



Exploring the Influence of Relationship Quality Dimensions on Students' Loyalty: Evidence from Private Higher Education Institutions in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract:

This study explores the influence of relationship quality dimensions—specifically student–institution, student–faculty, and student–peer relationships—on students' loyalty. The research sample comprised 107 students from two local private institutions. The study adopts a quantitative research design, and data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to undergraduate students in private higher education institutions in the UAE: Sharjah Maritime Academy in Khorfakan and Al Wasl University in Dubai (AWU). The study employed the G-power technique to ascertain the optimal sample size, while data analysis, encompassing both the measurement and structural models, was conducted using SmartPLS 4. The study's results indicate that emotional commitment plays a pivotal role in fostering students' loyalty. This emotional attachment to the institution, faculty, or peers leads to a stronger sense of belonging and investment in the educational experience, ultimately resulting in higher levels of loyalty. Additionally, goal commitment was another significant predictor of students' loyalty. When students are dedicated to achieving their academic and personal goals within the educational institution, they are more likely to remain committed and loyal to the institution throughout their academic journey.

Keywords: Quality of relationships, Student loyalty, Higher education institutions, Trust and commitment, Emotional commitment.

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استقصاء أثر أبعاد جودة العلاقة في ولاء الطلبة: دراسة تطبيقية على مؤسسات التعليم العالي الخاصة في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة

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الملخص:

تناول هذه الدراسة تأثير أبعاد جودة العلاقات -وتحديداً علاقات الطالب بالمؤسسة، الطالب بالهيئة التدريسية، وعلاقات الطالب مع أقرانه- على ولاء الطلاب. تكونت عينة البحث من 107 طالب من مؤسستين خاصتين محليتين: أكاديمية الشارقة البحرية في خورفكان وجامعة الوصل في دبي. تتبنى الدراسة تصميمًا بحثيًا كميًا، وتم جمع البيانات باستخدام استبيان منظم تم توزيعه على طلاب البكالوريوس في مؤسسات التعليم العالي الخاصة في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة. تم استخدام تقنية G-power لتحديد حجم العينة الأمثل، بينما أُجري تحليل البيانات، الذي شمل كلاً من نماذج القياس والنماذج الهيكلية، باستخدام برنامج SmartPLS 4. تشير نتائج الدراسة إلى أن الالتزام العاطفي يلعب دورًا محوريًا في تعزيز ولاء الطلاب، إذ يؤدي هذا الارتباط العاطفي بالمؤسسة أو الهيئة التدريسية أو الأقران إلى شعور أقوى بالانتماء والاستثمار في التجربة التعليمية، مما يترتب عليه مستويات أعلى من الولاء. علاوة على ذلك، كان الالتزام بالهدف أيضًا مؤشرًا مهمًا على ولاء الطلاب، إذ إن تفاني الطلاب في تحقيق أهدافهم الأكاديمية والشخصية ضمن المؤسسة التعليمية يزيد من احتمالية استمرارهم في الالتزام والولاء للمؤسسة طوال مسيرتهم الأكاديمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جودة العلاقات، ولاء الطلبة، مؤسسات التعليم العالي، الثقة والالتزام، الالتزام العاطفي.

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© نُشر هذا البحث وفقاً لشروط الرخصة Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)، التي تسمح بنسخ البحث وتوزيعه ونقله بأي شكل من الأشكال، كما تسمح بتكييف البحث أو تحويله أو الإضافة إليه لأي غرض كان، بما في ذلك الأغراض التجارية، شريطة نسبة العمل إلى صاحبه مع بيان أي تعديلات أُجريت عليه.



1. INTRODUCTION

In higher education institutions (HEIs), the quality of relationships established between students and their institutions, faculty members, and peers plays a critical role in shaping students' attitudes, behaviors, and long-term loyalty. Relationship quality—commonly reflected through trust, commitment, and satisfaction—has increasingly been recognized as a key determinant of students' loyalty and continued engagement with higher education institutions.

Seminal work by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001) introduced the Relationship Quality–Based Student Loyalty (RQSL) model, which represents one of the earliest and most influential theoretical frameworks in this field. Their model posits that dimensions of relationship quality, including perceived service quality, students' trust in the institution, and various forms of commitment (emotional, goal, and cognitive), are central drivers of students' loyalty. Empirical findings from their study confirmed that the quality of teaching and students' emotional commitment significantly influence loyalty outcomes, while service quality and trust exhibit strong, positive, and consistent effects. This work established relationship quality as a foundational construct for understanding student loyalty in higher education.

