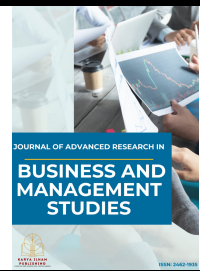




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# Marketing the Memories: A Conceptual Framework for Building Enduring Alumni Relations through Advertising, Promotions, and Events

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### ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper investigates the effect of advertising, sales promotions, and event experiences on alumni relations in a Malaysian higher education context, with reference to the University of Malaya. Using Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, it is argued that advertising creates awareness and identity, while sales promotions and event experiences promote affective and behavioural engagement and relations, which are the basis of alumni loyalty. Previous research indicates that event experience and sales promotions produce stronger relational results compared to traditional advertising. The proposed conceptual framework thus sees alumni relations as based on relational and experiential strategies instead of mass communication. This paper argues that this research offers a theoretical extension by situating the CBBE model in a non-Western higher education context, and a practical extension by providing guidance for universities to maintain alumni commitments through interactive, value-based engagement. The framework conceptually positions, as the researchers suggest, is likely to enhance institutional reputation, engagement, and longer-term alumni devotion as well as loyalty.

## 1. Introduction

Malaysia represents a theoretically relevant context for alumni relationship research due to its collectivist cultural orientation, where shared identity, institutional prestige, and communal experiences play a stronger role in loyalty formation than individualistic benefit-based appeals. In such contexts, alumni engagement is more likely to be shaped by symbolic affiliation and relational experiences rather than informational communication alone. Alumni relationships are complex phenomena that include emotional connection, behavioural engagement, and cognitive loyalty. Long-term engagement and interaction can lead to concrete benefits such as charitable giving, mentor support, and "goodwill" advocacy [18]. However, academic research has seldom focused on

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how specific marketing actions (advertising, promotion, and events) foster relationships, especially in Southeast Asian universities.

Advertising is a mechanism of communication that conveys the identity and successes of the institution and can generate positive emotions of nostalgia and pride. However, the one-way nature of advertising may limit the relational aspect of the groups. Research has found the alumni perceive traditional advertising as impersonal, especially in collectivist cultures where emotional relational aspects of behaviors and authenticity are valued [3].

Sales promotions like alumni discounts are valuable tools for re-engaging graduates. Promotional activities provide members with a tangible benefit which encourages their membership identity and re-invites members into the institution's community. If alumni heavily rely on a purely transactional incentive, it may eventually undermine their intrinsic motivation for exclusive loyalty, balancing alumni member loyalty will be key [2-19].

Event-based experiences such as homecomings, reunions, and networking programs are the most powerful relational platforms with alumni. Host productive events focused on shared experiences will create bond, belonging, and emotional connection. Alumni attach meaning to a degree of association or participation as in a successful event. Research done in the Malaysian context shows alumni attach significantly when events have interactivity, inclusivity, or cultural symbolism [1].

## **2. Literature Review**

Alumni relationships are complex phenomena that include emotional connection, behavioral engagement, and cognitive loyalty. Long-term engagement and interaction can lead to concrete benefits such as charitable giving, mentor support, and "good will" advocacy [18]. However, academic research has seldom focused on how specific marketing actions (advertising, promotion, and events) foster relationships, especially in Southeast Asian universities.

Advertising is a mechanism of communication that conveys the identity and successes of the institution and can generate positive emotions of nostalgia and pride. However, the one-way nature of advertising may limit the relational aspect of the groups. Research has found the alumni perceive traditional advertising as impersonal, especially in collectivist cultures where emotional relational aspects of behaviors and authenticity are valued [3-6].

Discounts that are offers or sales promotion to alumni, (e.g., discounted tickets), are also effective engagement strategies. Offering discounts to members provides an experiential economic benefit, reinforcement of identity as a member, and re-invitation to a campus community of their former institution. If alumni are too transactional in their motivation, eventually it can diminish their intrinsic sense of exclusive loyalty due to balancing of alumni members [19].

Event experiences like homecomings, reunions, and networking events are the strongest relational contexts with alumni. Providing productive events based on experience will create connection, belonging, and emotional bonding. Alumni instill value to a sense of affiliation or participation as in a successful event. Some research in the Malaysian context noted that alumni attach connection when events are interactive, inclusive, or culturally symbolic [1].

Collectively, the literature reveals that alumni engagement thrives through experiential and participatory communication strategies rather than purely persuasive ones.

