Unveiling the path to university students' advocacy intention: exploring the intriguing gender moderation

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Abstract

Purpose – This study introduces three variables related to brands that have the potential to enhance university students' advocacy intentions. The research explores how university brand identification, the perceived prestige of the university brand and the social benefits associated with the university brand impact students' advocacy intentions. Additionally, the study examines the moderating role of gender in these relationships.

Design/methodology/approach – Cross-sectional surveys of 326 undergraduate students enrolled in a Spanish university, and structural equation modeling was used to test and validate the conceptual model.

Findings – The findings from the structural equation modeling indicate that university brand identification, perceived university brand prestige and university brand social benefits significantly influence students' advocacy intentions. Furthermore, the multigroup analysis reveals a gender difference in the factors influencing advocacy intentions. Female students demonstrate significance in all three antecedents, whereas male students only show significance in university brand identification and perceived university brand prestige.

Practical implications – The current study's findings provide several insights for higher education institutions in developing enduring and committed relationships with their students.

Originality/value – This study offers relevant insights into the body of research on university branding, explaining the students' advocacy intentions through the variables of university brand identification, perceived university brand prestige and university brand social benefits. Also, this study is a novelty in introducing empirical evidence for the importance of the moderating role of students' gender.

Keywords University branding, University brand identification, Perceived university brand prestige, University brand social benefits, Students' advocacy intentions

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the current global landscape of higher education, higher education institutions (HEIs) face numerous challenges, including increased competition due to globalization, reduced governmental

financial support, and a shrinking university-going population. Additionally, HEIs face increasing competition from professional certificates. These certificates provide specialized skills and industry-specific knowledge, attracting individuals seeking quick entry into the job market. As a result, higher education institutions need to adapt by demonstrating the unique value proposition of a comprehensive degree program, aligning their offerings with industry needs, fostering strong industry connections, and offering flexible and modular learning options to meet the evolving demands of students and the job market (Stephen and Fru, 2023).

HEIs are increasingly implementing marketing techniques and strategies that have been shown successful in the commercial world to overcome these obstacles and improve their competitiveness (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Bowden, 2011; Balaji *et al.*, 2016; Schlesinger *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, universities have used branding strategies and practices to effectively compete and strengthen their relationships with students and alumni (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Chapleo, 2011; Pinar *et al.*, 2014; Abdelmaaboud *et al.*, 2021; Schlesinger *et al.*, 2023).

Brands, in general, represent consumers' perceptions and emotions toward a product and its performance (Kotler and Keller, 2006). The true value of a successful and strong brand lies in its ability to capture customer preference and foster attachment, ultimately resulting in higher levels of customer loyalty and advocacy behaviors (Park *et al.*, 2010; Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, in the context of universities, brands represent stakeholders' overall perceptions and emotions about the qualities of a particular institution, encompassing tangible aspects such as tuition fees and teaching quality, as well as symbolic and affective qualities like fun, excitement, and passion (Ali-Choudhury *et al.*, 2009; Rauschnabel *et al.*, 2016). Like in consumer markets, a successful and strong university brand can attract prospective students, enhance the loyalty of current students, and encourage advocacy behaviors (Pinar *et al.*, 2014; Casidy, 2013).

Universities are commonly conceptualized and managed as corporate brands (Balmer and Liao, 2007; Palmer *et al.*, 2016; Schlesinger *et al.*, 2023). However, research in university branding was previously considered underdeveloped and scarce (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007; Palmer *et al.*, 2016). In recent years, there has been a notable increase in university branding research (e.g. Pinar *et al.*, 2014; Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2019; Abdelmaaboud *et al.*, 2021; Schlesinger *et al.*, 2023) and universities are allocating more efforts and financial resources to branding activities aimed at building a strong institutional brand (Chapleo, 2011; Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2019). The existing literature on university branding primarily focuses on improving and promoting the university brand to attract more students (e.g. Joseph *et al.*, 2012; Rutter *et al.*, 2017). However, limited research has been conducted on the linkages between university branding practices and students' advocacy behaviors, despite it being a strategic goal for universities to survive and compete effectively in today's global marketplace (Sung and Yang, 2009; Balaji *et al.*, 2016; Pinna *et al.*, 2018; Abdelmaaboud *et al.*, 2021; Schlesinger *et al.*, 2023).

Recent literature has begun to address these gaps and shed light on the relationship between university branding practices and students' advocacy behaviors, offering valuable insights for HEIs seeking to thrive in the current competitive landscape (Sung and Yang, 2009; Balaji *et al.*, 2016; Pinna *et al.*, 2018; Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2019; Abdelmaaboud, 2021; Abdelmaaboud *et al.*, 2021; Schlesinger *et al.*, 2023).

Therefore, the current study strives to fill this gap and add to the body of knowledge on university branding by examining the influence of university brand identification, the perceived prestige of the university brand, and the social benefits associated with the university brand on students' advocacy intentions. Furthermore, it will add to the relatively sparse body of knowledge on the importance of gender differences in the educational context (e.g. Parahoo *et al.*, 2013; Wilkins and Balakrishnan, 2013; Wilkins *et al.*, 2016; Abdelmaaboud *et al.*, 2019) by investigating the moderating effect of students' gender on the proposed

relationships between university brand identification, the perceived prestige of the university brand, the social benefits associated with the university brand, and students' advocacy behaviors. The contribution of this study is to incorporate three crucial university branding strategies that help to engender and strengthen students' advocacy intentions. Furthermore, this study offers empirical evidence that reinforces the existing body of research that has highlighted the significance of the moderating influence of students' gender in university environments. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, literature and hypotheses development are presented. Then, we detail the research method, followed by data analysis and conclusions. In conclusion, the theoretical and managerial implications are explored, along with the limitations and the potential avenues for future research.

