Experiential marketing and Islamic branding: a new perspective on college decision in Islamic higher education

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to determine the effect of Islamic branding, experiential marketing and word of mouth on college decisions and to find marketing strategies through strengthening Islamic branding based on experiential marketing to increase the number of students at Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used a quantitative method, with data collection carried out using a survey method by giving questionnaires to respondents. The respondents’ criteria are active students, at least in semester three, who have studied at Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education in Indonesia, using a sampling technique with accidental sampling. Data analysis used Partial Least Square - Structural Equation Modeling to determine the estimated results or model predictions.

Findings – The results showed a significant direct effect of experiential marketing, Islamic branding and word of mouth on college decisions. There is an indirect effect between experiential marketing and Islamic branding on college decisions through word of mouth, but the word-of-mouth variable could not mediate the relationship between experiential marketing and Islamic branding on college decisions perfectly.

Research limitations/implications – The limitation of the results of the study is that it uses respondents who are and have participated in learning activities on the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education, where the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education has added value compared to other private campuses. The added value on the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education is the overall learning activity based on Kemuhammadiyahan Islam in Indonesia. Islam Kemuhammadiyahan is the identity of the Islamic branding strategy on the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education, which is only owned by the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education.

Practical implications – This study recommends marketing strategies through strengthening Islamic branding based on experiential marketing to increase the number of students at Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education.

Originality/value – The novelty of this research is the addition of experiential marketing and Islamic branding variable measurements on word of mouth and college decisions, especially prospective students to study at Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia.

Keywords Experiential marketing, Islamic branding, Word of mouth, College decisions

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The business community, government and society need various new knowledge based on information technology, biotechnology and multidisciplinary science to solve various

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globalization-related problems. Universities are social institutions whose task is to develop science and technology while still considering the humanities aspect. The job market requires a combination of different skills provided by the higher education system (Egron-Polak and Marmolejo, 2017). This country has more than 4,200 private universities, more than its public universities. Nonetheless, “state-mindedness” is still firmly tied to the community’s preference to select their college, which challenges the sustainability of educational services for private universities. Furthermore, there is a dichotomous perception of public views and opinions that positions graduates of state universities as superior to those of private universities. Public opinion is not always valid nowadays. Several private universities have engraved a variety of accomplishments, honors and “superior” accreditation from the National Accreditation Board for Higher Education (BAN-PT). It is essential to be aware of it because it directly affects how long private universities last, especially regarding management and development. Hence, quality-based management approaches must be used to manage and promote higher education. Private universities must plan, develop and implement a strategy prioritizing teaching, research and community service (Harahap et al., 2018). Many universities adapt to changes in the world, such as the need for new work practices or skills, new technologies for teaching and research and quantum leaps in science.

The fact that Indonesia has the largest Muslim community in the world has stimulated companies (including Islamic universities) to make a specific marketing strategy adjusted to the community, namely, Islamic branding. This branding transcends the distinction between halal and haram and the practice of incorporating Islamic precepts into western business strategy. Due to a lack of in-depth knowledge about connected Islamic doctrines or an abstract view of the complexities of this religion and its adherents, marketers may have this erroneous perception. Islamic branding is in its earliest stages of intellectual development (Al-hajla et al., 2018; Alserhan, 2017; Bukhari and Isa, 2019). In the past, “Islamic marketing” was an umbrella word for all aspects of a product’s life cycle, including marketing methods aimed at Muslim consumers. Islamic branding is now seen as separate from Islamic marketing because of growing academic and business interests. The expansion of the Muslim consumer market has necessitated hiring specialists in Islamic branding (Polas et al., 2018). Muslims experience an oscillation between Islamic culture/tradition and modern pressures in the current global era (secularization and modernization) as an impact of modern life. There needs to be clarity in positioning Islamic values as guidance for humans as khalifah and servants of Allah.

On the other hand, the demands of modern life (western life) bring up values that tend to be the antithesis of Islamic values. Ecological, epistemological and even existential crises are some of the things that make modern people reject religious values. The modern paradigm with a positivistic-anthropocentric approach has implications for the emergence of a civilization based only on the power of reason without the light of God. Modern life’s needs and Islamic values should work together in the role of Islamic universities as places of higher education that produce professionals in many fields. The establishment of several educational charities, including the thousands of institutions that can be found across the country today, attests to the centrality of Muhammadiyah in the educational life of the nation. The pioneers and activists of the association who have devoted themselves to establishing and developing Muhammadiyah universities have a crucial role. Ups and downs and conflicts occur in Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education. Still, this great ship of education must continue to stand at the forefront of the development of science and technology. The number of Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education in Indonesia is 55 universities, including universities and colleges with high competition in attracting public
interest. The existence of Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education is an actual form of the motto with the mission of Progressing Islam. The reason is that Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education has clear signs of progressive Islam. Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education in Indonesia has good leadership, even becoming the best practice nationally and internationally. Management in terms of organization and healthy governance is a characteristic of Perguruan Tinggi Muhammadiyah Aisyiyah (Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education). So that in the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education environment, there is good cooperation, a focus on development and collaboration, not elbowing each other between universities. The need to strengthen the Islamic branding marketing strategy built by Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education becomes an added value to the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah values. Islamic values and "Muhammadiyah values" poured into learning materials in the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah higher education study program become part of the experiential marketing part of Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah higher education students. One of the best universities in the world (UniRank Version 2022) is Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, under the Pimpinan Pusat (Central Board) (PP) Muhammadiyah Higher Education Research and Development Council. The PP Muhammadiyah Higher Education Research and Development Council has a vision of improving the quality of education and management in Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education as a means of Amar Ma’ruf Nahi Munkar. Moreover, the mission includes:

- encouraging efforts to improve the quality of education in Perguruan Tinggi Muhammadiyah (Muhammadiyah Higher Education) PTM;
- developing guidelines for the governance and organization of education in PTMs;
- developing networks to improve the governance and quality of education in PTMs; and
- carry out da’wah amar makruf nahi munkar which is rahmatan lil ‘alamin.

Based on the Muhammadiyah Central Leadership Regulation Number 01/PRN/I.0/B/2012 concerning the Higher Education Council as the organizer of business activities, programs and activities in the field of higher education in accordance with the policies of the association is tasked with:

- fostering Muhammadiyah ideology;
- developing Al-Islam and Kemuhmmadiyahan;
- planning, organizing, coordinating, fostering and supervising the management of the chess dharma of higher education;
- improving the quality and quantity of higher education;
- conducting research and development in the field of higher education; and
- submitting input to the leadership of the association as a consideration in determining policy.

