Relationship between Students and Higher Education Institutions (HEI): Emotional Commitment, Loyalty and Love Brand

Abstract

Currently, education in Brazil is a sector with many competitors, who have bet on the potential growth of the sector in the country given its notorious public educational deficit. In this context, differentiation strategies by Higher Education Institutions (HEI) become necessary in the search for attracting and retaining students. The purpose of this research consisted on investigate the Relationship Quality-Based Student Loyalty model proposed by Hennig-Thurau, Langer and Hansen (2001) in the context of the Brazilian HEI sector adding also a new construct to the previous model that is brand love. To collect empirical evidence, a survey was conducted with 306 students. The research showed the strength of three antecedents in the construction of students' emotional commitment to HEI, namely: social and academic integration, perceived quality and trust. These results also found that brand love is an outcome of student's loyalty to the HEI. Thus, the greater the emotional commitment, the greater the student's loyalty and, consequently, his brand love to the HEI.

Keywords: emotional commitment; love brand; higher education institutions.

1 Introduction

The present research purpose consisted on investigate the strength of social and academic integration, perceived quality and trust to emotional commitment to Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and its relationship with loyalty, as well as testing the impact of loyalty to HEI on brand love.

From 2000 to 2017, there was an increase in the number of HEI in Brazil. In 2000, there were 1,180 institutions (176 public and 1,004 private), and in 2017 it reached 2,448 HEI (296 public and 2,152 private) (INEP, National Institute for Educational Research Anísio Teixeira, 2018). When analyzing the number of students enrolled in IES in undergraduate courses, in the period from 2013 to 2017, there was an average annual growth of 3.2% (INEP, 2014-2018).

This scenario is associated in great measure to governmental programs for higher education expansion in the country along with incentives based on scholarship programs and university credit to create greater access to HEI by the middle and low income population. An important governmental program known as University for all (Programa Universidade para Todos -ProUni*)* offers scholarships in private HEIs for low-income students. Aside this project, there is also a Brazilian government funding program for undergraduate students known as FIES (Fundo de Financiamento Estudantil).

Another factor that led to the growth of HEI was the education sector commoditization. These institutions once recognized as “knowledge producers” found themselves self-financed, gaining private competitors, becoming a “knowledge market” (Czarniawzka & Genell, 2002). This often occurs due to the lack of structure, which should be guaranteed by the State, thus opening up an opportunity in the private sector that aims to meet a repressed and needy demand for an education service (Amorim, 2014). However, according to Goergen (2014), a commercial interest turned education into a profitable product.

In Brazil, HEI´s with public shares in the Brazilian stock market such as Kroton, Anima, Estácio and Ser Educacional had a 328% increase in gross revenue between 2011 and 2015, reaching 13.8 billion reais (Toledo, Saldaña & Burgarelli, 2016). This phenomena can be

explained by a severe cost reduction plan combined with dismissal of teachers and increase in students per classroom (Amorim, 2017). It is also worth mentioning a failure in FIES program that allowed until 2014 that any educational companies could hire the governmental funding as much as they wanted without any counterpart (Ragazzi, 2017).

Additionally, the university dropout rate is another relevant factor taken into account by educational managers. In Brazil, dropout in 2015 reached 39% considering private and public HEIs (INEP, 2016). Students evasion from school, in addition to be a social and academic waste is also a salient economic loss. There is revenue loss in the case of private HEIs, and in public HEIs case, they are government resources invested without a observed return (Silva, Motejunas, Hipólito & Lobo, 2007).

