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**SOCIETY OF  
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EVALUATION  
IN KENYA**

## **Universities' Brand Identity on Attachment Strength: Evidence from the Republic of South Africa**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper examined the influence brand identity has on the strength of international students' attachment to their South African public universities. The study was grounded on Cognitive psychology theory as its theoretical underpinning. A sample of 205 international students was drawn through purposive sampling techniques using questionnaires from participants across the various public universities. The data was analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) statistical technique with Smart PLS version 3.0 software to determine the relationship between the stated hypotheses. The findings revealed that the brand identity of the universities in South Africa has a greater influence on international students' satisfaction, attachment, and commitment levels but their willingness to recommend South African Public universities to prospective postgraduate students was not significant. International students' commitment to recommend South Africa's universities to prospective students in general was highly significant where as their levels of satisfaction and trust intent to recommend were not significant. The study contributes to the ongoing research in probing the linkage between branding and higher institutions. Implications for theory and practice were also provided.*

**Keywords:** *Internationalisation; Postgraduate International Students; Brand attachment; Identity*

### **1. Introduction**

Higher education market has globally become more competitive than before (Perera et al., 2022; Jeckells, 2022). Internationalisation within universities is developing rapidly as institutions are moving towards connecting international approaches in recruiting, collaborating in research as well as in capacity-building. The nature of the competition among universities has brought about the need for institutions to appreciate, manage, and haul a strong brand position (Maringe and Gibbs 2009; Celly & Knepper 2010).

According to Quintal, Shanka & Chuanuwatanakul (2012); Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos, & Bourlakis (2016); Melewar, Foroudi, Dinnie & Nguyen (2018) as well as Clark, Chapleo & Suomi (2020), how universities handle their relationship with students and how students recognise their institutions' brand make them have fond memories about the institutions in future. Bock, Poole, and Joseph (2014); Joseph, Mullen, and Spake (2012) also observed that in an increasingly aggressive higher education sector, universities are facing momentous challenges in recruiting students. In the past, universities appeared to work under the motto "if you build they will come" (Eccles 2004), but things have changed. Authors like: Hemsley - Brown, and Oplatka (2006); Healey (2008, p.334); Chapleo (2011) and Mampaey, Schtemberg, Schijns, Huisman and Wæraas (2020) have all revealed that the increasing competition for international students had compelled institutions to market themselves globally.

In their bid to go international, universities ought to be decisive about their branding activities to meet the needs of both current and potential students. Success is likely to be achieved with the institutions and countries' inclination to invest and act in response to the needs of the market - due to competition (Mpinganjira, 2009). According to Mirzaei,



Gray, Baumann, Johnson, and Winzar (2015); Ng, (2016); Balmer, Mahmoud, and Chen (2020), a brand represents an expensive asset, when managed in a holistic and integrative manner, it is likely to build long-term brand health. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) indicated that international education contributed \$15.0 billion to the Australian economy. International students studying and residing in Australia contributed \$14.5 billion to the economy, representing a 3.8 percent improvement from the earnings in 2012.

According to Quintal and Phau (2016), other countries such as the USA, the UK, Canada, and New Zealand are all employing global business approaches in their international education. Conversely, increasing tuition fees in western countries, with lower tuition fees in African universities coupled with low cost of living on the African continent are working in Africa's favour (Sam, Tetteh and Amponsah 2015). They further revealed that only Egypt and South Africa are tapping into the benefits of international education in Africa. According to the just-published edition of Study South Africa, an annual publication of International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA), the number of international students has "grown dramatically" from 12,600 to 72,875. This shows that South Africa has become a destination for many international students. Numerous studies have been conducted on higher education in South Africa with Boughey (2003); Fataar (2003); Jansen (2004); Schoole (2006); Scott, Yeld, and Hendry (2007); Boughey (2007); Mpinganjira (2009); (2011a) all addressing issues relating to African students' choice and other higher institutions abroad but the majority of the studies were not directly linked to branding.

According to Arpan, Raney, and Zivnuska (2003); Melewar and Akel (2005); Palmer, Koenig-Lewis and Asaad (2016); Frandsen, Gotsi, Johnstone, Whittle, Frenkel and Spicer (2018), studies on university branding activities remain underdeveloped in the existing literature. Alessandri, Yang, and Kinsey (2006) also opined that previous studies have asserted that, educational marketing research was seriously lacking in academic literature. Quintal et al. (2012) also affirmed that poor management of the international students' branding is likely to impact students' perceptions, thoughts, and allegiance towards their universities. A university that does not tackle the distinctive desires of its international students' population runs the risk of leaving students disenchanted, discontented, and even demoralised (Sherry, Thomas, and Chui 2010:34). This study is aimed at adding to the extant academic literature on branding in the context of the higher education sector (Chapleo 2010), something that is inadequate in Africa as well as in South Africa which has now become a surest destination for many international students – especially postgraduate students.

