

Examining antecedents and consequences of university brand image

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ABSTRACT

This research empirically attempted to assess the effect of brand familiarity and perceived service quality on brand image as well as to explore the position of brand image on student satisfaction in addressing previous efforts' mixed outcomes and bridging the gaps in the private higher education area. The data were collected from students of Jadara university in Jordan. PLS-SEM methods were used to test hypothesized relationships on a sample of 112 students. The findings show that familiarity with the brand and perceived quality of service had an important and beneficial connection with the image of the brand. Also, there was an important and positive connection between brand image and students' satisfaction. The revision has discussed the finding and an implication compared with past studies. These findings have significant implications for private higher education institutions that may be taken into consideration when developing their marketing plan. The finding will help design strategies to increase students' satisfaction and improve brand image. It has also presented some of recommendations for upcoming investigation.

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1. Introduction

In many nations, the higher education industry plays a major role for the extensive development process (Maekae, 2013). Universities spend millions of dollars each year on investment in teaching (Badran, 2014). In Jordan, this sector has witnessed a boom in the growth of private universities beside the public universities (Ministry of Higher Education & Scientific Research, 2018). These universities as a whole constitute a valuable part of the economic base of country (Badran, 2014; Hailat, 2016; Wagfi, 2014). In short, a university is no longer just a higher learning institution, it is also a business institution (Azoury et al., 2014, p.1). Of late, competition is rising tremendously in the education industry (Azoury et al., 2014; Duarte et al., 2010; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). Private colleges with lower brand images face a competitive market challenge (Chen, 2016, p.23). In this regard, private universities in Jordan are facing many challenges nowadays because of the increasingly intense competition between brands in domestic market (Hailat, 2016). To overcome the challenges of competitive pressures, the institutions in higher education sector are increasingly adopting branding and marketing strategies (Balaji, Roy & Sadeque, 2016). According to Plungpongpan et al. (2016) in the decision process, prospective students recognize universities that can distinguish themselves by generating powerful brand images (p.572). The universities today spend millions of dollars to burish their brand image (Azoury et al., 2014). The image is a vital factor when we distinguish between the products and services of companies. In this regard, private academic organizations' have also started to build their brand images and pay more attention to this component in the competitive market to attract more learners (Dejnaka et al., 2016).

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The increase in the competition among the academic organizations has helped them create a unique brand to attract prospective students (Hosseini & Nahad, 2012; Sung & Yang, 2008). The positive brand image of a university leads to attract more students, gain external sources of funding and public attitude toward university (Landrum et al., 1999). The studies related to measuring the image of the university are scarce (Hosseini & Nahad, 2012; Hysi & Shyle, 2015; Plungpongpan et al., 2016). However, this study will be extended to this context as a fresh zone of marketing management studies especially in developing countries. There is little research in the field of branding management that has mentioned the antecedents of brand image. Brands are the valuable assets for business firms (Alkhaldeh et al., 2016a). This study aims to expand the prior study that examined the effect of university brand familiarity as the antecedent of university brand image, (Hosseini & Nahad, 2012) by adding a new construct, which is perceived service quality (Ishaq et al., 2014).

Quality and familiarity with the brand are still the most important criteria for decision (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). The researchers also added the outcome of brand image, i.e. students' satisfaction (Azoury et al., 2014). Universities have to pay attention to students' satisfaction (Chen, 2016). Satisfaction has been seen as a reflection of positive emotional and cognitive states (Quan et al., 2020). Nevertheless, few studies have tried to take into account the impact of these constructs (Azoury et al., 2014; Chen, 2016; Hameed et al., 2014; Hosseini & Nahad, 2012). In addition to their rarity, these studies have revealed conflicting results. This article suggests to examine the connection between brand familiarity and perceived service quality on brand image, and brand image with students' satisfaction. This study is considered as one of the main issues of the modern marketing management, as this issue has become the center of attention of universities, and it controls the formation of the market. The need of private universities to create their brand on the Jordanian market no longer provokes controversy. The image has become the main factor for academic organizations' and their marketing policies (Dejnaka et al., 2016).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brand Image

Brand image is the key element in marketing (Alkhaldeh et al., 2016b; Chen, 2016). It is a set of beliefs and feelings that is prone merely to a cognitive approach. It allows to distinguish between products and services from others (Dejnaka et al., 2016). It has become the main factor for academic organizations and their marketing policies. According to Azoury et al. (2014) "universities with a powerful unique image will be better to compete effectively in the near future" (p.6). In the universities' context, the primary objective of image management was the need to attract students and distinguish themselves from others (Dejnaka et al., 2016, p.342). The increasing role of the image has resulted in increased competitiveness between universities (Hosseini & Naha 2012, p. 68). In addition, the significance of the image of academic organizations has a beneficial impact on their location in the rankings (Azoury et al., 2013). Currently, the image of a college is vital in the eyes of overseas candidates in the competitive educational market (Woodall et al., 2014). Consequently, "marketers in the area of higher education service should realize that developing a positive brand image is more important than creating awareness" (Mourad et al., 2011, p. 415). For universities, brand image is critical (Chen, 2016).

