

ATINER CONFERENCE PRESENTATION SERIES No: BRA2022-0263

**ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series**

BRA2022-0263

Athens, 25 October 2022

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a Public University Context:  
An Internal Stakeholder's Perspective**

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BRA2022-0263

Athens, 25 October 2022

ISSN: 2529-167X

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**ABSTRACT**

*In markets with strong competition and a decrease in product differentiation (such as Higher Education Institutions), the development and maintenance of customer (stakeholder) brand loyalty remains a key focus area of their marketing strategies. Limited research has been conducted where the principles of relationship marketing have been applied to the higher education sector. The objective of this article is to analyse brand trust, shared values and satisfaction as antecedents of brand loyalty within the relationship marketing context to foster internal stakeholder loyalty relations at universities. A quantitative study was conducted amongst 576 internal stakeholders from a public university in South Africa to ascertain how brand trust, satisfaction and shared values act as antecedents of internal stakeholders' loyalty to the university. The results indicated that internal stakeholders that share similar values to that of the university are generally satisfied with the services. Internal stakeholders that are satisfied with the services of the university trust the brand; internal stakeholders who trust the brand will recommend it to others and are committed to the university. Understanding the relationship marketing initiatives undertaken in the higher education sector will benefit management of HEI to formulate appropriate strategies to engage and better connect with all stakeholder groups, especially internal stakeholders.*

**Keywords:** *Brand trust, shared values, satisfaction, brand loyalty, internal stakeholders, HEI*

## Introduction

The competition for customer loyalty among branded products has been heightened as markets are continuously moving towards a higher degree of saturation (Ogunmokun, Unverdi-Creig, Said, Avci & Eluwole 2021). In markets with strong competition and a decrease in product differentiation (such as Higher Education Institutions, HEI), the development and maintenance of customer (stakeholder) brand loyalty remains a central role of their marketing strategies (Ahmad Mabkhot, & Shaari 2017). Yousaf, Abhishek, and Makhmoor (2020) assert that loyalty from students can imply strategic advantage for any educational brand. As student loyalty in HEI not only applies to the time of enrolment, a fundamental aim for any HEI would be to attract students who would, despite situational influences, be committed to the institution on the long term. The benefits of loyalty from staff and students have resulted in them being classified as important stakeholder groups and a top priority for higher education management (Austin & Pervaiz, 2017; Díaz-Méndez & Gummesson, 2011; Helgesen & Nasset, 2007).

Internal stakeholders show loyalty to HEI, in a similar fashion to that shown by customers to products. The benefits of brand loyalty amongst internal stakeholders, especially students, endures long after they have graduated, as students can enrol for postgraduate qualifications or recommend these programmes to prospective students (Giner & Rillo, 2016). The image and reputation of HEI which could potentially lead to additional resources such as funding for research projects or personal donations, are promoted through positive word of mouth of staff, current students and alumni (Freeland, Spenner & McCalmon 2014; Schlesinger, Cervera, Pérez-Cabañero 2017). Analysing loyalty of internal stakeholders as part of relationship management, especially with regards to students, is therefore warranted for the survival of HEI (Nejjari & Aamoum, 2020).

Although this is true, many authors only focus on the brand loyalty of students and tend to underestimate the importance of brand loyalty from all internal stakeholders in HEI. Disgruntled staff members who are less brand loyal could have a negative effect on the loyalty of other staff and students. For the purpose of this study, brand loyalty from an internal stakeholder's perspective (staff and students) was investigated.

Private sector experience provides the foundation for much of the relationship marketing theory in the literature. Limited research has been conducted where the principles of relationship marketing have been applied to the higher education sector (Bunce, Baird & Jones 2017; Dennis Papagiannidis, Alamanos & Bourlakis 2016; Frassetto et al 2012; Gummesson 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al 2001; Pucciarelli, and Kaplan, 2016; Schlesinger et al 2017; Sia, 2013).

