

# Determinants of Students' Intention to Recommend: The Effects of Memorable Experience, University Reputation, and Emotional Attachment

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the determinant factors of students' intention to recommend, by assessing the influence of memorable student experience and university reputation on students' intention to recommend, where attachment as a mediating variable.

A quantitative approach was employed using a structured questionnaire distributed to 300 students in 3 selected private universities in Padang through purposive sampling technique. The data were analyzed using PLS – SEM 4.0 version to examine the direct and indirect relationships among the variables. The results reveal that emotional attachment is a strong mediator that mediate the relationship between university reputation and recommendation intention. While university reputation is strong predictor for student emotional attachment and recommendation intention.

This study gives the contribution through the establishment the link between memorable students' intention to recommend and its determinants; memorable experience, university reputation and emotional attachment. Additionally, this study provides the opportunity to scholars to theoretically connect memorable student experience, university reputation, and intention to recommend directly or indirectly through the mediating effect of emotional attachment. This study identifies and addressing existing gaps, while offering new academic and practical contributions to the body of knowledge.

The research highlights the important role of university reputation in establishing student emotional attachment and intention to recommend, and this indicates that students in private universities in Padang, West Sumatera, Indonesia are more concerned about university reputation rather than any other factors that are examined in this study. Therefore, it is highly recommended for private universities providers to concentrate more on university reputation by establishing good quality academic through accreditation and quality service to create positive image for university to generate willingness of the student to recommend the universities to others.

Key word: Memorable experience, Reputation, Emotional attachment, Intention to Recommend

## INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the sectors that plays a crucial role in a country's social and economy development through the development of knowledge and skills of people in the society (<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/what-you-need-know-about-education-and-why-it-matters>). Therefore, Education empowers individuals to make decisions

toward their future, independently. This is very important because individuals who possess knowledge and skills have the ability to develop confidence, that directly can give the contribution in raising country's living standard (<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/what-you-need-know-about-education-and-why-it-matters>).

Subsequently, the demand for education is growing worldwide. This includes the demand for higher education, such as universities, both public and private. Since the year 2000, the number of university students around the world has increased tremendously, including the number of cross-border education that facilitated by the internet and collaborations between universities. (<https://universitybusiness.com/the-great-university-shake-up-four-charts-show-how-global-higher-education-is-changing>.) This led to fierce competition among universities, including the competition for enrolment of new students (Akahome and Sohail, 2022).

The growth of demand of higher education also occurred In Indonesia. The evidence from Statistics Indonesia, there were 3,107 higher education institutions in Indonesia in 2022. These numbers make Indonesia as the country with the second-highest number of higher education institutions in the world (<https://nu.or.id/nasional/indonesia-surplus-perguruan-tinggi-defisit-kualitas-IaXjV>). Of these numbers, 2,982 (95.97%) higher education institution were private (Annur, 2023). The majority of these universities (1,489) are located in Java, While, 787 universities are in Sumatera (<https://www.detik.com/edu/perguruan-tinggi/d-6192489/indonesia-punya-ribuan-perguruan-tinggi-wilayah-mana-terbanyak>).

The rapid growth of private universities in Padang city, West Sumatera, has also been accompanied by intense competition. There is a force to improve the quality of both academic and service side of university. in addition, establish good accreditation and university's facilities to foster students' satisfaction and reputation in order to create positive and memorable student experiences that encourage recommendations. Although universities invest significantly in academic quality, facilities, and branding efforts to strengthen their reputation, these initiatives do not always translate into students' willingness to recommend their institution, in addition, studies on reputation within the university sector remain scarce (Angliss, 2017). Accordingly, study about student experience that linked to post behavior action remains under research, there are not many studies available on this topic, leaving an opportunity for the authors to re-examine this topic (Rehman, Woyo, Akhome, Sohail, 2020), especially that incorporate the relationship between memorable students' experience, university reputation, emotional attachment, and intention to recommend. In the context of universities in Padang, where universities compete intensely for student enrollment, understanding the drivers of recommendation intention becomes particularly important. Therefore, this study aims to examine the influence of memorable university experiences and university reputation on students' intention to recommend, with attachment as a mediating variable. By addressing this gap, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how experiential and reputational factors translate into student advocacy in higher education. Therefore, this study aims to examine the direct and indirect relationships among these variables to provide a deeper understanding of how universities can enhance students' experiences and encourage positive behavioral intentions. This study is expected to contribute theoretically to higher education marketing literature and practically to university management strategies in strengthening student relationships and institutional competitiveness.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review summarizes existing research on the intention to recommend, memorable student experiences, university reputation and emotional attachment.