Helgesen and Nasset (2007) recorded a favorable impact of college image on the likelihood of students attending new classes at the same university and further education. Similarly, Beerli Palacio et al. (2002) reported that students' experience, understanding, and emotions towards the higher education organization shape the general assessment of university image. Brand image is vital for helping private institution of higher education gain entry to the brand consideration set. Creating the brand image of the private university is essential to the long-term survival of the university (Plungpongpan et al., 2016). Although organizational image has been examined frequently in other sectors, it has been seldom studied in the education arena. There is still lack of literature on the subject of university image, consequently, future studies are recommended to investigate brand image (Ramli et al., 2015).

2.2 Brand Familiarity

According to Netemeyer et al. (2004), brand familiarity is seen as the degree to which a customer is familiar with the brand name. It refers to the accumulated consumer experience, including direct and indirect experience, related to the product or service (Yang et al., 2015, p 109). It deals with a customer's past knowledge about the brand (Huang, 2016). Keller (2003), stated that brand familiarity precedes brand evaluation. According to Lee et al. (2012), in the minds of clients, familiar brands are usually extremely significant. In the clutter of competition, it is also a source of competitive advantage. Chen et al. (2015) concluded that brand familiarity affects customers' decision when buying products. Low and Lamb (2000) found that brand familiarity has an impact on brand associations for several products. Brand familiarity is as important as the antecedents of the brand's image (Keller, 1993, 2008; Park, 2009). Increasing familiarity with the brand may generate a positive image to enhance success in brand management (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). A prior study found that a brand familiarity was as an important antecedent of brand image (Hosseini & Nahad, 2012). Nevertheless, another research reported mixed findings (Hameed et al., 2014; Müge & Korkut, 2010; Park, 2009). Following the above argument, the present research suggests brand familiarity will have an influence on brand image. Thus,

H1: Brand familiarity has a significant relationship with brand image.

2.3 Perceived Service Quality

Perceived service brand quality is a central element of brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Aaker (2012) also postulated the role of perceived quality in building and maintaining brand equity. Perceived quality relates to the judgment about excellence and superiority of a product (Netemeyer et al., 2004; Zeithaml, 1988). It is also defined as the overall judgment about the dimensions of brand values (Aaker, 1991; Aaker & Jacobson, 1994). Perceived quality as the overall judgment and the generally excellent or superior evaluation by a customer on the quality services (Zeithaml et al., 1988). Perceived quality is consistently an attitude resulting from a comparison of consumer expectations with actual performance (Parasuraman et al., 1985). It is a perception of the consumer regarding the overall superiority of a brand in relation to its intended purpose and relative to alternative brands. Additionally, perceived quality adds value to a purchase decision (Low & Lamb, 2000). Moreover, perceived quality of a brand encourages clients to engage in citizenship behavior (Raza, 2020).

Perceived quality and reputation create attachment feelings that lead to satisfactory relationships and help to build brand equity (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). The quality of the brand is an important aspect for customers when they form a perception about the brand (Müge & Korkut, 2010). Literature on service marketing in education identifies the university image and perceived quality as important aspects (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Ramli et al., 2015; Vander Schee, 2010). A higher education organization with a powerful brand name conveys a positive image and reputation and is able to deliver high-quality education (Ramli et al., 2015, p22). The outcome showed that the university image and perceived quality of teaching and learning were closely related (Ramli et al., 2015). High-quality of education institutions brands will improve the material and human resources of education institutions. Students are the customers of education institutions, and with high-quality customers, education institutions “universities” can develop maximum profits. Additionally, enhancing the positive quality of education institutions service has become a critical topic in recent years (Chen, 2016).

Quality of lecturers is an essential factor affecting students' satisfaction and providing adequate confidence that a product or service will satisfy given requirements for quality (Ko & Chung, 2014). However, there are few studies on the service quality on brand image. Ishaq et al. (2014) conducted an empirical research and reported a positive influence on service quality on brand image perceptions of customers. The prior evidence demonstrated that perceived brand quality presents value to customers, leading them to buy the brand, and it is an important point of differentiation (Aaker, 2012). As the perceptions of brand quality improves other brand perceptions, brand quality will increase purchase intention and directly influence organizational performance (Aaker, 1991; Zeithaml, 1988). Thus, this study seeks to discover the effect of service quality on brand image of education institutions. Therefore, this revision attempted to minimize the perceived quality gap in higher education organizations.

