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Commitment, Loyalty, and Satisfaction in Higher Education: An Exploration of Under-Researched Dynamics in Private Ugandan Universities

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Abstract: In the intensely competitive environment of private higher education, cultivating student loyalty and satisfaction is critical for institutional sustainability. This qualitative inquiry explores the intricate interplay of student commitment, loyalty initiatives, and digital marketing strategies in shaping student satisfaction within private chartered universities in Kampala, Uganda. Adopting a phenomenological research design, data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 11 students and 6 university administrators across five private universities. Thematic analysis yielded three salient themes: (1) The architecture of commitment, (2) The economic and psychological dimensions of loyalty programs, and (3) The digital dilemma. The findings indicate that while students exhibit robust affective and continuance commitment to their institutions, this commitment is largely contingent upon perceived institutional investment in career-relevant skill development and professional socialization. Loyalty programs are predominantly valued for their instrumental, financial benefits rather than symbolic recognition, with tuition fee reductions emerging as the most potent incentive. Digital marketing, while effective for transactional communication, is perceived as insufficient for cultivating the deep emotional bonds requisite for profound commitment and loyalty. The study concludes that student satisfaction in private universities is fundamentally derived from substantive institutional investments in student welfare and meritocratic recognition, with digital marketing assuming a supportive rather than a transformative role.

Keywords: *Commitment, loyalty programs, student satisfaction, digital marketing, relationship marketing, qualitative research, private universities, Uganda*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

The higher education landscape in Uganda has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades, characterized by the rapid proliferation of private chartered universities. According to the Uganda National Council for Higher Education (NCHE, 2021), the private university sector has expanded by over 50% since 2015, creating an intensely competitive environment where student satisfaction has emerged as a pivotal determinant of institutional viability and success. Within this evolving context, universities are increasingly perceived not merely as academic institutions but as service providers operating within a competitive market, necessitating adaptation to significantly evolving student expectations (Kasozi, 2019; Mugisha & Baryamureeba, 2021).

The conceptualization of student satisfaction in higher education has evolved from its foundational roots in customer satisfaction principles, as applied within the service industry (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). In the specific Ugandan context, satisfaction is progressively recognized as a multifaceted construct influenced by academic quality, administrative efficiency, campus infrastructure, and the holistic student experience (Ssekamwa, 2015). Research consistently indicates that dissatisfied students are more prone to academic attrition, the dissemination of negative word-of-mouth, and ultimately, the erosion of institutional reputation and financial stability (Kasozi & Ssempebwa, 2019).

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Loyalty programs, a prominent relationship marketing strategy, have been extensively investigated in commercial sectors but remain underexplored within higher education contexts. These programs, designed to offer rewards and recognition for sustained engagement, possess the potential to enhance student satisfaction by providing tangible benefits and cultivating a sense of institutional appreciation (Uncles, Dowling, & Hammond, 2003; Suh & Yi, 2012). In the Ugandan context, characterized by significant student financial challenges, loyalty programs incorporating financial relief may exert a particularly pronounced impact.

Concurrently, the digital transformation of education has established electronic marketing, encompassing email, social media, university portals, and mobile applications, as a primary conduit for student engagement (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Kingsnorth, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated this digital shift, compelling universities to increasingly leverage digital platforms to sustain student connections during periods of remote instruction (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023). Nevertheless, a notable gap exists in understanding the interplay between these digital endeavours and traditional relational constructs. Specifically, it remains to be determined whether electronic marketing functions merely as a communication channel for information dissemination or actively reconfigures the fundamental psychological relationship between student commitment and ultimate satisfaction

