

“Analyzing the effect of inward- vs. outward-looking activities on student loyalty in Japanese universities”

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ANALYZING THE EFFECT OF INWARD- VS. OUTWARD- LOOKING ACTIVITIES ON STUDENT LOYALTY IN JAPANESE UNIVERSITIES

Abstract

The increasing global competitiveness of university admissions has propelled the need to understand the critical factors underlying students' loyalty. Although extensive research has been conducted on student loyalty, it focuses predominantly on student-centric activities, targeting only inward-looking measures aimed at students. In the corporate context, employees are considered the "second audience" for external marketing promotions, and the impact of these promotions on employee job satisfaction has been well researched. However, in the university context, little is known about how external policies affect student loyalty. Therefore, this study aimed to clarify the influence of both inward- and outward-looking activities on student loyalty in Japanese universities. An online survey was conducted for 1,000 Japanese university students. The results of applying structural equation modeling to the survey data confirm the positive effect of inward-looking measures on student loyalty. Significant effects were found for lectures ($\beta = 0.670$, p -value < 0.000) and job hunting ($\beta = 0.250$, p -value < 0.000), while campuses also showed a positive effect ($\beta = 0.148$, p -value = 0.039). Among outward-looking measures, only celebrity endorsements contributed positively to loyalty ($\beta = 0.136$, p -value = 0.026), while sports and digital channel promotions had negative effects, contrary to expectations. This may be attributed to the reliance of sports on wins and losses and digital channel promotions often inducing feelings of envy when students observe others' successes. Therefore, when university policymakers implement measures to strengthen their external brands, they must consider their impact on enrolled students.

Keywords

internal marketing, loyalty, marketing communication, lectures, campuses, job placement, sports, celebrities

JEL Classification

M31, I21

INTRODUCTION

Governments have emphasized the role of universities in sustainable economic development and promoted their independence and fostered competition (Schulze-Cleven, 2020). Consequently, market principles have been adopted in higher education, intensifying global competition for growth (Teixeira et al., 2022b). Business schools have been the frontrunners of competition in higher education (Kettunen et al., 2022). In recent times, academic competitiveness requires an organization-wide strategy and effective budget allocation (Musselin, 2018). Hence, universities deploy various marketing strategies such as advertising, infrastructure investment, academic stars' recruitment, and tuition discounting to attract top students (Mause, 2009). These efforts often require huge budgets, leading universities to engage in performance-based funding competitions (Teixeira et al., 2022a).

Therefore, understanding student loyalty is essential for universities to strengthen their brands (Schlesinger et al., 2017). Existing research



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has addressed various factors such as lectures (Burger, 2017; Feistauer & Richter, 2017; Kankhuni et al., 2022; Masserini et al., 2019), academic facilities (Charles, 2016), facilities (Masserini et al., 2019), and job placement (Lu & Song, 2020).

Universities are consistently developing various external activities to strengthen their brands. While such activities primarily target external stakeholders, their effects on enrolled students should also be considered. Promotion is a typical external measure. In the context of corporate advertising, employees are referred to as the “secondary audience” for promotions (Gilly & Wolfinbarger, 1998). From an employee’s perspective, understanding the social influence of an organization can increase job satisfaction (Hu et al., 2022). However, little is known about the impact of external policies on students in the university context. Promotions using digital channels have been particularly influential recently (Melović et al., 2020).

This study investigates the effects of inward- and outward-looking activities on loyalty among Japanese university students. Inward-looking activities included lectures (offline/online), campus, and job placement after school, while outward-looking activities comprised sports, celebrity endorsements, and digital channel promotions. The study findings complement existing literature. By considering corporate internal marketing in the analysis of the impact of outward-oriented policies on university employees, new insights have been provided. It is crucial to comprehensively evaluate the external activities of interest and the inward activities, which contribute to fostering loyalty. This is because evaluating only external activities may lead to overestimation. Therefore, university policymakers should consider the impact on students when implementing external policies.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Universities offer a wide variety of services, both in terms of hardware and software. Existing studies have investigated integrated factors, such as service quality, and evaluated student loyalty (Arrivabene et al., 2019). However, if multiple factors are grouped together, the impact of each factor cannot be understood, and the order of priority cannot be clarified. Hence, this study reviewed factors that contribute to university competitiveness identified in previous studies and derived hypotheses.

