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'Support your university': how brand identification drives supporting behaviours among students and employees

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ABSTRACT

Universities are increasingly investing in branding strategies to foster stakeholder support. However, despite the extensive research on brand identification as a key brand dimension in business settings, its antecedents and behavioral outcomes are still under-explored in higher education, especially among different stakeholder groups. This study examines how brand knowledge and brand pride shape brand identification and how different dimensions of brand advocacy influence the relationship between identification and crowdfunding intention, a high-commitment supportive behaviour. Using survey data from an Italian public university and multi-group structural equation modelling, the findings show that brand pride is the primary affective channel through which brand knowledge translates into brand identification. However, brand identification alone does not lead to crowdfunding intention. Its effect operates only through investment-oriented advocacy, whereas general advocacy behaviours, including positive word of mouth and forgiveness, do not predict crowdfunding intention. These findings highlight the distinctive role of investment-oriented advocacy across stakeholder groups.

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Brand strategy; higher education marketing; brand identification; brand advocacy; crowdfunding

Introduction

As competition intensifies in the higher education sector, universities are strengthening their branding efforts to attract more students, engage current ones, increase donations, and strengthen alumni relations.

Creating a strong brand is one of the most important marketing strategies (Aaker, 2012). Branding contributes to creating and maintaining a competitive advantage, clarifying a university's differentiation strategy, making its images and products stand out from those of competitors, and engaging students and other stakeholders in long-term relationships that can lead to valuable supportive behaviours (Balaji et al., 2016).

Although literature on branding in higher education is increasing, the role of a university's branding mechanisms in fostering supportive behaviours is under-investigated. Specifically, more research is needed to elucidate how key relational dimensions of university brands interact to generate general (e.g. brand advocacy) or specific

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(e.g. funding) supportive behaviours, and how these mechanisms work among different groups of stakeholders, given that universities are inherently multi-stakeholder contexts.

In a business context, a fundamental role in such dynamics is played by brand identification (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020), defined as a perceived state of oneness with a brand (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Previous research (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014) has confirmed the role of brand identification in increasing supporting behaviours in higher education. However, more in-depth investigations focused on specific antecedents and consequences of brand identification are needed to better define a contextual branding strategy.

In the present study, crowdfunding was used as a perfect empirical case to shed light on these mechanisms. Crowdfunding is a cooperative way to fund a project, whether business or non-business-related, by pooling even small amounts of money provided by a multitude of backers through the intermediation of a digital platform (Lenart-Gansiniec & Chen, 2023). By contributing, backers demonstrate a form of active support that is expected to align closely with the brand proposing the cause (Fortezza et al., 2023). In academic settings, crowdfunding is being increasingly adopted to improve research projects by using the networks surrounding universities (Spry et al., 2020). This requires the proactive management of multiple relational circles simultaneously.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the existing literature by identifying the role of the comprehensive brand patterns centred on identification in eliciting crowdfunding intention (as a high-commitment supportive behaviour) from those who are more deeply immersed in the daily university atmosphere, i.e. students and employees. In addition, the study examines the mediating role of specific advocacy behaviours.

Theoretical background and conceptual framework

Social identity theory and brand identification

Research on higher education branding is growing (i.e. Walter et al., 2022), but key brand dimensions driving beneficial stakeholder outcomes remain underexplored (Palmer et al., 2016). While prior studies emphasize the role of brand identification in fostering supportive behaviours, limited research has examined its antecedents and consequences. Based on the dominant theoretical perspectives of social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), brand identification reflects consumers' psychological state of perceiving, feeling, and valuing their belongingness to a brand. Originally conceptualized within the social psychological literature, SIT posits that individuals classify themselves and others into social categories to enhance self-esteem (Tajfel, 1978). Through this process, they develop a self-concept based on group membership and a sense of belonging. According to SIT, individuals are motivated to favour their own group to achieve positive distinctiveness, thereby enhancing their self-esteem. Consequently, group successes and failures are experienced as personal, leading individuals to support, promote, and defend the organization they identify with (Bakirtas & Gulpinar Demirci, 2022).

Since the seminal work of Mael and Ashforth (1992), several studies have applied this theory in the higher education sector (i.e. Cachón Rodríguez et al., 2019) and shown that identification plays an important role in the supportive behaviour of stakeholders, in particular of students. However, while early studies emphasized antecedents such as

organizational prestige and distinctiveness, subsequent research has expanded this framework by incorporating additional factors, including brand personality (Balaji et al., 2016), brand knowledge (Balmer & Liao, 2007), brand trust, and cultural diversity awareness (Yao et al., 2019). These developments highlight the dynamic and multifaceted nature of identification processes and call for further research when referring to specific contexts such as higher education. Therefore, to increase beneficial supportive behaviour, higher education marketers need to understand and work on its antecedents to increase brand identification, as well as its consequences, considering that different stakeholder groups may behave differently when closely associated with the brand.