### Intention To Recommend

The intention of students to recommend a university is considered an important contributor to its long-term success and sustainability. Recommendation intention is often linked to positive word-of-mouth communication, whereby students voluntarily share favorable views and experiences of their institution after having positive experiences there (Kairat et al., 2024). Students who have positive academic and non-academic experiences during their studies are generally more willing to recommend the university to prospective students and others. In this context, intention to recommend can be viewed as a post-behavioral outcome that develops when students evaluate their experiences positively (Wang et al., 2023), whereby students will intend to recommend the university when they have had a positive experience throughout their journey.

Recommendation is considered one dimension of customer loyalty (Zeithaml, 1996; Kairat et al., 2024). When students perceive their university experience positively in terms of academic programs and support services, they are more likely to develop intentions to recommend the institution to others and to continue their studies within the same university in the future. This suggests that enhancing the overall quality of the academic experience is essential for universities to build a strong institutional reputation and foster favorable word-of-mouth among students.

### **Student Memorable Experience**

In higher education, memorable experiences are shaped by both academic and non-academic factors during their time at university. Experiences relating to the service significantly influence behavior, willingness to return and tendency to provide word-of-mouth recommendations. Recommendations and word of mouth are a form of attitudinal loyalty (Zeithaml, 1996). This is especially true when positive and satisfying experiences are stored (Turay and El Sandra, 2025). Therefore, a memorable experience is a meaningful memory characterized by surprise, emotion, uniqueness and significance (Moliner-Tena et al., 2023).

Memorable experiences are closely related to autobiographical memory theory, which posits that experiences are personal and influenced by individuals' interpretations of specific events and situations (Herz & Brunk, 2017). Autobiographical memory involves memories of personal experiences, including emotions, locations, times and contextual details (Herz & Brunk, 2017). The crucial part of experience is about memorability since it links to behavioral intention (Sthapit and Coudounaris, 2018). However, not every experience becomes memorable; only meaningful and valuable experiences are likely to be retained in the long term (Lu et al., 2022).

Applying tourism research to the context of higher education, it has been found that students who have positive memories of their time at university are more likely to revisit and recommend it to others (Ali et al., 2016). Similarly, positive long-term memories may strengthen students' attachment to the university and their willingness to reconnect with it. Therefore, it is important for universities to understand how to create memorable experiences for their students. Students are more likely to maintain a positive relationship with institutions that provide memorable experiences (Pekovic & Rolland, 2020). In a university setting, memorable experiences have also been identified as an important factor in influencing students' intention to recommend their institution (Rehman et al., 2022) and develop emotional attachment (Tsai, 2016). Consequently, universities should focus on creating meaningful emotional, academic and social experiences throughout students' studies to encourage loyalty-related behaviors (Cho, Tan & Chiu, 2019).

### **University Reputation**

A university's reputation plays a crucial role in attracting new and retaining existing students, as well as gaining the trust of the stakeholders and public. With a good reputation, the university will be able to easily establish partnerships with other university both within and outside the country. A good reputation represents high quality (Amarat, Bas, Akbolat, and Unal, 2019; Turay et al., 2017) and increase trust the students and community (Irfan et al., 2020). In this sense, people prefer to do business with company that have a good reputation, and the same applies to universities. Students are increasingly viewing education as an important investment and consider the university's ranking and reputation as factors that increase the value of that investment (Azham & Ahmad, 2020). In addition, a university with a good reputation can more easily set admission standards, which in turn will help it produce high-quality graduates (Haggrave, Schmidt, & Perez, 2023) and make it easier for students to find employment (Wilkins, 2020).

Applying signaling theory into university context, reputation giving the signals to the public about the university quality and credibility (Smith, Smith, & Wang, 2010; Walker, 2010). In this respect, the university sends a signal to the public about its quality and strong performance through accreditation and the quality of its graduates. Positive perceptions of university reputation can encourage students' behavioral intention (Haffernan et al., 2017). In addition, university reputation shape students' emotional attachment (Kaushal, 2020).

