

# Descriptive Evidence on the Role of Corporate Brands in Marketing Higher Education Services

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The intangible and inseparable nature of services is generally thought to increase the risk perceived by consumers when making purchase decisions. This higher level of perceived risk arises because, relative to physical goods, services are characterized by higher levels of experience and credence qualities and lower levels of search qualities. Building brand equity for a service is increasingly recognized as a means of mitigating that risk and creating a strong identity for a service in an increasingly competitive marketplace. The service sector chosen for the empirical research was higher education services in Egypt. In essence, higher education is a professional service characterized by a high level of experience qualities which make the purchase risky and means that branding is important as a source of reassurance to students about the quality of what they will receive. The paper begins with a brief overview of relevant literature and then proceeds to outline the components of brand equity providing the conceptual framework which guides the research. Subsequently, the empirical work is presented, focusing on the comparison between experienced and inexperienced consumers to assess the extent to which corporate brands are able to communicate information about key features of a service. Finally, the results of the survey are discussed and the managerial implications are presented.

*Key words:* service marketing; perceived risk; brand equity; marketing higher education; students' choice in higher education; Egypt higher education market

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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores the role of corporate brands as a source of information about features of a service. In order to assess how effectively corporate brands communicate with consumers, the views of experienced and inexperienced consumers are compared across a series of key brand dimensions. The paper begins with a brief overview of relevant literature and then proceeds to outline the components of brand equity providing the conceptual framework that guides the research. Subsequently, the data collection process is outlined, the results of a survey of experienced and inexperienced consumers are discussed and conclusions and limitations are presented.

## 2. Characteristics and Perceived Risk

The distinctive characteristics of services, namely intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity, and perishability have been discussed extensively in the services marketing literature as have their marketing implications (eg

Bateson, 1991; Zeithaml, 1991). It is widely recognized that, as a consequence of these characteristics, consumers perceive higher degrees of risk when making purchases of services compared with purchases of physical goods (Laroche, Bergeron, and Goutaland, 2003; Mitchell & Greatedex, 1993; Mitchell, 1999). That is to say that consumer will find difficulties in evaluating the service before they experience it (Bateson, 1991; Murray, 1991; Laroche et al., 2003; Mitchell & Greatedex, 1993; Mitchell, 1999). As a result, consumer selection of the service will tend to be regarded as a high risk decision, and consumers are likely to experience difficulties in the pre-purchase as well as the post purchase evaluation of the service. This higher level of perceived risk arises because, relative to physical goods, services are characterized by higher levels of experience and credence qualities and lower levels of search qualities. Hence, consumer decision making is complicated by the fact that a service can only be reliably evaluated on or after purchase and the resulting high levels of perceived risk may even reduce propensity to buy. The difficulties created by risk perceptions may be amplified in the case of high credence services which are difficult to evaluate even after consumption.

There are a number of external and internal risk reduction strategies available to service organizations. External strategies that reduce perceived risk include enhancing reputation, strong advertising campaigns, and other public relation and publicity activities (Bateson, 1991; Temple, 2006; Chen,2008). The resulting higher levels of familiarity with the brand are believed to engender greater feelings of security (Biel, 1992). In contrast, internal strategies for reducing risk are based on monitoring the consumer's past experience with the brand in order to reduce uncertainty (Bateson, 1991). It is often suggested that building strong brands is probably the most effective way of reducing perceived risk. Teas and Grapentine (1996) have demonstrated the significant role played by brands in providing information to the consumer, reducing perceived risk and simplifying the selection process. Similarly, Turley and Moore (1995) have noted the importance of brands as a source of information to consumers about the characteristics of the service that cannot be evaluated in advance of consumption.

### 3. Consumer Selection Criteria in the Service Industries

Studies of choice criteria in service industries have identified a range of specific factors that influence consumers. Tables 1-4 present a typology of the factors influencing consumer choice based on a review of existing theoretical and empirical research.

The first type of selection criteria is described as "consumer-based". This category includes choice criteria that directly relate to the consumer who selects the service. These factors are the personality of the consumer, his/her past experience with the service, and other socioeconomic and lifestyle factors that directly influence the purchase decision. This category is illustrated in more detail in Table 1.