In addition, a limited number of formal studies has been conducted on HEI, specifically universities, and antecedents of internal stakeholder's loyalty. Rojas-Méndez et al (2009) investigated trust as a loyalty antecedent in HEI. Schlesinger et al (2017) as well as Helen and Ho (2011) investigated trust and

shared values while Coplan (2001) investigated variable ethics as a loyalty antecedent. Perin et al (2012) addressed the impact of student trust, commitment and quality perception on loyalty. Antecedents of student satisfaction and loyalty in HEI were addressed by Egyir (2015) as well as by Giner and Rillo (2016). Perceived quality, trust, commitment and loyalty were analysed in a virtual education scenario by, Marcelo, Cláudio and Spolavori, (2019) while Yousaf et al (2020) investigated the impact of brand trust and institutional commitment on student loyalty in India. The study of Schlesinger et al (2017) adds value to the literature as they employed the relationship marketing perspective to variables such as brand image, shared values commitment, overall satisfaction and trust to the effect of student loyalty, filling a major gap in the literature. A shortage of research in the use of appropriate holistic branding models in relation to student perceptions in higher education, especially linked to brand equity, commitment, satisfaction and trust however prevail (Alessandri et al 2006; Dholakia & Acciaro 2014). This study addresses brand trust, shared values, satisfaction and commitment as antecedents of brand loyalty in a public university context.

This study therefore addresses the shortfall in empirical studies on the antecedents of loyalty, specifically from an internal stakeholder's perspective in HEI, especially in an African context. The study, in addition, answers the call by Perin et al (2012) on more research regarding the views of commitment, trust and loyalty amongst different groups in HEI.

The objective of this article is to analyse brand trust, shared values and satisfaction as antecedents of brand loyalty within the relationship marketing context to foster internal stakeholder loyalty relations at universities. The identification of the relationships among these variables could advance a deeper understanding of their application in higher education, which could strengthen internal stakeholders' satisfaction, build trust and improve loyalty within educational institutions.

The introduction is followed by a literature discussion and the research hypotheses. An explanation of the research method applied in this study is followed by a presentation and discussion of the results of the study. Finally, the conclusion and opportunities for further research are presented.

## **Literature Review**

Globalisation, higher student demands and an awareness of international rankings have resulted in the reconsideration of relationships that Higher Education Institutions (HEI) have with their stakeholders in a quest to remain competitive (Schlesinger et al., 2017). The development and maintenance of stakeholder brand loyalty have, as a result, been acknowledged as a central role for HEI marketing strategies (Ahmad Mabkhot, & Shaari, 2017).

### *Brand Loyalty*

The premium that organisations pay in order to obtain and maintain loyal customers necessitates the use of brand loyalty as a conventional marketing idea that focuses on developing long-term brand relationships (Chikazhe et al 2020; Ngo & Nguyen 2016). Factors that determine customer loyalty can include customer satisfaction, trust, service quality, commitment, service recovery, emotions and corporate image (LeMahieu et al 2017; Medha 2015). Oliver (1999: 34) provided probably one of the most insightful definitions of loyalty: “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour.” This definition complements the seminal definition of brand loyalty of Aaker (1991) which claims that brand loyalty can be defined as a situation which reflects how likely a customer will be to switch to another brand, especially when that brand makes a change, either in product or price features.

Scholars have been challenged to measure and define brand loyalty as brand loyalty is seen to be a combination of two main components: behaviour and attitude. The actual frequency of buying the product or service relates to the behaviour component while attitude refers to the customers’ emotions and intentions to recommend or repurchase the product (Alhaddad, 2015; Ahmad Mabkhot, & Shaari, 2017; Pengurusan, 2017). Many scholars have also reviewed the link between brand trust and brand loyalty (Alhaddad, 2015; Dehdashti et al 2012; Ahmad Mabkhot, & Shaari, 2017) and revealed that the most important antecedent of brand loyalty is trust. Schlesinger et al (2017) proclaim that within the Higher Education environment, brand loyalty is the result of brand trust, shared values and ethics.

### *Brand Trust*

The seminal paper of Morgan and Hunt (1994) on relationship marketing provided the foundation for research into the relationship between trust, loyalty and commitment (Melewar et al 2017). The commitment/trust theory has aided relationship marketing, as it inspired marketers to co-operate with exchange partners in order to preserve relationship investments; believe that there will be no opportunistic action taken by a partner by viewing potentially high-risk options as being judicious and resist appealing short-term alternatives in favour of the long-term advantages (Mukherjee & Nath, 2007).

