CULTIVATING UNIVERSITY BRAND AMBASSADORSHIP BEHAVIOUR AMONG STUDENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN TANZANIA

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Abstract

The literature emphasizes students as prominent ambassadors representing Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to prospective students and other key stakeholders. The survival and growth of HEIs depend on students as university assets. Therefore, special attention should be invested to investigate how HEIs can engage them to gain preferable benefits, including ambassadorship. However, little is known about the predictors of the university brand ambassadorship behaviour to students of HEIs. This is an attempt to examine how university brand ambassadorship behaviour can be cultivated in students of HEIs. The model was developed and tested using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to 309 students of two colleges of the Higher education sector in Tanzania. The findings show that Internal Market Orientation (IMO) cultivates university brand ambassadorship to students of HEIs. Additionally, university brand knowledge and university brand identification mediate the relationship between IMO and university brand ambassadorship behaviour. The findings suggest that brand ambassadorship behaviour is relationship-based behaviuor, and hence relational investment should be considered a driver of such behavior. Therefore, HEIs should invest in IMO as an internal branding tool to build university brand ambassadorship behaviour to their students.

Keywords: Internal Market Orientation, University, University Brand Ambassadorship Behaviour, Higher Education Institutions, Higher Education Sector
Paper type: Research paper
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1. INTRODUCTION

Literature shows that students play an imperative role as ambassadors of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Balaji *et al*., 2016). As internal stakeholders, students assume essential qualities to be ambassadors of HEIs by playing the role of representative of their respective HEIs to prospective students, potential stakeholders, and the public (Eldegwy *et al*., 2018; Roga *et al*., 2015). Theoretically, brand ambassadorship is congruent behavior expressed by a person who is emotionally connected with the brand to the extent of living the brand through imbibe brand values as his values (Al-Shuaibi *et al*., 2016). It is behaviour expressed by a person who has long-term personal experiences on what the brand does, what the brand stands for and ready to position himself as the face of the brand (Wassler *et al*., 2019). The person who develops brand ambassadorship behaviour is ready to express self-identification with the brand due to convincing personal experience. When students engage actively in this form of supportive behaviour, HEIs benefit from increasing students' enrollments, mobilising research grants or funds and establishing collaboration with corporate sectors (Wilkins & Huisman, 2013). Balaji *et al*., (2016) accentuate that the

notion that students are ambassadors of HEIs has gained popularity in recent times when HEIs experience ever-growing competition in the higher education sector. This competition leads to a significant decrease in students' enrollment to most HEIs, difficulties in mobilizing research grants and funds and challenges in establishing strategic collaboration with the corporate sector (Williams & Omar, 2014).

It is widely accepted that ambassadorship behavior has been well examined in the context of service marketing(Morgan, 2016). Furthermore, previous studies indicate that ambassadorship behavior has been much connected with customer satisfaction (Devasagayam, 2017). In the line of this thought, literature exemplified customer satisfaction as the most important driver that fuels ambassadorship behaviour to customers. However, theoretical and empirical development of advanced behaviour similar to ambassadorship indicates that satisfaction as a short-term state of mind is insufficient to determine customers' behaviours, which requires investment relational and robust customer-producer relationship (Ghasemi, 2019). Furthermore, evidence indicates that like unsatisfied customers who do not register their complaints in-service failure, the percentage of satisfied customers who engage in supportive behaviour similar to brand ambassadors is low (Jung & Yoon, 2012). Therefore, satisfaction is not enough to predict consistent brand supportive behaviour, like ambassadorship behaviour (Devasagayam, 2017). In this regard, empirical evidence suggests using relationship-based approaches in examining the nature, antecedents and consequences of advanced behavioral intention such as ambassadorship behaviour, evangelism, etc. However, though the concept of ambassadorship behavior has been used in various empirical and theoretical contexts in higher education literature, scant evidence exist regarding the antecedents of university brand ambassadorship behaviour amongst students of higher learning institutions (Peseta *et al.*, 2016). Thus, given interactive nature of educational services, the contribution of this study is two, namely; first, the adoption of relationship based approach in determining ambassadorship behaviour in educational services which is among highly interactive services in service sector. Second, the adoption of ambassadorship behaviour in educational services through determining and examining its antecedents.

