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EXPLAINING ALUMNI DONATION BEHAVIOR FOR FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN INTEGRATED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract:

Malaysian public universities are seeking more diverse funding sources, including alumni donations, to support financial sustainability. Although previous studies have examined alumni relationships, identification and giving intentions, the connections between personal motivations and university practices remain insufficiently integrated. This conceptual paper proposes a framework for understanding alumni donation behaviour by drawing on Social Exchange Theory, Identity Theory, the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Stakeholder Theory. Using an integrative conceptual review of the literature discussed in this paper, the framework distinguishes four roles: reciprocity explains the value alumni attach to past university experiences; alumni identity reflects belonging; stakeholder engagement concerns institutional communication and trust; and the Theory of Planned Behaviour connects attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control to donation intention. The framework proposes that these factors inform donation intention, which may subsequently relate to actual giving. It is particularly relevant to Malaysian public universities, where alumni fundraising may operate alongside endowment and education waqf initiatives. The paper sets out propositions for future empirical testing and suggests that universities strengthen alumni relationships, communicate clearly about the use of funds and provide accessible donation channels. As the model has not been empirically tested, it offers a potentially more comprehensive conceptual explanation rather than evidence of causal relationships.

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Alumni Donation Behaviour; Financial Sustainability; Higher Education; Identity Theory; Malaysian Public Universities; Social Exchange Theory; Stakeholder Theory; Theory Of Planned Behaviour.

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Introduction

Since the 1970s, Malaysian public universities have been faced with a more complicated financial environment. The decreasing government funding and the pressing need to seek alternative sources of funding to uphold academic excellence. As government financial aid is subject to budgetary constraints, alumni donations have become an important source for supporting the institution's operations and ensuring long-term financial sustainability (Supian et al., 2021; Wang, 2023). To address this financial need, this document develops an integrated conceptual framework integrating Social Exchange Theory, Identity Theory, Theory of Planned Behavior and Stakeholder Theory to explain the factors affecting alumni donation behavior in a holistic way (Chai et al., 2023). By reviewing these theoretical perspectives, the study provides a profound insight into the significance of individual motivations and organizational engagement in shaping philanthropic intentions (Nisar & Nasruddin, 2022; Tamili et al., 2025). This holistic framework provides the essential knowledge of fundamental processes that cultivate enduring alumni loyalty, thereby facilitating the formulation of effective fundraising strategies in the Malaysian higher education context (Bai & Prompanyo, 2020).

The specific research gap is the limited explanation of how reciprocal experiences, alumni identification, university accountability and immediate giving decisions fit together in one model. Existing Malaysian studies address important parts of this process, including alumni engagement and waqf-related giving (Chai et al., 2023; Samsudin et al., 2025; Tamili et al., 2025), but the pathway from these motivations to donation intention and actual giving needs clearer conceptual integration. The present paper therefore proposes relationships for future testing rather than claiming to establish their effects.

Literature Review

Recent studies have shown that charitable involvement is a complex interaction between individual cognitive processes and external social influences (Bai & Prompanyo, 2020; Samsudin et al., 2024). There has been a growing trend in the use of multidimensional models to understand the motivations behind alumni's investment of time and resources in their alma mater, with a particular focus on the role of organizational identification and perceived brand equity as key variables influencing donations (Nasution et al., 2025). Research shows that

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alumni affiliation is a strong predictor of prosocial behavior, as individuals tend to endorse institutions that align with their intrinsic values and identity (Khan et al., 2021). Furthermore, recent studies suggest that alumni donations are not simply transactional but are "alumni citizenship behaviors" that include institutional support along with financial donations (Okaomee, 2025). However, empirical gaps persist in understanding how these motivational elements appear in the specific socioeconomic and cultural context of Malaysian public universities, where state-driven developmental paradigms have historically overshadowed personal philanthropy practices (Kabisa and Wanyonyi, 2026).

