Determinants of university brand loyalty in an emerging higher education market

Davood Ghorbanzadeh, Atena Rahehagh and Mohammad Najarzadeh

Department of Business Management,
Islamic Azad University Tehran North Branch, Tehran, Iran

Abstract
Purpose – A university’s brand is a key competitive advantage in higher education (HE). This study examines the university’s reputation’s intermediary impact on core services (emotional environment, perceived faculty and course suitability) and brand loyalty in private universities in Iran.

Design/methodology/approach – A quantitative method was used to achieve research objectives. The data collected from students enrolled in major private universities in the capital of Iran were analyzed to test the proposed model, both directly and indirectly, using structural equation modeling (SEM).

Findings – The findings confirmed all of the hypothesized relationships. Prominently, the core service construct (emotional environment, perceived faculty and course suitability) was found to be significantly affecting the university brand reputation. The study found evidence for the impact of university reputation on students’ loyalty. Findings also indicated the presence of several indirect relationships among the considered dimensions.

Research limitations/implications – Current research offers implications for universities that are met with the perpetual challenge of survival in the competitive HE marketplace. Findings from the study not only help build theory on university brand loyalty but also make an essential contribution towards guiding managers in developing effective strategies by building reputation and loyalty by concentrating on the most crucial determinants.

Originality/value – Although research in HE marketing is growing, the effects of university core services on building loyalty have not garnered attention, which is theoretically a vital construct. The paper presents a new framework to realize university brand loyalty with the help of integrated relationships among select dimensions in the setting of an emerging HE market.

Keywords University reputation, Brand loyalty, Emotional environment, Private universities, Iran

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Loyalty is a source of profitability and a competitive advantage in higher education (HE) (Susilawati et al., 2021). In HE, students are the primary patrons; without them, institutions cannot generate the desired revenues for operations (Demir et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the 21st century is marked by a highly competitive educational environment. Therefore, private institutions must satisfy clients and delight them for their continuous patronage. Enhancing developing market countries’ sustainability and international competitiveness depends on HE. Therefore, universities must reconsider their approaches to creating regional centers for higher learning (Susilawati et al., 2021).

Over time after the reforms, the number of universities increased enormously, as was witnessed in the service industry (Kahraman and Koray, 2020). Iran currently has 141 public-funded universities, 953 technical universities and 839 private-owned tertiary institutions (Ghorbanzadeh, 2023) offering various degree programs. According to the statistics of the Iranian Ministry of Science, more than 3 million students are studying in HE institutions.

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However, despite the current ease of entry into universities, competition has become a common phenomenon as institutions vie for students during the school selection period (Musselin, 2018). In addition, universities face many challenges which hinder the ability to enroll the desired number of students. For example, the sector lacks government funding to support operational activities. To a large extent, in Iran, only public universities receive some meager government financial support, and all private universities are fully self-financing. The government’s finance to institutions of higher learning is executed according to the performance–based funding strategy. This means that recipient institutions must be resourceful regarding the quality of faculty and other infrastructure used (Nisar, 2015). This strategy invariably removes the private universities with few resources from the list of potential recipients. As a result, the inability of universities to get the desired enrollment numbers means there will be a decline in revenue generation. This phenomenon threatens the survival of tertiary educational establishments and challenges the ability of these institutions to build strong bonds with students for retention to ensure a continuous flow of students during the recruitment period.

To mitigate this challenge, HE service providers must differentiate themselves and foster consistent patronage to secure student retention (Tariq et al., 2020). Therefore, the need to gain superior brand loyalty for ultimate survival in the market. Brand loyalty in the university setting can be linked to student loyalty or the capacity of a university to draw in prospective students to their brand over others. Brand loyalty or loyalty by students is an essential element of effective brand marketing. According to Aaker (1991), it constitutes a fundamental aspect of brand equity. Loyalty to a product has become a critical issue for ensuring the competitiveness of a university in a crowded market. HE is currently re-strategizing to enable institutions to consistently attract and retain students (Borishade et al., 2021).