Brand oriented organisations gain competitive advantage and perform better than organisations that are not brand-oriented, regardless of whether they are profit-making organisations (Wong and Merrilees 2008; Baumgarth 2010; Gromark and Melin 2011; Balaji, Roy and Sadeque, 2016) or a non-profit organisations (Hankinson 2002; Ewing & Napoli 2005; Napoli 2006). An examination of the marketing and brand management literature has revealed that, though there is a reasonable body of work on marketing in higher education (Elkin, Devjee and Farnsworth, 2005; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006; Healey, 2008; Aula, Tienari and Wæraas, 2015; Mampaey & Huisman, 2016), there is a comparative scantiness of published empirical research on branding and higher education (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006; Alessandri, Yang & Kinsey 2006; Bunzel 2007; Waeraas & Solbakk 2008; Chapleo 2011; Watkins & Gonzenbach 2013; Dholakia & Acciardo 2014; Goi, Goi & Wong 2014; Quintal & Phau 2016).

Kayombo (2014) identified limited studies on higher education branding in Africa. Cross and Rouhani (2004); Mtembu (2004); Rouhani (2007) as well as Dolby (2010) also observed limited studies on the South African international education experience; although a lot of studies have been carried out on higher education in South Africa including Boughey (2003); Fataar (2003); Jansen (2004); Schoole (2006), Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007); Boughey (2007); Mpinganjira (2009); (2011a); (2011b); (2012), as well as Chimucheka (2012).

Meanwhile, Watkins and Gonzenbach (2013); Dholakia and Acciardo (2014) also raised the issue of how future studies ought to highlight the need for research on effective branding in higher educational institutions. It is the limited literature on studies in branding and higher education from the global perspective on the African continent in the areas specified above actuated the current study. The purpose was to examine the influence of brand identity on the strength of attachment of international postgraduate students to their South African public universities.

The objectives of the study were as follows: examine the influence of brand identity on satisfaction, brand attachment and commitment of South African public universities; determine the influence of brand attachment of South African public universities on international students' satisfaction, trust and commitment and finally to examine the association



between international students' level of satisfaction, trust, commitment and their willingness to recommend South African public universities.

Herr (2001, p. 24) observed that cognitive psychology was becoming a mainstay of brand management stratagem. The theory concentrates on the areas of human reminiscence and the route by which information is internalized and used by individuals to make sense of their environment (Herr, 2001, p. 24). Any information, whether refreshing or devalued, is "stored in the memory in a form that can be retrieved, controlled and otherwise used - which is organized inconsequential patterns (Herr, 2001, p.24). There is an apparent connection between an institution and the image that surfaces at the thought of that institution. If people can associate definite attributes to a brand, based on cognitive psychology theory, they are more likely to distinguish it from others.

Consumer behavior theories define coherent decision-making to maximize satisfaction within a budget; and emotional mockups which normally focus on attitudes, customs, and professed control affecting intentions and actions. Such theories like the theory of consumer behavior, the prospect theory, the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell model etc. are manifestly different from cognitive theories like the cognitive psychology theory. Cognition is explained as a method of our thinking. It throws light on the very act of obtaining information through reflection, thinking, imagining, reminiscing, and problem-solving (Alahmad, 2020). Branding issues about the universities in South Africa are not just interpreted and used by the students in their quest to like and recommend the universities to prospective students. It rather goes beyond what the universities are offering to the international students. Students therefore use the information available to them like some of the socio-political factors like the Prejudice as well as Xenophobia and discrimination (Dominguez-Whitehead, Y., & Sing, 2015). Cognitive psychology theory was employed as a theoretical grounding to the current study because it provides credence towards the effects of branding activities on students' decisions about their respective universities.

The relevance of brand identity as a marketing tool has gained recognition world-wide. Brand identity is a set of connections linked to the company that strategists seek to make and sustain (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2002, p. 43). Brand identity is a result of several managerial actions that determines its core values (Yastioglu 2014, p. 3). "Brand identity is a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategists aspire to create or maintain" (Aaker, 1996, p. 68), which represents a bond between a company and the consumer. The current study operationalized brand identity using Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2002, p.43) definition of what the strategists seek to make and maintain on an object. It simply represents the university's values, services, ideas, and nature from the perspective of the chosen international students.

Brand attachment is the strength of a tie connecting a brand with the self (Park, MacInnis., Priester, Eisingerich and Iacobucci, 2010). According to Thomson, MacInnis and Whan (2005), brand identity represents the power of emotional attachment to an object which is associated with an asset in an object. It is also explained as a strong emotional bond between the consumers and a brand (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer and Nyffenegger, 2011). The study conceptualized brand attachment as basically a passionate bond, which is moderated with an inclusive feeling towards a preferred brand. It, therefore, explains the emotional association between international students and the universities in South Africa.

Satisfaction is defined by Day (1984, p.497) as 'a post-choice evaluative judgment concerning a specific purchase or selection'. Satisfying a customer leads to positive word of mouth remark, customer faithfulness, and sustainable profitability (Liu and Jang, 2009; Hague and Hague 2016). Therefore, satisfying a student who acts as a customer has a greater propensity in getting more students through positive word of mouth, loyalty, and feasible success in one's institution.