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the recognized imperative of student satisfaction for institutional sustainability, persistently low levels of satisfaction are observed in Ugandan private universities. A 2021 survey conducted by the Uganda National Council for Higher Education revealed that 63% of students in private universities expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching and learning (NCHE, 2021). Mugabi (2022) reported that 57% of private university students were discontent with the relevance of their academic programs to the labor market. Furthermore, a 2023 study by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa indicated that 62% of students were dissatisfied with the quality of online and hybrid learning modalities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While extant research has explored the nexus between relationship marketing and employee satisfaction in universities (Kyoshaba & Bakkabulindi, 2023; Katongole, 2022; Mayega, 2015), there is a paucity of qualitative research examining how student commitment and loyalty programs influence satisfaction, and the specific role of electronic marketing within these relationships. Most existing studies have predominantly employed quantitative methodologies, which, while valuable, may not fully capture the rich, contextualized experiences and meanings that students ascribe to their institutional relationships. This study endeavours to address this gap by employing a qualitative approach to explore the nuanced dynamics of commitment, loyalty programs, and electronic marketing in shaping student satisfaction.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of students and university administrators regarding the influence of commitment and loyalty programs on student satisfaction and the role of electronic marketing in these relationships, specifically within private chartered universities in Kampala, Uganda.

1.4 Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

i. How do students and administrators perceive the role of student commitment in shaping satisfaction within private chartered universities?
ii. How do loyalty programs influence student satisfaction in private chartered universities?
iii. What role does electronic marketing play in the relationship between commitment, loyalty programs, and student satisfaction?
iv. What are the perceived barriers to and facilitators of effective commitment-building and loyalty programs in private chartered universities?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This qualitative study makes several important contributions. First, it provides rich, contextualized insights into the experiences and perceptions of students and administrators regarding commitment, loyalty programs, and electronic marketing. Second, it addresses a gap in the literature by exploring these phenomena in the unique context of Ugandan private higher education. Third, it offers practical recommendations for university administrators seeking to enhance student satisfaction through improved relationship marketing strategies. Finally, it contributes to the theoretical understanding of relationship marketing in higher education by identifying the mechanisms through which commitment and loyalty programs influence satisfaction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two theoretical frameworks: the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and Herzberg's two-factor theory (Herzberg, 1966).

Commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) posits that successful relationship marketing depends on commitment and trust between parties. Commitment refers to an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship, while trust refers to confidence in a partner's reliability and integrity. In higher education, student commitment to an institution and trust in its operations are essential for satisfaction and loyalty. This theory suggests that institutions fostering student commitment through consistent, reliable interactions will experience higher levels of satisfaction and retention. Studies have confirmed the applicability of this theory in educational contexts, demonstrating that students who perceive their institutions as trustworthy and committed to their success exhibit higher levels of satisfaction and loyalty (Alves & Raposo, 2020; Ahmed & Ali, 2020).

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Herzberg, 1966) distinguishes between hygiene factors (whose absence causes dissatisfaction but whose presence does not motivate satisfaction) and motivators (which actively drive satisfaction). In the educational context, loyalty programs and electronic marketing may function as hygiene factors, preventing dissatisfaction without necessarily driving satisfaction, while commitment may function as a motivator that actively enhances satisfaction. This theoretical lens is particularly useful for understanding why some institutional initiatives, such as digital communication and symbolic rewards, may fail to generate lasting student satisfaction despite their prevalence (Suh & Yi, 2012; Ott & Xing, 2021).

2.2 Student Commitment in Higher Education

Student commitment is a psychological state that binds an individual to an organization, characterized by an intention to maintain membership and contribute to organizational goals (Allen & Meyer, 1990). In higher education, commitment comprises three interrelated components: affective commitment (emotional attachment to the institution), continuance commitment (perceived costs of leaving), and normative commitment (feelings of obligation to remain) (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001).

Affective commitment consistently emerges as a salient predictor of positive student outcomes. Students exhibiting robust affective commitment typically assimilate their university's ethos, cultivate a sense of belonging, and forge an emotional bond with the institution (Tinto, 2017; Kuh, 2019). This commitment is fostered through constructive interactions, perceptions of institutional support, and congruence between individual aspirations and institutional objectives (Stanley, Vandenberg, & Vandenberghe, 2015). Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates a positive correlation between elevated levels of student commitment and heightened satisfaction, enhanced academic performance, and an increased propensity for program completion (Lee & Kim, 2017; Smith & Jones, 2018).