The literature on student loyalty correlates with several studies. However, research has consistently focused on satisfaction (Williams et al., 2019), university reputation (Saoud and Sanséau, 2019), confidence or belief in an institution (Patterson, 2016) and dedication (Snijders et al., 2022). Other authors have also used service quality, satisfaction, trust and commitment as mediation variables (Khadim et al., 2018). To a large extent, none of these previous studies focused on the influence of emotional environment, perceived faculty quality and course suitability on brand loyalty mediated by university reputation. For example, previous studies by Chandra et al. (2018) explored the influence of service quality on student loyalty, with satisfaction as a mediating factor, in Riau. The findings revealed a significant influence of service quality on the expectations of students, affecting their loyalty. Annamdevula and Bellamkonda (2016) explored how service quality, directly and indirectly, affects student loyalty through satisfaction in three Indian state universities. The study’s outcomes exhibited a positive correlation between service quality and student satisfaction and between service quality, student loyalty and satisfaction.

Similarly, the research of Kunanusorn and Puttawong (2015) examined the interconnection among perceived value, trust, university reputation and satisfaction as determinants of student loyalty with mediator variables in the model. The study revealed student satisfaction, perceived value, trust, university reputation and satisfaction as determinants of student loyalty. Studies such as Kaushal and Ali (2020) explored how student loyalty was influenced by university reputation, brand attachment and personality. The research findings demonstrated that the image of a university influences student loyalty. Moreover, Todea et al. (2022) and Doña Toledo and Luque Martínez (2020) demonstrated that, compared to perceived quality, brand association, satisfaction and trust, commitment had a direct and substantial influence on student loyalty and commitment.
This study investigates how university reputation mediates the relationship between university core services (perceived faculty quality, emotional environment and course suitability) and brand loyalty among Iranian private university students. The research gap has become necessary since only limited research investigates the factors influencing university brand loyalty. Also, to a considerable extent, most of the related research works found in the literature were conducted in the developed world, with little or no studies in the developing world.

The present research adds to the literature on university brand loyalty in multiple aspects. To begin with, the study provides a new perspective to studies in university brand marketing, specifically university brand loyalty in Iran, such as service quality and satisfaction. However, it overlooked perceived faculty quality, emotional environment and course suitability mediated by the university’s reputation. Therefore, the study fills the literature gap by suggesting a new model for understanding brand loyalty in universities. Secondly, the proposed model is tested using five private-owned Iranian universities. The key research objectives are to:

**RO1.** Exploring the correlation between perceived faculty quality, emotional environment, course suitability and brand reputation in private universities.

**RO2.** Investigating the correlation between brand reputation and brand loyalty in private universities.

**RO3.** Investigating the mediation role of university reputation in the relationship between core services (perceived faculty quality, emotional environment and course suitability) and brand loyalty in private universities.

**Conceptual framework and hypotheses development**

**Theory of reciprocity**

The theory of reciprocity underpins this study. This theory posits that kind rewards are offered for kind actions whilst punishment is meted out for unkind actions (Hadi et al., 2019). The theory also stipulates that people usually analyze kindness by its results and underlying intention. Therefore, an action by a party demands that the other party reciprocate a similar action (Houston and Gassenheimer, 1987). Such actions of reciprocity ensure that firms can engage in mutually beneficial exchanges and subsequently build long-term relationships with customers (Leung et al., 2020). Reciprocal actions, thus, emanate from the initial positive actions of others.

It is envisaged in this research that university brand loyalty is a kind of action or behavior exhibited by students due to perceived faculty quality, course suitability and emotional environment (which are positive actions by the university). This positive action should cause students to reciprocate by being brand loyal. Studies have supported the view that reciprocity is a factor influenced by human behavior (Leung et al., 2020). The mediation of a university’s reputation will enable students to establish even more long-term relationships. Thus, the study assesses the theory based on the following criteria:

1. Perceived faculty quality, emotional environment and course suitability lead to the formation of a brand reputation among students.

2. Brand reputation is created by perceived faculty quality, emotional environment and course suitability leads to student loyalty to the brand.
Brand reputation will be a mediator between the core services (perceived faculty quality, emotional environment and course suitability) and university brand loyalty.

