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Antecedents to Alumni Loyalty

An Honors Thesis

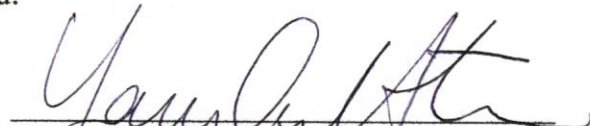
Diana Vasquez

Submitted to the Texas A&M University-Commerce Honors Committee in partial fulfillment of the Program of Honors Study leading to the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Journalism - Public Relations.

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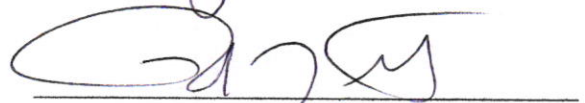
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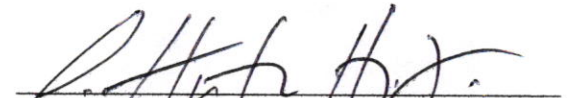
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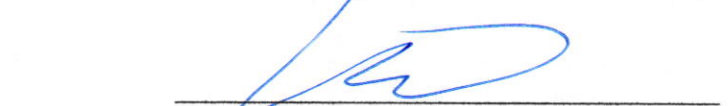
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Antecedents to Alumni Loyalty

Introduction

Loyalty has increasingly become an important part of university growth and development. Alumni who stay in touch and value their time at the university typically give back more and gain more (Cervera, Iniesta and Schlesinger 2015). The studies that have already been done concerning why alumni are more loyal than others will be extended through the current study specifically for Texas A&M University-Commerce. Many of the previous studies conducted have applied their findings to consumer products; this study will apply loyalty standards to alumni loyalty specifically.

For the purpose of this study we have researched a total of six variables: brand satisfaction, brand emotional attachment, quality of the interaction between professor and student, brand identification, perceived image, and student involvement. We have developed into how these variables play a role in the cognitive-affective-conation (and action) pattern of loyalty (Oliver 1997), a process of loyalty often used as a basis in major studies, and if they are all antecedents to loyalty in alumni specifically for the Texas A&M University-Commerce campus. We have determined their roles and relationships and how they as a whole can affect university loyalty, in turn affecting A&M-Commerce's brand equity. All six variables are antecedents to loyalty with student involvement being the key variable.

Literature Review

Brand Equity

Strong brands come from strong equity. Brand equity is a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand's name and symbol that adds to or subtracts from the value provided by a product or service (Aaker 1996). According to Aaker's definition those assets include brand awareness, brand associations, perceived brand quality, and brand loyalty. Under Aaker's research these four assets create the equity (value) for a brand and in order to have a strong brand all four of these assets have to be present. Brand

awareness refers to the strength of a brand's presence in the consumer's mind (Aaker 1996) and focuses on elements of brand recall and recognition. Brand associations include "product attributes, a celebrity spokesperson, or a particular symbol. Brand associations are driven by the brand identity – what the organization wants the brand to stand for in the customer's mind (Aaker, 1996, p.25)." Anything that a customer might relate to the brand can be brought back to brand awareness. Perceived brand quality "reflects a measure of "goodness" that spreads over all elements of the brand like a thick syrup (Aaker, 1996, p.19). Perceived quality is a brand association that is so important it became its own asset. The last asset, brand loyalty is "a key consideration when placing a value on a brand that is to be bought or sold (Aaker, 1996, p.21)." To Aaker, loyalty is something that adds value to the brand and therefore makes other customers loyal. Matthews observes something a little different. Brand equity is when "consumers assign a certain value to a brand based upon their personal perception of the brand (Matthews, 2014, p.27)." While loyalty is a precedent to brand equity in Aaker's definition, Matthews argues that loyalty is a product of a brand equity. If the consumer's perception is positive, then loyalty may ensue thereby causing repetitive brand purchasing (Oliver 1999).

Brand Loyalty

A highly loyal customer base can be expected to generate a very predictable sales and profit stream (Aaker 1996), which can explain why an emphasis in loyalty research has occurred. Loyalty can be described as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior (Oliver, 1997, p.34)." Having loyal customers can reduce competition in the marketplace and maintaining a loyal customer typically costs less than acquiring a new one. The question is, how does a brand make a customer loyal? Oliver developed a framework that includes three (with an honorary fourth) phases of loyalty. Loyalty is not merely repetitive purchasing, "it would be unwise to infer loyalty or disloyalty

solely from repetitive purchase patterns without further analysis (Oliver, 1999, p.21).” Therefore, the framework goes deeper into the development of loyalty and theoretically these phases happen consecutively while the consumer moves up in the phases, the deeper their loyalty becomes.

