:

How did the factors linked to student loyalty evolve amid the unprecedented changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, reshaping the landscape of academic learning?

This research is poised to examine the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic on student loyalty toward higher education institutions, utilizing a narrative review methodology that synthesizes insights from previously published studies. It is imperative to emphasize that our narrative review does not exist in isolation; rather, it is reinforced by valuable anecdotal information gleaned from candid and unstructured focus group discussions with students of the Faculty of Psychology at Universitas Indonesia.

The findings of this study are envisioned not merely as an endpoint but as a foundational cornerstone. They will play a pivotal role in delineating baseline data and shaping the trajectory of future research endeavors on student loyalty in higher education institutions, with a particular emphasis on the Indonesian perspective.

Purpose

This narrative review aims to offer an overview of existing studies detailing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on student loyalty within higher education. In addition to synthesizing findings from these studies, the review incorporates anecdotal insights obtained through discussions facilitated by the first author with undergraduate students from the Faculty of Psychology at Universitas Indonesia. The overarching goal is to enhance our understanding of potential factors influencing changes in student loyalty amid the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This review is not meant to be exhaustive; rather, it establishes a focal point that propels discussions forward, paving the way for empirical investigations in the future. This review catalyzes ongoing conversations and lays the groundwork for obtaining substantive empirical evidence in subsequent research endeavors.

Method

The methodology employed in this study followed the guidance of SANRA—the Scale for the Assessment of Narrative (Baethge et al., 2019). The search for relevant peer-reviewed articles was executed across three electronic databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, and the local electronic database, GARUDA – Garba Rujukan Digital. The keywords used for literature searches were 'student loyalty,' 'alumni loyalty,' and 'higher education.' The terms 'COVID-19 pandemic' and 'higher education management' were also integrated into the search criteria. Inclusion criteria for articles encompassed full-text availability online and being written in English. The initial search produced 109 articles, with a significant number being excluded due to a lack of explicit focus on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on student loyalty. Duplicates and articles not accessible in full text were also excluded. After reviewing abstracts, 15 articles were initially included, and ultimately, six articles were considered for this review after thoroughly examining their full texts. These six studies (Dangaiso et al., 2022; Easa & Bazzi, 2021; Felix et al., 2023; Swani et al., 2022; Sabo et al., 2022; Trinh, 2021) were conducted at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, incorporating data from university students in Zimbabwe, Lebanon, Indonesia, USA, Malaysia, and Vietnam respectively. Most studies used online and in-person completed surveys for data collection.

Furthermore, the study benefited from anecdotal insights from discussions with undergraduate students at the Faculty of Psychology, University of Indonesia. These discussions, occurring in 2022 during a feedback session between the university and undergraduate students, involved four separate sessions with different cohorts. Each cohort comprised three to five undergraduate students enrolled between 2018 and 2022. This diverse enrolment timeframe was strategically chosen to enable a comparison of student loyalty to the university before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

The following paragraphs present and organize the findings around factors influencing student loyalty, such as the quality of service, satisfaction, and university image. The ensuing paragraphs also contextualize the pertinent literature on higher education institutions' practices that serve to sustain student loyalty.

Quality of service emerges as a pivotal force shaping student satisfaction and subsequent loyalty (Galindo-Illanes et al., 2021; Todea et al., 2022). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, various factors compromised the quality of service. A study in Malaysia highlighted the deterioration in service quality during the shift from in-person to online learning, citing issues like unreliable internet connections, diminished opportunities for in-person interactions, and a restricted array of activities (Sabo et al., 2022). Similar findings were reported in studies conducted in Zimbabwe (Dangaiso et al., 2022), Lebanon (Easa & Bazzi, 2020), Indonesia (Felix et al., 2022), the USA (Swani et al., 2022), and Vietnam (Nguyen, 2021), all underscoring the connection between good service quality and student satisfaction. E-learning services and technologically competent lecturers were key to good service quality (Dangaiso et al., 2022; Easa & Bazzi, 2020; Felix et al., 2022; Nguyen, 2021).

Interestingly, certain elements played into the perception of student satisfaction. In a study in the USA (Swani et al., 2022), participants with high academic stress did not blame the university for pandemic-related challenges, viewing them as global experiences affecting everyone. This aligns with anecdotal insights from focus group discussions at the Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Indonesia, where participants expressed concerns about facilities but did not significantly correlate these concerns with overall satisfaction. Despite reported issues, satisfaction with the university remained largely unaffected.

