

# Brand image, service quality, and customer retention: Basis for improved customer relationship management framework for international students

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## Abstract

The international student market represents a significant and growing segment in the education sector. Retaining these students is crucial for universities' success. This study investigated the interplay between brand image, service quality, and customer retention in the context of international students and developed a framework for improved customer relationship management specifically for the international students. The study aimed to examine brand image, service quality and customer retention among higher education institutions (HEIs) which have international students in the Philippines and was made the basis in developing an improved customer relationship management framework. Descriptive design was utilized to understand the current perceptions and experiences of international students regarding the university's brand image, service quality, and their relationship with retention. A total of 413 samples were collected from Chinese international students attending to 30 Philippine universities. The respondents were Chinese students studying in the Philippines because higher education institutions primarily cater to students as their major clientele. The survey questionnaire was used as it is a well-suited data gathering instrument for this study due to its ability to efficiently collect standardized data on the specific variables of interest from a large population of international students. Based on the findings, the brand image of the university has moderate influence on the satisfaction of international students in terms of competence, trustworthiness, and differentiation. The respondents have moderate agreement on the service quality provided by higher education institutions as to reliability, empathy and tangibility. They generally agreed on all the indicators for customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and customer engagement in relation to customer retention in higher education institutions. A high significant relationship was found between brand image, service quality and customer retention and an improved customer relationship management framework was developed for universities. Results of the study may empower universities to develop targeted strategies and a data-driven CRM framework to improve brand image, service quality, and ultimately, retain a thriving international student population.

**Keywords:** brand image, service quality, customer retention, customer relationship management

## **Brand image, service quality, and customer retention: Basis for improved customer relationship management framework for international students**

### **1. Introduction**

In an increasingly globalized world, higher education institutions in the Philippines are striving to create an environment that not only attracts but also retains international students (Dioquino et al., 2018). These institutions recognize the value of international students, not only as a source of revenue but also as contributors to cultural diversity and global perspectives on campus. To achieve this goal, it is imperative to understand the intricate dynamics of customer relationship management (CRM) in the context of international students. This research examines the brand image, service quality, and customer retention, culminating in the development of an improved CRM framework tailored to the unique needs and expectations of international students.

In today's increasingly competitive higher education landscape, universities strive not only to attract the best and brightest students but also to ensure that the students who attend have a positive and fulfilling educational experience. A key factor that influences students' choice of university and their overall satisfaction during their academic journey is the brand image of the university. This paper explored the complex relationship between brand image and student satisfaction in the context of Philippine higher education. The researcher delved into how a strong brand image enhances student satisfaction and how, in turn, student satisfaction affects a university's brand image. Brand image encompasses a set of attributes that define a university's reputation, values, and identity in the eyes of students and other stakeholders. To investigate the link between brand image and student satisfaction, an empirical study was conducted by distributing a web-based questionnaire. This study collected data on the following key factors: competence, trustworthiness, and differentiation. To address the difficulties encountered by higher education institutions within a globalized, competitive, and rapidly evolving context, universities must strive to not only attract a varied and highly skilled student population, but also guarantee that their academic curricula and support services can accommodate the diverse and evolving needs and expectations of students (Cuaton, 2020). Within this environment, the interaction between service quality and consumers satisfaction has emerged as a focal point of interest for institutions of higher education (Putra, 2020).

Service quality involves a multitude of elements, encompassing academic services, administrative efficacy, student support services, infrastructure and facilities, and technological integration (Putra, 2020). These factors, both independently and collectively, exert significant influence on students' experiences and perspectives throughout their educational trajectory. The provision of services can have a significant impact on the level of satisfaction experienced by students, thereby influencing the reputation and long-term viability of the university. Hence, this study expands upon existing scholarly works to examine and evaluate the correlation between service quality in Philippine higher education and the satisfaction levels of Chinese students studying in the Philippines, specifically focusing on the dimensions of Reliability, Empathy, and Tangibility. In the modern educational paradigm, universities are constantly looking for ways to differentiate themselves from their peers and remain attractive to prospective and current students. In this quest, the correlation between customer retention and student satisfaction has become a key issue in higher education. Universities are increasingly recognizing that ensuring the satisfaction of current students is not only a moral responsibility but also a strategic imperative (Dioquino et al., 2018).

This paper provides insight into the complex relationship between brand image, service quality and customer retention. It explores how maintaining a student-centered focus can increase student satisfaction, contribute to their overall educational experience, and shape their perceptions of the university. In addition, the study investigated how satisfied students are more likely to continue attending, thus positively impacting the university's customer retention rates. This study aimed to bridge the gap in one's understanding of how universities can enhance the experience of international students by investigating the interplay of brand image, service quality, and customer

retention within a CRM framework. This study has both practical significances and theoretical significances.