This framework is the cognitive-affective-conation (and action) pattern (Oliver 1997). The first phase, cognitive loyalty, is solely based on “mere performance (Oliver, 1997, p.35)” and “entails the presence of explicit knowledge about a product/brand (Matthews, 2014, p.27).” The second phase, affective loyalty, shows that a “liking or attitude toward the brand has developed on the basis of cumulatively satisfying usage occasions (Oliver, 1997, p.35),” and entails the consumers’ feeling, moods, and emotional responses towards a product/brand (Oliver 1997). As for the third phase, conative loyalty, it is “a loyalty state that contains what, at first appears to be deeply held commitment to buy (Oliver, 1997, p.35),” “but similar to any “good intention” this desire may be anticipated but unrealized action (Oliver 1999).” While a consumer may be committed to a brand, this phase is lacking the action to show that commitment. The fourth honorary phase, action loyalty, has not been researched much but is the phase where that loyalty becomes action. Like Ajzen and Fishbein’s theory of planned behavior, at this stage consumers’ beliefs are actualized through their behavior (1991). Consumers have an exceptional desire to overcome obstacles that may get in their way (Oliver 1997). Once consumers reach this stage they have reached the highest form of loyalty. “When a consumer voluntarily removes him or herself from competitive overtures, effectively tuning out persuasive arguments to switch, he or she has achieved a state not unlike the concept of love (Oliver, 1997, p.35).”

University Loyalty

For this specific study, alumni loyalty specifically to the university they have attended has been examined. While loyalty in the broader sense is an act of repeat purchase, alumni loyalty is something a bit different. “After obtaining their degrees, alumni may become strong advocates of their university,

recommending the institution to others (Cervera, Iniesta and Schlesinger, 2015, p.478).” Universities are becoming increasingly interested in maintaining a relationship with graduates of their university. Alumni donations, both of monetary and time value provide the university with benefits. Students are continuing to build their relationship with their university even after graduation (Helgessen and Nettet 2007). Alumni are important stakeholders of the university “as influencers in the university environment, collaborators (knowledge, transfer, employers), or even as philanthropists (Alves and Raposo 2009; Cervera, Iniesta and Schlesinger, 2015, p.476).” Discovering what encourages students to become loyal alumni is the key to learning what gives a specific university an edge over another. Once these variables are determined the university can use them to focus on those variables to guarantee loyal graduates. In Cervera, Iniesta and Schlesinger (2015) university image, graduate satisfaction, quality of student-professor interaction, graduate-university identification and loyalty were all tested in their relations with one another. They found that the antecedents for loyalty intentions are decided not only by satisfaction but also by perceived image, the level of identification, and the quality of the interaction between professor and student in the encounter service (Cervera, Iniesta and Schlesinger 2015). While these were the variables chosen for this study, many other studies have included other variables such as emotional attachment.

Brand Satisfaction

“Satisfaction is a fairly temporal post usage state for one-time consumption or a repeatedly experienced state for ongoing consumption that reflects how the product or service has fulfilled its purpose (Oliver, 1999, p.41).” Each person can be satisfied differently depending on what they intended to get out of the product or service that they purchased. It can be assumed that there is a direct relationship between satisfaction and loyalty because a pleasurable feeling often leads to repeat purchasing (Matthews 2014). However, satisfaction and loyalty are not necessarily related. Loyalty is not as easily attained as satisfaction and being satisfied does not always lead to loyalty. Oliver compares

satisfaction to a “seed that requires nurturance of sun, moisture, and soil nutrients (1999, p.42),” satisfaction needs to be mixed with other factors in order to bloom into loyalty. Satisfaction is something that has been agreed to be determined post purchase (Sweeney and Soutar 2001), and depends on the experience of having used the product versus developing an idea of the product without using it. Satisfaction is a grey area because what one individual can find pleasurable can differ from person to another. For specifically university satisfaction, “satisfaction is considered an affective response, resulting from the student’s evaluation of the university’s teaching services and study support (Cervera, Iniesta and Schlesinger, 2015, p.477).” For the purpose of this study this specific definition of satisfaction has been used as it fits the broader definition while being detailed enough for the specific subject of study.