A university's reputation is a strong indicator of its performance. As an intangible asset, a university's reputation is a source of competitive advantage. According to the strategic approach, reputation is an asset that differentiates

firms, in this study is university and can protect it from competition (Caruana & Ewing, 2010). A university's reputation is not built overnight. Rather, it is the result of a long-term process that requires evaluation by stakeholders. A university's reputation reflects its standing in the eyes of its stakeholders and community.

## Emotional Attachment

Students' emotions can lead to the development of their attachment to university (Kastenholz et al., 2020). As a psychological concept (Abdullah and Waisuzzaman, 2014), it is included as one of the essential factors that influence behavior, intention to recommend, and loyalty (Japutra et al., 2014). In higher education, when students who have a strong emotional connection with the university, are more likely to share positive word of mouth and recommendations to others (Wang and Omar, 2023). In the same vein, Abdullah and Waisuzzaman (2014) also found that students' experiences have significant effect on emotional attachment. While Özer et al. (2023) found that alumni of university share their thoughts with prospective students based on identification, satisfaction, and emotional attachment. Kaushal et al. (2020) also point out that students with high attachment, students are likely to be highly involved in campus activities. Therefore, emotional attachment is included as one of an important factor in shaping students' memorable experiences (Herjanto et al., 2021), positive attitudes and behaviour (Özer et al., 2023), it also reflects on the university's performance and reputation.

The literature review above established the following hypotheses:

H1: Memorable student experience has a positive and significant effect on students' intention to Recommend.

H2: University reputation has positive and significant effect on students' intention to recommend

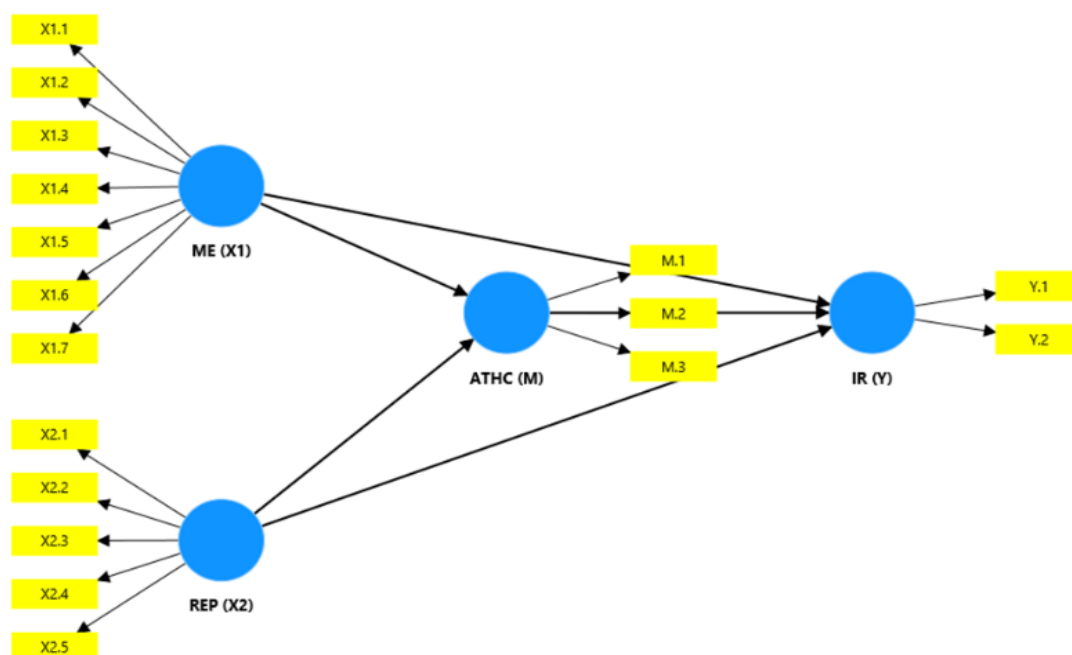
H3: Memorable student experience has positive and significant effect on emotional Attachment.

H4: University reputation has positive and significant impact on emotional attachment

H5: Emotional Attachment has significant and direct effect on students' intention to Recommend.

H6: Emotional attachment mediates the relationship between memorable student experience and students' intention to recommend.

H7: Emotional attachment mediates the relationship between university reputation and students' intention to recommend.