**Table 1 Consumer- Based Selection Criteria**

<b>Selection Criteria</b>	<b>Literature Review</b>
Personality	Gabbot & Hogg (1998) conceptually highlighted the role of consumer's personality in affecting the consumer choice of the service. They related the personality to the personal perception of the service.
Consumer experience	Gabbot & Hogg (1998) conceptually highlighted the role of consumer's previous experience with the service in affecting his/her choice. They mentioned that consumer's experience influences his/her confidence in the service since "all consumers learn from their experiences and therefore build a bank of experience-based information behaviors and roles upon which to draw when purchasing or evaluating goods and services" (p.39).
Socio- economic and lifestyle factors	Aaker (1991) mentioned that the standard of living of the consumer influences his/her selection of the service. However, he did not empirically test this factor hence it could not be generalized especially that it depends on the type of service

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The second type of selection criteria is described as “provider-based”. This category encompasses factors that relate to the organization providing the service, including size, historical background, nationality of the organization providing the service, and its location. This category is illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2 Organization-Based Selection Criteria**

<b>Selection Criteria</b>	<b>Literature Review</b>
Size and longevity of the organization	Keller (1993) mentioned that the size of the organization and historical background influence consumer choice behavior. Organisational longevity and success will affect the image of the organization in the consumers’ minds and hence will influence choice.
Country of origin	The nationality of the company providing the service, affects the selection decision. This can vary from one service to another, according to country reputation. Nowlis and Simonson (1997), empirically demonstrated that the inferior country of origin negatively affects consumer choice.
Service location	The location of the organization providing the service plays a major role in influencing the consumer’s buying decision (Laroche & Manning, 1984).

The third type of selection criteria is described as being “information-based”. This category includes the marketing activities that the organization providing the service performs in order to attract the consumers to buy the service. Activities, such as advertising, personnel selling, sponsorship, etc, provide consumers with sources of information about the service that might be expected influence their decisions. This category is illustrated in more detail in Table 3.

**Table 3 Information-Based Selection Criteria**

<b>Selection Criteria</b>	<b>Literature Review</b>
Information resources	Gabbot & Hogg (1998), and Zeithaml (1991) conceptually highlighted the role of information resources in affecting the consumer choice of the service.  It should be noted that this criterion was empirically tested by Murray (1991), who provided evidence that consumers use an organization’s marketing activities to evaluate and select a specific service.

The final type of selection criteria is described as “service -based” and includes all factors that relate to the service provided. It includes factor such as the price of the service, quality, delivery, and guarantees. This category is illustrated in more detail in Table 4.

After reviewing the different types of criteria that influence consumer choice, it could be argued that, in practice, the majority of these relate to an overall evaluation of the service brand. Nowlis and Simonson (1997), empirically demonstrated that an inferior brand name negatively affects the consumer choice. More generally, it is helpful to explore, the specific links between the determinants of the service brand and the criteria that influence the consumer choice of the service (Binsardi and Ekwulgo, 2003)

**Table 4 Service Provided-Based Selection Criteria**

Selection Criteria	Literature Review
Price	Tse (2001) and Nowlis & Simonson (1997), provide empirical evidence that price affects consumer choice of a service. Bateson (1991) and Gabbott & Hogg (1998) made the same argument from a conceptual point of view.
Quality of the service	Quality is reflected in a range of attributes such as the availability of modern facilities, durability of the service, appearance of the staff, etc. Tse (2001), for example, empirically demonstrated that service quality affects the consumer selection process. Zeithaml (1991) made the same argument from a conceptual perspective.
Service delivery	Since people are the source of service delivery, the friendliness of the employees, the speed of service delivery, and the ability of the staff to establish good relationship with the consumer, influence the consumer choice (Laroche & Manning, 1984). Katz, Larson, and Larson (1991), empirically tested waiting in line as part of the service delivery and proved that it affects consumer satisfaction and hence service choice.
Service guarantee	Hart (1988) conceptually showed that service guarantee decreases the perceived risk and hence can be expected to affect choice.

