Internal branding and students’ behavioral intention to become active member of university alumni associations in Tanzania: the role of students’ sense of belonging

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Abstract: Seminal work in alumni engagement suggests that university alumni associations could boost the numbers of alumni who support their universities through cultivating active membership and participation. Nevertheless, scholars focus less on the driver behind students’ intention to become and participate as active members of university alumni associations. This study intends to fill the gap in knowledge by examining the influence of internal branding as the driver of students’ behavioral intention to become and participate as active members of university alumni associations when mediated with students’ sense of belonging. Using a cross-sectional survey, the study collected data from 501 students of two colleges of higher education sector in Tanzania and was analyzed using Structural Equation Modelling. The findings indicate that internal branding as an inclusive approach in university branding influence students’ behavioral intention to become and participate as active members of university alumni associations when mediated with students’ sense of belonging. Therefore, HLIs should adopt internal branding procedures as a tool of internal management to cultivate students’ sense of belonging.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
Alumni are considered important stakeholders who offer contributions to their alma mater through financial donation and other support such as branding. All over the world, there is a significant increase in alumni support, particularly financial donations to their alma mater. However, the number of alumni who participate in supporting or donating to their alma mater does not reflect the number of students who graduate from these universities each year. Furthermore, there is a constant decrease in alumni who support or contribute to their alma mater. Several reports show that alumni who support their alma mater do so through university alumni associations. However, the number of students who build intent to join university alumni associations is not promising. Following the role of university alumni associations in boosting alumni support to their alma mater, this study proposes the internal management approaches, notably internal branding, as drivers that can boost students’ intent to join and become active members of university alumni associations.
belonging for building students’ behavioral intention to become and participate as active members of university alumni associations.

**Subjects:** Business, Management and Accounting; School Leadership, Management & Administration; Sustainability Education, Training & Leadership

**Keywords:** Internal branding; Alumni Association; Higher learning institutions; students’ sense of belonging; students’ behavioral intention

1. **Introduction**

In this era of globalization, there is a high demand for internal and external stakeholders and the entire communities towards Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) in addressing various global economic and social challenges (Miotto et al., 2020; Muya & Tundui, 2020). Overall, HLIs play an indispensable role in promoting knowledge transfer to the corporate world and aiding in addressing various social and economic challenges, and hence they are now regarded as much more than just a place for teaching and research (Miotto et al., 2020). However, because of reduced public funding, increased national and international competitiveness, higher stakeholder expectations, and a greater demand for openness and accountability, HLIs have recently faced new challenges that affect their ability to meet stakeholders’ expectations (Angulo-Ruiz et al., 2016). In addition, internal and external stakeholders evaluate HLIs and expect improved outcomes in various strategic areas, notably research and teaching, information and knowledge transfer, employability, and community involvement (El Nemar et al., 2020). Furthermore, in recent times, HLIs have faced considerable challenges, including increased internalization, a constantly changing job market, and a growing need for new innovative teaching and learning techniques (Miotto et al., 2018). Moreover, HLIs compete to enroll the qualified students, employ the most talented and innovative faculty members, collaborate with corporate sectors, and acquire or mobilize funds for developing and constructing appealing campuses (Maringe & Mourad, 2012). Similarly, current budgetary challenges and decreasing government subvention have substantially jeopardized the financial stability of most HLIs, necessitating new strategies to improve their appeal to various stakeholders such as students, faculty members, alumni, etc. (Mauze et al., 2020; Muya & Tundui, 2020). It is widely accepted that, through adopting strategies that appeal to their stakeholders such as students, alumni, etc., HLIs can improve their financial stability by generating funds through alumni donations and collaboration with corporate sectors (Maringe & Mourad, 2012).

Therefore, to survive in this setting in the educational market, HLIs management were driven towards adopting strategic reformation and transformation that fuels the emergence of academic capitalism (Magaji et al., 2020). In academic capitalism, scholars and practitioners categorize the higher education sector into service marketing, HLIs as service organizations, faculty members as service providers, and students as customers (Williams et al., 2012; Koskina, 2013). It is widely accepted that, after this categorization, several changes emerge in the higher education sector, including the adoption of marketization and commercialization approach that influences HLIs to deploy profit-making-based approaches such as branding (Nedbalová et al., 2014). Within this line of thinking, the study of alumni as strategic partners of HLIs has gained special attention among scholars as they expected to play a cardinal role in ensuring the survival and success of HLIs and boosting their capacities to meet the underlined expectations of both internal and external stakeholders (Cha et al., 2013; Drezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2020). Overall, the literature documents several challenges in the higher education sector, which can be resolved by involving university alumni, including promoting HLIs reputation through ambassadorship behavior, donation behavior, and linking HLIs with corporate sectors (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014; Bai & Prompanyo, 2020; Freeland et al., 2019). When alumni engage in brand-building behavior, it can help HLIs attract qualified faculty members, increase enrollments, and create the possibility of attracting potential strategic corporate collaboration or partnership to enhance their capacities to meet their obligations and stakeholder expectations (Stephenson & Bell, 2014).
Seminal work in alumni engagement has unveiled and reported several remarkable outcomes that HLIs could reap through partnering with internal and external stakeholders, particularly alumni (Kinyongoh, 2019). For instance, the report by Paul (2014), which investigated the role of alumni associations in strengthening private medical training institutions in sub-Saharan Africa, indicate that in the United States of America (USA), more than 50 percent of alumni make donations to their alma mater through university alumni associations. On top of that, the report further indicates that apart from revenue diversification, alumni associations and networks play a crucial role in facilitating HLIs branding, internship and employment possibilities for current and graduating students, professional and social networking opportunities for graduates, and recruitment for new students. Specifically, statistical evidence shows that strategic partnership with corporate sectors as part of professional and social networking was ranked among the leading supporter of HLIs by contributing more than $ 8.68 billion in 2012 (Cha et al., 2013). In addition, despite challenges related to alumni donation behavior, including a constant decrease in the number of alumni who donate, a report on the voluntary support of education by the Council for Aid to Education’s (2012) indicates that alumni donation to HLIs was around $ 7.8 billion and was ranked second amongst voluntary supports(Cha et al., 2013; Paul, 2014).