Ghosh, Whipple, and Bryan (2001, p. 325) defined trust as "the degree to which a student is willing to rely on or have faith and confidence in the college to take appropriate steps that benefit him and help him achieve his learning and career objectives". Trust is the belief that someone or something is reliable, good, honest, and effective. Commitment is also defined as the degree at which a person considers his or her relationship with another entity from a long-term viewpoint and is more likely to be in that relationship even when things are challenging (Thomson et al. 2005). It explains the state or quality of being dedicated to a cause such that it becomes difficult to break that bond.



Higher Education Institutions across the world have become more marketing-oriented, gradually identifying the significance of developing strong university brands (Vukasović, 2015; Mourad, Meshreki and Sarofim, 2019) while considering students as clients (Alam & Saeed, 2016; Guilbault, 2018). It is believed that favorable and exclusive associations with brands are formed after students complete their programmes of study before a long-term commitment is attained. Students are increasingly becoming aware that postgraduate education has little to do with the universities; rather the academic supervisors or promoters' effect matters most. Preceding studies underscore the effect of brand awareness and brand image as the core dimensions of equity in higher education (Mourad et al., 2011; Alam & Saeed, 2016; Mourad et al., 2019). However, there are other intangible characteristics such as personalities (Royo-Vela and Hünermund, 2016); reputation (Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos and Boulakis, 2016; Mourad et al., 2019); history and ranking position (Mourad et al., 2011; Mourad et al., 2019); attachment strength, commitment, trust, and satisfaction; from the physical features are all considered to have a greater effect on matured postgraduate students' decisions and sometimes students' association with faculties and staffs universities (Mourad et al., 2011; Mourad et al., 2019).

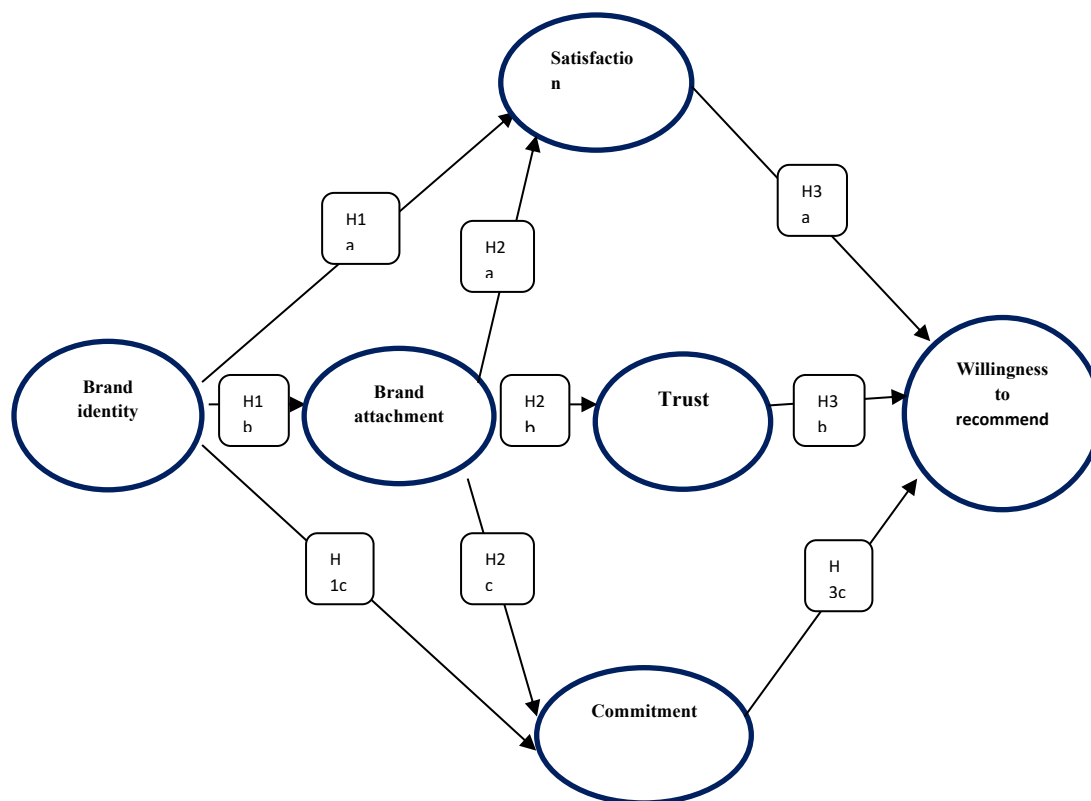
Other factors cannot be overlooked when evaluating brands' effects on future patronage. A PhD and a Master's qualification like any other university degree is a one-time purchase; so, trust, commitment, satisfaction cannot be assessed in terms of repeated purchase, but could be reflected, for instance, in the scholar's decision to pursue postgraduate studies in the same institution in future or to recommend the same university to future postgraduate candidates.

