

The Influence of Promotion and Customer Behavior on The Decision to Pursue Postgraduate Studies Mediated by Trust

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of promotion and customer behavior on the decision to continue studying for a Master's degree with trust as a mediating variable. Using a quantitative approach with PLS-SEM analysis, the study found that customer behavior has a significant direct influence on the decision to continue studying ($\beta=0.661$, $p<0.001$), while promotion and customer behavior have a significant effect on the formation of trust. However, trust was not proven to mediate the relationship between the independent variables and the decision to continue studying, creating a "trust-action gap" phenomenon. The implication is that higher education institutions need to integrate customer experience management with promotional strategies that build trust, as well as develop mechanisms for converting trust into actual decisions.

Keywords: Promotion, Customer Behaviour, Trust, Decision Studies

INTRODUCTION

One of the efforts to improve quality, universities in Indonesia are focusing on developing a more research-based curriculum and strengthening collaboration with international institutions and industries. Several universities have established partnerships with prestigious foreign universities for double degree programs and faculty or student exchanges. This focus is also reinforced by the requirement for master's students to publish scientific articles in reputable journals, both domestically and internationally, as a graduation requirement. The development of the master's curriculum is also accompanied by adjustments to global developments, such as the implementation of the industry 4.0 concept and the Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs).

Promotion to attract Master's degree (S2) students in Indonesia is faced with various complex challenges. Although many universities in Indonesia offer master's programs, the appeal of these programs and the success in attracting prospective students are often hindered by several factors.

The lack of awareness and understanding about the benefits of further studies and many prospective students who do not yet have sufficient understanding regarding the importance of continuing their studies to the master's level, especially in remote areas (Hartono et al, 20210). Some prospective students feel that work experience is more valuable than continuing formal studies to a higher level. In some cases, bachelor's degree graduates believe that a master's degree is not always necessary to advance their careers, especially in fields that do not require higher formal education. This poses a significant challenge for universities to promote their master's programs in a way that is more relevant and appealing to this segment.

The high tuition fees pose a challenge for most prospective master's degree students. Although there are several scholarship programs like LPDP, the cost of master's programs, especially at private universities, can be a significant barrier. This makes many prospective students choose to start working immediately or remain in their current positions without continuing their studies (Rahayu et al, 2020). Higher education institutions need to develop promotion strategies that highlight the long-term benefits of a master's degree, as well as strengthen accessibility through cost reductions or payment ease.

With the increasing number of universities offering master's programs, the competition to attract students is also rising. State universities that already have a good reputation tend to attract students more easily compared to private universities or universities in less well-known regions (Setiawan et al, 2019). Private and regional universities often struggle to promote their master's programs due to budget constraints, limited networks, and access to resources. This makes their promotion strategies less competitive compared to major universities.

In the current digital era, the use of social media and other digital platforms has become one of the keys to success in promoting S2 programs (Sari et al, 2021). Unfortunately, some universities have not yet optimally utilized social media and digital platforms in marketing their postgraduate programs. Less engaging content or digital marketing strategies that do not target the right audience make promotions less effective. The use of digital technology and data-driven marketing strategies can help universities reach a broader and more focused audience.

Many prospective students consider the quality of master's programs from the perspective of career prospects and the professional network offered. Colleges that do not have a strong alumni network or industry partnerships often struggle to promote their programs (Ramadhani et al, 2022). This makes prospective students hesitant to continue their studies because they do not see significant career benefits. Colleges need to strengthen their collaboration with the industrial sector and build a strong alumni network as part of their promotion strategy.

Prospective students often pay attention to the quality of lecturers when deciding to continue their studies in a master's program (Pham et al, 2022). If the program has instructors who are considered less competent or do not have a strong academic reputation, prospective students tend to choose other universities that are better known for having higher-quality instructors. The quality of lecturers, scientific publications, and their involvement in relevant research should be prioritized in the promotion to enhance the appeal of the master's program.

The S2 promotion program in Indonesia faces several major challenges, such as the lack of understanding among prospective students about the benefits of further studies, high costs, competition among universities, and the underutilization of digital technology. To address these challenges, universities need to formulate more innovative strategies, utilize digital media, and strengthen cooperation with the industrial sector and alumni.