**Figure 1. Research Model**

## Methods

A quantitative method was used to test a research model explaining the relationships between memorable student experiences, university reputation, student emotional attachment and intention to recommend. The sample size of this study were 300 students from three different universities in Padang. Utilized purposive sampling technique, whereby the students who were asked to complete the questionnaire were those in their 4th through 8th semesters. The sample size of this study surpasses the standard by Hair et al. (2010). In term of data collection, self-administered questionnaires were distributed to the respondents. The respondents were asked to make the choice within the list of the statement, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). This study adapted the items measurement from previous research. The measurement of students' intention to recommend was adapted from Bonn et al. (2007). The memorable student experience was borrowed from Sthapit et al. (2022b), Bi et al. (2020), and Hu and Xu (2021). The university reputation measurement was adapted from Petrick (2002). The student attachment measurement was adapted from Kaushal et al. (2020). This study utilized PLS 4.0 version to run the statistical analysis.

## RESULT

Before conducting data analysis with PLS 4.0 version, this study performed several screening tests to identify if there any issues found with the data. The tests performed such as multicollinearity heteroscedasticity and Respondents achievement level. The results of these screening tests confirmed that the data in this study is of high quality and reliable

### Demographic Statistic of Respondent

A descriptive statistics analysis of the sample study has been conducted. The respondents are from three universities, but the names of these universities have been kept anonymous at the request of the administrators. The results reveal that the largest group of students are in their fourth semester (152, or 51% of respondents), followed by those in their sixth semester (118, or 39%) and those in their eighth semester (30, or 10%). When broken down by faculty, the largest number of respondents came from the Faculty of Economics and Business, totaling 134 people (45%), followed by the Faculty of Law with 37 students (12%), the Faculty of Engineering with 56 students (19%), the Faculty of Computer Science with 49 students (16%), and the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences with 24 students (8%). Of the students, 39% (117) were female and 61% (183) were male. The descriptive statistics show that female students made up the largest proportion of university students in the study. In terms of age, the descriptive statistics showed That 34 (11%) of students were aged between 18 and 20. 77% (229 students) were aged between 21 and 23. Additionally, 9% (28 students) were aged between 24 and 26, and 3% (9 students) were aged between 27 and 29. According to the results of the sample study, the largest proportion of students were from Sumatra Island, totaling 275 students (92%), followed by Java Island with 15 students (5%), Kalimantan with seven students (2%), and Sulawesi with three students (1%).

Measurement model validation is the very first important step in PLS-SEM to ensure the items that used to measure the constructs are both valid and reliable. Convergent validity of reflective constructs is assessed using outer loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). Cronbach's alpha, and CR should exceed 0.70, while AVE should be above 0.50 (Hair et al., 2019). In this respect, all latent variables in this study exceeded the cutoff values recommended by Hair et al. (2016) and Ali et al. (2018). As it is seen in table 1.1 (*Convergent Validity*) dan table 1.2 (*HTMT*), and table 1. 3 (*Fornell-Larcker*)

Table 1.1

### *Convergent Validity*

| Model Construct | CA    | Rho A | CR    | AVE)  |
|-----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| ATCH (Mediator) | 0.866 | 0.866 | 0.919 | 0.790 |
| ME (X1)         | 0.938 | 0.941 | 0.951 | 0.735 |

|          |       |       |       |       |
|----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| REP (X2) | 0.903 | 0.908 | 0.928 | 0.721 |
| IR(Y)    | 0.774 | 0.774 | 0.899 | 0.816 |

Note: AVE =Average Variance extracted; CR = Composite Reliability

To ensure that the constructs can be distinguished from one another, a discriminant validity test was conducted. Discriminant validity is confirmed when an indicator shows a higher loading on its designated construct than on any other constructs. Hair et al. (2019), recommended several ways to test discriminant validity, such as Cross Loading, Fornell – Larcker criterion). The value of HTMT must be < 0.90 to achieve its discriminant validity (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt,2015). For the appropriate cross loading, the outer loading of an indicator must be greater than all its loading on the other constructs (Hair et al.,2019; 2016). while in assessing Fornell- Larcker, the square root of each construct’s AVE should have a larger value than the correlations with other constructs (Hair et al.,2014). In term of collinearity of the indicators, the VIF test was conducted and the result proved that there was no collinearity among the indicators since the VIF value < 5 (Hair et.al ,2011).

