How sociable is your university brand? An empirical investigation of university social augmenters' brand equity

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to integrate branding and higher education literature to conceptualize, develop, and empirically examine a model of university social augmenters' brand equity.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on an empirical survey of 401 undergraduate students enrolled in private universities in Egypt, this study model was tested using structural equation modeling.

Findings – The findings reveal that university social augmenters' reputation, coach-to-student interactions, and student-to-student interactions influence students' satisfaction with social augmenters. The results also suggest that students satisfied with university social augmenters are more likely to exhibit outcomes of brand equity – namely, brand identification, willingness to recommend, and willingness to incur an additional premium cost.

Practical implications – The results offer managerial implications for university administrators in their quest to enrich students' university experiences and build strong sub-brands within the university setting. University social augmenters are found to have strong brand equity manifestations and may hold the potential to differentiate university brands in an industry dominated by experience and credence.

Originality/value – This research contributes to the extant literature by filling two gaps in university branding literature. First, previous research has never unified separate streams of literature related to augmented services and brand equity. Second, limited conceptual and empirical research on university branding in general and university social augmentation in particular has been conducted in emerging markets, which has resulted in conceptual ambiguity for the key factors constructing students' university social experiences.

Keywords Egypt, Brand equity, Co-curricular activities, Higher education marketing, University branding, University social augmenters

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

For many years, marketers have successfully employed branding strategies and techniques to brand their products and services in various business domains. These strategies have propelled firms into a formidable growth pace. Marketers at higher education institutions (HEIs) took this success one step further by applying these strategies in HEIs (e.g. Judson *et al.*, 2008; Pinar *et al.*, 2014). Although the focus on HEIs' branding and university brand

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image remains challenging (Williams and Omar, 2014), some recent research endeavors have argued that universities possess certain components that can be considered as a brand *per se*, such as professors (Jillapalli and Jillapalli, 2014). This study extends this argument and proposes the following research question:

RQ1. Do university social augmenters have brand equity?

What begs this question regarding the applicability of branding a certain component of student university experience is the complex nature of both HEIs and student university experience, which makes it reasonable to argue that branding a component of student university experience separately would pay off. From a branding perspective, an HEI is a complex brand for two reasons: first, it aims to cater to diverse target audiences (e.g. students, parents, employers, business community, government); second, it must capture many colleges, programs, events, facilities, and qualities in the university brand communications. Accordingly, traditional university brand communications may lead to ambiguity, resulting in audiences creating their own interpretations of received messages. Furthermore, students' university experience in itself is complex as it is evolving, uncertain, and not pre-established (Ng and Forbes, 2009), and efforts in the literature have sought to determine which aspects of this wide experience are crucial for students to bring salient richness to a university brand (Elsharnouby, 2015). Students' university experience encompasses two levels: core and supplementary. The core level revolves around the vital factors deemed crucial for students to have high-quality learning experiences and meet their study obligations (Clemes *et al.*, 2008). The supplementary level includes augmented factors beyond the core, such as educational technology, library facilities, physical environment, university layouts, and campus facilities (Clemes *et al.*, 2008, Elsharnouby, 2016a; Mavondo *et al.*, 2004; Parahoo *et al.*, 2013; Paswan and Ganesh, 2009).

This study focuses on university social augmenters, which capture social interaction-related elements. University social augmenters are defined as any social platforms offered by the university that offer social interactions between students and are administered by university staff, such as organized volunteering, sporting, workshops, debate models, and clubs. As a service provider, the university offers a unique type of services in the sense that students remain in contact with the service provider for almost four years or more to get the service. During this long time, positive social experiences would make the university experience more balanced and fulfilling. Social interactions with other students offer students some critical privileges, such as networking, social skills, internship and job opportunities, and better self-understanding. On the other hand, students who find it difficult to integrate socially with other students can experience feeling out of place in the university setting (Fitzgibbon and Prior, 2010). Previous studies have argued that universities that can build outlets for social interactions among students tend to be rated favorably (Paswan and Ganesh, 2009). Social augmenters enable students to have a holistic educational experience by promoting social interactions with other students, faculty, alumni, and external parties.

This research contributes to the extant literature by filling two clear gaps in university branding literature. First, it conceptualizes, develops, and empirically examines a model of university social augmenters' brand equity (USABE). No previous research has unified separate streams of literature related to augmented services and brand equity. Second, limited conceptual and empirical research on university branding in general and university social augmentation in particular has been conducted in emerging markets, which has led to conceptual ambiguity among the key factors influencing students' university social experiences in such markets. Given this lack of knowledge, this study extends the rapidly growing research stream on university branding into an emerging market context by contextualizing and empirically examining: the role of social augmentation brand elements – namely, social augmenters'

reputation, social augmenter coach-student interactions, and student-student interactions within social augmenters – in enabling students' satisfaction with service augmentation; and the role of this satisfaction in generating USABE outcomes – namely, social augmenters' brand identification, willingness to recommend social augmenters to others, and willingness to incur additional premium costs to join a social augmenter.

This paper is organized as follows. First, the study's theoretical lens evolved through the need to belong theory and the consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) model. Then the conceptual model and hypothesis development are discussed. Next, the conceptual model is tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). Finally, the research findings and implications are discussed.

