
**THE INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL MARKETING AND BRAND IMAGE ON THE
DECISION TO STUDY AT PELITA BANGSA UNIVERSITY WITH PROSPECTIVE
STUDENTS' TRUST AS A MEDIATION VARIABLE**

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the effect of digital marketing and brand image on college choice decisions at Pelita Bangsa University, with prospective student trust as a mediating variable. The intense competition among private universities requires higher education institutions to implement effective digital marketing communication strategies to build strong institutional image and prospective students' confidence. This research adopts a quantitative approach using a simple random sampling method. The study population comprises all newly admitted students at Pelita Bangsa University for the 2026–2027 academic year. Hypothesis testing was conducted using multivariate Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) through Lisrel 8.8. The structural analysis reveals that digital marketing significantly influences both college choice decisions and prospective student trust. Similarly, brand image exhibits a positive and significant impact on prospective student trust as well as college choice decisions. Furthermore, prospective student trust is proven to have a significant direct effect on college choice decisions. Mediation analysis demonstrates that the indirect effects of digital marketing and brand image on college choice decisions via prospective student trust are larger than their direct effects. This confirms that prospective student trust plays a significant mediating role. The practical implication emphasizes the necessity of strengthening credibility and information transparency in higher education digital marketing strategies to foster trust and drive enrollment decisions.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Brand Image, College Choice Decision

INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has changed people's behavior in obtaining information, including in determining their choice of higher education. Prospective students now increasingly utilize digital media, such as official university websites, social media, search engines, and various other digital platforms, as their primary source of information before deciding whether to continue their education. This situation encourages universities to optimize digital marketing strategies to reach prospective students more effectively. Research shows that digital marketing has a positive influence on prospective students' decisions in choosing a higher education by increasing access to information, interaction, and engagement.

Competition among private universities in Indonesia is intensifying as the number of higher education institutions increases and public demand for quality educational services increases. Pelita Bangsa University, as one of the private universities in Bekasi Regency, is required to develop a marketing strategy capable of increasing its competitiveness amidst this competition. Success in attracting prospective students is determined not only by academic quality but also by the institution's ability to build effective marketing communications through digital media. Digital marketing is one strategy considered capable of providing a competitive

advantage for universities. Through social media, websites, digital advertising, email marketing, and educational content, universities can build closer relationships with prospective students. Easily accessible, interactive, and reliable information will increase prospective students' interest in educational institutions. Various studies have shown that digital marketing has a significant influence on the decision to choose a university.

In addition to digital marketing, a university's brand image is a crucial factor influencing prospective students' decisions. Brand image reflects public perceptions of the institution's academic quality, reputation, facilities, achievements, graduates, and credibility. The more positive a university's image, the more likely prospective students are to choose that institution as a place to continue their education. Previous research has shown that brand image significantly influences the decision to choose a university.

The decision to attend college is a process involving both rational and emotional considerations. Prospective students will compare several universities based on educational quality, cost, facilities, location, graduate job prospects, and the institution's reputation. In this process, information obtained through digital media and perceptions of the university's image are important factors influencing a prospective student's final decision.

However, the influence of digital marketing and brand image on college decisions is not always immediate. In practice, prospective students first build trust in the educational institution before making a decision. Trust arises when the information received is perceived as accurate, transparent, consistent, and in line with the actual conditions at the university. Therefore, prospective student trust is thought to be an important mechanism bridging the influence of digital marketing and brand image on college decisions.

Prospective student trust is a crucial asset for universities in winning the competition. Universities that can build credibility through effective digital communication and a positive image will more easily gain public trust. This trust will ultimately increase prospective students' confidence in choosing a university that they believe will meet their academic and future career aspirations.

Several previous studies have shown mixed results regarding the relationship between digital marketing, brand image, trust, and college decisions. Some studies suggest that digital marketing directly influences college decisions, while others suggest that this influence is stronger when mediated by trust or brand image. These differing findings indicate a significant research gap that merits further study, particularly in the context of private universities in Indonesia.