Literature review and research hypotheses

Students' advocacy intentions

Customer support and promotional behaviors for the company or its brands are one of the strategic goals for most organizations and companies because of their valuable consequences on their success and competitiveness (Fullerton, 2003; Jones and Taylor, 2007; Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012). Several scholars see customer advocacy as a synonym for positive word-of-mouth and recommendations (Fullerton, 2003; Jones and Taylor, 2007; Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012; Kumar and Kaushik, 2017). More broadly, others see customer advocacy as an active engagement in which customers are willing to spend more time and effort supporting and promoting the company or its brands (e.g. Jillapalli and Wilcox, 2010). Customer advocacy behaviors can occur socially and physically (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012; Kumar and Kaushik, 2017). Social advocacy behaviors encompass the actions of customers who actively promote the company or its brands to others and defend the company when others criticize it. Physical advocacy refers to visual promotion by displaying the company logo, stickers, and merchandise (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012; Kumar and Kaushik, 2017).

In the higher education context, all universities need the support and solidarity of their students as a core strategy for dealing with today's global challenges. Furthermore, the current students represent the future alumni who will contribute to the university by donating and engaging in citizenship behaviors (Kim *et al.*, 2010). Students' advocacy behaviors refer to various forms of student behavioral intentions that involve positive word of mouth about the university, recommending others to attend the university, representing the university to external audiences, and lending support to the university (Balaji *et al.*, 2016; Pinna *et al.*, 2018 Abdelmaaboud, 2021). Identifying the antecedents of students' advocacy behaviors attracted research interest in the past few years (e.g. Helgesen and Nesset, 2007; Balaji *et al.*, 2016; Schlesinger *et al.*, 2017). Previous studies well documented the positive influence of students' satisfaction on students' advocacy behaviors (Palacio *et al.*, 2002; Helgesen and Nesset, 2007; Schlesinger *et al.*, 2017). However, few studies have directed interest to the influence of university branding practices on students' advocacy behaviors (e.g. Sung and Yang, 2009; Balaji *et al.*, 2016; Pinna *et al.*, 2018; Abdelmaaboud, 2021; Abdelmaaboud *et al.*, 2021). In the next sections, we will highlight valuable brand strategies (university brand identification, prestige, and social benefits) that can be used to improve students' advocacy intentions.

University brand identification

Social identity theory posits that an individual's self-concept is composed of two identities: personal and social. Personal identity is shaped by idiosyncratic qualities such as values, goals, interests, and abilities; social identity is determined by membership in social groups, including nationality, race, occupation, and demographics. These identities are cognitively

interconnected and serve as the individual's response to the question "Who am I?" (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Ashforth and Mael (1989) extended the social identity theory to the organizational context and defined organizational identification as a perceived oneness with the organization. Later, several researchers argued that the direct interaction is not a prerequisite for identification and extended the concept of identification to the consumer–company relationship (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Ahearne *et al.*, 2005) and consumer-brand relationship (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012).

Consumer-brand identification can be defined as a consumer's perceived state of oneness with a brand (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012). Prior research has devoted significant emphasis to the concept of consumer-brand identification due to its significant impact on customers' attitudes and behaviors. (e.g. Kuenzel and Vaux Halliday, 2008; Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012). Universities are frequently conceptualized as brands (Balmer and Liao, 2007; Palmer *et al.*, 2016). Accordingly, university identification is conceptualized as a form of consumer brand identification (Balmer and Liao, 2007; Stephenson and Yerger, 2014; Balaji *et al.*, 2016; Palmer *et al.*, 2016; Abdelmaaboud *et al.*, 2021). In this regard, Balaji *et al.* (2016, p. 3024) defined university brand identification from students' perspective as a "student's perceived sense of belongingness or oneness with the university". In the same context, Balmer and Liao (2007) and Palmer *et al.* (2016) defined university brand identification as the student's/alumni's defining of the self in terms of an association with the university brand.

Previous studies supported the significant influence of university identification on both students and alumni's supportive behavior intentions (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Stephenson and Yerger, 2014; Balaji *et al.*, 2016; Palmer *et al.*, 2016; Pinna *et al.*, 2018; Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2019 Abdelmaaboud *et al.*, 2021). For instance, Mael and Ashforth (1992) supported the positive influence of university identification on alumni's support for the university, which was captured through three dimensions (participating in various organizational functions, financial contributions, and willingness to advise one's offspring and others to attend the university). Similarly, Palmer *et al.* (2016) reported the significant impact of university identification on alumni's loyalty toward the university, which manifested through alumni's recommendation and positive word of mouth and choosing the same university if he/she faced the same choice again. Among the current students, Balaji *et al.* (2016) and Pinna *et al.* (2018) supported the positive influence of university identification on students' intention to participate in future activities held and sponsored by the university, university affiliation through display of the university logo and merchandise, suggestions for improvements, and students' advocacy intentions manifested in their intention to recommend the university to the others. Therefore, the subsequent hypothesis has been posited:

H1. University brand identification positively and significantly affects students' advocacy intentions.