Theoretical background

The study model (see Figure 1) is based on the need to belong theory and CBBE model premises. Need to belong theory suggests that humans constantly seek social inclusion over exclusion, social acceptance over rejection, and group membership over isolation (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Humans' need to belong is manifested in their persistent desire to form and maintain lasting, positive, and impactful interpersonal relationships (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). The central assumption is that humans have a desire for interpersonal attachment, and this desire is an innate human motivation. Therefore, students are assumed to seek and maintain relationships with fellow students and staff based on their inner tendency to belong. Need to belong theory provides a theoretical foundation to explain why students enter into relationships with other students and staff involved in university social augmenters and what makes them remain and invest more time and effort in these relationships.

The model of this study is also grounded in Keller's CBBE model theoretical underpinnings. According to CBBE, the first step in developing strong brand equity is creating brand salience (Keller, 2001). Brand salience relates to customer awareness of the brand (i.e. customer ability to recall and recognize the brand). The CBBE model implies that for brands to proceed to the higher levels of brand equity, consumers should have a high level of awareness and familiarity with the brand. Thus, we propose that the reputation of university social augmenter is a necessary precursor in the social augmenters' brand-building effort. The social augmenter brand's reputation creates brand awareness which, in turn, may engender satisfying relationship with the social augmenter. Furthermore, according to the CBBE model, another key block in building brand equity relates to creating
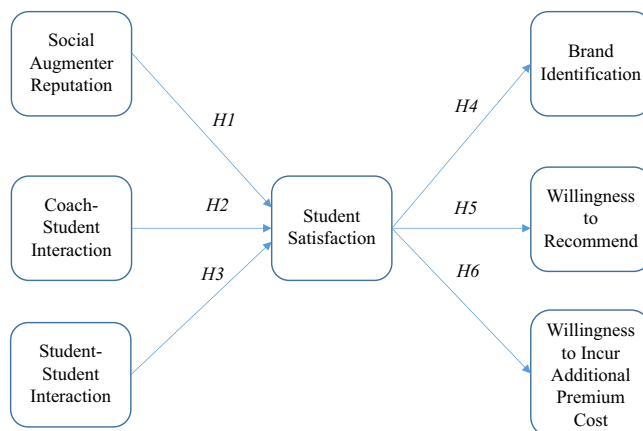
Figure 1.
Proposed
theoretical model

brand meaning in the minds of consumers (Keller, 2001). This could be achieved through favorable brand associations which are developed through customers' own experiences and interactions with the brand. We argue that the university ability to associate favorable meaning in the minds of students toward social augments can be achieved through designing social augmenters that facilitate high-quality interactions between students and the social augmenter coach and between students themselves.

According to the CBBE model, a brand response (i.e. what customers think or feel about the brand) is developed based on different associations with the brand (Keller, 2001). Customers may make some judgments of different aspects of the brand (e.g. quality, credibility, superiority) and develop some feelings toward the brand. The model of this study proposes that students would perceive that they have a satisfying experience with a social augmenter when it is perceived as reputable and facilitates the process of socialization with others.

The final part of our model is supported by brand resonance concept in the CBBE model. Brand resonance is "characterized in terms of intensity or the depth of the psychological bond that customers have with the brand as well as the level of activity engendered by this loyalty" (Keller, 2001, p. 15). Brand resonance facets can be measured through behavioral and altitudinal loyalty, sense of community and active engagement (e.g. willingness to invest time, energy, money, or other resources into the brand beyond those expended during purchase or consumption of the brand) (Keller, 2001). Thus, we hypothesize that students develop a high degree identification with the social augmenter, advocate it, and display willingness to incur additional costs (time/effort) to participate in it when they are satisfied with certain social augmenters.

Therefore, this study argues that student satisfaction with service augmentation (e.g. student activity) stems from social augmentation brand elements (e.g. social augmenter reputation, coach-student interaction, and student-student interaction) and creates USABE outcomes (e.g. social augmenter brand identification, willingness to recommend social augmenter, and willingness to incur additional premium costs to join the social augmenter).

Augmented university services
A typical university service has two levels: core and supplementary or augmented level. The concept of core and supplemental services in education has a robust theoretical background in higher education literature. The core level revolves around the vital factors considered fundamental for students to have high-quality learning experiences and meet their study obligations (Clemes *et al.*, 2008). The supplementary level includes augmented factors beyond the core, such as educational technology, library facilities, physical environment, university layouts, and campus facilities (Clemes *et al.*, 2008; Elsharnouby, 2016a; Mavondo *et al.*, 2004; Parahoo *et al.*, 2013; Paswan and Ganesh, 2009).

Some augmented services may add extra value to the core and allow HEIs to compete on additional services beyond the core service. Mitsis (2007) observed that students' experience is determined not only by their academic experience, but also based on support areas related to the university-wide experience. In the same line of thought, Parahoo *et al.* (2013) described student university experience as a holistic experience related to multiple aspects, including faculty, classroom and learning experience, and campus life aspects such as administrative service, physical facilities, and social environment. Paswan and Ganesh (2009) described augmented services in higher education as offering supplemental benefits that elevate the exchange to a level beyond that offered by just the mere core benefits. They suggested that "these service augmenters of the core are like the cherry on top of the pie and enhance the exchange experience to something beyond that provided by just the core" (p. 68). In shaping students' university experience, "augmentation elements could embellish or deplete the core of university experience" (Elsharnouby, 2015, p. 240).