Pelita Bangsa University is a private university that continues to develop digital marketing strategies through its official website, social media, and various online promotional platforms. Furthermore, the university continues to build its institutional image through academic quality improvement, accreditation, industry collaborations, and student achievement. However, the effectiveness of these strategies in building trust among prospective students and ultimately influencing their college decisions remains to be empirically proven.

Based on this description, this research is crucial to analyze the influence of digital marketing and brand image on the decision to study at Pelita Bangsa University, with prospective students' trust as a mediating variable. The results are expected to contribute to the development of higher education marketing management science and provide input for Pelita Bangsa University in formulating more effective marketing strategies to increase prospective students' interest and decisions in choosing Pelita Bangsa University as a place to continue their education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

DIGITAL MARKETING

Kannan and Li (2021) define digital marketing as a marketing process that utilizes digital technology to create, communicate, and deliver value to customers through various digital touchpoints throughout the customer journey. Digital marketing serves not only as a promotional medium but also as a means of building long-term relationships with customers through data-driven interactions.

Kotler, Kartajaya, and Setiawan (2019) explain that digital marketing is the application of digital technology to create ongoing communication, interaction, and relationships with customers so that their needs and desires can be met more effectively. This concept emphasizes the importance of utilizing digital platforms as part of a modern marketing strategy.

Syukri and Sunrawali (2022) define digital marketing as promotional and market discovery activities conducted through internet-based digital media, utilizing various platforms, such as social media, to expand market reach and increase marketing effectiveness. In a business context, digital marketing is a crucial strategy for increasing organizational competitiveness.

Pride and Ferrell (2023) define digital marketing as the use of all digital media, including the internet, mobile devices, and other interactive media, to develop communication and exchange value with customers. This definition emphasizes that digital marketing leverages digital technology to build more effective relationships between organizations and consumers.

Sanjaya and Tarigan (2019) state that digital marketing is a marketing activity that encompasses branding activities utilizing various digital media, such as websites, blogs, email, search engines, and social media. Its primary goal is to convey product or service information to consumers more quickly, effectively, and efficiently.

BRAND IMAGE

Snadrou and Haoucha (2024) explain that brand image is a comprehensive perception formed in the minds of consumers based on a combination of rational and emotional dimensions of a brand. In the context of higher education, brand image reflects how prospective students perceive the quality, reputation, identity, and values of an institution, thus influencing their decision to choose a university.

Castro-Gómez et al. (2024) stated that brand image is students' perceptions of a university's quality and identity, which is a key dimension in building a university's brand positioning. Brand image serves as a representation of an institution's values and strengths, distinguishing it from competitors.

According to Soimah et al. (2024), brand image is the positive image of an educational institution based on public perception of its service quality, academic reputation, and value proposition. A strong brand image can increase the attractiveness of a university and serve as a key factor in students' decisions about choosing a study program or university.

Zakaria et al. (2023) define brand image as a collection of perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions held in the public mind regarding a brand. In educational institutions, a positive brand image is a strategic asset for enhancing the reputation, competitiveness, and public trust in the institution. Alwi and colleagues explain that brand image is a mental representation of a university by stakeholders, formed through reputation, communication, service quality, brand identity, and their experiences with the institution. Brand image is a key element in building a university's competitive advantage.

Based on these five opinions, it can be concluded that brand image is the perception, beliefs, and impressions formed in the minds of consumers about a brand or institution as a result of experience, communication, reputation, service quality, and organizational identity. A positive brand image will increase trust, strengthen competitiveness, and encourage consumers in making decisions, including prospective students' decisions about choosing a university.

CONSUMER TRUST

Khamitov et al. (2024) explain that consumer trust is a consumer's belief that a company or brand has the integrity, capability, and good intentions to meet consumer expectations, thereby reducing uncertainty in the decision-making process. This meta-analysis research shows that integrity is the most powerful factor in building consumer trust.

Handoyo (2024) defines consumer trust as a consumer's willingness to be vulnerable to a seller or service provider based on the belief that the party will act honestly, safely, and responsibly in every transaction. In the digital context, trust is a key factor driving purchasing decisions.

Habibi (2024) explains that consumer trust is the level of confidence consumers have in information, products, and companies, allowing them to feel secure in making purchasing decisions. Trust is built through effective marketing communications, positive experiences, and company credibility.