Antecedents of brand identification

Among the several antecedents of brand identification, brand knowledge and brand pride are still under-investigated in the context of higher education. Brand knowledge reflects the personal meaning of a brand stored in memory (Keller, 2003). Based on the SIT, the association with the key values of a brand provides the means for many stakeholder groups to construct individual identities. Recently, brand knowledge has been recognised as an antecedent of student-university identification (Bakirtas & Gulpinar Demirci, 2022) since knowledge affects the processing of information and the overall evaluation of the university. We posit that students and employees could differ in the knowledge they possess and how they process it, due to their distinct roles and access to information. Employees are more exposed to the brand's values, culture, and information, which helps them improve their performance and guides their extra-role behaviours, since brand knowledge can be synonymous with a personal estimation in performing certain tasks in the organizational context (King & Grace, 2008). Daily immersion in brand values helps employees understand their role in the brand's success, motivating them to deepen their knowledge and increasing their likelihood of identifying with the brand. Therefore, as a first step, it is useful to test the effect of brand knowledge on brand identification in the two considered groups, which leads us to the following hypotheses:

H1a: Students' brand knowledge has a positive impact on their brand identification.

H1b: Employees' brand knowledge has a positive impact on their brand identification.

Pride has been widely studied in organisational literature as a specific emotion that drives behaviours and affects employees' performance in workplace settings (e.g. Bouckaert, 2001), but it is a relatively new concept in studies on internal brand management and consumers (Kaur & Verma, 2023) or students behaviour (Nofrizal & Aznuriyandi, 2024). In this context, brand pride can be framed as the pleasure of being associated with the brand (Helm et al., 2016).

Previous studies found that pride underlies both individual and social identity processes in the consumer context, especially in cases of high commitment (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010). From a market perspective, students can be considered 'customers' of higher-education institutions. High student commitment can lead to a sense of university pride, which may serve as a precursor to university identification. According to organisational literature, when employees feel pride, they are more likely to identify with the

organisation, resulting in positive attitudes and behaviours (Deepa et al., 2025). As employees, people may feel proud to belong to an organisation that is believed to have positive values, and this can contribute to enhancing their identification with it (Boons et al., 2015).

Therefore, the following hypotheses are postulated:

H2a: students' brand pride positively affects their brand identification.

H2b: employees' brand pride positively affects their brand identification.

The relationship between these two antecedents has been analysed in the context of brand citizenship behaviour, a construct that measures the extent to which employees engage in discretionary behaviours that support the organisation (Afshardoost et al., 2023).

Knowledgeable employees, through access to information about the organisation's brand, goals, and values, tend to perform better, which enhances their self-esteem and pride and, in turn, drives voluntary brand-supporting behaviours (Kelloway & Barling, 2000). The same relationship has not yet been studied in the student context, but, as Halbesleben and Wheeler (2009) have proposed, students can also be considered 'employees', with instructors serving as their supervisors and education becoming like a job for them. Therefore, drawing on the theoretical logic validated in organizational contexts, and in line with an exploratory approach, we broaden our hypotheses to examine their applicability to both students and employees:

H3a: Students' brand knowledge has a positive impact on their brand pride.

H3b: Employees' brand knowledge has a positive impact on their brand pride.

Moreover, according to SIT, positive evaluations of group membership are commonly associated with self-conscious emotions, including pride (Tracy et al., 2007). The more positively valued and distinctive the group is perceived to be, the more likely individuals are to internalize that membership into their self-definition. In this respect, brand knowledge plays a crucial role, as it enhances individuals' understanding of the university's values, achievements, and distinctiveness (Ansari & Kashif, 2019). However, this knowledge alone may not be sufficient to generate strong identification. According to SIT processes, affective evaluations of the group are essential for transforming cognitive appraisals into self-definitional attachment. In this regard, brand pride represents a key self-conscious emotion arising from positive evaluations of one's group membership. When individuals perceive their university brand as prestigious and valuable, this cognitive assessment fosters feelings of pride, which in turn reinforces their psychological attachment to the institution. Thus, we argue that:

H4a *Students' brand knowledge has a positive indirect effect on brand identification through brand pride.*

H4b *Employees' brand knowledge has a positive indirect effect on brand identification through brand pride.*

Brand identification consequences: social, physical, and specific supporting behaviours

In HE, several authors have shown that those students who identify with the brand are more likely to share the organisation's values and identity (e.g. Balaji et al., 2016) and support it with different actions such as wearing merchandising, recommending their university to friends, or enrolling in new courses.

Existing studies have also recognised the important role that brand identification plays in the employees' brand citizenship behaviours (Bravo et al., 2017), finding that the greater the identification, the more employees will act in accordance with the values of the organisation and spread positive recommendations about it.