Building on this theoretical foundation, more recent research has extended the examination of relationship quality by incorporating mediating and contextual variables. For example, Snijders et al. (2021) investigated the influence of relationship quality on students' loyalty through the mediating role of student engagement within the higher education sector in the Netherlands. Their findings demonstrated that high-quality relationships enhance student engagement, which in turn strengthens loyalty-related behaviors. This study highlights the evolving focus of the literature toward understanding the underlying mechanisms through which relationship quality operates in academic settings.

The growing importance of relationship quality and student loyalty must also be understood within the broader global expansion of tertiary education. Tertiary education, defined as post-secondary learning provided by universities, colleges, and vocational institutions (Zhang & Wang, 2024), plays a vital role in economic development, employability, and societal well-being. An educated workforce contributes to productivity and innovation, thereby strengthening economic resilience (Prabhakar, 2024). Beyond economic outcomes, higher education graduates are more likely to demonstrate environmentally responsible behavior, healthier lifestyles, and stronger civic engagement (Nikolaichuk et al., 2019; Shephard & Egan, 2018). Calderon (2018) estimates that global higher education enrolment will exceed 380 million students by 2030, with private institutions playing an increasingly prominent role in meeting this demand.

Within this global context, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has experienced rapid growth in its higher education sector. Since its establishment in 1971, the UAE has transformed its educational system into a modern, internationally oriented sector characterized by a high concentration of English-medium institutions



and international branch campuses (Warner & Burton, 2017). Despite this expansion, national policy initiatives, including the UAE Vision 2020, have emphasized that sustainable development in higher education requires improvements not only in scale but also in quality (Mawgood, 1999). Subsequent policy evaluations and assessment reports have highlighted persistent concerns related to educational effectiveness and student outcomes (ADEC, 2018).

These concerns underscore the importance of examining qualitative and relational dimensions within HEIs, particularly students' perceptions of their interactions with faculty members, institutional structures, and peers. Relationship quality in educational contexts refers to students' evaluations of these interactions and the extent to which they foster trust, commitment, and a sense of belonging (Snijders et al., 2021). Prior studies have shown that positive relational experiences contribute to student satisfaction and loyalty-related behaviors, such as positive word-of-mouth and intentions to continue studies at the same institution (Mavondo & Zaman, 2000; Tsarenko & Mavondo, 2001; Almanwari et al., 2024). Furthermore, Lervik and Johnson (2003) suggest that effective relational communication encourages students to re-enroll and pursue advanced academic programs.

Despite the substantial body of research on relationship quality and loyalty, important gaps remain. In particular, the application of established relationship marketing theories—such as Morgan and Hunt's (1994) commitment–trust theory—within higher education contexts is still limited (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001). Moreover, few studies have simultaneously examined multiple dimensions of relationship quality, especially within private higher education institutions in non-Western contexts, such as the UAE.

In response to these gaps, the present study aims to examine the influence of relationship quality dimensions—specifically student–institution, student–faculty, and student–peer relationships—on students' loyalty in private higher education institutions in the UAE. By empirically validating these dimensions within an underexplored context, the study extends existing relationship quality models and provides practical insights for institutional leaders and policymakers seeking to enhance student loyalty through improved relational strategies.

2.0 Literature Review

Understanding the mechanisms that govern students' loyalty toward higher education institutions (HEIs) has become a matter of paramount importance, particularly given the significant changes experienced by the higher education sector over the past decade. Accordingly, this literature review aims to synthesize prior research related to **relationship quality** and **students' loyalty**, establish the **theoretical foundation** underpinning their association, and identify gaps that justify the present study within the context of private HEIs in the United Arab Emirates. To achieve this objective, the literature review is organized into four main sections: relationship quality, students' loyalty, the theoretical framework, and previous empirical studies.



2.1 Students' Loyalty in Higher Education Institutions

Students' loyalty is a concept widely used in the educational services industry, particularly within the higher education sector, to describe the commitment demonstrated by former students or graduates toward their institution (Paul & Pradhan, 2019; Phonthanukithaworn et al. 2022). It is commonly characterized by students' willingness to recommend their university to others, speak positively about the institution, and return for further studies in the future (Webb & Jagun, 1997).

Students' loyalty also reflects how students feel about their institution and how these feelings are translated into attitudes and behaviours (Chris Siew-Har & Ramasamy, 2022; Helgesen & Nettet 2007). Loyal students are more likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication, recommend the institution to prospective students, and provide continued support after graduation (Al Hassani & Wilkins, 2022; Masserini et al. 2019). Consequently, alumni loyalty contributes to institutional reputation, financial support, and employment opportunities for graduates (Mohammed et al. 2022; Paul & Pradhan, 2019).