Table 1.2

*HTMT*

| Construct | ATCH  | ME    | REP   | IR |
|-----------|-------|-------|-------|----|
| ATCH      |       |       |       |    |
| ME        | 0.577 |       |       |    |
| REP       | 0.892 | 0.656 |       |    |
| IR        | 0.888 | 0.543 | 0.848 |    |

HTMT Value <0.90 (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019; Gold, Maholtra, & Segars, 2001; Hair et al,2017)

Table 1.3

*Fornell Larcker*

| Construct | (ATCH)       | ME           | REP          | IR           |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| ATCH      | <b>0.889</b> |              |              |              |
| ME        | 0.536        | <b>0.857</b> |              |              |
| REP       | 0.797        | 0.617        | <b>0.849</b> |              |
| IR        | 0.727        | 0.476        | 0.712        | <b>0.903</b> |

*Diagonals (in bold) represent the square root if the average variance extracted (AVE) while the off diagonals are correlations among constructs. Diagonal elements should be larger than off-diagonals element.*

### Assessment of Structural Model

Prior to hypothesis testing, the structural model must be tested. such as the structural model collinearity, path coefficient significance, coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), effect size ( $f^2$ ), and cross-validated-redundancy ( $Q^2$ ). the VIF test was conducted and the result proved that there was no collinearity among the indicators since the VIF value < 5 (Hair et.al ,2011). In addition, to ViF, An R-squared analysis must be performed to determine how much of the variance in the endogenous variable is explained by the exogenous variables. According to Hair et al (2016)  $R^2$  values are proposed to be substantial (0.75), moderate (0.50), or weak (0.25) for the endogenous latent variables (Hair et al., 2016). Adjusted R-Square value for emotional attachment (ATCH) is 0.636 and the adjusted R-Square for IR is 0.573. In term of effect size ( $f^2$ ), according Hair Jr. et al. (2014), Cohen (1988), suggested the  $f^2$  value of 0.02 (small), 0.15 (medium), 0.35 (large). In this study, the  $f^2$  of ATCH to IR is 0.161, ME to IR is 0.001, ME to ATCH is 0.009, Rep to ATCH is 0.971, and REP to IR is 0.091. To assess whether the  $R^2$  value indicates sufficient predictive accuracy, the Stone-Geisser’s  $Q^2$  value also needs to be examined (Geisser,

1974; Stone, 1974). The  $Q^2$  statistic evaluates the predictive relevance of the structural (inner) model using cross-validated redundancy measures (Hair et al., 2014). The  $Q^2$  values can be interpreted as small (0.02), medium (0.15), and large (0.35) predictive relevance for endogenous constructs (Hair et al., 2016). The  $Q^2$  value ATCH is 0.488 and the IR is 0.455. Therefore, the  $Q^2$  of this study is included as large.

## Hypothesis Testing

Employed the PLS-SEM algorithm to assess the path coefficient value and utilizing bootstrapping of 5,000 subsamples iterations at 0.05 confidence level, one-tailed to test the significance of positive path and significant direct relationship of the structural model for direct relationship testing. The significant relationship between the constructs can be determined through the T-value which must be  $> 1.645$  and P-value  $< 0.05$ .

Five direct effect hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5) that need to be tested. The H1 and H2 were tested to answer the objective of whether the variables of memorable experience (ME), university reputation (REP) have positive significant relationship with intention to recommend (IR). While hypotheses H3 and H4 were tested the positive significant relationship of ME and REP with student emotional attachment (ATCH). The last direct relationship (H5) test was aimed to answer whether ATC has positive and significant direct relationship with IRC. Furthermore, this study also has indirect relationship hypotheses (H6 and H7) which tested whether ATCH mediates the relationship between ME and IR (H6). While H7 was tested whether ATCH mediates the relationship between REP and IR. The result of hypotheses testing as captured in table 1.4

