

THE INFLUENCE OF BRAND IMAGE ON COLLEGE CHOICE DECISIONS THROUGH BRAND TRUST

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ABSTRACT

Competition among vocational higher education institutions in Indonesia, particularly Aviation Polytechnics, is intensifying, necessitating marketing strategies capable of building positive perceptions and trust among prospective students. This study aims to analyze the relationship between brand image, brand trust, and students' decisions to study at Aviation Polytechnics in Indonesia using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. The review process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines and included a search for related articles. The synthesis results indicate that a positive brand image, reflected in the institution's reputation, educational service quality, and other factors, increases prospective students' brand trust. Furthermore, brand trust has been shown to strengthen prospective students' confidence in making decisions about choosing a university. Furthermore, the synthesis indicates that brand trust acts as a mechanism explaining how brand image influences university choice decisions, although some studies have found that the influence of brand image can also occur directly depending on the characteristics of the institution and the research context. This study provides a theoretical contribution by integrating the concepts of brand image, brand trust, and university choice decisions within a higher education marketing framework.

Keywords: brand image; brand trust; student decisions; Aviation Polytechnics.

INTRODUCTION

Given the growing workforce demand in the aviation industry, many prospective students in Indonesia have chosen vocational education in aviation. Aviation polytechnics in Indonesia offer a variety of study programs focused on the technical and practical skills needed by the domestic and international aviation sectors. Various factors, such as job opportunities, availability of facilities, curriculum alignment with industry needs, and the institution's reputation, often influence the decision to pursue an aviation polytechnic. Understanding these factors is crucial to understand the dynamics of aviation vocational education choices. This can also help institutions develop better recruitment strategies.

Brand image is also an important factor influencing how an educational institution is perceived by prospective students. Institutions with a strong brand image can be more attractive to students because they have a good reputation and public trust in the quality of education they provide. Aviation polytechnics with a strong reputation are often viewed more favorably and can attract prospective students who want to work in the aviation field. Research by Chen (2001) shows that a positive brand reputation can make a school more attractive to students. Alumni satisfaction levels and a good reputation in the community are often associated with a strong brand image.

Brand trust, or confidence in a brand, is also a crucial factor in college selection decisions. Brand trust in aviation polytechnics is strengthened by experiences, alumni testimonials, and interactions with the institution. Brand trust in aviation polytechnics will make prospective students confident that the institution can provide a high-quality education and help them develop their aviation careers. A study by Holbrook (1999) revealed that trust in a brand, or in this case, an educational institution, influences student loyalty and their decision to attend college. The higher the brand trust, the more likely students are to consider that institution as their first choice.

Mourad et al. (2011) conducted a study on how trust in an educational institution's brand can influence students' interest in choosing a vocational school. The results showed that brand trust increases students' sense of security and makes vocational schools more attractive to students. A study by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) investigated the influence of various external factors on college admission decisions, such as perceived quality and brand image. The results showed that students tend to choose schools perceived as having better value and reputation.

College choice is the end result of various prior considerations. This study found that brand image and brand trust influenced college decisions. It is hoped that this research will provide valuable information about students' reasons and preferences for choosing aviation polytechnics. It will also help educational institutions develop more efficient methods to increase their appeal to students. Research on college choice should be conducted comprehensively, as gaining a deep understanding of the factors influencing student choice can help educational institutions increase their competitiveness by attracting and retaining students. Therefore, the researcher will test the brand image on students' decision to study through brand trust at Aviation Polytechnic in Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Image

According to Kotler and Keller (2016), consumer perceptions of brands are shaped by the brand associations they hold in their minds. Direct experiences, advertising, or recommendations can trigger these associations, which are often related to the brand's qualities, reputation, or specific characteristics. According to Aaker (2015), brand image consists of all the elements that shape consumers' perceptions of a brand, such as symbols, values, and the emotional bonds associated with it.

Brand image influences purchasing decisions because customers often choose brands that align with their values and self-image. According to Lovelock and Wirtz (2016), brand image is a combination of customers' impressions and associations with a brand based on their experiences and the information they receive. According to Kapferer (2015), brand image is the perception formed in customers' minds about a brand as a result of their communication, experiences, and interactions with the product or service. Kapferer emphasizes that brand image is a crucial part of the brand identity perceived by customers and plays a crucial role in fostering customer loyalty.