The development of strong bonds between students and institutions is central to students' loyalty. Rather than emphasizing causal effects, prior research indicates that students' loyalty is associated with higher levels of engagement, commitment, and continued institutional support after graduation (Kaewrattanapat Farouqa. & Hysaj, 2022). Loyalty is further reflected through students' intentions and behaviors during and after enrollment, such as positive recommendations and active participation in institutional activities (Kim et al. 2022; Snijders et al. 2021).

2.2 Students' Loyalty in Higher Education Institutions

Students' loyalty is a central concept in educational service research and refers to the degree of commitment students demonstrate toward their higher education institution. It is commonly reflected through positive word-of-mouth communication, willingness to recommend the institution to others, continued enrollment, and intentions to pursue further studies at the same institution (Webb & Jagun, 1997).

Students' loyalty also reflects students' attitudes toward their institution and the extent to which these attitudes translate into supportive behaviours (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007). Loyal students are more likely to speak positively about their university, recommend it to prospective students, and maintain long-term affiliations, including alumni support (Al Hassani & Wilkins, 2022).

Prior studies suggest that students' loyalty plays a vital role in sustaining competitive advantage for HEIs by enhancing reputation, enrollment stability, and graduate engagement (Kaewrattanapat et al. 2020). Loyalty intentions and behaviors may emerge during enrollment and continue after graduation through recommendations, institutional advocacy, and participation in extracurricular and alumni activities (Kim et al. 2022; Snijders et al. 2021).



2.3 Theoretical Framework: Commitment–Trust Theory

This study is underpinned by Commitment–Trust Theory, which posits that trust and commitment are fundamental elements for maintaining successful and enduring relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Within the higher education context, this framework suggests that students' trust in their institution and their emotional and goal-related commitment are central mechanisms shaping relational outcomes such as loyalty.

Commitment–Trust Theory has been widely applied in relationship marketing research; however, its application in higher education remains limited. The theory provides a robust foundation for examining how relationship quality dimensions are associated with students' loyalty, rather than implying causal effects, particularly in non-experimental research designs.

2.4 Previous Empirical Studies on Relationship Quality and Students' Loyalty

Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated a strong association between relationship quality dimensions and students' loyalty. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001) developed and tested the Relationship Quality–Student Loyalty (RQSL) model, confirming that service quality, trust, and emotional commitment are significant predictors of students' loyalty within higher education institutions.

Subsequent studies further supported these findings. Snijders et al. (2021) examined the association between relationship quality and students' loyalty through the mediating role of student engagement in the Netherlands and found that affective commitment played a crucial role. Other scholars argue that trust and commitment precede loyalty and jointly contribute to sustaining long-term student–institution relationships (Mohd-Any et al. 2019).

Despite the growing body of international research, studies examining students' perceptions of relationship quality and its association with loyalty in private higher education institutions in the UAE remain limited. This contextual gap highlights the importance and originality of the present study.

2.5 Relationship Quality Dimensions and Hypotheses Development

Relationship marketing theory identifies relationship quality as a key construct influencing relational outcomes. Prior studies conceptualize relationship quality as a multidimensional construct consisting of trust, affective commitment, and satisfaction (Snijders et al. 2018, 2021). Trust refers to students' confidence in the credibility and reliability of faculty and staff, affective commitment reflects students' emotional attachment, and satisfaction represents students' cumulative evaluation of their relationships within the institution.

Based on Commitment–Trust Theory and previous empirical evidence, the present study examines the **association** between relationship quality dimensions and students' loyalty. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- **H1:** Emotional commitment is positively associated with student loyalty.
- **H2:** Goal commitment is positively associated with student loyalty.

- **H3:** Trust is positively associated with student loyalty.

3.0 Methodology

This section outlines the research approach, design, sample characteristics, data collection procedures, measurement instruments, and data analysis techniques employed in the study.

3.1 Research Approach:

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) identify two approaches to such research: qualitative and quantitative. Also, they draw attention to a third one, a mixed approach. For this research, this study employs the quantitative method to recognize the relationship quality aspects that influence students' loyalty in private local higher education institutions in the UAE, Sekaran & Bougie (2019).

3.2 Research Design

In terms of the model conceptualized (Figure 1), the independent variable is relationship quality (RQ) while the dependent variable is students' loyalty. The relationship quality dimensions (RQ) were measured based on three scopes, including trust, goal commitment, and emotional commitment, and their association with students' loyalty. The basic assumption was that the three dimensions could have a direct relationship with students' loyalty, as illustrated in Figure 1.