Previous studies have explored several predictive factors for dropout as well as for students' loyalty to HEIs, regarding: a) increasing level of offers in the sector (Bergamo & Giuliani, 2009); b) failure to recognize the cost of exchange (Teixeira; Castro & Zoltowski, 2012); c) individual learning characteristics (Biazus, 2014); d) no vocational guidance meeting (Ramos et al., 2016; Biazus, 2014); e) academic failure (Pereira et al., 2006); f) lack of confidence in IES actors (Hennig-Thurau; Langer & Hansen, 2001; Anjos Neto, 2003; Bergamo, 2008; Marques, 2008); g) course load (Stratton; O'toole & Wetzel, 2007; Hennig-Thurau; Langer & Hansen, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2012; Bergamo, 2008); h) non-perception of services quality provided by HEI (Hennig-Thurau; Langer & Hansen, 2001; Stratton; O'toole & Wetzel, 2007; Bergamo, 2008; Marques, 2008), i) satisfaction with HEIs (Alcantra et al ., 2012; Bergamo, 2008); j) lack of academic integration; (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2012; Wetzel; O'toole & Peterson, 1999; Hennig-Thurau; Langer & Hansen, 2001; Bergamo, 2008; Marques, 2008); k) lack of social integration (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993; Teixeira; Castro & Zoltowski, 2012; Wetzel; O'toole; Peterson, 1999; Hennig-Thurau; Langer & Hansen, 2001; Bergamo, 2008; Marques, 2008); l) commitment to work (Hennig-Thurau; Langer & Hansen, 2001; Biazus, 2004); m) commitment to the family (Hennig-Thurau; Langer & Hansen, 2001; Biazus, 2004; Stratton; O'toole; Wetzel, 2007); n) commitment to non-university activities (Hennig-Thurau; Langer & Hansen, 2001; Stratton; O'toole & Wetzel, 2007); o) personal factors (Stratton; O'toole & Wetzel, 2007; Bizus, 2014); p) brand benefits (Anjos Neto, 2003); q) cognitive impairment (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2012; Hennig-Thurau; Langer & Hansen, 2001; Anjos Neto, 2003; Bergamo, 2008; Marques, 2008).

As demonstrated by previous studies, many variables are associated to student's loyalty and as stated by Teixeira, Castro and Zoltowski (2012) the chosen course is not always the central reason for HEI exchange; the environment, the sense of belonging and the integration with an HEI seem to be the most sensitive aspects than the course choice itself. In this scenario, the present research add to the actual literature focusing in the central factors that emerged as strongly significant at the Hennig-Thurau, Langer & Hansen (2001)'s work regarding students loyalty to HEI, being: social and academic integration, quality perception, trust, emotional commitment and loyalty. Additionally, the construct love brand was added as an outcome of student's loyalty to HEI.

The article is structured in five sections including this introduction. The following is the theoretical framework and the hypotheses that support the analysis and discussion of the results. Section three presents the methodological procedures adopted for data collection and analysis. Finally, sessions four and five present, discuss and conclude the empirical evidence in the light of the theoretical framework.

2 Theoretical Background

In this research, the Relationship Quality based Student Loyalty (RQSL) model by Hennig-Thurau, Langer, Hansen (2001) was chosen as the theoretical basis, which had some

previous validations and adaptations to the Brazilian scenario (Bergamo, 2008; Marques, 2008).

The RQSL model is based on the combination of two theories: student dropout proposed in the Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993), which studies student retention during the course, and the Relationship Quality Model (RQM) proposed by Hennig-Thurau and Klee (1997), which focuses on loyalty as the main result.

Student Integration model (SIM) that was revised and expanded in Tinto (2012) is a multidimensional and longitudinal system. It aims to explain the students' persistence and desertion decisions and the relative influencing factors. The model was based on Spady's theory (1970), which parallels Durkheim's theory of suicide, for whom the breaking of an individual's ties with the social system results from the lack of common life with society. Spady (1970) shows that the lack of integration of the student with the academic and / or social system in the university society can lead him to an abandonment process regarding the HEI.

The RQSL model was the theoretical junction of SIM and RQM models giving emphasis to the development of student loyalty. The resulting model is formed by the constructs of satisfaction, perceived quality, trust and commitment as antecedent variables of loyalty (Henning-Thurau; Klee, 1997).