In brand management, it is not enough to investigate only customer satisfaction. Highly loyal customers are generally satisfied, but satisfied customers are not always highly loyal. This is because feelings of satisfaction have fewer psychological barriers than loyalty. Loyalty measurement is essential for understanding the customers that underpin a company’s profits. Long-standing customers are not necessarily profitable for the company. In the past, loyalty was measured by behavioral indices, such as the frequency of repeated purchases or the number of purchases of the same brand. However, behavioral indices, by their nature, can-

not explain why a consumer has purchased repeatedly. Repeated purchases include purchases due to convenience, such as good store access, and accidental purchases without any feelings toward the product, also called spurious loyalty (Dick & Basu, 1994). Loyalty refers to customers having a favorable attitude toward the brand and repeating purchasing behavior with a strong will. Besides, their passion for the brand plays a role in promoting it as the best option for customers (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Hence, marketers working to build brand loyalty need to build a positive attitude toward the brand and should not be satisfied with just repeated purchases. Thus, simple attitude indices, such as repurchase intention, and recommendation intention, are universally adopted for measuring loyalty. In the case of a university, it is rare for people to actually make multiple purchases, so it is difficult to measure behavioral indicators. Therefore, attitudinal indicators were used.

Lectures are a fundamental method of instruction in higher education institutions, such as universities. As the fundamental service provided by universities, naturally contribute to student loyalty (Kankhuni et al., 2022; Masserini et al., 2019). Lectures serve as a cornerstone of

academic programs, delivering essential knowledge and skills to students in a structured format. The consistency and quality of lectures help establish a strong educational foundation, which in turn fosters trust and satisfaction among students. This lecture service includes instructor-led lectures and seminars in which student-directed research is conducted (Burger, 2017; Feistauer & Richter, 2017; Severiens et al., 2015). Instructor-led lecture is a teaching format where the instructor primarily leads the session, delivering information directly to the students. The main characteristic of this approach is its efficiency in transmitting knowledge, as the instructor can cover a large amount of material in a short time. Additionally, the instructor's expertise and experience are directly conveyed to the students, allowing for in-depth exploration of the subject matter. Meanwhile, seminars in which student-directed research is conducted refer to a type of class where students take the lead in conducting research and presenting their findings. The main characteristics of this approach include students selecting their research topics, gathering and analyzing data, and deepening their understanding through presentations. This format emphasizes student autonomy and curiosity, promoting the development of self-directed learning skills and critical thinking abilities. Both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages; therefore, integrated provision is common and essential (Fischer & Hänze, 2019). A recent significant development is the adoption of the online format of lectures. Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the demand for online learning tools in some universities was relatively low owing to the traditional preference for face-to-face lectures (Zawacki-Richter, 2021). However, in the wake of the pandemic, universities rapidly embraced digitization (Skulmowski & Rey, 2020). The studies conducted during the early stages of the transition found that online lectures led to decreased student motivation, reduced teacher-student communication, and decreased lecture quality (Tang et al., 2020). However, this can be attributed to the unprecedented social situation and the lack of preparation by teachers and students toward transitioning to this mode of learning (Selvaraj et al., 2021). After the establishment of online lectures, students began to prefer online formats (Kato, 2023).

The campus is the most symbolic exterior of a university. A campus refers to the grounds and buildings of higher education institutions, such as universities and vocational schools. Within a campus, there are classrooms and lecture halls for conducting lectures and seminars, libraries, research labs, student dormitories, cafeterias, sports facilities, administrative offices, and more. Campuses are important places for interaction among current students (Hanson et al., 2019). They provide a setting where students can collaborate on academic projects, participate in extracurricular activities, and build lasting relationships. This interaction is crucial for personal development and enhances the overall university experience. Each campus has a unique atmosphere and culture shaped by the university's characteristics and traditions. These diverse facilities and environments contribute to a vibrant campus life, supporting both academic pursuits and social engagement. Moreover, they attract students from outside the area (Charles, 2016). Campuses are broadly divided into two types. The first encompasses campuses with greeneries. Working in forest-rich campuses improves the psychological well-being of university students (Kim et al., 2021). The second type is urban campuses. In Japan, an increasing number of universities are relocating campuses to urban zones with the expectation that the improved accessibility will attract prospective students (Asahi Shimbun, 2022).

