

# E-CRM AS A CATALYST FOR BRAND AWARENESS AND ENGAGEMENT: A STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE FOR PRIVATE INSTITUTES OF HIGHER LEARNING IN MALAYSIA

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**Abstract:** *The emergence of E-commerce has ushered in a multitude of advantages, especially in terms of economic development. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Private Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) have faced significant challenges and intense competition including Malaysian Private IHLs. In response, these institutions have implemented various strategies to sustain their competitiveness in the education sector. Among these strategies, marketing management has emerged as a crucial approach, providing a comprehensible platform for cultivating market relations within the academic domain. This paper delves into the realm of electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM) in the private higher education sector, focusing on the impact of digital transformation on brand image. With the advent of e-commerce and the evolving expectations of tech-savvy students, establishing and maintaining a strong brand image has become crucial for private IHLs. This article explores the pivotal role of e-CRM to Malaysian Private IHLs in enhancing brand awareness and engagement as well as presents it as a strategic imperative for businesses. Drawing on theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, this research article provides insights into how businesses can leverage e-CRM to elevate their brand image, build customer trust, and foster long-term relationships. By understanding the significance of e-CRM as a catalyst for brand awareness and engagement, IHLs can develop effective strategies to thrive in today's dynamic marketplace.*

**Keywords:** *Brand Image, Customer Relationship Management, Electronic Customer Relationship Management, Institutes of Higher Learning, E-commerce.*

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## Introduction

In the emerging competitive and technological driven in education field, Private Institute of Higher Learning (Private IHL) must strive hard to retain and enlarge its customer base. As the number of Internet users increases, the marketing sector has also altered substantially as many businesses see the platform's efficiency in delivering targeted messages, generating income, and enabling two-way connection with clients (Kumar, Mokha & Pattnaik, 2021). The private IHL is experiencing a dynamic shift due to the rapid advancement of digital technologies and the rise of e-commerce. As students increasingly rely on digital platforms for their educational needs, private IHLs face new challenges and opportunities in enhancing their brand image.

As known empirically to how Customer Relationship Management (CRM) plays a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining strong connections with customers, Private IHLs in Malaysia also need to rely to its effectiveness of applying the CRM, to allow the effective management of its students, alumni, and other stakeholders. Aligned to the advancement in technology, CRM has also gone through the stage of adapting to digitalization leading to Electronic Customer Relationship Management (e-CRM) (Gil-Gomez, Guerola-Navarro, Oltra-Badenes, & Lozano-Quilis, 2020; Setiawan & Widaryanto, 2018). According to Burra et al., (2022), e-CRM encompasses the utilization of the Internet or the web to facilitate seamless communication and interaction between organizations and their consumers, thereby optimizing the implementation of CRM strategies. Meanwhile, e-CRM refers to how organizations and their consumers can connect via the Internet or the web to streamline the deployment of CRM (Abdeldayem, Yehia & Marie, 2022; Burra et al., 2022). Aligned to the digital pressure among the Private IHLs, it is believing the study on e-CRM among them is also critical toward meeting the branding needs to stay competitive.

In an era where digital technology blurs the boundaries between data platforms, the concept of e-CRM opens up opportunities for customers to engage with companies through multiple information channels, many of which are interconnected with information and communication technologies applications available on the Internet (P. Kumar, Mokha, & Pattnaik, 2022) which could lead to be engagement that could positively influence brand equity.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges to various industries, IHLs also has been directly impacted, which not excluded Malaysian Private IHLs (UNESCO, 2020). This, in turn, has led to the need to the study on how Private IHLs in Malaysia to understand the level of its customer satisfaction through the potentials of e-CRM. As organizations embrace e-CRM, there is a shift towards managing customer interactions digitally, leading to enhanced technological and organizational capabilities. This evolution provides opportunities for firms to leverage big data and gain a deeper understanding of how these capabilities can positively impact performance (Swathi, 2020). The richness of big data handled by e-CRM contributes to this knowledge and facilitates more effective e-CRM strategies for IHLs.

## Problem Statement and Research Objective

The important of e-CRM is seen to leverage technology for a deeper understanding of customers. This study aims to delve further into the essential E-CRM (Kumar, Mokha, & Pattnaik, 2022) that play a pivotal role in attracting and retaining customers, particularly within the context of Private Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs). Further exploration for this study on potential of e-CRM as pivotal role to Malaysian Private IHLs in enhancing brand awareness and engagement needed as limited studies of e-CRM especially in Private education sector.