These studies offer useful information on individual motives and alumni engagement, but they do not in themselves explain the same stage of the gift decision. This paper integrates these stages but preserves the conceptual separation of the theories: relational reciprocity, alumni affiliation, institutional stakeholder behaviors, as well as decision-making processes described in the Theory of Planned Behavior.

Social Exchange Theory and Alumni Giving

Social Exchange Theory explains that graduates engage in charitable activities when they evaluate the costs and benefits of their past and current relationship with the institution (Weerts & Cabrera, 2018). In such instances, graduates balance the material and immaterial benefits of their involvement (such as career networking opportunities or institutional prestige) with the costs of involvement. Reciprocity is a major driver as the alumni's gratitude for their educational experience causes them to "pay back" the institution in the form of donations (Saraeh et al., 2018). When organizations understand the emotional significance of the graduate experience, this cognitive assessment is greatly enhanced, transforming simple transactional interactions into enduring psychological contracts of mutual dedication (Kodiron et al., 2025). By cultivating these relationships, universities can transform alumni from passive followers into active stakeholders and see their donations as essential contributions to the institution's continued success (Cownie & Gallo, 2020). Universities that are successful in cultivating these exchanges often see a rise in sustained donations as alumni regard their financial contributions as an investment in the university's reputation and future success (Sium et al., 2023). This symbiotic relationship is further strengthened when alumni observe a strong link between their past undergraduate engagement and the current success of the university's mission.

The Social Exchange Theory reinforces the perceived reciprocity in the proposed framework: graduates are likely to be more supportive of a university if they perceive that they received value in the education, opportunities, and connections they gained. It's not about how much the donor can give right now or how they see themselves, it's about the relationship of reciprocity.

Identity Theory and Alumni Affiliation

According to Identity Theory, individuals incorporate social roles into their self-concept. This means that graduates who are labeled as "alumni" see their relationship with the school as an important part of their identity. When the university identity is salient, people are more motivated to engage in behaviors to protect and improve the university's reputation, and philanthropy is viewed as an expression of their own values (McNamee, 2020). This psychological connection creates a strong feeling of pride and belonging, transforming the alma mater from a simple historical setting into a fundamental aspect of the person's social identity

(Matarranz et al., 2024). This heightened level of organizational identification has a strong effect on donor intentions, as alumni are likely to support causes that are congruent with their self-concept and shared social identities (Drezner, 2017; Shea, 2018). Furthermore, a strong sense of belonging can effectively link past student experiences to future charitable engagement, as alumni who view the university as a permanent community are more inclined to contribute to its financial sustainability (Drezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2020). Through deep emotional connections, organizations can create community in which alumni see their contributions as an investment in a common identity, which is good for the whole university community (Jung & Lee, 2019).

Identity Theory builds alumni recognition and creates community. This could explain why alumni might view their support of the university as part of their identity even in the absence of any direct rewards, unlike reciprocity.

Theory of Planned Behavior in Alumni Donation

The Theory of Planned Behavior offers a detailed model to predict charitable intentions. The model suggests that a person's decision to donate is primarily driven by his/her behavioral intention. This intention is determined by three specific cognitive components, namely attitude toward donation, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Attitude refers to an alumnus's personal evaluation of giving, which is often influenced by their satisfaction with their undergraduate experience and the value of their degree (Dean & McLean, 2021). Subjective norms also involve the perceived social pressure to give, which can be increased by peers' engagement in philanthropy or institutional attempts to promote giving within the alumni network. Finally, perceived behavioral control is the graduate's self-rated ability to contribute, which depends on the graduate's financial resources and the perceived ease of the donation process. Through the combination of these cognitive elements, researchers are able to measure the degree to which alumni are personally motivated, socially obliged and practically able to give to their alma mater. By mapping these determinants, public universities in Malaysia can better understand why intentions to donate sometimes fail to translate into actual financial contributions, particularly when alumni perceive limited agency in the institutional giving process.

