

Understanding Internal Marketing Orientation in Higher Education

Evidence from a Portuguese Public University

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Abstract

This paper studies the internal marketing orientation (IMO) within a Portuguese public university, applying a validated multidimensional model comprising informal information creation, formal information creation, information dissemination, and responsiveness. Using a questionnaire-based survey which was distributed to the entire population of teaching staff, non-teaching staff and researchers at a Portuguese university, and based on a sample of 67 respondents, the study combines descriptive analysis, regression modelling, and cluster analysis to identify patterns in internal communication. The findings confirm the internal consistency of IMO dimensions and show that formal information creation significantly predicts information dissemination, while both dissemination and informal information creation positively influence perceptions of responsiveness. Using cluster analysis, we identify three distinct staff profiles (Disconnected, Ambivalent, and Engaged) with different perceptions of internal marketing. The positive effects of formal communication on dissemination are only observed among the Engaged group, suggesting that alignment with the institution moderates the impact of internal marketing efforts. These results suggest that the university should move beyond one-size-fits-all communication models and adopt differentiated, group-specific strategies. By combining psychometric measurement with staff segmentation, the study provides methodological and strategic contributions to internal marketing research and practice in university settings.

Keywords: Internal marketing orientation; Higher education institutions; Organizational communication; Employee engagement; Information dissemination; Organizational responsiveness; Cluster analysis; Regression modelling.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, internal marketing has gained growing attention in organizational research, particularly in service-oriented institutions where employee satisfaction and engagement are essential prerequisites for high-quality service delivery (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991; Lings & Greenley, 2005). Rooted in the premise that employees constitute an internal market, internal marketing orientation (IMO) proposes that organizations must generate, disseminate and respond to intelligence about employees' needs and expectations, mirroring the principles of external market orientation (Grönroos, 1990; Lings & Greenley, 2009). In higher education institutions (HEIs), this alignment has become increasingly relevant in the face of institutional growth, structural complexity, and the pressures of competitive repositioning.

Despite its acknowledged importance, empirical evidence on internal marketing in HEIs remains scarce, particularly in non-Anglophone contexts and often lacks quantitative validation. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the internal marketing orientation of a Portuguese public university, focusing on how different staff members perceive the organization's efforts in four core dimensions: Informal Information Creation, Formal Face-to-Face Information Creation, Information Dissemination, and Responsiveness (Lings & Greenley, 2005; Santos & Gonçalves, 2010). The research question guiding this study is: *To what extent do staff members perceive the internal marketing orientation of their university, and how do these perceptions vary across organizational groups and influence responsiveness?*

To answer this question, a structured questionnaire based on the IMO model was administered to all teaching, non-teaching and research staff of the university. From the 67 valid responses obtained, quantitative analysis was conducted to explore central tendencies, test relationships between IMO dimensions, and identify staff clusters based on shared perceptions of internal marketing practices.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of internal marketing orientation and its application in higher education. Section 3 presents the methodology, including the conceptual framework, measurement instruments, and data collection procedures. Section 4 outlines the empirical findings, while Section 5 discusses the implications of these results. The paper concludes in Section 6 with practical recommendations and directions for future research.

2. Internal Marketing Orientation (IMO)

IMO is a multidimensional construct grounded in the idea that employees are the organization's internal customers, and that jobs should be managed as internal products (Grönroos, 1990; Berry, 1981). It aligns managerial practices with the goal of fostering employee satisfaction, engagement, and alignment with strategic objectives, thereby creating conditions for improved external service quality (Kotler, 2000; Lings & Greenley, 2005). The construct evolved from early notions of internal marketing as primarily related to training and motivation (Sasser & Arbeit, 1976), toward a more comprehensive model of market-sensing and responsiveness within the internal environment (Lings & Greenley, 2009; Gounaris, 2008).