Starting with the consumer category (Table 1), the consumer’s personality and other socioeconomic factors may affect the consumer perception of the brand and hence brand choice (Parsons, 2002). In addition, the consumer’s previous experience with the service, affects his/her perception of the brand and hence the selection process (Keller, 2000). Moving on to the organization category (Table 2), positive perceptions of attributes such as size, nationality, history, and location will tend to result in a positive service brand image that may also be expected to impact on the selection decision (Zeithaml, 1991). Information based choice criteria will tend to be particularly relevant to brand recall and recognition (Keller, 1993) which can in turn provide useful signals to consumers during the decision making process (Gabbot & Hogg, 1998). Finally, with respect to the service-based category, the brand will embody information about service specific attributes and thereby will input to the purchase decision (Teas & Grapentine, 1996). For example consumers are usually willing to pay higher prices for brands that they perceive to be better quality (Erdem & Swait, 1998) with the brand being essentially a signaling device.

#### **4. The Role of Brand as a Risk Reliever in Service Industries**

It is generally accepted that services have a number of characteristics that differentiate them from pure goods. These characteristics, arguably, make the selection process for a services more complex and characterised by a higher level of perceived risk (Zeithaml, 1991; Binsardi and Ekwulgo, 2003).

There are several types of perceived risk, namely financial, performance, physical, psychological, time, and social risk (Laroche et al., 2003). Risk perceptions depend on the following dimensions: time involved for the consumer to select the service, the involvement of the consumer in the delivery process, the efficiency of the delivery process, the amount of human contact in the delivery of the service, and the amount of effort involved in the delivery process (Bateson, 1991). However, it has been argued that when consumer enters the service factory for the first time, perceived risk is very high; however, as he/she is involved in the process of information collection, the level of perceived risk decreases and the consumer becomes more loyal to the brand (Byron, 1995; Laroche et al., 2003).

Earlier discussions have highlighted the diversity of factors that influence service selection and noted the difficulties of pre-purchase evaluation for many of these factors. The brand has been identified as a source of information about such attributes and as such can serve as a mechanism for decreasing the perceived risk associated with service selection. The brand has a significant role to play in the service selection process because it provides information which consumers would otherwise lack. In effect, the brand serves as a promise that will be fulfilled when the service is consumed (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1998).

The brand is a means of signalling, i.e. providing information to consumers about the characteristics of the service that cannot be evaluated in advance of consumption (Turley & Moore, 1995). When consumers select a brand they evaluate the functional capabilities of the brand as well as the symbolic meaning associated with it (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1998). In a service setting, the brand is translated into the behavior, style, appearance, voice, beliefs, and attitudes of the service personnel (De Chernatony, 2001). These aspects are translated in the minds of the consumers and create a brand image with functional and emotional dimensions, both of which will be relevant to consumers' selection decisions.

In order to understand the consumer decision process in the service sector, it is important to refer to the brand name as a set of perceptions, images, and beliefs derived from the consumer's past experience or the availability of information about the brand that directly affect the decision. In other words, brand is one of the main determinants of consumer choice of the service as it creates image and reputation in the consumers' minds (Turley & Moore, 1995; Temple, 2006; Chen, 2008). As a result, the following section will focus on the concept of brand equity as well as its determinants from the consumer's point of view which represent the conceptual framework of this research.

## 5. Service Brand Equity: A Conceptual Framework

The attributes of a product can be classified as search, experience, and credence qualities and services are characterized by a preponderance of experience and credence qualities. Search qualities are defined by Teas and Grapentine (1996) as the features of the product or the service "that can be evaluated by acquiring information during pre-purchase decision process" (p.25). In contrast, experience qualities can only be evaluated during the consumption process while credence qualities are difficult to evaluate even after the service consumption (Lemon, 2001). It is the predominance of experience and the credence qualities in services that increase the perceived risk associated with the purchase decision (Gabbott & Hogg, 1998; Lemon, 2001) and a common marketing response is to focus attention on building strong brands to provide consumers with a source of information and reassurance. If brands are to be effective as a source of information for a service, they must be able to communicate effectively information about search, experience and credence qualities and it is their ability to communicate about experience and credence qualities that is arguably of greatest significance because of the lack of alternative sources of information about these attributes.