### **2.1 Problem Statement and Research Objectives**

In the Malaysian higher education context, alumni relations have always been a historical concept which is strategic yet underdeveloped in educational administration. Universities in all parts of the

world see the importance of their alumni as significant in supporting the university financially, establishing its reputation, and employability for its graduates; however, universities in Malaysia are typically not equipped with structures for post-graduation alumni relations [25]. Institutions continue their reliance on irregular communication via face-to-face or digital spaces, as well as somewhat ceremonial events to facilitate alumni engagement and avoid ongoing relationship-building. An example of this is the University of Malaya, the largest public university in Malaysia, therefore potentially having the largest population of alumni, who do not engage fully or consistently in university events, fundraising, or professional networking opportunities. Universities lack a centralised approach to alumni relations, which leads to important implications regarding the extent to which universities in Malaysia could feasibly use the relationships they develop with alumni in the long-term as collaborative partners as they strive to achieve their academic and societal goals.

If the situation continues, the consequences are complex and far-reaching. Poor alumni relations weaken the establishment of a sustainable donor culture, which means the university loses out on extra funding that supports scholarships, infrastructure, and innovation in research. Disengaged alumni also mean missed opportunities for mentoring and industry connections, decreasing the level of real-world experience and professional networking that are crucial to supporting students' employability. From a reputational standpoint, disengaged alumni diminish institutional pride and advocacy, thereby diminishing the Global profile and competitiveness of the university. Over time, these repercussions may devalue, weaken, and impair the university's ability to attract high-quality students, staff, and research collaborations, while also limiting the university's contribution to the development of national human capital formation and the goals in Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2015–2025.

Although awareness of these issues has increased, studies regarding alumni relations in the context of Malaysia continue to be limited and scattered [5]. Most studies do tend to focus on some operational or administrative dimensions of alumni relations management: frequency of contact, attendance rates, event extraction rates, etc. However, a research gap exists in terms of understanding the factors that drive long-term commitment to alumni relations studies [11]. There is a lack of study regarding how marketing communication tools: advertising, sales promotions, and event experiences, work together to influence alumni engagement. This matters because those tools are also methods of communicating value, identity, and belonging back to graduates [13]. In addition, most research studies operate within Western frameworks that discount cultural factors influencing relationship development, especially within collectivist cultures like Malaysia, trust, emotion, and shared/ English identity are crucial to loyalty and long-term commitment [16].

A significant gap also exists in the theoretical foundations of previous studies on alumni engagement. Previous frameworks, such as stakeholder theory and relationship marketing, have emerged intermittently to examine this topic. Although alumni loyalty has been examined from a brand equity perspective, there has been minimal exploration into this area. Keller's [12] Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model is widely used within consumer and corporate contexts and provides a strong basis for unpacking how an alumni's identity, meaning, and experiences lead to loyalty. The CBBE framework has, however, attracted a limited number of studies in the higher education sector, particularly in Southeast Asia. Hence, this study aims to contribute to this theoretical and contextual gap by utilising the CBBE framework and examining how advertising, promotions, and experiences at events shape alumni relations in a Malaysian university context.

#### Research objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between advertising and alumni relations among University of Malaya graduates.

2. To examine the relationship between sales promotion and alumni relations among University of Malaya graduates.
3. To examine the relationship between event experiences and alumni relations among University of Malaya graduates.

By addressing these objectives, the research aims to contribute to a culturally grounded and theoretically integrated model of alumni relations that supports institutional sustainability and long-term alumni partnership.

## *2.2 Hypothesis Development*

### **H1: Advertising → Alumni Relations**

Previous research suggests that institutional advertising can positively impact stakeholder attachment, brand identity, and loyalty, especially in higher education (e.g. [7-14-25]). Goh [7] illustrates the impact of Instagram advertising, where Uniqlo was able to enhance brand awareness and build consumer loyalty among young Malaysians. However, much of the literature on advertising has concentrated on recruiting campaigns and consumer brands rather than advertising directed towards alumni engagement. It is unclear whether generic advertising that communicates institutional accomplishments or identity-based advertising that highlights resonating values, heritage, and feelings lead to higher sustained loyalty. The literature tends to combine the two forms of advertising without isolating their effects on alumni, making it hard to draw a theoretical position on how both forms achieve loyalty.