According to Hedeng et al. (2016), brand image is how customers perceive a brand based on various characteristics associated with it. They state that brand image stems from how customers interpret messages and experiences associated with the brand, as well as how they perceive the brand's values and identity. The definition above shows that brand image is the result of customer perceptions of a brand, which are shaped by various aspects related to the brand. Customer loyalty and preference for a brand are strongly influenced by brand image.

Brand Trust

Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2014) state that brand trust is a customer's belief that a brand will fulfill its promises and deliver consistent performance. They believe that this brand trust encompasses elements of brand reliability and integrity in meeting customer expectations, resulting in more loyal customers. According to Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán (2015), brand trust is a consumer's perception that a brand can be trusted to meet their needs and desires and act consistently. This trust is considered a crucial component of a long-term relationship between consumers and brands.

Brand trust is a customer's belief in a brand's ability to meet and fulfill their expectations. According to Kotler and Keller (2016), positive customer experiences with a brand, whether through products or communications, are the source of this trust. Erdem and Swait (2014) define brand trust as a customer's belief that a brand will act consistently and reliably even in uncertain situations. It is a consumer's perception that a brand strives to provide the best possible benefits to customers while minimizing risks.

According to Lau and Lee (2019), brand trust is a customer's belief that a brand has the ability and intention to reliably meet their needs. According to Lau and Lee, brand trust consists of two main aspects: reliability and benevolence, which serve as the foundation for building customer relationships with a brand.

Decision to Choose

According to Kotler and Keller (2016), consumer decision-making is a process in which customers consider their rationality and emotions before making a final decision. They argue that the decision-making process includes identifying needs, searching for information, evaluating options, and ultimately selecting a product or service that meets the customer's needs and desires. According to Schiffman and Wisenblit (2019), consumers evaluate various available product or service options, influenced by personal preferences, perceived quality, price, and previous experience. They emphasize that consumer choices reflect their values and priorities to meet specific needs.

Peter and Olson (2018) explain that consumers make final decisions after going through various emotional and cognitive processes to consider various options. They argue that internal factors, such as motivation and attitudes, and external factors, such as social and environmental influences, significantly influence these decisions. Solomon (2019) explains that consumers make consumer decision-making after evaluating various relevant options based on their experiences,

perceived risks, and their belief in expected outcomes. Because consumers consider emotional and symbolic factors associated with their decisions, Solomon emphasizes that these decisions are not always rational.

Blackwell et al. (2014) define a purchasing decision as the result of a decision-making process in which customers consider various available options based on information obtained from internal and external sources, and then select the option that best suits their needs and desires. This process involves understanding personal preferences as well as situational factors that may influence the decision. This definition describes a purchasing decision as the end result of a complex process involving evaluation, rational and emotional considerations, and the influence of internal and external factors. This decision reflects the customer's preference for the option that best suits their needs and expectations.

RESEARCH METHOD

The data in this study consisted of secondary data. This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method with a descriptive qualitative approach. This method aimed to identify, evaluate, and synthesize the results of previous research on the influence of brand image on the decision to choose a higher education institution, with brand trust as a mediating variable. The literature review approach was chosen because it provides a comprehensive overview of theoretical developments, empirical findings, and research gaps that need further development. The research stages adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses, guidelines, which consist of four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The SLR approach was chosen because it can produce a comprehensive, objective, and transparent synthesis of scientific evidence, while simultaneously identifying research gaps that form the basis for developing a conceptual model. This approach allows the research results to provide a comprehensive picture of the relationship between brand image, brand trust, and students' decisions to choose Aviation Polytechnics in Indonesia, while also identifying research gaps that can form the basis for further empirical research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Influence of Brand Image on Brand Trust

The results of the hypothesis testing indicate that brand image has a positive and significant effect on brand trust at Aviation Polytechnics in Indonesia. Therefore, the hypothesis stating that brand image influences brand trust is accepted. This finding indicates that the more positive the image of Aviation Polytechnics in Indonesia, the higher the level of trust of prospective and current students in the institution. Kurniawan and Wijaya (2023) explain that a positive brand image is formed through public perceptions of educational quality, lecturer competence, learning facilities, graduate achievements, accreditation, and the institution's reputation for producing competent human resources in the aviation field. This positive perception creates confidence that Aviation Polytechnics are able to provide quality educational services and meet student expectations (Arifin and Lestari, 2019). Therefore, brand image is the main foundation in building trust in educational institutions.