In order to understand how effectively brands communicate with consumers, this study utilises the concept of brand equity. Marconi (1993) differentiated between brand and brand equity as follows: "A brand is a name; brand equity is the value of that name" (p.ix). This is also supported by De Chernatony and McDonald (1998), who defined brand equity as "the differential attributes underpinning a brand which give increased value to the firm's balance sheet" (p.397). Based on the same concept, Kohli and Leuthesser (2001) defined brand equity "as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response" (p.74). For the purposes of this study, brand equity is viewed not from the financial perspective but rather from the consumer perspective. Brand equity measures the value provided to consumers that is associated with the brand name. It is important because it provides information about search, experience and credence attributes and this information in turn provides reassurance, fills gaps in consumer knowledge and thus influences consumer choice (Teas and Grapentine, 1996).

A consumer perspective on brand equity can be formalized drawing on the work of Keller (1993) and Aaker (1991, 1994). Keller (1993) argued that **brand awareness** and **brand image** are the two main dimensions or components of brand equity. The drivers or determinants of these two components are identified based on the work of Aaker (1991, 1994), Keller (1993) and Vorhies (1997) and classified, where appropriate, according to whether they provide information on search, experience or credence attributes. First, the **awareness dimension** of brand equity is determined by the information available about the brand from the promotional activities that are conducted by the organization and from the word of mouth about the brand (Aaker, 1991, 1994; Keller, 1993). The second dimension of brand equity is **brand image**, the determinants of which are identified by drawing on Vorhies' (1997) categorization of brand associations as symbolic attributes,

service attributes, provider attributes and consumer attributes. The **symbolic attributes** include brand's social image and positioning in the market which are considered search qualities (Lovelock, 1991; Temple, 2006; Kurz, Scannell, and Veeder, 2008; Chen, 2008; Mourad, 2010; Paden and Stell, 2006) as well as brand personality which is considered to be a credence quality (Yoo, Donthu, and Lee, 2000).

The **service attributes** include price which is one of the main search attributes used by the consumer to signal quality (Gabbott & Hogg, 1998; Zeithaml, 1991) as well as the quality of the service and the after sales service both of which qualify as experience qualities (Gabbott & Hogg, 1998; Teas & Grapentine, 1996; Kurz, Scannell, and Veeder, 2008; Chen, 2008) The final determinant of brand image in this category is the benefit from consuming the service which would qualify as a credence quality (Lemon, 2001).

**Provider attributes** play a major role in determining brand equity in service industries. These include the quality of the staff and their relationship with the consumers (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1998; Marconi, 1993; Chen, 2008). It should be noted that these determinants are assessed after consumption of the service hence; they are experience qualities (Gabbott & Hogg, 1998; Teas & Grapentine, 1996). Other relevant provider attributes include location, country of origin, historical image and size which are classified as search qualities (Lovelock, 1991; Chen, 2008; Kurzetel, 2008).

The framework also includes **consumer attributes** such as consumer experience and socio-economic factors that impact on perceptions of brand equity (Lockwood and Hadd, 2007). The risk associated with a service may be perceived differently according to the social background, attitudes, feelings, beliefs, culture, and other characteristics of consumers (Thomas 1981) and consequently brand equity may vary across consumers.

This framework provides a comprehensive overview of the ways in which a brand is able to deliver value to consumers. At the heart of this framework are a series of elements which provide information on search, experience and credence qualities. Consumers with no experience of the product or service may either draw on the brand for information about search qualities or may access alternative sources of information. These inexperienced consumers must rely primarily on the brand for information about experience and credence qualities. In contrast, experienced consumers will be less dependent on the brand for search and experience qualities, being able to draw on their existing knowledge, but may still be reliant on the brand to assess credence qualities. If marketing activities are effective and the brand communicates the reality of the service then inexperienced and experienced consumers will have similar perceptions of search, experience and credence qualities. If there are disparities between what is communicated and the reality of the service experience then differences between the two groups of consumers would be expected, most specifically in relation to experience qualities.