In the comprehensive framework, the choice to donate is explained by the Theory of Planned Behavior as more immediate. It is proposed that attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control affect the intention to donate, and intention and perceived control may be related to actual donation behavior. These are hypothetical claims, not results that have been empirically verified.

Stakeholder Theory and University-Alumni Relationship

Stakeholder Theory suggests that universities exist in a complex network of internal and external stakeholders. Alumni are considered to be a critical stakeholder group whose interests are intrinsically tied to the institution's long-term success. In this context, alumni are not only recipients of education but active collaborators whose continued engagement significantly impacts the reputation of the institution and the strategic mobilization of resources (Shaari et al., 2019). By emphasizing alumni as stakeholders, universities can move beyond traditional fundraising toward a collaborative approach that aligns the institution's objectives with the career and social interests of the graduates (Jack et al., 2025). With this engagement strategy,

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the university is able to be sensitive to the changing needs of its alumni, thereby developing a symbiotic relationship that supports continued financial support (Chai et al., 2023). By effectively managing the expectations of stakeholders, Malaysian public universities may capitalize on the support of alumni to serve as brand ambassadors, thus improving the institution's competitiveness in the market and its operational sustainability (Mukhlas et al., 2025). Furthermore, as alumni act as vital links to industry and community sectors, viewing them through a stakeholder lens prompts institutions to move beyond simple transactional fundraising to more holistic engagement strategies (Rahuman & Mahadi, 2025a). This transformation enables universities to create beneficial ecosystems where graduates contribute to the achievement of institutional goals such as educational waqf or endowment initiatives while gaining access to professional networks and growth opportunities (Aien et al., 2024; Prempeh & Dzansi, 2024).

Integration of the Four Theories

The four theories are complementary, but not equivalent. Social Exchange Theory explains perceived reciprocity, Identity Theory explains belonging; Stakeholder Theory highlights transparent and responsive institutional practices; and Theory of Planned Behavior describes how these considerations may be reflected in attitude, social norms, perceived control and donation intention. Theories are explanatory lenses, not independent variables in this model. The constructs and proposed relationship between the constructs are the parts that can be empirically tested.

Stakeholder Theory would point to the university's effort to maintain ties with its alumni, especially by providing transparent financial reporting, responsiveness, and meaningful engagement opportunities. It is therefore an institutional view and not another measure of individual identity or mutuality.



Figure 1. Proposed Integrated Framework for Alumni Donation Behaviour.

The proposed pathway is summarized in Fig. 1. The left-wing theories identify different sources of motivation and institutional experience. The Theory of Planned Behavior identifies the immediate predictors of intention to donate. There is a need for empirical investigation into the relationship between intention and actual giving, and the importance of perceived control.

Alumni Giving in the Malaysian Public University Context

Since the 1970s, the historical setting for philanthropy in Malaysia's public universities has changed vastly from dependence on state-funded operational budgets to the current need to

diversify income streams. Historically, Malaysian public universities relied on the government to fund over 90% of their operating expenses (Hasbullah & Rahman, 2024). However, the continuous reduction of financial assistance from the government eventually forced these organizations to look for other sources of income, including philanthropy, to maintain their operational efficiency (Isa, 2014). To systematically reduce this dependence, which is very considerable, universities were given financial independence and required to earn 30% of their income themselves. Unfortunately, this shift has placed a heavy burden on universities. Now they have to spend a significant workload and energy on fundraising just to stay alive, instead of just doing their core jobs of teaching and research. A clear manifestation of this transition is the increasing use of traditional endowment and waqf mechanisms as strategic instruments to ease the financial pressure on public higher education institutions (Hasbullah & Rahman, 2024; Samsudin et al., 2025). However, Malaysia's cultural setting poses distinct challenges, as giving tendencies are frequently influenced by communal cultural values and religious giving traditions like waqf education funds, requiring a customized donor cultivation strategy (Samsudin et al., 2025).

