Data Constraints in the Evaluation of Experiential Student Recruitment Marketing: Qualitative Evidence from Private Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Experiential student recruitment marketing (ESRM), comprising open days, campus tours, education fairs, school visits, taster sessions and virtual events, is a principal means by which private higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia compete for undergraduate applicants. Institutions invest substantially in these activities, yet little is known about how they evaluate their effectiveness or what prevents systematic evaluation. This paper examines the data-related constraints that shape the evaluation of ESRM in the private Malaysian higher education sector, including foreign university branch campuses. The study adopts an interpretivist qualitative design. The study conducted semi-structured interviews with marketing, student recruitment, admissions, and school liaison professionals from 23 purposively sampled private institutions in the Klang Valley and Selangor, and analysed transcripts using reflexive thematic analysis supported by NVivo. Three interrelated constraints were identified. First, consent requirements under the Personal Data Protection Act 2010 complicate data collection because most SPM school leavers are minors under the Age of Majority Act 1971. Second, adoption of customer relationship management systems is uneven, leaving evaluation data fragmented across spreadsheets, email lists and paper records. Third, the centralised UPU admissions route obscures the path from recruitment experience to enrolment, weakening attribution. Formal evaluation is therefore reserved for large events and typically limited to post-event surveys, while belief in ESRM rests on anecdote and competitor behaviour. The paper identifies behavioural intention and emotion measures suited to the Malaysian higher education setting and offers recommendations for consent-compliant data practice. The findings extend ESRM evaluation literature to a Southeast Asian regulatory context and provide measurable constructs for future quantitative research.

Keywords: experiential marketing evaluation; student recruitment; data protection; customer relationship management; Malaysian higher education

INTRODUCTION

Private higher education institutions in Malaysia operate in a crowded and competitive recruitment market. The dual-sector structure of the national system places public universities, whose intake is allocated through the centralised UPU application, alongside a large private sector of universities, university colleges and foreign branch campuses recruiting directly through rolling admissions. Within this environment, experiential student recruitment marketing (ESRM), the staging of open days, campus tours, education fairs, school visits, taster sessions and virtual events, is among the most resource-intensive instruments institutions deploy to influence student choice (Doherty, 2025; Kotler & Fox, 1995). The marketing logic of these activities is well established: memorable, emotionally engaging encounters with a brand shape subsequent decisions (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Brakus et al., 2009).

What remains poorly understood is how institutions know whether these investments work. The evaluation of experiential marketing is a recognised weakness of the field in general (Wood, 2009; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013), and higher education presents additional complications that the literature has barely examined, particularly outside Western systems. In Malaysia, three conditions bear directly on evaluation. Most SPM school leavers are 17 years old and therefore minors under the Age of Majority Act 1971, so the collection of

their personal data is governed by consent requirements under the Personal Data Protection Act 2010 (PDPA). Customer relationship management (CRM) adoption in the sector is uneven (Jaber & Simkin, 2017; Jones et al., 2022). And the centralised UPU allocation for public places fragments the visibility of the applicant journey for private sector marketers. No published study has examined how these conditions shape ESRM evaluation practice in Malaysian private higher education.

This paper addresses that gap. Drawing on a doctoral study of ESRM management in the private Malaysian higher education sector, it answers two questions: how do private Malaysian HEIs evaluate ESRM as a tool for student recruitment, and what data-related constraints shape that evaluation? The paper contributes a contextualised account of evaluation practice under PDPA conditions, a set of behavioural intention and emotion measures appropriate to the Malaysian higher education setting, and practical recommendations for consent-compliant data management.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evaluating experiential marketing. Experiential marketing scholarship has produced rich accounts of what experiences do to consumers, including effects on satisfaction, emotion, loyalty and behavioural intention (Brakus et al., 2009; Lee & Chang, 2012; Tsaur, Chiu & Wang, 2007; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010), but comparatively weak guidance on how practitioners should measure those effects in operational settings. Wood (2009) observed that event marketing evaluation oscillates between measuring the experience itself and measuring its outcomes, and Schmitt and Zarantonello (2013) identified measurement as a central unresolved issue of the field. Implementation-oriented work has begun to specify key performance indicators for experiential campaigns, distinguishing functional, financial and holistic measures (Leahy, Doherty & Torres, 2022), yet these frameworks presume data availability that many organisations, and especially universities, do not possess.