This study may have practical implications that contribute to the attraction and retention of international students. This provided valuable information that can assist universities in formulating strategies to both attract and retain international students, ensuring their continued engagement throughout their academic experience. It also has the potential to enhance resource allocation. Through the identification of the primary factors influencing customer retention among international students, colleges can enhance their decision-making process about the allocation of resources. This research has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the field of strategic marketing. The results obtained from this study have the potential to provide valuable insights that can guide the formulation and implementation of focused marketing tactics. Universities have the potential to leverage the insights acquired from this study to bolster their brand reputation and provide service excellence that corresponds to the anticipated standards of international students. Consequently, this can result in more efficient marketing endeavors and, ultimately, increased enrollment rates.

This study has the potential to contribute to the theoretical comprehension of CRM in higher education. This study expands upon the existing theoretical framework of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) as it pertains to the specific setting of higher education. Further, it examined the potential use of customer relationship management (CRM) principles within the context of universities, specifically focusing on the management and cultivation of relationships with international students. This work expands the existing academic knowledge of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) by applying its principles to address the specific issues encountered in the international higher education industry. Furthermore, this research endeavor has the potential to incorporate the three fundamental elements of brand image, service quality, and customer retention into a holistic framework. This integration offers a comprehensive viewpoint on the interplay and impact of these aspects, presenting a significant theoretical basis for future investigations in the fields of CRM and international education.

**Objectives of the Study** - The study aimed to examine brand image, service quality and customer retention among higher education institutions (HEIs) which have international students in the Philippines and was made the basis in developing an improved customer relationship management framework. Specifically, the study determined the influence of brand image on the satisfaction levels of international students in higher education institutions in terms of competence, trustworthiness, and differentiation; assessed the service quality of international students in terms of reliability, empathy, and tangibility; determined customer retention in terms of customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and customer engagement; tested the significant relationship in terms of brand image, service quality and customer retention and developed an improved customer relationship management framework to enhance the satisfaction of international students in higher education institutions.

## 2. Methods

**Research Design** - The study used descriptive research design as a valuable tool for various fields. It provides a foundational understanding of a topic and helps identify areas for further investigation through more complex research designs. It is a type of research method used to systematically gather information about a phenomenon, situation, or population. Its main objective is to describe the characteristics, frequencies, trends, and categories of the topic being studied (Creswell, et. al., 2018). Descriptive design aimed at gathering data about the status of phenomena and it highlights the presentation of actual picture of the topic being studied. In this study, it was used to describe the current state of brand image, service quality, and their links to retention. The study can pinpoint areas where the university can enhance its approach to international students.

**Participants of the Study** - For this study, a total of 413 samples were collected from Chinese international students attending 30 Philippine universities. The respondents were Chinese students studying in the Philippines because higher education institutions primarily cater to students as their major clientele. The feedback provided by students plays a crucial role in shaping the institution's brand image, enhancing the quality of services, and ensuring student retention. The research aimed to understand the experiences of a specific group - Chinese

international students in the Philippines. This focus allowed for a deeper understanding of their unique needs and perspectives within that particular educational context. Chinese students represent a significant portion of the international student population in the Philippines. Focusing on this group allows the study to gather valuable insights applicable to a sizeable segment.

***Instruments of the Study*** - In this paper, relevant questionnaires from authoritative sources were used and modified with reference to expert opinions to form a questionnaire, and this questionnaire was measured using the Likert 4 Star scale method. To collect data for the research, an online survey was conducted via WeChat groups and emails. The questionnaire which is shown in the appendices includes three parts with a total of 45 items. Survey questionnaires required numerical replies, enabling the data to be examined using statistical methods. The first part is related to the variable 'Brand Image' with three dimensions (Competence, Trustworthiness and Differentiation). Each dimension in part one has 5 items, which are adopted from the research conducted by Sultan, et. al., (2019). The second part is related to the variable 'Service Quality' with three dimensions (Reliability, Empathy and Tangibility). The 15 items in part two were modified based on the study made by Latif et al. (2019) and Supriyanto et al., (2021). The third part of the questionnaire is related to the variable 'Customer Retention' with three dimensions (Customer satisfaction, Customer loyalty and Customer engagement) while the last part of the was adopted from the research by Ali (2021).

The Higher Institutions' Brand Image, Service Quality, and Customer Retention Instrument demonstrates an elevated level of consistency, as evidenced by the Cronbach's Alpha value of (.969). The validation of this assertion is supported by the high Excellence remark received for Brand Image (0.935). Additionally, it is further confirmed by the positive results obtained for competence (0.866), trustworthiness (0.806), and differentiation (0.860). Furthermore, the validation is reinforced by the Excellent remark received for Service Quality (0.911), and further confirmed by the positive results obtained for Reliability (0.848), Tangibility (0.812), and the acceptable result obtained for empathy (0.765). The instrument's reliability index test was confirmed by the Excellent remark from Customer Retention (.925), as well as the good results from Customer Satisfaction (.925) and Customer Loyalty (.844), and the Acceptable result from Customer Retention (.708). Consequently, the researcher is now able to proceed with the implementation of the survey utilizing the previously specified instrument.