Experiential marketing in education/training services, in this case, the higher education is obtained from the ongoing lecture experience and when obtaining academic services. Learning experiences or experiential learning are critical in a higher education’s marketing strategy to attract students or the public to study on campus (Mutohar and Haryati, 2020; Radford et al., 2015). The brand image of higher education is essential in influencing the decision of prospective students to determine which college to continue their studies. Brand image is the public’s perception of the company or its products and is influenced by factors
outside its control (Anggraeni and Rachmanita, 2015; Chang and Chieng, 2006; Dodds et al., 1991; Hong, 2019; Ji-Soo, 2017; Lai et al., 2018). Brand image has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention, showing that the better the consumer’s perception of the brand, the more the consumer’s purchase intention will also increase. A good brand image is influenced by many factors, including the advantages, uniqueness and preferences that exist in customer perceptions of a brand (Al-hajla et al., 2018; Alserhan, 2017; Bukhari and Isa, 2019; Polas et al., 2018). Brand Image at Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education focuses on Islamic branding with Al Islam and Muhammadiyah Studies, excellence and uniqueness based on customer and community perceptions. Muhammadiyah education is a modern Islamic education that integrates religion with life and faith for holistic progress. The customers who have used the product or service need to consider the company’s sales strategy. Customer satisfaction triggers the formation of positive word of mouth. This consumer attitude shows that effective word of mouth (WOM) will quickly build a brand’s credibility, which leads to recommendations by one consumer to another. If consumers are satisfied with a product or service, a positive WOM will be created about the product or service. However, if consumers are dissatisfied with a product or service, a negative WOM will decrease the number of consumers or potential customers who fail to buy or use the product or service (Cheung and Thadani, 2012; East et al., 2017; Lau and Ng, 2009; Wang and Yu, 2017).

Most research on experiential marketing is focused on product and service companies, so there is still room for research to focus on the education/training sector (Aristiawan et al., 2019; Bellinda et al., 2020; Kailani and Cibotar, 2015; Khan and Rahman, 2014; Lutfie and Marcelino, 2020; Zena and Hadisumarto, 2013). The results of previous studies show that experiential marketing and brand image impact word of mouth (Muhammad and Artanti, 2016; Anggraeni and Rachmanita, 2015; Ariswan et al., 2019). Several previous studies have shown that word of mouth has a positive and significant effect on customer purchase intentions (Ahmad et al., 2014; Ahmed Sallam, 2014; Ayuningsih and Maftukhah, 2020; Harahap et al., 2018; Hossain et al., 2017; Lerrthaitr and Panjakajor, 2014). This study shows that consumers will have a higher purchase intention with the circulation of good words. The purchase decision is the next stage after the intention or desire to buy (Ahmed Sallam, 2014; Mranani and Lastianti, 2019). In addition, purchasing decisions are also influenced by positive WOM. Personal experience is essential in convincing customers, as in traditional WOM, and customer experience positively influences WOM on purchasing decisions (Lee, 2018; Lutfie and Marcelino, 2020; Oetomo, 2017). In addition, brand image significantly affects purchasing decisions through word of mouth. A positive brand image will form a positive word-of-mouth communication in positive message recommendations to make the consumer purchase (Ahmed Sallam, 2014; Ayuningsih and Maftukhah, 2020; Ji-Soo, 2017; Muljani and Koesworo, 2019; Tariq et al., 2017).

More academic literature is needed concerning experiential marketing, Islamic branding and WOM by marketing to create strategies for college decisions. This study aims to fill the gap by proposing a conceptual model of experiential marketing, Islamic branding and WOM. This model is based on the college decision theory, which says that potential students choose universities based on experiential marketing in the form of learning activities and educational services (Daftary et al., 2020; Raub et al., 2017), the branding of an educational institution in the form of the quality and added value of higher education in particular (Jabbar and Edwards, 2019; Lent et al., 2017; Yi et al., 2020) and word of mouth from colleagues in the form of recommendations and positive information (Bruni-Bossio and Delbaere, 2021; Kaye et al., 2010). This research is so crucial because Muhammadiyah, through its higher education institutes, supports the Indonesian government from having to teach its people. Compared to other Islamic groups or mass organizations in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah movement has done very well by getting many schools and higher
education. Quantity is more than enough, and the next step is to improve marketing strategies through Islamic branding and experiential marketing. The purpose of this study is to determine and investigate the direct and indirect influence between experiential marketing, Islamic branding and word of mouth on people’s decisions to study at Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah higher education and to find out how to recommend marketing strategies that need to be carried out by Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah higher education in Indonesia by strengthening Islamic branding based on experiential marketing to increase the target number of students (Figure 1).

Literature review  
**Education service**  
Marketing creates demand and pursues existing customers and their potential. Competition is omnipresent, and the educational services sector tends not to be excluded (Latif et al., 2017). The fact that there are private universities shows that the human right to education is mostly being met. The responsibility to make it happen belongs not only to the government but also to the community. On the other hand, adding new universities increases the number of schools that are good for educational services – most people who use educational services, like students and their guardians or parents, like this effect. Universities have trouble getting new students because they need high-quality human resources for community development and to make the higher education sector more competitive. One of the most important parts of higher education is that it has to be of high quality and make students happy in the current situation. The universities will have to compete to keep and get the best students, so it will be essential for them to know how students feel about the services they offer (Borishade et al., 2021; Gul et al., 2019; Moslehpour et al., 2020; Tahili et al., 2021). Higher education institutions in Indonesia are being pushed to be independent from the government’s funding so that they have to be competitive in the market. Universities have to compete to better prepare students for the job market and, as a result, pay more attention to how happy their students are.  

Universities must also use marketing strategies to keep and get more students who are already there. Universities that cannot “sell” and market their education systems tend to be less popular with the public. Colleges need new students because they tend to be the starting point for their assignments (Abbas, 2020; Dent et al., 2019) (Gupta and Kaushik, 2018; Hong et al., 2019; La Rotta et al., 2019; Salam et al., 2019). Marketing of educational services does not aim to commercialize educational services because the community expects universities to show what makes them unique and what benefits they offer based on the community’s

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**Figure 1.** Research conceptual framework
needs and wants. A marketing strategy is an organization’s plan to do marketing by introducing itself to the public (Khoi et al., 2018). When looking at higher education and trying to help it grow, the marketing mix in educational services shows signs of a market-based approach (Manzuma-Ndaaba et al., 2018). The primary way this happens is through universities’ marketing activities through both electronic and nonelectronic media. These activities tend to introduce universities to the public. Universities should be held accountable for helping students succeed in the classroom and retaining them until graduation. Several studies have shown that a university’s commitment to student success after graduation is crucial (Srivastava and Dhamija, 2022; Yang et al., 2020). However, as previous research has shown, many potential students today seek more intrinsic values from their college experience, such as deeper relationships with faculty and staff and feelings of inclusion and belonging (Bozeman and Eadens, 2021). There is an urgent need for every higher education institution to evaluate its student services separately from its academic offerings. A plan should be made to determine how best to weave such services into the current pedagogy to generate an ideology of belonging and ownership by both the institution and the students. The current university model needs to focus on methods that can be measured and contribute to the success of the college (Othman et al., 2019). These actions should be measurable to gauge their effectiveness through student class success, retention and graduation rates.