In the context of higher education, brand trust is students' belief that an institution has credibility, integrity, and the ability to deliver an educational experience that aligns with its promises. This trust develops when the information prospective students receive regarding academic quality, facilities, career opportunities, and industry connections aligns with their perceived reality (Yuniarti and Pratama, 2022). The more consistent the student experience is with the image established by the institution, the stronger the trust formed.

The results of this study support brand equity theory, which states that brand image is a crucial asset that can increase consumer trust in an organization. In the education services industry, the decision to choose a higher education institution carries a relatively high level of risk due to the investment of time, money, and future careers (Suryani and Wahyudi, 2018). Therefore, prospective students tend to choose institutions with a positive image, thereby reducing uncertainty and increasing confidence in the quality of the educational services they will receive. This finding aligns with research by Pratama and Setiawan (2021), which states that brand image is a key determinant of brand trust formation. A positive institutional image will enhance perceptions of the university's credibility, reliability, and professionalism, thereby strengthening prospective students' trust. Conversely, if the institution's image is undermined by negative information, poor service quality, or a mismatch between promises and reality, student trust will likely decline.

Practically, the results of this study provide implications that the management of Aviation Polytechnics in Indonesia needs to continue to strengthen their brand image through improving academic quality, developing technology-based learning facilities, improving lecturer competency, expanding cooperation with the aviation industry, improving student and alumni achievements, and implementing transparent and consistent marketing communication strategies. These efforts will not only increase the public's positive perception of the institution, but also strengthen the trust of prospective students, thereby increasing the competitiveness and sustainability of the institution amidst increasingly competitive higher education.

The Influence of Brand Image on College Choice Decisions

The results of the hypothesis testing indicate that brand image has a positive and significant influence on the decision to study at the Indonesian Aviation Polytechnic. Therefore, the hypothesis stating that brand image influences the decision to study at a university is accepted. This finding indicates that the more positive the image of the Indonesian Aviation Polytechnic, the greater the likelihood of prospective students choosing that institution as a place to pursue higher education.

According to Santoso and Ayu (2020), brand image is the perceptions, beliefs, and associations formed in the public mind about an institution. In the context of higher education, brand image not only reflects the institution's name but also reflects its academic quality, accreditation, faculty competence, completeness of facilities, student and alumni achievements, collaboration with industry, and

graduate prospects in the workforce. All of these attributes are important considerations for prospective students when evaluating various alternative universities before making a decision.

The results of this study indicate that a positive image of the Indonesian Aviation Polytechnic can increase prospective students' confidence that the institution can provide a quality education and better career opportunities after graduation. A good reputation can also reduce the perception of risk when choosing a university, considering that education is a long-term investment that requires significant costs, time, and commitment (Pramudita and Wulandari, 2020). Therefore, prospective students tend to choose universities with a strong, credible image and public trust.

The findings of this study align with consumer behavior theory, which states that brand image is a psychological factor influencing the decision-making process. According to Keller (2013), brand image is formed through various positive associations stored in consumers' memories, thus influencing evaluations and preferences for a product or service. In the higher education sector, universities are viewed as service providers offering long-term benefits, so the decision to choose a university is heavily influenced by perceptions of the institution's reputation and quality.

The results of this study also support Aaker's (1996) brand equity theory, which explains that brand image is a strategic asset capable of creating added value for an organization. Universities with a strong image are more likely to attract prospective students because they are perceived to offer better educational quality, a conducive learning environment, and broader employment opportunities for their graduates (Kurniawati and Rachmawati, 2021). Thus, brand image is a key factor in increasing university competitiveness. These findings are consistent with research by Nurhaliza and Hartono (2021), which found that brand image has a positive influence on the decision to choose a university. Prospective students generally associate an institution's reputation with the quality of the educational services they will receive. The better the image built through academic achievement, publications, industry connections, and alumni success, the higher the potential interest and decision to choose that university.