Paswan and Ganesh (2009) grouped university service augmenters into five categories: campus life, financial, maintenance, health, and social interaction augmenters. Campus life

augmenters include tangible elements such as quality of classroom instruction, availability of recreational facilities, library facilities, instructional support resources including audio-visual media, and a feeling of comfort and safety. Financial augmenters include financial aid, assistantships, cost of books and study materials, and the availability of personal finances. Maintenance augmenters encompass the basics, such as food, housing, and clothing. Health augmenters capture the activities associated with physical well-being. Social interaction augmenters capture social elements related to student interactions with others (e.g. students, faculty, employees, alumni, and external parties).

University social augmenters

This study focuses on university social augmenters, which capture social interaction-related elements. Previous studies have demonstrated that social augmenters allow students to have a holistic educational experience by allowing for "social interaction" (Paswan and Ganesh, 2009). Student-student interaction does not occur only during the learning experience in the classroom setting; rather, it requires other interaction modes in the campus environment. Examples of social augmenters include clubs and workshops allowing for out-of-class student interactions (Paswan and Ganesh, 2009). Social interactions provide students with opportunities to join student organizations; such opportunities facilitate students' social integration and have proved to be of high importance within large universities (Gibson, 2010). Student-student interactions comprise some elements that have been demonstrated to be significant predictors of student satisfaction, such as creating opportunities to engage and socialize in pleasant experiences with peers (Gibson, 2010) and familiarizing new students with the social life of the campus (Schee, 2011).

Social augmenters in the form of student engagement in co-curricular activities (CCAs) have a positive impact on students' academic performance (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2008) as well as a significant effect on student loyalty (Paswan and Ganesh, 2009). Greenbank (2014, p. 67) defined CCAs as "all activities undertaken outside the formal university curriculum […] that are optional and additional to student's degree." Extensive evidence supplements the attractiveness of CCAs to students. Brown (2000) found that CCAs led to higher self-esteem and enhanced status among peers while also being considered a deterrent to antisocial behavior. Students were also found to allocate high importance to CCAs such as sports activities and athletic teams within the university life. University athletic programs have been credited as being a powerful attraction tool for universities (Toma and Cross, 1998). Prospective students often consider athletics to be a key component of the higher education experience (Alessandri, 2007). Watkins and Gonzenbach (2013) observed that CCAs such as campus sports activities may have their own dimension and impact on brand image.

The relationship between CCAs and academic performance is also well documented in the literature. A significant negative correlation exists between engagement with CCAs and students' likelihood to drop out of university (Wadley, 2008). Conversely, engaged students in CCAs are more likely to achieve a higher academic standing than non-engaged students. Other CCAs such as career-enhancing activities can increase graduates' prospects of finding employment because employers value students with high personal capital, which consists of both hard currencies developed through students' learning experiences and soft currencies developed through students' engagement in CCAs (Brown *et al.*, 2004). Student engagement with social augmenters was also found to increase student loyalty to their university (Paswan and Ganesh, 2009).

CBBE model and USABE

Brand equity resides in the consumer's mind and comprises the "essence of what consumers have learned, felt, seen, and heard about the brand over time" (Keller, 1993). Keller (1993)

examined brand equity from the consumer psychology perspective and introduced the concept of CBBE. He defined brand equity as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (p. 1). The proposed university social augmenters brand equity is grounded in Keller's (1993) brand-building blocks: salience, performance, imaging, judgments, feelings, and resonance.

In the context of university social augmenters, salience relates to students' awareness of the social augmenter brand and the brand associations they have about the social augmenter, which if repeated might constitute the social augmenter brand image. Some university social augmenters attract public attention, which can be translated into social augmenters' brand awareness. For example, Tobolowsky and Lowery (2006) observed that university sports teams receive special public and media attention. Sport athletics teams in some educational settings display an important brand characteristic, and the team's logo is associated with an excitement trait (Watkins and Gonzenbach, 2013). Therefore, some social augmenters possess their own brand image and reputation, which are different from those of the respective university.

Performance and imagining refer to the way by which the social augmenter meets the student's utilitarian and hedonic needs. This includes the group of soft skills and experiences that aid students in finding future jobs and social benefits offered by university social augmenters, such as making new friends. Brand judgment refers to social augmenters' ability to elicit positive feelings, such as the enhanced self-esteem students feel due to engagement in social augmenters. Some university social augmenters elicit positive emotional responses among students. A study conducted by Brown (2000) found that some student CCAs led to higher self-esteem and self-actualization and enhanced status among peers, by which positive emotional responses are generated. For example, participation in CCAs in the form of clubs, student councils, and other social events may elicit positive emotional responses (Massoni, 2011).

With university brand resonance, students express a high degree of loyalty to the university and seek the means to actively interact with the university and advocate it to others. Brand resonance depends mainly on the level of identification the customer has with the brand (Keller, 2001). A natural consequence for brand resonance is brand advocacy. Students develop advocacy behavior where they actively endorse the social augmenters to other students and recruit new members. Brand advocacy includes behaviors such as pleading for, recommending, and supporting the brand (Jillapalli and Jillapalli, 2014). Finally, social augmenters may display CBBE manifestations such as a willingness to incur additional costs (time/effort). Students are drawn to certain social augmenters (e.g. student clubs) and may be willing to invest the time and effort necessary to actively participate in such student activity.