Increased attention has been drawn from both researchers and practitioners in recent years regarding trust and brand trust. The conceptualisation of trust by Rotter (1967), who defined trust within the domain of an individual’s expectancy against others’ promise, has influenced major consequent definitions of trust. Two basic characteristics of trust are emphasised in this definition: firstly, the customer’s expectancy regarding a specific service provider or attribute of it, and secondly the intention of the customer to rely upon the provider’s quality offering (Yadav et al 2018). Although the definition of trust has evolved over

time, the definition of Morgan and Hunt (1994) that trust relates to one party's confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity suffices for this article. Helen and Ho (2011) state that qualities such as consistency, honesty, helpfulness responsibility, benevolence and competence are other qualities associated with a trustworthy party.

Brand trust is defined as “the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function” (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001: 82). Nawaz and Usman (2011) claim that when an organisation promises to provide quality products to consumers, and successfully meets the promise, brand trust is created. Brand trust has therefore been recognised as a key determinant in creating long-term relationships with customers which in turn positively affects brand loyalty in the relationship-marketing literature (Alhaddad, 2015; Ahmad Mabkhot, & Shaari, 2017; Melewar et al 2017; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Stakeholders who trust the brand are more willing to pay a superior price for it and to share information about the brand with others.

The antecedents of trust proposed in the literature are incomprehensive and inconsistent. Ganesan (1994) claims that the perceived level of risk in an organisation is reduced by trust in the organisation, which results in loyalty to the organisation, implying a mediating role of trust in brand loyalty. Similar studies by Yadav et al (2018) as well as Sitorus and Yustisia (2018) also support the mediating role of trust between customer satisfaction and loyalty. In addition to expectancy and intention characteristics of trust, reliability, competence, credibility, fulfilment and benevolence have been proposed as characteristics of trust by scholars like Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman (1993) and Sirdeshmukh et al (2002). The complementary role of trust and satisfaction are well acknowledged in the literature as relationship marketing constructs and provides the foundation for the first hypothesis:

H<sub>1</sub>: Brand trust has a positive relationship with brand loyalty.

### *Satisfaction*

Whilst trust is perceived to be a key factor for enhancing a possible relationship, satisfaction is perceived as the key factor to the relationship's continuity (Ahmad Mabkhot, & Shaari, 2017; Song et al 2019). Satisfaction in the marketing literature is defined as the level of over fulfillment experienced when a product or service provides or succeeds the expected customer-related outcome. Once stakeholders feel satisfied that the required level of benevolence, honesty and competence are fulfilled by the other party, customer satisfaction occurs (Correia et al 2014; Rodić Lukić and Lukić, 2018; Song et al 2019). The customer satisfaction construct has been extensively researched in services marketing (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016; Chikazhe et al 2020). El Alfy and Abukari (2019) proclaim that perceived service quality plays a significant role in guaranteeing the success of HEI, especially in the competitive environment.

Students' experience with educational services is different from the experience of customers in other service organisations and is indeed a complex

relationship (Chanaka Ushantha & Samantha Kumara, 2016.) Within the higher education sector, student satisfaction is created when actual performance exceeds or meets the student's expectation. Lai et al. (2015) claim that student satisfaction is influenced, not only by academic quality, but also by the HEI's services. Educational services, for the purpose of this study is adapted from the work of de Matos et al (2018) and is defined as all services provided by HEI including support services (social and academic management); educational supply (the work of lecturers), and physical infrastructure (canteen and sport centres, research centres and classrooms). The results of the study of Dennis et al (2016) affirm that campus climate, institutional effectiveness and student centeredness have a strong impact on student satisfaction. The result of student satisfaction is motivated students who identify with their university, recommend the university to others and remain loyal to the university.

Previous research has indicated that student satisfaction is positively related to student loyalty (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; de Matos et al 2018; Fares et al 2013; Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Rojas-Méndez et al 2009; Schertzer & Schertzer, 2004; Schlesinger et al 2017; Song et al 2019; Ueda & Nojima, 2012).

Based on the above discussion, a second hypothesis is proposed:

H<sub>2</sub>: Internal stakeholder satisfaction has a positive correlation with brand loyalty.