Heim et al. (2024) state that consumer trust is a consumer's perception of the credibility, reliability, transparency, and competence of an organization or brand, which encourages the formation of long-term relationships between consumers and service providers. Beck et al. (2024) define consumer trust as consumer confidence in the reliability of a platform or organization, built through transparency, oversight, information authenticity, and protection of consumer interests. This research shows that trust is the primary foundation of the relationship between consumers and digital service providers.

Based on these five opinions, it can be concluded that consumer trust is consumer belief in the integrity, credibility, competence, reliability and good intentions of an organization or service provider in fulfilling expectations and protecting consumer interests, so that consumers are willing to make decisions even though there is uncertainty or risk.

COLLEGE DECISION

Dwi Santy and Andriani (2023) explain that a purchasing decision is the final decision a consumer makes after searching for information, evaluating alternatives, and considering various marketing factors such as content marketing and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). This decision reflects the consumer's choice of the product or service that they believe best meets their needs and desires.

Oebit and Juniarti (2023) define purchasing decisions as a crucial stage in consumer behavior when a person makes a choice to purchase a product after considering price, product quality, promotions, and various other factors that influence the consumer's perceived value. Hidayansyah et al. (2023) explain that purchasing decisions are consumer actions to select and purchase a product based on an evaluation of the information obtained, including consumer reviews and ratings that help reduce uncertainty in the purchasing process.

Asmoro and Tuti (2023) state that purchasing decisions are a key indicator of consumer behavior, demonstrating consumers' success in determining which product to purchase after

considering satisfaction with product attributes, such as price and packaging. These decisions also influence repurchase intention.

Krallman et al. (2023) explain that purchasing decisions are the result of a psychological process involving the evaluation of benefits, risks, and purchase justification before consumers decide to purchase a product, particularly in the context of online shopping. Both emotional and rational factors influence these decisions.

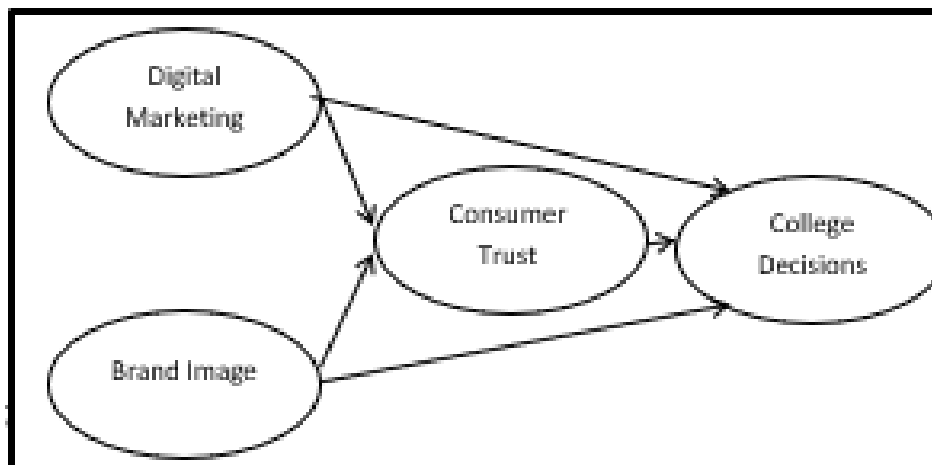
Based on these five opinions, it can be concluded that a purchasing decision is the final decision taken by consumers after going through the process of recognizing needs, searching for information, evaluating various alternatives, and considering the benefits, risks, quality, price, promotions, and other available information, so that consumers choose the product or service that is considered most capable of fulfilling their needs and desires.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative approach, a research method aimed at examining the relationships between variables through numerical data collection and statistical analysis. This approach was chosen because it aimed to examine the influence of digital marketing and brand image on college decisions, with prospective students' trust as a mediating variable. This approach enabled researchers to obtain objective, measurable results that could be used to test the formulated hypotheses.

The population in this study was all new students of Pelita Bangsa University, academic year 2026–2027. This population was chosen because new students have gone through the decision-making process in choosing Pelita Bangsa University as a place to continue their education. Therefore, respondents have relevant experience in assessing digital marketing strategies, university image, level of trust in the institution, and factors influencing their decision to study at Pelita Bangsa University.