The RQSL model measures student loyalty by the following variables: perceived quality of teaching services, trust in the institution's personnel, cognitive commitment to the institution, student goal commitment, and commitment emotional; the latter being influenced of the following antecedents: academic integration, social integration, commitment to professional activities, commitment to the family, commitment to non-university activities, perceived quality of teaching services and trust in the institution's staff. In this model, the perception of quality, trust and emotional commitment (preceded by social integration and academic integration) appear as the most influencing forces of student loyalty confirmed by the research applied in the Brazilian context (Marques, 2008).

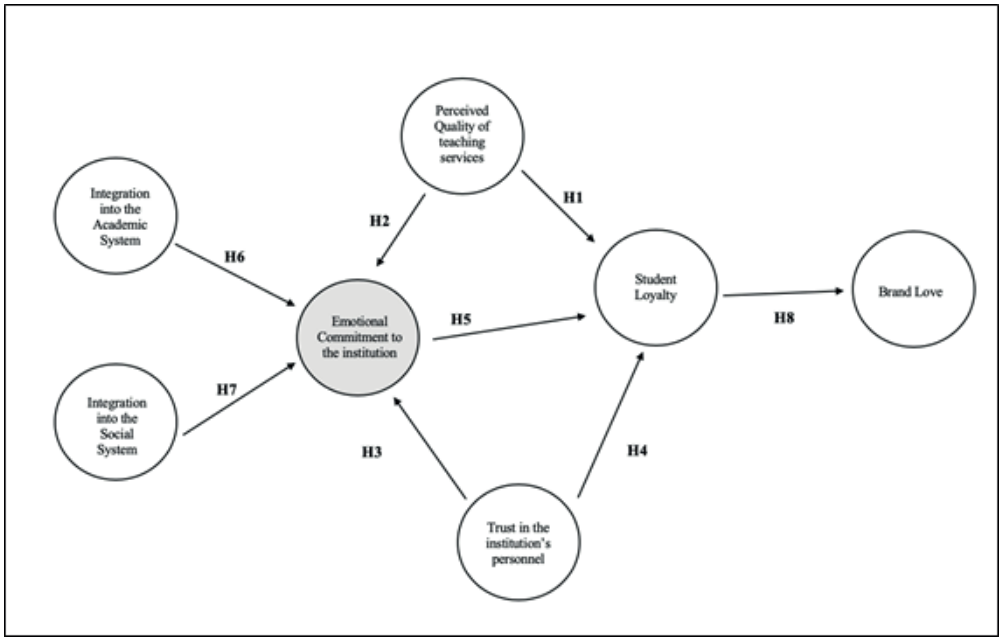
It is important to highlight that the RQSL model seeks to understand not only the dropout of students as in the study by Tinto (1975; 1993), but also, the students' loyalty to HEIs. Loyalty goes beyond the student's non-abandonment to HEIs, extending to the repurchase of extension courses and the dissemination of the HEI brand to society (Bergamo; Giuliani, 2009; Bergamo; Giuliani; Lago, 2012). Thus, the RQSL model aims to outline the main antecedents of a long-term relationship between student and HEI in such way he will become a promoter, defender of HEI's reputation and influencing the quality of IES' services (Bergamo, 2008).

In this research, we opted to use the antecedents of student's loyalty that had presented high predictive scores in previous studies namely: emotional commitment (formed by the social and academic integration), perceived quality and trust.

Additionally, we choose to add the brand love construct as an outcome of student loyalty to the HEI. The reasoning consists on the concept that love involvement is built based on a long lasting relationship based on emotional commitment, trust and quality perception (Fournier, 1998) which in turn leads to attitudinal and behavioral loyalty of the student towards the HEI. In other words, the greater the strength of emotional commitment and the student loyalty to the HEI, greater will be his love for the HEI´s brand as outcome of a positive and high connection between student and HEI.