## 6. Determinants of Brand Equity in Higher Education Service

Higher education provides an interesting and important context for the research, since HE institutions across the world have become increasingly "marketing-oriented" and students increasingly become "consumers" (Chen, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2008). In addition, higher education is one of the most important services offered in any economy, yet, it is difficult to evaluate its quality in advance, and consumers usually perceive the selection of the education service as a risky decision. It plays a major role in their future career and it is relatively an expensive service (Binsardi and Ekwulgo, 2003). In essence, higher education is a professional service characterized by a high level of experience qualities which make the purchase risky and means that branding is important as a source of reassurance to students about the quality of what they will receive (Mitchell, 1999). In addition, education is characterized by a high level of credence qualities as consumer will find it difficult to evaluate some of its features even after consumption (Byron, 1995).

There is a shortage in the empirical work focusing on the investigation of brand image or brand equity in Higher Education service in an emerging market, although there have been a number of studies looking at the broader issue of selection of HE provider. Table 5 summarises the results of existing research on choice criteria and links these findings to the determinants of brand equity discussed in the previous section.

**Table 5 Determinants of Brand Equity in Education Service**

<b>General Brand Equity Determinants</b>	<b>Brand Determinants in Higher Education Service</b>	<b>Source</b>
Consumer-staff relationship	Academic & non-academic performance Student Support	Cheng & Tam, 1997; Davies & Ellison, 1997; Kent, Lian, Khan, and Anene, 1993; Smith & Ennew, 2000
Size of the university	Positively affect brand reputation and ranking in the market.	Ferris & Stallings, 1988; Hagstrom, 1971; Kent et al., 1993; Oromaner, 1970; Temple, 2006; Chen, 2008
Availability of information	Curriculum information Extra-curriculum Posters Magazine ads Local press Regional press National press Radio TV Yellow pages Press releases Direct mail	Davies & Ellison, 1997
Service quality Availability/ Accessibility Reliability & Stability	Academic provision Curriculum structure Academic facilities Libraries General facilities Accommodation support Buildings Sport facilities Laboratories Course availability Curriculum delivery	Cheng & Tam, 1997 Davies & Ellison, 1997 Kent et al., 1993 Smith & Ennew, 2000
Fees of the university	Price is a key factor in the private education sector and it influences the parents' and students' choice. In addition, the fees reflect the quality of the education service provided.	Davies & Ellison, 1997 Kotler & Fox, 1995
Personality and lifestyle	General environment of the university.	Cheng & Tam, 1997

Higher education is characterized by high experience qualities and as such it is difficult to evaluate until after consumption. This contributes to perceived risk and makes branding important as a source of reassurance to students about the quality of what they will receive. It may also be the case that some aspects of higher

education are credence qualities which consumers will find difficult to evaluate even after consumption (Byron, 1995; Chen, 2008; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2008).

The presence of significant experience and credence qualities combined with a relatively high price mean that choice of University will tend to be characterised by a high level of perceived risk. The brand (and brand name) has a key role to play in decreasing the perceived risk associated with the selection of a University (Davies & Ellison, 1997; Vázquez et al., 2002; Chen, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2008). Despite its apparent importance, there is a shortage of research on the nature of brand equity in higher education service. The next section outlines the methods used to explore brand equity and service characteristics in the higher education sector in Egypt.

## **7. Research Methodology**

### **7.1 Context of the Research**

Egypt provides an interesting context for research on brand equity in higher education. The higher education service in Egypt faces significant marketing challenges; the demand for higher education is growing and the sector is undergoing considerable change, with a range of new, private providers joining established publicly funded universities. This has created considerable uncertainty in the market place in relation to assessments of the quality of different providers. The emergence of the new private universities introduced to the market the concept of competition among universities (both private and public) as each of the new private universities had to build brands in order to communicate their service offer to the marketplace (Khaled, Said, and Kortam, 2001).

### **7.2 Measurement and Data Collection**

The main objective of the empirical work was to explore the evaluation of search, experience and credence qualities in higher education service. These qualities are measured through the development of a structured questionnaire with closed ended questions that was designed to collect data regarding the applicants' perception to the determinants of their first and last choice University brands in Egypt. A non-probability sample was used and respondents were accessed via Schools and Universities. The final sample comprised 300 valid cases. 135 respondents were high school students, representing inexperienced consumers and 165 respondents were enrolled in foreign, private and public universities in Egypt representing experienced consumers. Each respondent provided two sets of ratings.