Perceived university brand prestige

In the organizational context, Dutton *et al.* (1994) distinguished between two different uses of the term organizational image according to the members' relation with the organization (inside and outside members): inside members' perception of organizational image focusing on their beliefs about how outsiders view the organization, whereas outside members perception focusing on their beliefs about what distinguishes an organization. The perception of inside members about organizational image refers to the construed external image (also called organizational prestige see for review; Smidts *et al.*, 2001; Ahearne *et al.*, 2005), whereas outside perception refers to organizational reputation (Dutton *et al.*, 1994). Scholars extend this view in the branding context (Currás-Pérez *et al.*, 2009; Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012; Tuškej and Podnar, 2018; Boseila *et al.*, 2023). For instance, Currás-Pérez *et al.* (2009, p. 551) defined brand prestige as "the positive image a consumer believes other individuals have of

the brand". Similarly, in the corporate setting, Tuškej and Podnar (2018, p. 4) defined corporate brand prestige as "a set of corporate associations established based on an individual's overall evaluation of the competitive market and social positions of the corporate brand as superior to other brands". Previous literature reported the valuable consequence of brand prestige on customer satisfaction (Jin *et al.*, 2016; Choi *et al.*, 2017), identification with that brand (Kuenzel and Vaux Halliday, 2008; Tuškej and Podnar, 2018), and customer loyalty (Jin *et al.*, 2016; Choi *et al.*, 2017).

In higher education literature, university brand prestige refers to the degree to which the university has a high position, both in absolute and comparative terms (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). According to Pinna *et al.* (2018), university brand prestige expresses the overall prestigious view of the university in society. Moreover, several researchers drew upon Dutton *et al.*'s (1994) definition of construed external image and defined perceived university prestige as the stakeholders' perception of how outsiders view their university (Kim *et al.*, 2010; Stephenson and Yerger, 2014; Casidy and Wymer, 2016; Myers *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, perceived prestige from the student's perspective refers to how university students think outsiders view their university. As a result, students may experience a sense of pride in their affiliation with a prestigious university when they perceive others see their university favorably, as this boosts their self-esteem. The higher position for the university brand achieves several benefits for the students and the university itself, students belonging to a prestigious university will give a good impression amongst potential employers, for the university's prestigious brand helps in attracting better quality students and staff (Fuller *et al.*, 2006; Casidy and Wymer, 2016).

Although previous studies document the positive influence of perceived university prestige on student satisfaction (Helgesen and Nesset, 2007; Clemes *et al.*, 2008) and their identification with the university brand (Balaji *et al.*, 2016; Myers *et al.*, 2016; Pinna *et al.*, 2018; Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2019), few studies focused on exploring the direct influence of perceived university prestige on students' loyalty and supportive behaviors (Casidy and Wymer, 2016; Pinna *et al.*, 2018). For instance, Casidy and Wymer (2016) supported the direct influence of perceived university prestige on students' loyalty and word of mouth. Pinna *et al.* (2018), in their study of the effects of students' university identification on students' extra-role behaviors, supported the direct influence of perceived university prestige on students' advocacy behaviors. Thus, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

H2. Perceived university brand prestige positively and significantly affects students' advocacy intentions.

University brand social benefits

Brands in higher education comprise complex benefits bundles; academic and social benefits are the most notable benefits carried by university brands (Palmer *et al.*, 2016). Not surprisingly, there is considerable interest in the previous literature with academic experience as the primary objective of value creation in the university setting (Mai, 2005; Thomas and Galambos, 2004; Palmer *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, there is significant emphasis on academic aspects, which are deemed crucial for students to have enriching learning experiences and fulfill their academic responsibilities (e.g. Clemes *et al.*, 2008; Elsharnouby, 2015). In addition to the academic factors, several supplementary factors offer supplemental benefits that enhance the exchange experience to something beyond that offered by just the core benefits (Paswan and Ganesh, 2009). Student interactions with others (students, academic staff, employees, university alumni, and external community) are one of the important supplementary factors (Paswan and Ganesh, 2009), which has a significant role in engendering student satisfaction (Thomas and Galambos, 2004; Gibson, 2010; Parahoo *et al.*, 2013).

One of the postulates in educational literature is that students are heterogeneous in terms of what their orientation is toward learning, and there are four different types of orientation (academic, vocational orientation, personal, and social orientation); students have academic orientation their goals centering mainly on the academic side of university life, students have personal and social orientation their goals focusing on personal relationship development and social interactions of university life, whereas getting a job after graduation is the main focusing of vocationally oriented students (Ng and Forbes, 2009; Pinar et al., 2014). Therefore, the social aspects of the university are the most important factors for personal and social-oriented students.

Previous marketing research supported the positive influence of social benefits (i.e. social interactions and bonds between the customer and service provider) on customer satisfaction and loyalty (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002), word-of-mouth communications (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000). In the branding domain, Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012, p. 409) defined brand social benefits as "the social interaction opportunities and gains afforded by a certain brand". So et al. (2017) argue that the customers' perception of the social interaction benefits provided by a certain brand influences their associations with this brand and their behavioral intentions. Accordingly, university brand social benefits can be defined as the social interaction opportunities and gains a university provides. Previous studies reported that the social aspects of the university (e.g. opportunities to socialize) significantly enhance students' satisfaction with their university (Thomas and Galambos, 2004; Gibson, 2010; Parahoo et al., 2013). Palmer et al. (2016) demonstrated that alumni recalled social experiences captured through evaluating peer group interactions during their studies, which significantly influenced their identification with the university brand and their loyalty and support for the university brand. Thus, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

H3. University brand social benefits positively and significantly affect students' advocacy intentions.

