

RELATIONSHIP MARKETING IN OPEN EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITAS TERBUKA IN STRENGTHENING LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE RIAU ISLANDS

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Abstract

Open and distance education is a strategic solution to expand access to higher education, particularly in island regions facing infrastructure and resource limitations. Universitas Terbuka has a regional UT office in Batam as a representation of open higher education in the Riau Islands Province. Universitas Terbuka Batam, as part of the Universitas Terbuka network in Indonesia, makes a significant contribution to expanding access to higher education in the Riau Islands Province. It not only offers learning flexibility but also builds long-term relationships with students through the implementation of relationship marketing. This approach focuses on creating, maintaining, and strengthening mutually beneficial relationships between institutions and students, thereby fostering lifelong learning. This research aims to describe the role of UT Batam Regional office in strengthening lifelong learning through relationship marketing strategies applied to active students. The method used is quantitative descriptive, with data collected using a structured questionnaire. The research respondents consisted of active students selected through purposive sampling techniques. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify levels of satisfaction, loyalty, and perceived benefits of learning. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the development of relational marketing strategies in open education, while also strengthening the values of intergenerational learning, which is an ancestral legacy for success and contribution to the community.

Keywords: relationship marketing, open education, lifelong learning, Universitas Terbuka, Riau Islands.

1 INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as the world's largest archipelagic state, faces unique and formidable challenges in providing equitable access to quality higher education. The geographical distribution across thousands of islands creates significant disparities in infrastructure, resource allocation, and educational opportunities, with a pronounced gap between urban centers on Java and more remote, rural regions. This complex geography severely hampers governmental oversight and the even distribution of educational resources, leaving many communities in a state of educational deprivation. The result is a higher education landscape marked by stark inequities,

where access is often determined by location and socioeconomic status rather than academic potential.

In response to these structural barriers, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), has emerged as a strategic and transformative solution. By leveraging technology, ODL transcends geographical constraints, offering a flexible and accessible pathway to higher education for individuals previously excluded due to distance, work commitments, or economic limitations. This educational model is not merely an alternative but a vital instrument for national development, democratizing access to knowledge and fostering a more skilled workforce across the entire archipelago.

At the forefront of this movement is Universitas Terbuka (UT), Indonesia's 45th state university, established in 1984 with the express mission to widen access to higher education and address the limited capacity of conventional institutions. Inspired by the global open university movement, UT was founded on the philosophy of "lifelong learning," embodying the constitutional mandate to educate all citizens, regardless of age, location, or time constraints. As a pioneer of ODL in Indonesia, UT provides a critical service to communities that cannot be reached by traditional face-to-face education.

The Riau Islands Province, with its strategic location bordering Singapore and its dynamic economy centered on industry and tourism, represents a key region where this educational model is crucial. One of the regional offices of UT in the Riau Islands Province, UT Batam regional office operational area encompasses seven regencies/cities: Batam, Tanjung Pinang, Bintan, Lingga, Karimun, Kepulauan Anambas, and Natuna. UT Batam serves as the regional hub, providing higher education opportunities to a diverse population of working adults and high school graduates across the province's many islands. As of the second semester of 2024, UT Batam regional office serves 15,568 students, demonstrating its significant role in the region's human resource development.

However, in the contemporary landscape of higher education increasingly characterized by marketization, global competition, and a focus on student retention simply providing access is no longer sufficient. ODL institutions face their own distinct challenges, including high rates of student dropout or "study suspension," often driven by feelings of isolation, financial difficulties, and the immense pressure of balancing work, family, and academic responsibilities. In this competitive environment, universities must move beyond a

transactional approach focused on enrollment and adopt strategies that build enduring, supportive relationships with their students.

This is the critical juncture where relationship marketing becomes an indispensable strategic orientation. By focusing on creating, maintaining, and enhancing long-term, mutually beneficial relationships, relationship marketing provides a framework for fostering the trust, commitment, and satisfaction necessary to support students throughout their educational journey. For an institution like UT Batam regional office, implementing a robust relationship marketing strategy is not just a tool for improving retention rates; it is the key to fulfilling its core mission of cultivating a genuine and lasting orientation toward lifelong learning among its students, thereby contributing to the sustained social and economic development of the Riau Islands and the nation as a whole.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative descriptive research design. This approach is deemed most appropriate for the research objectives, which are to describe the characteristics of relationship marketing variables as perceived by active students at UT Batam regional office and to identify the strength of key outcomes such as satisfaction, loyalty, and lifelong learning orientation. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), a descriptive design is effective for summarizing and organizing data to depict the attitudes and characteristics of a population, which directly aligns with the aim of this research.