Behavioral decision-making studies humans’ affective, cognitive and social processes to identify and select alternatives. The values, beliefs and preferences of the person making the decision will guide these steps, lead to final choices and affect behavior. Consumers go through the basic steps of purchasing to determine what products and services best suit their needs. Purchasing decision is a consumer’s decision about what to buy, how much to buy, where to do it, when and how to buy it (Bhutto et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2020). It involves several steps: identifying needs, looking for information, weighing options before buying, buying, using and weighing options after buying (Veling et al., 2022; Warburton and Terry, 2018). The purchasing decision process is the stages buyers go through in making choices about products and services to purchase (Tajeddini et al., 2021; Xiao and Li, 2019). Consumer decision-making is an integrating process using knowledge to compare and choose between two possible ways to act (Miletić and van Maanen, 2019; Yim and Byon, 2020). In other words, the availability of more than one choice is a must in decision-making. Decision-making is a basic psychological process that is key to understanding why people buy what they buy. The decision-making process begins with a need that is trying to be fulfilled (Fu et al., 2020; Xiao and Li, 2019). There are several ways to meet this need, so it is essential to evaluate what consumers think is the best way to meet it. In the process of comparing these, consumers need information whose amount and level of importance depend on the needs of consumers and the situation they face. Buying decisions will be made by weighing the pros and cons of a brand (compensatory decision rule) or looking for the best solution from the consumer’s point of view (non-compensatory decision rule). These rules will be reevaluated after the product has been used.

Studying at a respected college is an example of a consumer decision. Empirical research on college choice among high school students investigated the decision to enroll in college as well as the choice of which institution to attend from several options. The student demographics, geography, school quality and cost were revealed to be major factors influencing student decisions in this study. College preferences vary depending on the student’s background, gender, race, wealth and income (Kinsler and Pavan, 2011; Lovenheim and Reynolds, 2013; Pallais and Turner, 2006; Turley, 2009). A student’s decision may also be influenced by the institution’s quality or ranking and the students’
origins, as students differ in terms of how aware of or actively use rankings in their judgments, depending on their social resources. Understanding how institutional quality influences students’ decisions is critical, especially given the growing body of research on “academic mismatch” in higher education, which occurs when students apply to colleges that are less selective than the colleges they should attend based on their academic records (Avery and Hoxby, 2004; Bastedo and Jaquette, 2011; Montaguti et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2013). Recent research also suggests that no matter how well a student does in school, all college students would benefit from going to a higher-quality, better-funded four-year school with more skilled peers (Crisp and Nuñez, 2014). This is because schools with enhanced conditions and encouragement can assist students to remain in school and graduate (Abbas, 2020; Hwang and Choi, 2019).

**Experiential marketing**

Experiential marketing is an effort used by companies or marketers to package products so that they can offer emotional experiences that touch the hearts and feelings of consumers. Research conducted by Lutfi and Marcelino (2020) and Mranani and Lastianti (2019) shows that experiential marketing has a significant positive effect on consumer buying behavior. Businesses aim to attract consumers’ interest and build consumer relationships through five aspects: senses, feelings, thoughts, acts and related experiences (Mutohar and Haryati, 2020; Radford et al., 2015). This study explains that sense offers a new understanding of the relationship between a company’s product and its consumers, and sense is also very influential for consumers to act when they make a purchase. Feel in marketing seeks to appeal to customers’ most profound feelings and emotions to create a sense of customer experience ranging from familiar feelings to intense emotional levels of pride and prestige. This marketing feel is essential because when customers feel good, they will buy products. Aspects of thinking can be built through surprises; surprises must be positive, which means that customers get more than they asked for, more pleasant than they expected or something completely different from what they expected, making customers feel happy buying products (Khan and Rahman, 2014). Act marketing aims to create customers to change customer behavior and lifestyle. The act shows the customer another alternative to doing something, such as making a purchase. Consumers must be able to feel, think and act, even if it allows consumers to have a strong relationship with a sense of belonging to the product. Customers get various experiences with a product or service brand if sufficient information about the product exists. Relate to a person’s culture and reference group, which can create social identity. A marketer must create a social identity (generation, nationality, ethnicity) for its customers with the products or services offered to make consumers feel happy to make purchasing decisions (P.-L. Chang and Chieng, 2006; Stone et al., 2017).

Experiential marketing is effective in influencing the brand perception and purchasing decisions. Experiential marketing can provide a robust product experience as information to make purchasing decisions (P.-L. Chang and Chieng, 2006; Khan and Rahman, 2014; Lee, 2018; Yuan and Wu, 2008). Customers get this opportunity from the experiential marketing process for product purchasing decisions (Aristiawan et al., 2019; Mutohar and Haryati, 2020; Wibowo, 2019). Experiential marketing can affect the intensity of consumer purchases through the emotions it generates and by increasing the value attached to the product or brand itself (Lutfi and Marcelino, 2020). According to Pine and Gilmore (1998, p. 98), “an experience occurs when a company deliberately uses services as a stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in ways that create memorable events.” They state that providing experiences is part of success in the competitive field. To further elaborate on
the concept of experience, the research (Schmitt, 1999) proposes five different types of experiences: “feeling,” “sensing,” “thinking,” “acting” and “relating.” Due to the complicated nature of experiential value, this study uses Yuan and Wu’s (2008) concept to evaluate its components or aspects. As highlighted in Yuan and Wu’s (2008) research, value includes two essential aspects: functional and emotional. While emotional value refers to the customer’s emotional response during the post-purchase shopping experience, functional value is necessary. It includes the financial, mental and utilitarian rewards of the service/good.

Universities must continue improving the quality of education and business competitiveness for prospective students and the community so that universities can expand market segments globally and produce many quality graduates. The results of previous studies indicate that there is no influence between the relationship between the sense and feel factors of marketing on the competitiveness of Islamic universities in Indonesia. However, there is a significant influence between the relationship between thinking factors, habits and relationship marketing on the competitiveness of Islamic universities in Indonesia. Getting better at carrying out thoughts, actions and relationships in experiential marketing can increase the competitiveness of Islamic universities and increase prospective students’ interest in Islamic universities (Mutohar and Haryati, 2020). Companies can make their brands famous as brands that have advantages and add value to people’s minds through experiential marketing (Hosseinizadeh and Baktash, 2018). Experiential learning on campus is becoming a great tool to keep students motivated and engaged in the classroom. The contribution of experiential learning pedagogy should be addressed in the classroom; experiential learning elements are essential in every curriculum and a marketing strategy for educational institutions (Singh et al., 2022; Yazici, 2020). Experiential learning pedagogy can be an educator’s instrument to bridge the skills gap and make students work-ready to keep up with the demands of a dynamic business environment.