Cultural and institutional factors also influence behaviour attributes toward advertising. In a collectivist society or culture, messages that highlight prestige, heritage, and values of the group tend to carry more weight than messages that address individual benefits [10-23]. Furthermore, the institution may have regulations on alumni giving and institutional commitments that affect how alumni distinguish credibility in advertising methods. There remains little empirical evidence on advertising's relation to alumni loyalty in Southeast Asian higher education. Thus, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: There is a significant effect between advertising and alumni relations among alumni of the University of Malaya.

### **H2: Sales Promotion → Alumni Relations**

Marketing research consistently demonstrates that sales promotions, such as loyalty benefits, discounts, or exclusive perks, increase customer retention and brand loyalty [19-22]. Alumni benefit programmes at universities represent an insufficiently explored area, and while there is some evidence that a tangible promotional value enhances alumni satisfaction and connection [20], prior research is likely limited by methodological weaknesses, including research designs that depend on cross-sectional data, lack of control for prior loyalty, and insufficient distinction between types of promotions (e.g. monetary versus symbolic, recurring versus sporadic). The effectiveness of promotions also appears contingent upon their integration with emotional or identity-based appeals, but findings remain inconsistent.

In the case of Malaysia, the complexity is enhanced by cultural norms. Alumni may embrace a promotion that serves to provide prestige or recognition, but they may reject one that undermines

the institution's prestige. Additionally, regulations on accepted practices and institutional policies could further restrict the type of incentives permitted in the higher education context. Finally, many previous studies are conducted in Western contexts, and their findings may not be applicable to the Malaysian context, as relational value and collective identity may have greater salience. Given the paucity of empirical evidence in this area, this research proposes:

H2: There is a significant effect between sales promotion and alumni relations among alumni of the University of Malaya.

H3: Event Experiences → Alumni Relations

Alumni engagement through experiences, such as reunions, networking events, mentorship programmes, or cultural gatherings, has been known to provide an incremental tool for establishing emotional rapport, social bonds, and institutional identity amongst alumni [4-15]. Compared to more passive communicative forms, experience-based engagement offers a higher degree of emotional commitment and assurance of long-term loyalty. However, contemporary research often assumes that any event, regardless of type, session length, or the participation of the alumni, will achieve similar engagement outcomes. It often does not account for the types of any event (e.g. virtual and face-to-face; large and small gatherings; formal and less formal) or the different age cohorts or levels of previous engagement. Even studies that recognise engagement often use post-event self-reported engagement measures without assessing the ongoing engagement for change over time.

In the context of Malaysia, where communal engagement and collective identity hold significant cultural meanings, experiences through alumni events may be even more impactful. However, geographic dispersion of alumni, physical travel costs, and perceptions of inclusivity also play a part in participation and satisfaction. Besides, events purposefully intended to celebrate related institutional history or shared experience, or heritage likely elicit stronger emotion and connection than general social events. While all these participatory factors matter in an engagement context, empirical research into the impact of the dimensions of an experience, emotional, cultural, or symbolic, on building alumni relations, is not well articulated in Malaysia [24-25]. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

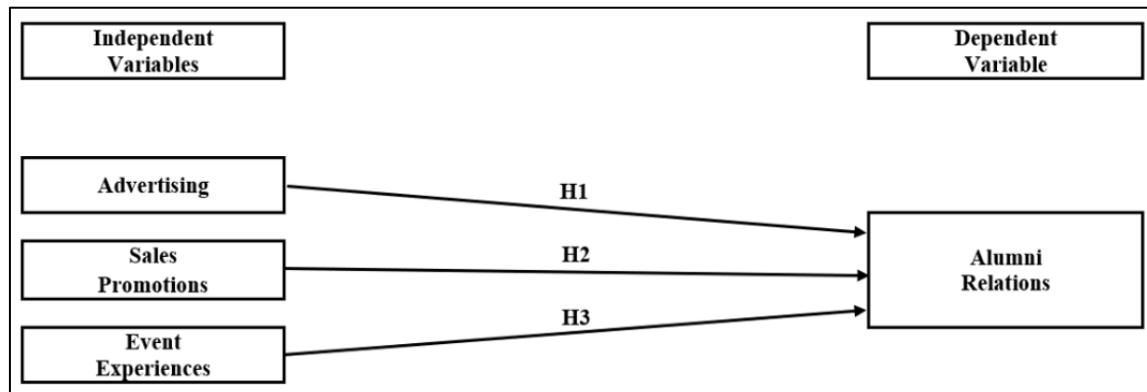
H3: There is a significant effect between event experiences and alumni relations among alumni of the University of Malaya.