The model proposed by Lings and Greenley (2005) identifies five behavioural dimensions of IMO: informal information creation, formal face-to-face information creation, formal written information creation, information dissemination, and responsiveness. These dimensions are operationalized based on the principles of external market orientation (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990), emphasizing the need to systematically gather intelligence on employee needs, disseminate it across the organization, and implement appropriate responses.

Empirical studies have validated the positive effects of IMO on various organizational outcomes, including employee satisfaction, commitment, compliance, and customer satisfaction (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Bansal et al., 2001; Piercy & Morgan, 1990). In particular, responsiveness to employees' feedback and concerns has been associated with stronger perceptions of organizational support and a greater likelihood of staff acting in line with institutional goals (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Vieira-dos Santos & Gonçalves, 2018).

In higher education, however, the application of internal marketing remains underexplored. Recent work by Vieira-dos Santos and Gonçalves (2018) demonstrates that a supportive organizational culture and internal communication mechanisms contribute positively to perceived organizational support among HEI staff. Nevertheless, most studies in this context are qualitative or descriptive, and few apply validated IMO models to analyse the perceptions of diverse university stakeholders.

The present study builds on this foundation by applying the Lings and Greenley (2005) framework to assess how teaching, research and technical-administrative staff in a Portuguese university perceive the institution's internal marketing orientation. By exploring both the mean evaluations and the interrelationships between IMO dimensions, the study seeks to contribute to the empirical grounding of internal marketing in the higher education sector.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Objectives

This study adopts a quantitative research design to assess the IMO of a Portuguese public university. Drawing on the model developed by Lings and Greenley (2005) and adapted for the Portuguese context by Santos and Gonçalves (2010), the research aims to evaluate how different groups of staff - academic, research, and administrative - perceive the university's performance in terms of internal information generation, dissemination, and responsiveness.

The main research objectives are: to measure the perceived levels of IMO dimensions across the university staff; to examine differences in perceptions across professional categories and organizational contexts; to analyse the interrelationships between IMO dimensions; and to identify staff clusters based on their evaluation of internal marketing practices, and derive implications for targeted internal communication strategies.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model guiding this study comprises four dimensions of internal marketing orientation (see Figure 1).

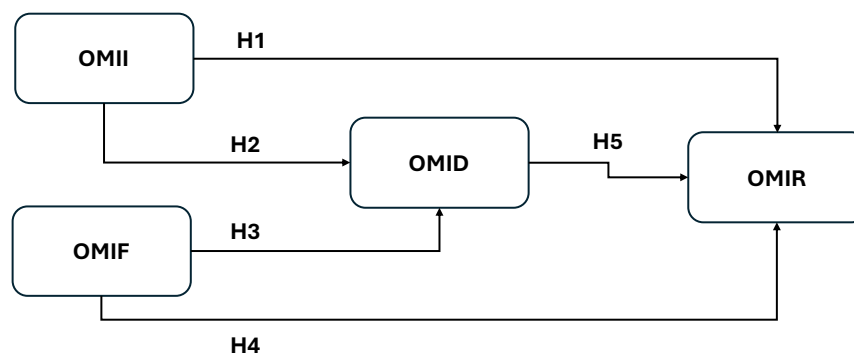


Figure 1 – Conceptual Model

The four dimensions depicted are:

- IMO - Informal information creation (OMII): the extent to which the organization gathers intelligence through informal interactions (e.g., spontaneous conversations, informal feedback);
- IMO - Formal Face-to-Face information creation (OMIF): the use of structured interactions, such as meetings or formal interviews, to collect input from staff;
- IMO - Information dissemination (OMID): the degree to which relevant information is shared across hierarchical and functional levels;
- IMO - Responsiveness (OMIR): the organization's capacity to act upon the information received and implement changes aligned with staff expectations.

While the original model includes a fifth dimension (IMO - Formal written information creation), it was excluded from the questionnaire in this study, following a pilot phase which indicated limited relevance in the institutional context under analysis.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed between February 2 and March 10, 2025, to the entire population of staff at the university, including faculty members, researchers, and administrative personnel. The instrument used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) to assess agreement with a set of statements representing the four IMO dimensions.