Research in developing country contexts has revealed additional dimensions of student commitment. Kasozi (2019) found that Ugandan students' commitment is significantly influenced by their perceptions of institutional responsiveness and career preparation. Similarly, Mugisha and Baryamureeba (2021) reported that commitment among Ugandan private university students is closely tied to their perceived return on educational investment, reflecting the significant financial sacrifices made by families. These findings suggest that the antecedents and manifestations of commitment may vary across cultural and economic contexts.

2.3 Loyalty Programs in Higher Education

Loyalty programs represent strategic marketing initiatives designed to incentivize sustained customer engagement with an organization over time (Suh & Yi, 2012). Within commercial sectors, such programs typically provide rewards, preferential pricing, or exclusive benefits to repeat clientele, aiming to augment retention and maximize lifetime value (Uncles et al., 2003; Ott & Xing, 2021). In the context of higher education, loyalty programs may encompass tuition reductions for continuing students, alumni benefits, recognition schemes, and privileged access to resources or events.

While nascent, research on loyalty programs in higher education is expanding. Tan and Ming (2015) identified that loyalty programs, such as academic achievement rewards and discounts on educational resources, positively influenced student satisfaction in Malaysian universities. Similarly, Ahmed and Ismail (2016) reported that loyalty programs, including academic incentives, preferential resource access, and recognition initiatives, significantly enhanced student satisfaction in Pakistani universities. Lee and Choi (2017) demonstrated that loyalty programs comprising scholarships, exclusive events, and discounts exerted a significant positive impact on student satisfaction in South Korean universities.

However, the effectiveness of loyalty programs in higher education may depend on their design and implementation. Research by Berman (2006) suggests that loyalty programs are most effective when they provide meaningful value to participants, are easy to understand and use, and are integrated into the overall customer experience. In higher education contexts, this implies that loyalty programs must be aligned with student needs and institutional values to generate genuine satisfaction and commitment.

2.4 Electronic Marketing in Higher Education

Electronic marketing, or e-marketing, leverages digital technologies to achieve marketing objectives, including the cultivation of customer relationships and the enhancement of brand recognition (Chaffey &

Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Kingsnorth, 2023). Its evolution in higher education spans from rudimentary online presences to sophisticated multichannel strategies, encompassing email marketing, social media engagement, content marketing, search engine optimization, mobile applications, and learning management systems (El-Gohary, 2016; Yannopoulos, 2016).

The primary objectives of electronic marketing in higher education include student recruitment, engagement, retention, and alumni relations (Fahy & Jobber, 2015; Armstrong et al., 2016). Furthermore, it facilitates communication, enables personalized interactions, and fosters virtual communities (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014; Ryan, 2017). When effectively implemented, electronic marketing can enhance perceived service quality and strengthen institutional affiliations (Ahmad, Bakar, & Ahmad, 2015; Siddique & Akhtar, 2020).

However, the transformative potential of electronic marketing in higher education remains contested. Research by Martínez and Rodríguez (2019) found that while digital communication channels are essential for operational efficiency, they are insufficient for building the deep emotional connections that characterize strong institutional commitment. Similarly, Irfan and Zahid (2022) reported that students perceive digital communication as a baseline expectation rather than a source of satisfaction. These findings suggest that electronic marketing may serve a hygiene function in higher education relationships, consistent with Herzberg's (1966) theoretical framework.

2.5 Research Gap

Despite burgeoning scholarship on relationship marketing in higher education, several significant research gaps persist. Firstly, a preponderance of existing studies has employed quantitative methodologies, precluding an in-depth understanding of student experiences and perceptions. Secondly, the Ugandan context remains largely underexplored, with most investigations concentrated in Western or Asian settings. Thirdly, the intricate interrelationships among commitment, loyalty programs, electronic marketing, and satisfaction have received limited scholarly attention. This study endeavours to address these lacunae by employing a qualitative approach to investigate the experiences and perceptions of students and administrators within Ugandan private universities.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Philosophy and Approach

This study adopted an interpretivist research philosophy, positing that social reality is constructed through the meanings and interpretations individuals attach to their experiences (Pham, 2018). Interpretivism is particularly apposite for exploring the intricate, subjective experiences of students and administrators concerning commitment, loyalty programs, and electronic marketing. Consistent with the interpretivist paradigm, this study employed a qualitative research approach (Moriarty, 2011; Thanh & Thanh, 2018).