Perceived faculty quality and brand reputation
Value and quality significantly influence purchase behavior and product choice (Cheung and To, 2019). According to Zeithaml and Parasuraman (2004), perceived quality is “the consumer’s judgment about a product’s overall excellence or superiority”. It can also refer to a client’s perceived brand superiority compared to alternative brands (Foroudi et al., 2018). Customers assess quality by evaluating the disparity between expected and perceived quality (Suttikun and Meeprom, 2021). Thus, a customer’s individual product experience, specific needs and consumption circumstances can influence their subjective assessment of quality (Quan et al., 2020). Foroudi et al. (2018) discussed that warranties, price and product information are essential elements that can be used to indicate quality for a brand; thus, the higher the quality, the higher the price premium. In the literature, there is a consensus that perceived quality plays is crucial in brand differentiation and expansion (Suttikun and Meeprom, 2021), enabling a firm to charge higher prices (Lee, 2023).

The value of the faculty in the university influences students’ selection of an educational institute (Zhang et al., 2019). Lecturers and professors are essential resources in every university, impacting the fulfillment of student expectations and image (Malinen and Savolainen, 2016). In this respect, Gilani and Cunningham (2017) explained that the capacity of universities to attract and retain high-caliber staff is a vital determinant of success.

However, Kaushal et al. (2023) conducted a study to investigate how perceived quality influences a university’s reputation from the student’s point of view. The results indicated a favorable correlation between perceived quality and university reputation. Also, studies by Dennis et al. (2016) showed that perceived quality strongly correlated with brand reputation. In the university setting, studies by Ilgan et al. (2018) revealed that quality of education is essential for attracting students to choose a particular university. Drawing from the argument above, the present research postulates that perceived quality exerts a substantial and favorable influence on brand reputation:

$H1$. Perceived faculty quality has a significant positive effect on brand reputation.

Emotional environment and brand reputation
Scholarly investigations suggest that a university’s physical and psychological context significantly influences students’ view of its reputation since it indicates the quality of the service delivery. The university’s physical environment constitutes the size of the university, while other scholars describe it as concerning the visual aesthetics and available student amenities on campus (Cha and Kim, 2015). The psychological environment, also called the emotional environment, is the friendly and warm atmosphere that impacts students’ perception of the university’s image (El-Kassar et al., 2019). University education involves both classroom work and interacting with the social environment on campus. These interactions result in psycho-social adjustments, meeting new people and attaining new interests.

Universities appoint academic and career advisors to foster the development of student’s intellectual and social skills (Uddin and Johnson, 2019). These advisors’ responsibility is to assist students in making well-informed choices about their academic and career paths, resolving relevant campus issues and challenges and establishing suitable objectives for their academic and professional endeavors (Hatch and Garcia, 2017). Research findings have
shown that such advisory services increase students’ satisfaction in tertiary education (Zhang et al., 2019) and improve the brands of universities.

As part of improving the psychological environment, which directly impacts students’ well-being, many contemporary HE institutions endeavor to enhance recreational and sports amenities on campus. These facilities offer the students a balanced life and engagement in pursuits that promote physical fitness after classroom work (Alhaza et al., 2021; Mokoena and Dhurup, 2017). These services are vital in enhancing students’ satisfaction with their university education and campus experience (Schmidt and Lockwood, 2017). A consistent scholarly finding regarding recreational amenities is that a university’s active provision of recreational and sports facilities influences brand loyalty and improves its reputation in the market (Powers et al., 2019).

Agrey and Lampadan (2014) revealed that a secure and welcoming setting was a significant factor in selecting a particular university. Respondents in studies by Lee (2014) revealed that a friendly and warm environment influenced their decision to choose a particular destination for their study abroad. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that the emotional environment positively impacts brand reputation towards the university.