Prior to distribution, five pilot tests were conducted to ensure clarity and face validity. Based on feedback, minor adjustments were made to the structure and wording of the items. The final version of the questionnaire included 13 items: 7 items assessing Informal and Formal information creation, and 6 items assessing Information dissemination and Responsiveness.

3.4 Sample

A total of 67 valid responses were obtained. Respondents represented various organizational units within the university, including departments, laboratories, and administrative services. The sample included individuals with different academic backgrounds and hierarchical positions, allowing for exploratory analysis of subgroup differences.

3.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to examine the central tendencies of each IMO dimension. Group comparisons were performed using non-parametric tests to detect statistically significant differences in perceptions based on academic qualifications, work context, and functional area.

To investigate the relationships between dimensions, multiple linear regression analyses were conducted. The first model tested whether informal and formal information creation predicted information dissemination. The second model examined the effects of both information dissemination and informal information creation on organizational responsiveness.

Finally, a cluster analysis was performed to identify staff profiles based on their responses to the IMO items. These clusters were interpreted as representing distinct perceptions of the university's internal marketing practices and subsequently used to develop targeted strategic recommendations.

4. Results

4.1 Sample Characterization

The final sample comprised 67 valid responses from staff members of a Portuguese public university. Participants were diverse in their roles, organizational affiliation, and academic background. In terms of professional function, the sample included teaching staff (faculty), non-teaching technical and administrative staff (TAG), and researchers. Most respondents were affiliated with academic departments, while others worked in research laboratories or support services.

Regarding gender distribution, the sample was predominantly female, and most participants were aged between 35 and 54 years. Academic qualifications varied, with a significant proportion holding doctoral degrees, followed by master's degrees and bachelor's or equivalent. Tenure at the university also ranged broadly, with most participants having between 10 and 29 years of service.

This heterogeneity provides a comprehensive perspective on the internal marketing orientation perceived across different staff profiles and organizational contexts within the university.

4.2 Reliability Analysis

To assess the internal consistency of the instrument used to measure internal marketing orientation, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each of the four dimensions included in the model. The results indicate a high level of reliability across all dimensions, exceeding the conventional threshold of $\alpha = 0.70$ (Nunnally, 1978), and thereby confirming the robustness of the measurement scales.

- OMII - Informal Information Creation (7 items): $\alpha = 0.85$
- OMIF - Formal Face-to-Face Information Creation (3 items): $\alpha = 0.89$
- OMID - Information Dissemination (3 items): $\alpha = 0.94$
- OMIR - Responsiveness (3 items): $\alpha = 0.97$

4.3 Linear Regression Analysis

To examine the interrelationships between the core dimensions of internal marketing orientation, two multiple linear regression models were estimated. The first model explored the joint effects of informal and formal information creation on information dissemination. The second examined how dissemination and informal creation influence responsiveness.

A multiple regression model (see Table 1) was tested to evaluate the contribution of both informal (OMII) and formal face-to-face (OMIF) information creation to information dissemination (OMID). The model explained 54,8% of the variance in dissemination ($R^2 = 0.548$).

However, only **formal face-to-face information creation** emerges as a statistically significant predictor, with a strong positive effect. In contrast, informal information creation did not contribute significantly to the model when both predictors were included. The Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.507, indicating no concerning level of residual autocorrelation.

Table 1 – Regression Model Summary, ANOVA and Coefficients: Dependent Variable OMID

Model Summary ^b										
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	Durbin-Watson
1	.740 ^a	.548	.534	1.04321	.548	38.768	2	64	<.001	1.507

a. Predictors: (Constant), OMIF, OMII

b. Dependent Variable: OMID

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	84.382	2	42.191	38.768	<.001 ^b
	Residual	69.651	64	1.088		
	Total	154.033	66			

a. Dependent Variable: OMID

b. Predictors: (Constant), OMIF, OMII

Coefficients ^a						
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1.186	.331		3.587	<.001
	OMII	.136	.140	.119	.975	.333
	OMIF	.625	.118	.649	5.298	<.001

a. Dependent Variable: OMID

Source: Own elaboration

A second model (see Table 2) assessed whether both information dissemination (OMID), formal information creation (OMIR) and informal information creation (OMII) predicted responsiveness (OMIR). The model accounted for 69% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.69$)