Before 1994, South Africa had a very small number of international students (Cloete, Sheppard, and Bailey 2015). The country's higher education institutions have increased the number of international students, particularly at the postgraduate level. There was a total of 73,859 international students, making 7.5% of the total enrolled in the public higher education institutions in the 2013/2014 academic year as compared to 46,687 international students in 2002 (Government Gazette, 2017, p. 11). According to Mokhothu and Callaghan (2018), South Africa has an enrolment of 74,000 international students in undergraduate and postgraduate levels: representing a high growth of international students into South African higher educational institutions since 2013. The White Paper for Post School Education and Training (2013) revealed that there was an increase in the internationalization of higher education in South Africa in the past two decades. That, to Cloete, Sheppard, and Bailey (2015), the full introduction of government funding incentives, intended to encourage postgraduate studies, has led to an increase in the numbers. Although international students and other activities associated with the internationalization of higher education in South Africa could generate revenue for the higher education institutions and the country, as commercialization was not the primary reason for internationalization in South Africa (Government Gazette, 2017, p. 22), universities, especially universities of technology all over South Africa were traditionally supported to some extent by the government. The socio-economic problems in South Africa, characterized by the high unemployment rate, illiteracy rate, and other vices ought to compel the government, policymakers on higher institutions to reconsider branding their institutions to minimize the pressure on the South Africa government in terms of funding of institutions – a concept that can be adopted from other developed countries.

In 2000, the Council on Higher Education's Size and Shape Task Team detected that South Africa was not necessarily focusing on promoting its higher education system internationally. Law (2002) observed that conventionally, the higher education institutions in South Africa have been rather unprogressive in terms of marketing the institutions to potential students. It is, therefore, clear that little effort has been made by South African tertiary education providers in branding the student recruitment process (Beneke & Human 2010).

South Africa has facilities and resources in its institutions of higher learning for postgraduate studies, making them competitive or the best among institutions in the developed world. Nevertheless, the lack of exertion to consider a marketing solution in the South African student recruitment milieu – with specific reference to international students appear to differ strangely from the development in numerous external markets - particularly in the United States, Europe, and Australia.





**Figure 1: The Conceptual model of the study**

The hypotheses statements of the study were given below:

*H1a, b, c:* There is a significant positive relationship between brand identity on brand attachment, satisfaction and commitment

*H2, a, b, c:* There is a significant positive relationship between brand attachment on satisfaction, trust and commitment

*H3a, b, c:* There is a significant positive relationship between brand satisfaction, trust, commitment on students' willingness to recommend South African universities.

Students form their perceptions of brand identity on satisfaction, attachment, and commitment before and after graduation. McCracken (1989) observed that different students are likely to find themselves in the construction of different meanings based on experiences and observations. Da Silveira, Lages, and Simões (2013) opined that, for changes to be effectual in a higher education environment, branding activities ought to be lively and flexible towards students' satisfaction. Launching of an effective brand is likely to strengthen relationship building, forming an attachment between institutions and the students' (Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos & Bourlakis 2016). A brand attachment was defined by Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, and Iacobucci (2010) as the strength of the bond involving the brand with the self. Students are more likely to form and uphold such attachment while studying and even after graduation. Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann (2005); Ilicic and Webster (2011) all posited that the higher the brand activities employed by an organisation, the greater the consumer's views of the brand as an acceptable partner in progress relationship towards committing to the brand. Elliott and Healy (2001) also observed that student-centeredness, campus climate, and instructional effectiveness have a strong influence on the satisfaction level of students, trust, and commitment. Deducing from the preceding discussion above, the study will, therefore, hypothesise that:

*H1a, b, c:* The brand identity of South African universities will have a significant positive effect on international students' level of satisfaction, attachment strength, and commitment.

A greater number of universities are investing in brand management (Melewar & Akel 2005). Student satisfaction is the short-term thought that emanates from an assessment of a student's educational experience (Elliott & Healy 2001). According to Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann (2005) the higher the brand





relationship quality, the stronger the attachment is likely to be - regarding satisfaction and commitment. A strong brand attachment is more likely to have a considerable role in explaining consumer feelings under certain conditions such as trust (Ilicic & Webster 2011). Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos, and Bourlakis (2016) observed that the stronger the attachment to the institution, the higher the commitment and satisfaction level of their students. The study, therefore, hypothesises that:

*H2 a,b,c* : Attachment strength will have a significant positive effect on satisfaction, trust, and commitment levels on international students in South Africa.