***Data Gathering Procedure*** - All parts of the questionnaire which were adopted and modified to tailor to the study's objectives were sent to the respondents through online. The international students who were identified as respondents were contacted through online. The survey link was sent to them for easy access and collection. Convenience sampling was used to survey students who are easily accessible, such as those attending universities located in Manila and nearby province and those enrolled in certain programs. The questionnaire underwent a content validation to help verify if the questionnaire items are relevant and understandable to specific respondents. It also ensured that the questionnaire accurately captures the information which is intended to measure. Reliability testing also was done to assess whether the questionnaire produces consistent results over time or across different groups of respondents. Reliability testing helps identify inconsistencies and improve the questionnaire's stability. After the gathering of data, all responses were tabulated and were further interpreted and analyzed to address the objectives.

***Data Analysis*** - The study employed weighted mean and rank as statistical methods to evaluate the impact of brand image on the satisfaction levels of international students in higher education institutions. Specifically, the dimensions of Competence, Trustworthiness, and Differentiation were considered. Additionally, the researchers utilized these methods to assess the perceptions of Service Quality among international students in higher education institutions in the Philippines, focusing on the dimensions of Reliability, Empathy, and Tangibility. Lastly, the study employed weighted mean and rank to investigate customer retention, considering Customer Satisfaction, Customer Loyalty, and Customer Engagement. The Shapiro-Wilk Test yielded p-values below the significance threshold of 0.05 for all variables, indicating that the dataset did not exhibit a normal distribution. Consequently, the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (rho) was employed as a component of the non-parametric statistical tests to ascertain the presence of a statistically significant association. The statistical analyses

were conducted using SPSS version 28.

**Ethical Considerations** - The research adhered to ethical considerations to ensure that all acquired information was used solely for research purposes, hence upholding the research's quality and integrity. The researcher also obtained the informed consent of Chinese international students in the Philippines by means of written correspondence and communication. This ensured that the intended participants are adequately informed and prepared to provide responses to the pertinent inquiries involved in the research. Additionally, the study implemented measures to safeguard the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants by refraining from requesting their personal identification information while they completed the surveys. The researcher also guaranteed that the respondents provide their responses to the questionnaires willingly and in accordance with their own volition. Finally, this also guaranteed the absence of any harm or injury to the participants of the study, with utmost emphasis placed on their safety and security.

### 3. Results and discussion

Table 1  
*Summary Table on Influence of Brand Image on the Satisfaction Levels*

Key Result Areas	Composite Mean	VI	Rank
Competence	2.96	Agree	3
Trustworthiness	2.97	Agree	2
Differentiation	2.99	Agree	1
Grand Composite Mean	2.97	Agree	

*Legend: 3.50-4.00=Strongly Agree; 2.50-3.49=Agree; 1.50-2.49=Disagree; 1.00-1.49=Strongly Disagree*

Table 1 summarizes the influence of brand image on the satisfaction level of the respondents which has a grand composite mean of 2.97. In today's competitive landscape, international students are bombarded with choices. A brand that differentiates itself from competitors by offering unique value propositions, experiences, or features is more likely to capture attention and build positive university brand image. Differentiation tops the dimensions of brand image which implies that international students' specific needs were met. According to Beverland, et al. (2020), Differentiation often involves understanding and catering to specific customer needs that might be unmet by competitors. Fulfilling these unmet needs through innovative products, services, or approaches leads to a higher level of customer satisfaction. Effective differentiation can create an emotional connection with customers. A brand that stands out for its commitment to sustainability, exceptional customer service, or a unique company culture can resonate with consumers on a deeper level, leading to increased satisfaction and loyalty. It is interesting to note that differentiation can influence how customers perceive the value they receive for their money. When a brand offers a distinct advantage or addresses a specific pain point in a way that competitors do not, customers are more likely to feel they are getting a good deal and experience higher satisfaction (Hajikhani, et. al., 2018).

Table 2  
*Summary Table on Service Quality Perceptions*

Key Result Areas	Composite Mean	VI	Rank
Reliability	2.96	Agree	2
Empathy	2.95	Agree	3
Tangibility	2.98	Agree	1
Grand Composite Mean	2.96	Agree	

*Legend: 3.50-4.00=Strongly Agree; 2.50-3.49=Agree; 1.50-2.49=Disagree; 1.00-1.49=Strongly Disagree*

Table 2 presents service quality perceptions and demonstrates how service quality affects satisfaction levels in three important outcome domains: Reliability, Empathy, and Tangibility. The overall average of 2.96 is within the "Agree" category. The respondents' consensus is apparent, as all three primary result categories are classified as "Agree," demonstrating a widespread agreement with the positive influence of service quality on Reliability, Empathy, and Tangibility. The composite mean represents the average score for each main outcome area, indicating the level of agreement on the influence of service quality on that area.