Although the literature has documented the significant contribution of alumni to their alma mater, evidence indicates that the number of alumni who are actively involved and participated in supporting and recommending their HLIs has decreased considerably over the years (Cha et al., 2013). Dreznner (2013) argues that if deliberate measures could have been taken to create their donors base, HLIs could have benefited more than they currently enjoy. On top of that, decreasing students who participate in donation behavior and other related behavior is alarming to HLIs that depend on external stakeholders such as alumni support to survive in the current competitive setting in the educational market (Paul, 2014). Surprisingly, scholars have put less attention on the reasons behind the decrease in the number of alumni who support their alma mater, while substantial attention has been on the drivers for fueling donation behavior (Cha et al., 2013). As much as the number of alumni who donate to their HLIs decrease, one could think that the focus of scholars could be on investigating the driving force behind student intent to become and participate as active members of the university alumni associations. On the other hand, the literature suggests that the decreasing number of alumni who support HLIs is due to the insufficient effort by HLIs to cultivate students’ sense of belonging, which can fuel students’ intention to support HLIs (Francioni et al., 2020). It is widely accepted that insufficient effort by HLIs to cultivate support behavior is due to the perception that current students may become and participate as active members of university alumni associations by fault (Cha et al., 2013). It is against this argument this study suggests that students’ sense of belonging is an influential factor in ensuring students build intention to become active members of the university alumni associations. Paul (2014) suggested that even though students may join the university alumni associations, there should be strategies to ensure they become active members.

Empirical studies in alumni support and donation behavior indicate that university alumni associations are important forums that elicit donation behavior and other forms of supports (Stephenson & Bell, 2014). Newman (2011) reported that the university alumni association is an academic community that promotes a sense of responsibility and accountability to former students and other stakeholders to their HLIs. In this view, university alumni associations should be perceived as the supportive organ in the management of HLIs. Furthermore, Stephenson and Bell (2014) consider alumni associations as an engine to build university social community identification which may trigger other supportive behavior, including positive recommendations. However, although plenty of studies exist regarding the role of university alumni associations in triggering supportive behavior, empirical studies investigating factors fueling student readiness to be active members of university alumni associations are scant(Aikins et al., 2019). Therefore, this study aiming at extending knowledge of university alumni associations and alumni donation behavior by investigating internal branding as a determinant of students’ behavioral intention to become and participate as active members of the university alumni associations. While building its theoretical
foundation on student involvement theory by Astin (1999), this study argues that establishing a sense of involvement is vital in motivating students to become and participate as active members of the university alumni associations. In this line of thinking, the study proposes that internal branding as an essential tool of internal management can enhance student involvement and develop students’ sense of belonging to the university community, which eventually influences them to build behavioral intention to become and participate as active members of the university alumni associations.

2. Students’ Sense of Belonging

Literature indicates that students’ sense of belonging is the most important driver in determining several students’ behavior(Ahn & Davis, 2020). For instance, empirical evidence indicates that students’ sense of belonging can stimulate behavior such as students’ intention to stay and positive recommendations (Kneka & McCartney, 2021). Therefore, scholars emphasize promoting a sense of belonging to students to elicit supportive behavior, including brand value co-creation, brand-building behavior, and donation behavior (Altschwager et al., 2018). In this view, students’ sense of belonging can be developed through investing in building warm, respectful interactions between HLIs-students-staff in a tripartite relationship (Ahn & Davis, 2020). Theoretically, a sense of belonging is an individual feeling of affiliation and identification with an object, particularly brands, organizations, social groups, or communities. Sense of belonging is a form of self-categorization, in which a person considers himself or herself as part of a certain social group or community, organization, brands, etc. Within the context of education, a sense of belonging is a psychological state of mind regarding students’ closeness with their respective HLIs and their entire community members (Davis et al., 2019). Altschwager et al. (2018) suggested that HLIs communities consist of internal and external stakeholders such as faculty members, students, alumni, etc. Therefore, students with a strong sense of belonging perceive school as an essential part of their long-term well-being, as reflected in their academic and non-academic pursuits and relationships with faculty members and other students (Kneka & McCartney, 2021).

Therefore, students’ sense of belonging is a psychological state highly associated with social, behavioral support characterized by bi-directional relationships, interpersonal relatedness different from loneliness(Davis et al., 2019). Often when students develop a high level of sense of belonging are expected to create a higher level of commitment towards HLIs and the entire community (Drezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2020). In addition, a higher level of sense of belonging towards HLIs is the most crucial driver in influencing students to uphold their closeness as active members of various HLIs communities, including university alumni associations(Cha et al., 2013). Besides, students’ sense of belonging creates students’ willingness to be involved and participate in academic and non-academic events organized by HLIs(Altschwager et al., 2018; Drezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2020). Similarly, students’ sense of belonging reduces dropout rates and sense of isolation, enhancing students’ intention to stay (Altschwager et al., 2018). Therefore, with support from the above empirical and theoretical viewpoint, it is theorized that students’ behavioral intention to become active members of the university alumni associations is the outcome of a strong students’ sense of belonging to HLIs.