Trust is the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation of the other party (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman 1995: 712). Commitment explains an exchange between two or more partners supposing an ongoing relationship with another, which becomes imperative as to an utmost endeavour towards maintaining such a relationship (Morgan and Hunt 1994). According to Caceres and Paparoidamis (2007), commitment towards a brand tends to develop a resistance to unenthusiastic feelings which are likely to be generated by specific dissatisfactions. Laurence, Crosby, and Johnson (2001) reiterated that the major driver of loyalty is often brand commitment since it is a fraction of building, creating, and maintaining a relationship with customers. According to Chen and Zimitat (2006), students' attitude is highly correlated with their loyalty, satisfaction, and trust behaviour. Mao and Oppewal (2010) and Quintal et al. (2012) have reported a positive relationship between students' interest, trust, and commitment towards their willingness to recommend their universities to different people. A study that was conducted by Gruber, Fuß, Voss and Gläser-Zikuda (2010) revealed that satisfied university students in Germany were more willing to recommend their universities to people and prospective students. It is believed that favourable thoughts are probable to influence the willingness of international students to engage in future participation at their university (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009). Accordingly, the study posits that:

*H3 a,b,c* : There will be a significant positive relationship between satisfaction, trust, and commitment on international students' willingness to recommend South African universities.

## **2. Research methodology**

This section presents the method that was used in the study.

The participants for the current study comprised of international postgraduate students – specifically postgraduate candidates studying in the various South African public universities. Relying on Roscoe's (1975) observation that a perfect sample size ought to be larger than 30 and in most cases fewer than 500 samples for the utmost research. A non-probability sampling could be employed by eliciting respondents based on personal judgment (Sekaran 2010; Zikmund, Carr, and Griffin 2012). International students were the target sample for this study: purposive technique was used to sample 205 international postgraduate students from the various public universities in the Republic. The sampling was deemed suitable based on Sekran (2010) and Zikmund, Babin, Carr and Griffin (2012) revelation on the use of non – probability towards the sampling of specific respondents for particular research.

The views of the respondents: PhD and other postgraduate students in the various universities were more apparent towards the content and the structure of the study. The preliminary version of the research instrument was pre-tested with 15 respondents sampled from three public universities from the Gauteng Province in the country. Respondents were provided with copies of the questionnaire by the researcher – where opinions on the clearness of the instructions; the phrasing of the questions; the arrangement of the questions coupled with the time used in completing the questions were all noted and corrected before the actual collection was done. The pilot testing enabled the reliability and internal consistency of the measurement items to be examined (Balmer et al., 2020) before the actual data collection was carried out. Strictly, international PhD students were sampled using purposive sampling while referrals were also made in sampling other postgraduate candidates. The data were collected within eight months. Academicians who were in other universities were also contacted and used in administering and collecting the questionnaires while the researcher also distributed and collected many of the questionnaires within his reach – specifically public universities in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. A total number of 300 respondents were targeted. The reason was that the exact number of the PhD and Master's students across the various universities was not known, since many institutions register their postgraduate students throughout the academic year. Because of that, the retrieved usable sample of 205 responses was deemed appropriate and used for the actual analysis. All the items used in the study were obtained from previously-validated scales and were modified in suiting the scope of the study as presented in Table 1.



**Table 1 Validated instrument employed in the study**

Construct	Number of items	Author (s)
Attachment strength	5	Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich and Iacobucci (2010)
Trust	4	Jillapalli and Jillapalli (2014)
Willingness to recommend	4	Pepper, Jackson and Uzzel (2011)
Brand identity	4	Goi, Goi and Wong (2014)
Commitment	4	Jillapalli and Jillapalli (2014)
Satisfaction	8	Sahina, Zehir and Kitapç (2011)

The study's scale was on a five-point Likert scale which was anchored by 1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree to express the degree of agreement with each statement within the questionnaire. To ensure adequate reliability, a minimum number of items used in the study's variables were three – consistent with the recommendation by Nunnally (1978) on the minimum item to be used under a variable.

The use of control variables in the study helped to ensure that the study did not oversee alternative explanations for outcomes or findings. Incorporation of control at postgraduate level was employed with the use of only views of both masters and doctorate international students; at the institutional level, only international students in the various public universities were sampled as well as the country level, where the international students were grouped according to blocks such as Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, Non-SADC Africa, Europe, Asia, and America – instead of the various countries where they originally come from.

The research data used in the study were analysed by the Partial Least Square (PLS) model using SmartPLS 3.0 software. It was used for the determination of measure validation and structural model (Henseler et al. 2009) in the study. First, it assessed the association of the constructs. Secondly, it determined the effects of each measuring constructs in the research model and finally, it also estimated the statistical significance of factor loadings and the path coefficients (Chin 2001; Davison et al. 2003) using a non-parametric bootstrap procedure.