Brand Emotional Attachment

“Brand emotional value is defined as the benefit derived from the feelings that a brand generates (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001, p.211).” Consumers can value brands depending on the emotions that are evoked in them by the purpose they serve. Emotions and satisfaction are often linked together. Sweeney and Sutar (2001, p.217) assessed that “there is an importance of emotional value on a consumer’s willingness to buy,” while this assesses that emotions that can be developed through the use of products, emotional value can be a bit different for university brands. Emotional value experienced at the university is done through the building of relationships. McAlexander, Koenig and Schouten explored how the nature of relationships among students affects their long term loyalty to a university and concluded that “the production and consumption of transformational experience provide opportunities for forming relationships (2004, p.64).” Students “find mutual support among each other as they work together to negotiate obstacles and tackle challenges” and it is “their bond through and to the educational institution that has brought them together (McAlexander, Koenig and Schouten, 2004, 63).” Their findings show that with respect to the qualities of the “university experience” we find that

transformational experiences associated with education are important and long-lasting contributors to relationships and future brand-loyalty related outcomes (McAlexander, Koenig, and Schouten 2004).

Quality of the Interaction between Professor and Student

In many of the studies read, this variable was often overlooked or not even considered. However it is included in this study because it is something that can affect all of the other variables as well as stand on its own. It can be considered a combination or even a subset of brand satisfaction and brand emotional attachment. "The service encounter between student and professor is analyzed as a specific type of service, in which an extended encounter, provisions of extras, and special attention can be significant factors in explaining service satisfaction and positive feelings (Cervera, Iniesta and Schlesinger, 2015, p.477)." A special bond can develop between a student and professor and can induce positive feelings about the university they are associated with and in turn maintain loyalty; the same can happen with a negative connotation.

Brand Identification

At the highest level of loyalty, the consumer becomes fully immersed in self-identity with the brand, "the consumer finds a "natural match" with both the consumable and its environment (Oliver, 1999, p.40)." To put a standard definition with identification, "when a person identifies with an organization, he or she perceived a sense of connectedness to an organization and defines him or herself in terms of the organization (Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn, 1995, p.46)." In essence, complete identification causes the product to become one with the consumer's lifestyle or psyche (Oliver 1999). However, when comparing identification between a product or service it is different than that of an educational institution, "students are not so much customers but are; moreover, lifelong organizational members of a corporate brand community (Balmer and Liao, 2007, p.357)." When dealing with an experience as unique as attending a university the identity that develops is done so through

organizations that boost self-esteem and promote self-expression (Stephenson and Bell 2014).

Individuals have a tendency to express in-group favoritism and competitiveness toward out-groups by sharing their social identity with the group (Stephenson and Bell 2014). This fits into the highest level of loyalty because it requires the most effort and ultimate self-realization.

Perceived University Image

A constant variable in all of the studies I searched was the variable of image. The perception of the university that each student has can vary because no one experiences the same thing during their time at the university. "Following Ngyen and LeBlanc (2001), image is defined as the overall impression left in the minds of customers (Cervera, Iniesta and Schlesinger, 2015, p.477)." As alumni looking back at their college experience their overall impression can affect future behavior and involvement in their alma mater. This variable is likely a culmination of all the other variables and in general a culmination of the service that a student experienced during their time.

University Student Involvement

University involvement was not a variable that was mentioned in detail by previous studies of loyalty. While involvement has many factors other than just time and amount of involvement, it is often difficult to measure the intensity of those other factors (Bradley and Graham 2000). For this study we will be measuring the amount of involvement in time and amount of involvement. Without involvement the other variables may have little to no chance of leading to loyalty. Involvement in the university can be academic or nonacademic, as found in Thomas (2011, p.187) "the social life has emerged as the second most important factor in driving student satisfaction," and therefore can influence loyalty overall. As there is not much research on the relationship between involvement and loyalty, my hypothesis is that university involvement during the student experience is the ultimate antecedent to the other variables that can lead to loyalty. Without student involvement, loyalty is hard to attain.

Hypothesis

1. As the amount of student university involvement increases, brand satisfaction increases.

Student University involvement is at the basic stage of loyalty, the cognitive stage. As one becomes more involved in the university, through organizations, attending events, being active in their studies, satisfaction that the university brand promise is being fulfilled follows naturally and turns into affective loyalty.