This research article provides insights into how businesses can leverage e-CRM to elevate their brand image, awareness, build student trust, engagement, and foster long-term relationships. There are limited studies on e-CRM with brand awareness and engagement among Private IHL as previous studies focus more on other fields. Kumar, Mokha, and Pattnaik (2021) have noted that numerous studies have explored the influence of e-CRM on a wide range of factors, including customer satisfaction (Rashwan, M. Mansi, & Hassan, 2019), customer loyalty (Mang'unyi, Khabala, & Govender, 2018; Shastri, Sharma, & Sethi, 2020), customer retention (Al-Dmour, Algharabat, Khawaja, & Al-Dmour, 2019), financial profitability (Kaur & Kaur, 2016; Cajestan, 2018) mostly in banking or hotel industries. However, it is worth highlighting that the impact of e-CRM within the educational context, particularly in Private Institutes of Higher Learning, has not been thoroughly analysed and evaluated, as underscored as a noticeable gap in previous research (Zaim et al., 2020). In addition, previous studies have increased our understanding of how the human-computer interface affects consumer behaviour, E-CRM remains a relatively underexplored area (Kumar, Mokha & Pattnaik, 2021). Besides that, e-CRM concept believed that it should be analysed further as evidence has been found that the concept will better assist the relationship between customers with universities students (Setiawan and Widaryanto, 2018).

Therefore, this study will explore on how potentially e-CRM as pivotal role to Malaysian Private IHLs in enhancing brand awareness and engagement as well as presents it as a strategic imperative for businesses. This research article provides insights into how businesses can leverage e-CRM to elevate their brand image, build customer trust, and foster long-term relationships. The findings of this study will shed light on the positive effects that stem from a robust relationship between the institution and its customers, particularly in terms of service performance.

## Literature Review

### **E-CRM in the Private Institute of Higher Learning Sector**

Digital transformation plays a crucial role in enhancing brand image and competitiveness for private IHL. By leveraging digital technologies and strategies, these institutions can create a strong online presence, engage with their target audience, and differentiate themselves from competitors. Through effective digital marketing efforts, such as social media campaigns, search engine optimization, and content marketing, institutions can build brand awareness, reach a wider audience, and communicate their unique value propositions. By embracing digital transformation, institutions can also optimize their administrative processes, streamline operations, and provide seamless online services, enhancing overall efficiency and customer satisfaction. Ultimately, by staying ahead in the digital landscape, it is believed that private higher education institutions especially in Malaysia can establish a positive brand image, foster competitiveness, and attract students in an increasingly digital-driven world. This transformation involves the adoption of advanced digital tools and platforms such as learning management systems, online course delivery methods, virtual classrooms, and interactive e-learning resources to facilitate remote learning, collaboration, and engagement among students and faculty members.

In Malaysia, the Private IHLs comprise Private Universities, University Colleges, and Colleges or Institutions. According to the website [www2.mqa.gov.my](http://www2.mqa.gov.my), as of October 2022, there are a total of 523 Private IHLs in the country. These institutions in Malaysia recognize the importance of meeting student expectations and as highlighted by Manogharan & Varadarajan

(2018), they undertake various programs to fulfil their customers' needs. However, despite these efforts, a significant number of students fail to adhere to the required timelines, resulting in a more challenging journey for these institutions to retain their student population.

However, according to Snijders, Wijnia, Rikers, & Loyens (2019), in order to retain the students, student satisfaction and loyalty toward institutions are critical. Hence, in achieving those competitive edge, it is required to find a good strategy to give the best in building strong relationship with their customers i.e., students of which the exploration on establishing e-CRM is seen having great potentials to the Private IHLs. This situation has somewhat created a marketing warfare among private institutions to attract as many students as possible. To sustain their presence in the industry, private IHLs must adopt a more creative approach in promoting their services and embrace digitalization as a strategic imperative (Oppong, Singh, & Kujur, 2020). By leveraging modern technology, Private IHLs can tap into the transformative potential of digital technologies, particularly in the context of e-CRM including Malaysian Private IHLs. As how CRM have emerged as instrumental factors in driving global transformations in both business and society, offering numerous benefits for companies and customers alike (Swathi, 2020). E-CRM is also believed to facilitate Malaysian Private IHLs in getting the students through effective brand awareness. Through the implementation of e-CRM practices and the utilization of digital tools, IHLs can enhance their ability to deliver tailored and personalized experiences, build stronger relationships with students, and ultimately improve their overall satisfaction and loyalty.