Thus, the literature is quite consistent in suggesting that one of the consequences of brand identification is the tendency to support the related brand (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). This suggests that when students or employees identify with a university, they might, in turn, be more likely to promote it through actions that are not part of their formal job or student status requirements. These studies typically span different forms of citizenship behaviour, emphasizing their voluntary and prosocial nature (Yao et al., 2019). Within the marketing and branding literature, supportive behaviours usually refer to the so-called brand advocacy construct. Studies measuring brand advocacy are often found to lack consistency in their measurement sources, and various adaptations have been made over time (Shimul et al., 2026). To date, three main behaviours have mostly been related to brand advocacy: favourable word of mouth, resilience to negative information, and willingness to invest in the company, typically by purchasing new/more products. Some authors focused solely on one of these behaviours, particularly positive word of mouth (Kemp et al., 2012; Schepers & Nijssen, 2018). In contrast, other authors (Pai et al., 2015; Xie et al., 2019) adopted a more comprehensive approach, incorporating items related to each of the aforementioned supportive behaviours.

The impact of brand identification on brand advocacy (Schepers & Nijssen, 2018) seems clear, also in the HE context (Ramos, 2025), but further studies are needed to understand how brand identification specifically influences the various behaviours that constitute brand advocacy, and how this applies to different stakeholder groups who are expected to identify with the brand in different ways and to varying extents. Therefore, the following hypotheses are stated:

H5a: Students' brand identification positively affects word of mouth.

H5b: Employees' brand identification positively affects word of mouth.

H6a: Students' brand identification positively affects the willingness to forgive the brand if something goes wrong.

H6b: Employees' brand identification positively affects the willingness to forgive the brand if something goes wrong.

H7a: Students' brand identification positively affects investments in their university.

H7b Employees' brand identification positively affects investments in their university.

Research on brand advocacy has primarily focused on its antecedents, offering limited insight into its outcomes, which are often implicitly assumed to be positive (Schepers & Nijssen, 2018).

In response to the imperative to advance the investigation of new outcomes (Shimul et al., 2026), in this study, the authors considered purely donation-based crowdfunding decisions to be a powerful litmus test that can measure the responsiveness of brand advocates when called to action. Specifically, the objective is to examine which precise dimensions of brand advocacy – whether communicative (word of mouth), protective (forgiveness), or transactional (investment advocacy) – effectively drive the crowdfunding intentions of students and employees.

Accordingly, the next hypotheses are:

H8a: Students who are more willing to spread positive information about their university are more inclined to fund it through a crowdfunding campaign.

H8b: Employees who are more willing to spread positive information about their university are more inclined to fund it through a crowdfunding campaign.

H9a: Students who are more willing to forgive their university in case of bad news are more inclined to fund it through a crowdfunding campaign.

H9b: Employees who are more willing to forgive their university in case of bad news are more inclined to fund it through a crowdfunding campaign.

H10a: Students who are more willing to invest in their university are more inclined to fund it through a crowdfunding campaign.

H10b: Employees who are more willing to invest in their university are more inclined to fund it through a crowdfunding campaign.

Furthermore, the present study aims to contribute to the extant literature on this topic by adding another brick to the existing corpus. Fortezza et al. (2023) have already demonstrated that the decision to provide financial support for an academic research project via CF is influenced by a combination of other- and self-oriented motivations. The latter concerns the backer's aspiration to tangibly align their identity with the supported brand. This study aims to demonstrate that brand advocacy serves as the pivotal factor through which brand identification translates into crowdfunding intention. In view of the aforementioned points, the final hypotheses to be verified are:

H11a: Students' tendency to spread positive word of mouth about their university mediates the relationship between brand identification and the intention to crowdfund university projects.

H11b: Employees' tendency to spread positive word of mouth about their university mediates the relationship between brand identification and the intention to crowdfund university projects.

H12a: Students' willingness to forgive their university in case of bad news mediates the relationship between brand identification and intention to crowdfund university projects.

H1b: Employees' willingness to forgive their university in case of bad news mediates the relationship between brand identification and intention to crowdfund university projects.

H13a: Students' willingness to invest in their university mediates the relationship between brand identification and intention to crowdfund university projects.

H13b: Employees' willingness to invest in their university mediates the relationship between brand identification and intention to crowdfund university projects.

Figure 1, below, depicts the theoretical model proposed and tested in this study.