**H2.** The emotional environment has a significant positive effect on brand reputation

*Course suitability and brand reputation*

Universities offer different courses for students to make their choice. As in any effective marketing of goods and services, every university must start by identifying the needs of consumers in order to satisfy them profitably. Thus, management should initiate customer research as a starting point in universities, ensuring that the courses developed align with their requirements and needs. According to Al-Fattal (2010), there is a significant link between the program offered and the institution, as it constitutes the fundamental basis of its identity. Gibbs (2002) further noted that this identity sets the institution apart in the minds of its customers and significantly impacts their response to the presented offerings. The researchers, therefore, suggested steps for proper identification of needs with regards to developing courses for students - it commences with analyzing consumer needs, generating ideas, conducting preliminary analysis, pre-positioning the concept, performing field studies and, ultimately, studying consumer evaluation.

Studies (Le et al., 2020) revealed that job opportunities associated with studying particular courses influence students’ choice of a university. Studies by Pinar et al. (2014) investigated the requirements and desires of students pursuing an Educational Leadership Master. The study also assessed the factors influencing their program choice and identified recruitment strategies perceived as most effective.

**H3.** Course suitability has a significant positive effect on brand reputation.

*Brand reputation and brand loyalty*

Academics and practitioners accept that brand reputation is increasingly becoming important. It is a source of demand and offers the image of superior quality and added value which justifies premium prices (Ishak et al., 2020). Reputation is “an overall estimate that the company is held by its constituents” (Hoffmann and Weithaler, 2015, p. 5). A university brand must have a positive reputation to excel and remain profitable (Hussain et al., 2020). Hence, any university that wants to dominate the market must build an excellent reputation to meet customer demand.

Studying at a reputable institution elevates the social status of an individual. In addition to the academic program offered by a university, potential students select a particular school based on its brand reputation (Hoffmann and Weithaler, 2015). Furthermore, Yusuf (2021)
indicated that a university’s reputation had a strong relationship with performance and concluded that it was an essential element to consider for potential students.

Angliss (2022) revealed that students and professors consider the effectiveness and quality of products and services offered by universities to evaluate their reputation. The institution’s reputation directly impacts its credibility, thus ensuring fast admittance into the job market after graduation.

An institution’s reputation fosters valuable connections, elicits a positive response and performance and cultivates increased commitment, engagement and unity among university faculty and staff (Pérez and Torres, 2017). The importance of a reputation has been recognized in scholarly literature to gain a competitive edge. Thus, possessing a favorable institutional reputation can be vital in oversaturated markets, as prospective students may opt for a prestigious university based on its overall reputation (Ghorbanzadeh, 2023). Drawing from the argument above, the following hypothesis is posited:

**H4.** University brand reputation has a significant positive effect on brand loyalty.

Figure 1 represents the conceptual framework of this study.

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**Research methodology**

*Participants and procedures*

A quantitative research design was used to validate the hypotheses proposed in this research. Specifically, the data were obtained in the form of survey questionnaires consisting of a series of questions. The questionnaire is made up of two sections. The first section included items intended to measure perceived faculty quality, emotional environment, course suitability, brand reputation and brand loyalty using a seven-point Likert scale. The second section captured respondents’ demographic information.

To make sure that the design of our questionnaire achieves a satisfactory level of reliability and validity, the questionnaire was submitted to university professors and experts, and the final draft was revised based on their feedback. Respondents rated all measures on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Completely Disagree) to 7 (Completely Agree).

A convenience sampling method was employed to collect data. Participants in this research were all students of the five private universities (Islamic Azad University) in Tehran, Iran (Science and Research Branch, North Tehran, South Tehran, West Tehran and Central...
Tehran). The reason for choosing Islamic Azad University is that more than half of Iranian students study at this university. Also, this high-ranked university has enjoyed significant growth over the last decade, particularly in the number of students. In addition, all the selected private universities commanded high levels of public repute in Iran and have experienced a remarkable expansion in infrastructure, program offerings and student enrollment over the past five years. Finally, these HE institutions have been popular among students for their reputation of high quality (Ghorbanzadeh, 2023; Ghorbanzadeh and Sharbatiyan, 2022). After the pilot study, the questionnaire was uploaded on social media pages attributed to the university. A total of 400 questionnaires were collected. The final number of valid questionnaires, after excluding incomplete and incorrectly completed questionnaires was 384. Respondents’ characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Variables and measuring items
The variables used in this study were estimated with validated scales established in the prior literature, as shown in Table 2. The variable sources and number of items were as follows. First, perceived faculty quality was measured using 5 items from Aaker (1991). Second, we used the 6 items from Pinar et al. (2014) to estimate the emotional environment variable. Third, the course suitability variables were adapted from 5 items used in Ivy (2001) and Sia (2013). Fourth, brand reputation (5 items), which was adapted from Foroudi et al. (2019) and Dennis et al. (2016). Finally, to measure brand loyalty, 4 items from Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021) were used.