3. Internal Branding

The empirical studies about internal branding in organizations and HLIs, in particular, are scarce (Mampaey et al., 2020). However, the literature suggests that branding in organizations should start from within(Judson et al., 2009). This argument supports the fact that brand messages cannot attract attention in the external marketplace unless perfectly communicated and supported by the internal market (Dean et al., 2016). Overall the brand should start to sell itself inside the organization, i.e., to internal stakeholders such as faculty members, before selling itself outside the organization, i.e., to customers. Therefore, internal branding includes activities that ensure faculty members’ buy-in, corporate culture, and unique brand personalities invoked within the corporate organization culture(Yu et al., 2018b). Furthermore, as an inclusive approach to branding, internal branding should motivate internal stakeholders, including faculty members, students,
etc., to imbibe the brand values and ideologies, motivating them to convince external stakeholders to accept the university brand (Mauze et al., 2020). Internal branding has gained popularity in recent times where it has been proved that brand values or ideologies cannot be communicated effectively and efficiently to the external market unless the values and ideologies have been imbibed or instilled by internal stakeholders (Mampaey et al., 2020). It is agreed that internal stakeholders, including faculty members, are unlikely to support something they do not trust or believe. In this line of argument, it can be said that the ultimate purpose of internal branding is to convert faculty members into brand ambassadors who are motivated to live the brand and endorse unique brand values, characteristics, ideologies in their routine behavior (Alam et al., 2018). Therefore, successful internal branding is expected to enhance faculty members’ degree of belonging, identification with, and commitment to the brand, motivating them to consistently replicate the desired brand values.

It is widely accepted that convincing internal stakeholders, including faculty members, about a particular brand value or a specific brand interpretation, is indeed a very challenging phenomenon. From a practical perspective, faculty members and other internal stakeholders are likely to possess different perceptions and attitudes about their HLIs. It is widely accepted that this challenge is more intense in the higher education sector as internal stakeholders such as faculty members and students believe that they are somewhat independent, having the freedom to pursue activities without any official university brand (Alam et al., 2018). Therefore, this study conceptualizes that internal branding is not just a set of managerial activities focusing on creating and internally communicating the distinguishing features of the HLIs (Yu et al., 2018b). Precisely, internal branding should be perceived as a collective set of discursive legitimations of the external brand, legitimations that are not necessarily conscious or planned. Overall, internal branding should be perceived as the evolving collective activities that create an inner positive sense of brand ownership about the external brand, eventually strengthening the organization’s brand (Dean et al., 2016). Therefore, in the absence of internal brand legitimation, an external brand becomes unsupported through anti-brand external communications, indicating a mismatch or detachment between internal activities of internal stakeholders and brand external communication (Mampaey et al., 2020). Often, this form of external brand communication that detaches from internal stakeholders’ actions may fail to make HLIs live up to their specific brand allegiance or promises (Mauze et al., 2020). Therefore, an organization’s brand cannot claim superiority unless it is legitimized through attracting internal support; otherwise, it may lead to branding myopia. Again, internal stakeholders such as faculty members or students cannot claim that the brand is superior unless such brand values and ideologies align with faculty members’ self-image and self-identity. Thus, when a brand claims its superiority while these two conditions have not been fulfilled, its authenticity is highly questionable.

4. Internal brand communication

Literature posits that internal brand communication is a vital tool to build brand legitimation. It is documented that the primary purpose of internal branding is to legitimize the brand, i.e., to give the brand moral authority to claim its ability to deliver values according to customers’ expectations (Muradov et al., 2019). The role of internal brand communication is to establish values congruence between internal stakeholders and their brand. Overall, when there is congruence between university brand values and stakeholders’ self-image or self-identity, it can enhance internal stakeholder intention to support the university brand. Therefore, internal communication should energize internal stakeholders to take up the specific and relevant brand values in their personal lives. According to Sharma and Kamalanabhan (2012), marketers should use internal communication as the focal point to encourage behavioral change to support the brand amongst stakeholders. Therefore, internal brand communication can induce a sense of belonging to stakeholders, which legitimizes the brand. Within the context of educational marketing, internal brand communication should help both internal and external stakeholders establish closeness between them and their respective HLIs by sharing a common understanding of the brand values. The first hypothesis in the study is that,
H$_3$: There is a significant positive relationship between internal brand communication and students’ sense of belonging.

5. Brand oriented training

The role of brand-oriented training is to equip internal stakeholders with knowledge about the brand. It is widely accepted that knowledge is vital in building brand closeness to express consistent brand-building and supporting behavior. In other words, an individual who is knowledgeable about the brand values is likely to build a sense of closeness with the brand compared to an unknowledgeable person. On the same note, unlike an unknowledgeable person, a knowledgeable person is likely to develop consistent brand building and supporting behavior. King & So (2015) recommend that brand-oriented training should ensure stakeholders become more confident in exhibiting pro-brand behavior. On top of that, literature documents that brand knowledge is crucial in enhancing customers’ resilience towards negative Word of Mouth (NWOM) (Elsharnouby et al., 2021). For instance, in the context of the educational market, brand knowledge is vital in the whole process of students’ recruitment and enrollment (Sujchaphong et al., 2017). Therefore, HLIs should use different approaches, including regular students’ orientation events and training to instill university brand values to stakeholders, notably students, to build a sense of closeness. Seminal work in student orientation as an internal branding tool indicates that orientation events help new students to build a sense of belonging and identification with their HLIs (Altschwager et al., 2018). Within the context of brand-oriented training, regular training in different forms, including orientation events, regular training, etc., may promote students to build robust closeness with their HLIs. With support from the above explanation, the second hypothesis is;

H$_4$: There is a significant positive relationship between brand-oriented training and students’ sense of belonging.