2. As the quality of interaction between student and professor is enhanced, brand emotional attachment increases.

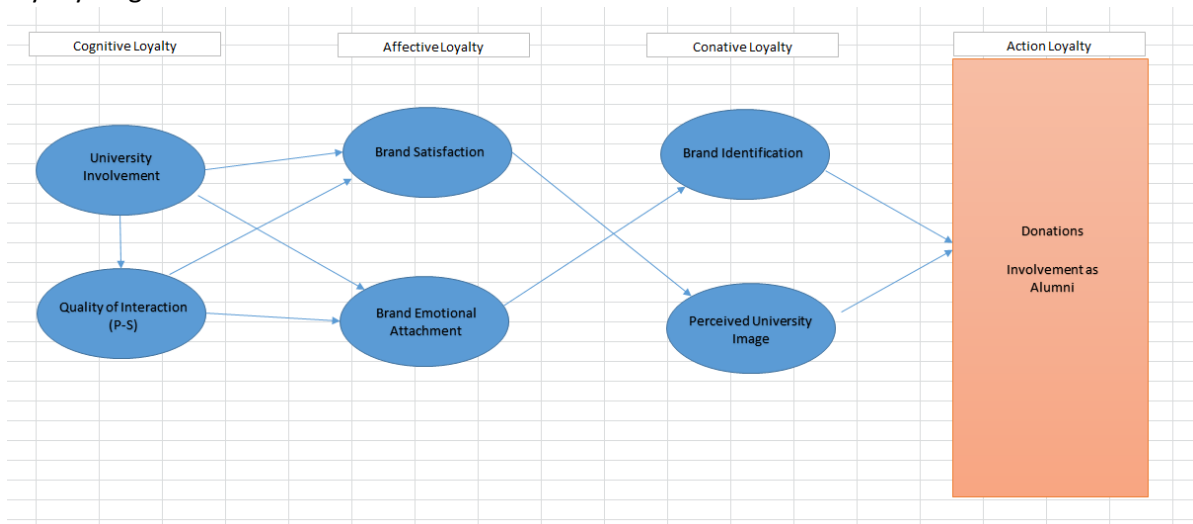
Interaction between the student and professor begins at the cognitive loyalty stage and can reach the affective loyalty stage once it turns into brand emotional attachment. When students relate their professor back to the university and value the relationship that they have established, that is when the transition occurs.

3. As brand emotional attachment increases, brand identification increases as well.

Once students have developed an attachment to the university, through building of relationships and shared experiences, their affective loyalty can turn into conative loyalty when that attachment turns into an identification that is synonymous with the university. Students cannot think of the university without thinking of their ultimate realization.

4. Positive perceived university image leads to alumni donations and/or alumni involvement.

What students ultimately think of their university, at the conative stage, whether they value their time there or if they have an overall positive feeling and would recommend it to others can lead to them taking action and becoming involved and donating as alumni, ultimately reaching the action loyalty stage.



Methodology

In order to assess the thesis statement in this study, we have researched all six variables pertaining to university loyalty: brand satisfaction, brand emotional attachment, quality of interaction between professor and student, brand identification, brand perceived image, and university student involvement and their relationships with each other.

Data Collection

Data is representative of the population of interest: alumni at Texas A&M University-Commerce. We have contacted the alumni base through email. The survey was sent out in late September. The email contained an introduction to the study with an attached link to the survey. The survey was sent out using emails provided by the Office of Institutional Advancement at A&M-Commerce. Data collected were analyzed using basic correlation and regression analysis using SPSS software and a data collection tool named Qualtrics. By analyzing the data we have determined the relationships between the variables and their correlation in relation to loyalty. The model created shows the hypothetical scenario to loyalty.

Questionnaire Development

The final survey developed consisted of a total of nineteen questions distributed among the seven variables that we tested (student involvement, quality of interaction between professor and student, brand identification, brand emotional attachment, perceived image, satisfaction, and action loyalty). The questions were pulled from previous studies and kept as simple as possible.

Scale

Questions on student involvement were determined using a scale used in Bradley and Graham (2000).

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT (measured on a scale ranging from 10-20 “least amount of hours” to 41+ “max amount of hours”)

1. During your undergraduate career, how many hours a week did you spend on class related activities (attending class, studying, tutoring, lab)?
2. During your undergraduate career, how many hours a week did you spend on out of class,

university related activities (college clubs, organizations, attending sporting events, plays, exhibits)?

Questions for quality of interaction between professor and student and brand identification were based on the scale used in Cervera, Iniesta and Schlesinger (2015).