The moderating role of students' gender
Prior research has indicated that the disparities between male and female students have various consequences within the educational setting (e.g. Parahoo et al., 2013; Wilkins and Balakrishnan, 2013; Young-Jones et al., 2013; Wilkins et al., 2016; Abdelmaaboud et al., 2019). For instance, Parahoo et al. (2013), in examining the effects of reputation and perceived faculty academic competence on students' satisfaction, proved that the two factors significantly influence male students' satisfaction, while only the reputation for female students' satisfaction. Young-Jones et al. (2013) reported that male students showed a lower sense of student responsibility than female students. In addition, Wilkins et al. (2016) argued that gender variations between male and female students play a moderating effect in the link between university identification and student commitment. Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesizes have been proposed:

H4a. Student's gender moderates the effect of university brand identification on students' advocacy intentions.

H4b. Student's gender moderates the effect of perceived university brand prestige on students' advocacy intentions.

H4c. Student's gender moderates the effect of university brand social benefits on students' advocacy intentions.

Figure 1 depicts the connections between the concepts examined in our research and the influence of student gender as a moderator.
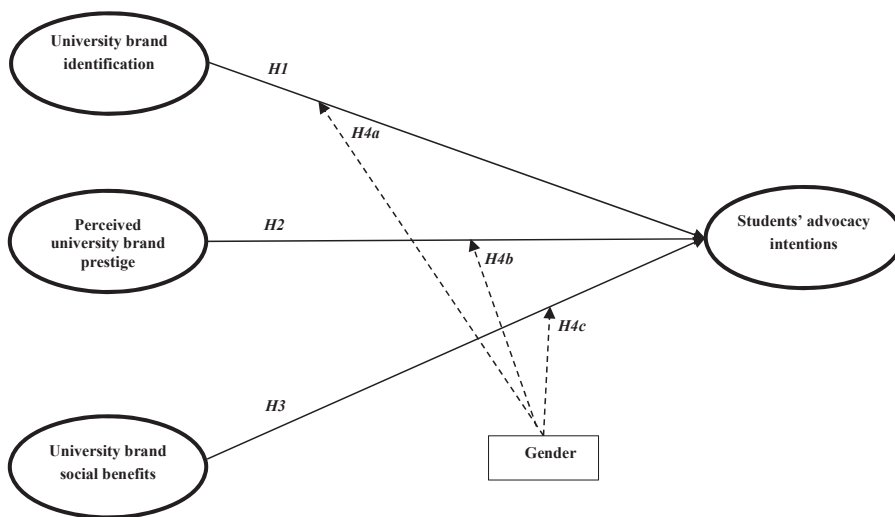
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Methodology

Sample

By employing a convenience sampling method, a total of 400 printed questionnaires were handed out and filled out by undergraduate students attending business/management programs at a Spanish university. The survey questionnaire was distributed in classes under the supervision of the class tutor and a team member. Students were instructed to fill out the survey regarding their overall university experience and not any specific class. A total of 326 reliable questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 81.5%. Out of the total of 326 participants, 43.6% were male students, and 56.4% were female students. The sample distribution according to student level was 16.9% freshman, 25.5 sophomore, 24.5 junior, and 33.1 senior students.

Measurement instrument

The construct measures used in this study were all taken from previously validated instruments. Students' Advocacy intention was measured using a four-item scale drawn from the work of Zeithaml *et al.* (1996). This scale has been used previously in measuring advocacy intentions in the higher education context, for example, Stephenson and Yerger (2014) and Balaji *et al.* (2016). For the independent variables, university brand identification was measured using a well-established scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992) manifested in a five-item scale. This scale has been used in several studies, for instance, by Pinna *et al.* (2018) and Fazli-Salehi *et al.* (2019). Perceived university brand prestige was measured using a four-item scale derived from Mael and Ashforth (1992) and Balaji *et al.* (2016). We captured university brand social benefits using a four-item scale based on the work of Stokburger-Sauer *et al.* (2012) and So *et al.* (2017).

The questionnaire captured students' opinions employing a 5-point Likert scale, on which "one" equaled "totally disagree" and "five" equaled "totally agree". The questionnaire was created using a multistage procedure. The questionnaire was initially drafted in English, and then a Spanish version was generated. Two linguists proficient in both Spanish and English then translated the Spanish version back into English. Furthermore, two marketing

academics evaluated the measures for face validity and content validity. Subsequently, the survey was improved based on their recommendations. Subsequently, the questionnaire underwent a pre-testing phase with a limited sample size ($N = 13$) consisting of undergraduate students who expressed their willingness to engage in the present study. Based on their comments, several minor modifications were implemented to enhance the survey's clarity.

Analysis and results

In order to evaluate the suggested model and hypotheses, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed, utilizing Smart PLS software (version 3.2.8). We followed PLS, a two-step approach by first assessing the measurement model and then examining the structural model to test the causal relationships among the latent factors by the available data (Hair *et al.*, 2017). In addition, we utilized the partial least squares-multi group (PLS-MGA) approach to examine the moderating effects.