The research conceptual model is presented in Figure 1 followed by the eight hypothesis proposed for this research.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



Hypothesis 1: The educational institution's service quality, as perceived by the students, has a significant positive impact on student loyalty.
Hypothesis 2: The students' perception of service quality has a significant positive impact on emotional commitment.
Hypothesis 3: The students' trust in the educational institution has a significant positive impact on emotional commitment.
Hypothesis 4: The students' trust in the educational institution has a significant positive impact on student loyalty.
Hypothesis 5: The students' emotional commitment to the educational institution has a significant positive impact on student loyalty.
Hypothesis 6: The students' integration into the academic system has a significant positive impact on emotional commitment.
Hypothesis 7: The students' integration into the social system has a significant positive impact on emotional commitment.
Hypothesis 8: The student loyalty has a significant positive impact on brand love.

3 Method

The research applied a quantitative approach searching for measure the casual relationship between the constructs as they are positioned in the conceptual model (Fig. 1) through the survey method. The data collection tool was based on structured 5-point Likert questionnaire that was developed and distributed by Question Pro online platform

The instrument was divided into 3 parts: a) the first one was based on Bergamo (2008), in which personal and demographic information was collected such as age, gender, marital status, children and family income; b) the second part sought to investigate student loyalty to HEI, perceived quality, trust, emotional commitment, social integration and academic integration. The scales were based on RQSL's original questionnaire by Hennig-Thurau, Langer and Hansen (2001), and on the adaptations and translations made by Bergamo (2008) and Marques (2008) and Anjos Neto (2003); and c) the third part consisted on assertations regarding the brand love construct. The scale used was based on Loureiro, Vrontis and

Kaufmann (2014).This last scale was submitted to a reverse translation to avoid any possible meaning error.

Additionally, a pre-test was carried out with 82 undergraduate students from a HEI located in the city of Sao Paulo, Brazil. Validation tests were carried out, specifically Crombach's Alpha analysis and factor analysis. Items with factorial loads below 0.500 were eliminated, reducing the original scales, obtaining scales with a reliability index greater than 0.7.

The final research instrument was distributed between 10 October 2018 and 9 November 2018 with undergraduate students from a private HEI (named here as ALPHA) with 3 campuses located in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Porto Alegre, totaling 306 valid questionnaires. In the message accompanying the questionnaire, there was a explicative text regarding the academic objective of the survey and asking for the respondent's consent. There was also an response incentive by drawing a book voucher.

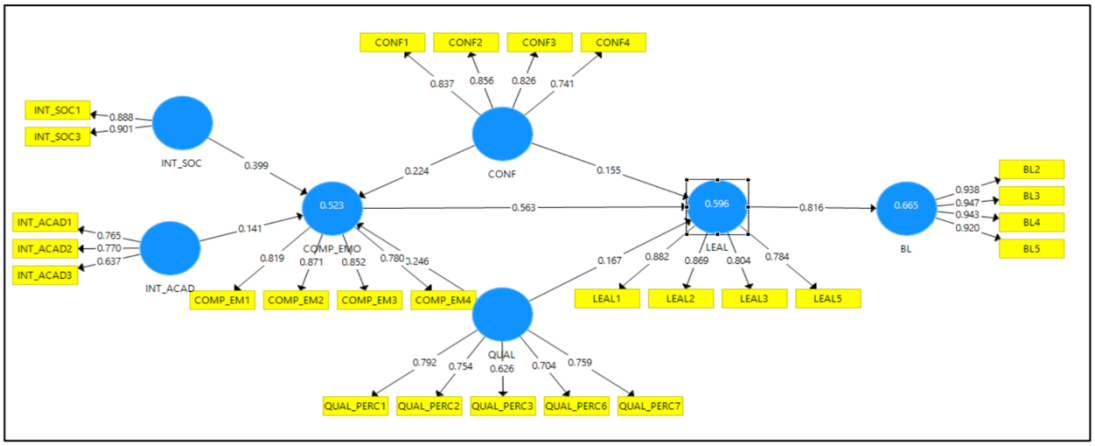
Descriptive statistical analyzes as well as multivariate techniques were applied using PLS technique to test hypotheses according to the conceptual model. The R software was used to perform the econometric tests.