Moreover, there is a lack of research on the interaction between these different socio-cultural incentives and modern institutional fundraising strategies in Malaysia (Sadiq et al., 2025) despite the need for different financial supports. Previous studies have highlighted the significance of personal trust and altruism in shaping endowment intentions (Samad et al., 2022). However, recent studies have failed to provide insight into how alumni engagement strategies can be designed across public universities to balance these traditional values with the modern-day imperatives of financial sustainability (Nisar et al., 2022). Furthermore, the Malaysian policy landscape has progressively advocated for institutional independence, yet the effectiveness of these initiatives is hampered by the lack of empirical models that translate stakeholder relationship management into reliable financial outcomes (Politis et al., 2023). Therefore, there is an urgent need to bridge the gap between the theoretical engagement models and the practical governance of the philantropic instruments such as cash waqf to ensure the financial stability of the institutions (Hussin et al., 2024). Recent studies emphasize that although public universities like Sultan Idris Education University have succeeded in forming formal charitable entities, the effectiveness of these platforms depends on transparent governance and the strategic alignment of donor motives with the institution's development objectives (Hasbullah & Rahman, 2023; Latif, 2025). This alignment is essential to be able to manage the inherent risks of alternative revenue generation as institutions must negotiate the intricate relationship between traditional philanthropy and contemporary fiduciary accountability (Rahman, 2025). Universities can embed a culture of giving by nurturing this balance, drawing upon religious and social obligations to ensure long-term sustainability (Saufi et al., 2024).

There are three reasons why the Malaysian context is important. For public universities, it's looking first at additional sources of revenue while remaining true to its educational and community missions. Secondly, the educational waqf and endowment systems are existing avenues for charitable contributions. Third, graduates may have different levels of familiarity with these platforms, varying financial resources and different expectations regarding transparency and how the money is spent. Thus, the framework considers institutional trust and availability of donations, as well as individual identity and expectations from society (Hasbullah & Rahman, 2024; Hussin et al., 2024; Samsudin et al., 2025).

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Methodology

Research Design

The study uses a broad conceptual literature review and theoretical synthesis to develop a framework of alumni donation behavior in the public universities of Malaysia. This paper uses published research discussed in the literature review and compares the main ideas of four established theories. The aim is to make clear, testable propositions, not to estimate effects or present empirical findings. This is not a systematic literature review as there is no formal search protocol, no documented list of databases, no screening counts.

Theoretical Synthesis and Framework Development

The synthesis was thought of in three conceptual stages. Social Exchange Theory Identity Theory Theory of Planned Behavior Stakeholder Theory were evaluated on the basis of the constructs they explain. Overlapped concepts were identified and the proposed links were consolidated in Figure 1 and Table 1. It is rather an interpretative conceptual fusion than a statistical analysis.

- The analysis identified perceived reciprocity, alumni affiliation, institutional transparency and involvement, attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, intention to donate, and donation actions.
- Conceptual distinction: reciprocity, belonging and stakeholder practices were not treated as synonymous, but compared with similar concepts. Malaysian fundraising mechanisms of educational waqf and endowments were viewed as context-specific factors.
- Model development: The constructs were structured with suggested relationships culminating in donation intention and subsequent behavior. The theories themselves were not put forth as independent variables, but rather particular constructs of the theories were the proposed explanatory factors.

It builds a framework that establishes conceptual expectations that can be tested through future surveys, interviews or mixed method studies. It does not draw causal links. It does not show that one way is stronger than another.

Proposed Constructs and Relationships

The theoretical contributions of each of the viewpoints are shown in Table 1. The model views donation intention as a possible link between motivations and actual contributions, and perceived behavioral control as also possibly relevant to the behavior.

Table 1. Constructs and Their Proposed Role in the Framework.

Theory	Main construct	Proposed contribution
Social Exchange Theory	Perceived reciprocity	Positive experiences may support favourable attitudes towards giving.