Antecedents of student satisfaction with social augmenters
Student engagement in social augmenters may energize satisfaction, an aspect of relationship quality. Gibson (2010) observed that student satisfaction is shaped by their university-wide experiences, not just their experiences with their college or department. Social augmenters are in many cases a vehicle by which service providers surpass expectations, thereby enhancing satisfaction. Based on the models suggested by Elsharnouby (2015) and Parahoo *et al.* (2013), the study model suggests that satisfaction with social augmenter experience is influenced by the social augmenter reputation, social augmenter coach-student interaction, and student-student interactions within the social augmenter.

Social augmenter reputation
Brand reputation is defined as customers' positive beliefs about what distinguishes one brand from another (Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002). Brand reputation includes dimensions such as

awareness (recognition, familiarity, salience, and recall) and brand image (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). Brand image depicts consumers' perceptions about the brand and how they associate with it (Mitsis, 2007). It is widely accepted that university services' reputation/image has a direct impact on students' satisfaction (Alwi and Kitchen, 2014; Palacio *et al.*, 2002; Clemes *et al.*, 2008; Elsharnouby, 2015; Gibson, 2010). Institutional image is considered a key antecedent for consumers' value perception, satisfaction, and loyalty (Brown and Mazzarol, 2009). This argument is extended into the university social augmenter setting and we hypothesize that:

> *H1.* The social augmenter brand reputation is positively related to student satisfaction with the social augmenter.

Coach-student interaction

The social augmenter coach has a vital role in delivering a high-quality student experience. Previous studies agree that personal interaction between the customer and the service provider is crucial for the successful service delivery (Ennew and Binks, 1999). This dimension seeks to recognize the fact that a service encounter takes place in a social setting, which should include interaction aspects such as courtesy, friendliness, and respect (Kelley *et al.*, 1990). Sierra and McQuitty (2005) observed that, when there is a close interaction between a service employee and a customer, the process of service delivery and how the service is delivered are often more important than what is delivered. The notion to regard students as customers and universities as service providers has been supported in previous research (Meek and Wood, 1998). Like some other services, students' satisfaction with their university experience is influenced by the staff-student interaction (Gibson, 2010). Hence, the coach ought to be a university staff member who echoes brand attributes such as courtesy, friendship, respect, and responsiveness. Therefore, the social augmenter coach-student interaction is hypothesized to be an antecedent of student satisfaction:

> *H2.* The social augmenter coach-student interaction is positively related to students' satisfaction with the social augmenter.

Student-student interaction within social augmenter

Students' overall university experience is shaped by both in-class and out-of-class experiences. Students usually prefer classrooms with a high level of social interaction (Elliot, 2002). Furthermore, associations with other students outside the classroom are a major educational component of the formal education process (Conway *et al.*, 1994). The social integration aspect of the university experience is considered to be of critical importance to students' achievement and success (Fitzgibbon and Prior, 2010). For example, the friendliness of other students was found to be a significant predictor of students' satisfaction with university studies (Nevill and Rhodes, 2004), and "difficulty in fitting in socially" was reported as a main reason behind students' withdrawal from the university (Fitzgibbon and Prior, 2010). Out-of-class student-student interactions, such as engagement with CCAs, are also suggested to provide students with development and personal gains. Massoni (2011) observed that, through their engagement in CCAs, students learn lessons in leadership and teamwork and develop friendships. Furthermore, Yoo and Donthu (2001) found that consumption experience within the service setting is one of the antecedents of CBBE. Palmer *et al.* (2016, p. 2) argued that "higher education brands typically comprise complex bundles of benefits, most notably academic and social benefits [...]. In fact, the distinction between these two brand dimensions may be complex, with some students seeing the primary benefit of higher education as a process of socialization." Therefore, it is not surprising to find that social integration is a significant predictor of student satisfaction (Schee, 2011). Students have a favorable evaluation of universities that facilitate social

interaction, networking, and collaboration among students (Elsharnouby, 2016b). Based on this discussion, high-quality student-student interactions are hypothesized to be an antecedent of students' satisfaction:

   H3. Student-student interactions within social augmenters are positively related to students' satisfaction with the social augmenter.

Consequences of student satisfaction with social augmenters
Based on the discussion of the CBBE model, satisfied students with social augmenters are expected to exhibit outcomes of brand equity such as citizenship behavior, extra-role, and spontaneous performance. Previous studies have reported a wide range of brand equity consequences, including sharing unique and positive experiences with others, recommending the brand to others, helping other consumers (i.e. students), tolerating services that fail (Yi and Gong, 2013), being willing to incur premium costs (Netemeyer *et al.*, 2004), and experiencing brand identification (He *et al.*, 2012). In this study, the emphasis is on three outcomes: brand identification, willingness to recommend, and willingness to incur additional premium costs.

Brand identification of the social augmenter
Some university social augmenters may have the power of brand identification. Brand identification in higher education refers to the "sense of belonging to and identification with a university" (Palmer *et al.*, 2016, p. 1). University brand identification is also articulated as students/alumni defining the self in terms of an association with their university brand (Balmer *et al.*, 2010). This is evident with students' sense of pride when, for example, wearing their university sports teams' sweatshirts depicting the university logo.