#### **Electronic Customer Relationship Management (E-CRM)**

Refers to the use of internet and web applications to deal with customers (Zatalini & Pamungkas, 2017). To achieve what the company expects, and to maintain a sustainable customer relationship, many companies develop and maintain CRM-based data warehouse systems in an electronic way. The use of e-CRM information technology improves the service to customers which is more flexible (Setiawan & Widaryanto, 2018).

#### **Brand Awareness**

Defined as the knowledge about the brand, or the descriptive information. about the brand stored in consumers' memories (Kotler et al., 2019). Brand awareness, in combination with brand identity, brand image, brand association, and brand loyalty are described.

#### **Engagement**

Khan et al. (2019) explained brand engagement has been defined as “a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g. a brand) in service relationships”. Extending this view, Hollebeek et al. 5 (2019, p. 166) defined customer engagement as a customer’s “motivationally driven, volitional investment of operant resources (including cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social knowledge/skills), and operand resources (e.g., equipment) in their brand interactions.” Through the customer’s proactive contribution to their brand interactions, customer engagement reveals the customer’s intent to reach their utilitarian, hedonic, or social product- or brand-related goals, thereby helping to reduce perceived risk and build trust (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019).

## Hypotheses

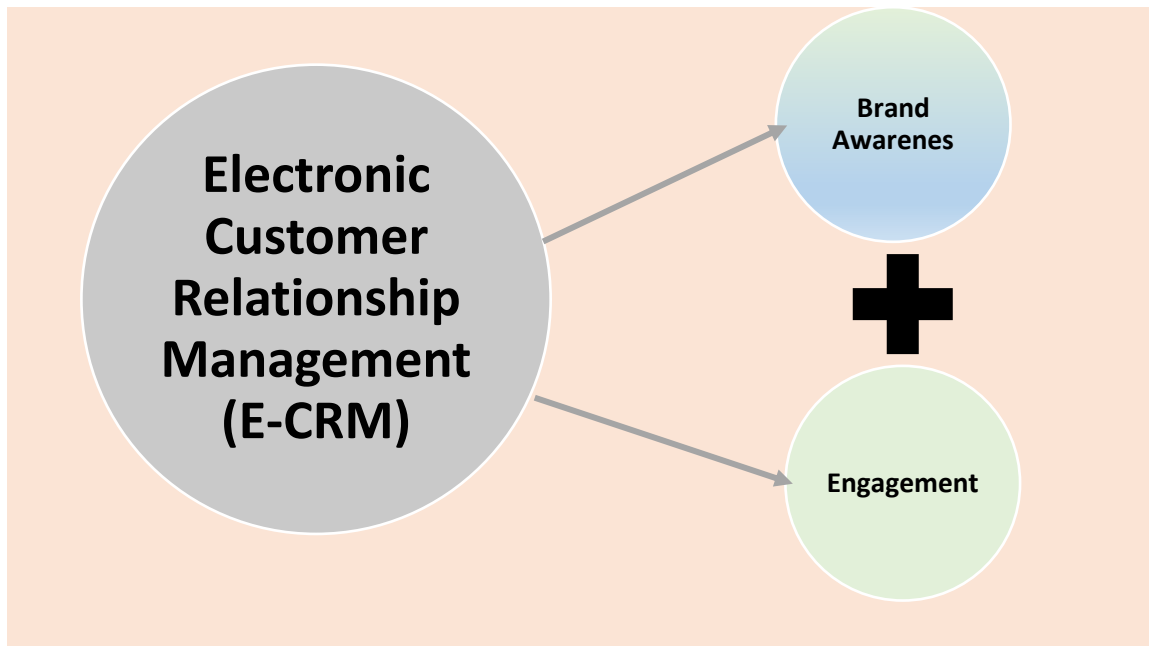
### **E-CRM with Brand Awareness and Engagement**