3.2 Research Design

A phenomenological research design was employed in this study. Phenomenology seeks to elucidate the essence of lived experiences by exploring how individuals perceive and construct meaning from phenomena (Creswell, 2013). This design is particularly well-suited for investigating students' and administrators' experiences with commitment, loyalty programs, and electronic marketing, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' subjective realities and the meanings they ascribe to their institutional relationships.

3.3 Study Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in five private chartered universities situated within the Kampala Metropolitan Area, Uganda: Kampala International University (KIU), Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU), Uganda Martyrs University (UMU), Ndejje University (NU), and Uganda Christian University (UCU). These institutions were purposively selected to represent the diversity of private higher education in Uganda, including both faith-based and secular institutions.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The sample comprised 17 participants, consisting of 11 third-year students (6 from Business and 5 from Education/Humanities faculties) and 6 university administrators. The inclusion of both students and administrators enabled triangulation of perspectives and a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Sample size determination was guided by the principle of data saturation, which was achieved after 14 interviews, with three additional interviews conducted to confirm saturation (Hennink & Kaiso, 2022).

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interview guide explored participants' experiences and perceptions regarding commitment, loyalty programs, electronic marketing, and student satisfaction. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in exploring emergent themes while ensuring that key topics were systematically addressed. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, with each session lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were subjected to thematic analysis, adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo software was utilized to facilitate data management and coding. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, techniques including member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling were employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Institutional approval was secured, and all participants provided informed consent before their involvement. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms and the secure storage of data. Participants were apprised of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without reprisal (Rana, 2020). All procedures complied with the ethical guidelines of the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology.

4. FINDINGS

The thematic analysis yielded three overarching themes: (1) The Architecture of Commitment, (2) The Economics and Psychology of Loyalty Programs, and (3) The Digital Dilemma. Each theme is presented below with illustrative quotations from participants.

4.1 Theme 1: The Architecture of Commitment

This theme encompasses three sub-themes: The Duality of Commitment, The Currency of Care, and The Shadow of Cost.

4.1.1 The Duality of Commitment

Participants articulated commitment as a multifaceted construct, encompassing both affective and continuance dimensions. Business students predominantly expressed commitment through a calculative, instrumental lens:

"My commitment to this university is not just about feeling attached. It's about the investment I have made. I have paid significant fees, and I need to graduate and get a good job. That is my primary motivation." (CM-03)

This instrumental orientation aligns with continuance commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990), where students remain engaged due to perceived costs of leaving rather than emotional attachment.

In contrast, humanities and education students expressed commitment through a more emotional, relational lens:

"This university has profoundly influenced my personal and intellectual development, fostering a deep sense of belonging. My lecturers have transcended the role of instructors, serving as mentors who have challenged and supported my growth. The prospect of departure evokes a palpable sense of loss." (CH-09)

This emotional expression reflects affective commitment, characterized by genuine identification with the institution and its values. Administrators acknowledged this duality:

"A discernible divergence exists between business and education students. Business students exhibit a more transactional orientation, prioritizing return on investment. Conversely, education students demonstrate a more relational approach, valuing the interpersonal connections cultivated." (AD-01)

These findings extend Allen and Meyer's (1990) commitment model by revealing how disciplinary context shapes the relative salience of commitment dimensions, a pattern previously noted by Kasozi (2019) in Ugandan higher education.

4.1.2 The Currency of Care

Participants consistently identified institutional care as a fundamental driver of commitment:

"A university that prioritizes student well-being demonstrates its commitment through the provision of excellent services. When confronted with challenges, the assurance of attentive listening and effective problem-solving is paramount. Responsiveness from administration and accessibility of faculty cultivate a profound sense of being valued." (CM-04)

This perception of care aligns with the empathy dimension of the SERVQUAL framework (Parasuraman et al., 1985), emphasizing the importance of individualized attention and genuine concern for student welfare.