The average Tangibility score is 2.98, which is top-ranked and falls inside the "Agree" category based on the range of 2.50-3.49. The data suggest that the respondents agree that service quality has a beneficial effect on Tangibility. The term "Tangibility" pertains to the tangible and actual elements of an educational experience or institution. Firstly, the study of cognitive processes involved in perceiving and engaging with stimuli. Tangibility is a significant factor in influencing students' views and involvement in their educational experiences, according to psychological analysis. Visible indicators of an institution's dedication to student success and well-being include tangible factors like campus infrastructure, amenities, and resources. The significance of observational learning and environmental signals in shaping individual behavior and attitudes is emphasized by social cognitive theory (Gruber et al., 2022). Studies have demonstrated that students develop opinions about the quality of an institution by observing concrete indicators such as the appearance of the campus, the available technology, and the sporting facilities (Raza et al., 2020). The presence of well-maintained facilities and up-to-date materials in the learning environment improves students' feelings of belonging, motivation, and academic involvement. Therefore, considering the psychological aspect, the tangibility of an institution has an impact on how students perceive its reputation, legitimacy, and supportiveness, ultimately shaping their overall educational experience. In addition, the consideration of brand image and reputation is also important. In the realm of higher education administration, tangible factors contribute to the establishment of a favorable brand image and reputation for the school. Brand management concepts prioritize the significance of maintaining consistent branding across all touch points to communicate a cohesive brand identity and message (Keller, 2021).

Tangible components such as the physical campus, advanced facilities, and contemporary technology are concrete representations of an institution's principles and dedication to achieving high standards. Studies have demonstrated that students view universities with advanced physical facilities and contemporary resources as more renowned and credible (Panda et al., 2019). Concrete favorable experiences contribute to students' recognition, contentment, and allegiance to the institution, thereby improving its reputation and competitiveness in the higher education market (Ghosh et al., 2023). Thus, from a managerial standpoint, it is crucial to invest in real assets to enhance institutional visibility, distinguish oneself from competitors, and ensure long-term viability. Furthermore, the matter of student recruitment and retention is of utmost importance. Physical objects or materials are essential in both attracting and keeping students. The physical components of a campus, including its infrastructure, facilities, and resources, have a significant role in shaping students' opinions about how well the institution aligns with their needs, how compatible it is with their goals, and how desirable it is as a place of study. According to social identity theory, individuals obtain a feeling of belonging and identification from shared physical environments and experiences (Scheepers, et. al., 2019). While selecting a college or university, students place importance on aspects such as the visual appeal of the campus, up-to-date facilities, and access to advanced technology. The presence of well-equipped physical facilities and modern resources plays a crucial role in distinguishing higher education institutions in a competitive environment. These factors have a significant impact on students' decisions to enroll in a particular institution and their long-term dedication to it. Hence, it is imperative to invest in tangible resources to attract and retain students, enhance institutional enrollment, and foster student achievement and contentment.

The mean value of Reliability is 2.96, falling inside the "Agree" category based on the range of 2.50-3.49. The data suggest that the respondents agree that service quality has a beneficial effect on reliability. The level of dependability has a substantial impact on students' contentment and confidence in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Razinkina et al. (2018) highlight that providing consistent academic support, quick feedback, and reliable administrative services can build trust, decrease uncertainty, and improve students' overall satisfaction and engagement. Moreover, the average composite value of Empathy is 2.95, which is categorized as "Agree". This indicates that there is a similar degree of agreement regarding the beneficial influence of service quality on empathy. Empathy is essential in influencing students' experiences and levels of satisfaction. According to Latif et al. (2019), educational institutions that give importance to the well-being of students, provide individualized assistance, and show sincere concern and comprehension, promote favorable connections, trust, and contentment among students. Kanduri, et. al., (2023) highlighted the significance of empathy as a distinguishing feature, alongside tangibles and

reliability, due to its direct influence on emotional well-being.

Table 3  
Summary Table on Customer Retention

Key Result Areas	Composite Mean	VI	Rank
Customer Satisfaction	2.99	Agree	1
Customer Loyalty	2.96	Agree	2
Customer Engagement	2.95	Agree	3
Grand Composite Mean	2.97	Agree	

Legend: 3.50-4.00=Strongly Agree;2.50-3.49=Agree;1.50-2.49=Disagree;1.00-1.49=Strongly Disagree

Table 3 presents customer retention and demonstrates how customer retention affects international students' satisfaction levels in three important outcome domains: Customer Satisfaction, Customer Loyalty, and Customer Engagement. The overall average of 2.97 is within the "Agree" category, further confirming that respondents agree on the positive influence of Customer Retention in all areas examined. The composite mean represents the average score for each main outcome area, indicating the level of agreement on the influence of Customer Retention on that area. Amidst the changing environment of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), it is crucial to comprehend and enhance customer retention, particularly considering the growing globalization of education. Retention techniques are of utmost importance in affecting the satisfaction levels of international students, whose experiences are influenced by distinct obstacles and expectations, across many areas (Nunes et al., 2021). Customer retention in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) encompasses the deliberate tactics and procedures implemented by these institutions to guarantee the continuation of enrolled students' academic pursuits, sustain their active involvement, and eventually facilitate the attainment of their educational objectives (Manogharan, 2018). Retention assumes greater significance in an international setting, mostly due to issues such as cultural disparities, difficulties in adaptation, and divergent expectations (Mashenene et al., 2019).