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Identity Theory	Alumni identification	Belonging may strengthen attitudes towards giving and perceived social expectations.
Stakeholder Theory	Institutional transparency and engagement	Clear reporting and accessible engagement may support trust, attitudes and perceived control.
Theory of Planned Behaviour	Attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control	These constructs may shape donation intention; intention and perceived control may relate to actual giving.

P1: Greater perceived reciprocity is proposed to be associated with more favourable attitudes towards alumni giving.
P2: Stronger alumni identification is proposed to be associated with more favourable attitudes and stronger perceived social expectations to give.
P3: Greater perceived institutional transparency and engagement are proposed to be associated with more favourable attitudes and greater perceived ease of giving.
P4: Attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control are proposed to be associated with stronger donation intention.
P5: Donation intention and perceived behavioural control are proposed to be associated with actual donation behaviour.

Discussion

This current combination of the four theories is filling a gap in the current literature, which has largely considered alumni contributions as consequences of purely microeconomic or exclusively marketing-oriented approaches (Talib et al., 2022). This research combines different perspectives, returning to a complex framework that recognizes the cognitive and social complexities in the donor's decision-making process (Tamili et al., 2025). Previous studies have tended to study donation intentions from a single perspective, such as the extended theory of planned behavior in collectivist contexts, where stakeholder accountability may connect institutional practices to alumni motivations. Moreover, the theoretical implications of this framework illuminate that alumni donations are not merely a byproduct of institutional reputation but a conscious outcome of successfully maneuvering through the reciprocal expectations between the university and its alumni (Nisar et al., 2024). This implies that alumni engagement strategies need to shift from passive solicitations to collaborative partnership frameworks, where non-financial contributions are a strategic tool to strengthen emotional bonds and increase the likelihood of future financial support (Abbaspour, 2026). Moreover, using alumni engagement as a determining factor is consistent with studies that have found that the complex relationship between graduates and their alma mater may be a stronger predictor of donations than traditional demographic characteristics alone (Maulana et al., 2023). However, this theoretical framework has inherent limitations, particularly in terms of intergenerational differences in digital donation readiness, which need to be empirically refined to accommodate different life stage needs (Jatmiko et al., 2023). Future research needs to investigate the impact of technological skills and platform functionality on the intensity of the relationship between identity-driven commitment and actual donation behaviors (Rahuman & Mahadi, 2025; Ulza et al., 2024).

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The conceptual value added is the distinction between three basic rationales for giving and the more immediate decision-making process. The graduate's perceived interaction with the university is reciprocity, their sense of inclusion is identity, and the university's transparency and responsibility are stakeholder practices. The relationships they suggest with the constructs of the Theory of Planned Behavior can be empirically tested, rather than taken for granted.

Theoretical Implications

Together, these theories suggest that the transition from passive association to active philanthropy is contingent on the congruence between the institutional brand and the alumnus' self-identity, which could reduce the psychological burden of giving (Okaomee, 2025). This broad approach focuses on how that identification ignites the initial commitment, and then how the material rewards and perceived behavioral autonomy offered subsequently can assist in converting emotional ties into monetary activities (Amani, 2022). This collaboration skillfully addresses the fragmentation in contemporary philanthropy research, which tends to overlook the relationship between individual donor characteristics, the recipient's organizational context, and the fundraiser's professional role (Chapman et al., 2022).