Literature postulates that ambassadorship behaviour is developed through a well-structured bi-directional communication channel, facilitating the exchange of information about the brand core values between an organisation and internal stakeholders (Sakka & Ahammad, 2020). Xiong *et al.*, (2013) suggest that effective internal communication that allows collection, communication and responsiveness to internal stakeholders creates internalisation of brand values. Therefore, as previously mentioned, ambassadorship behaviour is not the result of a short-term state of mind such as satisfaction. Instead, it is an outcome of the long-term effects of internalising brand values nurtured by relational investment between the person and the brand (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2005). Therefore, this study theorises that ambassadorship is consistent behaviour due to relational investment that evokes feelings of self-belonging to students by absorbing the brand values. Devasagayam (2017) considers that self-belonging is the most important attribute that characterized brand ambassadors. This implies the person has sync in, replicated and passionately absorbs the specific brand as personal values. By so doing, brand ambassadors develop self-identification reflecting specific and unique values and identity of the brand. This means that brand ambassadors do not use only verbal communication to promote the brand but rather communicate its values and identity through living the brand values (van Zoonen *et al.*, 2018). This attribute distinguishes between brand ambassadorship behaviour with other supportive behaviour such as positive recommendations, loyalty, etc.

Literature suggests that ambassadorship behaviour is a market-based approach used by profit-oriented organisations to build a competitive edge. Therefore, an integration of the concept of ambassadorship in HEIs promotes the use of the market-based approach in building HEIs competitiveness in this era of transformations and reforms in the higher education sector (Addison & Addison, 2016; Hurt, 2012). These transformations and reforms lead to the categorisation of the higher education sector into services marketing (Ng & Forbes, 2009), students as customers of HEIs (Guilbault, 2018), HEIs as services organisation (Naidu & Derani, 2016), and HEIs staff as services providers (Kalenskaya *et al*., 2013). Therefore, students as customers of HEIs are expected to be champions of HEIs brand by promoting their HEIs to prospective students and the public. In addition, this categorisation of the higher education sector makes educational services fall under the highly interactive service category, which its effectiveness can be measured by looking relationship between students, HEIs and staff. Koskina (2013) cemented that, given the interactive nature of educational services; quality of service is determined by looking at how students, HEIs and staff form these tripartite relationships. Thus, students evaluate service quality while considering how HEIs uphold their promises and how staff as service providers delivers the services. Therefore, it is important to note that HEIs expectations to students as HEIs ambassadors can be determined by the attempt that HEIs has done to induce, commitment to communicating HEIs brand core values to prospective students for them to communicate the same to other potential stakeholders.

As noted above, empirical studies about students as ambassadors of HEIs have been given attention by scholars in various empirical studies on HEIs brand (see. Balaji *et al*., 2016; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014; Wilkins *et al*., 2016). However, there is the nonexistence of empirical studies which examine how brand ambassadorship behaviour is cultivated among students of HEIs (Ylonen, 2010). Therefore, the current study examines Internal Market Orientation (IMO) as a combination of managerial functions in stimulating ambassadorship brand behaviour to students of HEIs in Tanzania. The study `enhances market orientation theory in explaining IMO as antecedents of the university brand ambassadorship behaviour. Literature has documented several studies which attempt to examine antecedents of various students supportive behaviours such as students identification (Balaji *et al*., 2016), alumni donations behaviour (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014), students loyalty, and positive Word of Mouth (WOM) recommendations(Zainol *et al*., 2020), etc., with a lack of empirical studies which test the antecedents of university brand ambassadorship behaviour empirically in HEIs settings. Reviewed literature of HEIs branding emphasizes that students play an important role as ambassadors of HEIs; however, the paucity of empirical evidence exists on how student ambassadorship behaviour is constructed or predicted to students of HEIs (Peseta *et al*., 2016). Therefore, this study's point of departure is IMO as an internal branding tool in promoting university brand ambassadorship behaviour among students of HEIs. It attempts to extend students' current knowledge as ambassadors of HEIs by examining environments that must exist in HEIs settings to support ambassadorship behaviour to students of HEIs. Therefore, it can be explained that IMO as an internal branding tool concentrates on building the relationship between students or staff with HEIs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Internal Market Orientation (IMO)*