Experiential marketing has a positive impact on word of mouth; if customers like what they learn, they become more loyal to the brand, resulting in a more positive WOM (Lin et al., 2009; Lin and Lin, 2008). Furthermore, research conducted by Muhammad and Artanti (2016) shows that through empirical research on college choice among high school students has explored the decision to enroll in college and the choice of which institution among many options. These studies reveal several essential factors that drive students’ decisions, including cost, school quality, geography and student demographics. Research has also found that college choices vary by student background, race, gender, income and wealth (Kinsler and Pavan, 2011; Lovenheim and Reynolds, 2013; Pallais and Turner, 2006). The cost of higher education, including tuition, fees, room and board and financial aid, is essential in students’ decisions about which institution to choose (Avery and Hoxby, 2004).

**H1.** Experiential marketing has a positive effect on college decision.

**H3.** Experiential marketing has a positive effect on word of mouth.

**Islamic branding**

Muslim clients differ from other customers in general. Muslims are customers manifestly distinct from other buyers (Sandikci, 2011). In addition, Muslims are dynamic, multifaceted, impacted by culture and unexpected. It is the Islamic faith that distinguishes Muslim clients from others. Islam has clear and stringent standards regarding how to conduct business and provide service to Muslim consumers. Businesses must follow Shariah (Islamic law) to serve
Muslim customers (Alserhan, 2017, 2020; Jumani and Siddiqui, 2012; Jumani and Sukhabot, 2020). Due to the significance of the Islamic religious worldview for Muslims, corporations produce brands that cater to the Muslim market niche. Islamic and other brand agendas have attracted the attention of Muslims and non-Muslims worldwide and have expanded through social ties. Islamic branding has been classified into three forms (Alserhan, 2010). First, Islamic brand by compliance, Islamic brands must show and have a solid appeal to consumers by complying with Islamic sharia. Brands included in this category are halal products that result from production in Islamic countries, and their use is specifically for Muslim consumers. Second, an Islamic brand by origin is the use of a brand without showing the halal identity of a product because the product is the result of a production process originating from a country that is already known as an Islamic country. Finally, in Islamic brands, the customer comes from non-Muslim countries but has included a halal label on their products so that Muslim consumers can enjoy their products. Creating and sustaining an effective brand over the long term is highly dependent on the emotional attachment between the brand and the customer. Customers play a big role in developing brand meaning by creating various brand associations, brand identity and reputation. This role makes customers feel ownership of the brand and creates a sense of intense and active engagement and emotional attachment to the brand (Bukhari and Isa, 2019; Jumani and Sukhabot, 2021). Islamic branding is based on the required emotional attachment between Muslim consumers and the brands they use. The existence of an emotional attachment between the brand and the customer ensures customer loyalty and active engagement with the brand (Islam, 2020). Consumers adopt, use and retain brands they perceive as part of themselves.

The practice of Islamic branding has received considerable attention among academics and practitioners; they suggest and demand that manufacturers use the concept of Islamic branding more. The Muslim market covers 21.01%, or about 1.43 billion, of the world’s population, meaning that the increase in the world’s Muslim population every year is very high. Muslims make up the majority of the population in more than 50 countries in Asia, Africa and Europe. These data support the fact that the Muslim market will grow significantly to US$30tn by 2050 (Alserhan, 2010). With the largest Muslim population globally, Indonesia is a potential market for producers both from within and outside the country. Manufacturers realize that Muslim consumers are a good target and market opportunity to sell and market their products. The marketing strategy they often apply is Islamic branding, using Islamic identity (with Islamic writings, Sharia, Islamic names and halal labels) in selling their products. The company’s marketing strategy to use Islamic branding and experiential marketing has many positive impacts, especially on the positive word-of-mouth effect on consumers. If customers like what they learn from a product from positive WOM communication, they become more loyal to the product brand (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2016; Gupta and Harris, 2010; Muhammad and Artanti, 2016; Park et al., 2019; Sair et al., 2020):

- **H2.** Islamic branding has a positive effect on experiential marketing.
- **H4.** Islamic branding has a positive effect on word of mouth.
- **H5.** Islamic branding has a positive effect on college decision.

**Word-of-mouth**

WOM communication is a communication process for providing recommendations individually or in groups for a product or service that aims to provide personal information...
Word of mouth refers to exchanging comments, thoughts or ideas between two or more consumers, neither of which constitutes a marketing source. So if the word-of-mouth information comes directly from other people who describe their own experiences personally, then this is much clearer to consumers than the information contained in advertisements. Word-of-mouth promotion has an impact on consumer purchasing decisions. It is found that word-of-mouth promotion is one of the essential elements of a marketing tool to create good relationships with customers and gain a competitive advantage over competitors (East et al., 2017; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Henning-Thurau, 2004; Pratiwi and Yasa, 2019). Research related to word-of-mouth states that WOM has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention, meaning that the better WOM, the higher the consumer’s purchase intention for a product (Al-Gasawneh and Al-Adamat, 2020; Ayuningsih and Maftukhah, 2020; Situmorang and Panjaitan, 2017).

WOM is communication between customers or consumers about the information on a product, service or company that comes from sources independent of any commercial influence (Litvin et al., 2008). This interpersonal exchange of consumers provides easy access to various information related to the consumption of products or services and goes beyond traditional advertising strategies. The available information goes beyond the message that comes from the company and can inadvertently influence an individual’s purchasing decision-making (Brown et al., 2007). The widespread implementation of WOM is one of the most influencing factors for consumer behavior in purchasing decisions (Daugherty and Hoffman, 2013). WOM implementation is very significant with intangible products, especially in the tourism or hospitality sector, where consumers find it challenging to evaluate the product before consumption (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012; Lee and Youn, 2009; Litvin et al., 2008). Users generally trust other consumers more than sellers, so WOM can influence many consumers and is seen as one of the consumer-dominated marketing channels where consumers are not dependent on the market and sellers can give credibility to their products (Brown et al., 2007; Lau and Ng, 2009; Nieto et al., 2014). WOM has become a more independent, reliable and credible medium (Arndt, 1967; Lee and Youn, 2009).

Companies in the industrial era 5.0 see both types of WOM and e-WOM recommendations and create new opportunities to listen to all customers’ needs and adjust the way they promote products or services. The new promotion strategy can improve the company’s services and better meet the needs of its customers, so that the company’s profits can increase better. Consumers can get product information from many sources. Unlike traditional marketing and advertising, customers receive information without company influence (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012). Customers’ word-of-mouth advertising can help organizations attract new customers and strengthen their brand (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas and Alserhan, 2010). WOM also helps organizations assess their business strategy by revealing customer preferences through reviews and feedback (Ismagilova et al., 2017; Ismagilova et al., 2019). Companies must understand customer behavior to create long-term connections and harness customer influence in their business (Aren et al., 2013; Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016).