Data analysis and results
To test the proposed hypotheses and theoretical model, this research employed partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis and SmartPLS 3.0 software was utilized to assess both the measurement and structural models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Determinants of university brand loyalty</th>
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<tbody>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>48.4</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22 years and below 22 years</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23–25 years</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–30 years</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–35 years</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 years and above</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participating University</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science and Research Branch</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Tehran Branch</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Tehran Branch</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Tehran Branch</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Tehran Branch</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>64.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source(s): Research findings

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents
Measurement model assessment

During the evaluation of the measurement model, three key criteria were emphasized: discriminant validity, convergent validity and internal consistency. As depicted in Table 2, all constructs exhibited good reliability, as revealed by their Cronbach’s alphas (Campbell and Fiske, 1959) and composite reliability (CR) values exceeding the threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019). Additionally, all factor loading values surpassed 0.5, and no items within any construct exhibited excessive residual variance shared with other constructs. Moreover, the average variance extracted (AVE) values for all constructs exceeded the threshold of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2019), indicating satisfactory convergent validity.

To assess discriminant validity between variables, the Fornell–Larcker criterion was employed. As demonstrated in Table 3, the square roots of the AVE for each variable in the overall model were higher than the correlation coefficients between the variable and other variables. This supports the conclusion that the variables exhibited good discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Structural model assessment

This study evaluated the model fit and predictive ability using two indicators: coefficient of determination (R2) and predictive relevance (Q2). The R2 values for each endogenous variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Latent and observed variables</th>
<th>Factor loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived faculty quality → CR:0.91; Cronbach’s α: 0.88; AVE:0.69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university’s faculty are knowledgeable in their fields. (PFQ1)</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The faculty are willing to help students. (PFQ2)</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The faculty is accessible for students’ questions and concerns. (PFQ3)</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The faculty cares about students’ needs. (PFQ4)</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The faculty are polite in responding to student’s needs. (PFQ5)</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional environment → CR:0.90; Cronbach’s α: 0.87; AVE:0.61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university provides a supportive environment. (EE1)</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university provides the students with a sense of community. (EE2)</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The faculty/staff-students’ interactions are warm. (EE3)</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university’s graduates receive job offers. (EE4)</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university’s graduates have successful careers. (EE5)</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ relationships are characterized as warm and friendly. (EE6)</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course suitability → CR:0.92; Cronbach’s α: 0.89; AVE:0.70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university has excellent resources for research. (CS1)</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university offers courses that meet my career goals. (CS2)</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university has innovative programs that meet market needs. (CS3)</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university offers flexible programs and courses. (CS4)</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university offers a wide range of courses. (CS5)</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand reputation → CR:0.91; Cronbach’s α: 0.88; AVE:0.69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a good feeling about the University. (BR1)</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I admire and respect the University. (BR2)</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university offers products and services that are good value for money. (BR3)</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university is well-managed. (BR4)</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This university has a good reputation. (BR5)</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand loyalty → CR:0.87; Cronbach’s α: 0.81; AVE:0.64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I say positive things about this university to other people. (BL1)</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I recommend this university to others. (BL2)</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I encourage friends and relatives to get an education at this university. (BL3)</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider this university as my first choice. (BL4)</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note(s): CR = Composite reliability and AVE = Average variance extracted
Source(s): Research findings
in the model were deemed acceptable (0.207–0.468), indicating that the model possessed satisfactory predictive accuracy. Furthermore, the Q2 values, calculated using the blindfolding method, for each endogenous variable were greater than 0, signifying good predictive ability (Hair et al., 2019). The findings are presented in Table 4.