QUALITY OF INTERACTION BETWEEN PROFESSOR AND STUDENT (measured on a scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”)

1. My professors showed interest in giving more than academic input.
2. I established a good relationship with my professors.

BRAND IDENTIFICATION (measured on a scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”)

1. I am interested in what people think of the university.
2. I feel that the university’s success is my success.
3. When somebody praises the university I feel that the praise me.

Brand emotional attachment questions were based on the scale used in Sweeney and Soutar (2001).

BRAND EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT (measured on a scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”)

1. My experience at the university is one that makes me feel good.
2. I enjoyed my experience at the university.
3. Attending the university gave me pleasure.

Questions regarding perceived image and satisfaction were determined on the basis of measurements used in Helgessen and Nettet (2007).

PERCEIVED IMAGE (measured on a scale of 1 “extremely positive” to 5 “extremely negative”)

1. What is the perception of the university among your circle of acquaintances?
2. What is the perception of the university among the general public?
3. What is the perception of the university among your employers?

SATISFACTION (measured on a scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”)

1. I am satisfied with my university experience compared to my expectations.
2. I am satisfied with my university compared with an ideal one.
3. My decision to choose the university was correct.

The survey conducted tested these variables using the loyalty scale used in Berry, Parasuraman and Zeitamil (1996).

ACTION LOYALTY (measured on a scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”)

1. I am likely to donate to the university in monetary value.
2. I am likely to donate to the university in time value.
3. I would be likely to attend the same university if starting anew.

The survey was sent to a total of 15, 724 alumni who received their undergraduate degree in the past twenty years, prior to the East Texas State University – A&M - Commerce name change using Qualtrics.

After a week of having an active survey link, we received a total of 658 responses. Out of those there

were 524 usable surveys, in which all questions were answered. This means that we had an initial 4.18% response rate and a final response rate of 3.33% after removing unusable surveys.

Results

The purpose of this study was to measure the seven different variables and see if there were specific correlations, mentioned in the hypothesis section previously. Figure one shows the mean responses related to each variable, as multiple questions were formulated for each variable. This is valuable because it can be used to determine where the university experience currently stands and determine what qualities may need to be improved to increase loyalty. Action Loyalty scored a 2.9053 mean score out of a 1 “strongly disagree” to a 5 “strongly agree” scale with a standard deviation of 1.03671 which can be significant when trying to determine whether most alumni can be considered loyal or not.

Figure One - Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Student Involvement	1.7188	.60736	512
Quality of Interaction	3.9074	.94471	524
Brand Identification	3.6622	1.08869	518
Emotional Attachment	4.2660	.88056	520
Perceived Image	2.1603	.71358	524
Brand Satisfaction	4.0778	.96065	523
Action Loyalty	2.9053	1.03671	521

The hypotheses in this study can be answered using Figure Two, which shows the correlations of each variable towards each other. Hypothesis One states that as the amount of student university involvement increases, brand satisfaction increases. Figure Two demonstrates a significant and positive relationship between the student involvement and brand satisfaction variables ($r=.126, p<0.01$).

Hypothesis Two states that as the quality of interaction between student and professor enhances, brand emotional attachment increases. Figure Two demonstrates a positive relationship between the quality

of interaction between student and professor and brand emotional attachment ($r=.597, p<0.01$).

Hypothesis Three states that as brand emotional attachment increases, brand identification increases as well. Figure Two demonstrates a positive relationship between brand emotional attachment and brand identification ($r=.563, p<0.01$). Hypothesis Four states that positive perceived university image leads to alumni donations and/or alumni involvement. Figure Two demonstrates a positive relationship between perceived university image and alumni loyalty ($r=.456, p<0.01$). All four hypotheses held in this study as we anticipated.

Figure Two – Correlations

	Student Involvement	Quality of Interaction	Emotional Attachment	Brand Satisfaction	Brand Identification	Perceived Image	Action Loyalty
Student Involvement	1	.189**	.193**	.126**	.167**	.030	-.093*
Quality of Interaction	.189**	1	.597**	.513**	.372**	-.163**	-.240**
Emotional Attachment	.193**	.597**	1	.832**	.563**	-.305**	-.442**
Brand Satisfaction	.126**	.513**	.832**	1	.548**	-.417**	-.448**
Brand Identification	.167**	.372**	.563**	.548**	1	-.318**	-.446**
Perceived Image	.030	-.163**	-.305**	-.417**	-.318**	1	.456**
Action Loyalty	-.093*	-.240**	-.442**	-.448**	-.446**	.456**	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Statistical Analysis

Another finding that might be of interest is shown in Figure Three which shows the relationships that action loyalty depends on the most. Perceived Image is the highest significant relationship that action loyalty depends on ($B=0.471, p<0.01$). Emotional attachment ($B=-0.337, p<0.01$) and brand identification ($B=-0.197, p<0.01$) follow as significant relationships for action loyalty to depend on.