Job placement is a crucial factor for university students because most students aim to secure jobs after graduating from university. The employment rate for four-year university graduates in Japan in 2022 was 97.3% (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2022). Therefore, students demonstrate strong positive attitudes toward employment. Job placement refers to the activities and services provided to help students and job seekers find suitable employment. The goal of job placement is to ensure that students find careers that match their skills and interests, enabling a smooth transition into the workforce and successful professional lives. Nonetheless, these job placements are course-based with information technology taking the forefront in the labor market (Lu & Song, 2020). Job placement services include career counseling, resume and CV writing assistance, interview preparation, internship

placements, and hosting job fairs and company information sessions. Additionally, these services often provide access to job listings and connect students with potential employers, facilitating networking opportunities and increasing the likelihood of job offers. Through these comprehensive support systems, students are better equipped to navigate the job market and achieve their career goals. Furthermore, social media plays an important role in job hunting. For example, LinkedIn is used by individuals of different age groups, particularly university students, to search for jobs (Loha & Chowdhury, 2021). Nonetheless, universities that increase student employability are of significant value to students.

Sports play a crucial role in the education and daily lives of university students. Universities offer a variety of sports clubs and societies, such as baseball, track and field, tennis, soccer, and skiing, allowing students to participate based on their interests and skill levels. This participation fosters student interactions, enriching their university experience. Companies recognize sports as a measure to improve their corporate brand image (Do et al., 2015). This trend is noticeable in sports-related industries and in the food industry, where strengthening the corporate brand image is essential (Dixon et al., 2019). Corporate sports activities can be divided into two main categories: sponsorship of sports events (Morgan et al., 2020) and sponsorship of athletes (Malik & Gupta, 2014). Sponsorship of sports events is financial or material support provided by companies or organizations for specific sports events. Through this sponsorship, companies provide the necessary funds and resources for organizing and running the events, and in return, they gain opportunities to widely promote their brand and products. Sponsorship can be realized in various forms, such as displaying corporate logos, placing advertisements, conducting promotional activities during events, and providing VIP seating. On the other hand, sponsorship of athletes refers to the financial or material support provided by companies or organizations to specific athletes, who in turn promote the company's brand and products. This sponsorship allows athletes to obtain the funds and resources needed for training and competitions, while companies leverage the athletes' fame and influence to enhance brand recognition. According to university policymakers, notable achievements

by college athletes increase the quantity and quality of prospective applications and strengthen schools' financial and academic standing (Peterson-Horner & Eckstein, 2015).

Celebrities are individuals widely recognized by the mass media and the public for their fame and notability, including wealthy individuals, actors, athletes, models, and authors. Employing celebrities in advertisements attracts consumer attention (Till, 1998) and creates positive economic effects (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995). In the university context, this concept extends to the production of famous graduates. These distinguished alumni enhance the university's reputation and can attract prospective students and funding. Their success stories serve as powerful testimonials of the institution's quality of education and opportunities it provides. Additionally, these notable graduates often give back to their former universities, further boosting the university's prestige and resources. For celebrities to be effective in corporate advertising, they must possess specialized knowledge related to the target product (Kim et al., 2017). University graduates fulfill this condition because they have acquired specialized knowledge during their academic tenure.

Digital channel promotions refer to the use of the internet, desktop computers, mobile phones, and other digital media to promote products and services through specific channels. In universities, digital channel promotions are utilized for various purposes, including student recruitment, brand enhancement, information dissemination, and expanding opportunities for online education. By leveraging social media advertising, webinars, and data analysis, universities can conduct highly effective marketing activities. In the context of corporate advertising, employees are referred to as the "secondary audience" of external promotions, meaning they are indirectly influenced by the promotional activities aimed at the general public (Gilly & Wolfinbarger, 1998). From an employee's perspective, external promotions can have two effects. The first is the effect of improving job satisfaction. Perceptions of the social impact of work significantly impact satisfaction (Hu et al., 2022). Witnessing the company you work for and the products you are responsible for in the media may make it easier to perceive the significance of your