   Hamann *et al.* (2007) demonstrated that university experience confers a particular degree of social status, providing graduates with a sense of identification and a way to define themselves. This high level of association between the student and university brand may be similar to Keller's well-established brand equity building blocks of resonance when a student defines him- or herself through association with the university brand. Palmer *et al.* (2016) suggested that recalled academic and social experiences are significant drivers of brand loyalty and brand identification. Furthermore, a high level of brand identification exists among satisfied consumers (e.g. Stephenson and Yerger, 2014). Thus, students' satisfaction with social augmenters is expected to be positively related to brand identification:

   H4. Students' satisfaction with social augmenters is positively related to the social augmenter's brand identification.

Willingness to recommend the social augmenter
Previous studies examined loyalty in higher education to be synonymous with student advocacy and willingness to recommend the university. As a university degree is a one-time purchase, loyalty to the university is manifested in students' willingness to recommend the university through word of mouth and to be an advocate (Boulding *et al.*, 1993; Bourke, 2000). Satisfied students are more likely to engage in some extra-role behaviors, such as encouraging new students to join the university and undertake collaboration with their institutions after they graduate (Alves and Raposo, 2009), come back to the university to take further courses (Mavondo *et al.*, 2004), and advocate the university to employers for recruitment purposes (Clemes *et al.*, 2008). In the same vein, students satisfied with university service augmenters are more likely to recommend their universities and become an advocate for them (Paswan and Ganesh, 2009). Therefore, it seems plausible to extend this argument and hypothesize that students satisfied with university social augmenters are

more likely to share their positive memorable experiences with others and recommend the university social augmenter. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

> *H5.* Students' satisfaction with social augmenters is positively related to willingness to recommend the social augmenter.

Willingness to incur a premium cost for the social augmenter
University social augmenters are primarily voluntary activities. Therefore, when students participate in such activities, they incur different forms of cost, such as time and effort. Willingness to incur such costs would likely exist with certain types of students (i.e. satisfied students). In the service sector, there is strong empirical evidence that satisfied customers – those who receive higher quality service – are willing to pay more for it (Finkelman, 1993; Homburg *et al.*, 2005). From a branding perspective, firms with higher brand equity can expect positive consumers' responses toward their brands. One of these key responses is customers' willingness to pay a price premium – that is, "the amount a consumer is willing to pay for a brand in comparison with other brands offering similar benefits" (Buil *et al.*, 2013, p. 64). The literature indicates that brand equity makes consumers more willing to pay a price premium because they perceive some unique value in the brand that no other brands can provide (Chaudhuri, 1995; Netemeyer *et al.*, 2004). This argument is extended to the university setting and the study proposes that social augmenters may possess brand equity in that students satisfied with social augmenters will be willing to incur premium costs (time and/or effort) because they get unique value from their engagement in these augmenters. Therefore, this discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

> *H6.* Students' satisfaction with social augmenters is positively related to willingness to incur a premium cost to join the social augmenter.

Methodology
Study context
This study was conducted in the private higher education sector in Egypt. Privately owned universities are relatively new components to the higher education landscape in Egypt. They emerged as part of Egypt's privatization policies of the mid-1990s. These universities brought new construction to the higher education industry, creating competition for students' attraction and retention (Mourad *et al.*, 2010). Sectorial competition started by four universities in 1996 reached 34 universities in 2017. Egypt, like many developing countries, has a predominantly young population, with 55 percent of the population being younger than 20 years old (El Khouli, 2015).

The competitive environment for universities in Egypt is intense, including not only local players (state-owned and private universities) but also international universities abroad that attract Egyptian students. Locally, universities in Egypt are battling for market shares while aiming to keep their brands relevant and unique to students. However, this is proving to be challenging because private universities share similarities due to operating under the umbrella of the Ministry of Higher Education. The Ministry maintains tight control over facilities, infrastructure, approval and periodic reaccreditations of programs, ratio of faculty to students, size of student body, allotted admission class, students' selection criteria, and university advertising messages (Ministry of Higher Education, 2013). Furthermore, degree-awarding universities have the same accrediting bodies and offer similar alumni membership associations with professional syndicates. Although the core educational services are heavily regulated by the Ministry, which may restrict offerings across private universities, there is a free hand when it comes to university-augmented services.

Measurement of the study variables
The measurement scales intended to measure the model constructs were sourced from previously validated scales in the literature. In some cases, a few previous scales were adjusted to contextualize the measures to suit the higher education setting. All constructs were measured with seven-point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). To measure the concept of social augmenter reputation, we adopted the scale of Jillapalli and Jillapalli (2014) to capture the extent to which students believe that the student activity they selected at the beginning of the questionnaire has a good reputation and good standing compared to other student activities offered both within the university and by other universities. This scale was originally developed by Ganesan (1994). A measure of coach-student interaction was adopted from Mai (2005). Based on their experience with the university social augmenter, students rated university administrative staff members responsible for overseeing the student activity with regard to their accessibility, whether they provide reliable information and good support and whether they act in a timely manner. The items for student-student interactions scale were based on items from Mostafa (2006). The respondents were asked to evaluate their interaction with other students within the university social augmenter. A three-item Likert-type scale was adopted from Sivadas and Baker-Prewitt (2000) to measure students' overall satisfaction with the social augmenter. We measured brand identification using a four-item scale adopted from Palmer *et al.* (2016). We captured students willingness to recommend the social augmenter using a three-item scale adopted from Paswan and Ganesh (2009) and Yoo and Donthu (2001). Finally, for students' willingness to incur a premium construct, a two-item scale was adopted from Netemeyer *et al.* (2004). All of the scales' items are included in Table I.