6. Brand oriented leadership

Leadership style is an integral part of internal branding management. Therefore, leadership style plays a cardinal role in realizing inclusive internal branding. Specifically, leadership style such as transformational leadership is very powerful in creating enabling environments for successful internal branding (Vallaster & De Chernatony, 2005). In theory and practice, transformational leaders align the organizations’ brand values and stakeholders’ interests (Terglav et al., 2016). Sujchaphong et al. (2020) emphasize that transformational leaders are charismatic who can inspire stakeholders to sacrifice for the organization’s brand. In addition, transformational leaders are well determined to ensure stakeholders build closeness with the organizations’ brand and behave according to the brand through appealing to unique attributes of the brand (Chapleo & Clark, 2016). Overall, brand-oriented leadership represents leaders who behave as role models to demonstrate behavior that supports the organization’s brand. It refers to a form of leadership in which a person becomes an exemplar in demonstrating personal pride in the brand, advocating, living, and breathing the HLIs brand values.

Therefore, brand-oriented leadership promotes leaders in HLIs to be active in translating the brand values when fulfilling their obligations. Terglav et al. (2016) posited that when they translate the brand values, leaders are expected to emphasize non-verbal messages by demonstrating positive interactive behavior with stakeholders such as faculty members, alumni, and students. On the same argument, Sujchaphong et al. (2020) emphasize that talks or merely words that do not go together with the correct behavior of leaders cannot help institutions build stakeholders’ closeness with the brand. Thus, internal stakeholders, including students and faculty members, are inspired to support the institution’s brand if leaders express their willingness to support it through words and proper actions. In view of this, internal branding emphasizes that leaders have a strategic role in promoting their stakeholders to commit their resources, energy, efforts, and
psych to build a sense of belonging by expressing pro-brand behavior (Chapleo & Clark, 2016). With these theoretical and empirical explanations, the third hypothesis is that:

\[ H_3: \text{There is a significant positive relationship between brand-oriented leadership and students' sense of belonging.} \]

7. **Students' behavioral intention**
The study conceptualizes students' intent to become active members of alumni associations as a category of behavioral intention demonstrated by students with intense feelings of closeness or belongingness to HLIs (Mazambani et al., 2017). Therefore, behavioral intention is explained by specific motivation incentives influencing a particular behavior. The more robust the intention to perform the behavior, the more likely the behavior will be performed (Simiyu et al., 2020). Thus, students' behavioral intention should be perceived as the subjective probability of becoming active alumni association members due to motivational factors, i.e., internal branding orientation. According to Amani (2018), any form of behavioral intention is developed by cognitive and affective behavior, implying that the behavior can take the form of either an affective reaction or a cognitive reaction. Theoretically, regardless of the form of behavioral intentions, i.e., cognitive or affective reactions, a person who develops behavioral intention is often driven by specific extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors (Al-Kilani & Twaisi, 2017). Based on these theoretical explanations, the study introduces internal branding as an intrinsic motivational factor to nurture students' behavioral intention to become and participate as active members of the university alumni associations. Empirical studies in educational markets have highlighted the role of internal branding in building different supportive behavior for students towards HLIs. For instance, Maunze et al. (2020) recommended internal branding as a mechanism to achieve students' engagement in higher education institutions. On the other hand, Mampaey et al. (2020) reported that internal branding could internalize the brand to build brand legitimation to students, motivating them to support their HLIs. Within the context of this study, internal branding is theorized to fuel students' sense of belonging to HLIs and its entire community en route to creating the intent to become an active member of the university alumni association. The above theoretical and empirical explanations give the fourth hypothesis, which states that:

\[ H_4: \text{There is a significant positive relationship between students' sense of belonging and students' behavioral intention to become active members of the university alumni association.} \]

8. **Theoretical foundation**

8.1. **Student involvement theory**
Astin (1984) propounded the theory of student involvement to provide a theoretical understanding of students' participation in the learning process. The theory suggests that the learning process will be productive when students are involved as co-partners in knowledge development and sharing. It encourages educators to focus less on what they do and invest more in what students do. Therefore, unlike other theories such as the content theory that place students in a passive role as just recipients of information or knowledge, student involvement theory places students in an active role as co-creators of knowledge, enhancing their development and ways of sharing it (Lewis et al., 2015). Furthermore, the theory suggests that highly involved students are ready to devote substantial time and energy by participating actively in student organizations such as the university alumni associations and interacting with other university community members, including faculty members and other students (Cha et al., 2013). Finally, the theory provides behavioral procedures and mechanisms to facilitate students' development (Astin, 1999). Although the theory focuses on explaining involvement in the context of knowledge development and the learning process, other scholars have unveiled the significant role of student involvement theory in
explaining how education institutions can shape students’ college experiences. Theoretically, some scholars agree that such experiences are expected to motivate students’ future intent to be active alumni (Cha et al., 2013). Therefore, the theory suggests that different factors can increase students’ involvement in university, including participation in sports, campus life, and students’ orientation (Astin, 1999). This study theorizes that internal brand orientation is a powerful positive factor that can enhance student involvement, build a sense of belonging, and develop an intent to become and participate as an active member of the university alumni associations.