The literature considers IMO as an internal branding tool that focuses on ensuring that internal stakeholders, i.e., employees build consistent, supportive behaviour towards the brand values (Yu *et al*., 2018). As an internal branding tool, IMO is conceptualized as a tool for collecting and disseminating potential information about brand values and internal stakeholders (Sanchez-Hernandez & Miranda, 2011). It gains popularity in management studies due to evidence which confirms that effective communication within an organisation can improve internal stakeholders' satisfaction and performance

(Boukis *et al*., 2017). It is also believed that IMO can strengthen an organisation system to address social and financial needs, reinforce internal service delivery and service quality, and create favorable working environments (Boukis *et al*., 2017). Yu *et al*., (2020) documented that IMO helps relational investment between the brand values and internal stakeholders such as employees. IMO creates cohesion between brand values and individual behaviour, paving the way to an individual consistent brand supportive behaviour. Internal stakeholders include existing students and employees of HEIs who should be induced with brand values to offer constant support to university brands (Vel *et al*., 2019). It is agreed that students and employees, as internal stakeholders, are key assets of HEIs to build a competitive edge in the higher education sector's current competitive setting.

Yu *et al*., (2018) suggested that when internal stakeholders such as employees are informed, understand, and believe in brand values, they can consistently perform by the brand values while demonstrating consistent brand supportive behaviour. Thus, IMO motivates internal stakeholders to build consistent behaviour which reflects brand promises and values. Yu *et al*., (2018) investigated IMO and internal branding outcomes while focusing on higher education sector employees and discovered that dimensions of IMO such as internal information collection, internal communication, and responsiveness have a significant impact on building brand supportive behaviour to employees of higher education.

2.1.1 Dimensions of IMO
2.1.1.1 Internal Information Collection
To enhance internal stakeholders' supportive behaviour, it is necessary to ensure their needs are well understood and fulfilled. Therefore, it is vital to ensure regular collection of information that specifies internal stakeholders' current and future needs. It is believed that by collecting information from internal stakeholders, emotional connection is created by internal stakeholders and their respective organisations (Vel *et al*., 2019). This emotional connection is more helpful in building and enhancing commitment and identification with the organisation. Also, emotional connection can improve a person's confidence in brand values and create brand congruent behaviour (Lings & Greenley, 2010).

2.1.1.2 Internal Communication
IMO as internal branding tools involve sharing information about the organisation's brand values or messages. Internal communication aims to ensure each member of the organisation is aware of the brand values, vision, etc. It focuses on inducing brand values in internal stakeholders' minds to drive their supportive behaviour towards the brand (Edo *et al*., 2015). It intends to build internalisation of brand values to internal stakeholders to build congruent brand behaviour. Therefore, internal communication should cut across organisation departments, units, etc. In this view, internal communication helps internal stakeholders be informed and know what the brand stands for and what ought to be (Modi & Sahi, 2018).

2.1.1.3 Internal Responsiveness
Evidence shows that commitment towards the brand is an outcome of regular exchange feedback between the organisation and internal stakeholders. It is widely accepted that internal stakeholders feel that they are part of the organisation if regular exchange feedback is given to them regarding their social and financial needs and how an organisation is expected to address them (Boukis *et al*., 2017). In addressing these social and financial needs, regular feedback exchange is necessary to build commitment and identification towards the organisation (Boukis *et al*., 2017). Besides, regular exchange feedback reduces misconceptions that internal stakeholders may have about the organisation. The misconception may bring to the surface multiple meanings on brand values and affect internal stakeholders' ability to develop a unified corporate brand (Gounaris, 2008). Several improvements can be made through regular

exchange feedback, particularly in service delivery, service quality, service recovery, etc. In addition, it ensures pleasant environments in the workplace and, therefore, creates commitment and identification towards the brand values.