### *Shared Values*

Values are disseminated, reflected and enacted in all organisations and are fundamental to organizational culture (Chen, Lune & Queen 2013; Weiner, 1988). Morgan and Hunt (1994: 25) provide a seminal definition of shared values as 'the extent to which partners have beliefs in common about what behaviours, goals, and policies are important or unimportant, appropriate or inappropriate, and right or wrong'. Helen and Ho (2011) claim that the development of trust and commitment in a relationship is influenced by shared values as the perceptions of values between partners may strengthen the partner's perceived ability to predict the other partner's purpose and behaviour. Coulter and Coulter (2002) proclaim that shared values reduce interpersonal barriers and facilitate the achievement of common goals which enables a higher level of trust between parties. The influence of shared values on some aspects of consumer brand perception has been noted by several authors (Eisingerich and Rubera 2010; Sichtmann & Diamantopoulos, 2013; Brecic, Filipovic, Gorton, Ognjanov, Stojanovic, & White 2013). Previous research in higher education has indicated a positive association between trust and shared values (Holdford & White 1997; Adidam, Bingi, & Sindhav 2011; Helen & Ho 2011; Schlesinger, et al 2017).

The only other study that could be found that incorporated the elements of shared values, trust and satisfaction on loyalty in the higher education sector was that of Schlesinger et al (2017). Prior to Schlesinger et al's (2017) study, Helen and Ho (2011) studied the concept of shared values and its influence on relationship commitment, yet shared values were never tested (as far as could be ascertained) as an antecedent to internal stakeholders' loyalty before this study.

The results of the Schlesinger et al (2017) study indicate that having shared values promoted by a university has a medium effect size on student loyalty. Schlesinger et al's (2017) study, in addition, indicates a strong effect size between shared values and university image, indicating that when students share ideals and values of the university, they assess the university's image more positively.

Based on the discussion above the third hypothesis was formulated:

H<sub>3</sub>: The shared values of internal stakeholders with the university have a positive correlation with loyalty.

### *Commitment*

Commitment is described as a fundamental element in relationship marketing. Commitment can be defined as the perception of one party that all-out efforts are needed to maintain a critical relationship with another party (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Within HEI, students' commitment is focussed on the cost-benefit relationship between the students' perseverance at their HEI, their goals to graduate and the negative aspects relating to an early departure from the university, indicating a strong relational bond that encourages the student to continue the relationship (Bergamo 2008; Ali et al 2016; Yousaf et al 2020). Yousaf et al (2020) propose that the commitment from students, in addition, indicates emotional and utilitarian attachments which result in strong involvement and identification with an HEI. In this process, the one party's (HEI) commitment to service quality and the other party's (student) commitment to the HEI brand are indicated. According to Perreira and Sequeria (2020), emotional commitment from a student's perspective is rooted in their sense of belonging, identification with the university and shared values. In this scenario, commitment can be seen as the match between the student's expectations and the deliverance of the expected skills, value and abilities of the institution.

Bunce, Baird, and Jones (2017) propose that the ability of the service provider, in this case the HEI, to deliver the promised high-quality benefits and value remains critical to developing commitment from stakeholders. Moira and Silva (2015) believe that unless there is commitment to maintain trust and a reciprocal relationship, neither HEI nor students will receive sufficient value from the relationship. Connely et al (2015) confirm this statement and add that student preference for the brand, rejection of competitors and continued patronage are results of trust-enabled commitment in HEI. It can therefore be said that commitment in the relationship emerges between the student and the HEI as a result of the relationship between trust and loyalty (Marcelo, et al 2019). From a staff point of view, Meyer, Stanley, and Parfyonova, (2012) express that normative commitment is preceded by the strong correlation of affective commitment with organisational citizenship behaviour, job performance, and attendance.

Based on the discussion above the fourth hypothesis was developed:

H<sub>4</sub> Commitment has a positive correlation with loyalty.



## **Methodology**

The study was based on a positivistic paradigm. The study was quantitative and descriptive in nature as the researcher wanted to establish internal stakeholders' perceptions regarding the association between trust, satisfaction, shared values, commitment and brand loyalty in the organisation. The data collection method utilised in this study was a computer-aided self-administered web-based survey. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to accommodate staff and students that did not have access to computers. The questionnaire included ordinal questions to ascertain the degree to which respondents agree or disagree with a series of statements. Five-point Likert-scale questions were utilised where the respondents' answers ranged between 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. In order to obtain demographic data from the respondents, nominal scales were employed where the respondents were allowed to provide only a descriptor as the response.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section A comprised of the demographic details of the respondents. Section B consisted of items regarding brand loyalty. The questionnaire consisted of reliable and valid items sourced from previously tested measuring instruments. Items relating to brand loyalty were based on the work of Sasmuta and Suki (2015), Ling (2013); Lee, Moon and Mun (2015) as well as Mokgosa and Molefhi (2012).