Preliminary validation of the data was assessed with reliability using the Cronbach's alpha values ( $\alpha$ ) of all constructs ranging from 0.721 to 0.894 which were all greater than 0.7 while the composite reliability (CR) values exceeded 0.7, indicating adequate internal consistency for the constructs (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson & Tatham 2006) as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2 Accuracy statistics**

Measurement items		Cronbach Alpha ( $\alpha$ )	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted	Factor loadings
Brand Attachment (BA)	BA1	0.847	0.894	0.629	0.724
	BA2				0.878
	BA3				0.838
	BA4				0.764
	BA5				0.764
Satisfaction (S)	S1	0.808	0.875	0.638	0.803
	S2				0.855
	S3				0.824
	S4				0.704
Brand Identity (BI)	BI1	0.721	0.843	0.643	0.758
	BI3				0.786
	BI3				0.858
Trust (T)	T1	0.894	0.934	0.826	0.894
	T2				0.920
	T3				0.912



<b>Willingness to Recommend (RC)</b>	RC1	0.878	0.916	0.732	0.847
	RC2				0.857
	RC3				0.853
	RC4				0.864
<b>Commitment (C)</b>	C2	0.743	0.848	0.651	0.767
	C3				0.823
	C4				0.828

**Note:** BI = Brand identity; BA = Brand attachment; C = Commitment; T = Trust; S = Satisfaction while RC = Willingness to recommend.

The validity of the instrument was determined using Smart PLS version 3.0 software.

The convergent validity was measured through the factor loadings of each measurement item and they were all above 0.5. as shown in Table 2. The discriminant validity was also assessed using the inter - construct correlation matrix procedure as recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981), where all the constructs' values of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct was greater than the squared correlation with each of the other constructs. Again, the average variance extracted (AVE) values of the constructs were employed as part of the discriminant validity measure, where the values were all greater than the recommended threshold of 0.50 (Hair et al. 2006) as presented in Tables 2 and 3.

**Table 3 Inter – construct correlation matrix**

	<b>BA</b>	<b>BI</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>RC</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>T</b>
<b>Brand Attachment (BA)</b>	0.792	<b>1</b>				
<b>Brand Identity (BI)</b>	0.737	0.802	<b>1</b>			
<b>Commitment (C)</b>	0.065	0.000	0.807	<b>1</b>		
<b>Recommendation (RC)</b>	0.083	0.045	0.774	0.856	<b>1</b>	
<b>Satisfaction (S)</b>	0.648	0.626	0.010	0.037	0.798	<b>1</b>
<b>Trust (T)</b>	0.554	0.504	0.152	0.166	0.654	0.909

**Note:** BI = Brand identity; BA = Brand attachment; C = Commitment; T = Trust; S = Satisfaction while RC = Willingness to recommend.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Presentation of results

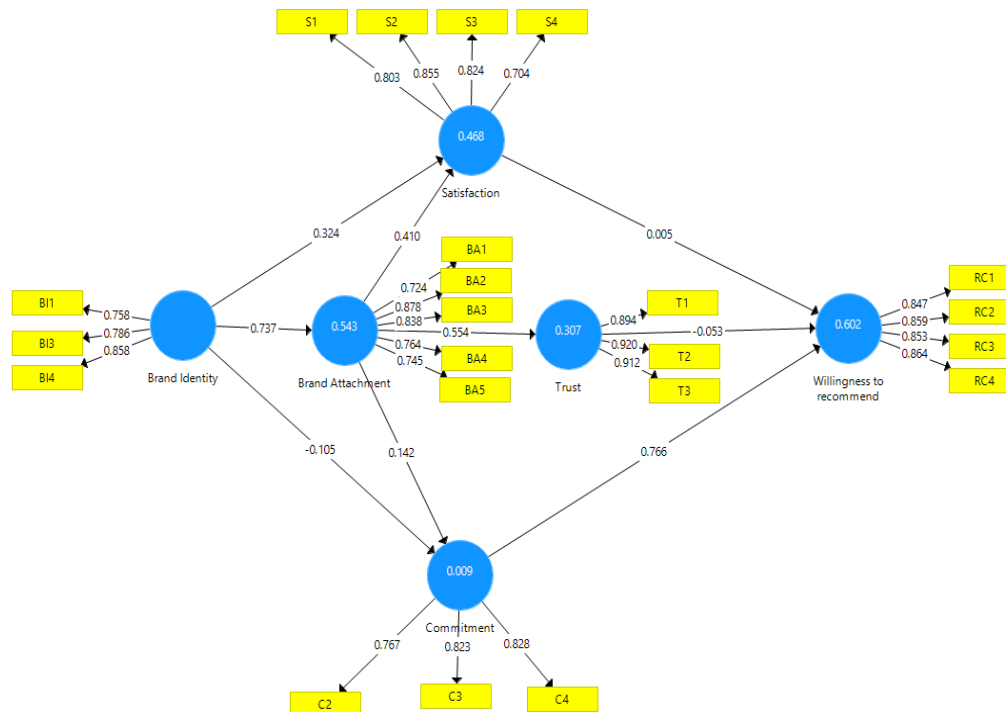
The hypothesised relationships between the various constructs were analysed using Smart PLS software. Path analysis and levels of significance were used in determining the hypothesised relationships of the study. The bootstrapping strategy was used to authenticate the results of the hypotheses, with 300 bootstrap samples selected for a one-tailed test – which was grounded on critical t statistical values of 1.65 (significance level 5%) and 2.33 (significance level 1%) (Hair et al. 2013). The R<sup>2</sup> value of 0.468 for international students' satisfaction designated that, 46.8 % of the variance was explained by the students' brand attachment and brand identity factors. The R<sup>2</sup> value of 0.543 for brand attachment revealed that 54.3 % of the variance was described by the brand identity of South African universities. 'Trust' as a variable exhibited an R<sup>2</sup> value of 0.307 which was explained by the brand attachment level of the students while a willingness to recommend as a variable recorded the highest value of R<sup>2</sup> with 0.602 which explained students' trust, satisfaction as well as their commitment levels.