Moreover, the relative lack of real-time interaction with peers was linked to student satisfaction (or lack thereof). Easa and Bazzi (2020) found a negative association between limited social opportunities and student satisfaction in Lebanon. Consistent with these findings, insights from anecdotal information revealed that the primary contributor to student satisfaction is their contentment with the social environment, described as pleasant and supportive, fostering growth. This perception persisted before, during, and after the pandemic. Previous research on student-faculty relationships emphasizes the positive outcomes stemming from positive perceptions of these relationships (Snijders et al., 2020). Lecturers' encouragement, support, and respect are crucial in fostering student participation, indirectly predicting satisfaction (Lee, 2012).

Lastly, a study in Malaysia (Sabo et al., 2022) indicated that undergraduate students deserved financial compensation for the altered higher education experience during the pandemic. They argued that online learning should not incur the same charges as offline learning. This sentiment was echoed in anecdotal information from the Faculty of Psychology, University of Indonesia, particularly among students enrolled in 2018 and 2019 who had experienced traditional learning before the pandemic. Students from the 2020 and 2021 cohorts, having experienced only online learning, did not explicitly express lower satisfaction, potentially due to a lack of a comparative baseline before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research on student engagement highlights the pivotal role of academic and social activities in higher education (Martinez et al., 2012). In the Faculty of Psychology context, students actively participate in various extracurricular activities, such as committees, organizations, and competitions, fostering social connections with peers and academic community members, including lecturers. While university-level activities attract participation, they may not generate the same attachment as faculty-level activities. Student engagement in extracurricular activities significantly influences their perceived satisfaction with the faculty.

Student engagement is "the effort, both in time and energy, students commit to educationally purposeful activities as well as the institutional conditions that encourage students to engage in such practices" (Kashif & Basarat, 2014, p.210). Student engagement is also a positive, fulfilling, study-related state comprising vigor, dedication, and absorption (Bakker et al., 2014). It involves the student's intrinsic motivation to engage in educational activities, forming a positive attitude and self-confidence among students (Kashif & Basarat, 2014). This matters more for university students as these positive attitudes and self-confidence can help them form identities. As Kaufman (2014) points out, the university is an important social location

where identity formation occurs. This aligns with one of the primary developmental tasks, identity formation (Erikson, 1998). Despite the initial designation towards adolescence, most identity exploration occurs in emerging adulthood rather than adolescence (Arnett, 2000). Specifically, identity exploration has three areas of focus: love, work, and worldviews. Exploration of identity involves trying out various life possibilities and gradually moving toward making enduring decisions. Higher education institutions play a role in fulfilling students' needs for identity formation. The psychosocial process is not centered solely around the individual but also in the heart of the communal culture (Erikson, 1998). Initial institutional student engagement is very important as students will use those initial learning experiences to learn about social cues and perceived expectations (McDearmon, 2012) to their university to develop a sense of identity and behavior patterns. Insights from anecdotal information align with this concept, as participants expressed meaningful engagement with the university since their orientation period, facilitated by a mentoring program that supported their adaptation as freshman students. This engagement propelled them to participate in various academic and non-academic activities, contributing to exploring and constructing their sense of identity throughout their university journey.

Student engagement lays the foundation for student loyalty to the university, as evidenced by findings from Snijders et al. (2019), highlighting the positive association between student engagement, particularly in dedication and vigor, and student loyalty. The satisfaction derived from quality services, especially through engagement, contributes to a favorable university image and reputation—considered indispensable resources for an organization's survival (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001). The anecdotal information mirrors this perspective, revealing that participants consciously chose to pursue higher education at Universitas Indonesia, already holding positive perceptions of the university's image and reputation. Despite reported dissatisfaction with specific services, participants expressed a strong attachment to the faculty, demonstrating loyalty even during the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, the Faculty of Psychology at the Universitas Indonesia maintained student engagement through various online activities, including mentoring programs, webinars, and other means of group engagement. This sustained engagement further strengthened brand identification with the faculty and the university. However, loyalty levels varied across cohorts, influenced by students' satisfaction in other areas. Notably, participants from 2018 and 2019, experiencing decreased satisfaction during the pandemic, reported lower intentions or higher hesitancy in displaying behaviors indicative of future alumni loyalty.