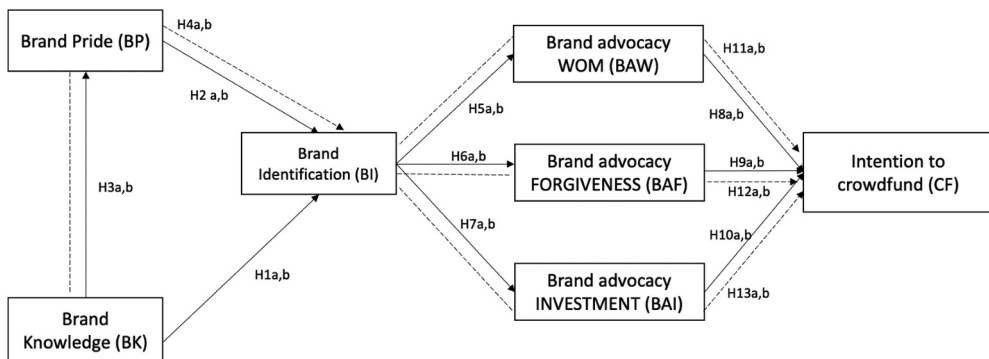


Figure 1. Theoretical model. Note: “a” hypotheses measure the students’ path; “b” hypotheses measure the employees’ path.

Research methodology

The conceptual framework was tested using an extensive sample of employees and students working for and studying at one of the largest public universities in Italy (20.000–40.000 students), which is also one of the most active ones in the field of branding and one of the first to introduce a dedicated crowdfunding platform to boost its research projects. Before the official launch of the CF platform, a survey was conducted to inform both students and employees about the first CF campaign. They were not given any specific information on the campaign to ensure that the stated CF intention would not have been influenced by the given cause to be supported. Respondents were only given information about CF (i.e. what it consisted of and how it worked), the objective(s) of CF research (i.e. supporting some of the university’s research projects), and its importance for the university (i.e. highlighting the role of research for society). Moreover, they

were informed that the CF campaign, which would have been launched soon, would not have offered any rewards. Rather, it would have been a tangible way to express their commitment to the university. Respondents were asked about their willingness to support the first research project with any amount of money once the CF was in place. They were also informed that those who expressed a higher level of CF intention (corresponding to the option 'very willing to support') would have been contacted via email to participate in the 'first contribution circle' of the campaign.

A pre-test was conducted on a discretionary sample of 30 units (both students and employees) to evaluate the initial questionnaire items and optimize them. An invitation to participate in the online survey was then sent via email to all the students and employees extracted from the official university database. Due to non-interventional studies, no ethical approval was needed.

Measurement scales

Existing literature was used as the basis upon which to operationalise all latent constructs with multi-item scales. The items were measured using five-point Likert scales (from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree'), except for the items regarding intention to crowdfund, for which a four-point scale (from 1 = 'Not at all' to 4 = 'Very much') was adopted. Brand identification was measured with a six-item scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992) and already adopted in previous branding research and in the higher education field (Kuenzel & Vaux Halliday, 2008; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014). A five-item scale adapted from Helm et al. (2016) was used for brand pride, and a three-item scale from Algesheimer et al. (2005) was used for brand knowledge, both adapted to fit the context. Brand advocacy was measured with three different variables related to the three different behaviours as in Xie et al. (2019): an adapted three-item scale for WOM, a two-item scale for resistance to negative information, and a two-item scale for intention to invest.

Sample characteristics

After data cleaning, the final sample consisted of 1,462 valid responses for the student sample and 110 valid replies for the employee sample. Despite the large imbalance in the dimensions of the two groups, the sample reflects the proportion of current students and employees at the university.

Despite the statistically significant difference in the average age of the components of the two samples (students = 22.47, employees = 43.53, $t = -19.21$, $p < 0.001$), the percentage of females in the student sample is comparable with the percentage in the employee sample (65.05% and 52.73% respectively, $\chi^2(1) = 6.2302$, $p = 0.01$). Differences were also observed in funding habits, with employees more likely to contribute financially (students 10%, employees 30%, $\chi^2(1) = 38.562$, $p < 0.001$).

Data analysis

A two-step procedure was used to test the research hypotheses; first, the measurement models were tested through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), then the structural model

was estimated (Magno et al., 2024). All the analyses were implemented using lavaan, an R package for SEM (Gana & Broc, 2019).

To evaluate the differences across the student and the employee groups, a multi-group CFA was developed, and a measurement invariance analysis was performed (Hair et al., 2019). The configural invariance model only imposed the same structure on each group, leaving each loading estimate totally free. The metric invariance model set the corresponding loading parameters to be equal between the groups.

Because the two groups differed substantially in sample size, we followed Chen's (2007) recommendations for assessing measurement invariance under conditions of unequal samples. Rather than relying solely on the chi-square difference test, we evaluated changes in approximate fit indices when comparing the configural model with the metric model. In line with Chen (2007), a change of 0.005 in CFI combined with a change of 0.010 in RMSEA was considered evidence of noninvariance. Establishing metric invariance ensures that the constructs, particularly their factor loadings, function equivalently across groups, thereby reducing the risk that observed group differences are driven by measurement artifacts. Once measurement invariance was supported, structural relationships were compared across groups within a multi-group SEM.