One of the main issues is understanding the motivations and decision-making processes of prospective students in choosing a master's program. Factors such as career prospects, institutional reputation, and education costs influence this decision (Lei et al, 2022). There is a gap between prospective students' expectations of the master's program and the reality they face. This can lead to dissatisfaction and a high dropout rate (Arambewela et al 2009). The development of technology and the increasing popularity of online learning influence the preferences and behaviors of prospective students in choosing master's programs (Seaman et al, 2018). High education costs and concerns about return on investment (ROI) are major considerations for many prospective master's students (Zimdar et al, 2017).

Many prospective master's students are working professionals, so they seek programs that can balance work and study (Tinto et al, 2012). The increase in international student mobility creates new challenges and opportunities in higher education consumer behavior (Hemsley et al, 2015). The pandemic has changed the preferences and behaviors of prospective master's students, including an increased interest in online programs and concerns about health safety (Aristovnik et al, 2020).

Decision on Further Studies to a higher level is an important step in the development of one's career and academics. Various factors can influence this decision, one of which is trust. Trust can be defined as a positive belief in the reliability and integrity of an entity, in this case, the educational institution and the master's degree program (Choi et al, 2021).

This research focuses on three main variables believed to influence the decision to pursue a master's degree: promotion, Customer Behaviour, and trust. Promotion has long been recognized as an important element in higher education marketing strategies (Foroudi et al, 2021). Meanwhile, Customer Behaviour in the context of higher education reflects the behavior patterns and preferences of prospective students in choosing study programs (Lei et al, 2010). Trust, as a mediating variable, plays a crucial role in the decision-making process of prospective students (Pham et al, 2022).

Problem formulation

Some research questions (RQs) that arise in this study are as follows:

RQ1: Promotion *a positive effect on positive* the decision to pursue further studies?

RQ2: Promotion *a positive effect on positive* trust?

RQ3: Customer Behaviour *a positive effect on positive* trust?

RQ4: Customer Behaviour *a positive effect on positive* the decision to pursue further studies?

RQ5: Trust *a positive effect on positive* the decision to pursue further studies?

RQ6: Promotion *a positive effect on positive* the decision to pursue further studies mediated by trust?

RQ7: Customer Behaviour *a positive effect on positive* the decision to pursue further studies mediated by trust?

Novelty

The novelty of this research lies in integrating aspects of promotion, consumer behavior, and trust to understand the decision-making process for pursuing a master's degree, the results of which can be used to develop more effective educational marketing strategies.

METHOD

This research uses a quantitative approach with a survey method. The sample consists of 75 postgraduate students selected using purposive sampling technique. Data were collected through an online questionnaire that measured the variables of promotion, customer behavior, trust, and decisions to pursue further studies at the master's level using a 5-point Likert scale. Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the research hypothesis.

Problem-Solving Approach

This research uses a type of quantitative research with a causal research design, which is a study to test hypotheses about the influence of one or more independent variables on the dependent variable. The research approach will yield a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the decision to pursue a master's degree and the mediating role of trust, thereby providing practical solutions for educational institutions. This strategy is designed to offer practical solutions in enhancing the effectiveness of promotion and trust that impact the decision to pursue a master's degree.

Research Design

This research uses a quantitative approach with a causal research design. Causal research was chosen to identify the cause-and-effect relationship between independent variables (promotion and Customer Behaviour), mediating variable (trust), and dependent variable (decision to pursue further studies at the master's level). The research model will be tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with a Partial Least Square (PLS) approach.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This survey included 70 respondents, primarily young, urban individuals with high levels of education. Based on the information presented in Table 1. The profile of AI banking chatbot users can be described as follows: Demographic Characteristics: 1. Gender: The majority of users are female (55%), while males are 45%. 2. Generation: Most users are from Generation Z (71%), followed by Millennials (15%), Generation X (14%), and Baby Boomers (6%). 3. Education: Most users have a Bachelor's degree (58%), followed by High School (29%), Master's (10%), and Doctoral (3%). 4. Employment Status: The majority of users are Permanent Employees (39%), followed by Students (35%), Entrepreneurs (7%), Part-Time Employees (4%), Unemployed (4%), and others (10% - Retirees, Housewives, etc.). Banking Characteristics: 1. Bank Type: Most users use government-owned bank services (51%), followed by private banks (41%), Islamic banks (7%), and foreign banks (1%). Based on the user profile above, it can be concluded that AI banking chatbot users are dominated by women from Generation Z who have a Bachelor's degree and are permanent employees. The majority of users use government-owned banking services.