Practical Implications for Fundraising in Malaysia

To revitalize fundraising, Malaysian public universities need to adopt personal outreach programs to leverage on identity salience and emotional attachment (Watermeyer et al., 2021). By shifting from generic solicitation to community-based advocacy models, institutions can turn alumni into "brand evangelists," creating a feeling of belonging that leads to sustained philanthrophic support (Kumar et al., 2024). Also, they should create proper communication channels in universities that provide clear reports of funds usage. Trust building is critical for long-term donor commitments (Ida, 2025; Pedro et al., 2020). Policy makers may promote clear and accessible arrangements for voluntary endowment and education waqf donations subject to relevant regulations. Finally, institutional leadership should focus on developing interdisciplinary alumni engagement offices that go beyond superficial transactional metrics to center on developing lasting stakeholder trust and social impact (Nguyen et al., 2023). Institutionalizing these feedback loops allows universities to effectively bridge the gap between abstract institutional mission and the individual donor's desire for measurable societal contribution (Liu & Li, 2024). Furthermore, these programs must also deal with the complex intricacies of physical and mental distance, as alumni who are physically distant from their university must continue to be engaged through digital channels that can replicate the "closeness" of being physically present on campus (Gold, 2023). These strategies in combination with the development of reputable campus traditions and strong institutional branding can greatly enhance alumni affinity to their university and increase financial engagement (Khan et al., 2021).

Limitations and Future Research

Although the proposed integrated framework provides a broad overview of donation behavior, it is merely a theoretical construct that has not been validated empirically through quantitative analysis or longitudinal studies (Shaker & Nelson, 2021). Future empirical research methodologies should focus on longitudinal surveys to measure changes in these identified psychological motivators across life stages and career paths of Malaysian graduates. Additionally, future research could employ moderated mediation analyzes to identify specific

"trigger points," such as career promotions or major reunions, that may affect the strength of these theoretical frameworks over time (McNamee and Drezner, 2022). Furthermore, it will be critical to improve the model's predictive accuracy by extending this model to incorporate cross-cultural factors and different types of donors, for example, by distinguishing between alumni from public and private institutions (Middleton & Lee, 2020). Other factors that scholars could consider are comparative analyzes on the impact of digital crowdfunding mechanisms, as these platforms could change significantly the traditional donor-institution relationship.

Another limitation is that the literature was conceptually synthesized without a documented systematic search and screening methodology. Thus, the claims should be taken as a starting point for empirical investigation, not as proof of explanatory superiority or causality.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the ongoing debate on the financial sustainability of higher education by proposing a coherent conceptual framework to explain the patterns of alumni donation in Malaysian public universities. The framework combines Social Exchange Theory, Identity Theory, Theory of Planned Behavior, and Stakeholder Theory to give a holistic understanding of the psychological, social, and institutional factors that collectively shape alumni's motivations to give philanthropy. Unlike previous studies on donation behavior based on a single theoretical perspective, the proposed model implies that alumni donations may be related to reciprocal relationships, identity development, behavioral intentions, and stakeholder involvement simultaneously affecting sustained financial support.

The framework also fills a major gap in the literature by explaining how mainstream theoretical perspectives can be incorporated in Malaysian public universities. The paper integrates these complementary theories and the unique cultural, religious and institutional context of the country to provide a more comprehensive explanation on how Malaysian public universities could improve alumni relations. The integration of waqf, endowment projects and stakeholder-focused involvement greatly enhance the framework's relevance in enabling sustainable revenue diversification strategies within the framework of decreasing government financial support.

From a practical standpoint, the proposed framework provides strategic guidance to university administrators, alumni offices, and policymakers in designing more effective alumni engagement and fundraising methods. We anticipate that by fostering meaningful relationships, reinforcing alumni identity and community, boosting trust in the institution and making giving easier, we will promote increased participation in philanthropy and support long-term institutional sustainability. These initiatives should move beyond transactional fundraising and create engagement across the alumni experience.

However, this research is largely theoretical and has not been empirically tested yet. Future research should apply the proposed constructs with quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods to explore the relationships between the identified variables across different alumni categories and institutions of higher learning. Longitudinal and comparative studies will also reveal how the alumni donation behavior varies over time and in different institutional contexts. Finally, the proposed conceptual framework offers a theoretical grounding for subsequent empirical studies and a significant reference point for the development of evidence-based strategies for

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increasing alumni philanthropy and improving the financial viability of Malaysian public universities.

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