2.2 Population and Sample

The population for this study comprises all 15,687 active students enrolled at UT Batam during the second semester of 2024. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select the research respondents. The criteria for inclusion were students who had been actively enrolled for at least two consecutive semesters. This criterion was established to ensure that respondents had sufficient experience and interaction with UT Batam regional office academic and administrative systems to provide informed feedback on the relational variables under investigation. The final sample consisted of 113 respondents from various faculties, providing a representative cross-section of the student body.

2.3 Data Collection and Instrument

Data was collected using a structured online questionnaire developed in Google Forms and distributed through student communication channels, including WhatsApp groups. The questionnaire was designed based on the theoretical constructs outlined in the literature review. It consisted of closed-ended questions using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), to measure each of the research variables.

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 From Transactional to Relational Marketing

Historically, transactional marketing dominated higher education strategies, focusing on one-time exchanges through the “4Ps” (product, price, place, promotion). However, the realization that retaining students is more sustainable than constantly acquiring new ones led to the adoption of RM. Leonard Berry (1983) defined RM as attracting, maintaining, and enhancing relationships, while Christian Grönroos emphasized mutual value creation and promise management. In this context, UT Batam regional office mission is reframed: from simply delivering education to managing long-term developmental relationships with students.

3.2 Trust and Commitment as Core Foundations

The Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing by Morgan & Hunt (1994) forms the backbone of the article’s argument. Trust and commitment are seen as the key mediators that drive loyalty and sustainable engagement. Trust is built when students perceive their university as reliable and transparent, particularly crucial in ODL where face-to-face trust-building cues are limited. Commitment, meanwhile, reflects the student’s desire to maintain the relationship, motivating persistence despite the challenges of distance learning. Trust precedes commitment, and both must be actively nurtured through consistent quality and care.

3.3 Strategic Communication and Relational Bonds

In ODL, communication is the experience. Personalized, motivational, and responsive communication fosters belonging, reduces isolation, and builds academic confidence. Beyond communication, Berry’s (1995) three levels of relational bonds are outlined:

1. Financial Bonds (scholarships, discounts) – least sustainable.
2. Social Bonds (virtual communities, proactive advising) – build personal connections.

3. Structural Bonds (integrated systems and platforms) – strongest, creating high switching costs and long-term commitment.

UT Batam regional office ability to establish structural bonds through seamless digital ecosystems is presented as a unique competitive advantage.

3.4 Experiential Outcomes: Perceived Value and Satisfaction

Effective communication and bonding generate perceived value (Zeithaml, 1988) and satisfaction. Value is seen as the trade-off between what students “get” (functional, social, emotional, and epistemic benefits) and what they “give” (monetary and non-monetary sacrifices). In ODL, the non-monetary sacrifices time, effort, stress are especially high, making functional and epistemic benefits critical for positive value perception. Satisfaction, on the other hand, reflects students’ emotional evaluation of whether expectations are met, driven by interaction quality, support systems, course design, and flexibility.

3.5 The Apex of Relational Strategy: Loyalty and Lifelong Learning

The culmination of a successful relationship marketing strategy is not merely a satisfied customer but a loyal partner. In the context of higher education, this loyalty is the bedrock upon which institutional sustainability and long-term success are built. However, for an institution whose core mission is education, the ultimate goal must transcend even institutional loyalty. The final and most profound objective is to leverage the strong, trust-based student-institution relationship as a catalyst for fostering a student's internal motivation and capacity for lifelong learning. This final section of the theoretical framework will synthesize all preceding constructs, illustrating the causal pathway from the foundational drivers of the relationship to the cultivation of student loyalty, and finally, forging the critical theoretical link between that loyalty and the development of a lifelong learning orientation. This represents the apex of the relational strategy, where the university's marketing objectives become perfectly aligned with its highest educational ideals.

3.6 Cultivating Student Loyalty

Student loyalty is the ultimate outcome and the most telling metric of a successful relationship marketing program. It is far more than simple repeat behavior (i.e., continued enrollment); it is a deep-seated psychological attachment and a deeply held commitment to the institution.

Oliver (1999) provides a canonical definition of loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to re-patronize or re-buy a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive purchasing of the same brand...despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior." In the higher education context, this translates to a student's firm intention to continue their studies at the institution, to choose the same institution for future educational needs, and, crucially, to become a positive advocate and ambassador for the university through word-of-mouth recommendations.