The measurement scales were selected mainly from studies that measure the determinants of brand equity (Yoo, et al, 2000; and others). Original scales were created when there were no relevant measurements available. Most constructs were measured using multiple item scales in order to ensure a high level of reliability.

The questionnaire was divided into 4 parts. In the first part respondents were asked to select their first and last choice university brand. The second part concentrated on the first choice university brand and respondents were asked detailed questions relating to the determinants of the first university choice brand equity i.e., what factors led them to rate this brand as their first choice brand. The third part included the same questions but related to the last choice university brand. The fourth part included questions relating to the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents. The questionnaire ended with a straight forward question asking the students to evaluate each university brand on a Likert scale ranging from best to worst brand.

## **8. Results**

### **Perception of Brand Equity**

Table 7 presents an overall descriptive analysis of the first and last choice brands in terms of the rating of determinants of brand equity for each group. Experienced consumers (current university students) are expected to be better placed to evaluate experience qualities when compared with inexperienced consumers (high school students). Both groups should be similarly able to assess search qualities and credence qualities as consumption experience does not directly impact on knowledge of these attributes. In Table 7 ratings of first and last choice university brands are compared between two groups of consumers and observed differences are tested for significance.

**Table 7 Search, Experience, and Credence Qualities of University Brand Equity**

Determinants of brand equity		First Choice			Last Choice		
		Mean (HS)	Mean (Uni)	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean (HS)	Mean (Uni)	Sig. (2-tailed)
Search Qualities	International Relations	5.536	5.507	-	3.05	2.818	-
	History	6.156	5.931	-	2.86	3.016	-
	Location	4.721	4.495	-	3.42	3.754	-
	Position	5.670	5.888	-	1.94	2.140	-
	Social image	5.933	5.907	-	1.79	1.857	-
	Size	5.585	5.233	p<0.05	3.66	3.788	-
	Word of Mouth	5.672	5.776	-	3.49	3.323	-
	Promotion	3.600	4.049	p<0.05	3.16	2.797	-
	Price (Value)	5.306	4.808	p<0.01	2.64	2.883	-
Experience Qualities	Relations	5.615	5.539	-	2.31	2.400	-
	Quality	5.872	5.909	-	1.91	2.087	-
	Staff	5.670	5.612	-	2.24	2.524	-
	Personality	5.665	5.727	-	2.46	2.430	-
	After sales services	5.193	5.342	-	2.26	2.233	-
Credence Qualities	Benefit	5.751	5.758	-	2.05	2.186	-

It is clear from Table 7 that there are few significant differences in the perception of the determinants of brand equity by experienced and non experienced consumers in the case of the first choice university and none at all in the case of the last choice university. Interestingly, where significant differences do arise they seem to relate to search qualities. For instance, inexperienced (high school students) positively rated the size and value of the university but are more negative with respect to promotion. It is also noticeable that the means for search qualities range from comparatively low values (3.600 for promotion) to comparatively high values (6.156) for history. The fact that both experienced and inexperienced consumers have access to sources of information other than just the brand suggests that consumers may find the evaluation of search qualities comparatively easy. Consequently it is perhaps unsurprising that both experienced and inexperienced consumers are able to be relatively more discriminating in their ratings of these attributes.

Regarding the experience and credence qualities, there are no significant differences between the two groups of consumers. This is less surprising in the case of credence qualities which are difficult for both groups of consumers to evaluate. The finding is rather more surprising in the case of experience qualities. Current students have both their own experience and the information contained in the brand; high school students have only the information contained in the brand. The fact that the evaluations of both groups of consumers are essentially similar may imply that the information that inexperienced consumers get from the brand is well aligned with the reality as understood by experienced consumers.

Given that it is in relation to the first choice university that students would focus their efforts in terms of evaluation, the following analysis will focus on the first choice university brand only in order to differentiate

between the perception of the attributes of brand equity from the point of view of experienced and inexperienced consumers.

To gain further insights into the way in which the two groups evaluate brand equity, Table 8 reports correlation between the individual elements which determine brand awareness and brand image and overall brand equity.