The average Customer Satisfaction score is the top ranked with a value of 2.99, which falls inside the "Agree" category based on the range of 2.50-3.49. The data suggest that the respondents agree that Customer Retention has a beneficial effect on Customer Satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is achieved by meeting or surpassing the requirements, expectations, and experiences of students. Academic achievement, support, cultural assimilation, and campus experience are highly esteemed by international students (Fong et al., 2022). A high level of customer retention signifies that students are content with their courses and perceive them as valuable, relevant, and fulfilling. The provision of customized assistance, inclusive regulations, and prompt response contribute to the sense of appreciation, support, and comprehension experienced by international students (Khosravian, 2022).

The mean value of Customer Loyalty is 2.96, falling inside the "Agree" category based on the range of 2.50-3.49. The data suggest that the respondents agree that Customer Retention has a beneficial effect on Customer Loyalty. Moreover, the average composite value of Customer Engagement is 2.95, which is categorized as "Agree". This indicates that there is a similar degree of agreement regarding the beneficial influence of Customer Retention on Customer Engagement. Loyalty goes beyond mere gratification, involving emotional connections, shared principles, and reciprocal desires for advancement (Todea et al., 2022).

The respondents' consensus is apparent, as all three primary result categories are classified as "Agree," demonstrating a widespread agreement with the favorable influence of service quality o Customer Engagement in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) refers to the extent of students' involvement, interaction, and connection with their institution, especially overseas students. Efficient methods for keeping overseas students engaged result in improved learning experiences, cultural interactions, collaborative projects, and overall personal growth. Active and involved students make a good impact on the energy, creativity, and high quality of an institution, leading to overall advancement and shared achievements (Nusairat et al., 2023).

Table 4 shows that the calculated rho-values, which range from 0.590 to 0.626, imply a moderate to strong positive correlation between the sub variables of brand image and service quality. The association between brand image and service quality was statistically significant, as indicated by the p-values obtained being less than 0.01.

The first variable evaluated is competence. For reliability, the correlation coefficient between competence and reliability is 0.590, indicating a highly significant positive correlation ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Table 4  
*Relationship Between Brand Image and Service Quality*

Variables	rho	p-value	Interpretation
<b>Competence</b>			
Reliability	0.590**	<.001	Highly Significant
Empathy	0.618**	<.001	Highly Significant
Tangibility	0.626**	<.001	Highly Significant
<b>Trustworthiness</b>			
Reliability	0.594**	<.001	Highly Significant
Empathy	0.620**	<.001	Highly Significant
Tangibility	0.611**	<.001	Highly Significant
<b>Differentiation</b>			
Reliability	0.592**	<.001	Highly Significant
Empathy	0.614**	<.001	Highly Significant
Tangibility	0.608**	<.001	Highly Significant

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

This suggests that brands perceived as competent tend to offer reliable services, which is crucial for maintaining customer satisfaction and trust. For empathy, the correlation coefficient between competence and empathy is 0.618, also highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that competent brands are perceived as empathetic, understanding the needs and concerns of their customers. For Tangibility, the correlation coefficient between competence and tangibility is 0.626, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that competent brands offer tangible elements in their services, which customers can perceive and evaluate, contributing to overall service quality perceptions. Competence is a crucial element of brand image in the field of service quality research.

Das et al. (2021) have emphasized the significance of proficiency in interactions with customers. Competence pertains to the aptitude of service providers to execute their duties with effectiveness and efficiency, hence impacting consumers' evaluations of service quality. The second variable evaluated is Trustworthiness. For reliability, the correlation coefficient between trustworthiness and reliability is 0.594, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that trustworthy brands are perceived as reliable in delivering their services consistently. For empathy, the correlation coefficient between trustworthiness and empathy is 0.620, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that trustworthy brands demonstrate empathy towards their customers, understanding their needs and providing personalized experiences. For tangibility, the correlation coefficient between trustworthiness and tangibility is 0.611, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that trustworthy brands offer tangible aspects in their services, reinforcing their reliability and credibility. HEIs perceive trustworthiness as a crucial element of brand image.

The study conducted by Lewicka (2022) emphasizes the need of trust-building tactics in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) for equipping teachers and staff with the necessary skills to engage in reliable interactions with students. Higher education institutions (HEIs) frequently incorporate ethical training and integrity modules into their programs, with the aim of cultivating trustworthiness in students (Yousaf et al., 2020). By prioritizing trustworthiness in the curriculum and providing practical learning opportunities, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) may equip teachers and staff to follow ethical standards and establish trust-based relationships with students. This, in turn, will improve views of service quality within the industry.

The third variable evaluated is differentiation. For reliability, the correlation coefficient between differentiation and reliability is 0.592, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that differentiated brands are perceived as reliable in delivering unique and innovative services. By placing a strong emphasis on distinguishing themselves in their programs and marketing strategies, students may consider the brand as a reliable university. For empathy, the correlation coefficient between differentiation and empathy is 0.614, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that differentiated brands demonstrate empathy towards their customers, creating personalized and memorable experiences (Wearne et al., 2020). For tangibility, the correlation coefficient between



differentiation and tangibility is 0.608, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that differentiated brands offer tangible elements in their services, distinguishing themselves from competitors and enhancing service quality perceptions (Samudro et al., 2020).