Previous consumer responses in the form of negative or positive attitudes towards a product or service can affect customers’ purchase intention in the future. This consumer response becomes the basis for the consideration of new customers to compare the actual performance of a product or service with their expectations (Hussain et al., 2017). Positive reviews can enhance a company’s sales by increasing positive attitudes and expectations, while bad reviews can lower sales, assessments and consumer intentions, according to the bulk of studies in this field (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Sonnier et al., 2011; Zhu and Zhang, 2010). When customers have a strong attachment to a brand, they are more likely to
contest and, thus, disregard bad brand information (Ahluwalia et al., 2000). Yet, some research focuses on the repurchase intention and WOM of Indonesian customers (Shihab et al., 2018), particularly in relation to social commerce. The leaders of higher education institutions are advised to engage current students as key stakeholders in creating the higher education experience from the point of enrollment. Therefore, students no longer see themselves as “consumers of higher education services” but can think of themselves more as “partners” of their chosen university (McCann and Hewitt, 2023; Othman et al., 2019). Current students and alums can be encouraged by their universities to become more active actors, interacting better with their lecturers and supporting employees of higher education institutions. As a result, satisfied students and alums can further contribute to the marketability of higher education institutions and attract more potential students into university study programs through positive e-WOM (Bozeman and Eadens, 2021):

$$H6. \text{ Word of mouth has a positive effect on college decision.}$$

$$H7. \text{ Experiential marketing has a positive effect on college decisions through the word-of-mouth mediation variable.}$$

$$H8. \text{ Islamic branding has a positive effect on college decision through word-of-mouth mediation variables.}$$

Methods
This research is explanatory (research that explains the relationship between research variables and hypothesis testing) with a quantitative approach (Sarstedt et al., 2019). This study is intended to explain the position of the variables to be studied and the influence between one variable and another. This study describes the strategy of strengthening Islamic branding based on experiential marketing at the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education in Indonesia. The initial stage of the research began with the formulation of the problem and the determination of research objectives. The next stage was the literature study, which involved reviewing previous studies from several journals and theoretical studies to help determine research hypotheses. The making of research design was the concept of the research flow and continued with the making of questionnaires and their distribution. After distributing the questionnaires and the data collection process is complete, data was processed using partial least square - structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM is a component- or variant-based SEM structural equation model. This multivariate analysis technique combines factor analysis and regression analysis (correlation), intending to test the relationship between variables in a model, indicators and their constructs and relationships between constructs. PLS-SEM is used to test theories or develop theories that aim to make predictions (Hair et al., 2019). At the data processing stage, it is necessary to test statistical data with validity and reliability tests. This research model used the second-order technique in data processing. Two distinct approaches are used to do an analysis of the measurement model within the smart-PLS software. The first model is its outer model, and the second model is the inner model. The initial stages in the first-order test of this model measure convergent validity with the outer loading limit using a value of 0.50 so that the indicator’s validity is convergent in the perfect category. Furthermore, for testing the composite reliability value, Cronbach’s alpha and average variance extracted (AVE) must meet above 0.5 (Sarstedt et al., 2019). Data processing results are then analyzed to produce conclusions and research recommendations for Muhammadiyah and Aisyiyah Universities.
This study used four variables: experiential marketing, which has five dimensions with 14 indicators and is measured by 14 items; Islamic branding, which has three dimensions with 10 indicators and is measured by 10 items; word of mouth, which is an intervening variable with two indicators and is measured by two items; and the college decision variable, which has five indicators and is measured by five items. These statements were adopted from various sources of previous studies (Table 1) and edited according to this study. Measurement of variables in the research process was done using a Likert scale to measure variables or constructs based on the subject to state the results of agreement on the psychological concept, namely, behavior, and opinions on the views of a person or group about the existence of social phenomena that have previously been determined in detail by the researcher. This Likert scale gave each score on the items stated as alternative response values for the value using a scale of 1–5. A five-point Likert scale was adopted to measure the constructs, and the range was “strongly disagree (1)” to “strongly agree (5)”. The types of data used in this study were primary and secondary data collected. Primary data is a collection of answers to the content-based research questionnaire in the form of respondents’ individual opinions or perceptions. The primary data in this study were obtained from the questions in the questionnaire received from each respondent, who was a student or alumni from Muhammadiyah and Aisyiah Higher Education in Indonesia. The questioner was divided into two parts: first section of the questionnaire composed of demographic characteristics of the sample, such as age, gender, last education, previous education level and current semester.