During the multi-group CFA phase, the BI construct was refined by reducing the number of items to four to improve the overall model fit. The retained items demonstrated satisfactory loadings and contributed to a more parsimonious and well-fitting measurement model.

The models were then evaluated using the goodness-of-fit indices presented in Table 1, below. These are: the common model fit measures, including χ^2 and the difference between the two models, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR).

In line with Chen's (2007) recommendations for unequal sample sizes, the change in fit indices between the configural and metric models was negligible ($\Delta\text{CFI} = 0.0001$; $\Delta\text{RMSEA} = 0.0008$). As both values are well below the suggested cutoffs ($\Delta\text{CFI} \leq .005$ and $\Delta\text{RMSEA} \leq .010$), the results support metric invariance across groups, indicating that the factor loadings are the same across the student and employee samples.

Lastly, to determine the extent of method variance in the current data, Harman's single-factor method was used. The multi-item constructs were loaded on one latent variable, leading to the following fit indices for this single-factor model: $\chi^2(\text{df})=8399.735$ -(398); CFI = 0.662; TLI = 0.643; RMSEA = 0.160; SRMR = 0.112. Compared with the measurement model, this model had a significantly poorer fit ($\Delta\chi^2(\Delta\text{df})=5168.7(48)$, p -value = 0.000).

Table 1. Goodness-of-fit of measurement models and invariance analysis.

Model	$\chi^2_{(\text{df})}$	$\Delta\chi^2_{(\Delta\text{df})}$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Unconstrained (configural invariance)	839.843 (336)		0.979	0.973	0.044	0.029
Constrained (metric invariance)	856.858 (350)	15.504 (14) $p = 0.3446$	0.979	0.974	0.043	0.030

Construct validity

The convergent and the discriminant validity of the measurement model with respect to the seven constructs outlined in this paper were evaluated and measured with 21 items.

Convergence validity was assessed by evaluating the value of the factor loadings associated with each item: significant loadings equal or greater than 0.5 indicated convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, for each construct, the average variance extracted (AVE) measure was calculated, where values greater than 0.5 indicated validity.

Reliability was assessed for each construct of the model, using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR), each of which had to exceed 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019). The analysis results are shown in Table 2.

Discriminant validity was assessed by using the criteria provided by Fornell and Larcker (1981) so that the AVE would be greater than the squared correlation between two constructs. Table 3 provides the descriptive statistics, correlation, and discriminant validity of the constructs.

Structural models

The hypotheses were initially tested separately in the group of students and in the group of employees. The proposed models had an acceptable fit to the data in both samples (students: $\chi^2(df)=1166.476(180)$; CFI = 0.955; TLI = 0.947; RMSEA = 0.061; SRMR = 0.050; employees: $\chi^2(df)=244.815(180)$; CFI = 0.965; TLI = 0.959; RMSEA = 0.060; SRMR = 0.060). The model was then tested in a multiple group analysis, also presenting an acceptable fit ($\chi^2(df)=1411.293(360)$; CFI = 0.956; TLI = 0.948; RMSEA = 0.061; SRMR = 0.048).

Invariance across groups was then evaluated by adding constraints to the loadings and to the regression coefficients of the model; specifically, a fully constrained model (i.e. a model in which both the factor loadings of the constructs and the regression coefficients among the constructs are constrained to be equal in the two groups) was estimated.

This model had a worse fit than the unconstrained model ($\chi^2(df)=1459.599(383)$; CFI = 0.954; TLI = 0.950; RMSEA = 0.060; SRMR = 0.054); fully unconstrained vs fully constrained: ($\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df)=48.306(23)$, p -value < 0.005). Next, the fully unconstrained model was compared with a partially constrained model where only the factor loadings of the constructs were constrained to be equal in the two groups. The results showed that the partially constrained model performs similarly to the fully unconstrained model ($\chi^2(df)=1429.338(374)$; CFI = 0.955; TLI = 0.950; RMSEA = 0.060; SRMR = 0.049); fully unconstrained vs partially constrained: ($\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df)=18.095(14)$, p -value = 0.2025). Therefore, given that the full measurement metric invariance conducted with the multi-group CFA suggests that factor loadings can be equal in the two groups, we chose to provide the results of the partially constrained model.

Multi-group structural equation model analysis (multi-group SEM) was conducted to test the research hypotheses described above, by estimating the structural model using the ML approach. The results are shown in Table 4, which displays the final standardized estimated regression coefficients between factors for the two groups in the model.

Table 2. Results of CFA.