Measurement model

The measurement model was evaluated according to the four major recommended criteria: indicator reliability, construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Hair *et al.*, 2017). As demonstrated in Table 1, the indicator reliability was confirmed, as all outer loadings met the acceptable level of at least 0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2017), apart from two items from UBI (UBI3, UBI5), one item of PUBP (PUBP4), and two items of UBSB (UBSB1, UBSB2). The items UBI5 and PUBP4 were removed; their deletion improved the reliability and validity of their related constructs, whereas items (UBI3, UBSB1, and UBSB2) were retained because they were almost close to the acceptable level. Their deletion does not enhance the reliability and validity of their related constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, the construct reliability for all constructs was established, as evidenced by Cronbach's α values ranging from 0.704 to 0.830, as shown in Table 1., which were above the lower limit of 0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2017), and Dillon-Goldstein's rho (rho_A) values for all constructs as the most important PLS reliability measure higher than 0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, the average variance extracted (AVE) values for all constructs ranged between 0.523 and 0.747, which were higher than 0.50 (Hair *et al.*, 2017), indicating adequate convergent validity for the constructs.

We followed the recommendation of Hair *et al.* (2017) to assess the discriminant validity. Initially, through the evaluation of cross-loading, we determined that each construct exhibits a stronger association with its own items compared to others. Furthermore, according to the Fornell–Larcker criterion, the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct must exceed its maximum correlation with any other construct. As demonstrated in Table 2, this condition is met. Also, all constructs' heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) values are lower than the cutoff value of 0.85. Finally, by using a bootstrapping procedure, we found the confidence interval of the HTMT statistic does not include 1. Therefore, we can conclude that discriminant validity has been established.

Structural model and hypothesis testing

We followed the procedures of Hair *et al.* (2017) to test the structural model. Firstly, the collinearity issues among constructs were examined using the variance inflation factor (VIF) values of all exogenous variables, which were in the appropriate range higher than 0.20 and less than 5 (Hair *et al.*, 2017) and ranged between 1.217 and 2.638 indicating the absence of collinearity issues. Secondly, the predictive accuracy of the model was assessed using the coefficient of determination (R^2 value). According to Hair *et al.* (2017), R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, or 0.25 can be described as substantial, moderate, and weak, respectively. Therefore, the R^2

Constructs and items	Items	Loading	α	rho_A	CR	AVE
University brand identification (UBI) (Mael and Ashforth, 1992)			0.756	0.775	0.846	0.581
When someone criticizes the [University], it feels like a personal insult	UBI1	0.836				
I am very interested in what others think about the [University]	UBI2	0.790				
When I talk about the [University], I usually say "we" rather than "they"	UBI3	0.626				
When someone praises the [University], it feels like a personal compliment	UBI4	0.780				
If publicity in the media criticized the [University], I would feel embarrassed	UBI5	deleted				
Perceived university brand prestige (PUBP) (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Balaji *et al.*, 2016)			0.830	0.836	0.899	0.747
People think highly of the [University]	PUBP1	0.819				
The [University] maintains a high standard of academic excellence	PUBP2	0.900				
It is considered prestigious to be a student in the [University]	PUBP3	0.872				
[University] has a rich history	PUBP4	deleted				
University brand social benefits (UBSB) (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012)			0.704	0.736	0.814	0.523
[University] offers me the opportunity to socialize	UBSB1	0.678				
I feel a sense of kinship with other people who belong to the [University]	UBSB2	0.656				
I gain a lot from interactions with other people who belong to the [University]	UBSB3	0.766				
Being a student/graduate of the [University] makes me feel like I belong to a special group	UBSB4	0.787				
Student advocacy intentions (SAI) (Balaji *et al.*, 2016)			0.806	0.829	0.871	0.630
I will recommend [University] to others	SAI1	0.866				
I will recommend [University] to those who ask or seek my advice	SAI2	0.837				
I will recommend others on the [University] social media (e.g. Facebook or Twitter)	SAI3	0.721				
I will post positive comments about the [University] on my social media (e.g. Facebook)	SAI4	0.742				

Note(s): α = Cronbach's α, rho_A = the Dillon–Goldstein's rho, CR = composite reliability, AVE = the average variance
Source(s): Table by authors

Table 1.
Measurement model
evaluation results

value of SAI (0.512) can be considered substantial. To assess the cross-validated redundancy, the blindfolding procedure was employed to investigate the Stone-Geisser's Q^2 value. The Q^2 value of SAI (0.301), which is greater than 0, indicates that the model had good predictive power. With respect to the effect sizes f^2 that quantify the contribution of exogenous constructs to endogenous constructs in the structural model relationship. According to Cohen (1988), f^2 values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 represent small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively. Accordingly, UBI (0.065) and UBSB (0.028) have a small effect size on SAI. PUBP, on the other hand, exerts a moderate effect size of 0.341 on SAI.

To determine the statistical significance of the coefficients of the pathways, a bootstrapping approach was employed with 5,000 resamples. The results of the pathways' coefficients for the hypothesized direct impacts are presented in Table 3 and Figure 2. As illustrated in Table 3, all of the three antecedents UBI (β = 0.212, t = 4.319, p < 0.01), PUBP

	SAI	UBI	PUBP	UBSB
Fornell–Larcker criterion				
SAI	0.794			
UBI	0.517	0.762		
PUBP	0.674	0.477	0.864	
UBSB	0.500	0.470	0.518	0.723
Heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT)				
SAI				
UBI	0.656			
PUBP	0.799	0.604		
UBSB	0.618	0.627	0.640	

Note(s): SAI = student advocacy intentions; UBI = university brand identification; PUBP = perceived university brand prestige; UBSB = university brand social benefits
Source(s): Table by authors