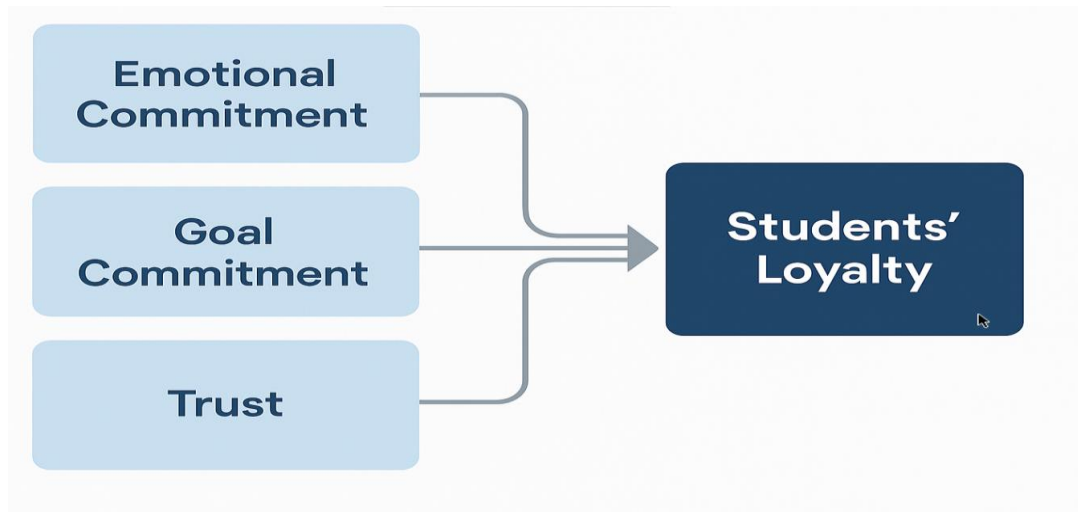


Figure. 1 research design: relationship quality dimensions

3.3 Sample

The study's sample consists of 107 students from Sharjah Maritime Academy in Sharjah and Al Wasl University in Dubai. A convenience sampling technique was used because a complete sampling frame was unavailable. The sample size was determined using G*Power to achieve a satisfactory statistical power of 80%, which indicated a minimum sample size of 77 participants.



Demographics:

- **Age:** 18–25 years
- **Gender:** Male and female students
- **Educational level:** Undergraduate programs in various disciplines
- **Background:** Local private higher education students in the UAE

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The survey was distributed through Google Forms. All 107 responses were completed, and no partially completed questionnaires were included. Extreme cases were checked using the Mahalanobis Distance outlier test, and no outliers were detected.

3.5 Questionnaire Design

The study employed a structured questionnaire to measure relationship quality and student loyalty. The questionnaire was designed to meet research objectives while ensuring clarity, minimizing respondent fatigue, and maintaining cost-effectiveness (Sekaran & Bougie, 2019).

- **Sections:** 3 sections covering student–institution, student–faculty, and student–peer relationships.
- **Item Types:** 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), measuring attitudes and perceptions toward each dimension.
- **Reliability and Validity:** Pre-tested via a pilot study with 15 students to ensure clarity and internal consistency; Cronbach's alpha values exceeded 0.7 for all constructs.
- **Source/Design:** Questions adapted from validated instruments in previous studies (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Snijders et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2003).

3.6 Measurement Instruments

this study employed a Likert scale questionnaire format. Likert scales have been described by Udaya Ngani et al. (2006) as proper and widely used in the attitudinal measurement. It is commonly used to measure activities, with the scale ranging from very low to very high. In this study, the scale represents respondents' attitudes from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree, indicating each factor's dramatic level of influence.

In addition, the Likert scale is a psychometric scale used in instruments to tap respondents' extent of agreement or otherwise in a given statement. The adopted Likert scale in this study is originally a 5-point scale that ranges from Strongly Agree (SA), Agree(A), Neutral(N), Disagree(D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Many researchers will prefer to use longer scales by adding options. Other researchers rather use an even number of scales like 4-point and 6-point scales. According to Neuman (2014) longer scales allow the respondents to independently choose the options without being compelled. From another perspective, Malhotra et al. (2006) and Roberts et al. (2003) disclose that providing "a no-opinion" or neutral option tampers with the value of the data; this is perhaps obvious in various research conducted across the globe.



Source of measurement instrument

Sources of measurement instrument. S/N	Variables	Sources	Remarks
1.	Students Loyalty	Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001	Adopted
2.	Trust	Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001	Adopted
3.	Goal Commitment	Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001	Adopted
4.	Emotional commitment	Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001	Adopted

3.7 Common Method Variance

Given that data were collected using a self-report survey, potential **common method variance (CMV)** was considered. Procedural remedies were implemented to minimize CMV, including the use of clear and simple language, avoidance of ambiguous or double-barreled items, and full labeling of scale points. Respondents were also assured of anonymity to reduce evaluation apprehension and response bias.

3.8 Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. PLS-SEM is appropriate for predictive research models involving latent constructs and is particularly suitable for studies with relatively small sample sizes and non-normal data distributions.