Data collection and sample
A questionnaire was developed through a multi-stage design process. The initial form was constructed based on a rigorous literature review followed by an exploratory study, both of which led to an initial draft of the questionnaire. Relevance, clarity, and validity of the questionnaire were ensured using a pre-test procedure with a sample of two faculty members and ten students. The final format of the questionnaire was 28 questions, all of which were answered using a Likert-type scale. Demographic data were also solicited from the respondents. To reach the target sample, a filter question was included at the beginning of the questionnaire in order to screen participants (i.e. they had to name a CCA they had an experience with at their university).

The study population was all students enrolled in private universities in Egypt. However, the study focused more on ten largest private universities, which provide students with noticeable CCAs. These universities accommodate approximately 100,000 students. A quota sampling technique was used to represent each university based on the actual student population in each university. A sample size of 460 was deemed appropriate for this study, as the smallest quota assigned to the smallest university is not too small (i.e. not less than 30). Out of 460 questionnaires distributed, 410 were retrieved, yielding a relatively high response rate of 89 percent. Of the 410 responses, 9 were removed due to the absence of significant parts of the questionnaire. Thus, 401 questionnaires were included in the final analysis (i.e. 87 percent of the original sample). Data collection for this study occurred over a period of approximately three months. Females represented 53.4 percent while males represented 46.6 percent of the total sample units. In terms of age, the average age of respondents was 20.04 years.

Results
The study adopted the SEM approach using AMOS 20. Multi-item scales were evaluated using confirmatory factor analyses to assess the reliability and validity of the measures.

Constructs	Operationalization of the constructs	λ	T	CR
Brand reputation	I believe that this student activity has a good reputation	0.698	–	
	Most students in the university have a favorable opinion about this student activity	0.739	12.828	0.807
	This student activity has a good standing as compared to other student activities offered within the university community	0.748	12.958	
	This student activity has a good standing as compared to similar student activities offered by other universities	0.688	12.064	
Coach-student interaction	The university administrative staff members responsible for overseeing this student activity are accessible	0.721	–	0.867
	The university organizing staff members responsible for overseeing this student activity are accessible	0.770	14.195	
	The university organizing staff responsible for overseeing this student activity provided me with reliable information	0.808	14.807	
	The university administrative staff responsible for overseeing this student activity provided me with good support	0.686	12.723	
	The university administrative staff responsible for overseeing this student activity supported me in a timely manner	0.672	12.481	
Student-student interaction	There is good collaboration among students in the preparation stages of this student activity	0.672	–	0.787
	There is good communication among students during the execution of this student activity	0.735	12.504	
	Working with students enrolled in this student activity has motivated me to get the best out of this activity	0.824	13.551	
Student satisfaction	Overall I am very satisfied with this student activity	0.716	–	
	This student activity has met my expectations	0.767	14.068	0.768
	This student activity has met my needs	0.697	12.867	
Brand identification	When someone criticizes this student activity, it feels like a personal insult	0.731	–	0.809
	I am very interested in what others think about this student activity	0.665	12.651	
	When I talk about this student activity, I usually say "we" rather than "they"	0.738	14.046	
	When someone praises this student activity, it feels like a personal compliment	0.735	13.988	
Willingness to recommend	I say positive things about this student activity to others	0.724	–	
	I recommend this student activity to other students	0.794	15.115	0.815
	I encourage other students to participate in this student activity	0.811	15.419	
Willingness to incur a premium	I am willing to pay a higher price (time and effort included) for this student activity than any other activity	0.766	–	0.738
	I am willing to pay more (time and effort included) in order to get into the next level of the same activity or a similar student activity	0.764	13.521	

Table I.
Constructs and findings of confirmatory factor analyses

The model exhibited a good fit to the data, $\chi^2 (231) = 463.17$, $\chi^2/df = 2.01$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.95, IFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.05. The CFA statistics revealed that the composite reliability values for the seven factors were between 0.738 and 0.867, which are all above the 0.70 cut-off value suggested in the literature (see Table I). Furthermore, the average variance extracted (AVE) for all model constructs surpassed the 0.50 threshold suggested in the literature (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Both values guarantee high internal consistency and, therefore, the reliability of all constructs (see Tables I and II). The results also supported convergent validity of the scales as all CFA item loadings exceeded 0.50 (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Finally, to assess discriminant validity, AVEs were compared with squared correlations between all pairs of constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2010). In all cases, AVEs exceeded squared correlations between all pairs of constructs, indicating discriminant validity (see Table II). Furthermore, the total AVE was 0.54.