Table 2 – Regression Model Summary, ANOVA and Coefficients: Dependent Variable OMIR

Model Summary ^b										
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	Durbin-Watson
1	.831 ^a	.690	.676	.81082	.690	46.824	3	63	<.001	1.524

a. Predictors: (Constant), OMID, OMII, OMIF

b. Dependent Variable: OMIR

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	92.350	3	30.783	46.824	<.001 ^b
	Residual	41.418	63	.657		
	Total	133.768	66			

a. Dependent Variable: OMIR

b. Predictors: (Constant), OMID, OMII, OMIF

Coefficients ^a						
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	.037	.282		.131	.896
	OMII	.376	.109	.354	3.443	.001
	OMIF	.182	.110	.203	1.658	.102
	OMID	.355	.097	.381	3.657	<.001

a. Dependent Variable: OMIR

Source: Own elaboration

Two predictors were statistically significant, **informal information creation** and **information dissemination**, with a positive effect, with a Durbin-Watson value of 1.524, indicating no concerning level of residual autocorrelation.

These results reinforce the role of **formal communication mechanisms** in enhancing internal information flow. They also highlight that both **informal information exchange and effective dissemination** play a central role in shaping employees' perceptions of organizational responsiveness.

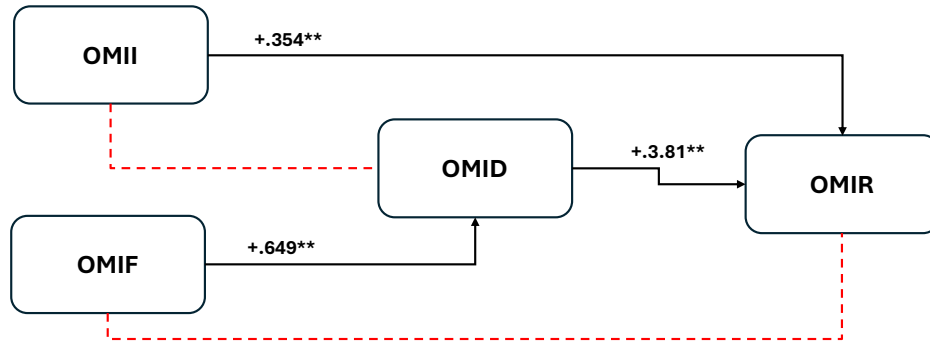


Figure 2 – Empirical Model

Source: Own elaboration

4.4 Cluster Analysis

To identify distinct perception profiles within the organization, a cluster analysis was conducted based on the four core dimensions of internal marketing orientation: informal information creation (OMII), formal face-to-face information creation (OMIF), information dissemination (OMID), and responsiveness (OMIR). A three-cluster solution was identified as the most interpretable and theoretically meaningful configuration. These groups were labelled Disconnected, Ambivalent, and Engaged, reflecting their overall evaluation profiles.

The **Disconnected** group ($n = 24$) displayed the lowest average scores across all dimensions, particularly in responsiveness ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 0.56$) and informal information creation ($M = 1.61$, $SD = 0.57$). Most respondents in this group were non-teaching technical and administrative staff (TAG), mainly female, aged 45 and above, and holding master's or doctoral degrees. They were predominantly affiliated with support services and had longer tenures (10 to 29 years) at the university. This cluster reflects a segment of staff who perceive limited access to internal communication and organizational responsiveness, and may feel structurally marginalized or organizationally distant, suggesting a need for more inclusive and informal engagement mechanisms.