The analysis followed a two-step approach. First, the measurement model was assessed to evaluate reliability and validity. Second, the structural model was examined to test the hypothesized relationships among the study variables.

4.0 Results

This chapter presents the empirical results of the study. The results are reported objectively, without methodological explanation, and are organized into measurement model assessment and structural model evaluation.

4.1 Measurement Model Results

Utilizing the SmartPLS (4) tools, the partial least squares (PLS) approach was employed to assess the measurement model (Ringle, et al., 2022). The measurement model evaluation focused on examining item reliability, internal consistency, and construct validity. Item reliability was assessed through indicator loadings, while internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Convergent validity was examined using the average variance extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity was assessed through the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, following established guidelines (Richter, et al., 2017). The results indicate that the measurement model meets the recommended criteria and is suitable for subsequent structural model assessment.



4.2 Assessment of the measurement model

The internal consistency of constructs has been tested using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability indices, which must be at least 0.7. The average variance extracted (AVE) values should be more than 0.50, and second, the factor loadings of all measuring items should be greater than 0.70 to ensure convergent validity (Hair et al., 2017). Table 1 shows the final Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, factor loading, and AVE values. They are all greater than the cutoff points.

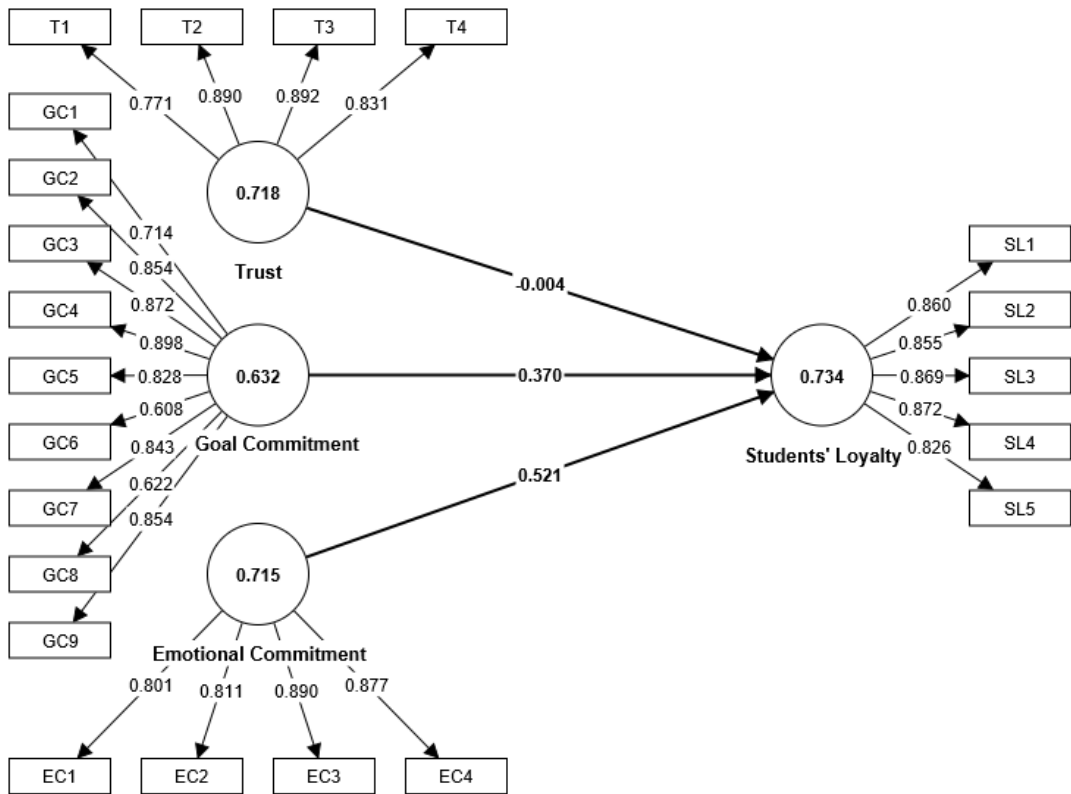


Figure 2: Measurement model.