Universities compete fiercely for students, and a strong brand image is a powerful tool. This image encompasses a university's reputation, public perception, and the value it conveys to students. However, a strong brand image alone isn't enough. The key to sustaining a positive image and attracting students lies in delivering high-quality services. These services encompass everything from academic offerings and student support to campus life experiences. When a university consistently delivers on the promises inherent in its brand image, it creates a positive and holistic student experience. This reinforces the university's brand image, fosters student satisfaction, and ultimately fuels its success in the competitive educational landscape (Li, et. al.,2020).

Table 5  
*Relationship Between Brand Image and Customer Retention*

Variables	rho	p-value	Interpretation
<b>Competence</b>			
Customer Satisfaction	0.582**	<.001	Highly Significant
Customer Loyalty	0.576**	<.001	Highly Significant
Customer Engagement	0.635**	<.001	Highly Significant
<b>Trustworthiness</b>			
Customer Satisfaction	0.569**	<.001	Highly Significant
Customer Loyalty	0.552**	<.001	Highly Significant
Customer Engagement	0.586**	<.001	Highly Significant
<b>Differentiation</b>			
Customer Satisfaction	0.562**	<.001	Highly Significant
Customer Loyalty	0.549**	<.001	Highly Significant
Customer Engagement	0.617**	<.001	Highly Significant

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Table 5 shows that the computed rho-values, which range from 0.549 to 0.635, imply a moderate to high direct association between the sub variables of brand image and customer retention. The association between brand image and customer retention was statistically significant, as indicated by the p-values found being less than 0.01. The first variable evaluated is competence. For customer satisfaction, the correlation coefficient between competence and customer satisfaction is 0.582, which is highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates a strong positive relationship between a company's perceived competence and customer satisfaction. For customer loyalty, the correlation coefficient between competence and customer loyalty is 0.576, also highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that customers are more likely to remain loyal to a brand they perceive as competent. For customer engagement, the correlation coefficient between competence and customer engagement is 0.635, again highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that customers are more likely to engage with a brand they perceive as competent. Multiple studies have emphasized the importance of proficiency in influencing consumer perceptions and behavior. Perceived competence has a positive impact on consumer loyalty, engagement, and satisfaction, according to scholars including Cambra-Fierro et al., (2021). Competence brands are viewed as trustworthy and proficient in providing superior products or services, leading to the development of trust and loyalty among customers (Chang, 2020). Furthermore, a study conducted by Lan, et. al.,(2020) revealed that customer engagement is positively influenced by competence. This means that customers are more inclined to interact with firms that they view as competent.

The second variable evaluated is Trustworthiness. For customer satisfaction, the correlation coefficient between trustworthiness and customer satisfaction is 0.569, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that a brand's perceived trustworthiness positively influences customer satisfaction. For customer loyalty, the correlation coefficient between trustworthiness and customer loyalty is 0.552, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that trustworthiness contributes significantly to customer loyalty. For customer engagement, the correlation coefficient between trustworthiness and customer engagement is 0.586, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that customers are more likely to engage with a trustworthy brand. Trustworthiness is an essential aspect of brand image that has received considerable focus in academic research. Multiple studies (e.g., Khan, et. al.,2023;

Syedghorban et al., 2021) emphasize the significance of trust in cultivating enduring relationships between brands and customers. According to Li et al. (2020), customers are more inclined to buy from and suggest brands that they trust. Trust is a crucial factor in customer engagement, since customers are more inclined to engage with brands that they consider to be trustworthy (Tuti, et. al., 2022).

The third variable evaluated is Differentiation. For customer satisfaction, the correlation coefficient between differentiation and customer satisfaction is 0.562, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that customers are more satisfied with brands that they perceive as differentiating themselves effectively. For customer loyalty, the correlation coefficient between differentiation and customer loyalty is 0.549, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that differentiation contributes significantly to customer loyalty. For customer engagement, the correlation coefficient between differentiation and customer engagement is 0.617, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that differentiation positively influences customer engagement. Differentiation is a crucial tactic for brands to distinguish themselves in a fiercely competitive marketplace. Islami et al. (2020) contend that successful differentiation can result in a competitive edge and improved consumer loyalty. Distinguishing brands provide distinct value propositions that strongly appeal to clients, resulting in increased satisfaction and loyalty (Denga et al., 2022). In addition, a study conducted by Jha, et. al.,(2024) revealed that differentiation has a beneficial impact on customer engagement. This is because people are attracted to brands that provide unique and new products or services.

In today's competitive marketplace, building a strong brand image is essential for customer retention. A positive brand image goes beyond simply advertising a product or service. It encompasses the entire customer experience, from initial brand perception to post-purchase interactions. According to Verhoef, et al., (2020), when a brand image effectively communicates its values, promises a high-quality experience, and consistently delivers on those promises, it fosters trust and loyalty among customers. Satisfied customers are less likely to switch to competitors and more likely to become repeat customers. This loyalty translates directly into higher customer retention rates. Furthermore, a strong brand image can evoke emotional connections with customers. These connections can be built upon shared values, a sense of community, or a positive brand personality. Customers who feel a deeper emotional attachment to a brand are even more likely to resist switching and remain loyal, further strengthening customer retention. Ultimately, a well-crafted brand image acts as a powerful tool for businesses to not only attract customers but also keep them coming back for the long term.