The **Ambivalent** group ($n = 19$) reported moderate scores on all dimensions, especially information dissemination ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.95$) and responsiveness ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.92$), suggesting inconsistency in communication practices or mixed personal experiences. The group is mostly composed of TAG staff, with diverse educational backgrounds and mainly female. Members were distributed across support services and academic departments, with a significant proportion having over 30 years of institutional experience. This group appears to reflect uncertainty or inconsistency in communication experiences, with some access to information but a lack of alignment or strategic coherence in internal messaging.

The **Engaged** group ($n = 24$) showed the highest scores across all dimensions: information dissemination ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 0.83$), formal communication ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 0.87$), responsiveness ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.75$), and informal creation ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.65$). This group is mostly composed of TAG staff, aged mostly between 35 and 54, was predominantly affiliated with academic departments, and had a stronger presence of individuals with doctoral degrees. The results could be explained by integration in units where internal communication is strategically managed and valued. Their positive evaluations position them as potential internal ambassadors for good practices in communication and engagement.

These clusters provide a differentiated view of internal marketing orientation within the university and reinforce the idea that perceptions of internal communication vary significantly depending on professional function, tenure, and organizational context.

4.5 Nonparametric Tests

To assess whether the differences observed between the three staff clusters were statistically significant across the four dimensions of internal marketing orientation, nonparametric tests were conducted using the Kruskal-Wallis H test (see Figure 2). This approach was selected due to the non-normal distribution of the variables and the relatively small sample size within each cluster. The results revealed statistically significant differences among the groups in all four dimensions.