Table 1

Convergent Validity

Constructs	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance extracted (AVE)
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Trust	T1	0.771	0.869	0.910	0.718
	T2	0.890			
	T3	0.892			
	T4	0.831			
Emotional Commitment	EC1	0.801	0.867	0.909	0.715
	EC2	0.811			
	EC3	0.890			
	EC4	0.877			
Goal Commitment	GC1	0.714	0.924	0.938	0.632
	GC2	0.854			
	GC3	0.872			
	GC4	0.898			
	GC5	0.828			
	GC6	0.608			
	GC7	0.843			
	GC8	0.622			
	GC9	0.854			
Students' Loyalty	SL1	0.860	0.909	0.932	0.734
	SL2	0.855			
	SL3	0.869			
	SL4	0.872			
	SL5	0.826			

The square root of the AVEs should be bigger than the correlations among other variables to ensure discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 2 demonstrates that no values of the components was greater than the square root of AVE (the bolded principal diagonal cells). The Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations was also used in this study because the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion has been contested, with detractors questioning its accuracy in identifying a lack of discriminant validity in variance-based SEM studies (Henseler, 2016; Henseler, et al., 2015). The HTMT is the average of the Heterotrait-Monotrait method correlations (i.e., the correlations of indicators across constructs assessing various phenomena). To discriminate between two components, the HTMT should be much lower than 0.90 (Henseler, 2016). The HTMT ratios as shown in Table 2 are well below the threshold.



Table 2

Discriminant Validity

Fornell & Larcker Criterion

Constructs	Emotional	Goal	Students'	
	Commitment	Commitment	Loyalty	Trust
Emotional Commitment	0.846			
Goal Commitment	0.774	0.795		
Students' Loyalty	0.804	0.770	0.857	
Trust	0.687	0.695	0.611	0.848

HTMT

Constructs	Emotional	Goal	Students'	
	Commitment	Commitment	Loyalty	Trust
Emotional Commitment				
Goal Commitment	0.860			
Students' Loyalty	0.800	0.836		
Trust	0.789	0.768	0.679	

Furthermore, high correlations may lead to multi-collinearity issues; thus, we examined the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) for all pathways to rule out this danger. All VIFs were lower than 5, which suggests that our model has no multicollinearity issues, according to analytical findings (see Table 3) (Hair, et al., 2012). Consequently, the model has the required discriminant validity.

Table 3-
Results

Relationships	Std. Beta	Std. Dev.	t-values	p-values	Confidence Intervals		F2	VIF	Q2	R2	Decision
					LLCI	ULCI					
EC -> SL	0.52						0.32	2.79			Supported
GC-> SL	0.37	0.111	4.685	0.000	0.3	0.711	5	2	0.62	0.70	Supported
TR-> SL	-	0.113	3.277	0.001	0.155	0.578	1	9	1	1	Not Supported
	0.00						0.00	2.16			Supported
TR-> SL	4	0.081	0.053	0.958	-0.177	0.141	0	6			Not Supported

4.3 Assessment of the Structural Model

The structural model may be used to test the hypotheses if the measurement model is acceptable.



To examine the structural model, we used the SEM method based on SmartPLS 4. (See Table 3). Following Streukens and Leroi-Werelds' (2016) recommendation for the PLS-SEM context, the boot-strapping method was carried out using 10,000 randomly generated sub-samples to increase the degree of accuracy. This was done to assess the statistical significance of the route coefficients. Hence, Table 3 and Figure 3 show that two of three suggested hypotheses have received empirical confirmation. Specifically, the hypothesized relationship between emotional commitment and students' loyalty (H1) was confirmed to be significant ($\beta = 0.521$, $t = 4.685$) and supported. The results support hypothesis H2, which predicted a favorable correlation between goal commitment and students' loyalty ($\beta = 0.370$, $t = 3.277$). However, H3, which posited that trust is positively related to students' loyalty, was not significant ($\beta = -0.004$, $t = 0.0053$) and hence not supported.

Furthermore, the model fits the data well in the SRMR, with a value of 0.073, below the cutoff of 0.08. (Henseler, et al., 2015; Hu & Bentler, 1998). Additionally, the R2 coefficients show that the modeled constructs explain a significant portion of the students' loyalty variance, which is at a reasonable level, considerably over 0.701. On the other hand, the observed 17 percent of unexplained variation suggests that there may be more variables beyond the purview of the conceptual model provided that might enhance explanations of students' loyalty. Further, the f-squared (which indicated the contribution of the independent variable to the R2) values of the significant relationships were satisfactory (0.325 and 0.161) for emotional and goal commitment, respectively.