### *Sampling Procedures*

The population of this study included all the internal stakeholders (staff and students) of a South African University. Estimating the number of students at the university to be 27000 (June 2019) and based on a 5% margin of error, a sample size of 325 students were deemed to be sufficient. Similarly, estimating the number of staff to be 2500 (June 2019) and based on a 5% margin of error, a sample size of 300 staff members were deemed to be sufficient (personal communication, Kirstie Eastwood, stats consultant). A total of 700 respondents was then targeted. This study employed convenience sampling as all the names of the staff and students were available on the university's email list. The cover letter which included a link to the web-based survey was sent to staff and students via email.

### *Data Analysis Techniques*

The primary data obtained from the questionnaire were edited, coded and captured in an excel spreadsheet, which was analysed using STATISTICA version 25. The data were analysed and interpreted by making use of descriptive and inferential statistics. The internal reliability of the factors was assessed through the calculation of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and the inter-item relatedness of the variable of study. In order to summarise the data of the variable into smaller subsets or factors, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted. Data were subjected to factor analysis using Principal Axes Factor and orthogonal Varimax

rotation. All KMO values were well above 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), indicating that the data was sufficient for EFA. Eigenvalues-greater-than-one values proposed by Kaiser (1960) were used to identify which factors explain the largest portion of the total variables of the study.

Using the eigenvalue cut-off of 1.0, one factor explained a cumulative variance of 56.34% of brand loyalty. Brand loyalty consisted of six items with an average inter-item correlation of 0.68 and Cronbach's Alpha coefficient value of 0.87.

Spearman's correlation coefficient was calculated to test whether there were any correlations between the various antecedents of brand loyalty in this study, namely the respondent's trust in the brand, whether they were satisfied with the services of the university, whether they would recommend the organisation to others, and whether they were committed to the organisation. ANOVA was conducted to compare the mean factor scores of the staff and student groups in order to establish whether there are significant differences in the responses between the different groups. Post hoc tests (Tukey HSD test) were performed to identify significant differences between groups as ANOVA only indicates whether or not there are significant differences. Tukey tests were conducted between the factors of the variables to determine which group has a statistically significant difference on  $p=0.0$ ;  $p<0.05$  and  $p<0.10$ . Cohen's  $d$  values were calculated to establish the existence of any practical significant differences between the various factors and the various groups.

#### *Demographic Information of the Respondents*

A total of 567 respondents took part in the study. Of the respondents, 51% were female and 49% were male. The majority of the respondents (55%) were in the age group of 17-25 years old, 17% were between the ages of 26-35 years old, 9% between the ages of 36-45 and 9% were older than 46 years. The majority of the respondents (42%) resided in the Business and Economics (BES) Faculty, (congruent with the statistics of the university that BES is the largest faculty). The Arts and Law faculties were both represented by 16% of the respondents, Health Science by 14% of respondents whilst the Education and cross-faculty respondents each amounted to 1% of the total respondents. The majority of the respondents (49%) fell in the support staff category, whilst academic and administrative staff amounted to 15%, students 25% and staff that were students as well 11 % of the respondents.

#### *Descriptive and Inferential Statistical Analysis*

For the purpose of descriptive statistical results, answers where respondents agree and strongly agree were grouped together as were answers of disagree and strongly disagree. The results of the descriptive statistics highlighted the following with relation to the variables of the study. The mean value for brand loyalty ranged between 3.50 and 4.37 and the standard deviation for brand loyalty ranged

between 0.97 and 1.26 indicating that respondents varied slightly in their answers, but the responses were overall very positive.

A large majority (84.5%) of respondents agree that they trust the university brand, 69.4% indicated that they were satisfied with the services of the university, whilst 70.2% indicated that they were loyal to the brand and that they will recommend the university's brand to other people. Respondents were positive that they prefer to work or study at the university.

## **Results and Discussion**

The following paragraphs indicate the results and discussion of the inferential statistics performed in the study.