H2: Perceived service quality has a significant relationship with brand image.

2.4 Student Satisfaction

Consumers' satisfaction has been a popular subject in marketing. It is the consumer's fulfillment response (Oliver et al., 1997). It is a judgment that characterizes a product or service. According to Chen (2016) students' satisfaction has become vital in academia. Student's satisfaction is a key marketing strategy (Azoury et al., 2014). Higher education institutions have to pay attention to students' satisfaction. Beerli Palacio et al. (2002) stated that brand image of university education institutes and students' satisfaction is the essence needed to establish and enhancement the competitive advantages. Increasingly, students' satisfaction of academic performance is becoming important in understanding their perspective on their learning experiences and it is also becoming an essential indicator of the quality of teaching (Alves & Raposo, 2007; Ko & Chung, 2014). Of course, for universities, where competition is growing, students' satisfaction has assumed substantial importance in many countries (Woodall et al., 2014). Loyalty and satisfaction represent reactions to brand-related stimuli (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Ko and Chung (2014) point out that students' satisfaction with their universities has had beneficial impacts on their readiness to recommend the university after graduation and to pursue another degree at the same college or donate to the college.

According to Chen (2016) “When students evaluate satisfaction, they will reflect on their experience on campus” (p.25). Lately, higher education has become a major service, and students have become the clients. Therefore, a study of the factors which drive students' satisfaction would seem to have value (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009). Obviously, the publication of satisfaction data will noticeably have an impact on good students, and studies that address the satisfaction of students have lately increased (e.g. Chen, 2016; Woodall et al., 2014). Nevertheless, there is little evidence about students' satisfaction as a way of providing universities with a competitive advantage within the developing countries higher education marketplace. Azoury et al. (2014) and Hosseini and Nahad (2012) confirmed that overall images have influenced students' satisfaction at university. Hence, this revision also studied customer satisfaction and tried to find the students' satisfaction. However, it seems that there have been few studies that address the importance of the satisfaction of students and the perception of the brand image (Zhang, 2015). So, this revision tried to minimize this gap in higher education institutions setting.

H3: Brand image has a significant relationship with student's satisfaction.

Theoretical framework

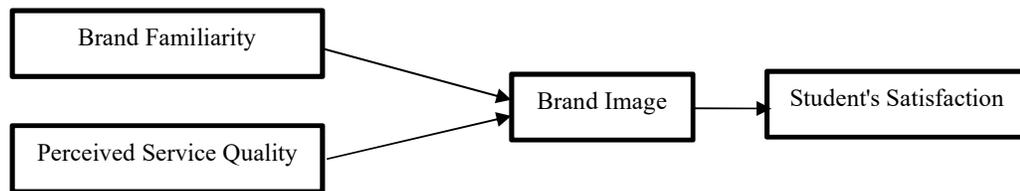


Fig. 1. Proposed model. *BF*=Brand Familiarity, *PSQ*= Perceived Service Quality, *BI*= Brand Image, *SS*= Student's Satisfaction.

On the theoretical grounds, students who have a strong familiarity with university brand and perceived service quality would probably have a high level of brand image. Also, it is assumed that the higher the university brand image is, the better students' satisfaction will be. In contrast, the earlier research found mixed results (Azoury et al., 2014; Chen, 2016; Hameed et al., 2014; Hosseini & Nahad, 2012).

3. Research methodology

This research used the systematic technique of random sampling. The samples used in the research were 112 Jadara University brand students in Jordan's Irbid Governorate. The questionnaire consisted of sixteen items, the measure was modified and adapted from previous works, including three questions of brand familiarity (Hosseini & Nahad, 2012), four questions of perceived service quality (Kim & Lee, 2018), six questions of brand image (Chen, 2016; Hosseini & Nahad, 2012), and three questions of students' satisfaction (Chen, 2016; Hosseini & Nahad, 2012). All the items on a 5-point Likert scale were anchored.