Emotions and behavioural intentions as evaluative constructs. Two construct families dominate outcome-oriented evaluation. Emotional response has been studied since Edell and Burke (1987) distinguished upbeat, warm and negative feelings in advertising research, and Tsaur et al. (2007) demonstrated in an experiential setting that emotion influences behavioural intention through satisfaction. Behavioural intention, grounded in attitude theory (Ajzen, 1991), offers proximate, measurable indicators of marketing effect where final behaviour is delayed or unobservable. Both families require systematic data capture at or after the experience, which places data infrastructure at the centre of evaluation capability.

CRM and data management in higher education. Research on CRM in universities reports persistent adoption barriers, including limited in-house expertise, fragmented ownership of prospect data and weak strategic orientation (Jaber & Simkin, 2017; Jones, Torres & Doherty, 2022; Khashab, Gulliver & Ayoubi, 2020). Where CRM is absent or partial, recruitment data accumulates in disconnected spreadsheets and mailing lists, preventing the longitudinal view needed to connect an experience to an application. Recent reviews of higher education marketing confirm that analytical capability is becoming a differentiator in student recruitment (Cingillioglu, Gal & Prokhorov, 2024; Pawar, 2024).

The Malaysian regulatory and admissions context. The PDPA 2010 regulates the processing of personal data in commercial transactions in Malaysia and requires notice and consent for collection and use. Because the principal recruitment audience consists of SPM leavers who are mostly minors, institutions face additional care in obtaining valid consent at fairs, school visits and open days. At the same time, the UPU system allocates public university places centrally, so a private institution courting a school leaver cannot always observe whether, where and why that student eventually enrols. These conditions are absent from the Western settings in which ESRM evaluation has been studied so far (Doherty, 2025), which motivates the present inquiry.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts an interpretivist paradigm with a phenomenological ontology, treating evaluation practice as accessible through the situated accounts of the professionals who perform it (Carson, Gilmore, Perry & Gronhaug, 2005). A qualitative design using semi-structured interviews was selected because the topic is

underexplored and requires depth and flexibility of enquiry rather than measurement against predetermined variables.

Purposive sampling targeted professionals responsible for planning, implementing or evaluating ESRM for domestic undergraduate recruitment in private universities, private university colleges and foreign university branch campuses. The sampling frame was drawn from the Malaysian Qualifications Register, concentrating on the Klang Valley and Selangor as the densest recruitment market. Twenty-three institutions participated, with marketing function sizes ranging from fewer than three staff to 30, and student enrolments from under 5,000 to 33,000. Interviews lasted 45 to 75 minutes, were conducted in person or by video conference, and were recorded with consent and transcribed. Institutions are identified by code (HEI 1 to HEI 23).

Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) with NVivo support, moving through familiarisation, coding, theme development, review and definition. Trustworthiness was addressed through the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), an audit trail and reflexive journalling. The university research ethics committee approved the study, and all data handling complied with the PDPA. This paper reports the findings relating to evaluation and data; companion analyses of resourcing and internal stakeholder engagement are reported elsewhere.

FINDINGS

Data collection under consent constraints. Respondents consistently identified the collection of prospect data as the first obstacle to evaluation. Because most SPM leavers are minors, institutions must manage notice and consent carefully when capturing contact details and preferences at fairs, school visits and open days. Respondents described conservative practices, including collecting minimal data, routing consent through parents or schools, and in some cases forgoing capture altogether at smaller events, which removes those activities from any later analysis.

We'd definitely be careful and seek some advice since marketing to kids under eighteen opens up a whole different ballgame. But we're clear about what we need to do since there are PDPA rules we have to follow. (HEI 1)

Fragmented systems. Adoption of CRM was uneven across the sample. A minority of institutions operated a single prospect record from first contact to enrolment. In most, data sat in silos across spreadsheets, departmental email lists and paper registration forms, and staff turnover periodically erased institutional memory of past campaigns. Respondents attributed the gap to cost, limited in-house expertise and competing priorities, consistent with prior CRM research in universities (Jones et al., 2022; Khashab et al., 2020).