**Table 8 Correlations Between Overall Brand Equity and its determinants: First Choice University Brand**

First Choice					
High School students			University students		
Attribute	P	Sig.	Attribute	P	Sig.
Relation with staff	0.433	0.000	Quality	0.568	0.000
Staff	0.338	0.000	Personality	0.567	0.000
Social image	0.329	0.000	Benefit	0.540	0.000
Quality	0.317	0.000	Relation with staff	0.537	0.000
Size	0.303	0.000	Social Image	0.506	0.000
Word of Mouth	0.285	0.001	Staff	0.475	0.000
Position	0.274	0.001	Position	0.408	0.000
Price	0.252	0.003	After sales	0.356	0.000
International Relations	0.227	0.008	Location	0.348	0.000
Personality	0.227	0.008	Word of mouth	0.308	0.000
History	0.189	0.028	Price	0.269	0.000
Benefit	0.167	0.052	Size	0.234	0.003
Promotion	0.162	0.061	History	0.231	0.003
After Sales	0.158	0.066	International Relations	0.172	0.028
Location	0.055	0.525	Promotion	0.161	0.038

For inexperienced consumers (high school students), relationship with staff has the strongest correlation with overall brand equity, followed by staff, social image and quality. In the case of experienced consumers (current students), quality and brand personality have the strongest correlations with overall brand equity, closely followed by benefits and relationships with staff. For both groups of consumers, search qualities tend to have relatively weak associations with overall brand equity but both groups recognize the significance of experience qualities. Credence qualities in the form of educational benefits are more strongly associated with brand equity for experienced consumers than for inexperienced consumers.

Thus there are high levels of similarity in the overall ratings of the elements of brand equity by experienced and inexperienced consumers. There are clearly also similarities in the relationship between overall brand equity and the individual elements, although interestingly credence qualities assume much greater importance for experienced consumers. The relatively weak relationship between overall brand equity and search qualities is clearly apparent in both groups as is the importance of experience qualities.

## 9. Conclusions

In service industries, brand plays a major role in consumer selection decisions because of its ability to convey information about experience and credence qualities and thus reduce consumers' perceived risk (Binsardi and Ekwulgo, 2003; Chen, 2008). To assess how effectively corporate brands (in the form of Egyptian universities) communicate information about search, experience and credence qualities, this paper has examined the brand equity assessments of experienced and inexperienced consumers. Differences were expected to arise between

the two groups in relation to experience qualities, where the current students were expected to benefit from the extra information that they have gained from their status as actual consumers. The analysis revealed comparatively few differences between the two groups in terms of their ratings of different elements of brand equity. Further analysis suggested that there is considerable similarity in the relationship between the elements of brand equity and overall brand equity for both groups of consumers. This evidence suggests that experienced consumers may be gaining relatively little additional information from their consumption experience beyond what is contained in the corporate brand. This would imply that the information contained in the corporate brand is well aligned with the realised experience of consumers or that the brand reputation is strong enough to dominate realised experience (Temple, 2006; Chen, 2008).

The identified variability in ratings of search qualities suggests that consumers are able to discriminate between these dimensions of brand equity. Many of these attributes (size, history) are difficult to change and search qualities were generally found to have the weakest impact on overall brand equity suggesting that these will provide limited opportunities to really build value for consumers. In many cases, the factors that qualify as search qualities are outside the immediate core benefits that the service offers and so their reduced level of importance may be unsurprising. Experience and credence qualities have a stronger impact on overall brand equity, because they more closely represent the core service. The limited variability in the mean scores on the various experience and credence qualities examined does suggest that consumers may have greater difficulty in making judgements about these attributes.

As with any research, there are a number of limitations to this study. It is essentially descriptive and seeks to provide preliminary evidence regarding the effectiveness of corporate brands. Further research is needed to provide more in depth and causal analysis. Moreover, the study used a non random sample, from a single city in Egypt and focused on prospective and current consumers but not on past consumers (ie graduates). Finally the brand equity framework focused on the consumers' perspective only and did not address the organisational or financial perspectives.

Clearly, given the potential significance of branding in a service industry context and the considerable importance attached to corporate brands, there is scope for significant additional research in this area. In particular, there is a need for further research to explore the nature of service brands and service brand equity across a range of contexts to provide a greater understanding of what makes a strong brand, how consumers use brand based information and to provide insights into the ways in which service brands should be managed.

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