3.1. Data analysis

3.1.1 Measurement Model

Partial Least Square (PLS) analysis technique was used to examine the research model by using Ringle et al. (2015)'s Smart PLS3.0 software. The validity and reliability are two criteria used to test the outer model, according to Hair et al. (2017). Convergent and discriminant validity results are shown respectively in Table 1 and 2. The composite reliability values and Cronbach's alpha were above the 0.7 limit value, supporting the accuracy of the measures. The AVE values surpassed the 0.5 threshold value, showing a satisfactory convergent validity. Finally, the square root of each AVE was greater than the correlations between the constructs, indicating that the measures have good discriminant validity. Briefly, the validity and reliability of the measurement model were accomplished (Hair et al., 2017; Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 1

Convergent validity

Construct	Items	Loading	AVE	Alpha	CR
Brand familiarity	BF 1	0.884	0.756	0.839	0.903
	BF 2	0.836			
	BF 3	0.888			
Perceived service quality	PSQ 1	0.789	0.664	0.831	0.888
	PSQ 2	0.806			
	PSQ 3	0.792			
	PSQ4	0.869			
Brand image	BI 1	0.729	0.631	0.881	0.911
	BI 2	0.799			
	BI 3	0.86			
	BI4	0.859			
	BI5	0.829			
	BI6	0.671			
Student Satisfaction	SS1	0.884	0.689	0.773	0.868
	SS2	0.883			
	SS3	0.71			

Note: AVE=variance accounted for, CR=Composite reliability

Table 2
Discriminant Validity-the square root of the AVE

	BF	PSQ	BI	SS
BF	0.870			
PSQ	0.630	0.815		
BI	0.682	0.748	0.794	
SS	0.495	0.653	0.656	0.830

3.1.2 Structural Model

For testing the outer model, the findings of analysis revealed that coefficient of determination (R^2) for BI (0.633) and SS (0.430) is substantial as stated by Cohen (1988). The findings of the bootstrapping and the path coefficient of hypothesized relationships are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Path coefficient of Hypotheses

H	Relationship	Std. Beta	SE	t-Value	Decision	P-value
H1	BF → BI	0.349	0.090	3.90	S***	0.000
H2	PSQ → BI	0.528	0.093	5.67	S***	0.000
H3	BI → SS	0.656	0.059	11.06	S***	0.000

Note: t -values > 2.58*** ($p < 0.01$), SE= Stander error, S=Supported.

The results revealed that the relationship between brand familiarity and brand image was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.349$, $t = 3.90$, $P < 0.01$), providing empirical support for hypothesis H₁. Similarly, the relationship between perceived service quality and brand image was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.528$, $t = 5.67$, $P < 0.01$), therefore providing support for hypothesis H₂. The results also revealed that the relationship between brand image and student's satisfaction was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.656$, $t = 11.06$, $P < 0.01$), thereby providing support for hypothesis H₃. Overall, the results revealed that all hypotheses are supported with statistically positive significant.

4. Discussion

The outcomes of our revision empirically show the antecedents and consequences of brand image in a higher education setting. The hypothesized relationships were all supported. The results have shown that brand familiarity has a positive relationship on brand image; this result is supported by past revision (e.g. Hosseini & Nahad, 2012) which found the same outcome. Moreover, the results have shown that perceived service quality has a positive relationship on brand image; this outcome is supported by earlier studies (Ishaq et al., 2014) which found a positive relationship. In short, to explain brand image, brand familiarity and perceived service quality seems to be vital constructs ($R^2 = 0.633$). Likewise, brand image had a positive effect on students' satisfaction. This outcome is supported by prior studies (Schlesinger et al., 2017) which found a positive relationship. The study results presented some managerial implications. Marketers of universities' branding need to evaluate the antecedents and consequences of brand image. The above assessment revealed the role of brand familiarity and perceived service quality in generating and retaining brand image. Thus, there is a discussion in the literature about the important connection between brand familiarity and perceived service quality with brand image and brand image on the satisfaction of the students. There are limited studies that have examined this problem in the Arab context, exploring Jordanian students in particular. Hence, institutions of higher education should devote more attention to their brand image. The results highlighted the importance of the relationship elements. Therefore, this empirical value can be utilized for developing marketing plan and planning the long-term relationship with students. Briefly, marketing programs' success is a main factor that determines brand competition. It is expected, through outcomes, to improve the brands in the Arab region in general and in Jordan in particular. In theory, social exchange theory has extended in new context (Emerson, 1976). This revision also expands the concepts of brand image, student satisfaction, brand familiarity and perceived service quality and connections between them. Moreover, the key driver of students' satisfaction is the image of university. Higher education institutions with positive images will be better placed to promote the satisfaction of students (Schlesinger et al., 2017). However, the role of image in the students' satisfaction was overlooked. Accordingly, this study helps in bridging this hole.

5. Limitations and Recommendations

A possible limitation of the current study is associated with the context and sample size. Future research should conduct the proposed research framework on a large sample and on public universities. In addition, the factors that were utilized in this research were studies from various literature reviews. This study also included only few antecedents to predict brand image. For this reason, future studies are recommended to test other constructs to expand the model.

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