Constructs	AVE	Brand reputation	Coach interaction with students	Student-student interaction	Student satisfaction	Brand identification	Willingness to recommend	Willingness to incur premium
Brand reputation	0.517	1						
Coach-student interaction	0.537	0.416	1					
Student-student interaction	0.557	0.535	0.497	1				
Student satisfaction	0.529	0.544	0.461	0.628	1			
Brand identification	0.516	0.488	0.462	0.617	0.615	1		
Willingness to recommend	0.604	0.596	0.456	0.586	0.639	0.680	1	
Willingness to incur a premium	0.586	0.472	0.365	0.459	0.523	0.559	0.631	1

Note: AVE, average variance extracted

Table II.
Correlation matrix and average variance extracted scores for all the constructs

Hypothesis testing
As indicated in Table III, the results show that the three antecedents are statistically significant predictors in terms of affecting students' satisfaction with university social augmenters. The social augmenter's brand reputation demonstrates a strong significant impact on students' satisfaction ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$), supporting *H1*. The results also supported *H2* and *H3* as both coach-student interactions and student-student interactions had significant effects on students' satisfaction ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$ and $\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$). The three predictors explained 47 percent of the variation in students' satisfaction. The results also showed a significant positive relationship between satisfaction and brand identification ($\beta = 0.91$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting *H4*. Students' satisfaction explained 31 percent of the variation in brand identification. The results also indicated that willingness to recommend the social augmenter was positively related to students' satisfaction ($\beta = 0.94$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting *H5*. Furthermore, 35 percent of the variance in willingness to recommend the social augmenter could be explained by students' satisfaction. Finally, *H6* is supported since willingness to pay a premium cost was positively related to students' satisfaction ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$), and that satisfaction explained 27 percent of the variation in students' willingness to pay a premium cost.

Hypothesized paths	β	*t*-Value	Hypothesis result
H1: social augmenter reputation → satisfaction	0.25***	6.72	Supported
H2: coach-student interaction → satisfaction	0.18***	5.06	Supported
H3: student-student interaction → satisfaction	0.40***	10.26	Supported
H4: satisfaction → brand identification	0.91***	15.33	Supported
H5: satisfaction → willingness to recommend	0.94***	16.45	Supported
H6: satisfaction → willingness to incur premium cost	0.52***	12.28	Supported
R^2			
Satisfaction	0.47		
Brand identification	0.31		
Willingness to recommend	0.35		
Willingness to incur premium cost	0.27		

Note: ***Significant at $p < 0.001$

Table III.
Structural model results

Discussion and implications

The primary objective of this study is to investigate whether university social augmenters have brand equity. The study identified three aspects as distinctive components of students' experience with university social augmenters – namely, the social augmenter's reputation, coach-student interactions, and interactions between students. The findings of this study underscore the significance of these three facets in enabling students' satisfaction with a university's social augmenter which, in turn, engenders brand differential effects – namely, social augmenters' brand identification, willingness to recommend social augmenters to others, and willingness to incur additional premium costs to join a social augmenter.

Theoretical implications

Extant literature in higher education indicates that HEI as a complex brand possesses certain components that can be considered as a brand *per se*, such as professors (Jillapalli and Jillapalli, 2014). Extending this argument to university's social augmenters, the findings of this study indicate that the model of CBBE is valid and demonstrate the importance of brand salience (reputation), brand meaning (quality of interactions between students and with social augmenter coach), brand response (satisfying experience), and brand resonance (identification, willingness to recommend social augmenters, and willingness to incur additional premium costs) in constructing the social augmenter brand equity in the minds of university students. Our study also reconciles the ample satisfaction literature with evolving models of CBBE in the formation of university social augmenter brand equity model. As such, this study expands and builds upon the limited prior research on university branding (e.g. Palmer *et al.*, 2016).

The study finds that students' satisfaction with a university's social augmenter is determined by the augmenter's reputation among students. This result concurs with the findings of Clemes *et al.* (2008) and Elsharnouby (2015), who determined that a superior university reputation generate higher student satisfaction. What is new in this study is that the same logic is found to apply to student CCAs. In other words, when student activity is reputable and highly regarded among students, there is a high probability that students feel satisfied when participating in it. This finding supports the study argument that university social augmenters can become strong brands if their reputation is fostered.

Critical to the formation of social augmenter brand equity is the quality of social experience within the social augmenter. Social experience is delineated in this study by both coach-student interactions and student-student interactions within the social augmenter setting. Strong brands require meaningful relationships with those who represent the brand (e.g. social augmenter coach). The higher education literature supports that university administrative staff members play a critical role in influencing students' satisfaction (e.g. Parahoo *et al.*, 2013) and university brand attitude (Elsharnouby, 2016b). Aspects such as staff responsiveness to students' concerns and staff accessibility and reliability were found to be indicators of students' satisfaction (Gibson, 2010). In addition, the level of social integration with other students has proved to be a significant predictor of student satisfaction, particularly in large HEIs (Gibson, 2010). Social experience is also found to have a positive effect on brand identification, brand loyalty, alumni's volunteer and brand support behaviors in the context of higher education (Palmer *et al.*, 2016). Consistent with these studies, the results of this study support the pivotal role of supportive student social experience in enabling students' satisfaction with social augmenters.