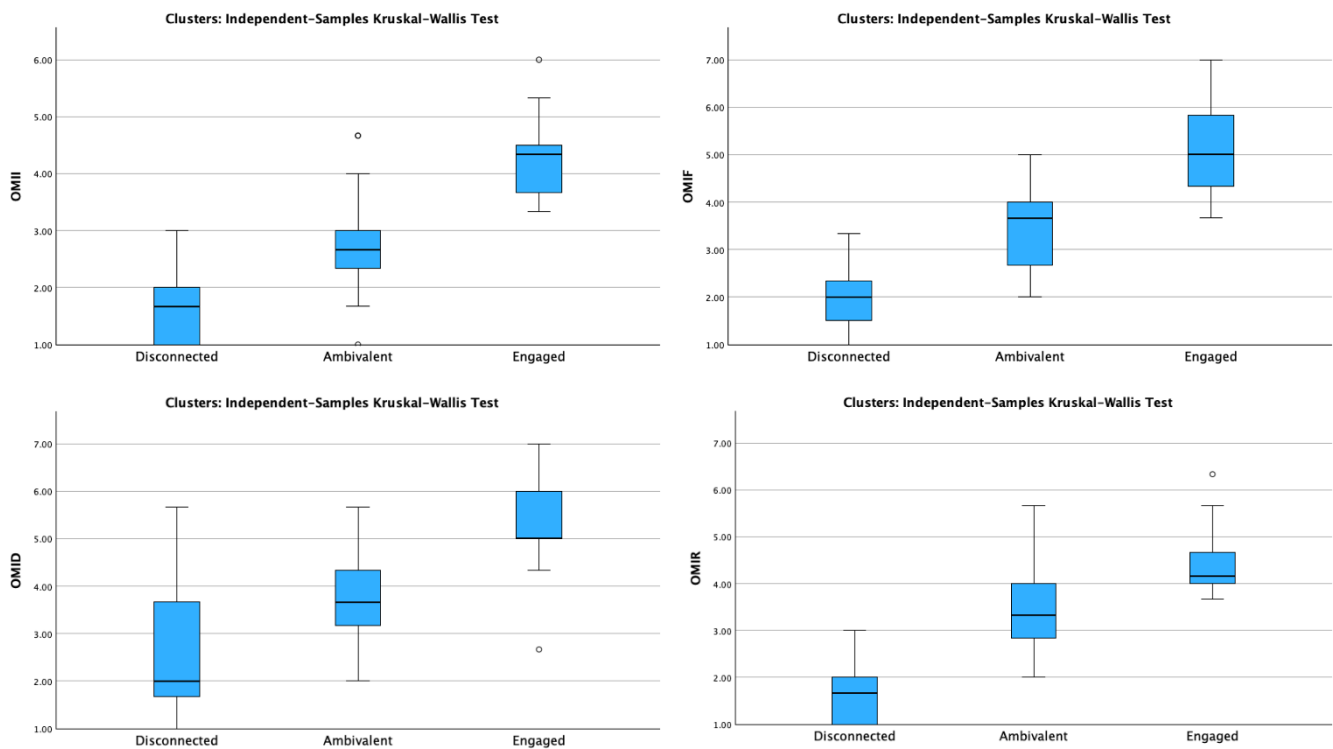


Figure 2 – Non-parametric Tests for the Cluster Groups: OMII, OMIF, OMID and OMIR

These findings confirm that the three clusters (Disconnected, Ambivalent, and Engaged) differ significantly in their perceptions of the university's internal marketing efforts. The consistently high significance across all dimensions reinforces the robustness of the cluster solution and highlights the relevance of adopting differentiated internal communication strategies based on staff segmentation.

4.6 Implications of Cluster-Specific Dynamics

The identification of distinct clusters based on perceptions of internal marketing orientation raised the question of whether the predictive relationships observed in the overall regression models are consistent across all staff segments. To explore this, the regression equations were re-estimated separately for each of the three clusters: Disconnected, Ambivalent, and Engaged.

The results reveal substantial variation in the strength and significance of the relationship across the three groups. In the Engaged group, the relationship between OMIF and OMID remained statistically significant ($\beta = 0.537$, $p = .014$), with a moderate explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.258$). This suggests that in organizational contexts perceived as communicatively mature, staff members recognize a clear link between structured communication and effective dissemination.

For the Disconnected group, the relationship between OMIF and OMID was not statistically significant. Similarly, in the Ambivalent group, the effect was negligible and non-significant. These findings suggest that for staff who are less aligned with the organization, formal communication efforts may not be sufficient (or even noticed) to improve perceived information flow. The relationships between OMIF, OMII, OMID and OMIR were not statistically significant in any of the three groups.

These discrepancies have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they point to non-invariance of the internal marketing model across organizational subcultures. Practically, they suggest that a one-size-fits-all communication strategy may be ineffective: while structured communication is impactful for some, it may be irrelevant or insufficient for others.

Therefore, future internal marketing strategies should incorporate segmentation and tailoring, recognizing that different groups of employees interpret and respond to communication practices in different ways. The integration of cluster analysis with regression modeling proves to be a valuable approach for identifying differentiated dynamics in internal marketing. It provides

evidence that staff respond to communication strategies in distinct ways, and that segmentation should inform both the design and delivery of internal communication initiatives.

The preceding analyses provide robust evidence of both general patterns and group-specific differences in how staff perceive and respond to internal marketing practices within the university. In the following section, we interpret these findings in light of the theoretical framework and relevant literature, highlighting key implications for organizational communication strategy and employee engagement in higher education institutions.

5. Discussion

This study set out to examine IMO in a Portuguese higher education institution, drawing on the model of Lings and Greenley (2005) and its validated Portuguese adaptation (Santos & Gonçalves, 2010). By combining a survey-based measurement of four core dimensions - informal information creation, formal face-to-face information creation, information dissemination, and responsiveness -with a cluster-based segmentation of the staff population, the study offers both detailed empirical insight and strategic implications regarding how different groups of staff perceive and respond to internal marketing efforts.

The results confirm the reliability and internal consistency of the IMO dimensions, and linear regression models demonstrate that formal information creation plays a key role in predicting the dissemination of information across the university. Additionally, both information dissemination and informal interaction significantly predict responsiveness, emphasizing that effective internal communication requires not only structured channels but also trust-based, spontaneous exchanges.