9. Methodology

9.1. Research Design and Sampling

The study adopted a quantitative approach using a cross-sectional survey research design to collect data from 501 students of two colleges of the higher learning institutions in Tanzania to test the proposed model. The study's primary objective was to examine the influence of internal branding on students’ behavioral intention to become active members of the university alumni association. Therefore, respondents who participated in the study were third year students who were about to accomplish their studies, and hence virtually, they are prospective members of university alumni associations. The respondents’ characteristics indicate that 301(60.1%) were males and 200(39.9%) were females. On top of that, age categories show that all respondents (501) fall under the age of 21–30. This is because; statistics indicate that in Tanzania, most students who pursue tertiary education, particularly first degree, and fall under the age of 21–35.

9.2. Measures

The measurement of variables was done using scales adopted from previous literature on internal branding, students’ sense of belonging and behavioral intention. The study adopted measurement scales by King and So (2015) to measure internal branding dimensions. In this study, internal branding is a second-order construct consisting of three dimensions, i.e., internal brand communication, brand-oriented training, and Brand oriented leadership. However, the scales were adjusted to fit the higher education sector and educational markets context, as indicated in Table 1. Furthermore, students’ sense of belonging was measured using scales by Hoffman et al. (2002), with slight modifications in terms of rewordings to fit the context of the study, as shown in Table 1. Finally, students’ behavioral intention was adapted from studies on students and consumer behavioral intention by Amani (2018); Simiyu et al., (2020), and modifications were done to make it suitable in the higher education sector and setting of the study. Overall, the modified scales in terms of rewordings have been presented in Table 1 and their validity and reliability assessment.

9.3. Common Method Bias (CMB)

The methodology used in this study may raise the concern of common method bias. Therefore, to check common method bias, the study adopted Harman’s one-factor test as recommended by Podsakoff et al., (2003). According to Podsakoff et al., (2003), in testing common method bias using Harman’s one-factor, all latent items should be subjected to Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), and the rule of thumb is that none of the factors should explain more than half of the variance. The results revealed that the un-rotated factor accounted for 45.4% of the total variance; therefore, common method bias was not the concern in the data.

10. Measurement model assessment: testing reliability and validity issues

The reliability of the model was assessed using the Cronbach alpha coefficient (α), factor loadings, and Composite Reliability coefficient (CR). As indicated in Table 1, the internal consistency of the model was good because the value of Cronbach alpha coefficient (α) for all variables was above the recommended range of 0.7 (Santos & Reynaldo, 2013). Again, the test for McDonald Construct Reliability (MaxRHI) has confirmed high reliability as its value for all variables was above the acceptable value of 0.7 (Ab Hamid et al., 2017), as indicated in Table 2. Furthermore, the Composite Reliability coefficient for all variables was above the threshold value of 0.7, indicating good
| Item                          | Statements                                                                                                                             | Loadings | CR  | α  |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|-----|----|
| Internal Brand Communication | The university communicates brand values to students through internal mass communications, for example, newsletters, memos, and brochures | 0.793    | 0.793 | 0.793 |
| IBC1                         | The university communicates brand values specifically to each group of students.                                                        | 0.716    |     |    |
| IBC2                         | The university communicates brand values to me personally.                                                                             | 0.766    |     |    |
| IBC3                         | The university communicates brand values to me personally.                                                                             | 0.765    |     |    |
| Brand Oriented Training      | The university reinforces/delivers brand values through training activities.                                                           | 0.838    | 0.831 | 0.830 |
| BOT1                         | The university provides me with the skill set necessary to imbibe and deliver these values.                                              | 0.772    |     |    |
| BOT2                         | The university supports me in attending training activities that are related to brand values.                                          | 0.754    |     |    |
| BOT3                         | The university supports me in attending training activities that are related to brand values.                                          | 0.754    |     |    |
| Brand Oriented Leadership    | The university top management regularly talks about the most crucial brand values                                                     | 0.781    | 0.781 |    |
| BOL1                         | The university top management regularly talks about the most crucial brand values                                                     | 0.728    |     |    |
| BOL2                         | The university top management lives the brand values                                                                                  | 0.764    |     |    |
| BOL3                         | The university top management shares the future of the university brand with students                                                  | 0.719    |     |    |
| Students’ Sense of Belonging | The university top management supports me in attending training activities that are related to brand values                             | 0.862    | 0.861 |    |

(Continued)
| Item | Statements | Loadings | CR   | α    |
|------|------------|----------|------|------|
| SSB1 | I feel like a real part of this university community | 0.761 | 0.836 |      |
| SSB2 | Other students in this university take my opinions seriously | 0.789 |      |      |
| SSB3 | I feel proud of belonging to this university community | 0.778 |      |      |
| SSB4 | I am included in lots of activities at this university community | 0.797 |      |      |

| Item | Statements | Loadings | CR   | α    |
|------|------------|----------|------|------|
| SBI1 | In the future, I would feel happy to become an active member of the university alumni association | 0.724 | 0.839 |      |
| SBI2 | I would like to be involved frequently as a member of this university community |      |      |      |
| SBI3 | I intend to participate as often as possible in academic and social events organized by this university community | 0.800 |      |      |