Table 2.
Discriminant validity

Hypothesized paths	β	Std. E	t-Value	Hypothesis result
H1: University brand identification → Student advocacy intentions	0.212	0.049	4.319***	Supported
H2: Perceived university brand prestige → Student advocacy intentions	0.499	0.048	10.330***	Supported
H3: University brand social benefits → Student advocacy intentions	0.142	0.048	2.984***	Supported

Note(s): β = path coefficients, Std. E = standard error, ***p < 0.01, ns = non-significant
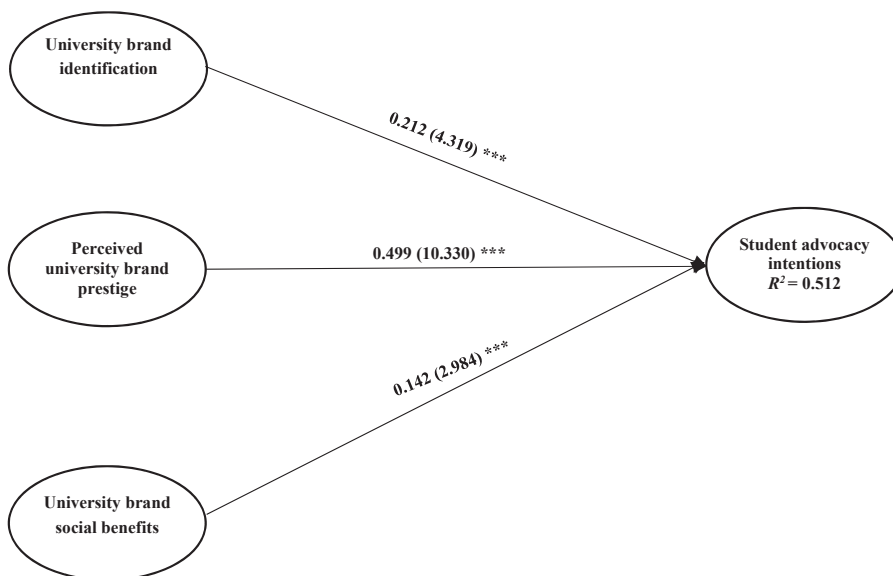**Source(s):** Table by authors

Table 3.
Structural model results

(β = 0.499, t = 10.330, p < 0.01), and UBSB (β = 0.142, t = 2.984, p < 0.01) have a significant influence on SAI, thus H1, H2, and H3 are supported.

Moderation analysis
In order to assess the postulated moderation relationships (H4), based on the gender of the students, the sample was partitioned into two groups: 185 female students and 141 male students. Each group's structural model was evaluated (see Figure 3). The R^2 value of SAI in the male student group was (0.452) which can be considered moderate. In contrast, it can be considered substantial in the female student group (0.577). Thus, university brand identification, perceived university brand prestige and university brand social benefits have a stronger explaining power of students' advocacy intentions for female students (58%) than for male students (45%).

The partial least squares-multi group (PLS-MGA) approach was used to compare the path coefficients of male and female groups. Table 4 presents the path coefficient results and significance for each group, as well as the comparison between the two groups. The path from UBI to SAI was significantly higher for female students (=0.237, t = 3.835, p 0.01) than for male students (=0.187, t = 2.282, p 0.01). Interestingly, the path from PUBP to SAI is almost close in the two groups: male students (β = 0.499, t = 5.794, p < 0.01) and female students (β = 0.504, t = 9.175, p < 0.01). The path from UBSB to SAI was non-significant among male students (β = 0.091, t = 1.087, p = 0.277), whereas it is significant among female students (β = 0.176, t = 3.167, p < 0.01). Regarding the significance of the difference between the two

**University brand
identification**

0.212 (4.319) ***

**Perceived
university brand
prestige**

0.499 (10.330) ***

**University brand
social benefits**

0.142 (2.984) ***

**Student advocacy
intentions**
$R^2 = 0.512$

Source(s): Figure by authors

groups, the findings revealed a significance between the two groups in only one path (i.e. the path from UBSB to SAI), as the *p*-value of the difference was more than 0.95 (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, H4c is supported where H4a and H4b are not.

Discussion
This study aimed to add to the body of knowledge on university branding. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to explore how university brand identification, perceived university brand prestige, and the social benefits associated with the university brand influence students' advocacy intentions. Furthermore, this study aimed to investigate the influence of gender as a moderator in these associations.

The idea of Hypothesis 1 was to investigate the influence of university brand identification on students' advocacy intentions. The results revealed that university brand identification is a significant predictor of students' advocacy intentions. The findings demonstrated that students who identify with the university's brand develop psychological attachments to it and care about it because they see it as an extension of themselves. This psychological attachment and care inspire students to commit to the institution's goals, put forth more voluntary effort on its behalf, and continue a close relationship with it after they graduate. This finding is in line with earlier research that supported the idea that student brand identification had a beneficial impact on students' supportive behaviors (Kim *et al.*, 2010; Balaji *et al.*, 2016; Palmer *et al.*, 2016; Pinna *et al.*, 2018; Abdelmaaboud, 2021; Abdelmaaboud *et al.*, 2021),