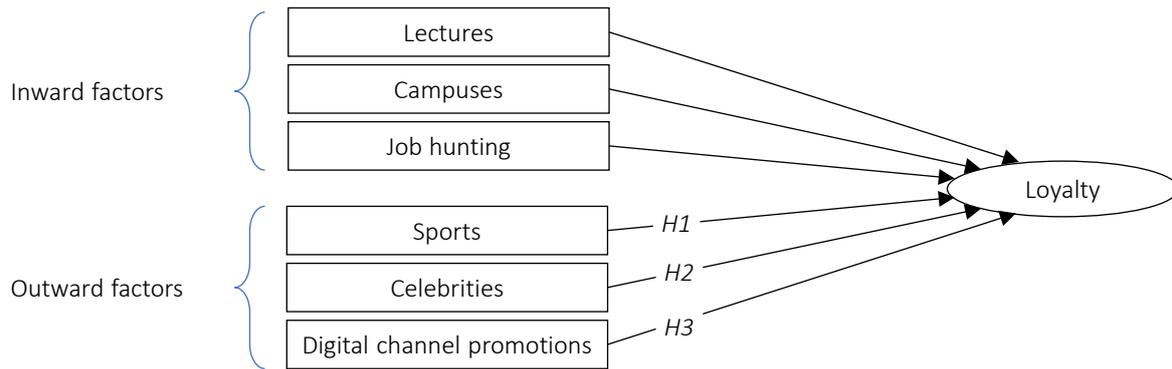


Figure 1. Hypothetical model

work. The second aspect is the effectiveness of the message transmission from managers to employees (Acito & Ford, 1980). In universities, promotions are predominantly channeled through digital platforms rather than traditional mass media. Currently, the influence of digital channel promotions is extremely large (Melović et al., 2020).

This study aims to clarify the effects of both inward- and outward-looking activities on student loyalty in Japanese universities. Specifically, the study seeks to identify how learning activities (such as lectures and seminars), campus characteristics, job placement, and external activities like celebrity endorsements, sports, and digital channel promotions influence student loyalty.

Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized model used in this study.

Following the literature review, the study elaborates on the following hypotheses:

- H1: Sports activities positively impact student loyalty.*
- H2: Distinguished alumni positively impact student loyalty.*
- H3: Digital channel promotions positively affect student loyalty.*

2. METHODOLOGY

An online survey was conducted between February 1 and 10, 2024, using 1,000 university students in Japan as the sample population with a mean of 21.359, SD of 2.050, and median of 21. As illustrat-

ed in Table 1, 50.8% of the respondents were males and 49.2% were females. The survey was distributed through a panel of Japanese companies. All study participants provided the informed consent.

As shown in Table 2, the survey items comprised the following 21 categories: loyalty (Nos. 1-3), lectures (Nos. 4-6), celebrities (Nos. 4-6), campuses (Nos. 7-9), job hunting (Nos. 10-12), sports (Nos. 13-15), and digital channel promotions (Nos. 19-21). All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = definitely disagree, 5 = definitely agree).

Table 1. Respondent attributes

Item	Content	Number of respondents	Ratio
Gender	Male	508	50.8%
	Female	492	49.2%
University type	National/public	318	31.8%
	Private	682	68.2%
Faculty	Law and Political Science	71	7.1%
	Economics	102	10.2%
	Business Administration and Commerce	75	7.5%
	Sociology	71	7.1%
	Literature	130	13.0%
	Education	53	5.3%
	Science and Engineering	201	20.1%
	Computer Science	28	2.8%
	Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, and Nursing	140	14.0%
	Others	129	12.9%
Year	1 st year undergraduate	279	27.9%
	2 nd year undergraduate	171	17.1%
	3 rd year undergraduate	230	23.0%
	4 th year undergraduate	236	23.6%
	Graduate School Master's Program	76	7.6%
	Graduate School Doctoral Program	8	0.8%