The population in this study were all alums or students from at least semester three who had lectured for at least 1 (one) year at Muhammadiyah-Aisyiah Higher Education. The sampling used non-probability technique which does not provide equal opportunities for each element (member) of the population to become a member of the sample. This technique applied a purposive sampling method with the determination of the sample based on the target of the population elements following the criteria and the most suitable respondents to provide answers to data collection under the research problem and research objectives (Rahman et al., 2022). The questionnaire was created using Google Form and was distributed through direct mail the respondents who were previously confirmed that they were alumni and/or students of Muhammadiyah-Aisyiah Higher Educations. The samples, i.e. students and alums, were chosen as respondents purposively by the criteria that they have had learning experiences and academic services from campus so that they can be a reference to continue their further studies, both Master’s and Doctoral Degrees at Muhammadiyah-Aisyiah Higher Education. Each Muhammadiyah-Aisyiah Higher Education student or alumni was a source or object of interest in this study so that it can be determined and defined the answers and statements that match the questions in the questionnaire related to the research variables. The characteristics of respondents in this study have a variety of respondents based on gender, age, last education, origin of last education and current semester, with an overall sample size of 352 respondents (after eliminating three incomplete questionnaires). This sample size is appropriate as a sample size for structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis and reflects a 15% response rate. Sampling in this study refers to the minimum sample size of 5–10 observations for each parameter estimated because the total population size cannot be known with certainty (Hair et al., 2019). Besides that, if the sample size is too large, it is thought to be difficult to get a good goodness of fit measure (Sarstedt et al., 2019). This study uses a scale of 10 because this research is large-scale social, so the number of statements in this study (30) is multiplied by 10, resulting in a minimum sample size of 300 respondents. Ethical concerns must be taken into account throughout the study process. Integrity in reporting data, protecting
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operational definition</th>
<th>Dimensions – indicators</th>
<th>Statement items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiential marketing (EM) is a marketing approach that involves emotions and feelings by creating positive experiences with quality learning and educational services. <em>Source: (Khan and Rahman, 2014; Schmitt, 1999; Yuan and Wu, 2008)</em></td>
<td>Sense (EM1)</td>
<td>• PTMA campus promotions appeal to my senses • PTMA campus lecture activities attract my senses • Studying at the PTMA campus is interesting for me • Lectures on the PTMA campus have a special experience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Lecture activities on the PTMA campus stimulate my curiosity • Activities during lectures on the PTMA campus develop my interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Think (EM2)</td>
<td>• Activities during lectures on the PTMA campus connect me with the outside community • Lecture activities make me closer to Islam Kemuhammadiyahan</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Relate (EM3)</td>
<td>• Activities during lectures on the PTMA campus stimulate my curiosity • Activities during lectures on the PTMA campus develop my interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Act (EM4)</td>
<td>• Lectures on the PTMA campus have a special experience • The information on the PTMA campus website caught my attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feel (EM5)</td>
<td>• Lectures at the PTMA campus make me comfortable • Feeling interested after studying at the PTMA campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic branding (IB) is the perception of Islam described by higher education in people’s minds. <em>Source: (Alserhan, 2010; Bukhari and Isa, 2019; Trishananto, 2019)</em></td>
<td>Origin (IB1)</td>
<td>• PTMA campuses are located in Muslim-majority countries • PTMA campus promotion is aimed at Muslim-majority countries • Islamic activities in promoting PTMA campuses come from Muslim-majority countries</td>
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<td>Compliance (IB2)</td>
<td>• PTMA campus implements all its activities to shape Islamic brand perception • PTMA campuses get certification recognition as Islamic campuses to form Islamic brand perceptions • PTMA campus services are carried out by selected human resources with a sufficient understanding of Islamic Kemuhammadiyahan principles</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Customer (IB3)</td>
<td>• PTMA’s target market for new student admissions is the Muslim community • PTMA campus governance meets sharia standards • PTMA campus service standards have met sharia principles • PTMA lecture activities accommodate sharia principles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Operational definitions of research variables and indicators
personal information and being forthright about findings are all crucial to the scientific method. Ethical considerations must be taken into account throughout the entirety of the research process. Ethically conducted research is more likely to yield accurate and fair results (Knottnerus and Tugwell, 2018). This includes the research’s design and sample strategies, collecting data method, data collection instruments, materials and data processing methodologies. Adherence to ethical principles during research and reporting is essential to establishing the reliability of result findings.

**Result and discussion**

The respondent characteristics are divided based on gender, age, last education, the origin of previous education and current semester. There were 116 male respondents and 236 female respondents, who were limited to a minimum age of 17 years. This age limit is due to the characteristics of the respondents being students and having taken semester 2 of the undergraduate program. The respondent’s age factor affects the knowledge, responsibility, ability to think, act and maturity level of the respondent in making decisions. **Table 2** shows that respondents aged 21–30 years – as many as 274 respondents or 77.84% – dominated the unit of analysis in this study. Most of the respondents were students or alumni with at least the last education from high school to a doctoral degree, with the dominance of undergraduate students, as many as 249 respondents or 70.74%. The dominance of student respondents in semesters 7–8 is 131 or 37.22% so that respondents can show their experiences during learning during lectures at Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education. In general, most of the respondents (252 respondents or 71.59%) previously received education from public or private schools or universities. Many student respondents chose Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Educations to pursue further education.
Table 3 shows that the composite reliability, Cronbach’s alpha and AVE values have met above 0.5. AVE and Cronbach’s alpha have also met the standard values in the composite reliability test. At the research data processing stage, the model is tested using second order; in the first-order test of this model, the convergent validity with outer loading uses a value of

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<th>Gender</th>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<th>Age (years)</th>
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<td>21 – 30</td>
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<td>≥41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Master</td>
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<td>28.41</td>
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<td>Public or private universities</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>71.59</td>
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<td>Already graduated</td>
<td>70</td>
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**Source:** Authors

**Outer model**

Table 3 shows that the composite reliability, Cronbach’s alpha and AVE values have met above 0.5. AVE and Cronbach’s alpha have also met the standard values in the composite reliability test. At the research data processing stage, the model is tested using second order; in the first-order test of this model, the convergent validity with outer loading uses a value of

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<th>Indicator</th>
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<th>AVE</th>
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<td>0.938</td>
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<td>0.732</td>
<td>0.740</td>
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</table>

**Source:** Authors
0.50 so that the indicator has been declared to meet convergent validity and is stated in the very good category. All the outer loading values have met the requirements of convergent validity to be tested for reliability and construct validity. The second-order outer model test shows that all outer loadings have values above 0.5 and meet convergent validity (Table 4 and Figure 2). The measurement of discriminant validity uses the criteria presented by Fornell-Larcker and cross-loadings. The Fornell–Larcker postulate states that a latent variable shares more variance with the underlying indicator than other latent variables. This postulate means that the AVE value of each latent variable must be greater than the highest $R^2$ (R-Square) value compared to the value of the other latent variables. The second criterion for discriminant validity is that each indicator’s loading should be higher than its respective cross-loading. If the Fornell–Larcker criterion assesses discriminant validity at the construct level (latent variable), then “cross-loading” is possible at the indicator level.

**Inner model**

Inner model testing is done by looking at the goodness of the R-Square model, the model fit parameters and the significance of the hypothesis. R-Square shows a value of 0.718 for the

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<td>0.905</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Outer loading

Source: Authors
college decision variable and 0.674 for the word-of-mouth variable, indicating that the model is good. Based on the results of the data analysis, the R-Square value for the entrepreneur identity variable is 0.196. The R-Square value for the leadership self-efficacy variable is 0.312. In addition, the standardized root mean square residual, Chi-Square and normed fit index values in the fit model indicate that the model has fulfilled the goodness of fit (Table 5).

Hypothesis testing through the inner model shows that the $H1–H6$ hypotheses proposed in this study are acceptable and significant. The hypothesis of the effect of word-of-mouth mediation on the indirect test of experiential marketing ($H7$) and Islamic branding ($H8$)
variables on the college decision variable showed positive results with outer loadings of 0.110 and 0.147 and t-statistics of 2.983 and 2.972 (p-value ≤ 0.05). The analysis of specific indirect effects using PLS in Table 6 shows whether this mediation is full mediation or partial mediation. On the path coefficient test, it can be shown that there is a direct influence between experiential marketing and college decisions and a direct influence between Islamic branding and college decisions; these two relationships show positive and significant results, so it can be concluded that this mediation relationship is only a partial mediation.