Student loyalty, a precursor to alumni loyalty, exerts a lasting impact on institutions. Vianden and Barlow (2014) argue that students' initial commitment fosters continuous favorable perceptions and loyalty toward the institution. Loyal alumni contribute material and nonmaterial support, influencing institutional profitability and overall success (Iskhakova et al., 2017). Material support, encompassing alumni giving, repurchase behavior, and alumni association membership, as well as nonmaterial support, involving volunteering and providing valuable feedback, showcase the multifaceted contributions of alumni. Anecdotal information suggests that most Faculty of Psychology students are loyal and eager to volunteer non-material support toward their alma mater. However, further research is needed to understand the factors influencing material alumni support, particularly in times of financial challenges and increased competition in higher education.

This article was written as an exploratory endeavor to conduct research regarding student loyalty during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite variations and changes in the quality of services due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students' satisfaction and loyalty to their higher education institutions were still considerably high. This study's findings have implications regarding how social environment, fostered through student engagement, has a more prominent impact on student loyalty and how it helps university students develop their identity in their emerging adulthood. By engaging students more through more communal activities for their identity development, universities can also gain their students' loyalty.

Limitations of the Study

Considering the insights from the literature review and anecdotal information, empirical studies are needed to understand better how student satisfaction and social environment – as a component of student satisfaction- are linked to student loyalty. This anecdotal information highlights key traits of undergraduate students in the University of Indonesia's Faculty of Psychology. Firstly, their loyalty is influenced by the fact that many students willingly choose this institution, having a positive perception before admission. They readily identify with it as a brand. Secondly, the faculty's culture fosters closeness and openness, creating an environment where students appreciate the services provided due to their empathetic nature. This social aspect significantly impacts their loyalty and willingness to contribute as future alumni. Lastly, while narrative reviews offer a broad perspective on a topic, their limitations in subjectivity, bias, lack of systematicity, and potential incompleteness should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Conclusion and Future Recommendation

Despite its limitations, this paper aims to explore factors underlying student loyalty, especially in the context of the pandemic, through a narrative review and anecdotal information. Maintaining student loyalty is critical to any higher education institution because it supports the management and promotion of the institution, as well as fostering good student-faculty relationships with current, former, and future students – which will produce more students who are loyal to their institutions (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016).

This review has shed light on the critical role of students' loyalty in the sustained growth and development of higher education institutions. The findings underscore the interconnected nature of service quality, student satisfaction, and loyalty. The review of six relevant papers highlights a clear association between the quality of services provided during the pandemic and students' satisfaction levels. This satisfaction, driven by quality services and active engagement, indirectly fosters student loyalty.

These insights emphasize the importance of maintaining high standards in educational services, especially in times of crisis, to ensure students' allegiance to their respective institutions. An intriguing aspect revealed through anecdotal information is the paramount significance of the social environment in shaping student satisfaction. The perception of a pleasant and supportive social setting that facilitates personal and academic growth emerges as a primary factor contributing to student contentment.

This insight emphasizes the need for institutions to actively cultivate positive social spaces actively, even in remote or hybrid learning models, to enhance student satisfaction and loyalty. Moreover, the enduring nature of the relationship between quality services, student satisfaction, and loyalty is highlighted.

Despite the myriad changes and uncertainties brought about by the pandemic, the university's perceived positive image and reputation consistently influenced students' loyalty. This consistency suggests the resilience of certain factors in maintaining a favorable perception of higher education institutions, offering a foundation for institutions to build upon in their strategic planning.

As we navigate the evolving landscape of higher education in a post-pandemic era, the implications of this review point towards the necessity of continued emphasis on service quality and the creation of supportive social environments. Future research in this domain, as outlined in the implications section, should further explore these dynamics, considering factors such as discipline-specific variations, global perspectives, and the impact of hybrid learning models. By addressing these areas, institutions can refine their strategies to foster and sustain the loyalty of students, ensuring a robust foundation for their ongoing success and development.

Specifically, the implication for future research is as follows: 1) future research could delve deeper into understanding the specific elements within the social environment that contribute significantly to student satisfaction. Identifying the key components, such as peer interactions, faculty support, and extracurricular activities during the pandemic, could provide valuable insights for institutions aiming to enhance student loyalty. 2) conducting longitudinal studies beyond 2023 could help track the evolution of student loyalty and satisfaction in response to ongoing and emerging changes post-COVID-19. This approach would enable researchers to observe trends, identify persistent factors influencing loyalty, and assess the adaptability of institutions to new challenges. 3) while the study suggests a connection between quality services, university image, and loyalty, future research could develop and validate specific measurement tools to assess higher education institutions' perceived image and reputation quantitatively. This would enable a more precise analysis of the relationship between these factors and student loyalty.

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