Table 2. Variable list

No	Category	Variable	Question	Mean	SD
1	Loyalty	LOY_1	Overall, the experience at this university delivers me good value.	3.364	1.090
2		LOY_2	If I was faced with the same choice again, I would still choose the same university.	3.223	1.209
3		LOY_3	I will recommend the university to my friends and family.	3.253	1.122
4	Lectures	LEC_1	This university has excellent faculty.	3.373	1.001
5		LEC_2	This university has an excellent variety of lectures (offline and online).	3.592	1.013
6		LEC_3	This university has excellent seminar and laboratory activities.	3.390	1.021
7	Campuses	CAM_1	This university has beautiful campus buildings.	3.499	1.142
8		CAM_2	This university has an excellent campus location.	3.067	1.317
9		CAM_3	This university has many shops and restaurants on or near the campus.	3.007	1.258
10	Job hunting	JOB_1	This university has many graduates who have gone on to work at well-known companies.	3.265	1.136
11		JOB_2	This university's academic background will give you an advantage when finding employment.	3.191	1.184
12		JOB_3	This university has excellent job-hunting support.	3.362	1.118
13	Sports	SPO_1	This university is famous for track and field sports.	2.298	1.382
14		SPO_2	This university is famous for rugby.	2.201	1.292
15		SPO_3	This university is famous for baseball.	2.189	1.255
16	Celebrities	CEL_1	This university has many famous celebrities as its graduates.	2.613	1.275
17		CEL_2	This university has many famous entrepreneurs and business people as graduates.	2.366	1.230
18		CEL_3	This university has many famous politicians as graduates.	2.469	1.236
19	Digital channel promotions	DIG_1	This university is excellent at promoting information on its website.	3.486	1.036
20		DIG_2	This university is excellent at promoting information on social media.	3.190	1.065
21		DIG_3	This university is excellent at promoting information through video content.	3.126	1.065

In this study, the hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). Factors were extracted through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and their suitability was assessed using the following indicators: the comparative fit index (CFI), goodness of fit index (GFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), Cronbach's alpha, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability. Next, based on the extracted factors, SEM was applied using the hypothetical model depicted in Figure 1 to test the hypothesis. A significance level of 5% was considered statistically significant. The statistical analysis software R (version 4.2.2) was utilized for all analyses.

3. RESULTS

As presented in Table 3, the results of the CFA showed high compatibility, with CFI = 0.944, GFI = 0.935, SRMR = 0.045, and RMSEA = 0.057. Furthermore, the following fit indicators generally met the criteria and demonstrated high validity: Cronbach's alpha threshold of 0.6 (Gallais et al., 2017), AVE surpassing the threshold of

0.5 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988), and CR exceeding the threshold of 0.7 (Ahmed et al., 2022). SEM was performed using these factor structures. As illustrated in Table 4, significant positive effects were observed for the inward-oriented activities of lectures and seminars (offline/online), campuses, and job placement. Regarding outward-oriented activities, a positive influence was confirmed for celebrities. Conversely, a negative influence was detected for sports and digital channel promotions. Thus, *H2* is supported, while *H1* and *H3* are not supported.

4. DISCUSSION

According to existing literature, inward-oriented activities such as lectures (Burger, 2017; Feistauer & Richter, 2017; Kankhuni et al., 2020; Masserini et al., 2019), campuses (Charles, 2016), facilities (Masserini et al., 2019), and job placement (Lu & Song, 2020) positively affect loyalty. However, among external activities, only celebrity endorsement is positively associated with student loyalty, contrary to expectations. Concurrently, sports and digital channel promotions negatively affected student loyalty in this study. A possible reason could

Table 3. Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Constructs/items	Standardized loading	Cronbach's alpha	AVE	CR
Loyalty				
LOY_1	0.803	0.801	0.567	0.797
LOY_2	0.679			
LOY_3	0.785			
Lectures				
LEC_1	0.800	0.758	0.515	0.760
LEC_2	0.663			
LEC_3	0.685			
Campuses				
CAM_1	0.565	0.663	0.41	0.672
CAM_2	0.658			
CAM_3	0.677			
Job hunting				
JOB_1	0.796	0.792	0.579	0.803
JOB_2	0.817			
JOB_3	0.651			
Sports				
SPO_1	0.731	0.822	0.611	0.824
SPO_2	0.852			
SPO_3	0.764			
Celebrities				
CEL_1	0.853	0.880	0.711	0.881
CEL_2	0.859			
CEL_3	0.816			
Digital channel promotions				
DIG_1	0.709	0.746	0.494	0.745
DIG_2	0.710			
DIG_3	0.689			

Table 4. Results of structural equation modeling

Factor	Model				Results	
	Standardized coefficient	SE	p-value		Hypothesis	Judgment
Lectures	0.670	0.090	< 0.000	***		
Campuses	0.148	0.097	0.039	*		
Job hunting	0.250	0.054	< 0.000	***		
Sports	-0.130	0.044	0.011	*	H1	Unsupported
Celebrities	0.136	0.050	0.026	*	H2	Supported
Digital channel promotions	-0.187	0.112	0.047	*	H3	Unsupported