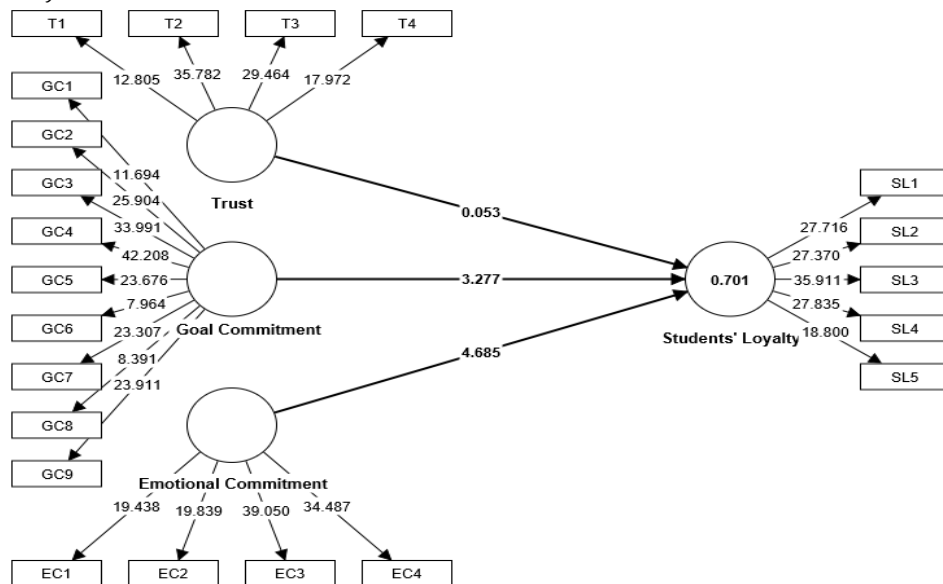


Figure 3: Structural model

Last but not least, this research assesses PLSpredict by Shmueli et al (2019). Shmueli et al (2019) developed a novel method for out-of-sample prediction, and is now part of SmartPLS as the function



PLSpredict. The foundation of PLSpredict is the K-fold cross-validation⁵⁸ idea. The process divides the data set into K equal portions (K in our instance = 10). It estimates the model K times on K1 data sets using r as the number of repetitions (r in our case = 10 since it is a fair trade-off between accuracy and running time). If Q^2 is greater than zero, the model (PLS) exceeds the linear model's most naive benchmark (LM). The comparison between the root mean squared error (RMSE) of prediction values produced with PLSpredict and the RMSE values obtained with other methods is another significant indicator of the predictive capacity (LM). The findings indicated that the model had a high level of predictive power since all the PLS RMSE and MAE values and less than that of LM as shown in Table 4.

Table 4
PLS predict

	Q ² predict	PLS-SEM_RMSE	PLS-SEM_MAE	LM_RMSE	LM_MAE
SL1	0.423	0.919	0.688	0.970	0.753
SL2	0.435	0.974	0.771	1.095	0.879
SL3	0.594	0.747	0.538	0.901	0.617
SL4	0.544	0.873	0.652	1.052	0.779
SL5	0.437	0.887	0.661	1.000	0.737

5.0 Discussion and Interpretation

In this section, the researchers recognize the significance of relationship quality within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and its profound impact on students' loyalty. They emphasize that establishing and maintaining robust connections with students are imperative for the enduring success of HEIs. To facilitate this endeavor, marketers in higher education have directed their efforts toward comprehending relationship quality. The discussion below presents evidence of the impact of Relation Quality on students' loyalty.

5.1 Emotional Commitment and Students' Loyalty:

The researchers present evidence concerning emotional commitment and its profound influence on students' loyalty. They specifically reference the first hypothesis, which posits a significant positive correlation between emotional commitment and students' loyalty. Furthermore, the study's findings are consistent with prior research conducted by various authors, including (Alkaisi, 2023; Aziz et al., 2021; Chen, 2020; Naghneh et al., 2017; Guilbault, 2016; Encinas and Cavazos, 2017; Şahin, et al., 2014; Tran, et al., 2020; Wang, et al., 2016).

Emotional commitment, which pertains to students' attachment and dedication to their academic institutions, flourishes over time as they encounter positive experiences and cultivate a sense of security in their affiliation with these institutions.

Emotional commitment is discussed further, emphasizing its importance in higher education (Snijders et al., 2018, 2021, 2022). The researchers quote Baptista's argument that "teaching, learning, and research in



higher education require not only cognitive commitment but also emotional commitment from all involved, including both academics and students” (2021, pp.15). Therefore, students who feel emotionally connected to their institutions are more satisfied and likely to show behavioral loyalty where they continue their academic studies at the same school in the future and attitudinal loyalty where they speak positively about their institution.

5.2 Goal Commitment and Students' Loyalty

The researchers discuss the impact of goal commitment on students' loyalty, addressing the second hypothesis. The findings of this research support the idea that there is a significant and positive relationship between goal commitment and students' loyalty. This finding is consistent with numerous prior investigations conducted by investigations (Curtis, et al., 2020; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Oliver, 2014; Rojas-Méndez et al., 2009; Pedro et al., 2019; Lau, 2012). Goal commitment refers to students' dedication and full devotion to their main academic and career objectives.