Experiential marketing variables have five dimensions, namely, sense, think, relate, act and feel. The dimension that most represents the experiential marketing variable is the feel dimension. In measuring the related dimension, the indicator of lecturing activities at Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education pleasing students most dominantly reflects the related dimension, while the pleasant student service indicator reflects this dimension less dominantly. The dimension that does not affect the experiential marketing variable based on the data processing results from the respondents is the sense dimension. Students’ impressions of interesting lectures are more representative to be an indicator of the sense dimension compared to impressions of unique experiences. Experience is often the result of direct observation and participation in authentic, imaginary or virtual activities that occur specifically to stimulate human sensory stimuli. The experiential marketing perspective recognizes that many products are symbolic expressions for their consumers. Experiential marketing offers a new understanding of product and consumer relationships (Stone et al., 2017). As an institution that provides educational services, the existence of universities not only pays more attention to providing services that provide benefits for students but also needs to create positive experiences for students (Mutohar and Haryati, 2020). The concept of experiential marketing offers an alternative strategy that focuses more on the ability of the product or service to offer emotional experiences to touch the hearts and feelings of customers (Aristiawan et al., 2019; Lutfi and Marcelino, 2020; Wibowo, 2019). This study shows that experiential marketing can significantly influence word of mouth and university decisions, either directly or indirectly, and supports the results of previous studies (Aristiawan et al., 2019; Khan and Rahman, 2014; Muhammad and Artanti, 2016; Widowati and Tsabita, 2017). The results of this study indicate that to increase students’ self-confidence toward higher education institutions, it is appropriate for higher education managers to start paying attention to efforts to form positive and unique experiences that encourage students’ emotional side to foster student confidence in their alma mater.

The measurement of the Islamic branding variable has three dimensions: Islamic branding by origin, compliance and customer. The dimension that most influences the Islamic branding variable is Islamic branding by customers. In measuring the dimensions of Islamic branding by customers, the indicator of lecture activities accommodating sharia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Original sample</th>
<th>Sample mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>T-statistics</th>
<th>P-values</th>
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<td>0.049</td>
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<td>EM → WOM → CD</td>
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<td>0.112</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>2.983</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 6. Path coefficient

Source: Authors
principles most dominantly reflects the dimension of Islamic branding by customers. In contrast, the indicator of the target market of the Muslim community in admitting new students of Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education is less dominant in reflecting this dimension. The dimension that does not affect the Islamic branding variable based on the data processing results from the respondents is the Islamic branding dimension by origin. In measuring the dimensions of Islamic branding by origin, the indicator that the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education campus is located in a Muslim-majority country most dominantly reflects the dimension of Islamic branding by origin. In contrast, the indicator of promotional activities for the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education campus is aimed at countries with a majority Muslim population that is less dominant, which reflects this dimension. Higher education institutions with religious values must be able to answer the demands of business competition by providing more value and excellence. Therefore, students who have just graduated have superior religious values obtained in their educational environment. Students and alumni who receive learning and education on religious values will receive assessments and responses from the community, making the identity of an Islamic college more vicious and widely known. Islamic religious education is a form of solid character in one’s personality, so to get strong belief values, one of the foundations should be supported by the environment. Religious values will encourage someone to work sincerely, patiently, and do their best because they are responsible for their faith to achieve a worship value from every work activity (Polas et al., 2018; Shahbaz et al., 2021; Trishananto, 2019). This study indicates that Islamic branding significantly affects experiential marketing, word-of-mouth and college decisions, either directly or indirectly, and supports the previous research (Polas et al., 2018; Trishananto, 2019).

The WOM variable has two indicators related to the recommendation of Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education as the best place for education and positive stories about campus. A positive story about the campus is the most dominant indicator that reflects this variable. In comparison, the less dominant indicator reflecting the WOM variable is the recommendation of the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education campus as the best education place. WOM is considered the widest and most important channel for customers to seek information and distribute their knowledge (Özdemir et al., 2016); this can be done through any form of communication. WOM communication has been shown to be nine times more effective for rapid information dissemination compared to print and media communication (Chang et al., 2012). In addition to marketer-driven communication such as advertising, non-marketer-driven communication such as WOM is an impactful alternative communication channel (Philip Kotler, 2009). WOM can be any oral and personal communication, positive or negative, about a brand, product, service or organization in which the receiver of the message perceives the sender as having noncommercial intentions. In Arndt’s definition, word of mouth involves an object such as a brand, product, service or organization, and the subject uses personal communication channels to communicate positively or negatively about the object with noncommercial intent (Arndt, 1967). Westbrook defines WOM as “all informal communications directed to other consumers concerning the possession, use or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers” (Westbrook, 1987). More recently, Barreto defines WOM as “the process of oral or written communication between a sender and an individual or group of recipients, regardless of whether they share the same social network, to share and acquire information, informally “ (Ana Margarida Barreto, 2014). The three definitions discussed have treated word of mouth as an informal communication between subjects (e.g. sender and receiver) regarding an object (e.g. product, brand, organization or seller) or experience (such as ownership or use) to share and obtain information for noncommercial purposes. For
customers, in this case, students, information about university academic services can be accessed quickly from various circles or people. Customers can receive information without influence from the company compared to traditional marketing and advertising (Jalilvand et al., 2011). For universities, WOM can help to get new students and build their brand because students and alumni as customers also advertise the company’s products or services, either consciously or unconsciously (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas, 2003). In addition, WOM also helps college management to understand their customers’ preferences based on reviews and feedback from customers, which can be used to evaluate business strategies (Ismagilova et al., 2019).

The college decision variable has five indicators: recognition of needs, information search, alternative evaluation process, the decision to study and behavior after college. The most dominant indicator that reflects this variable is the ease of finding information on Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education. In comparison, the less dominant indicator reflecting the college decision variable is evaluating the selection of the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education. The results of this study indicate that word of mouth can significantly influence college decisions directly and support previous research (Ahmed Sallam, 2014; Aristiawan et al., 2019; East et al., 2017; Harahap et al., 2018; Lau and Ng, 2009; Miswanto and Angelia, 2018; Muhammad and Artanti, 2016). Researchers proposed three stages in the college selection process. In the first inclination stage, students decide whether to enter college (Kolman et al., 1987). An important part of the decision-making process is the formation of a choice set, which usually occurs at a later stage. The choice set is the set of options that a person looks at when making a decision. The alternatives considered are critical to understand because examining how a student’s final choice compares to the set of potential options they considered can provide valuable insight into their preferences and decisions. At this stage of the process, students search for schools, obtain information about higher education institutions and develop criteria to rate schools before they decide on the college they will attend, which is the third and final stage of the sequential choice process (Castleman et al., 2015; Kolman et al., 1987). The quality or ranking of the institution can also be a factor that influences students’ decisions. It is also shaped by students’ backgrounds, as students vary, based on their social resources, in terms of the extent to which they are aware of or actively use rankings in their decisions. Understanding how students’ decisions are influenced by institutional quality is critical, especially as there is much research on academic “mismatch” in higher education, which is when high school students apply to schools that are less selective than the schools they should be attending based on their academic records (Avery and Hoxby, 2004; Bastedo and Jaquette, 2011; Page and Scott-Clayton, 2016; Smith et al., 2013). Prospective students from Muhammadiyah will become loyal to Muhammadiyah universities to continue their education. Recommendations and information from alumni or senior prospective students help in making college decisions. Information can be in the form of learning activities, quality of educational services, learning activities, costs or the quality of educational institutions.