The results demonstrate that strong social augmenters within HEIs should have brand characteristics in order to build satisfaction, which is regarded as an important facet of brand relationship quality. Satisfaction with a brand results from the consumer's cumulative evaluation of the brand's actual performance relative to expectations (Aaker *et al.*, 2004). Thus, enhancing the three antecedents, as indicators of a social augmenter's

actual performance, will likely improve the relationship between students and the university's social augmenter and ultimately with the university's brand. With 47 percent of the variation in students' satisfaction being explained by the social augmenter's brand characteristics, the study can conclude that social augmenters are more than core enhancers and may be viewed in a new light as separate brands.

This research further provides evidence of social augmenter brand equity through examining the differential effects of engaging in satisfying experience within social augmenters. Satisfied students are expected to explicitly identify themselves with the university's social augmenter by, for example, wearing their university sports team's sweatshirts or posting and sharing photos on social media platforms about their experience in CCAs. The results also indicate that a higher level of satisfaction will make students advocate for a CCA by recommending it to other students and encouraging them to participate in such activity. Recent literature in higher education indicate that students with strong university brand identification are more likely to engage in advocacy behaviors and act as brand ambassadors (Balaji *et al.*, 2016). In addition, students satisfied with CCAs are far more likely to be willing to incur different forms of cost, such as time and effort, to participate in these activities than unsatisfied students. Similar to firms with higher brand equity, branded university social augmenters can motivate students to pay a premium cost to join.

Managerial implications
The empirical results of this study offer managerial implications for HEI administrators in their quest to enrich students' university experiences and build strong sub-brands within the university setting. In practice, universities as complex systems of various sub-brands (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007) require complex endeavor of brand management that takes into account several factors and employs a holistic perspective on brands and their value (Rauschnabel *et al.*, 2016). This study proposes that a university's social augmenters possess the characteristics of a brand and can consequently enhance the university brand. Sharma *et al.* (2013) observed that many universities place more emphasis on functional attributes, which are parity points rather than differentiators. However, the findings of this research suggest that social augmenters may be considered as brand differentiators (i.e. differentiating between universities) and could be included as an important factor in students' choice criteria for a university. This argument seems plausible in a context (i.e. Egypt) where friendship and personal relationships in the service setting play a stronger role than other considerations, such as functional factors, in shaping consumers' experiences (Elsharnouby and Parsons, 2010).

HEI may have a unique vision, high-quality academic programs, highly qualified staff, state-of-the-art technology – yet it is perceived as a meaningless brand to students. Students perception of the university experience is built on not only the functional attributes such as degree programs, and qualifications of staff (Yuan *et al.*, 2016), but also the social life of the campus (Schee, 2011) and university social experience (Palmer *et al.*, 2016). When students become passionate about their university brand and actively associate with it, they are more likely to look forward entering a long-term relationship with that university (Wilkins and Huisman, 2013). It is recommended that HEIs establish and design CCAs that have a good reputation among students, coupled with facilitating high-quality student-to-student interactions, and high-quality staff-to-student interactions to enable satisfying university social experience. HEIs are hereby advised to make every effort to strengthen social augmenters brand image through internal marketing communications endeavors. This could be achieved by conveying a strong, exceptional and distinctive brand identity of CCAs through brand marketing efforts to the internal audience (e.g. students). Universities are also advised to assign competent coaches to manage CCAs and take care of the branding efforts of

theses CCAs. When students actively engage in well-managed CCAs, they will build personal relationships with other students and engage in "greater levels of university supportive behaviors and become genuine university ambassadors" (Balaji *et al.*, 2016, p. 3030).

University social augments offer HEIs a cost-effective tool for their endeavors to both target new students and improve the positioning of their university brand in the minds of current students. The development of a university's social augmenters is a financially prudent decision. Social augmenters are a comparatively low cost to implement due to the voluntary nature of students' participation. Social augmenters are not usually within the students' set of expectations, so they, if designed and facilitated effectively, can easily satisfy and delight the students. It is also easy to customize and offer a wide range of social augmenters to cater to different students' interests, even in a limited offering of core programs.

Students' social experiences are always considered as a post-enrollment factor shaping students' university experiences. This factor could also be approached as a pre-enrollment factor in targeting new students. A one-week junior student debate conference offered by a university to high school students or an invitation to prospective students to participate in a CCA may offer a window into the future social experience and facilitate understanding of the university experience. Sampling some of the university's social services prior to enrollment may help in differentiating the university and help prospective students visualize their future university experience. By engaging with prospective students before they make their university selection decision, universities can cultivate and foster student's attachment and attitude toward the university.

One of the key things students share about their university experiences on social media platforms is their participation in university CCAs. Through this behavior, students usually try to say something about themselves to the people in their social networks. Making the affiliation with the university and its CCAs visible to everyone in a student's social network could be seen as a public declaration of affection for the university and/or the social augmenter. Also, numerous TED talks delivered by students were inspired by university positive social incidents that took place within the university sphere. HEI administrators can encourage students to generate content related to their experiences with CCAs on social media as a means to position their university brand identity around concepts such as excitement, sentimentality, and friendship. Finally, university administrators are advised to allocate substantial resources to establish and facilitate social augmenters. The resources include both financial resources (e.g. funding and facilities) and human resources (e.g. supportive and motivated staff). Social augmenters brands are valuable university assets and can contribute to university efforts to build strong and meaningful brand image in the minds of students.

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Further reading

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