### *2.3 Underpinning Theory and Proposed Conceptual Framework*

This study is based on Keller's [12] Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, which is used as the theoretical framework to discuss how alumni form long-lasting relationships with their universities. The CBBE model is based on the idea that brand equity is created over time through four different stages namely, brand identity, brand meaning, brand response, and brand resonance. Each stage represents progressively deeper psychological and emotional connection between the consumer and the brand that ultimately manifests in loyalty and advocacy. When applied to higher education, these stages represent how alumni move from being aware of a university, to forming an emotional attachment, to making a lifelong commitment [31].

Within the context of the CBBE model, the primary channels for a university to communicate its brand and promote brand-related relationships, in this case with alumni, are advertising, promotional support, and event experiences. As these represent different but overlapping elements of the brand building process, alumni engagement at the University of Malaya can also be conceived

as an outcome of the brand relational aspect of marketing communication in highly appealing, meaningful, and values-driven ways.



**Fig. 1.** Proposed conceptual framework

**Source:** Authors' Own Work

### 2.3.1 Advertising and alumni relations: building brand identity

In the CBBE hierarchy, the first stage, brand identity concerns creating awareness and recognition of the brand's existence and purpose. In the university context, advertising functions as the foundation for establishing this identity by communicating institutional achievements, values, and heritage. Through print, digital, and social media advertising, universities project their academic excellence, community impact, and legacy, which helps alumni recall their affiliation with pride and belonging.

Advertising also supports alumni cognitive loyalty, helping alumni see their university as a respected institution with a future-oriented agenda. This reinforcement of identity elicits nostalgia and facilitates symbolic connection to the peer graduate team and the institution. Keller [12] argues, a strong brand identity has driven consumers (and in this case, alumni) to embed their self-concept in the brand. For instance, when alumni see their university consistently represented as a prestigious and impactful institution, etc., they embody that identity as a component of their personal and professional identity.

Nonetheless, advertising's effect on alumni relations, for example, alumni engagement, support, and passion, may be moderated by its emotional and cultural relevance. Reduced levels of alumni engagement in collectivist cultures, such as Malaysia, respond more favourably to messages of shared legacy, institutional prestige, and community achievements vs. individualistic, promotional messaging. Thus, if the advertising message captures those feelings, shared ideals, and vision to be the first layer of alumni connection, recognition, and identification that would lead to the next layer of relational engagement.

**Table 1**

Construct	Primary Mechanism	CBBE Stage	Alumni Outcome
Advertising	Cognitive signalling	Brand Identity	Recognition, pride
Sales Promotions	Norm of reciprocity	Brand Meaning	Commitment, participation
Event Experiences	Emotional immersion	Brand Resonance	Advocacy, attachment

Although these tools coexist, they operate through distinct psychological and relational mechanisms.

### *2.3.2 Sales promotion and alumni relations: strengthening brand meaning*

The second phase of Keller's model, brand meaning, pertains to how individuals create associations with a brand based on perceptions of performance and imagery. As it relates to alumni relations, sales promotions including alumni privileges, discounts, exclusive access to resources, and membership benefits, represent a concrete way for the university to acknowledge its alumni. These types of promotions evoke feelings of value, reciprocity, and a sense of belonging that, in turn, help to reinforce that alumni are valued partners of the university.

From a CBBE model perspective, these promotions signal functional meaning (meaning alumni relate functional benefits to maintaining a relationship with the institution) and symbolic meaning (meaning alumni relate gestures to a continued good standing as a participant of the institution). The two types of meanings work in tandem to support deepened engagement and a strong relationship with the alumni's institution. This follows Keller's idea that a brand has meaning when it connects logically (through value) and emotionally (through connection).

Within Malaysia's relational and status-oriented context, the promotional design must reflect prestige, respect, and relevance. Instead of being viewed purely as transactional incentives, the promotion should indicate respect and lasting association. Properly designed, the promotions elevate alumni from passive supporters into engaged participants who feel appreciated and respected, which elevates them to the brand meaning level of the CBBE model and strengthens behavioural loyalty.