Note: SE: standard error; ***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; CFI = 0.938, GFI = 0.931, SRMR = 0.050, RMSEA = 0.059.

be the negative reputation of athletes with respect to academic performance (Peterson-Horner & Eckstein, 2015). In digital channel promotions, it is common to disseminate the academic research results of faculty members and the achievements of students. However, this practice can contribute to social media fatigue, which is a rising problem in modern society. Students bombarded with information about the successes of their peers may experience feelings of jealousy and develop negative emotions (Yan et al., 2023). Conversely, with

celebrity endorsement, there is less variation in results, unlike with sports. Furthermore, the perceived psychological distance between celebrity endorsers and students poses fewer risks such as social media fatigue. Therefore, celebrity endorsement has a significant impact on student loyalty.

The global increasing competition in university admissions has prompted many studies on the underlying mechanism influencing student loyalty. Several determinants including lectures (Burger,

2017; Feistauer & Richter, 2017; Kankhuni et al., 2022; Masserini et al., 2019), campuses (Charles, 2016), facilities (Masserini et al., 2019), and job placement (Lu & Song, 2020) have been reported. However, these determinants are all external factors. In companies, the effects on employee satisfaction through external activities such as promotions have been studied in the context of internal marketing (Gilly & Wolfinbarger, 1998; Hu et al., 2022). However, little is known regarding the impact of external policies on university student loyalty. Therefore, this study adds to literature by analyzing the impact of external activities such as sports, celebrity endorsements, and digital channel promotions on student loyalty. Only celebrity endorsements had a positive impact on student loyalty. Conversely, sports, which tend to depend on wins and losses, and digital channel promotions, which tend to generate feelings of envy owing to other students' achievements, had a negative impact. This proves that both internal and external activities must be considered when analyzing student loyalty.

The study's results highlight two practical implications. First, when university policymakers implement measures to strengthen their external brands, they must consider their impact on enrolled students. With the development of social media, word-of-mouth reviews from existing students can significantly impact the decision-making processes of prospective students. An increase in dissatisfactory reviews from enrolled students can diminish the benefits of even a strong reputation. Therefore, when implementing digital channel promotions, it is crucial to enhance the university's brand and foster a sense of belonging among enrolled students rather than focusing solely on individual achievements. Second, targeting celebrities as prospective students is an effective brand-strengthening strat-

egy. The entrance exam has a selection process that evaluates not only academic ability but also comprehensive social activities. Many universities have produced celebrities using the latter, thereby confirming its usefulness. Notably, universities employing this strategy face risks similar to that of advertising companies. An example is incurring losses when a celebrity endorser is mired in a scandal (Hussain et al., 2020).

While this study provides valuable insights, it has some limitations. First, the results were limited to Japanese universities, thus limiting their generalizability beyond this context. Second, the study exclusively focused on current students, overlooking the broader aspects of university branding and external appeal. Particularly, engaging alumni is crucial for higher education institutions because of their potential contributions concerning time and financial support to their alma maters (Snijders et al., 2019). Recently, the reskilling and upskilling of working adults has attracted considerable attention, and the role of university offerings in this development is significantly recognized. Third, determining the suitability of a university based on its online presence is challenging. Recently, Minerva University has been experiencing rapid growth by providing small-group online education globally, without the need for physical campuses (Yoshimi, 2020). Similarly, in Japan, correspondence courses are offered both online and on campus. Fourth, when examining the effects of sports, individual university performances were not considered. This may moderate the effect of sports on student loyalty. Fifth, when verifying the effectiveness of digital channel promotions, factors such as students' award history and experience of being featured in university promotions were not considered. These factors can moderate digital channel promotions. These are factors to consider for future research.

CONCLUSIONS

This study clarified the effects of both inward- and outward-looking activities on student loyalty in Japanese universities. The results of applying structural modeling to data gathered through an online survey confirm the significant effect of activities directly targeting students, such as lectures and seminars (offline/online), campus, and job placement were found to positively affect student loyalty. However, among external activities, only celebrity endorsements were found to contribute positively to student loyalty, contrary to initial expectations. Concurrently, both sports and digital channel promotions neg-

actively affected student loyalty. This phenomenon may be attributed to the tendency for sports to emphasize wins and losses, and the potential of digital channel promotions to create feelings of envy when students perceive the successes of their peers.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Masaki Koizumi.
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 Writing – review & editing: Takumi Kato.

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