Administrators recognized the importance of demonstrating care:

"Our commitment to students must extend beyond rhetoric and be substantiated by actionable initiatives. This necessitates investment in comprehensive academic support services, robust career counselling, and the cultivation of inclusive environments that foster a sense of safety and support." (AD-02)

However, students also identified gaps:

"At times, the university's focus appears to be exclusively on tuition revenue, rather than on the quality of our educational experience. When concerns are raised, they are frequently met with disregard or generic, unhelpful responses." (CM-01)

This disconnect between institutional rhetoric and student experience undermines trust and commitment, consistent with the findings of Tinto (2017) and Kuh (2019) on the importance of perceived institutional investment in student success.

4.1.3 The Shadow of Cost

Financial considerations cast a significant shadow over student commitment:

"My commitment to this university is primarily driven by obligation. My family has made substantial sacrifices to cover my fees, rendering departure or academic failure untenable. This commitment, therefore, stems from necessity rather than genuine affection." (CM-02)

This expression reflects normative commitment, a sense of obligation to remain due to external pressures and expectations (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

"The financial burden is overwhelming, generating persistent anxiety regarding future tuition payments. This pervasive stress impedes the development of a genuine emotional attachment to the institution." (CM-06)

The financial strain described by students is consistent with broader research on economic barriers to higher education in Uganda (Mugabi, 2022; Kasozi, 2019), suggesting that financial constraints may undermine affective commitment development.

Administrators acknowledged these challenges:

"Our students contend with significant financial pressures. Many struggle with tuition payments, which, in turn, impacts their capacity for full engagement with university life." (AD-04)

This sub-theme demonstrates that financial considerations can serve as both a source of commitment (through continuance and normative dimensions) and a barrier to affective commitment, creating a complex motivational landscape for students.

4.2 Theme 2: The Economics and Psychology of Loyalty Programs

This theme encompasses three sub-themes: The Primacy of Financial Benefit, The Quest for Recognition, and The Limits of Symbolic Rewards.

4.2.1 The Primacy of Financial Benefit

Students overwhelmingly valued loyalty programs offering tangible, direct financial benefits:

"Branded promotional items like pens or t-shirts are largely inconsequential as tokens of appreciation. In a challenging economic climate, students are grappling with tuition costs. If the university genuinely seeks to demonstrate loyalty to its high-achieving students, a 10% tuition discount for Dean's List recipients would be a far more impactful gesture." (CM-08)

This preference for financial incentives aligns with research by Tan and Ming (2015) and Ahmed and Ismail (2016), who found that financial benefits are the most effective loyalty program elements in higher education contexts.

Administrators recognized the importance of financial incentives:

"We have successfully implemented a program that offers a tuition discount to students who maintain a high GPA, applicable to the subsequent semester. This initiative has been exceptionally well-received, as students perceive it as a tangible reward for their academic diligence and a recognition of their commitment to their studies." (AD-03)

However, financial benefits were not the sole consideration:

"While financial support is undeniably important, loyalty programs should not be exclusively transactional. If the sole impetus for my continued affiliation is a discount, then the authenticity of my commitment is questionable." (CH-10)

This nuanced perspective suggests that students desire a balance between instrumental benefits and symbolic recognition, consistent with Herzberg's (1966) distinction between hygiene factors and motivators.

4.2.2 The Quest for Recognition

Beyond monetary advantages, students articulated a profound desire for recognition:

"Receiving an award for academic excellence transcended the mere acquisition of a certificate. It represented an affirmation of my efforts, a public acknowledgment by both faculty and peers. This recognition instilled a sense of pride and served as a potent motivator for sustained academic endeavour." (CH-09)

This need for recognition reflects the broader psychological literature on validation and belonging (Ragins & Dutton, 2017), suggesting that institutional acknowledgment serves both motivational and identity functions.

Administrators concurred regarding the salience of recognition:

"Our annual awards ceremony serves to commend outstanding students. This initiative extends beyond the distribution of certificates; it aims to affirm our students' value and acknowledge their diligent contributions." (AD-05)

The recognition described here functions as a motivator in Herzberg's (1966) framework, actively driving satisfaction rather than merely preventing dissatisfaction.