The researchers suggest that students' belief in the growth potential of their future careers or the availability of different occupational specialties is related to their level of commitment to their chosen majors Riley (Collins, & Collins, 2019). Students who perceive their chosen profession aligning with their personal ambitions and skillsets are likelier to be loyal and satisfied with their academic institution.

5.3 Trust and Students' Loyalty:

The researchers address the third hypothesis, which proposed a positive and significant relationship between trust and students' loyalty. However, the findings do not support this hypothesis, contrary to the findings of previous studies by (Athiyaman, 1997; Schertzer & Schertzer, 2004; Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Ismail, et al., 2019; Thomas, 2011). Trust is the degree to which relationship partners see one another as trustworthy and nice. It reduces ambiguity and opportunism while fostering openness and shared goals (Singh, & Jasial, 2020).

This study's findings align with those of an unpublished Ph.D. thesis by Alkaisi, 2023 where both examined the relationship between trust and students' loyalty in educational settings. Both studies independently arrived at the same conclusion, revealing that their respective data analyses did not support the initial hypothesis proposing a positive and significant relationship between trust and students' loyalty. These results foster the understanding of the complexities involved in shaping students' loyalty, demanding more exploration of additional factors affecting their loyalty to educational institutions and opening ways for further research to recognize the core dynamics more thoroughly.

The researchers explore potential reasons for the lack of significant impact of trust on students' loyalty. They suggest that cultural factors, such as power distance, may play a role in influencing students' perceptions



of trust (Hofstede, 1980). In the UAE, where the study was conducted, a high-power distance culture may lead students to view faculty and staff as unquestionable authorities, reducing their expectations of trust.

Furthermore, the researchers indicate that emotional commitment is strongly related to students' satisfaction. As emotional attachment to an institution increases, the significance of trust may diminish, as students may overlook faults due to their positive emotional connection.

Overall, the discussion provides valuable insights into the relationship between relationship quality factors and students' loyalty. Emotional and goal commitment emerge as crucial drivers of loyalty, while cultural and emotional factors may influence the impact of trust. These findings contribute to understanding student loyalty in higher education settings and offer implications for institutional practices to enhance student satisfaction and loyalty.

6.0 Conclusion

This study set out to examine the influence of relationship quality dimensions on students' loyalty within local private higher education institutions in the United Arab Emirates. Using a quantitative research design and SmartPLS (4) to assess both the measurement and structural models, the study provides empirical evidence on how different dimensions of relationship quality shape students' loyalty in this specific educational context.

The findings indicate that relationship quality, as a multidimensional construct, plays a meaningful role in fostering student loyalty. In particular, emotional commitment emerged as the strongest predictor of students' loyalty, underscoring the importance of students' emotional attachment to their institution, faculty members, and peers. This suggests that when students feel emotionally connected and valued, they are more likely to develop long-term loyalty toward their institution.

In addition, goal commitment was found to have a significant positive impact on students' loyalty. This highlights the importance of alignment between students' academic goals and the institution's educational offerings, support systems, and learning environment. When students perceive that their institution supports their personal and academic aspirations, their sense of commitment and loyalty is strengthened.

In contrast, the results revealed that trust did not have a significant effect on students' loyalty in the context of this study. This finding suggests that while trust remains an important relational element, it may not independently drive loyalty among students in local private higher education institutions in the UAE when emotional and goal-based commitments are taken into account. This outcome provides a more nuanced understanding of the relative importance of relationship quality dimensions and indicates that not all relational factors exert equal influence on loyalty.

From a practical perspective, the findings emphasize the need for private higher education institutions to prioritize strategies that enhance students' emotional engagement and support their academic goals. By



fostering supportive relationships, encouraging meaningful interactions, and aligning institutional services with students' expectations and ambitions, universities can strengthen student loyalty, retention, and positive word-of-mouth.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on student loyalty by offering context-specific evidence from the UAE and by distinguishing the relative effects of relationship quality dimensions. The findings provide valuable insights for university administrators and policymakers seeking to enhance student loyalty and institutional sustainability in an increasingly competitive higher education environment.

7.0 Limitations

The study was limited to private academic institutions, and did not address public or international higher education institutions in the UAE. Therefore, the results of the study may differ if applied to these institutions due to their different academic, cultural environment. In addition, the limited number of 107 students from two private universities in the UAE might limit the accuracy of the findings. Moreover, the research was applied merely to Khorfakkan and Dubai cities, so the findings may not apply to students in different parts of the Emirates, considering the UAE has many many higher education institutions with varied characteristics.

Statements and Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable. This study did not involve human participants or animals requiring ethical approval.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Author Declaration

The authors affirm that all data, materials, and content presented in this article are original and have not been plagiarized or reproduced without appropriate citation. This work was carried out independently and has not been submitted for publication elsewhere.

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