The bootstrapping algorithm in Smart PLS 3.0 software was employed to select a resampling sample of 5,000 to analyze the path testing results of the model. The results of hypothesis testing can be found in Table 5.

Specifically, the path coefficient from perceived faculty quality to brand reputation was 0.406 (t = 6.458, p < 0.000), indicating a significant positive effect of perceived faculty quality on brand reputation, supporting H1. Furthermore, emotional environment was found to have a positive influence on brand reputation (β = 0.265, t = 3.578, p < 0.000), supporting H2. H3 was supported as course suitability positively influenced brand reputation (β = 0.273, t = 3.071, p < 0.02). Finally, brand loyalty was significantly affected by brand reputation (β = 0.493, t = 7.318, p < 0.000). The final model path diagram is illustrated in Figure 2.

Discussion
The study proposed and tested an integrated model of loyalty and its antecedents in the HE context. The study reveals that perceived faculty quality relates positively to brand reputation, supporting hypothesis 1. This affirms the arguments by Hult and Edström (2016) who concluded that the quality of professors or instructors impacts significantly and
relates positively to whether students remain loyal to the university or not. Also, the result of hypothesis 2 showed that the emotional environment perceived by students has a positive effect on a university’s brand reputation. This finding is consistent with the results of the studies of Khoshtaria et al. (2020) and Dursun and Altin Gumussoy (2021). It can be argued that the emotional environment as a supportive element causes students’ attachment to the university brand and creates a positive image. A consistent scientific finding regarding supportive elements such as emotional environment is that the university’s active provision of a warm and friendly environment affects brand loyalty and improves its reputation in the market. Furthermore, course suitability also impacts positively and significantly on brand loyalty. Thus, it supports Hypothesis 3. This confirms the findings of previous works (e.g. Al-Fattal, 2010; Avery and Hoxby, 2004). It further confirms the findings of Sultan and Wong (2019). This indicates that the course suitability for students influences whether they recommend or select the university when choosing universities. Findings from the current study indicate that university reputation positively affects the loyalty behavior of students. This supports hypothesis 4. The results of this study are consistent with a study by Kaushal and Ali (2020) and Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021) that demonstrates as university reputation has a substantial effect on student loyalty in Indian universities. Loyal students, therefore, are more likely to suggest their university to others, continue their studies at the same school and keep in touch with their alma mater after graduation (Kaushal and Ali, 2020). In addition, the study reveals that university reputation mediates the effects of perceived faculty quality, emotional environment and course suitability on brand loyalty. It also relates to the assertion that potential students select a particular school based on its brand reputation (Angliss, 2022; Toropova et al., 2019). This indicates how reputable a university can affect its selection and overall enrollment. The research aligns with previous studies in emerging markets that concluded that the high caliber of professionals, the strong reputation of the university, carefully differentiated programs and the employability of their graduates determine how loyal people are to that university brand (Mæland and Espeland, 2017).
Theoretical implications
Based on the findings, there are several theoretical implications. First, the study highlights the importance of considering multiple factors when examining university brand loyalty. It emphasizes the need to adopt a holistic perspective that considers the emotional environment, perceived faculty quality, course suitability and brand reputation as elements of brand loyalty. This reinforces the principles of the theory of reciprocity, which suggests that students may reciprocate by developing allegiance towards the institution when they experience a positive emotional environment. This expands the theoretical understanding beyond traditional factors like image and offers a comprehensive perspective on the factors influencing students’ loyalty to a university. Second, this research enhances the theoretical comprehension of how reputation operates as a mechanism that mediates the impact of these factors on brand loyalty. Finally, the study also underscores the significance of adopting a student-centric approach to understanding brand loyalty. It further implies that universities should go beyond providing academic excellence and further create a positive emotional climate. It emphasizes the significance of course suitability as a determinant of university brand loyalty. This stresses the principle of reciprocity. It will further help align the courses with the needs and interests of students and expand the understanding of the role of curriculum design in enhancing brand loyalty. This principle applies to the perceived faculty quality. Thus, as students perceive that the faculty members are competent, they may feel the need to reciprocate in terms of brand loyalty.