Table 6  
*Relationship Between Service Quality and Customer Retention*

Variables	rho	p-value	Interpretation
<b>Reliability</b>			
Customer Satisfaction	0.592**	<.001	Highly Significant
Customer Loyalty	0.606**	<.001	Highly Significant
Customer Engagement	0.619**	<.001	Highly Significant
<b>Empathy</b>			
Customer Satisfaction	0.600**	<.001	Highly Significant
Customer Loyalty	0.632**	<.001	Highly Significant
Customer Engagement	0.601**	<.001	Highly Significant
<b>Tangibility</b>			
Customer Satisfaction	0.567**	<.001	Highly Significant
Customer Loyalty	0.603**	<.001	Highly Significant
Customer Engagement	0.620**	<.001	Highly Significant

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

The table shows that the estimated rho-values, which range from 0.567 to 0.632, imply a moderate to high positive correlation between the sub variables of service quality and customer retention. The association between service quality and customer retention was statistically significant due to the p-values obtained being less than 0.01. The correlation coefficient between reliability and customer satisfaction is 0.592, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that customers who perceive a high level of reliability in the service are more likely to be satisfied. The correlation coefficient between reliability and customer loyalty is 0.606, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that reliability plays a crucial role in fostering customer loyalty. The correlation coefficient

between reliability and customer engagement is 0.619, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This implies that reliability is positively associated with customer engagement, indicating that reliable service experiences lead to higher levels of customer interaction and involvement.

The correlation coefficient between empathy and customer satisfaction is 0.600, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that empathetic service experiences contribute significantly to customer satisfaction. The correlation coefficient between empathy and customer loyalty is 0.632, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that empathetic service interactions foster stronger customer loyalty. The correlation coefficient between empathy and customer engagement is 0.601, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This implies that empathetic service experiences lead to increased customer engagement and interaction with the brand. The correlation coefficient between tangibility and customer satisfaction is 0.567, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that tangible aspects of the service contribute positively to customer satisfaction. Meanwhile, the correlation coefficient between tangibility and customer loyalty is 0.603, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that tangible elements in the service enhance customer loyalty. The correlation coefficient between tangibility and customer engagement is 0.620, highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This implies that tangible aspects of the service drive customer engagement and interaction.

Service quality in the context of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) pertains to the degree to which the institution fulfils or surpasses the expectations of its students, teachers, staff, and other stakeholders regarding educational, administrative, and support services (Latif et al., 2019). The dimensions of service quality often include tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Martha-Martha, et. al., 2018). With the wide range of choices available to students and other individuals involved, the quality of service becomes a crucial element for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Organizations that continuously provide exceptional service quality tend to build better reputations, cultivate more loyalty among stakeholders, and attain higher rates of customer retention (Pham et al., 2019).

On the other hand, declines in the quality of service can result in unhappiness, customer loss, and a damaged reputation for the organization. The correlation between service quality and client retention is essentially synergistic. Enhancing the quality of service can boost stakeholder satisfaction, trust, and loyalty, hence boosting the probability of their ongoing involvement and retention (Dicker et al., 2019). In contrast, inadequate service quality can gradually diminish trust, give rise to dissatisfaction, and finally cause stakeholders to withdraw their support. To enhance the quality of service and promote client retention in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), many strategic initiatives can be implemented. Consistently seek input from students, instructors, staff, and other stakeholders to identify areas that need improvement and undertake corrective actions (Martins et al., 2019). Furthermore, stakeholder engagement involves establishing transparent lines of communication with stakeholders, comprehending their requirements, expectations, and apprehensions, and taking proactive measures to satisfy them to improve the quality of service and cultivate loyalty (Asim, et. al., 2018). Additionally, it is recommended to allocate resources towards faculty and staff development by implementing training and development initiatives. These programs aim to improve the competencies, interpersonal skills, and service orientation of professors and staff, thereby raising the overall quality of service provided (Pedro et al., 2018).

Universities compete fiercely to retain students in a crowded educational landscape. Service quality, encompassing the services provided to students and how effectively they are delivered, plays a critical role in this effort (Shin et al., 2018). High-quality services, such as effective teaching, robust academic support, and efficient administrative processes, directly influence student satisfaction (Li, et. al., 2020). Satisfied students feel valued, have a fulfilling educational experience, and are less likely to consider transferring (Park et al., 2019). This translates directly to higher student retention rates.