As educational service providers, universities must begin to pay attention to the emotional aspects of students, whose formation occurs through their experiences. The problem that often arises is building this experience; all aspects involved in campus services are an essential part and must be integrated. One of the critical aspects is the quality of the services provided and the higher education’s reputation in the community. Universities that provide educational services to the students should earn the community’s trust. The trust of students and society, in general, is an essential factor determining the future of higher education. Through efforts to implement the experiential marketing concept, all the university managers will begin to form activities that will become experiences for their
students. Academic and nonacademic activities must form an orientation on the positive side of the experience that encourages the emotional side of students so that the formation of trust can gradually increase. The logical consequence is that there will be positive word-of-mouth behavior, and in the end, they can recommend to others that they choose the college they are currently studying at. The implementation of experiential marketing must be carried out in an integrated manner by all components within the campus as a series of structured activities to provide a positive experience for students. This condition will ultimately become an evaluation for each student based on all the activities he has experienced on campus.

The reality is that the Indonesian government pays less attention to Islamic universities. For example, the budget allocated to private universities (PTS) from the state revenue and expenditure budget (APBN) is only 10% to be divided by the 4,520 private universities in Indonesia. Private Islamic religious universities require more education funds, but the government’s complex bureaucracy and the centralization of the higher education curriculum prevent universities from innovating radically. The visionary policy of “Merdeka Belajar, Kampus Merdeka” of the Minister of Education and Culture includes the opening of new study programs, the university accreditation system, the freedom to become incorporated state universities and the right to study three semesters outside the study program, giving great hope for private universities to be able to develop their quality quickly. This visionary policy deserves to be appreciated because it can provide a policy breakthrough that will bring progress to Indonesian higher education. The implementation challenges of the “Merdeka Belajar” policy are collaboration mechanisms between private Islamic religious universities and study programs with off-campus parties; paradigm shifts in incorporated state universities to compete on an international scale; and internship mechanisms outside the study program. With the existence of government policies and the implementation of “Merdeka Belajar,” there is optimism among private Islamic religious universities to develop rapidly and autonomously innovate for the development of all aspects of higher education. Free Learning Policy, an independent campus, grants autonomous freedom to educational institutions, freedom from complicated bureaucracy and freedom for students to choose the desired program. The big goal to be achieved by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemdikbud) is creating an autonomous, non-bureaucratic culture of educational institutions and an innovative learning system based on specialization and the demands of the modern world. This policy provides excellent hope for private Islamic religious universities to be able to develop quickly and develop institutional quality.

Theoretically, this research can help develop the theory of experiential marketing and Islamic branding for educational services in Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Educations. The policies by the Muhammadiyah Central Leadership and the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education Research and Development Council have a real-world impact that aligns with current government policies. First, there is Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education, which has been accredited “A” by the National Accreditation Board and needs to share experiences and cooperation with other Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education to be able to improve superior institutional capabilities. Second, Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education needs to keep improving the institutions and the people working there. Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education must follow the Tridharma of Higher Education, which includes teaching, research and service to the community. Third, the people running Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education need to get more entrepreneurial. Most funding for Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education comes from student funds, government grants and other assistance. Some Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah
higher education institutions have tried to build a business wing to build independence for the long term. Fourth, Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education still does not focus on the Southeast Asian region. Regionalization attempts to build networks and work with Southeast Asia or even Asia-Pacific campuses. Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education needs to realize that networking and working with other campuses, both at home and abroad, will get people excited about improving institutions’ quality and human resources. At least Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education, which still needs to be developed, can network and cooperate with public universities and Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education, which is already advanced. With the hope that they can copy, learn from and spread good governance, a strong academic culture and the drive to keep working creatively, innovatively and competitively. Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education will be able to make a big difference in the future of science, technology and the welfare of the Indonesian people.

Conclusion
This study aims to determine the direct and indirect effects of experiential marketing, Islamic branding and word-of-mouth on the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education college decisions. The results showed a significant direct effect of experiential marketing, Islamic branding and word of mouth on college decisions. There was an indirect effect between experiential marketing and Islamic branding on college decisions through word of mouth, but the word-of-mouth variable could not mediate the relationship between experiential marketing and Islamic branding on college decisions perfectly. The implementation of Islamic branding strategy contributes significantly and has a significant impact on improving college decisions and increasing positive WOM. This study implies that Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education can use strategies to improve experiential marketing in lecture activities and student services and improve Islamic branding strategies as one of the added values of learning based on Islamic and Muhammadiyah studies. All university managers will create student experiences by implementing experiential marketing. Academic and nonacademic activities must emphasize the positive to engage students’ emotions and build trust. The result is favorable word-of-mouth, and they can promote their college to others. Experiential marketing must be implemented by all campus components as a series of scheduled activities to provide students with a favorable experience. This condition will evaluate each student’s campus activities. Although this study has valuable contributions, it also has some limitations, which may affect its generalizability to a larger population. The first limitation of the study results is that using respondents who are currently and have participated in learning activities at Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah College may not be a truly random sample or necessarily indicative of the larger population. The second limitation relates to the definition of constructs for the model, and there is limited information about the reflective hierarchy model. This study examined constructs in the second-order reflective model. The limitations of this research also exist in its operational variables and only focus on alumni respondents who may continue their master’s and doctoral degrees at Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Educations and also student respondents who have participated in learning activities for at least a year, which makes it possible to return to study at Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Higher Education to continue to a higher level of study. The third limitation is that the data used in this study came from Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah universities and, as such, may not generally apply to other Islamic-based colleges. The existing service marketing literature is very limited in its study of the Indonesian service environment, which is a major limitation of this research. Therefore, this limitation can be considered a research gap and
can be extended to other association of south east Asian nations countries to obtain more complete results. Future research can add other variables to improve college decisions through positive word-of-mouth, such as service quality and marketing mix on campus or in college. Service quality is a method of measuring service quality through aspects of perception and expectations. This method can also measure how well the company can meet consumer needs. Marketing education services require a special strategy to be accepted by consumers, including a marketing mix strategy. In simple terms, the marketing mix is a marketing strategy that combines several elements to drive business progress. In addition to adding variables and measurements, a qualitative approach or a quantitative–qualitative combination that considers the moderating role of demographic variables should be the subject of further research.

References


Further reading


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