The hypothesised relationships of the study presented in Figure 2 and Table 4 showed that, hypothesis statement *H3c*; commitment on willingness to recommend was positive and highly significant with path coefficient value, t – statistics value and probability value respectively as ( $\beta = 0.766$ ,  $\mu = 17.842$ ,  $\alpha = 0.00 < 0.01$ ); which was followed by *H1b* on brand identity and brand attachment with ( $\beta = 0.737$ ,  $\mu = 12.286$ ,  $\alpha = 0.00 < 0.01$ ); *H2b*, brand attachment and trust ( $\beta = 0.554$ ,  $\mu = 6.668$ ,  $\alpha = 0.00 < 0.01$ ); *H2a* hypothesised between brand attachment and satisfaction – which was also positive and significant with ( $\beta = 0.410$ ,  $\mu = 3.722$ ,  $\alpha = 0.00 < 0.01$ ) while *H1a* with brand identity and satisfaction with ( $\beta = 0.324$ ,  $\mu = 2.740$ ,  $\alpha = 0.00 < 0.01$ ). However, *H2c*, *H3b*, *H1c* and *H3a* did not support their respective stated hypotheses. *H2c* which was brand attachment on commitment recorded a positive relationship but





was not significant thereby rejecting the stated hypothesis with values ( $\beta = 0.142$ ,  $\mu = 0.912$ ,  $\alpha = 0.362 > 0.05, 0.01$ ), it was followed by *H3b* with trust and willingness to recommend which was also positive and insignificant with ( $\beta = -0.053$ ,  $\mu = 0.699$ ,  $\alpha = 0.485 > 0.05, 0.01$ ); *H1c* with brand identity and commitment recorded ( $\beta = -0.105$ ,  $\mu = 0.652$ ,  $\alpha = 0.515 > 0.05, 0.01$ ) while *H3a* recorded the least with ( $\beta = 0.005$ ,  $\mu = 0.077$ ,  $\alpha = 0.938 > 0.05, 0.01$ ).



**Figure 2. The structural model of the study**

**Note:** BI = Brand identity; BA = Brand attachment; C = Commitment; T = Trust; S = Satisfaction while RC = Willingness to recommend.

**Table 4 Results from the structural analysis**

Study's hypothesis	Hypothesis	Path coefficients	T - Statistics	P -Values	Supported / Rejected
BI $\rightarrow$ BA	H1b	0.737	12.286	0.000 ***	Supported
BI $\rightarrow$ S	H1a	0.324	2.740	0.007 ***	Supported
BI $\rightarrow$ C	H1c	- 0.105	0.652	0.515	Rejected
BA $\rightarrow$ S	H2a	0.410	3.722	0.000 ***	Supported
BA $\rightarrow$ T	H2b	0.554	6.668	0.000***	Supported
BA $\rightarrow$ C	H2c	0.142	0.912	0.362	Rejected
S $\rightarrow$ RC	H3a	0.005	0.077	0.938	Rejected
T $\rightarrow$ RC	H3b	-0.053	0.699	0.485	Rejected
C $\rightarrow$ RC	H3c	0.766	17.842	0.000***	Supported

**Note:** BI = Brand identity; BA = Brand attachment; C = Commitment; T = Trust; S = Satisfaction while RC = Willingness to recommend.

### 3.2. Discussion of results

The study examined the influence of South African universities' brand identity on postgraduate students' attachment strength and their willingness to recommend the universities to prospective or potential international students. It was based on three contentions: First, an assessment of the brand identity of the universities on students' satisfaction, attachment, and commitment. Secondly, an examination of the brand attachment on satisfaction, trust, and



commitment and finally, an assessment of the link between satisfaction, trust, commitment on willingness to recommend.

First and foremost, the brand identity of the South African universities has a greater influence on the attachment levels of international postgraduate students and on their level of satisfaction – which means that the general attributes of South Africa’s universities brand identity have a positive and significant influence on students’ attachment and satisfaction, while the effect the universities’ brand identity has on commitment was observed to be negative. Ferreira (1996) and Kim, Han and Park, (2001) opined that brand identification augments a positive image among people who normally belong to a social group. It demonstrates how international students like the universities in South Africa but their commitment to the universities’ activities tends to be a bit unclear – regarding how satisfied they were with the universities but were not necessarily committed to them. An attachment could have a weighty role in influencing one’s objective under certain conditions (Ilicic and Webster 2011). The findings of the study agree with Palacio, Meneses and Perez (2002) whose observation in the educational institution revealed that the identity and image of brands tend to have a greater influence on satisfaction. That, according to Mpinganjira (2010), South Africa has become the surest destination not only to African students.