The path to achieving this level of loyalty is a cumulative process, built upon the successful establishment of all the relational constructs previously discussed. The literature provides a clear and consistent causal chain that forms the basis of this study's conceptual model. The journey begins with the foundational drivers: effective, personalized

Communication and the strategic development of Relational Bonds (financial, social, and structural). These activities build the essential psychological foundation of Trust and Commitment, as posited by Morgan and Hunt (1994). A student who trusts the institution and feels committed to the relationship is more likely to engage fully with the educational experience, leading to a positive assessment of the Perceived Value of their education. This combination of a trusted relationship and a strong value proposition is the primary driver of Student Satisfaction.

Finally, a consistent body of research in higher education marketing demonstrates that student satisfaction is the most significant and direct antecedent of student loyalty. While trust and commitment are essential mediating variables that make satisfaction possible, it is the student's overall positive evaluation of their experience that solidifies their loyal attachment. Therefore, the proposed model for this study will show these variables converging in a logical sequence: the university's relational strategies build trust and commitment, which enables the delivery of value and the creation of satisfaction, which, in turn, culminates in enduring student loyalty.

3.7 From Loyalty to Lifelong Learning Orientation

The final and most innovative step in this theoretical framework is to extend the causal chain beyond institutional loyalty to the development of a lifelong learning orientation. This is where the study moves from a conventional marketing model to one that is deeply rooted in educational philosophy. The central argument is that the very same relational process that

creates a loyal student simultaneously cultivates the core attributes of a lifelong learner. A lifelong learning orientation is defined as the self-initiated, self-directed, voluntary, and ongoing pursuit of knowledge and skills for either personal or professional development. It is not merely a set of activities but a mindset—a proactive and curious disposition toward continuous learning and a skill set that includes the ability to learn independently and adapt to new challenges.

Higher education institutions have a critical role to play in fostering this orientation. They can achieve this by creating relationship-rich learning environments where students feel safe, supported, respected, and genuinely cared for. It is within such a supportive relational context that students are inspired to move beyond rote memorization and develop a deeper, more intrinsic motivation for learning. The theoretical bridge connecting student loyalty to a lifelong learning orientation can be constructed through a logical, step-by-step process:

1. A successful relationship marketing strategy, characterized by effective Communication and strong Relational Bonds, establishes a foundation of Trust and Commitment. The student feels secure in their relationship with the university.
2. This secure and trusted relationship fosters a crucial sense of Belonging. Even at a distance, the ODL student feels like a valued member of an academic community, not an isolated consumer of educational content.
3. This sense of belonging and institutional support directly enhances the student's Academic Self-Efficacy—their belief in their own ability to succeed in a challenging, self-directed learning environment. They develop confidence in their capacity as a learner because the institution has demonstrated confidence in them.
4. The continuous positive feedback loop of receiving high Perceived Value and experiencing Satisfaction reinforces this self-efficacy. Each successful assignment, each piece of constructive feedback, and each newly acquired skill validates their effort and creates a positive psychological association with the act of learning itself.
5. A Loyal student is therefore the product of this entire developmental process. Their loyalty is not just an attachment to the UT Batam brand; it is an outcome of a system that has successfully nurtured their confidence, independence, and competence as a learner.

6. This cultivated confidence and independence are the very essence of a Lifelong Learning Orientation. The student has, through their supportive relational journey with the university, "learned how to learn". They are equipped with the skills and, more importantly, the intrinsic motivation to continue their educational journey long after their formal program has concluded.

Ultimately, this framework suggests that the highest and truest expression of student loyalty is not simply retention or advocacy, but the embodiment of the university's core educational mission. The ultimate "product" of relationship marketing in higher education is not a loyal customer, but an empowered, self-directed lifelong learner. An institution like UT Batam regional office, by adopting a truly relational approach, does more than secure its market position; it fulfills its societal mandate. The success of its students as continuous learners and contributors to their community becomes the most powerful and authentic testament to the university's value, creating a virtuous cycle where effective marketing and profound educational impact become one and the same.

Table 1: Conceptual Definitions and Theoretical Foundations of Research Variables

Variable	Conceptual Definition	Key Theoretical Foundation(s)
Trust	A party's confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity.	Morgan, R. M., & Hunt, S. D. (1994). <i>The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing</i> .
Commitment	An enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship that is considered worthy of maximum maintenance efforts.	Morgan, R. M., & Hunt, S. D. (1994). <i>The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing</i> .
Communication	The formal and informal sharing of meaningful and timely information between exchange partners to foster mutual understanding.	Duncan, T., & Moriarty, S. E. (1998). <i>A communication-based marketing model for managing relationships</i> .
Relationship Bonding	The strategic development of financial, social, and structural ties that bind the customer to the firm, increasing switching costs and partnership value.	Berry, L. L. (1995). <i>Relationship marketing of services—growing interest, emerging perspectives</i> .
Perceived Value	A consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product or service based on perceptions of what is received versus what is given.	Zeithaml, V. A. (1988). <i>Consumer perceptions of price, quality, and value: A means-end model and synthesis of evidence</i> .
Student	A student's short-term attitude and	Oliver, R. L. (1980). <i>A</i>