4.2.3 The Limits of Symbolic Rewards

Students evinced skepticism towards purely symbolic forms of reward:

"I have accumulated several certificates commemorating my participation in university events. While aesthetically pleasing, their substantive value is negligible. They offer no practical assistance in offsetting tuition fees or enhancing employment prospects.” (CM-01)

This skepticism reflects a pragmatic orientation where students evaluate institutional initiatives based on their practical utility and impact on their educational and career outcomes.

“Branded merchandise is acceptable, yet it fails to address our fundamental requirements. Our primary objective is education, not sartorial embellishments. Should the university genuinely seek to cultivate loyalty, investment in superior facilities, qualified faculty, and robust career development initiatives would be more appropriate.” (CM-06)

This perspective suggests that students are discerning consumers of institutional offerings, preferring substantive investments over superficial gestures. This finding aligns with research by Ott and Xing (2021) on the importance of meaningful loyalty program design.

4.3 Theme 3: The Digital Dilemma

This theme encompasses three sub-themes: Efficiency as Baseline, The Disconnect of Digital Recognition, and The Irreplaceable Human Touch.

4.3.1 Efficiency as Baseline

Students perceived electronic communication as efficacious for transactional purposes but not as a catalyst for commitment:

“The university portal facilitates essential functions such as grade retrieval, course registration, and fee payments. Its convenience and efficiency are undeniable. However, it does not engender a heightened sense of commitment to the institution; it merely functions as a utility.” (CM-06)

This perception positions electronic marketing as a hygiene factor (Herzberg, 1966), where its absence causes dissatisfaction but its presence does not actively generate satisfaction or commitment.

Administrators acknowledged this inherent limitation:

“Digital platforms have substantially augmented our operational efficiency, enabling more rapid communication and consistent information dissemination. Nevertheless, efficiency alone is insufficient to cultivate commitment. Students anticipate efficient service; it does not inherently foster loyalty.” (AD-04)

This recognition aligns with research by Martínez and Rodríguez (2019), who found that digital communication is perceived as a baseline expectation in higher education rather than a source of competitive advantage.

4.3.2 The Disconnect of Digital Recognition

Students expressed dissatisfaction with automated forms of recognition:

“The receipt of an automated email congratulating me on my academic performance, while ostensibly positive, felt devoid of genuine sentiment. It lacked the impact of a lecturer personally acknowledging my achievement.” (CH-10)

This perceived disconnect reflects the limitations of computer-mediated communication in conveying authentic emotion and interpersonal warmth (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976).

“When the university disseminates a generic congratulatory message via social media, it lacks a personalized touch. It conveys an impression of perfunctory action. Recognition, to be effective, ought to be both meaningful and individualized.” (CM-04)

Students’ preference for individualized recognition is consistent with research on personalization in service delivery (Parasuraman et al., 1985), suggesting that generic digital communication fails to satisfy the empathy dimension of service quality.

Administrators conceded this observed disconnect:

“Despite our efforts to leverage digital platforms for recognition, we have observed that students respond more favourably to personal interaction. A faculty member taking the initiative to congratulate a student in person yields a significantly greater impact than a standardized email.” (AD-01)

This recognition by administrators indicates an awareness of the limitations of digital communication, yet institutional practices may not fully reflect this understanding.

4.3.3 The Irreplaceable Human Touch

Students consistently underscored the indispensable value of human connection:

“While automated congratulatory emails or e-certificates posted on a portal offer convenience, they lack the profound human element. The symbolic prestige associated with a physical ceremony, standing in a hall, shaking the Vice-Chancellor’s hand cannot be replicated digitally. Digital platforms facilitate transactional processes like fee payments or result checks, but they are insufficient for cultivating a genuine sense of belonging or institutional pride. The intangible essence of a university resists digitization.” (CH-09)

This powerful articulation reflects the concept of social presence (Short et al., 1976), suggesting that communication media vary in their capacity to convey the feeling of interacting with a real person.

This sentiment underscores a broader theme regarding the irreplaceable value of human interaction in fostering commitment:

“My most salient university experiences have stemmed from personal interactions: a lecturer's individualized explanation of a complex concept, an advisor's tailored career guidance, or a peer's empathetic support during challenging periods. These interactions are fundamental in building commitment and loyalty, a function that digital tools cannot adequately fulfill.” (CM-03)

This finding is consistent with Tinto's (2017) research on the importance of social integration in student retention and commitment.