Also, the study made it evident that the brand attachment level of the universities in South Africa has a positive and significant impact on students’ trust and satisfaction but again had an insignificant impact on the commitment level of the same students. It again gave credence to the fact that the students’ trust and were also satisfied with the universities in the country but were again not committed to the universities. An extension of the observation is that, the stronger the attachment to the institution, the higher the commitment levels and the satisfaction level (Palacio et al. 2002). According to Chang (2002), the education and growth of students are dependent on the investment in the atmosphere with which they are connected.

Finally, it was observed that there was a positive and significant influence between students’ level of commitment and their willingness to recommend South Africa’s universities to prospective students, while satisfaction towards a willingness to recommend as well as trust on their part to recommend – all recorded positive but insignificant influence. It simply explained that international students in South Africa per the outcome of the results trust their universities brand, were satisfied with the brand but were not committed to recommend them to their colleagues. According to Mpinganjira (2010), the South African government has collaborated with the institutions of higher learning with measured processes designed to attract students from across the globe, and the country has become the most prevalent place of academic excellence in Africa (Chimucheka, 2012).

### **3.3. Implications**

In the first place, the study is expected to contribute towards theory regarding the scant literature on branding in higher education in Africa as well as South Africa. Goi et al. (2014) suggested for further empirical substantiation of brand identity as a concept about studies associated with Higher Education. The revelations from Kayombo (2014) whose findings observed limited studies on HEI branding in Africa, Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar and Sen (2012); Tuškej, Golob and Podnar, (2013); Stephenson and Yerger (2014) also highlighted on limited studies on brand identification in higher education while Quintal and Phau (2016) revealed how students view on branding has not been empirically established well in the extant literature. The findings of this study will help fill the above gaps in the extant literature.

Secondly, the study is expected to provide management of the various universities in South Africa - especially those in the public universities, an assessment tool for measuring how international students perceive the branding activities of the South African universities. Heeger (2005, p.53) elucidated that an “increasing number of institutions recognize the financial benefits of educational entrepreneurialism”. Branding essentially drives the sales and services of an organization (Cheslock, 2006.p.31). Universities need to market themselves outside the country if they are to attract more international students. “Understanding what your constituents want from you and where they place you in their value system is what a brand is all about” (Moore, 2010: 49). It, therefore, demonstrates that the branding of the universities in South Africa is more likely to push for an increase in the universities’ revenue base to limit the pressure associated with funding on the part of the South African government. It is with the backdrop of providing knowledge and benefitting at the same time, that colleges and universities are turning to brand as they seek to thrive, and in some cases survive, in the current marketplace for higher education (Kim, Han and Park, 2011, p.724).



Finally, it is also expected to inform policymakers in South African higher education as regards the relationships between branding and higher institutions in South Africa - from the perspective of international students. The development of a well-known brand offers additional avenues for institutions to manage higher education expenditure. "Such a university becomes 'privatized' by attracting sufficient non-state financial support to meet its operating expenses, strengthen its endowment base, and compete even more vigorously" (Rothblatt 2008, p. 28). Policymakers in South Africa's education system ought to regard international education in South Africa as a service and treat international students' as major customers. Moore (2010.p. 46) stated that "the education market is becoming more competitive and far more crowded" and therefore South Africa ought to devise strategies that can attract international students, who by their patronage will support the government in funding higher education.

Universities and Business Schools management ought to rely on relationship marketing techniques as a vital marketing activity that could drive their status as higher education. A novice marketing strategy that relies on marketing techniques in solving societal problems. It was clear from the open-ended comments that many of the international students in the Gauteng province liked the South African universities but they were afraid to recommend them to prospective students as a result of some socio – political and economic factors affecting South Africa in general as a country. "Some problems that happen, like xenophobia, are affecting non-South African nationals, making people in a position of permanent fear. This can lead to days of not much commitment to work: need more safety (Herman 2011b, 50)".

#### 4. Conclusion

The paper has drawn-out the discussion on the impact of brand identity values on attachment and commitment of international students in the specific context of the higher education sector of South Africa. First, it has revealed that international students in South Africa identify themselves with their universities' brands, trust the ideals of the universities but were not committed to the universities. This may be due to some activities or issues in the country inhibiting their interest other than the institutions themselves. Secondly, the study concludes that international students preferred to attach themselves to South Africa's universities' brands; trusted the brands; were satisfied but again not committed. There is a need for South African universities to focus on branding their institutions in upholding the commitment level of international students. Finally, the study concludes that international students trust the universities' brands and were satisfied. However, they were not willing to recommend the universities to prospective students though they were satisfied and trusted the institutions' brands. This study has revealed how positive attributes such as brand identity and brand attachment influence international students' satisfaction and trust levels but play an insignificant role in their commitment to recommend the universities to prospective customers or students.

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