### *2.3.3 Event experiences and alumni relations: achieving brand resonance*

The highest tier of the CBBE pyramid, brand resonance, indicates a profound psychological connection that often leads to loyalty, attachment, and advocacy. In the context of higher learning institutions, the experience of events such as reunions, professional networking sessions, homecoming events, and mentoring programs, represents the most direct opportunity for creating brand resonance. Events are not simply gatherings, but they are emotional experiences which reignite the alumni's identity, feelings of belonging, and shared history.

As noted previously by Keller [12], resonance is the stage when consumers have developed an active relationship with the brand, reflected in repeated interactions, advocacy and emotional resonance. Alumni that attend meaningful university events are likely to engage in affective commitment, volunteering, donating, or representing the institution as ambassadors for free. Events help facilitate emotional storytelling, nostalgia, and collective pride of the community which turns an abstract affiliation with the institution into lived experience.

In the context of Malaysian culture, communal gatherings imbued nostalgic significance, as social affiliation and shared rituals boost loyalty. As such, alumni events that infuse culture, inclusivity, and institutional heritage are more likely to inspire strong emotional resonance, resulting in continuing engagement with their institution. When alumni create this type of resonance, they do not only reminisce about their university, but they experience it, ultimately consistent with the goal of the CBBE model (lasting brand loyalty and stage brand advocacy).

### *2.3.4 Integrating the constructs: a holistic view of alumni relations*

In summary, advertising, sales promotions, and event experiences form a scale of alumni involvement with the CBBE model of identity, meaning, and experience. Advertising is the beginning tap for building awareness and identity, sales promotions bring relational meaning through value and

reciprocity, and event experiences complete the process leading to emotional engagement and loyalty. Each of these dimensions exhibit the progressive repositioning of alumni from passive consumers of messages to more active, emotionally engaged stakeholders of the university.

In this way, the conceptual framework positions alumni engagement as the summative effect of branding activities that attend to alumni identity, meaning, and experience. The model recognises that alumni loyalty can only be built through the synergy of alumni engagement, and not the singularity of alumni communications, input, identity, meaning, and experiences.

### **3. Expected Outcome**

As per Keller's [12] CBBE model, it is anticipated that advertising, sales promotions, and event experiences will probably have different contributions to the development of alumni relations at the University of Malaya. Advertising is expected to create initial awareness of the brand and facilitate the development of the alumni's identification with the university, by articulating the values, accomplishments, and prestige of the university. While this process may enhance brand identification and cognitions of loyalty, the possibility of catalysing a more profound emotional connection is likely somewhat limited because advertising is, by nature, rather impersonal [29-30]. In Malaysia, a collectivistic culture, advertising may enhance alumni awareness and pride when it is framed around collective success and common heritage [27-30]. However, the direct effect of advertising, even within this context, on alumni engagement will likely remain low in comparison to other touchpoints that are more interactive in nature.

On the other hand, it is anticipated that sales promotions will also have a potentially stronger and more detectable effect on alumni relations on perceived institutional value and reciprocity. Value related components, such as privileges, exclusivity/ability to access, and rewards will stimulate alumni to feel valued and recognised thereby reinforcing both functional and symbolic ties to their respective university. The transfer of respect and belonging will increase the likelihood of higher behavioural loyalty, such as attending programmes or participating in donation. If a particular event and/or promotion is mindfully designed and implemented, it should create an experience of unquestionable prestige and value [25-26], thereby taking alumni engagement to a level that transgresses a transactional channel to a relational commitment of being.

Event experiences are expected to have the greatest positive influence on alumni relations through emotional engagement and lasting commitment. According to O'Sullivan *et al.*, [21], meaningful alumni events with strong social, professional, or cultural components are events that provide an experience which converts institutional membership to an emotionally lived experience. By utilising nostalgia, shared pride, and community identity into the experience, these types of events can facilitate an ongoing alumni connection and loyalty. Overall, the model is expected to explain about 50% of the variance in alumni relations, indicating moderate explanatory power and strong predictive relevance. Together, these findings will confirm that relational and experiential strategies, as opposed to traditional advertisement only, are the best ways to develop sustained and emotionally sustained educational (alumni) engagement.

### **4. Significance of Research**

This conceptual paper is theoretically important because it extends Keller's [12] CBBE models to a specific application area, alumni relations in higher education contexts. In this paper, advertising is considered the primary marketing communication tool used to drive brand identity, sales promotions to create brand meaning, and event experiences to drive brand resonance. The paper provides a new



account of how marketing communication tools affect alumni loyalty over the long term, built on previous studies that observe alumni relations as a social or administrative function, treating it as an organised process of building a brand relationship. A gap is also bridged in the literature on contexts in Southeast Asia in which cultural values, emotional depth, and institutional brand attachment have not been looked at but together contribute to an innovative understanding of the processes associated with alumni engagement.