2.2 University Brand Knowledge

The term brand knowledge encompasses an individual understanding and recall of certain brand-related information. It is descriptive and evaluative brand-related information representing idiosyncratic inference regarding a specific brand stored in an individual's memory (Keller, 2002). It has to do with individual abilities to remember and associate the brand with the correct distinctive features such as brand values. In this view, a person with a high level of brand knowledge should be able to recite unique brand-related information (Nguyen *et al.*, 2019). Ngo *et al.*, (2020); Xiong (2014) consider brand knowledge a cognitive representation of the brand that holds specific meaning to a person. It is widely accepted that brand knowledge is based on consistent communication with customers to elicit real comprehension of the brand (Ngo *et al.*, 2020).

Studies on consumer memory show that brand knowledge affects a diversity of complex information-processing factors such as brand familiarity(Campbell & Keller, 2003). Chen, (2019) accentuated that, brand knowledge is developed by connecting various information or interrelated notions to a brand, whereas those types of information or notions constitute key dimensions of brand knowledge, i.e., brand image and awareness. Thus, brand knowledge comprehends tacit and explicit knowledge. It is theoretically postulated that implicit knowledge is typically subjective, practical, and personal. In contrast, explicit knowledge is objective and theoretical, which can be asserted through different forms of media such as documents, audiovisuals, etc., (Schmitt & Zhang, 2012). Thus, it is theoretical hypothesized that:

H1: IMO dimensions has a significant influence on University Brand Knowledge

2.3 University Brand Identification

Brand identification is a psychological state of mind that makes customers perceive, feel, or value their belongingness with their favorite or chosen brand (Lam *et al.*, 2010). Badrinarayanan & Laverie, (2011); Hughes & Ahearne, (2010) put it this way, brand identification is the psychological connection symbolizing a persons' oneness with its favorable brand and hence consider either the brand's successes or failures as its own. Brand identification is likely to occur when the brand satisfies specific self-definitional needs, including self-categorization, self-distinctiveness, and self-enhancement (Elbedweihy *et al.*, 2016). It is believed that, once customers perceive that brands hold characteristics that they perceive to be central to their own unique identities, they would incorporate the brand's attributes into their self-identity and self-definition and communicate such self-definition and identity to others (Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011).

Therefore, customers who identify themselves with particular brands are expected to be more willing to have closeness with the brands and be delighted to promote the brand (Elbedweihy *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, it is expected that brand identification is positively related to how customers are engaged through IMO. In other words, such strong attachment with their favorable brands can also motivate customers to strive for the brand benefits through acquiring the brand (Lam *et al.*, 2010), and more importantly, in engaging to advanced intensities of volitional information sharing similar to word-of-mouth communication (Beatty *et al.*, 1988). It is therefore theorized that:

H2: IMO dimensions has a significant influence on university brand identification

2.4   University Brand Ambassadorship Behaviour

Theoretically, ambassadorship behaviour has a theoretical root on positive Word of Mouth (WOM). Therefore, traditionally ambassadorship behaviours were defined as forms of behaviours expressed by an individual who advocates for the brand through positive Word of Mouth (WOM) recommendations and communications (Ghasemi, 2019). This means that a person who is an ambassador of the brand is committed to the brand and hence is motivated to support the brand by engaging in positive WOM recommendations and communications (Ind, 2004). However, recent empirical studies unveil the truth that ambassadorship behaviour covers behaviour beyond sharing positive WOM. It is widely accepted that, for a person to develop ambassadorship behaviour, he/she must develop strong identification, which is explained as "living the brand," to emotionally communicate the brand to its specific group of customers (Ind, 2004). Ambassadorship behaviour involves embodying brand corporate identity to personal appearance, demeanor, values, and voice. This means ambassadorship behaviour motivates the person to express or display the degree of brand advocacy, i.e., how far the person behaves like one who knows, loves, and spontaneously sells the brand (Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018). Although ambassadorship behaviour has a theoretical root from positive WOM recommendation, Wassler *et al.*, (2019) stress that, unlike behaviour intention such as WOM, ambassadorship behaviour is a more advanced form of behavioural intention. In other words, ambassadorship behaviour covers behaviour beyond positive WOM. Often, a person who expresses ambassadorship behaviour develops behaviour that flows from within after imbibing specific brand values, ideologies, rituals, etc. In this view, this person tends to communicate this behaviour regardless of service failure, price changes, etc.