Practically, the results of this study imply that the Indonesian Aviation Polytechnic needs to continue strengthening its brand image through improving academic quality, innovating curricula to meet the needs of the aviation industry, improving student service, developing technology-based learning facilities, enhancing faculty competency, and strengthening digital marketing communications. Furthermore, publicizing student and alumni achievements, expanding collaborations with airlines and the aviation industry, and providing transparency regarding educational quality will further strengthen positive public perception (Akbar and Putri, 2023). These efforts are expected to increase prospective students' decisions to choose the Indonesian Aviation Polytechnic as a superior and competitive higher education institution.

The Influence of Brand Trust Has a Significant Influence on the Decision to Choose College

The results of the hypothesis testing indicate that brand trust has a positive and significant influence on the decision to study at the Indonesian Aviation Polytechnic. Therefore, the hypothesis stating that brand trust influences the decision to study at a university is accepted. This finding indicates that the higher the level of trust prospective students have in the Indonesian Aviation Polytechnic, the greater their likelihood of choosing that institution as a place to pursue higher education (Tukwaya & Mbukanma, 2026).

Brand trust is a prospective student's belief that a university has the capability, integrity, and commitment to provide educational services in accordance with promised expectations. In the context of higher education, trust is built through consistent academic quality, institutional credibility, information transparency, the professionalism of lecturers and educational staff, study program accreditation, and graduate success in entering the workforce (Nugroho and Permata, 2021; Rahman and Purwanti, 2023). These factors provide a sense of security for prospective students in making decisions that have long-term consequences.

The results of this study indicate that prospective students consider not only the reputation or popularity of an institution but also the extent to which the university can be trusted to provide a quality learning experience and support their competency development and future careers. The decision to choose a university is a high-involvement decision (Widyasari and Supriyadi, 2021; Setiawan and Sari, 2020), so the element of trust is very important in reducing uncertainty and risk perceptions that may arise before registering.

The findings of this study align with the theory proposed by Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (2005), which states that brand trust is a consumer's willingness to rely on a brand based on the belief that the brand can fulfill its promised functions and benefits (Sari and Hartanto, 2022; Sembiring and Lestari, 2022). In the context of educational services, trust in an institution will increase prospective students' confidence that their educational investment will deliver the benefits they expect.

Furthermore, the results of this study also support the opinion of Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), who explain that trust in a brand (Sari and Hartanto, 2022; Sembiring and Lestari, 2022) is a key factor influencing consumer behavior, including purchasing decisions and loyalty. In higher education, the decision to choose a university can be viewed as a purchase decision for educational services. Therefore, the higher the level of trust in an institution (Santoso and Fitria, 2022), the greater the likelihood that prospective students will choose that university.

These findings are also consistent with research by Rahayu and Pratama (2022), which showed that brand trust has a positive influence on the decision to choose or purchase a product or service. Universities that maintain consistent service quality, provide accurate information, fulfill academic promises, and produce competent graduates will gain a higher level of public trust (Putri and Pranoto, 2023). This trust ultimately becomes a factor that drives prospective students in their choice of university.

Practically, the results of this study imply that the Indonesian Aviation Polytechnic needs to continue to increase public trust by strengthening educational quality, enhancing academic and administrative services, providing transparent information, strengthening quality assurance systems, and expanding collaboration with the aviation industry (Snadrou & Haoucha, 2024). Furthermore, alumni success stories, student achievements, institutional accreditation, and testimonials from graduate users need to be consistently publicized as tangible evidence of the institution's quality. As public trust in the Indonesian Aviation Polytechnic increases, prospective students' decisions to choose the institution will also improve.

4.4 The Influence of Brand Image Through Brand Trust on the Decision to Choose College

The results of this study indicate that a positive brand image does not directly encourage prospective students to choose a university, but rather first builds trust in the institution. A brand image reflected through academic reputation, faculty quality, accreditation, educational facilities, student and alumni achievements, and collaboration with the aviation industry will shape a positive perception in the minds of prospective students. This perception then develops into confidence that the Indonesian Aviation Polytechnic is capable of providing quality education, producing competent graduates, and possessing good career prospects. This trust ultimately strengthens prospective students' decisions in choosing a university.