In terms of practical importance, this paper contributes relevance to universities in their efforts to improve alumni relations as part of a larger agenda of strategic brand management and sustainability. The framework emphasises that alumni loyalty is earned considerably through relationships and experiences rather than just marketing communication that is transactional or informative. Utilising strategies that engross engagement strategies that invoke shared identity and reciprocity create lasting memories transforming graduates to a lifelong “partner” who contribute advocacy, mentoring, philanthropy, etc. These are all area of importance in Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2015-2025 to ensure which illustrates the aim of collective responsibility between stakeholders and sustaining lifelong learning [31].

In addition, the conceptual model acts as a helpful guide for policy makers and educators in higher education to create focused strategies specifically for alumni that meet cultural norms and institutional objectives. When implementing alumni strategies that combine the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural aspects of engagement, universities are likely to enhance their reputational capital, diversify funding sources, and strengthen employment connections as well as university-industry relationships [28]. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that human-centred marketing practices that reflect authenticity, inclusivity, and cultural considerations help create and sustain healthy relationships with alumni and enhance the university's image as a lifelong partner in personal and professional development.

## **5. Limitation, Recommendation and Conclusion**

This conceptual paper advances alumni relations theory by repositioning alumni engagement as a progressive brand–relationship formation process, rather than a collection of isolated communication or administrative activities. Existing alumni research has predominantly approached engagement through operational indicators such as contact frequency, participation rates, or fundraising outcomes. In contrast, this study contributes theoretically by integrating Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model into the alumni relations domain and extending its explanatory scope through relational and experiential perspectives. By doing so, alumni loyalty is conceptualised not merely as behavioural compliance, but as an outcome of identity formation, reciprocal meaning, and emotional resonance embedded within the university–alumni relationship.

Notably, the paper demonstrates that alumni relations cannot be sufficiently explained through brand awareness or informational communication alone. Instead, loyalty emerges through cumulative psychological processes that align alumni self-concept, perceived value, and lived experiences with the institutional brand. This reframing contributes to higher education branding literature by bridging brand equity theory with alumni relationship management, an area that has remained theoretically fragmented.

Beyond applying CBBE to a new context, the proposed framework conceptually extends alumni engagement scholarship by differentiating the distinct yet complementary roles of advertising, sales promotions, and event experiences. Advertising is positioned as a mechanism for reinforcing institutional identity and symbolic affiliation; sales promotions function as relational signals that create meaning through reciprocity and recognition; and event experiences operate as immersive

platforms that generate emotional attachment and social bonding. Together, these elements form a coherent engagement trajectory that moves alumni from passive recognition to active institutional resonance.

This extension challenges prevailing assumptions that single-touchpoint strategies or transactional incentives can drive alumni engagement. Instead, the framework reframes alumni relations as a relational ecosystem, where identity-based communication, value exchange, and experiential participation interact to produce enduring commitment. The model further contributes by situating alumni engagement within a collectivist cultural context, highlighting how shared heritage, prestige, and communal experiences intensify relational outcomes—an aspect under-theorised in predominantly Western alumni studies.

From a practical perspective, the framework offers clear guidance for higher education administrators seeking to strengthen alumni relations. Universities should move beyond generic promotional communication and adopt identity-driven advertising that emphasises institutional legacy, collective achievement, and societal contribution. Alumni benefits and privileges should be designed not as short-term incentives, but as symbolic gestures of appreciation that reinforce a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. Most critically, institutions should prioritise culturally meaningful alumni events that foster interaction, inclusivity, and shared memory-making, as these experiences play a central role in cultivating emotional resonance and long-term advocacy.

For universities operating in collectivist contexts such as Malaysia, the findings underscore the importance of aligning alumni engagement strategies with cultural expectations surrounding prestige, reciprocity, and communal identity. By strategically integrating advertising, promotions, and event experiences within a coherent relational framework, universities can transform alumni from episodic participants into lifelong partners who contribute advocacy, mentoring, and institutional support. In this way, alumni relations evolve from a peripheral administrative function into a core component of sustainable higher education branding and stakeholder engagement.

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