It is widely accepted that ambassadorship behaviour requires deliberate measures from an organisation or business firm that owns the brand. Therefore, it is important to ensure a person who is expected to be the ambassador develops brand knowledge that implies accurate information regarding the brand values and philosophy guiding the organisation (Xiong *et al.*, 2013). This confirms scholarly views that ambassadorship behaviour is constructed with dimensions beyond customer satisfaction. In this line of argument, brand knowledge should help the person to understand his/her role during customer interactions (Gupta *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, it should help a person prepared to be an ambassador to comprehend and grab the necessary understanding of the brand. On the other side, the person must develop identification with the brand, which implies self-connection and commitment to specific attributes and brand values (Merk & Michel, 2019; Piehler *et al.*, 2016). It is widely accepted that brand ambassadorship behaviour is associated with a personal level of knowledge and identification with the brand. This implies that consistent knowledge about the brand and identification with the brand should be developed internally to help a brand ambassador represent the brand to the marketplace through ambassadorship behaviour. Therefore, it hypothesized that:

H3: University brand Knowledge has a significant influence on university brand ambassadorship behaviour.

H4: University brand identification has a significant influence on university brand ambassadorship behaviour.
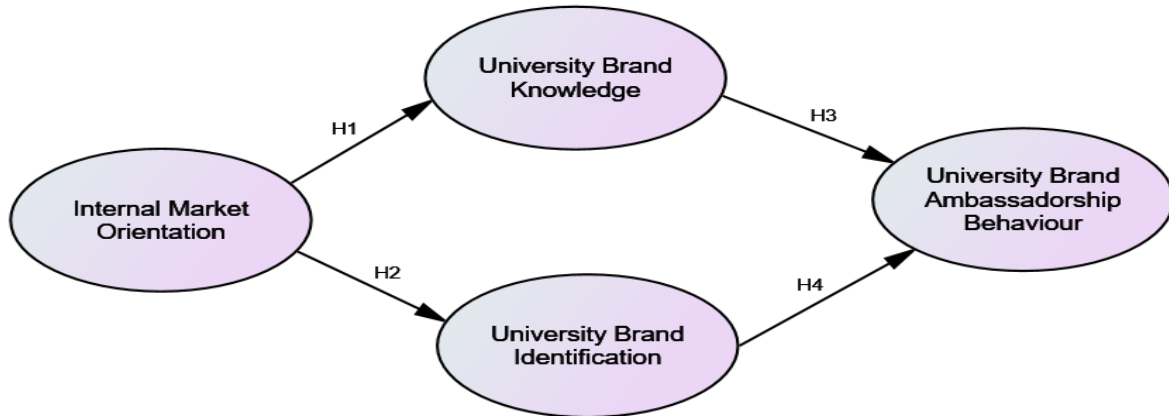
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. METHODS

The study had 340 respondents from two colleges of higher education in the Dodoma region, Tanzania. The sample was established using stratified proportional sampling, whereas students were categorised into strata according to their study programmes and were selected randomly from each study programme. Cross-sectional survey research design guided the study, where data were collected at a particular time, place, and widespread population. Also, the intention was not to capture periodical changes that may occur after interventions. Structural Equation Model (SEM), which belongs to multivariate data analysis techniques, was used to carry out inferential data analysis. The technique is more powerful and useful in estimating indirect and direct effects on complex models constituting constructs measured using multiples measures.