Note: CR = Composite Reliability, α = Cronbach Alpha Coefficient
Table 2: Discriminant validity of the study variables using the Fornell-Larcker criterion

|                          | AVE  | MSV  | MaxR(H) | 1       | 2       | 3       | 4       | 5       |
|--------------------------|------|------|----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. Students’ Sense of Belonging | 0.611 | 0.540 | 0.863    | 0.781   |         |         |         |         |
| 2. Internal Brand Communication | 0.562 | 0.513 | 0.795    | 0.716   | 0.749   |         |         |         |
| 3. Brand Oriented Training | 0.622 | 0.479 | 0.837    | 0.692   | 0.673   | 0.749   |         |         |
| 4. Brand Oriented Leadership | 0.544 | 0.540 | 0.783    | 0.735   | 0.643   | 0.631   | 0.737   |         |
| 5. Students’ Behavioural Intention | 0.636 | 0.410 | 0.853    | 0.640   | 0.555   | 0.531   | 0.584   | 0.798   |

Note: AVE = Average Variance Extracted, MSV = Maximum Shared Variance, MaxR(H) = Maximum Reliability, the bolded value in diagonal represent the square root of AVE, and other values outside the diagonal are correlations.
construct validity (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). This indicates good reliability of the measurement items. Furthermore, all items were loaded above the recommended threshold of 0.6 and significant, indicating that convergent validity was achieved, as shown in Table 1. As indicated in Table 2, the values of AVEs are above the threshold of 0.5 for all variables indicating good convergent validity (Floyd & Widaman, 1995; Ab Hamid et al., 2017). Finally, the study assessed the discriminant validity using Fornell-Larcker Criterion. As indicated in Table 2, the criterion suggests that discriminant validity is achieved if the value of the square root of AVE should be greater than the value of inter construct correlation between the variable and other variables (McDonald & Ho, 2002). Furthermore, the value of Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) should be less than the value of AVE for each variable (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Therefore, based on these criteria, Table 2 indicated that discriminant validity was achieved because the value of the square root of AVE is greater than the value of inter construct correlation between the variable and other variables. In addition, the value of MSV for each variable is less than its respective AVE value.

11. Assessing psychometric properties of the measurement model
The psychometric properties of the measurement model of the five-factor structural model, including Internal brand Communication, brand-oriented training, brand-oriented leadership, students’ sense of belonging, and students’ behavioral intentions, were checked using AMOS version 21. The measurement model fits statistics suggests reasonable fit as follows: \( x^2 = 168.134 \) (\( p < 0.001, df = 94 \)); \( x^2/df = 1.789 \) below threshold of 3 (Hooper et al., 2008), Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.981, Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) = 0.962; Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) = 0.945, Tucker-Lewis Coefficient (TLI) = 0.976 all were above the recommended value of > 0.9 (Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.040 below the recommended threshold of < 0.1 (Hooper et al., 2008)). Therefore, all variables and their respective measurement items were retained for the next step: hypotheses testing.

12. Analysis of structural model and testing of hypotheses model
Before testing the proposed hypotheses, the structural model goodness of fit was checked through AMOS version 21. The structural model fits statistics yielded accepted model fit as follows: \( x^2 = 181.910 \) (\( p < 0.001, df = 97 \)); \( x^2/df = 1.875 \), CFI = 0.979, GFI = 0.960, AGFI = 0.943, TLI = 0.973; RMSEA = 0.042). Furthermore, convergent and discriminant validity were checked, and the results are presented in Tables 1 and 2 above. Concerning hypothesis testing, Structural Equation Modelling using AMOS version 21 was used, and the findings in Table 3 indicate that all

| Hypothesis | Coefficient | p-value | t-statistics | Decision |
|------------|-------------|---------|--------------|----------|
| H1: Internal Brand Communication → Students’ sense of belonging | 0.371 | *** | 4.792 | Accepted |
| H2: Brand Oriented Training → Students’ sense of belonging | 0.302 | *** | 3.966 | Accepted |
| H3: Brand Oriented Leadership → Students’ sense of belonging | 0.412 | *** | 6.258 | Accepted |
| H4: Students’ sense of belonging → Students’ behavioral intention | 0.652 | *** | 12.678 | Accepted |

Note: *** indicate p-value < 0.001
hypotheses were accepted. Therefore, internal branding dimensions directly influence students’ behavioral intentions to become active members of university alumni associations when mediated with students’ sense of belonging. Internal brand Communication directly influence students sense of belonging ($\beta = 0.371; t > 1.96; p < 0.05$). Brand oriented training directly influence students sense of belonging ($\beta = 0.302; t > 1.96; p < 0.05$). In addition, brand-oriented leadership directly influence students sense of belonging ($\beta = 0.412; t > 1.96; p < 0.05$). Finally, students sense of belonging directly influence students behavioral intention to become an active member of alumni university association ($\beta = 0.652; t > 1.96; p < 0.05$).

13. Testing of mediation effect
The mediating effects were tested using process mediation test version 3.4 by Andrew Hayes. As indicated in Table 4, the bootstrap upper limit CI and lower limit CI, which are 0.156 and 0.390, respectively, imply no zero in 95 percent CI. For that reason, students’ sense of belonging mediates the relationship between internal branding and students’ behavioral intentions to become active members of the university alumni associations.