Construct and measurement items	Students (n _S = 1462)				Employees (n _E = 110)				Overall (n = 1572)			
	Loading	AVE	CR	α	Loading	AVE	CR	α	Loading	AVE	CR	α
1.BP: Brand Pride		0.75	0.94	0.94		0.75	0.92	0.94		0.75	0.94	0.94
It makes me proud when others notice that I belong to *University name	0.850				0.839				0.837			
*University name stands for contents that make me proud	0.872				0.885				0.876			
I am proud of how *University name is perceived by the public	0.778				0.824				0.810			
When I tell others what *University name stands for, I do that with a sense of pride	0.908				0.906				0.900			
It makes me proud to be a part of *University name	0.909				0.906				0.918			
2. BK: Brand Knowledge		0.70	0.87	0.87		0.83	0.95	0.92		0.71	0.84	0.88
When compared to other people, I know a lot about *University name	0.810				0.917				0.906			
Other people consider me an expert regarding this brand	0.830				0.829				0.855			
I consider myself very experienced with *University name	0.865				0.946				0.945			
3. BI: Brand Identification		0.51	0.77	0.77		0.52	0.77	0.78		0.51	0.88	0.77
When someone criticizes *University name, it feels like a personal insult	0.711				0.650				0.660			
I am very interested in what others think about *University name	0.574				0.667				0.537			
When I talk about *University name, I usually say “we” rather than “they”	0.659				0.714				0.714			
*University name’s successes are my successes	0.740				0.723				0.667			
4. BAW: Brand Advocacy WOM		0.89	0.96	0.96		0.78	0.93	0.91		0.89	0.96	0.96
I intend to say positive things about *University name to friends, relatives and other people	0.928				0.911				0.896			
I intend to recommend my friends, relatives and other people *University name	0.934				0.822				0.845			
I intend to speak well of *University name to friends, relatives and other people.	0.970				0.901				0.898			
5. BAF: Brand Advocacy Forgiveness		0.68	0.81	0.81		0.70	0.83	0.82		0.68	0.81	0.81
I forgive *University name when it makes mistakes.	0.798				0.723				0.794			
I will forgive *University name for unfavorable media specific coverage.	0.849				0.954				0.876			
6. BAI: Brand Advocacy Investment		0.74	0.85	0.85		0.89	0.95	0.94		0.76	0.86	0.86
How likely would you “invest” in *University name (e.g. buy merchandising, donate 5 × 1000 of your personal income tax or other support actions)	0.886				0.904				0.918			

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Construct and measurement items	Students (n _S = 1462)				Employees (n _E = 110)				Overall (n = 1572)			
	Loading	AVE	CR	α	Loading	AVE	CR	α	Loading	AVE	CR	α
How likely would you encourage other people (e.g. your family members, friends) to “invest” in *University name?	0.834				0.980				0.968			
7. CF: Intention to Crowdfund To which extent are you willing to back a *University name’s scientific research project online?	0.806	0.59	0.73	0.74	0.962	0.80	0.89	0.88	0.915	0.60	0.75	0.75
To which extent would you like to back a *University name’s scientific research project online?	0.735				0.820				0.867			

Note: Loadings = Standardized factor loadings, AVE = average variance extracted, CR = composite reliability, α = Cronbach’s alpha. Parameters are estimated using the Robust ML approach (MLR).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics, correlation, and discriminant validity of the constructs.

Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Students</i>									
1. BP	3.08	0.89	(0.87)						
2. BK	2.88	0.86	0.17	(0.83)					
3. BI	3.25	0.84	0.72***	0.29 *	(0.68)				
4. BAW	3.50	1.08	0.82***	0.04	0.61***	(0.94)			
5. BAF	2.84	0.88	0.60***	0.09**	0.44***	0.58***	(0.82)		
6. BAI	2.35	1.07	0.64***	0.20***	0.60***	0.55***	0.44***	(0.86)	
7. CF	2.27	0.69	0.38***	0.13***	0.39**	0.31***	0.27***	0.58***	(0.76)
<i>Employees</i>									
1. BP	3.56	0.80	(0.87)						
2. BK	3.42	0.95	0.34***	(0.91)					
3. BI	3.81	0.72	0.85***	0.37**	(0.69)				
4. BAW	3.91	0.82	0.76***	0.32**	0.78***	(0.88)			
5. BAF	2.84	0.84	0.40***	0.27**	0.45**	0.48***	(0.84)		
6. BAI	3.32	1.24	0.72***	0.38***	0.71***	0.68***	0.43***	(0.95)	
7. CF	2.54	0.78	0.49***	0.21*	0.44***	0.47***	0.38**	0.72***	(0.89)

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Diagonal values in parentheses are values of the square root of AVEs.

Table 4. Standardized regression coefficients for multi-group SEM analysis.