By leveraging digital technologies and implementing e-CRM strategies, institutions can enhance their interactions with students, provide personalized support, and foster long-lasting relationships. E-CRM enables institutions to collect and analyze valuable data about students' preferences, behaviors, and feedback, allowing them to tailor their offerings and services to meet individual needs (Setiawan & Widaryanto, 2018). This personalized approach not only enhances the student experience but also contributes to a positive brand perception and reputation. According to a study by Azila (2011) and Prima Zani (2013), the effective implementation of e-CRM in higher education institutions positively influences students' perceptions of service quality. Moreover, e-CRM enables timely and targeted communication with students through various digital channels, such as email, chatbots, and social media, fostering engagement and building a strong brand image (P. Kumar et al., 2022; Matarazzo, Penco, Profumo, & Quaglia, 2021).

The availability of these digital communication platforms allows students to conveniently seek support, ask questions, and provide feedback, resulting in improved satisfaction and an enhanced institutional reputation. Additionally, e-CRM facilitates efficient management of student inquiries, applications, and enrolment processes, streamlining administrative operations and further contributing to a positive brand image (Jafari Navimipour & Soltani, 2016). Additionally, e-CRM provides private higher education institutions with effective tools to enhance brand image and reputation by personalizing interactions, fostering engagement, and streamlining administrative processes.

Remarkably, brand image takes the lead in a customer's decision-making process, becoming the embodiment of their product experience (Ardabili et al., 2012). The nexus between customer loyalty and brand image has been extensively demonstrated through a plethora of studies, unveiling a robust and positive correlation (Rohmad, Rivaldo, Victor Kamanda, & Yusman, 2022). It is within this captivating backdrop that the potential of e-CRM to elevate brand image and foster unwavering customer loyalty unfolds, paving the way for captivating connections that transcend expectations. Hence, the interest of the study to examine on how e-CRM could give impact to Private IHLs in Malaysia to attract more customers via brand image has seemed justified.

According to Dehghanpouri, Soltani, & Rostamzadeh (2020), e-CRM possesses the capabilities to enhance customer service and retain valuable customers through networking. These networks have the potential to reduce communication costs for organizations in terms of both monetary expenses and time duration. Furthermore, a study by Dean et al. (2009) demonstrated that a significant number of organizations in the United States leveraged e-CRM to achieve higher customer satisfaction. As in the others study, the organizations aim to cultivate strong relationships with customers by providing them with the utmost satisfaction, leading to customer retention, repeated purchases, and loyalty (Dotan, 2008; Dyche, 2001; Mang'unyi, Khabala, & Govender, 2018; Mulyana, 2020).



**Figure 1: the Significant relationship Model of Electronic Customer Relationship Management (E-CRM), Brand Awareness and Engagement.**

Source: Kumar, Mokha & Pattnaik (2021), Azila (2011), and Prima Zani (2013)

### Methodology

The methodology for this study was involved a survey among students to test the relationships among the variables under investigation. The study exclusively included participants who were users of E-CRM which was students of Malaysian Private IHLs. Thirty questionnaires were distributed to selected respondents in two private institutions of higher learning (Private IHLs). All questionnaires were handed out in person to the respondents, and a two-week period was allocated for them to complete the questionnaires. The completed questionnaires were collected within four weeks, and all 30 questionnaires were returned, resulting in a 100% response rate. Data analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics 23 software. To ensure data accuracy, a frequency analysis was performed to identify and rectify data entry errors. The minimum and maximum values for each variable were examined to further validate the data entry accuracy. Any identified data entry errors were thoroughly verified and corrected prior to the data analysis. To determine the scale values for each research instrument, the composite mean was calculated by summing the scores of the items and dividing by the number of items that comprised each dimension. This methodology allowed for a comprehensive examination of the variables, ensuring data accuracy and reliability in the subsequent analysis of the study's relationships among E-CRM, brand awareness and engagement within the context of private institutions of higher learning.

### Finding and Discussion

This study highlighted the growing importance of E-CRM in Private IHL. As businesses and educational institutions embrace technology-driven solutions to enhance customer experiences, E-CRM has emerged as a pivotal strategy. The adoption of E-CRM is shown to not only facilitate the development of digital platforms and maintain long-term customer relationships but also enhancing brand awareness and engagement with the institutions.