14. Discussion
This study examines the role of internal brand management in nurturing students’ behavioral intention to be involved and participate as active members of the university alumni associations. The study justification is based on the current evidence, which shows that university alumni associations are essential agents for boosting and cultivating various brand supportive behaviors, including alumni donation. The study argues against the current understanding that students become active members of university alumni associations by fault (Paul, 2014). Furthermore, the motive behind the study was to address the recent challenges of a significant decrease of alumni who willingly intend to be active members in alumni associations as an engine for building and boosting supportive behavior, particularly alumni donation behavior. With support from existing empirical studies and student involvement theory, the study builds its theoretical foundation on the idea that alumni who are active members of the university association are likely to develop various supportive behavior, including brand building behavior, brand co-creation behavior and donation behavior. In other words, the study suggests that university alumni associations can
be used as a tool to nurture students’ behavior through the influence of social community identification. The study has unveiled that; current students who are prospective members of university alumni associations should be nurtured to develop an intent to be actively involved and participate as a member of the university social communities. In the milieu of alumni participation as a member of the university alumni association, the findings suggest that universities should have deliberate strategic actions focusing on involving and engaging students in routine operations as potential stakeholders of HLIs. Literature on educational marketing considers students as valuable assets of HLIs, and therefore it is necessary to establish a proper mechanism to reap benefits from them. In this view, the study proposed internal brand management as an inclusive branding approach in the management of universities to promote students’ sense of belonging, which is an essential catalyst in building behavioral intention to behave as active members of the university alumni association.

Therefore, the study findings confirm the theoretical understanding developed in this study that when enabling environments are created to instill university brand values to students, there is a likelihood of building a sense of belonging as an engine towards intent to participate and be involved as active members of university alumni associations. Specifically, the study findings unveiled that internal branding as an inclusive approach in university branding is an essential tool in internalizing brand values to students of HLIs, which builds students’ sense of belonging. The study theorizes that students’ sense of belonging mediate the relationship between internal branding and students’ behavioral intention to become active members of university alumni associations. In this regards, the study findings suggest that students cannot develop an intent to become an active member of university alumni association unless have developed sense of belongingness or closeness. In this study, a sense of belonging implies feelings of being a member of a particular social community, such as a university social community. Other scholars perceive a sense of belonging as an indication of intimacy, familiarity, sense of ownership or affiliation, etc. Therefore, a sense of belonging has a specific role in building intent among students to continue upholding their closeness with HLIs by motivating students to engage and participate actively as members of the university alumni associations. Within the study findings, it has been confirmed that internal brand communication can engender internalizing the brand, which intrinsically builds students’ feelings of belongingness or closeness (Dean et al., 2016). It is widely accepted that building a sense of closeness through internal communication is only possible when students imbibe the university brand values as personal brand values. Evidence indicates that when students absorb the university brand values, they can develop a sense of belonging, which influences them to become active members of the university alumni associations.

Furthermore, concerning brand-oriented training, the findings indicate that students’ behavioral intention to become active members of the university alumni association is fueling by regular training offered to them about the university brand. Through well-focused training, students can internalize university brands and develop a sense of belonging. When viewing a sense of belonging as familiarity or intimacy, it can be confirmed that brand-oriented training equips students with knowledge about university brands can ultimately influence them to live and breathe the university brand values and become active members of university alumni associations. Therefore, a sense of belonging or closeness is nurtured by university brand knowledge focusing on inducing students that university brand values are compatible with students’ personal values. The findings show that training that intends to ensure students absorb brand values is of great importance in creating a sense of ownership and closeness to students. This closeness ensures students continue to have unforgettable and meaningful experiences with the university brand throughout their entire life. The findings suggest that an unforgettable experience with the university brand is paramount in building student behavioral intention to join the university alumni association to retain such memorable experience. Therefore, the intent to join a university alumni association is students’ responses to uphold and strengthen their long-term relationship with HLIs. Stephenson and Yerger (2014) discovered that students join university
alumni associations due to the high connection with the university. It is further found that joining a university alumni association is an outward expression of their self-connection with their university.

The findings have further unveiled the importance of brand-oriented leadership in motivating students to become active members of university alumni associations. In the lens of these findings, leaders responsible for managing universities should demonstrate important characteristics that promote university brand values and ideologies. In other words, students’ intent to demonstrate a high level of being active members of university alumni associations is motivated by behavior managers or leaders of universities. University management has a role in leading university community members towards demonstrating supportive behavior towards the university brand, including the intention to become an active member of the university alumni association(Paul, 2014). In this regard, leaders of universities should inspire students as their followers in whatever they are doing during accomplishing their routine obligations. Overall, leaders of universities should translate the university brand values on all occasions they encounter with students. Therefore, university management should avoid words without actions that discourage students from committing their effort and energy to support the university brand. Thus, the role of university management in fueling students intention to be involved as active members of the university alumni association is to live the brand and translate brand values when exercising power or authority (Sujchaphong et al., 2020). Consequently, university management should inspire students to believe that it is possible to live the university brand values and ideologies through showing or demonstrating specific benefits which they can accrue from living the brand values or ideologies. The findings suggest that university management can fuel students’ sense of belonging through demonstrating unique behavior reflecting the university brand values.