It looks like you've got a bunch of great things going on in various areas, but they're not really linked up. There's a big CRM project happening right now that's definitely working to connect all those pieces together. (HEI 1).

Attribution through the UPU route. Where prospective students pursue public places through UPU, private sector marketers lose sight of the journey between experience and outcome. Several respondents noted that a successful school visit may shape a ranking decision they can never observe, and that even direct applicants rarely record which experience influenced them. The result is a structural attribution gap that no amount of internal data discipline fully closes.

From what we've seen, that approach just doesn't fly. Telling a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old to "consider" or "imagine" being here at [HEI] doesn't really hit home. They need to actually experience it. It's all about going to the event, getting involved, and having a good time. We have to make sure what we provide meets their expectations and keeps things fresh and exciting. If they come back next year, there should be something new to check out. But we won't ever spell it out like, "This could be you next year." (HEI 19).

Evaluation practice. Against these constraints, formal evaluation was selective. Large-scale experiences, principally open days, were evaluated through post-event surveys of attendees; smaller activities were judged informally through attendance counts, staff impressions and anecdote. Respondents expressed dissatisfaction

with this asymmetry but regarded it as a rational allocation of scarce analytical effort. Belief in ESRM effectiveness remained strong and was justified through conversion stories and the observation that competitors run the same activities.

They're pretty basic, but they get the job done, and we'd definitely like to make them better if we had more time and resources. (HEI 18)

It's typical not to really evaluate things, or to just look at simple stuff, like whether student numbers went up. If they did, it must be a success; if not, then why are we spending all this cash? So, yeah, evaluations do happen, but they're often way too simple and not very deep. (HEI 5).

Measures respondents actually seek. When asked what success looks like, respondents articulated two measurable construct sets. The behavioural intentions sought from prospects after an experience included applying to the institution or ranking it highly on the UPU form, registering for a subsequent event, and granting permission for future contact. The emotions sought clustered into upbeat feelings such as excitement, warm feelings such as belonging and reassurance, and the avoidance of negative feelings such as confusion or intimidation, a pattern consistent with the categories of Edell and Burke (1987) and extending the emotion set of Tsaur et al. (2007) to higher education.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that ESRM evaluation in private Malaysian higher education is constrained less by the absence of evaluative intent than by the data conditions under which marketers work. Consent requirements for an audience of minors, fragmented systems and centralised allocation together produce an environment in which systematic measurement is costly and partial, so institutions economise by evaluating only flagship events and trusting experience for the rest. This extends the evaluation literature in three ways. First, it adds a regulatory dimension, the PDPA and the age profile of the audience, that is absent from Western-based accounts of experiential evaluation (Doherty, 2025; Wood, 2009). Second, it confirms in a new national setting that CRM deficiencies documented elsewhere (Jaber & Simkin, 2017; Jones et al., 2022) translate directly into evaluation incapacity. Third, it provides construct lists, behavioural intentions, and emotions grounded in practitioner accounts that future quantitative studies can operationalise in the Malaysian context.

For practice, three recommendations follow. Institutions should design consent into the experience itself, using clear notices, parental channels and purpose-limited capture so that compliance and data collection reinforce rather than oppose each other. They should maintain a single prospect record, even a modest one, since the analytical value of data lies in linkage across touchpoints rather than in volume. And they should specify in advance a small set of behavioural intention and emotion indicators for every activity, so that even light-touch surveys accumulate comparable evidence over successive recruitment cycles. For policymakers, the attribution gap created by centralised allocation suggests the value of anonymised, sector-level feedback to institutions on the pathways of applicants they have engaged.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the data constraints shaping the evaluation of experiential student recruitment marketing in private Malaysian higher education institutions. Interviews with professionals across 23 institutions showed that consent requirements under the PDPA, uneven CRM adoption and the opacity of the UPU route confine formal evaluation to large events and sustain a belief-based justification of ESRM investment. The study contributes a contextualised account of evaluation under South East Asian regulatory conditions and identifies measurable behavioural intention and emotion constructs for future research. Limitations include the focus on marketer perceptions within one national system and one metropolitan region; the qualitative design supports transferability rather than statistical generalisation. Future research should pair marketer accounts with student-side data, test the identified constructs quantitatively and extend the inquiry to public universities and technical and vocational providers.

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