The sampling technique used in this study was probability sampling with the simple random sampling method. This technique provides an equal opportunity for each member of the population to be selected as a research sample, thereby minimizing bias in respondent selection. The simple random sampling method also aims to produce a representative sample of the new student population of Pelita Bangsa University, class of 2026–2027. Thus, the research results are expected to be able to describe the population conditions more accurately and can be used as a basis for drawing conclusions regarding the influence of digital marketing and brand image on college decisions, with prospective student trust as a mediating variable.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The statistical method used to test the hypothesis in this study uses the multivariate Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) technique with the help of the Lisrel 8.8 application. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate the suitability of the model proposed in this study using the goodness of fit criteria. According to Sudirman et al., (2020) in Santoso (2018) stated that several criteria that need to be considered to assess goodness of fit, among others: if the RMSEA value is close to 1, then the model is considered good, then if the GFI and AGFI values are close to 1, then the model shows a fit model.

Figure 1. Full Standardized Value

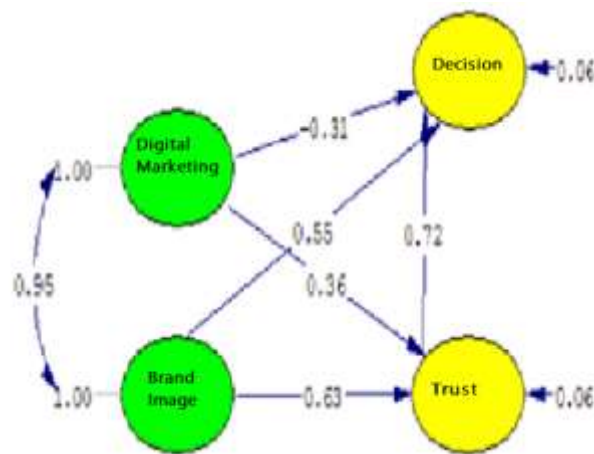


Figure 2. Full Tvalue

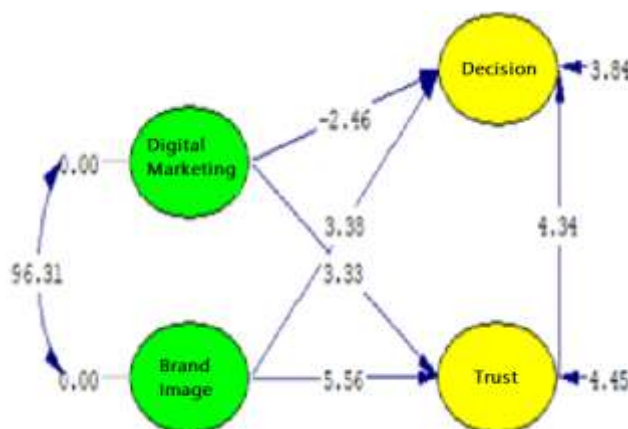


Table 4.15 Significance Between Variables

Cross-Structure	tvalue	Ttable	Test Results
Digital Marketing => Prospective Student Trust	-2.46	1.96	Significant
Digital Marketing => College Decisions	3.33	1.96	Significant
Brand Image=> Prospective Student Trust	3.38	1.96	Significant
Brand Image=> College Decision	5.56	1.96	Significant
College Decision => Prospective Student's Trust	4.34	1.96	Significant

Table 4.16 Cross-Structure of Direct and Indirect Mediating Variables on Prospective Student-Employee Trust

Cross-Structure	Direct	Indirect	Test Results
Digital Marketing => College Decision Intention Through Trust	(0.31)2100 = 9.61%	0.36 x 0.72 x 100 = 25.92%	TL>L (mediating)
Brand Image=> College Decisions through Trust	(0.55)2100 = 30.25%	0.63 x 0.72 x 100 = 45.36%	TL>L (mediating)

1. The Influence of Digital Marketing on College Intention Decisions

The first hypothesis (Ha) states that digital marketing influences turnover intention. The figure shows that the calculated t-value is greater than the t-table, i.e., $3.33 > 1.96$, making it significant. Therefore, digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on employee college intention, or in other words, Hypothesis 1 (Ha) is accepted.