Hypothesis	Students (a)		Employees (b)	
	Coefficient (se)	Result	Coefficient (se)	Result
H1: BK→BI	0.044 (0.02) ^o	borderline	0.124 (0.06)ns	not supported
H2: BP→BI	0.918 (0.03)***	supported	0.851 (0.10)***	supported
H3: BK→BP	0.167 (0.03)***	supported	0.344 (0.06)***	supported
H5: BI→BAW	0.838 (0.06)***	supported	0.856 (0.12)***	supported
H6: BI→BAF	0.630 (0.04)***	supported	0.519 (0.19)**	supported
H7: BI→BAI	0.693 (0.05)***	supported	0.796 (0.20)***	supported
H8: BAW→CF	−0.042 (0.02)ns	not supported	−0.152 (0.13)ns	not supported
H9: BAF→CF	0.032 (0.03)ns	not supported	0.061 (0.13)ns	not supported
H10: BAI→CF	0.592 (0.02)***	supported	0.812 (0.06)***	supported
Indirect effect				
H4: BK→BP→BI	0.154 (0.03)***	supported	0.293 (0.06)***	supported
H11: BI→BAW→CF	−0.035 (0.03)ns	not supported	−0.130 (0.13)ns	not supported
H12: BI→BAF→CF	0.020 (0.02)ns	not supported	0.032 (0.08)ns	not supported
H13: BI→BAI→CF	0.411 (0.03)***	supported	0.646 (0.14)***	supported

Notes: *** p -value < 0.001; ** p -value < 0.01; * p -value < 0.05; ^o p -value < 0.1; ns: not significant; Standard errors are computed using bootstrapping with $M = 1000$ number of bootstrap draws.

Discussion

The objective of this paper was to provide new insights into how brand identification drives supporting behaviours in the HE context among two key stakeholder groups: students and employees. The findings show that a strong sense of identification with the university predicts brand advocacy among both students and employees. However, of the three advocacy behaviors examined, only investment-oriented brand advocacy mediates the relationship between identification and the intention to provide concrete support to the institution, such as funding through crowdfunding initiatives. The study also identifies key mechanisms fostering brand identification and highlights differences between stakeholder groups. The results show that one hypothesized relationship is only borderline supported for students and not supported for employees. Moreover, although other relationships are significant in both groups, their strength varies, as reflected in different coefficients. Overall, these findings provide insights into previously unexplored antecedents and outcomes of brand identification in the HE context.

As far as the antecedents of brand identification, this work has demonstrated the role played by two under-investigated brand constructs – brand pride and brand knowledge. Our findings confirm brand pride to be a strong antecedent of brand identification (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010; Deepa et al., 2025) for both groups (H2). The degree of pride held by an individual in their university is commensurate with the extent of identification they feel with that institution. Conversely, considering brand knowledge, the pathway to brand identification is found to be totally divergent between the two groups. For students, brand knowledge exerts both a direct (H1a is borderline) and an indirect effect on brand identification (H4a). While the direct effect is consistent with previous research (Bakirtas & Gulpinar Demirci, 2022; Balaji et al., 2016), the indirect effect lends support to our exploratory hypothesis that students exhibit behavioural patterns that are more akin to those of employees than traditional consumers in their relationship with the university brand. Conversely, consistent with prior research conducted in non-HE contexts (Ansari & Kashif, 2019; Kelloway & Barling, 2000), brand knowledge has been identified as a significant predictor of brand pride (H3), with the latter fully mediating the relationship between brand knowledge and brand identification. Our findings suggest that, among employees, knowledge alone is not sufficient to foster identification. In fact, consistent with SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tracy et al., 2007), identification emerges only when brand knowledge translates into a more affective response, namely, brand pride. This is consistent with Lee and Davies (2021), who suggest that knowledgeable employees tend to perform better at work, which enhances their pride and, consequently, their identification. However, what this research adds is that brand knowledge, in the absence of pride, does not lead to brand identification (H1b is not supported), indicating the pivotal mediating role of pride in this relationship. Thus, for employees, the cognitive component (knowledge) must activate the affective component (pride) to produce identification, whereas for students, knowledge contributes to identification directly. The overall analysis of the antecedents of brand identification suggests that, while brand knowledge is statistically significant among students, its direct effect is comparatively modest. Notably, the indirect effect through pride exceeds the direct effect, highlighting the central mediating role of pride in translating brand knowledge into brand identification.

As far as the outcomes of brand identification, we shed light on the role of advocacy behaviours. Despite the prevalence of brand identification as a significant predictor of supportive behaviours exhibited by brand advocacy, it is imperative to comprehend the specific dimensions of these behaviours that are stimulated by this intricate construct and the ultimate outcomes that ensue. The findings of the study indicate that brand identification affects all these behaviors (H5, H6, and H7 are supported), but only individuals who develop strong 'Investment brand advocacy' are more likely to demonstrate a willingness to support their university through voluntary financial contributions (H10), even in the absence of any expectation of gain or reward. This suggests that different advocacy behaviours have distinct levels of impact, with investment-oriented behaviours being the only predictors of concrete support.