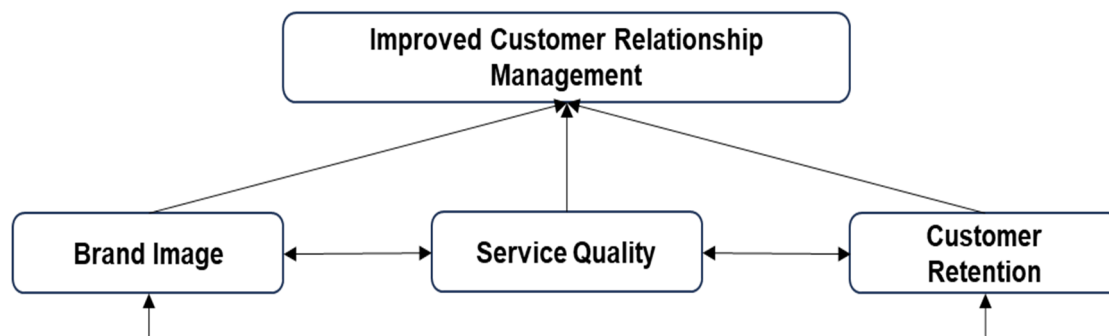


Figure 1 The Improved Customer Relationship Management Framework

Figure 1 shows the outcome of this research which is “an improved customer relationship management framework.” Brand image is one variable that influences both service quality and customer retention in this research model. Branded services directly enhance service quality and customer retention. Brand image encompasses the collective impression and perception that customers hold toward a specific brand (Susanto et al., 2022). The brand's shape is influenced by various aspects, including its visual features (such as the logo, emblem, and color), reputation, story, and culture (Bernarto et al., 2020). The consumer's cognition, emotions, and attitudes towards the brand are reflected in it, making it a crucial foundation for developing a relationship between the consumer and the brand.

Service quality is a variable that directly influences both brand image and customer retention. This indicates that service quality has a favorable impact on both brand image and customer retention. Service quality pertains to the distinctive features and qualities of the services offered by a service provider while carrying out its duties (Ali et al., 2021). It quantifies the capacity of a service provider to fulfill the requirements and anticipations of its clientele (Fida et al., 2020). Customer retention in this model is a variable that is influenced by both brand image and service quality. Specifically, customer retention has a positive impact on both brand image and service quality. Customer retention is the strategic approach used by businesses or service providers to effectively maintain and sustain their existing client base, ensuring continued purchases of products or services (Alkitbi et al., 2020). A strong correlation exists between brand image, service quality, and customer retention in higher education institutions. Put simply, higher education institutions that have a more positive image and offer superior services are also more inclined to retain customers (students).

There are other factors contributing to this correlation. Firstly, higher education institutions that possess a favorable brand image and are renowned for delivering exceptional services are regarded as reputable and well-established establishments. Students frequently pursue colleges with robust brand reputations due to their belief that their degree would carry enhanced value in the job market (Ricadonna et al., 2021). The institution's perceived worth is further enhanced by positive word-of-mouth from current and former students, as well as favorable rankings and evaluations. Consequently, students are more inclined to persist in their enrollment at higher education institutions that possess a favorable brand image due to their assurance in the worth and authenticity of their education (Susanto et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the provision of superior services by higher education institutions plays a crucial role in fostering a favorable student experience, ultimately resulting in heightened levels of satisfaction and involvement (Salamah et al., 2022). Higher education institutions prioritize student support services, including academic advising, career counseling, and extracurricular activities, to foster a helpful and rewarding atmosphere for students. Institutions that allocate resources towards modern facilities, cutting-edge technology, and innovative teaching methods boost the overall learning experience (Rahmatulloh, et. al.,2021). When students have a sense of support, engagement, and satisfaction in their educational journey, they are more inclined to stay enrolled and successfully finish their degree programs. Once again, it is commonly observed that higher education institutions that possess a favorable brand image tend to have robust alumni networks and engagement activities (Alwi et al., 2020). Consequently,

students have a feeling of inclusion and camaraderie, thereby enhancing the probability of their ongoing attendance and subsequent engagement as alumni.

Overall, higher education institutions that have a great brand image and provide high-quality services are more likely to retain students for many reasons. These universities are highly regarded for their exceptional quality and worth, offer a fulfilling student experience, and foster robust alumni networks that enhance student involvement and achievement. By giving priority to brand image and service quality, higher education institutions may enhance student retention and establish themselves as front-runners in the fiercely competitive higher education sector.

#### 4. Conclusions and recommendations

The brand image of the university has moderate influence on the satisfaction of international students in terms of competence, trustworthiness, and differentiation. The respondents have moderate agreement on the service quality provided by higher education institutions as to reliability, empathy and tangibility. The respondents generally agreed on all the indicators for customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and customer engagement in relation to customer retention in higher education institutions. A highly significant relationship was found among brand image, service quality and customer retention. An Improved Customer Relationship Management Framework was developed for universities.

The HEI may strengthen the brand image, hence improving the retention of international students by emphasizing competence, trustworthiness, and distinction. The HEI may strengthen the service quality to boost the retention of international students by focusing on reliability, empathy, and tangibility. The HEI may increase the retention rate of international students by prioritizing customer satisfaction, enhancing customer loyalty and fostering consumer engagement. The Improved Customer Relationship Management Framework may be offered for the HEIs in Philippines to improve international students' retention by focusing on brand image, service quality, and customer loyalty. Future researchers may use other variables to improve the retention of international students. They could investigate the intermediary and regulatory impacts of additional variables on the relationship between brand image, service quality, and customer retention.

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