Internal Market Orientation (IMO) was conceptualized as a second-order construct made up of three variables: internal information collection, internal communication and responsiveness. To measure these three variables, measures scales, as proposed by Boukis *et al.*, (2017), were adopted. In addition, the study had parallel mediation, where two mediated variables were used, namely university brand knowledge and University brand identification. To measure brand knowledge scales proposed by Kang *et al*., (2017), Boukis *et al*., (2017) were adopted. Also, university brand identification was measured using scales suggested by Stephenson & Yerger (2014). To collect relevant information which could answer study questions, minor modifications were done on the scales to fit the higher education sector and settings where the study was conducted.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Testing Reliability and Validity of the Model

IMO was a second-order construct defined by three sub-constricts Internal Information Collection (INFC), Internal Communication (INCO), and Internal Responsiveness (INRE). First, as a second-order construct, IMO indicates that all three sub-constructs are loaded above the recommended value of 0.5, which implies that three sub-constructs explain the IMO construct (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). The Cronbach alpha coefficient was above 0.7, indicating good internal consistency of the measures (Nunnally, 1978). Furthermore, Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) above the recommended value of 0.7 and 0.5, respectively, which implies good convergent validity (Valentini *et al*., 2016). Secondly, for the first-order constructs, the results indicate that all factor loadings for all constructs loaded above 0.5, which means the proposed items are the good measures of the constructs (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). The aggregate Cronbach alpha coefficient, which combines all IMO constructs, is 0.876 above the threshold of 0.7 (Mwaiseje & Changalima, 2020; Nunnally, 1978). Additionally, internal consistency

was good as Cronbach alpha for Internal Information Collection (INFC), Internal Communication (INCO), and Internal Responsiveness (INRE) were 0.780, 0.760, and 0.945, respectively above the suggested value of 0.7(Brown, 2002; David, 2019). The level of reliability of instruments used was good, as the value of Composite Reliability (CR) for Internal Information Collection (INFC), Internal Communication (INCO), and Internal Responsiveness (INRE) was 0.781, 0.767, and 0.946, respectively above the threshold of 0.7 (Henseler *et al.*, 2014). Max(RH) for Internal Information Collection (INFC), Internal Communication (INCO) and Internal Responsiveness (INRE) was 0.795, 0.792, and 0.951 respectively indicating high level of reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Again, convergent validity was achieved because; the value of AVE for Internal Information Collection (INFC), Internal Communication (INCO) and Internal Responsiveness (INRE) was 0.5, 0.525, and 0.813, respectively, above the acceptable range of 0.5 (Valentini *et al.*, 2016). Finally, discriminant validity was tested by comparing the square root of AVE and inter-correlation between the constructs and other constructs comparing the value of Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) and AVE of specific constructs. Statistically, discriminant validity is achieved if AVE is greater than the inter-correlation between the construct and other constructs and if MSV is less than AVE of the specific construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All these conditions were fulfilled, and therefore discriminant validity was good.

4.2 Testing Measurement Model Properties

The measurement model constitutes the theory that shows how specific measured variables embody or represent the theory. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the dimensionality of multiples variables used in the study. The results indicated in Table 4.3 show that the fitness model is good as model fit indicators have to value that within the acceptable range. Furthermore, to evaluate the distinctiveness of the hypothesized model, three alternative models were constructed and compared with the hypothesized model. The results indicated in Table 1 show that the hypothesized model was unique and distinct when comparing the values of model fit indexes of the hypothesized model and alternative models. Therefore, all three first-order variables which explain IMO as a second-order construct were retained, which allow further step for testing the causal relationship between the study variables.

Table 1: Confirmatory Factor Analysis for the variables measures

	x^2	d.f.	CFI	GFI	AGFI	TLI	RMSEA
Three-factor Model	82.520	41	0.979	0.954	0.927	0.972	0.057
Two-factor Model: Internal Information Collection and Internal Communication variables combined	147.513	43	0.947	0.913	0.867	0.932	0.089
Two-factor Model: Internal Information Collection and Internal Responsiveness variables combined	305.588	20	0.819	0.761	0.571	0.747	0.215
Two-factor Model: Internal Communication and Internal Responsiveness variables combined	354.578	43	0.842	0.796	0.687	0.798	0.153

Notes: *GFI-Goodness of Fit Index, AGFI-Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index, RMSEA- Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, CFI-Comparative Fit Index, TLI-Tucker-Lewis Coefficient.*

4.3 Structural Model Analysis

The structural model made up the theory that shows how constructs are related to other constructs. The model examines the structural relationship between the variables of interests. This study hypothesized a six-factor model including Internal Information Collection (INFC), Internal Communication (INCO), and Internal Responsiveness (INRE) which form Internal Market Orientation as an exogenous variable, university brand knowledge and university brand identification as mediated variables, and university brand ambassadorship behaviour which is an endogenous variable. Table 2 shows the results of the fitness of the model, indicating a good fit of the structural model.