Satisfaction	affective response resulting from the cognitive evaluation of their educational experiences, services, and facilities.	<i>cognitive model of the antecedents and consequences of satisfaction decisions.</i>
Loyalitas Mahasiswa Student Loyalty	A deeply held psychological and behavioral commitment to re-patronize a preferred service provider consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior.	Oliver, R. L. (1999). <i>Whence consumer loyalty?</i>
Life Long Learning Orientation	The self-initiated and self-directed acquisition of knowledge and skills for personal or professional development that is voluntary, continuous, and motivated by intrinsic fulfillment.	Knapper, C. K., & Cropley, A. J. (2000). <i>Lifelong learning in higher education.</i>

Descriptive analysis was conducted by compiling frequency distribution tables to determine the level of variable score attainment, first by determining the interval range based on the criteria, referring to the following statistical formula:

$$c = \frac{X_n - X_1}{K}$$

Sources: Supranto (2008:74)

c = estimated size (class width, class size, class length)

k = number of classes

X_n = largest observed value

X₁ = smallest observed value

Table 2 : Score Criteria

Criteria	Mean Score
Very Poor	1 < 1.8
Poor	1.8 ≥ 2.6
Fairly Good	2.6 < 3,4
Good	3,4 ≥ 4,2
Very Good	4,2 < 5

Table 3 : Results of data processing from the questionnaire

Variable	Question item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Criteria
Trust	I believe UT Batam Regional Office provides honest information to its students.	4,38739	0,70362	Strongly Agree
	I am confident that UT Batam Regional Office is capable of maintaining the quality of distance education.	4,41441	0,66767	Strongly Agree
	I feel that the UT Batam Regional Office can be relied upon to provide academic services.	4,36036	0,69844	Strongly Agree
Commitment	I feel that the UT Batam Regional Office is committed to supporting the academic success of its students.	4,29730	0,73379	Strongly Agree
	UT Batam Regional Office strives to maintain long-term relationships with its students.	4,26126	0,74731	Strongly Agree
	I feel supported to continue my studies until completion.	4,32432	0,72860	Strongly Agree
Communication	Academic information from UT Batam Regional Office is easy to understand and clear.	4,16216	0,75646	Agree
	UT Batam Regional Office provides open communication channels for students.	4,16216	0,81484	Agree
	I received timely information regarding both academic and non-academic activities.	4,14414	0,74781	Agree
Relationship Bonding	I feel a sense of closeness with the staff/management of UT Batam Regional Office.	3,68468	0,96839	Agree
	UT Batam Regional Office pays attention to the individual needs of its students.	3,98198	0,84004	Agree
	I feel valued as part of the UT Batam Regional Office community.	4,04505	0,85593	Agree
Student Satisfaction	I am satisfied with the administrative services at UT Batam Regional Office	4,18018	0,74018	Agree
	I am satisfied with the flexibility of the learning system at UT	4,35135	0,66961	Agree
	I am satisfied with the quality of teaching materials and learning content.	4,20721	0,72694	Strongly Agree
	I am satisfied with the student	4,28829	0,67907	Strongly

	support services (tutors, guidance, student activities).			Agree
	Overall, I feel satisfied studying at UT	4,35135	0,69647	Strongly Agree
Student Loyalty	I intend to complete my studies at UT Batam Regional Office	4,57658	0,64195	Strongly Agree
	I will recommend UT Batam Regional Office to others.	4,38739	0,74170	Strongly Agree
	I am proud to be a student at UT Batam Regional Office	4,48649	0,68713	Strongly Agree
	I want to stay in touch with UT Batam Regional Office after I graduate.	4,36937	0,75087	Strongly Agree
Perceived Benefits of Learning	Studying at UT helps me develop new skills.	4,26126	0,72234	Strongly Agree
	The flexibility of studying at UT is beneficial for me, as I have limited time.	4,52252	0,65988	Strongly Agree
	The knowledge I gained is beneficial for career development.	4,44144	0,65703	Strongly Agree
	I feel that studying at UT has boosted my confidence.	4,36937	0,67358	Strongly Agree
	UT adds value to my personal and social life.	4,33333	0,69215	Strongly Agree
Lifelong Learning Orientation	I feel it's important to keep learning even though I've already graduated from college.	4,34234	0,79306	Strongly Agree
	UT encourages me to always develop myself.	4,33333	0,70528	Strongly Agree
	I am motivated to take additional training or courses after graduation.	4,18018	0,85520	Strongly Agree
	Lifelong learning is an important part of my life.	4,30631	0,83005	Strongly Agree
	I feel that the value of intergenerational learning is important to implement in families and communities.	4,39640	0,73066	Strongly Agree