The study highlighted the positive relationships between E-CRM, brand awareness and engagement. The outcome of this discovery aligns with the earlier research conducted by

Kumar, Mokha, and Pattnaik (2021), Azila (2011) and Prima Zani (2013). As there was limitation in this study, this study opens the door to additional research opportunities, particularly in the context of education. The application of E-CRM especially in private IHLs is a relatively unexplored area and could be a deeper understanding of some dimension in E-CRM, which could offer valuable insights for future research.

The e-CRM finds as an application across all business levels that allow electronic interactions with customers, enabling organizations to engage with their customer base effectively (Nguyen, 2012). Implementing e-CRM strategies in IHLs, can enhance the student experience, strengthen brand image, and improve overall institutional effectiveness. How this e-CRM works for IHLs is when it enables institutes to establish personalized and interactive communication channels with students, fostering engagement and enhancing their overall experience. As studied by Dubihlela & Molise-Khosa (2014) that e-CRM systems have emerged as a significant advancement in marketing, aiming primarily to establish and nurture enduring customer relationships. Moreover, several studies have highlighted the ability of e-CRM systems to make significant contributions to business successes and competitive advantage (Azila, 2011; Das, 2012; Dubihlela & Molise-Khosa, 2014; Mang'unyi, Khabala, & Govender, 2017), as customer can access product or service more convenient and less expensive as compare with traditional way (K. C. J. S. Kumar & Vikkraman, 2011).

One of the primary challenges in implementing e-CRM systems is ensuring the privacy and protection of customers data (Romano & Fjermestad, 2007). Higher education institutions must comply with relevant data protection laws and regulations, such as the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) in Malaysia. It is crucial to establish robust data security measures, including encryption, access controls, and regular audits, to safeguard student information. Implementing transparent data handling practices and obtaining explicit consent from students will also foster trust and confidence in the institution's e-CRM initiatives (Dehghanpouri et al., 2020; Romano & Fjermestad, 2007).

Introducing e-CRM into a private higher education institution may face resistance from faculty, staff, and administrators. Common concerns in digital transformation like e-CRM may include the perceived complexity of the system, fear of job displacement, and unfamiliarity with digital tools (Anaam et al., 2021; Kitsios, Giatsidis, & Kamariotou, 2021; Rashwan, M. Mansi, & Hassan, 2019). To overcome resistance, it is essential to communicate the benefits and purpose of e-CRM clearly. Conducting training programs and workshops to familiarize stakeholders with the system's functionalities can help alleviate concerns. Involving key stakeholders in the decision-making process and highlighting the potential positive impact on brand image and student experience can foster organizational buy-in.

In addition to the above challenges, other factors to consider include the need for ongoing staff training and development to ensure a competent e-CRM team, integration of e-CRM with existing information systems and processes and aligning e-CRM initiatives with the institution's overall strategic objectives. This is because behind all the benefit gain through adopting e-CRM system, there also unsuccessful story that need to be highlight. Anaam et al., (2021) in their review had reported that the significant problem behind the failure of e-CRM organizational change, company policy, and lack of CRM understanding. However other study stated that the failure of e-CRM system due to the company members hard to change from traditional way or practice (Bhanu & Magiswary, 2010; Nguyen, 2012).

By addressing these challenges and considerations, private institutes of higher learning in Malaysia can navigate the complexities associated with e-CRM implementation and maximize its potential to enhance brand image, improve student satisfaction, and foster long-term loyalty.

## Conclusion

Building and maintaining strong relationships with students, alumni, and other stakeholders is of paramount importance in the realm of higher education. Students are the lifeblood of educational institutions, and forging meaningful connections with them is crucial for their academic success and overall satisfaction. By cultivating strong relationships, institutions can create a supportive and engaging learning environment, promote student engagement, and enhance student outcomes. Moreover, maintaining relationships with alumni is essential as they serve as ambassadors of the institution, contributing to its reputation and credibility. Alumni connections can lead to valuable networking opportunities, mentorship programs, and even philanthropic support. Additionally, fostering relationships with other stakeholders such as parents, faculty, staff, and the broader community helps create a sense of unity and collaboration, leading to a more vibrant and dynamic educational ecosystem. These relationships foster loyalty, trust, and a sense of belonging, contributing to institutional growth, sustainability, and success.

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