Administrators corroborated the critical role of human connection:

“Students seek not merely information, but also community. They desire a sense of belonging. While digital platforms can disseminate information efficiently, they are incapable of generating community. This requires authentic human connection, and maintaining this balance is crucial.” (AD-03)

This recognition by administrators of the importance of community-building underscores the need for a balanced approach that leverages digital efficiency while preserving human interaction for relationship development.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The Architecture of Commitment

The findings reveal a complex architecture of commitment, characterized by a duality of affective and continuance dimensions, the central role of institutional care, and the shadow of financial cost. This architecture reflects the unique dynamics of private higher education in Uganda, where students make significant financial investments and face considerable economic pressures.

The observed duality of commitment aligns with Allen and Meyer’s (1990) three-component model. However, the findings extend this model by revealing how disciplinary context shapes the relative importance of these dimensions. Business students expressed more continuance commitment, while humanities and education students expressed more affective commitment. This disciplinary difference suggests that universities may need to tailor their relationship marketing strategies to different student populations, a consideration not previously emphasized in the commitment literature (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001).

The finding that institutional care is a fundamental driver of commitment is consistent with previous research on student engagement and retention (Tinto, 2017; Kuh, 2019). Students respond to visible investments in student support services, underscoring the importance of demonstrating care through concrete actions. This finding resonates with the empathy dimension of the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1985), emphasizing that perceived institutional responsiveness to student needs is essential for building commitment.

The shadow of cost reflects the economic realities of private higher education in Uganda. With tuition fees representing a significant financial burden, students are compelled to view their commitment through a calculative lens. This financial imperative can undermine affective commitment, highlighting the need for universities to address financial barriers to engagement. This finding is consistent with research by Kasozi (2019) and Mugabi (2022), who documented the significant economic challenges facing Ugandan university students.

5.2 The Economics and Psychology of Loyalty Programs

The findings reveal a complex interplay between economic rationality and psychological needs for recognition in student perceptions of loyalty programs. While students valued tangible financial benefits, they also sought recognition and validation.

The primacy of financial benefits aligns with research by Tan and Ming (2015) and Ahmed and Ismail (2016), who found that financial incentives enhance student satisfaction. However, this study extends their research by revealing the specific mechanisms through which financial incentives operate: by reducing anxiety, validating effort, and enabling continued enrolment. This finding suggests that financial loyalty programs address both psychological and economic needs, reducing stress while providing tangible rewards.

The quest for recognition reflects students' psychological needs for validation and belonging (Ragins & Dutton, 2017; Scott, 2013). Institutional acknowledgment of student achievement sends a powerful message of care and appreciation, which can strengthen commitment and enhance satisfaction. This finding aligns with Herzberg's (1966) Two-Factor Theory, positioning recognition as a motivator that actively drives satisfaction rather than merely preventing dissatisfaction.

The limits of symbolic rewards underscore the importance of substantive benefits over mere symbolism. Students exhibit skepticism toward programs that offer solely symbolic recognition without tangible advantages, suggesting that loyalty initiatives must be meaningful and responsive to student needs. This finding is consistent with research by Ott and Xing (2021) on the importance of meaningful loyalty program design and by Berman (2006) on the conditions for effective loyalty programs.

5.3 The Digital Dilemma

The findings reveal a fundamental tension in the role of electronic marketing: while digital tools are efficient for transactional communication, they are perceived as inadequate for fostering the emotional bonds that drive deep commitment and loyalty.

The view of efficiency as a baseline expectation is consistent with research on the role of electronic marketing in higher education (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Kingsnorth, 2023). Electronic marketing serves a hygiene function: its absence causes dissatisfaction, but its presence does not actively motivate satisfaction (Herzberg, 1966). This finding challenges the assumption that increased digital engagement automatically translates into stronger student relationships.