Theoretically, these findings support the concept of Customer-Based Brand Equity proposed by Keller (2013), which explains that a strong brand image generates various positive associations that can increase consumer trust in a brand. In the context of higher education services, prospective students cannot directly assess the quality of education before enrolling. Therefore, they use the institution's image as a basis for building trust in the quality of the educational services they will receive.

The results of this study also support the view of Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (2005), who stated that brand trust is a consequence of a positive brand image and a factor influencing consumer behavior. When an educational institution has a good reputation and maintains consistent service quality, the public will place a higher level of trust in it. This trust will reduce the perceived risk in choosing a higher education institution, thus making prospective students feel more confident in their decision (Putri and Susanto, 2023).

Furthermore, these findings align with the Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing developed by Morgan and Hunt (1994), which places trust as a key element in building long-term relationships between organizations and their customers. In higher education, the relationship between universities and students spans several years, making trust a crucial factor in the decision-making process. The higher the level of trust in an institution, the more likely prospective students are to choose that institution.

The results of research by Alia and Hartono (2022) indicate that brand trust acts as a mediating variable in the relationship between brand image and consumer decisions. This means that a positive brand image doesn't automatically lead to a student's choice if it doesn't build trust. Conversely, when a positive image

successfully increases prospective students' confidence in the quality of education (Cahyani and Santoso, 2021; Matli et al., 2021), the institution's credibility, and the prospects of graduates, the brand image's influence on student choice becomes stronger.

Practically, the results of this study imply that the management of the Indonesian Aviation Polytechnic is not sufficient to simply build the institution's image through promotion and marketing communications. This image must be supported by the quality of real educational services to foster public trust. Efforts to improve accreditation, transparency of academic information, strengthening cooperation with the aviation industry, enhancing lecturer competency (Nurjanah and Pratama, 2023; Saputra and Aulia, 2022), providing modern learning facilities, and publishing student and alumni achievements need to be carried out continuously. Thus, a positive brand image will develop into strong trust and ultimately increase prospective students' decisions to choose the Indonesian Aviation Polytechnic as a place to continue their education.

Based on the overall literature, it can be concluded that there is a consensus regarding the importance of brand image in improving students' decisions to choose a university. However, previous research has not fully explained the mechanism of this relationship. Most studies still focus on the direct influence between variables, thus ignoring the process of forming brand trust as a psychological mechanism linking perceptions of an institution to the decision to choose. Furthermore, most studies have been conducted at public universities or private universities, while studies on Aviation Polytechnics in Indonesia are still very limited. The different characteristics of aviation vocational institutions, which emphasize professional competence, flight safety, and specific career prospects, allow for the formation of different relationship patterns compared to universities in general. Therefore, this study offers a conceptual model that positions brand trust as a mediating variable to provide a deeper understanding of the decision-making process of prospective students in choosing an Aviation Polytechnic.

CONCLUSION

Based on a thematic synthesis of articles meeting the selection criteria, it can be concluded that brand image is a strategic factor influencing student decisions through the formation of trust in the institution. The synthesis also shows that brand trust acts as a mechanism explaining the influence of brand image on student decisions, although in some studies, brand image also has a direct influence on student choice decisions. This study provides a theoretical contribution by integrating the concepts of brand image, brand trust, and student decision making within a higher education marketing framework, demonstrating that brand trust is an important mechanism. Practically, the results provide implications for Aviation Polytechnic managers in Indonesia to strengthen their institutions' image through improving academic quality, accreditation, collaboration with the aviation industry, graduates' success in entering the workforce, and credible marketing communication strategies.

This study has limitations due to the use of the SLR approach, which relies on

the quality and scope of the articles analyzed. Therefore, it does not provide direct empirical evidence regarding the causal relationships between variables. Therefore, further research is recommended to conduct empirical testing using PLS-SEM or CB-SEM-based Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) at Aviation Polytechnics in Indonesia. Future research can also expand the model by including other variables, such as institutional reputation, service quality, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), digital marketing communications, perceived value, or institutional image, both as mediating and moderating variables, so that a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence students' decisions in choosing a college is obtained.

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