Figure 2: Structural Model

Table 3: Structural Model Goodness of Fit

Model Fit Index	The Goodness of Fit Index	Suggested Value	Real Value	Remarks
Absolute Fit	AGFI	Close to 1	0.807	Satisfactory
	GFI	Close to 1	0.846	Satisfactory
	RMSEA	$0 \leq RMSEA \leq 0.1$	0.079	Good
	x^2/df	≤ 0.5	586.292/202(2.902)	Good
Relative Fit	IFI	Close to 1	0.908	Good
	TLI	Close to 1	0.894	Satisfactory
	CFI	Close to 1	0.907	Good
Parsimony Fit	PCFI	> 0.7	0.793	Good
	PNFI	> 0.7	0.757	Good

Notes: GFI=Goodness of Fit Index, AGFI=Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index, RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, NFI = Normed Fit Index, CFI = Comparative Fit Index, PNFI = Parsimony Normed Fit Index, PCFI = Parsimony Comparative Fit Index

4.4 Path Analysis

The path analysis results in table 3 indicate that IMO influences university brand ambassadorship behaviour to students of HEIs. Furthermore, the results indicate that university brand knowledge and university brand identification mediate the relationship between IMO and university brand ambassadorship behaviour. The results show that, IMO influence university brand knowledge with (β = 0.165; p < 0.05), and university brand identification with (β = 0.130; p < 0.05). These results supported hypotheses 1 and 2. Finally, university brand knowledge influence university brand ambassadorship behaviour with (β = 0.860; p < 0.05), and university brand identification influence university brand ambassadorship behaviour with (β = 0.130; p < 0.05). Therefore, IMO is the most important driver of the university brand ambassadorship behaviour mediated by the university brand knowledge and the university brand identification.

Table 3: Path Analysis Output

Hypotheses	Variables			Estimate	SE.	t-value	p-value
H$_1$	UBKN	<---	IMO	0.165	0.041	4.050	***
H$_2$	UNBID	<---	IMO	0.130	0.040	3.223	0.001
H$_3$	UNBAB	<---	UNBID	0.130	0.044	2.975	0.003
H$_4$	UNBAB	<---	UBKN	0.860	0.094	9.164	***

*Notes: *** p < 0.001*

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study has the intention to contribute knowledge on the predictor of university brand ambassadorship behaviour to students of HEIs. The findings confirm that university brand ambassadorship behaviour is developed when students are well knowledgeable and perfectly establish identification with the respective HEIs. Therefore, in this context, university brand ambassadorship behaviour does not emerge from a vacuum; rather, it is cultivated through strategic and policy measures of respective HEIs. HEIs management has a special task to foster healthy behaviour in their students, motivating them to become ambassadors of their respective HEIs. This idea is supported by Cha *et al.*, (2013), who investigated students intent to become active alumni and revealed that students' intention to support their HEIs is not by fault rather, HEIs must invest in cultivating such intent. The findings propose IMO as an internal branding strategy to be adopted by HEIs to stimulate ambassadorship behaviour to their students. This means students develop brand ambassadorship behaviour after being exposed to specific environments that allow them to receive and deliver important information about their respective HEIs.

However, the information should be powerful enough to elicit students' knowledge and identification of their respective HEIs. It is believed that, by acquiring information, students become more oriented about their HEIs and hence develop necessary or essential qualities or attributes to qualify as ambassadors. The study's findings suggest that IMO raises students' intent to behave like ambassadors of their respective HEIs as it prompts the university brand knowledge and the university brand identification. It is widely accepted that knowledge and identification about an object or entity are developed when individuals access information about the entity. This means ambassadorship behaviour as a form of the university brand supportive behaviour is extended to students who are well knowledgeable and well-identified with HEIs. However, evidence shows that not all satisfied customers may wish to become and behave like ambassadors of their favourite or loving brands. Therefore, HEIs should establish a favourable

atmosphere that can motivate them to become ambassadors of their favorite and loving brands. In the milieu of study findings, students should be exposed to an atmosphere that encourages them to live the HEIs brand. This favourable atmosphere may establish policies and by-laws to collect and disseminate information, receive and give feedback on strategic issues that affect students' academic and social welfare.