Managerial implications
Based on the findings, there are several managerial implications for HE institutes. First, the authorities of the universities should focus on creating a positive emotional environment for their students. This includes fostering a supportive and inclusive campus culture by providing opportunities for student engagement and personal development to ensure a welcoming and friendly atmosphere. This will help to increase student satisfaction and foster a sense of loyalty towards the institution. The study reveals a relationship between perceived faculty affects university brand loyalty. Therefore, the authorities of universities should invest in hiring and retaining high-quality faculty members who are knowledgeable, experienced and capable of delivering effective instruction. The universities should offer ongoing training and development initiatives to improve faculty quality. This will help enhance their reputation and foster loyalty among students.

Second, the management of universities should regularly assess and update their course offerings to ensure they align with students’ academic and career aspirations. By offering relevant and engaging courses, universities can enhance student satisfaction and reputation and foster brand loyalty. The university authorities should actively focus on cultivating a robust and favorable reputation through diverse strategies. This is important because a university’s reputation mediates the emotional environment, perceived faculty quality, course suitability and brand loyalty. This includes maintaining high academic standards, conducting impactful research, fostering collaborations with industry and community partners and promoting student success and alumni achievements.

Third, the management of universities should also provide opportunities for students to participate in campus life actively. This will enhance students’ experience and satisfaction and strengthen brand loyalty. Universities should commit to student satisfaction by promptly addressing student concerns. It will further help to improve the educational experience, reputation and overall brand loyalty.

Fourth, universities should, moreover, prioritize clear and timely communication regarding academic policies, program requirements and updates that may affect students. Transparent information about faculty qualifications, course availability and the overall
university environment should be provided to help manage students’ expectations. This contributes to a positive student experience, thereby fostering brand loyalty.

Finally, policymakers and regulators should establish and enforce quality assurance mechanisms and accreditation standards for universities in emerging markets. Regulators and policymakers should prioritize initiatives supporting faculty development and enhancing instruction in HE institutions in emerging markets. Policymakers should advocate comprehensive student support services within universities in emerging markets. They should emphasize transparency and accountability in HE institutions in emerging markets. Regulators should promote stakeholder engagement and further establish a feedback mechanism for stakeholders like students and alumni to improve course suitability and the overall reputation of universities in emerging markets.

Limitations and future research directions
This study is not without limitations. It has been conducted in a private university, which is somewhat similar to any other private company. Consequently, the results of this study might not be generalizable to public universities. Were this study to be repeated in a public university, the results might differ in light of the different characteristics of public and private universities and the perceptions of students in these universities. Therefore, future studies might focus on collecting data from public universities to determine whether these results can be generalized. To this end, a comparison of the data between public and private universities might yield richer insights. Additionally, the study was conducted within universities in Iran, capturing only the data from students’ perspectives. Future studies might benefit from the perspectives of other stakeholders such as members of the faculty, staff, alumni and parents, as well as examining the relationships of different types of stakeholders in understanding and designing university branding strategies. It is also proposed that more research be conducted to increase the sample size and the number of colleges in order to improve the model’s generalizability. Also, the reputation construct is treated as a crucial variable in the study, and while the literature suggests it as a composite of several stakeholders’ perceptions, the current study utilized the approach of examining it as an aggregate assessment reflected through a particular group of stakeholder, i.e. students pursuing HE. Although this standpoint is consistent with Wartick’s (1992) contention, however, it is important that studies assume vantage points of other important groups like teachers and guardians while examining the university’s reputation. Finally, the study limited the scope of empirical examination to endogenous construct loyalty, which may be further extended to understand the impact on behavior intentions displayed by the students. Assuming these recommendations, newer insights would not only strengthen theoretical underpinnings but would also uncover newer pathways for practitioners.

References


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Corresponding author
Davood Ghorbanzadeh can be contacted at: daxygh@yahoo.com

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