However, the identification of three distinct staff profiles challenges the assumption of uniformity in how communication practices are experienced. Staff alignment with the institution appears to moderate the effectiveness of formal communication: while the Engaged group clearly perceives its impact on dissemination, this relationship does not hold for the Ambivalent and Disconnected groups. This observation supports prior research suggesting that internal marketing practices are more effective when embedded in a broader organizational culture of support and mutual trust (Gounaris, 2008; Vieira-dos Santos & Gonçalves, 2018). They also support the view that internal communication is not merely transactional, but depends on relational dynamics and employee identification with the institution.

From a strategic management perspective, these findings have significant practical implications. Structured communication mechanisms may be effective in units where alignment and engagement already exist. However, for less connected groups, communication strategies should go beyond information provision and actively invest in building trust, informal dialogue, and opportunities for authentic feedback. The importance of adapting communication strategies to different internal audiences is also consistent with broader calls for human-centered and adaptive approaches to organizational change in higher education (Zhu & Engels, 2014).

Finally, the integration of cluster analysis with regression modeling contributes methodologically to the field by demonstrating how segmentation can enhance the strategic relevance of internal marketing diagnostics. Rather than relying on aggregate metrics, organizations can gain a more precise understanding of where interventions are most needed and what type of engagement strategy is likely to be effective.

6. Conclusions

This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of IMO in higher education by combining validated psychometric assessment with cluster-based segmentation. Focusing on a Portuguese public university, we investigated how employees perceive key dimensions of internal marketing: informal and formal information creation, information dissemination, and organizational responsiveness. While formal information creation was shown to be a significant predictor of dissemination, and both dissemination and informal communication predicted responsiveness, these relationships proved not to be homogeneous across the organization.

The identification of three distinct groups (Disconnected, Ambivalent, and Engaged) revealed substantial variation in how staff experience internal marketing practices. These profiles provide a strong case for the design of differentiated and targeted internal communication strategies.

For the Disconnected group, where formal efforts appear to have little impact and overall scores are low, it is essential to invest in trust-building and informal engagement mechanisms. This may include open listening sessions, informal feedback loops, and visible responsiveness to concerns raised by staff, particularly those in long-standing support roles. Enhancing informal communication opportunities may be particularly valuable in reducing perceptions of marginalization and increasing connection with the institution.

In contrast, the Ambivalent group demonstrates moderate but inconsistent perceptions. For these staff members, communication strategies should aim at stabilizing and clarifying internal messaging, through more transparent decision-making, regular structured updates from leadership, and the reinforcement of communication routines that build predictability and reduce

ambiguity. Encouraging feedback and closing the communication loop will also help strengthen the perceived credibility of the institution's internal messaging.

The Engaged group, who already experience communication positively, represents a strategic opportunity. These staff members could be mobilized as internal ambassadors, sharing good practices, mentoring colleagues in less engaged groups, and contributing to collaborative internal initiatives. Maintaining high communication quality in these units is equally crucial to sustaining engagement levels over time.

From a strategic perspective, this study highlights the value of combining cluster analysis with regression modelling to allow identification of areas for improvement in internal marketing orientation. The results provide institutional leaders with a stronger empirical foundation for designing segmented and context-sensitive internal communication strategies, allowing to evolve from a one-size-fits-all model and aligning with the diverse realities and experiences of its internal audiences.

This study is not without limitations. The analysis was conducted in a single institution and based on a relatively small sample, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the use of self-report data introduces the risk of response biases, and the cross-sectional nature of the design precludes causal interpretations.

Future research could address these limitations by adopting longitudinal designs to track changes in perceptions over time and assess the impact of targeted interventions. Comparative studies across universities or national contexts would also deepen our understanding of how organizational culture mediates internal marketing practices. In addition, mixed-methods approaches, e.g., combining surveys with interviews or focus groups, could offer richer insight into the mechanisms behind communication perceptions. Finally, multigroup structural equation modeling could formally test the invariance of the internal marketing model across organizational subgroups, providing a more rigorous statistical basis for segmented communication strategies.

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