The purpose of Hypothesis 2 was to investigate the influence of perceived university brand prestige on students' advocacy intentions. The findings revealed that perceived university brand prestige has a significant and pivotal role in engendering students' supportive behaviors toward their universities. In fact, it was identified as the most influential factor in predicting students' intentions to advocate for their universities. This view is consistent with the findings of (Casidy and Wymer, 2016; Pinna *et al.*, 2018), as they
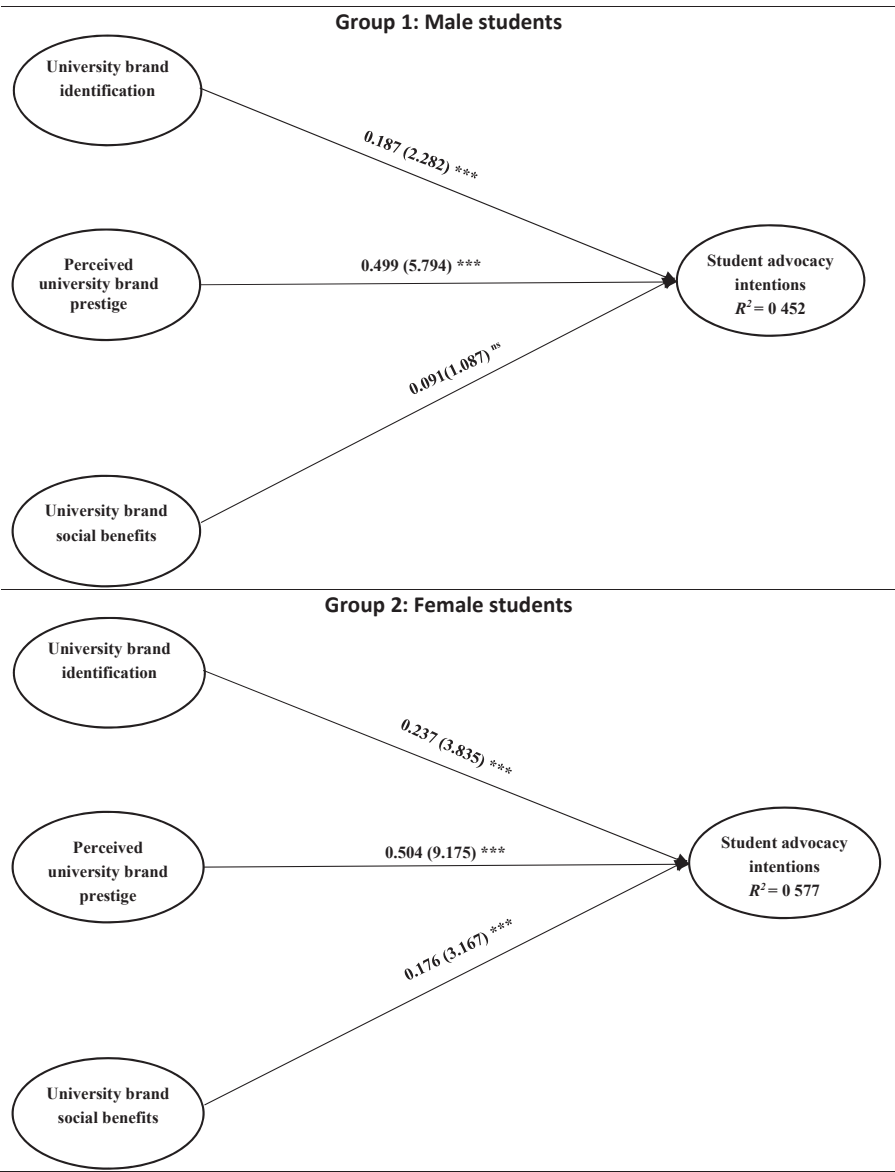
Figure 3.
Outline of results from
the proposed research
model: the moderating
effect of gender

Note(s): Path coefficients (*t*-statistics): **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$; n.s = Not significant
Source(s): Figure by authors

reported the direct influence of perceived university prestige on students' loyalty and supportive behavior intentions.

Hypothesis 3 examined whether university brand social benefits influence students' advocacy intentions. The results showed that university brand social benefits significantly

Hypothesized paths	Male ($N = 141$)		Gender Female($N = 185$)		Difference	
	β	t-Value	B	t-Value	Δβ	p-Value
H4a: University brand identification → Student advocacy intentions	0.187	2.282***	0.237	3.835***	0.050	0.689
H4b: Perceived university brand prestige → Student advocacy intentions	0.499	5.794***	0.504	9.175***	0.005	0.510
H4c: University brand social benefits → Student advocacy intentions	0.091	1.087ns	0.176	3.167***	0.085	0.955

Note(s): β = path coefficients, Δβ = difference in path coefficients, ***$p < 0.01$, ns: non-significant
Source(s): Table by authors

influence students' advocacy intentions. This finding suggests that the social aspects of the university (e.g. opportunities to socialize) significantly enhance student loyalty and support for the university brand. This result adds support to the scant literature that referred to the importance of university brand social benefits as an important marketing tool that has favorable consequences on the attitudes and behaviors toward a university (Thomas and Galambos, 2004; Gibson, 2010; Parahoo et al., 2013; Palmer et al., 2016).