Theoretical implications

The theoretical contributions of this study are consolidated around three primary pillars that advance higher education branding and stakeholder relationship marketing literature.

First, this study refines social identity theory (SIT) in academic environments by clarifying the precise cognitive-affective interface through which brand identification is constructed across different stakeholder groups. Prior HE research led to the expectation that brand knowledge would directly foster the stakeholder-university identification by facilitating the cognitive alignment of individual and institutional values (e.g. Bakirtas & Gulpinar Demirci, 2022). This study challenges this direct cognitive linkage by demonstrating a crucial boundary condition: brand knowledge in isolation is structurally insufficient to cultivate self-definitional identification, particularly among internal organizational stakeholders. Instead, our findings prove that cognitive assets must be processed through an affective emotional channel – specifically brand pride – to activate psychological identification.

Second, this study advances the brand advocacy literature by identifying the specific behavioral channels that bridge psychological identification and the stated willingness to give, demonstrating a clear decoupling between different advocacy dimensions. Conventional branding frameworks often assume that highly identified stakeholders act as generalized advocates (Foroudi et al., 2019), supporting the organization uniformly across all advocacy facets (e.g. Xie et al., 2019). Our empirical results dismantle this assumption by showing that the translation of brand identification into financial supportive intentions occurs exclusively through the investment-oriented advocacy pathway.

This finding introduces a critical theoretical distinction between 'soft' advocacy (positive talking and protection) and 'hard' advocacy (financial commitment). While brand identification successfully drives all three dimensions of advocacy, only investment-oriented advocacy acts as the active behavioral conduit for financial co-creation. This changes previous assumptions in higher education marketing by demonstrating that a stakeholder can be a highly vocal advocate (spreading positive WOM) or highly protective of the brand (forgiving errors) without being willing to provide financial support. By establishing investment advocacy as the sole significant mediator, this research provides a more sophisticated model of stakeholder behavior, proving that different supportive

behaviors have distinct psychological triggers and cannot be treated as a singular, homogeneous brand advocacy construct.

Finally, this study advances the literature by explicitly comparing supporting behaviours across different stakeholder groups, including employees. To date, research in the higher education field examining the individual – brand relationship has predominantly focused on alumni or current students, while employees have been largely overlooked. Only a limited number of studies have compared multiple stakeholder groups (e.g. Bakirtas & Gulpinar Demirci, 2022). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to incorporate employees alongside students and to examine a concrete supporting behavior.

Managerial implications

From a strategic marketing perspective, university administrators should recognize that different forms of stakeholder support are driven by different mechanisms. While brand identification effectively promotes communicative behaviours such as positive word-of-mouth and brand defense, it is not sufficient to generate financial support. Crowdfunding intentions and other high-commitment behaviours emerge only when identification is accompanied by investment-oriented advocacy. To foster such advocacy, universities must first strengthen brand pride, the primary emotional driver through which brand knowledge translates into brand identification. Because the sources of pride differ across stakeholder groups, internal branding initiatives should be tailored accordingly. For employees, pride is more likely to arise from recognition and awareness of the societal impact of research and teaching. For students, it can be reinforced through the visibility of academic achievements, graduate success, and prestigious institutional partnerships.

Once identification is established, universities should avoid treating the stakeholder community as a homogeneous target for fundraising initiatives. Instead, behavioural and attitudinal segmentation should be used to identify stakeholders already displaying investment-oriented advocacy, as they represent the most promising audience for crowdfunding campaigns and can be recruited as campaign ambassadors. At the same time, universities should lower the psychological barriers to financial giving among other stakeholders by encouraging incremental forms of investment, such as tax-designation schemes (e.g. Italy's 5 × 1000) or co-branded merchandise supporting research. These initiatives can help cultivate investment-oriented advocacy over time, gradually transforming psychological attachment into a willingness to contribute financially and expanding the pool of potential high-commitment supporters.

Limitations and future research directions

This study has several limitations, highlighting potential directions for future research. First, because the survey was conducted before the launch of the university's crowdfunding platform and without presenting a specific project, the findings capture stated crowdfunding intentions rather than actual contribution behaviors. Future studies should combine survey measures with transactional data from active crowdfunding campaigns.

Second, the analysis was conducted within a single Italian public university, potentially limiting generalizability. Replication across different institutional and national contexts would help assess the influence of cultural and organizational factors. Finally, while this study compared students and employees, future research should examine other stakeholder groups, such as alumni and corporate partners, to determine whether the role of investment-oriented advocacy in driving crowdfunding intentions remains consistent across internal and external stakeholder environments.

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