In this view, it is necessary to manage HEIs to establish strategic and policy measures that focus on mobilizing students' involvement and engagement in decisions that affect students' welfare and entire HEIs communities' welfare. The findings show that regular feedback or responsiveness as part of IMO creates a common understanding among stakeholders, i.e., students, staff, and HEI, on what students expect from HEI and what HEI can deliver or offer. Students as customers of HEIs might build relevant knowledge on what HEIs stands for and what it offers. Besides, the process of creating or striking a balance between students' expectations and what HEIs can deliver is crucially important to motivate students to build strong identification that creates the base for becoming ambassadors. The findings concur with other studies in students supportive behaviour, such as Hu *et al.*, (2018), who reported that, when mediated with value congruence, internal branding has positive effects on three categories of students supportive behaviour, namely; brand service performance, intention to work for the brand, and positive WOM. Balaji *et al.*, (2016) also examine antecedents and consequences of university brand identification and reported that university brand identification is an outcome of the University brand personality, the university brand knowledge and the University brand prestige. In their view, the consequence of the university brand identification is the university brand supportive behaviour in the form of suggestions for future improvement, the university affiliation, advocacy intention and participation in the future university activities.

7. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study has the following theoretical contribution to the body of literature about higher education marketing. First, in theoretical implication, the study contributes to market orientation theory by testing it in the higher education sector. Specifically, the study's theoretical contribution is based on ambassadorship behaviour as an outcome of internal market orientation. Previously, most of the literature on service marketing has predominately focused on customer satisfaction as the primary driver of ambassadorship behaviour. However, customer satisfaction is inadequate in explaining theoretically this advanced behavioural intention. Therefore internal market orientation provides new insights into examining and understanding ambassadorship behaviour through the lens of relationship-based approaches. Second, on the other side, the study has a theoretical contribution to the power of internal market orientation in explaining how brand knowledge and brand identification are constructed. In explaining this, the study extends theoretical understanding knowledge theory and identification theory, which is considered the most important dimension in explaining consumer behaviour.

8. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study offers a number of practical implications to practitioners in service marketing and higher education marketing in particular. The study has unveiled the importance of students as HEIs assets as suggested by many previous literatures. Therefore, HEIs management should deliberately focus on revisiting policies to strengthen their relationships with students. In other words, HEIs management should not consider students as merely customers; instead, they should view them as important stakeholders who determine the survival of their institutions. It is therefore important to make sure that primary operations of HEIs become students centered. HEIs management has a strategic role in ensuring students grasp knowledge about the institutions to help them to represent appropriately to the public and other potential stakeholders. Empirical findings of the study have unveiled that university brand

knowledge can be developed through regular meetings, orientation events, academic events, etc. On the other side, to behave as HEIs ambassadors, students should build identification, i.e., self-image and self-identity with the institutions. In addition, HEIs management should develop measures that align students' expectations, values, and ideologies with HEIs. In this hyper-competition era in the higher education sector, HEIs infuse HEIs values and ideologies to students to ensure they consider them as their personal values or ideologies. They have to be motivated to develop psychological ownership of the university brand if the intention is to convert them into HEIs ambassadors.

9. LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the study has enriched IMO knowledge as the driver of ambassadorship behaviour in the higher education sector, the following areas provide room for further studies on the topic under investigation. First, the study participants were students of two public colleges of higher education sector; this may bring limitations in generalizing the findings to private colleges or institutions. Therefore, it is necessary to have a study that involves respondents from both private and public colleges to have a broader picture of IMO as a marketing strategy in the higher education sector. Furthermore, a comparative study can be done by comparing IMO's usability among private and public colleges of higher education. Evidence shows that private colleges are more aggressive in using marketing-based strategies than public colleges.

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