The second objective of this study is to explore the moderating role of gender in the relationship between university brand identification, perceived university brand prestige, and university brand social benefits and students' advocacy intentions (Hypothesis 4). The results demonstrated that university brand identification, perceived university brand prestige, and the social benefits associated with the university brand have a stronger explaining power of students' advocacy intentions for female students than for male students. Specifically, the findings of this study show that university brand identification, perceived university brand prestige, and the social benefits associated with the university brand as strategies to generate and enhance students' advocacy behaviors toward the university are valid for female students. In contrast, only two strategies (i.e. university brand identification and university brand prestige) are valid for male students. This finding aligns with the existing research in psychology and marketing, which has extensively explored the distinction between males and females in their interpersonal relationships. The research consistently demonstrates that females tend to prioritize personal and social relationships more than males (e.g. Dittmar et al., 1995; Swanson et al., 2003; Zhou et al., 2014; Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015; Mahrous and Abdelmaaboud, 2017). For instance, Dittmar et al. (1995) demonstrated that females are relationship-oriented and place a higher emphasis on emotional and social value. In contrast, males are activity-oriented and focused on functional value. In a similar vein, Swanson et al. (2003) argued that females are more sensitive to social interaction and interpersonal relationships; thus, in general, females are more likely to engage in word-of-mouth communication than males.

Implication
The current study's findings give various insights into the marketing discipline as well as higher education institutions, with the following theoretical and managerial consequences.

Theoretical implications
The contribution of this study is to incorporate three crucial university branding strategies that help to engender and strengthen students' advocacy intentions. Moreover, this study offers concrete evidence that reinforces the existing body of research that has highlighted the significance of the moderating influence of students' gender in university environments.

In particular, this study offers relevant insights into the body of research on university branding (Chapleo, 2011; Pinar et al., 2014; Palmer et al., 2016; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2019), which can be summed up as follows. First, the findings of this study offer further support to the previous findings that confirmed the significant influence of the identification with the university brand on supportive behaviors toward the university (Kim et al., 2010; Balaji et al., 2016; Palmer et al., 2016; Pinna et al., 2018; Abdelmaaboud, 2021; Abdelmaaboud et al., 2021), and consistent with the previous marketing literature that proved that developing identification with a brand generating customer's loyalty and supportive behaviors toward that brand (Currás-Pérez et al., 2009; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Tuškej and Podnar, 2018).

Second, the positive influence of perceived university brand prestige on students' advocacy intentions is consistent with the previous literature that reported that students'

perception of how outsiders view their university is a key factor in influencing students' satisfaction and their supportive behaviors toward the university (Casidy and Wymer, 2016; Pinna *et al.*, 2018; Abdelmaaboud, 2021). Thus, when students perceive that outsiders positively view their university, they are more likely to engage in supportive behaviors that benefit the university because of the high position it bestows upon them.

Furthermore, the positive influence of social benefits on students' advocacy intentions refers to the crucial role that social benefits have in enhancing students' satisfaction with their university (Thomas and Galambos, 2004; Gibson, 2010; Parahoo *et al.*, 2013); it also has a crucial role in generating students' advocacy behaviors.

Finally, this study is a novelty in introducing empirical evidence for the importance of the moderating role of students' gender in the relationships between university brand identification, perceived university brand prestige, the social benefits associated with the university brand, and students' advocacy intentions. In this regard, the findings of this study show that university brand identification, perceived university brand prestige, and the social benefits associated with the university brand as strategies to generate and enhance students' advocacy behaviors toward the university are valid for female students. In contrast, only two strategies (i.e. university brand identification and university brand prestige) are valid for male students. These findings offer empirical confirmation for earlier studies that highlighted the significance of gender disparities in the educational setting (Parahoo *et al.*, 2013; Wilkins and Balakrishnan, 2013; Wilkins *et al.*, 2016; Abdelmaaboud *et al.*, 2021).

Practical implications
Branding presents universities with a significant chance to engage closely with their students, who serve as their representatives and valuable ambassadors. Hence, A successful and strong university brand has the potential to attract prospective students, enhance the loyalty of current students, and encourage advocacy behaviors. The empirical Findings of this study have supported the crucial role of three important university branding strategies (i.e. university brand identification, perceived university brand prestige, and the social benefits associated with the university brand) in engendering and strengthening students' advocacy intentions. This indicates that together with the vital role of academic experience and service quality universities should put more effort into these strategies to build a good relationship with students and stimulate their supportive behaviors and intentions. The significance of university brand identification in shaping students' advocacy intentions implies that in order to foster devoted relationships with students and elicit their supportive behaviors and intentions toward the university, marketing strategies should target the elements that motivate students to develop a self-identification relationship with their respective institutions. Second, the pivotal role of university brand prestige on students' advocacy intentions suggests that universities' branding efforts and marketing communication should seek to improve university image because of its direct influence on students' advocacy intentions. Third, the positive influence of university social benefits on students' advocacy intentions suggests that besides the academic benefits, universities should focus on improving and enhancing the social aspects and interactions to achieve a higher level of supportive behaviors among students throughout the university.

Finally, the current study's findings could be useful for university managers interested in achieving a higher level of student advocacy intentions using its resources. In this case, the results indicate that for female students, the universities can improve the students' advocacy intentions through three variables: university brand identification, university brand prestige, and university brand social benefits. However, for male students, the students' advocacy intentions can be improved through the university brand prestige.

Limitations and further research

The findings of this research should be evaluated in consideration of various limitations that suggest possible directions for future investigations. First, the data was collected from undergraduate students at a Spanish university. Hence, the outcomes might accurately depict the unique circumstances of this particular university, and the findings could vary in another university with a distinct context. Future studies could replicate the model in different universities to enhance the generalizability of the results. This study employed a cross-sectional survey design, which is advantageous for ascertaining the direction of relationships between variables but limits the capacity to establish causal inferences. Subsequent investigations may employ a longitudinal design in order to ascertain the causal relationship between variables and to track the evolution of students' advocacy intentions and behaviors with regard to the university.

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