Table 1.4

### Hypotheses Result

| Hypotheses | Path                                    | $\beta$ | Standard Error | T-values | P-values | Remark          |
|------------|-----------------------------------------|---------|----------------|----------|----------|-----------------|
| H1         | ME $\rightarrow$ IR                     | 0.028   | 0.075          | 0.373    | 0.709    | Not supported   |
| H2         | REP $\rightarrow$ IR                    | 0.350   | 0.113          | 3.088    | 0.002    | Supported       |
| H3         | ME $\rightarrow$ ATCH                   | 0.071   | 0.053          | 1.342    | 0.180    | Not Supported   |
| H4         | REP $\rightarrow$ ATCH                  | 0.753   | 0.051          | 14.735   | 0.000    | Supported       |
| H5         | ATCH $\rightarrow$ IR                   | 0.433   | 0.103          | 4.221    | 0.000    | Supported       |
| H6         | ME $\rightarrow$ ATCH $\rightarrow$ IR  | 0.031   | 0.026          | 1.193    | 0.233    | Not Supported * |
| H7         | REP $\rightarrow$ ATCH $\rightarrow$ IR | 0.326   | 0.080          | 4.064    | 0.000    | Supported *     |

Significant at T-value  $> 1.645$ , one-tailed, P-Value

\*Significant critical t-value  $> 1.960$ , two-tailed, p-value

## DISCUSSION

From seven hypotheses that proposed in this study, three of the hypotheses are not supported (H1, H3, and H6). This is also condition also occurred in the study by Turay and Elsandra (2025) Memorable students experience is not determinant factor of students' intention to recommend and students emotional attachment. In term of mediation effect, students' emotional attachment was not a mediator of the relationship between memorable experience and students' intention to recommend. However, university reputation is a strong predictor of students' intention to recommend and students emotional attachment. While students' attachment was proven mediate the relationship between university reputation and student intention to recommend. This finding also proved that REP has the highest significant level to ATCH with  $\beta$  value 0.753 and T Values 14.735. This because reputation (REP) reflecting the quality of university (Lai, 2019). High perception of quality will increase student satisfaction and translated to their emotional attachment (Kaushal et al., 2020). In addition, university reputation also a good determinant for student giving recommendation to others, loyalty (Tiara et al, 2020). The non-

significant relationship between students' memorable experiences and their intention to recommend the university to others suggests that memorable experiences is not strong enough to develop students' intention to recommend. The study by Kairat et al. (2024) showed that students' satisfaction is the good predictor of their intention to recommend. Meranga et al. (2023) proved that student intention to share positive words to others is significantly influence by engagement and students' academic performance. While Cho et al (2019) found that memorable students experience has direct effect on students' satisfaction before it translated to any kind of students' loyalty intention form.

Additionally, students' memorable experience also found did not have significant relationship on students' emotional attachment. Study by Özer et al. (2023) highlighted that emotional attachment is generally associated with deeper psychological elements such as trust, identification, pride, and a sense of belonging toward the institution. In addition, this study also found that emotional attachment did not mediate the relationship between memorable experience and student intention to recommend this is because not all experiences in university create a deep psychological bond with the institution. According to previous studies, emotional attachment is more likely to emerge through continuous interactions and strong relational engagement rather than through one-time positive experiences (Brodie et al., 2011; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Positive experiences may contribute to temporary satisfaction or enjoyment; however, these experiences do not always translate into enduring emotional attachment (Russell, 2003). In higher education, students often recommend a university because of reputation, academic quality, potential for employability, or overall satisfaction (Haffernan et al.,2017).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that students' memorable experiences do not significantly influence emotional attachment or intention to recommend. This suggests that university providers should focus on creating positive experiences and building positive, continuous relationships with students in order to foster emotional attachment. It is evident that students in Padang place a high value on university reputation. Therefore, it is strongly advised that the university provider improves both the academic and non-academic quality in order to foster a positive student experience and satisfaction. Importantly, the university must ensure that the educational programmes offered align with student expectations by enhancing accreditation and improving the university's image. This can lead to strong emotional attachment to the university. This emotional connection to the university and its academic and non-academic staff will foster a sense of belonging, automatically triggering students' intention to recommend.

This study is not without its limitations; through this limitation there will be an additional knowledge and direction for future studies in the university context. The unit of analysis of this study is limited to 300 students from three universities in Padang, West Sumatera, Indonesia. In this sense, the findings of this study can only be generalized the intention of recommend of the students from these three universities. Based on this limitation, it is strongly recommended that future researchers adding the numbers of the private universities in other cities in Sumatera to give better generalization on determinant of students' intention to recommend.

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