Based on the data presented in the table, it can be concluded that students have a very positive perception of Universitas Terbuka (UT) Batam regional office across the various measured aspects. Consistently, the average (mean) scores for all variables fell within the "Agree" to "Strongly Agree" categories, supported by relatively low standard deviations, indicating a consensus or uniformity of responses among the respondents. Students demonstrate a very

high level of trust, with strong confidence that UT Batam regional office provides honest information (mean 4.38), is capable of maintaining the quality of distance education (mean 4.41), and can be relied upon to provide academic services (mean 4.36). This trust serves as the foundation for the formation of strong commitment from students. They felt UT Batam regional office was committed to their academic success (mean 4.29) and felt supported in completing their studies (mean 4.32), indicating a strong psychological bond with the institution. Regarding the Communication variable, students agreed that academic information was easy to understand (mean 4.16) and that the institution provided open communication channels (mean 4.16). Meanwhile, on the Relationship Bonding aspect, students felt valued as part of the UT Batam regional office community (mean 4.04). Nevertheless, the score for "feeling close to staff/management" (mean 3.68) was slightly lower than the other items, which may indicate that this area could still be further optimized. High Satisfaction and Significant Benefits Overall student satisfaction levels are very high (mean 4.35). This satisfaction is driven by various factors, particularly the flexibility of the learning system (mean 4.35) and the quality of the teaching materials (mean 4.20). Furthermore, students perceive tangible benefits from their studies. The highest benefit is felt in the flexibility of their studies, which aligns with their time constraints (mean 4.52), followed by increased self-confidence (mean 4.36) and a positive contribution to career development (mean 4.41). This perceived satisfaction and benefit ultimately leads to an extraordinary level of Student Loyalty. The intention to complete studies (mean 4.57) and recommend UT Batam regional office to others (mean 4.38) are the strongest indicators of this loyalty. Most importantly, these results show that UT Batam regional office has successfully fostered a lifelong learning orientation. Students feel motivated to continue developing themselves (mean 4.33) and consider learning an important part of their lives (mean 4.30), which aligns with the core mission of open education.

Overall, this table presents strong quantitative evidence that the relational strategies implemented by UT Batam regional office successfully created positive experiences that were not only satisfying but also built loyalty and instilled a value of lifelong learning in its students.

Table 4 : Results for each variable's criteria

Variable	Indikator	Mean	Criteria
Relationship Marketing :	Trust	4,38739	Very Good
	Commitment	4,29429	Very Good
	Communication	4,15616	Very Good
	Relationship Bonding	3,90390	Good
Student Satisfaction		4,27568	Very Good
Student Loyalty		4,45495	Very Good
Perceived Benefits of Learning		4,38559	Very Good
Lifelong Learning Orientation		4,31171	Very Good

Specifically, Student Loyalty stands out with the highest average score of 4.45, indicating an exceptionally strong commitment and attachment of students to the institution. This is supported by very high scores on the variables of Trust and Perceived Benefits, both of which are at 4.38. This finding indicates that such high loyalty is built on a solid foundation of trust and the perception that the education pursued provides tangible benefits. Other important variables such as Student Satisfaction and Lifelong Learning Orientation were also rated "Very Good," confirming the institution's success in meeting expectations and instilling a spirit of continuous learning. The only indicator that falls into the "Good" category, although its value remains positive, is Relationship Bonding with a score of 3.90. This figure indicates that, compared to other functional aspects such as quality and benefits, the aspect of bonding or personal closeness between students and the institution may still have room for further improvement.

4 CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the relationship marketing strategies implemented by UT Batam regional office have been effectively successful in building strong and positive relationships with its students. This is evidenced by the high levels of Trust, Satisfaction, and Perceived Benefit among students, which ultimately resulted in outstanding Loyalty as the variable with the highest score. This success demonstrates that a relational approach focused on effective communication and fulfilling institutional promises is a key foundation for maintaining student commitment in a distance learning environment. Nevertheless, this study also identified that the aspect of Relationship Bonding, particularly personal closeness between students and staff, is an area that still has room for optimization. Ultimately, these findings confirm that the success of UT Batam regional office lies not only in its ability to create loyal

students, but also in fostering a lifelong learning orientation, which aligns with the core mission of open education to create independent learners capable of contributing to society.

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