4 Results

Regarding the demographic aspect of the respondents, 72% identified themselves as female and 28% as male, most respondents were 21 years old (25%); followed by 20 years (20%), 22 years (20%), 19 years (9%), 23 years (9%), 26 years or more (8%), 24 years (4%), 25 years (4 %) and 18 years (1%). The sample was formed by undergraduate students from the following degrees: Advertising (43%); Management (18%); Design (14%); International Business (12%); Journalism (7%); Social Science (3%), and, Information Technology (3%).

The proposed conceptual model proved to be robust to explain the relationships tested in this research. Figure 2 shows the relationships and coefficients resulting from the tests.

Figure 2. Resulting Coefficients – Hypothesis Tests



Legend: Int_soc (social integration); Int_acad (academic integration); Comp_emo (emotional commitment); Conf (trust); Leal (loyalty); Qual (quality); BL (Brand Love)

4.1 Antecedents to emotional commitment

Regarding the antecedents of emotional commitment and the related hypotheses H2, H3, H6 and H7, the results are presented below:

Hypothesis 2: The students' perception of service quality has a significant positive impact on emotional commitment.

The hypothesis 2 was validated in accordance with the results of Marques (2008) and Henning-Thurau, Langer and Hansen (2001). In this research, perceived quality explains 25% of students' emotional commitment, and is related to the infrastructure and professional quality of HEI employees.

Hypothesis 3: The students' trust in the educational institution has a significant positive impact on emotional commitment.

The H3 hypothesis was validated, confirming the results already obtained in the studies by Marques (2008) and Henning-Thurau, Langer and Hansen (2001). The present research showed that trust explains 22% of emotional commitment, and is related to the institution integrity, and to the flexibility, trust and availability from HEI's employees and professors to students.

Hypothesis 6: The students' integration into the academic system has a significant positive impact on emotional commitment.

H6 was confirmed in accordance with the studies by Bergamo (2008) and Henning-Thurau, Langer and Hansen (2001). In this research, the academic system explains emotional commitment by 14%, and is associated with academic participation and student performance in HEI, in addition to the professors' accessibility.

Hypothesis 7: The students' integration into the social system has a significant positive impact on emotional commitment.

The H7 was validated aligned with Bergamo (2008) and Henning-Thurau, Langer and Hansen (2001). In this research, the social system explains 40% of emotional commitment, and is associated with the student's participation in HEI's social events (non-academic) and his interaction with colleagues outside the HEI's environment.

4.2 Antecedents to student loyalty

Regarding the antecedents of student loyalty, the results of hypotheses H1, H4 and H5, are discussed hereafter.

Hypothesis 1: The educational institution's service quality, as perceived by the students, has a significant positive impact on student loyalty.

H1 was validated confirming the studies carried out by Bergamo (2008), Marques (2008) and Henning-Thurau, Langer and Hansen (2001). In this sample, perceived quality explains loyalty by 17%, and is related to the HEI's infrastructure and professional quality of its employees.

Hypothesis 4: The students' trust in the educational institution has a significant positive impact on student loyalty.

H4 was confirmed, in accordance with Bergamo (2008) and Henning-Thurau, Langer and Hansen (2001). The results indicated that trust explains 16% of student loyalty, and is related to the institution integrity, and also to the flexibility, trust and availability of HEI's staff and professors with students.

Hypothesis 5: The students' emotional commitment to the educational institution has a significant positive impact on student loyalty.

The H5 was confirmed aligned with Bergamo (2008), Marques (2008) and Henning-Thurau, Langer and Hansen (2001). Data resulted that emotional commitment explains, with 56%, the student loyalty, and is related to recommendation, advocacy and the student's affective bonds with HEI.

4.3 Loyalty as an antecedent of brand love

Hypothesis 8*: The student loyalty has a significant positive impact on brand love.*

H8 had also been confirmed where loyalty explains 82% of brand love for the HEI, referring in this sample by feelings of happiness, pleasure, passion and feeling good about studying at HEI.