Figure Three - Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	1.430	.133		10.762	.000		
PerceivedImage	.691	.059	.471	11.803	.000	1.000	1.000
2 (Constant)	3.424	.261		13.100	.000		
PerceivedImage	.542	.057	.369	9.488	.000	.910	1.098
EmotionalAttachment	-.393	.045	-.337	-8.665	.000	.910	1.098
3 (Constant)	3.697	.264		13.996	.000		
PerceivedImage	.497	.057	.338	8.693	.000	.879	1.137
EmotionalAttachment	-.273	.052	-.235	-5.222	.000	.660	1.515
BrandIdentification	-.188	.043	-.197	-4.370	.000	.653	1.531

a. Dependent Variable: ActionLoyalty

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to understand what may or may not affect action loyalty for alumni who graduated from Texas A&M University- Commerce with their undergraduate degree. To do so we used the cognitive-affective-conation (and action) pattern (Oliver 1997) developed for consumer products as a basis to develop our hypotheses and choose the variables in this study: student involvement, quality of student professor interaction, brand emotional attachment, brand identification, perceived image, brand satisfaction, and action loyalty. Data were collected from over 524 alumni within a week through a survey at random.

After analyzing data we have concluded that there is a positive relationship between student involvement and brand satisfaction, which is consistent with Astin's model of student involvement (1984). This can help the university acknowledge program and organization efforts that get students involved as well as rigorous academic programs which lead to more academic involvement. This can help students become more satisfied with their time at the university. There is also a positive relationship between the quality of interaction between students and professors and brand emotional

attachment. This can lead to encouragement of fostering professor and student relationships, through small classrooms and more one on one interaction that can conclude in more attachment for students towards their university. We determined that there is a positive relationship between brand emotional attachment and brand identification, which can encourage the university to provide more opportunities to develop that emotional attachment that leads to identification with the university. There is also a positive relationship between perceived image and alumni loyalty, and not only that but perceived image is what action loyalty relies the most heavily on. This is an area that can lead the university to strive for a more prestigious image in the eyes of its students and non-students. The more prestigious and successful the university appears, and making sure those successes are communicated, the more alumni are willing to act upon their loyalty.

Limitations (Margin of Error)

Our study had a couple of limitations. The first limitation is the selection of alumni that we had to choose from. The database of the Office of Institutional Advancement that we requested the email addresses from only included emails of alumni who had not chosen to no longer receive any contact from the university. Therefore, our sample of alumni may have been a bit biased in only including alumni who had not already opted out of emails. The second limitation would be the survey itself, specifically the scale used for questions pertaining to perceived image. The scale seemed to cause a bit of confusion for some of the participants. Most of the other questions selected for the survey used a scale of 1 to 5, strongly disagree to strongly agree, however the scales used for the perceived image questions were on a scale of 1 to 5 but from extremely positive to extremely negative, which can be a bit confusing for participants. The other minor limitation is the failure of including an option of zero for the student involvement questions. Some participants received their degree online, therefore did not participate in on campus activities. Although participants could opt to skip the question, some may have chosen an answer without

knowing so. The huge sample size may be another limitation. With over 15,000 emails sent and over 600 responses received, almost all correlations were seen as significant.

Proposed Contributions of the Study

This study is beneficial to Texas A&M - Commerce because it has determined relationships that are vital to creating loyal alumni. Therefore, A&M - Commerce and potentially other university campuses can use the information in order to improve the factors that foster the most loyal alumni during their undergraduate careers. Our study reaffirmed the Oliver theory of cognitive-affective-conation (and action) pattern loyalty after applying it to alumni, not just consumer products. The hypotheses were created using the pattern of loyalty as a basis for the variables. This study has reaffirmed the value from Aaker's and Matthews' research of loyalty's role in the value of a brand, in this case applying it to A&M-Commerce. This study can prove to be valuable to any entity that uses alumni loyalty and programs to help understand the process of creating loyalty. It has helped distinguish the qualities of the most loyal alumni. The Office of Institutional Advancement at Texas A&M University-Commerce will be using this study to help better their programs.

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