### *ANOVAs*

A One-way ANOVA was performed to determine whether the average score for Brand Loyalty differed according to Faculty. From the results obtained, an overall difference was observed ( $F = 2.419$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $Sig. = 0.026$ ). This difference was further investigated to determine between which groups the differences lie. According to the results obtained, the two faculties that had a significant difference were the Law Faculty and Business and Economic Sciences Faculty. The respondents that fell into the Business and Economic Sciences Faculty category had a significantly higher average score of 3.98 when compared with the respondents that fell into the Law Faculty category, which had an average score of 3.50 ( $sd(BES) = 0.85011$ ,  $sd(Law) = 0.94364$ ,  $Sig. = 0.012$ ).

A one-way ANOVA was also performed to determine whether the average score for Brand Loyalty differed according to the various positions in the university. From the results obtained, no overall difference was observed ( $F = 2.056$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $Sig. = 0.085$ ). These results indicate that there is no difference in loyalty from academic, administrative, support staff or students within the university.

In order to determine whether the average score of Brand loyalty, specifically for students, differed according to the years that they have studied with the university, a one-way ANOVA was performed. An overall difference was observed from the results ( $F = 4.215$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $Sig. = 0.001$ ). This difference was further investigated to determine between which groups the differences lie. According to the results obtained the groups that have a significant difference were first year students and students that had studied for more than three years (mostly postgraduate students). First year respondents had a significantly higher average score of 4.22 when compared with respondents that fell in the three years and more group, which had an average score of 3.70 ( $sd$  (one year) = 0.87,  $sd$  (three years and longer) = 0.105,  $Sig.=0.711$ ). These results differ from the correlation between time spent with a university and trust (of staff members) (indicated below in Table 1) confirming the complexity of the relationship between students'

experience with educational services as indicated by Chanaka Ushantha and Samantha Kumara (2016).

*Spearman’s Correlation*

Spearman’s correlation coefficient was calculated to test whether there were any correlations between the various antecedents of brand loyalty in this study, namely the respondent’s trust in the brand, whether they were satisfied with the services of the university, whether they would recommend the organisation to others, and whether they were committed to the organisation. As the ANOVA results for students differed according to the time they had studied, the author wanted to establish whether years in service also impacted staff’s brand loyalty. This item was included in the correlation analysis performed. The Spearman’s correlation coefficient is based on the ranked values for each variable rather than the raw data. Spearman’s correlation is often used to evaluate relationships involving ordinal variables and to test if there is a correlation and not the direction of the correlation: Table 1 indicates the results of Spearman’s correlations of antecedents of loyalty.

**Table 1. Results of Spearman’s Correlations of Antecedents of Loyalty**

Correlations							
		Trust the brand	Years in service	Satisfied with services of university	Values similar to university	Recommend university to others	Committed to university
Spearman's rho	Trust the brand	1.000					
	Years in service	-.106 <sup>*</sup>	1.000				
	Satisfied with the services of the university	.319 <sup>**</sup>	-0.082	1.000			
	Vaues similar to that of university	.272 <sup>**</sup>	-0.016	.310 <sup>**</sup>	1.000		
	Recommend the university to others	.409 <sup>**</sup>	-0.049	.467 <sup>**</sup>	.344 <sup>**</sup>	1.000	
	Committed to university	.436 <sup>**</sup>	-0.020	.430 <sup>**</sup>	.381 <sup>**</sup>	.660 <sup>**</sup>	1.000
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Correlation interpretation r < 0.3      Small Correlation 0.3 < r < 0.5      Medium Correlation r > 0.5      Large Correlation							

Correlations indicated with \*\* were all significant at the 0.01 level.

From Table 1 it is clear that years of service cannot be seen as an antecedent of loyalty as all the correlations are small. The only large correlation ( $r > 0.5$ ) was observed between commitment to the university and recommendation of the

university to others (0.660). The results in Table 1 indicate negative correlations between: brand trust and years in service (-0.106). This result indicates that the length of service of employees does not influence their brand trust. A negative correlation can be seen between years in service and satisfaction of services (-0.082) indicating that employees can be satisfied with services at the beginning of their term and that satisfaction does not grow over time. The negative correlation of years in service and sharing similar values (-0.049) is surprising as generally one would assume that employees would leave an organisation if the values differ from that of the organisation, in this case the assumption can be made that other elements play a larger role in loyalty toward the university. Years in service and commitment to the organisation also has a negative correlation of (-0.020), confirming that there is no correlation between the two.