2. The Influence of Brand Image on College Intention Decisions

The second hypothesis (Ha) states that Brand Image influences the Decision to Study Intention. Based on the figure, it is known that the accepted t-count value is greater than the t-table, namely a value of $5.56 > 1.96$, so it can be said to be significant. Thus, Brand Image is proven to influence the Decision to Study Intention of employees or in other words, that Hypothesis 2 (Ha) is accepted.

3. The Influence of Digital Marketing on Productivity

The third hypothesis (H_a) states that digital marketing has an impact on productivity. The figure shows that the calculated t-value is greater than the t-table, which is $-2.46 > 1.96$, so it can be said to be significant. Thus, talent management has a negative and significant effect on employee college decisions, or in other words, Hypothesis 3 (H_a) is accepted.

4. The Influence of Brand Image on Prospective Student Trust

The fourth hypothesis (H_a) states that Brand Image has an impact on Productivity. The figure shows that the calculated t-value is greater than the t-table, i.e., $3.38 > 1.96$, making it significant. Therefore, Brand Image has a positive and significant impact on employee Productivity, or in other words, Hypothesis 4 (H_a) is accepted.

5. The Influence of College Intention Decisions on Productivity

The fifth hypothesis (H_a) states that the intention to study has a positive and significant effect on employee productivity. The figure shows that the calculated t-value is greater than the t-table value, which is $4.34 > 1.96$, making it significant. Therefore, the intention to study has a positive and significant effect on employee productivity, or in other words, Hypothesis 5 (H_a) is accepted.

6. The Direct and Indirect Effects of Digital Marketing on Prospective Students' Trust through College Intention Decisions

The sixth hypothesis (H_a) states that the direct effect of Digital Marketing on Prospective Student Trust is $(0.31)2100 = 9.61\%$. The indirect effect of Digital Marketing on Prospective Student Trust through College Decisions is $0.36 \times 0.72 \times 100 = 25.92\%$. The percentage results above show that Digital Marketing can increase Prospective Student Trust through College Decisions. Thus, the Digital Marketing variable is a Mediating variable.

7. The Direct and Indirect Influence of Brand Image on Prospective Student Trust through College Intention Decisions

The seventh hypothesis (H_a) states that the direct influence of Brand Image on the Trust of Prospective Student Employees is $(0.55)2100 = 30.25\%$. The indirect influence of Brand Image on the Trust of Prospective Student Employees through College Decisions is $0.63 \times 0.72 \times 100 = 45.36\%$. The percentage results above show that Brand Image can increase the Trust of Prospective Student Employees through College Decisions. Thus, the Brand Image variable is a Mediating variable.

CONCLUSSION

Based on the test results in the study, which discusses the formulation of the research problem to determine the influence of independent variables, namely Digital Marketing and Brand Image on the trust of new students with the decision to study as a mediating variable at Pelita Bangsa University. After going through several test techniques, the following conclusions were obtained:

1. Digital marketing, as a partial component, has been shown to have both positive and negative effects on the decision to study at Pelita Bangsa University. This suggests that appropriate digital marketing can influence new students' college decisions.
2. Brand image has been proven to have a partial positive and significant influence on the decision to study at. This can prove that brand image can influence the decision to study at new students.

3. Digital marketing has been shown to have a partially positive and significant impact on the trust of new students at Pelita Bangsa University. This demonstrates that digital marketing can influence the trust of new students at Pelita Bangsa University.
4. Brand image has been shown to have a partially positive and significant influence on college decisions. This demonstrates that brand image can influence college decisions.
5. Prospective students' trust has been shown to have a partial, positive and significant influence on their decision to study at Pelita Bangsa University. This demonstrates that prospective new students' trust can influence their decision to study at Pelita Bangsa University.
6. New student trust is proven to mediate between Digital Marketing and the decision to study at Pelita Bangsa University, because the results of the indirect influence are greater than the direct influence.
7. New students' trust has been shown to mediate the relationship between brand image and their decision to study at Pelita Bangsa University, as the indirect influence is greater than the direct influence.

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