15. Implication

15.1. Practical implication
This study provides potential practical implications to the management of HLIs and the entire faculty members. In a practical context, HLIs increasingly depend on alumni for financial support, brand-building behavior, and university brand value co-creation. Therefore, it is necessary to establish enabling environments for students to develop a passion for joining university alumni associations and becoming active members. Within the context of the study findings, this enabling environment can be created through an inclusive approach in managing HLIs, which places students in an active role as co-partner for the growth and survival of HLIs. Therefore, the following are practical implications that HLIs should consider in building student intent to join university alumni associations:

• HLIs should adopt internal branding to promote members of the entire HLIs community to support their HLIs through brand-building behavior and donation behavior. Therefore, internal branding as an internal management tool should be adopted to provide specific responsibilities and obligations that seek to promote students intent to support their alma mater. Overall internal branding intends to develop a sense of belonging to students to their HLIs as internal stakeholders. Therefore, students’ intent to participate as active members of the university alumni association depends on whether HLIs have assigned them specific obligations or responsibilities to perform as internal stakeholders who have a stake in HLIs. The theory of student involvement indicates that uninvolved students often developed a sense of isolation towards their respective HLIs, which reduces the likelihood of developing a sense of belonging and eventually intent to retain their membership as prospective university alumni. Furthermore, lack of involvement may reduce time spent by students in various extracurricular activities, including participation in student organizations or alumni association, interaction with faculty members and other community members.
• Furthermore, HLIs should consider internal branding as a means to facilitate student engagement. Practically, internal branding is the most effective and efficient way of reaping consistency benefits from students as internal stakeholders. Within the context of internal branding, students become strategic resources that can allow HLIs to survive in the current competitive environment in the educational market. Therefore, the success and survival of HLIs in the current competitive settings of the educational market depend on how they deploy such strategic resources. Hence, practically HLIs are strongly argued to put considerable attention to current students as prospective university alumni through engaging them in various operations, which may motivate their sense of belonging. The study findings clearly and substantially reveal that it is important for HLIs management and the entire faculty members to use an inclusive approach such as internal branding as a mechanism to ensure students actively demonstrate a sense of belonging to HLIs. Furthermore, HLIs management and entire faculty members should ensure students' sense of belonging motivate students to develop the intention to participate in students clubs, social events, and other events outside the classroom to engender intent to participate in university alumni association in the future. In todays cutthroat competition in educational markets, HLIs and the entire faculty members have to find creative and innovative inclusive strategies to enhance students' involvement and engagement to ensure students build intent to become active members of the university alumni associations.

Evidence indicates that creative and innovative strategies such as internal branding can enhance the relationship between HLIs and current students as prospective alumni. Therefore, HLIs management should embrace internal branding to empower HLIs leaders to encourage students to become and participate as prospective university alumni. In addition, HLIs management should use internal branding to create a network of connections between students as prospective university alumni and HLIs and its entire community members, including faculty members. Therefore, the strength of the network of connection among current students, faculty members, other members of the HLIs community, such as alumni, fosters special educational experiences can prompt a sense of belonging to current students and intention to become active members of the university alumni association. As stated earlier, alumni intention to give back does not just involve treasure in financial donations. In a broader sense, giving back may further extend to look at the current time invested by current students to support HLIs by participating in various academic and non-academic events. Therefore, HLIs should adopt internal branding to ensure current students as prospective alumni develop the willingness to continue upholding their relationship or membership with HLIs by participating as active members of university alumni associations.

16. Theoretical implication
The study contributes to various theoretical contexts, including internal branding, students’ sense of belonging, and students’ behavioral intentions. First, the study provides a theoretical explanation of the role of student involvement in building a sense of belonging as antecedents of students’ behavioral intention to join university alumni associations. Second, although student involvement theory has been used to explain various behavioral intentions in the learning process, few studies have demonstrated its theoretical contribution in explaining other behaviors, such as participating in various student organizations such as alumni associations. Therefore, in this study, student involvement theory has been used to extend the theoretical understanding of internal branding as a positive factor that encourages students’ active involvement in various student organizations. On top of that, the study contributes to the theory of internal brand orientation, which has not been given adequate attention in the higher education sector. Theoretically, this study suggests that internal branding as part of internal orientation is resourceful in helping students to build a strong sense of self-motivation and develop belief in their ability to determine the survival and success of HLIs. Finally, the student introduces behavioral intention in explaining students’ future intent to become active members of the university alumni association. Previous empirical evidence has focused on university alumni associations as agents for boosting students’ support, mainly financial donations. However, scant evidence exists on the studies examining factors that can enhance students’ intent to become active members of
university alumni associations. Therefore, researchers may use this theoretical base as a starting point to explore more and to develop theories to address this challenge. This study suggests internal branding, which suggests the power of living the brand among stakeholders towards students’ behavioral intention to become active members of the university alumni association.

17. Limitations of the study

However, despite the significant contribution made by this study to the body of knowledge, the following limitations provide an opportunity for future research in the same field of examination or other related fields. The first step in taking a quantitative approach was to design a cross-sectional survey that captured only the quantitative aspects of the topic under consideration. In addition, the respondents of this study were third-year students at two public universities who answered the survey questions. Finally, the primary outcome variable in this study was students’ behavioral intention to become active members of the university alumni groups, which was analyzed as a unidimensional construct in this study.

18. Direction for future studies

Based on the above-underscored limitations, the following are recommendations for future studies. First, it is necessary to adopt a qualitative approach to capture a naturalistic picture of the topic under investigation. Additionally, this study involved third-year students of two public colleges, and therefore it is necessary to include participants from private colleges of higher education. Second, in the same line of argument, it is important to adopt a comparative study by comparing internal branding practices in private and public colleges of higher education. This suggestion is based on evidence that, when comparing public and private HLIs, private HLIs are aggressive in adopting market-based approaches compared to public HLIs. Future studies may wish to explore this construct as a multi-dimensional variable consisting of cognitive and affective behavioral intention. On top of that, further studies should be conducted to examine through comparative analysis to understand the differences in terms of the role of internal branding to students who graduate and become active members of university alumni associations versus students who graduate and do not become active members of the university alumni association.

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