A medium correlation exists between brand trust and commitment to the university (0.436), recommendation of the university to others (0.409) and satisfaction with services (0.319). The relationship between brand trust and commitment to the university confirms the relationship-marketing literature above as well as the commitment/trust theory as discussed by Mukherjee and Nath (2007). The findings, furthermore, support the results of Yadav et al (2018) and Sitrus and Yustisia (2018) that trust is a mediator for loyalty and that brand trust is a key determinant in creating long-term relationships with stakeholders and positively affects brand loyalty as depicted in the relationship-marketing literature (Melewar et al 2017; Ahmad Mabkhot, & Shaari, 2017). A small correlation (0.272) exists between brand trust and sharing similar values.

Satisfaction with the services of the university has a medium correlation with recommendation of the university to others (0.467), a medium correlation with commitment to the university (0.430) and a medium correlation with sharing similar values (0.310). These results confirm the medium effect size of the results of Schlesinger et al. (2017) between shared values and student loyalty. The correlation between satisfaction and brand loyalty was found to be statistically significant which is consistent with the findings of Yadav et al (2018), Song et al (2019); Schlesinger et al (2017); and de Matos et al. (2018). Therefore, it was again empirically validated that loyalty is a consequence of satisfaction.

These results complement the work of Yousaf et al (2020) that loyalty from students implies a strategic advantage for a university. The findings, in addition, complement the work of Perin et al (2020) who revealed that commitment is influenced by students' perceived quality of services and trust regarding their HEI. This finding, in addition, provides a good explanation of the behavioural and attitudinal components of brand loyalty, namely behaviour to act in a specific way is determined by the attitude towards it. Internal stakeholders will recommend the university if they are committed to it. This result is in line with the findings of Perin et al. (2012) that indicate that commitment is an antecedent of loyalty. It is worth noting that the path from commitment to loyalty was non-significant in the SEM results of Yousaf (2020); however, commitment had significant mediating effects on loyalty.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

From the results of the study the following suppositions can be made:

Internal stakeholders that share similar values to that of the university are satisfied with the services. Internal stakeholders that are satisfied with the services of the university trust the brand; internal stakeholders who trust the brand will recommend it to others and are committed to the university. Trust, satisfaction with the services, and sharing similar values are therefore seen as antecedents of internal stakeholder loyalty to the university. Hypotheses 1 to 4 are therefore accepted.

Understanding the relationship marketing initiatives undertaken in the higher education sector will benefit management of HEI to formulate appropriate strategies to engage and better connect with all stakeholder groups, especially internal stakeholders which include staff and students.

The main contribution from the study stems from the confirmation of the existing relationships between HEIs' trust, shared values, satisfaction with services, commitment, and internal stakeholder loyalty in the South African HEI context. Such relationships had already been addressed and confirmed in other settings.

The research provides practical implications for HEI. The study has found that internal stakeholders (staff and students) differ with regards to their time spent with the university and loyalty associated with it, the supposition can therefore be made that students' loyalty decreases as they inherently assume the relationship with the HEI could potentially end and they no longer require the total commitment on their part to the relationship with the university. HEI should, as a result, develop employee as well as student satisfaction surveys to ensure survival in times of difficult economic competition. More attention should be given to students' attitudes and complaints whilst ensuring that all relevant information regarding shared values and a shared brand identity are continually distributed to all internal stakeholders. Interaction between faculties and students could be improved to provide more opportunities and convenience to postgraduate students, fostering the relationship between the two parties.

This study, in addition, can assist HEI to understand and assess the impact of brand trust on internal stakeholder commitment and loyalty. Building a strong corporate brand identity and image will assist HEI to build and maintain a feeling of shared values, satisfaction and encourage recommendations from internal stakeholders to potential external stakeholders. HEI should understand the importance of commitment and the role it plays in creating loyalty from internal stakeholders. Marketers of HEI should therefore strive to market an image of fair intentions to prospective staff and students and back it up with continuous efforts.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

This study has some limitations. First, the author does not claim the generalisability of the results as the data were collected from only one university in

South Africa, and the findings will not necessarily attribute to other HEI inside South Africa, nor to HEI outside of South Africa or to the public sector.

The finding that internal stakeholders (staff and students) differ with regards to their time spent with the university and loyalty associated with it warrants further investigation. Future research could include a mixed research method and focus on interaction with smaller groups to understand the phenomenon.

Additional research is encouraged with regards to the relationship between commitment, trust and loyalty to understand the dynamics of various stakeholder groups in HEI.

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