The disconnect of digital recognition reveals the limitations of technology in mediating meaningful human interaction. This finding is consistent with research on social presence (Short et al., 1976), which suggests that communication media vary in their ability to convey the feeling of interacting with a real person. The findings suggest that digital communication may be insufficient for conveying the authenticity and personalization that students value in recognition.

The irreplaceable human touch underscores the importance of face-to-face interaction in building commitment and loyalty. This finding suggests that universities should not over-rely on digital tools but should maintain and strengthen human-mediated interaction. This perspective aligns with Tinto's (2017) research on the importance of social integration and with research by Martínez and Rodríguez (2019) on the limitations of digital communication in higher education relationships

5.4 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it extends the commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) by revealing how disciplinary context and financial pressures shape the balance between different forms of commitment. The finding that business students exhibit more continuance commitment while humanities students exhibit more affective commitment adds nuance to the understanding of commitment formation.

Second, it extends Herzberg's two-factor theory (Herzberg, 1966) to higher education, positioning electronic marketing as a hygiene factor and recognition as a motivator. This application of Herzberg's framework provides a useful lens for understanding differential effects of institutional initiatives.

Third, it reveals the mechanisms through which commitment and loyalty programs influence satisfaction. The finding that loyalty programs operate through multiple mechanisms- financial relief, recognition, and validation contributes to a more nuanced understanding of their effectiveness.

Fourth, it challenges assumptions about the transformative potential of digital technology in relationship marketing. The finding that digital tools are insufficient for building emotional bonds contradicts the technological determinism implicit in some discussions of digital marketing.

5.5 Practical Implications

Based on the findings, the following practical implications are proposed:

1. Recognize disciplinary differences: Universities should recognize that students from different disciplines may have varying orientations to commitment and tailor strategies accordingly. Business students may respond more to practical, career-oriented support, while humanities students may value relational and community-building initiatives.

2. Demonstrate care through action: Commitment is built through visible institutional care. Universities should invest in student support services, ensure responsive administration, and foster accessible faculty. The findings suggest that care must be demonstrated through concrete actions rather than merely rhetoric.

3. Address financial barriers: Universities should explore financial support mechanisms, including tuition discounts, scholarships, and flexible payment plans. Financial barriers can undermine affective commitment, making financial support not only a loyalty incentive but also a condition for genuine commitment development.

4. Design meaningful loyalty programs: Loyalty programs should offer tangible, substantive benefits rather than merely symbolic recognition. The findings suggest that students value loyalty programs that address their practical needs, particularly financial needs.

5. Recognize student achievement: Universities should establish meaningful recognition programs that validate student effort and achievement. Recognition should be personalized and public, rather than generic and automated.

6. Use electronic marketing strategically: Universities should leverage digital tools for efficiency while preserving personal interaction for relationship building. Digital tools should be used for transactional communication, while face-to-face interaction should be prioritized for meaningful connection.

7. Preserve human connection: Despite the proliferation of digital tools, human connection remains essential for building commitment and loyalty. Universities should invest in faculty-student interaction, mentoring programs, and community-building activities.

6. CONCLUSION

This qualitative inquiry investigated the interplay of student commitment, loyalty programs, and electronic marketing in shaping student satisfaction within private chartered universities in Kampala, Uganda. The findings delineate a complex architecture of commitment characterized by a duality of affective and continuance dimensions, underscore the pivotal role of institutional care, and highlight the pervasive influence of financial considerations. Loyalty programs are predominantly valued for their instrumental, financial benefits, although students also articulate a desire for recognition and validation. Electronic marketing proves effective for transactional communication but is perceived as insufficient for fostering the emotional bonds requisite for profound commitment and loyalty. For university administrators, these findings suggest that student satisfaction hinges on substantive institutional investments in student welfare and the implementation of meritocratic recognition systems, with electronic marketing playing a supportive rather than transformative role. Universities are therefore advised to prioritize investment in student support services, design impactful loyalty programs, and safeguard human connection in an increasingly digitalized educational landscape. While commitment and loyalty programs are essential components of relationship marketing in private higher education, their efficacy depends on addressing the specific needs and circumstances of students, recognizing the paramount importance of institutional care, and cultivating the human connections that underpin enduring commitment and satisfaction.

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