Table 1 summarizes the hypothesis tests performed, with the appropriate results. The model proved to be robust with convergent and discriminant validity. The *p* value and f^2 are also suitable for studies in marketing. For f^2, 0.02 has a small explained variance; 0.15 has an average explained variance; and 0.26 has a large explained variance.

Table 1. Hypothesis test summary

	Path Coefficient	f^2	VIF	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	P Values	R^2 adjusted
H3 (Leal-> Comp Emo)	0.224	0.058	1.809	0.054	4.175	0.000	0.517
H6 (Int Acad -> Comp Emo)	0.141	0.032	1.297	0.049	2.860	0.004	
H7 (Int Soci -> Comp Emo)	0.399	0.303	1.102	0.041	9.649	0.000	
H2 (Qual -> Comp Emo)	0.246	0.062	2.062	0.062	3.975	0.000	
H5 (Comp Emo -> Leal)	0.563	0.519	1.511	0.054	10.411	0.000	0.592
H4 (Conf -> Leal)	0.155	0.032	1.892	0.056	2.763	0.006	
H1 (Qual -> Leal)	0.167	0.034	2.045	0.073	2.306	0.021	
H8 Leal -> BL	0.816	1.986	1.000	0.024	34.515	0.000	0.664

Source: Research Data

Regarding student's loyalty antecedents, the results indicated that emotional commitment has a major significance (0.563) against quality perceived (0.167) by the student and confidence (0.155). In other words, perceived quality (infrastructure and quality of the teaching staff) and trust (students towards HEI's staff), proved to be less influential variables in building the student's long-term relationship with the HEI. Additionally, the results might infer that these factors are considered minimum conditions to be delivered by private HEIs and they are no longer seen as differential resources.

In the other hand, emotional commitment appeared as a key factor formed by four components: 1) academic integration, which implies the relationship between students and their professors; 2) social integration, which demonstrated the level of socialization among students directed and in directed promoted by the HEI; 3) trust in the HEI reputation, and 4) perceived quality. The results showed that among the four antecedent factors, social integration has a significant force. In this sense, one might consider that feeling of participation in the group and the sense of belonging are considered of great importance by the students, in addition to factors such as quality, trust and academic integration.

5 Conclusion

This study sought to investigate the strength of social and academic integration, perceived quality and trust in emotional commitment to HEI and its relationship with loyalty. The novelty proposed by this research was consisted to replicate an adapted version of the RQSL model using only variables with high predictive power as presented in previous researches. Additionally, the brand love construct was added as outcome of the student loyalty. The results demonstrated that the adaptation proved to be a reliable predictive instrument to explain that the students' loyalty to a private HEI is strongly linked to their emotional commitment.

Also, brand love addition to the proposed conceptual model allowed to show that the loyalty relationship established between the student and the HEI can lead to an emotional long lasting bond, demonstrating an even greater commitment along with feelings like pleasure, happiness, well-being and passion for the brand.

Managerial implications

In a context of high competitiveness as it's the case in the region where the research was applied, the results provide insights for HEI's managers to generate proactive actions that might stimulate greater integration among students and non-students, professors and HEI staff through academic entities such as sport leagues and student academic centers. It's expected that these actions will enhance the sense of belonging, the proudness of being part of a group that is supported by the HEI. Furthermore, in conditions where the institution plays a role of facilitator or funding agent for the entities' events and actions, it's expect that the students will express their gratitude to the HEI through several positive actions that might lead to loyalty and brand love, such as positive word-of-mouth to everyone including potential candidates and posting in social media such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok their activities regarding the HEI. In other words, the investment in social and academic integration might lead to convert the regular HEI student into an HEI's fan, acting as promotor of the HEI brand enhancing its reputation in the academic environment, as well as for society and the recruiting market.

Suggestions for future research

It is proposed to replicate the present research:

a) applying a comparative research among HEIs with the same competitive profile;

b) applying a comparative research among HEIs with different competitive profile;

c) investigating the recent graduated students to verify their degree of loyalty and propensity to continue to establish a relationship with the HEI; and

e) apply the proposed model with students of public HEIs.

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