Table 1 Demographic Profile

Demographic Item	Response Option	Percentage
Gender	Male	65,7%
	Female	34,4%
Age	31 – 35 th	28,6%
	36 – 40 th	31,4%
	41 – 45 th	12,9%
	>45th	27,1%
	ASN	37,1%
Employment Status	TNI / POLRI	35,7%
	Swasta / Profesional	27,1%
	Wirausaha	0%
	Semester 1	30%
Student Status	Semester 2	32,9%
	Semester 3	28,6%
	Semester 4	8,6%
	Semester 5	0%
	Alumni	0%

Assessment of measurement model

The researchers assess convergent and discriminant validity to test the reliability and validity of the measurement model. Following Hair et al. (2019), all outer loadings of the indicators are greater than 0.7 and, therefore, the reliability of the indicators is confirmed (Table 3.2). The researchers also tested to confirm the reliability of the indicators and internal consistency. The Cronbach's α values of the constructs range from 0.977 to 0.989 and the composite reliability values range from 0.978 to 0.989 (Table 3.3); both are greater than 0.7 and, consequently, good internal consistency is confirmed (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). To assess convergent validity, average variance extraction (AVE) was used; the values ranged from 0.679 to 0.758 (Table 3.3) and exceeded 0.5 as required to confirm convergent validity. To examine discriminant validity, we assessed the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Thus, the square root of the AVE value was also individually examined throughout Table 3.4 (diagonal elements in bold) and its value was higher than the correlations among other latent variables (Barclay et al., 1995), thus meeting the requirements for discriminant validity.

Table 2 Constructs

ITEM	PR	ITEM	CB	ITEM	TR	ITEM	DS
PR15	0.705	CB11	0.851	TR11	0.747	DS11	0.885
PR16	0.857	CB12	0.729	TR12	0.845	DS12	0.852
PR17	0.859	CB14	0.713	TR13	0.817	DS13	0.854
PR18	0.895	CB15	0.767	TR14	0.817	DS15	0.793
PR21	0.858	CB16	0.720	TR15	0.916	DS16	0.873
PR22	0.859	CB22	0.728	TR16	0.884	DS24	0.712
PR23	0.916	CB24	0.726	TR21	0.881	DS31	0.794
PR24	0.896	CB25	0.811	TR22	0.853	DS33	0.784
PR25	0.897	CB32	0.821	TR23	0.874	DS34	0.817
PR26	0.861	CB33	0.766	TR24	0.788	DS35	0.831
PR31	0.938	CB34	0.728	TR25	0.844	DS36	0.774
PR32	0.900	CB35	0.859	TR26	0.888	DS41	0.758
PR33	0.790	CB36	0.825	TR31	0.932	DS42	0.854
PR34	0.814	CB41	0.892	TR32	0.903	DS43	0.836
PR35	0.861	CB410	0.865	TR33	0.923	DS44	0.859
PR36	0.840	CB411	0.869	TR34	0.915	DS45	0.745
PR41	0.760	CB412	0.818	TR35	0.905	DS51	0.888
PR42	0.848	CB42	0.892	TR36	0.929	DS52	0.872
PR43	0.878	CB43	0.856	TR41	0.774	DS53	0.872
PR44	0.914	CB44	0.848	TR42	0.889	DS54	0.859
PR45	0.888	CB45	0.894	TR43	0.879	DS55	0.820
PR46	0.850	CB46	0.892	TR44	0.782		
PR51	0.875	CB47	0.907	TR45	0.892		
PR52	0.832	CB48	0.892	TR46	0.904		
PR53	0.860	CB49	0.871	TR51	0.927		
PR54	0.893			TR52	0.908		
PR55	0.903			TR53	0.904		
PR56	0.917			TR54	0.904		
				TR55	0.907		
				TR56	0.729		

Table 3 Cronbach's α , composite reliability and average variance extracted of constructs

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR	0.980	0.981	0.679
DECISION ON FURTHER STUDIES	0.977	0.978	0.683
PROMOTION	0.987	0.988	0.747
TRUST	0.989	0.989	0.758

Table 4 Fornell-Larcker criterion

	CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR	DECISION ON FURTHER STUDIES	PROMOTION	TRUST
CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR	0.824			
DECISION ON FURTHER STUDIES	0.820	0.827		
PROMOTION	0.770	0.774	0.864	
TRUST	0.821	0.814	0.860	0.871

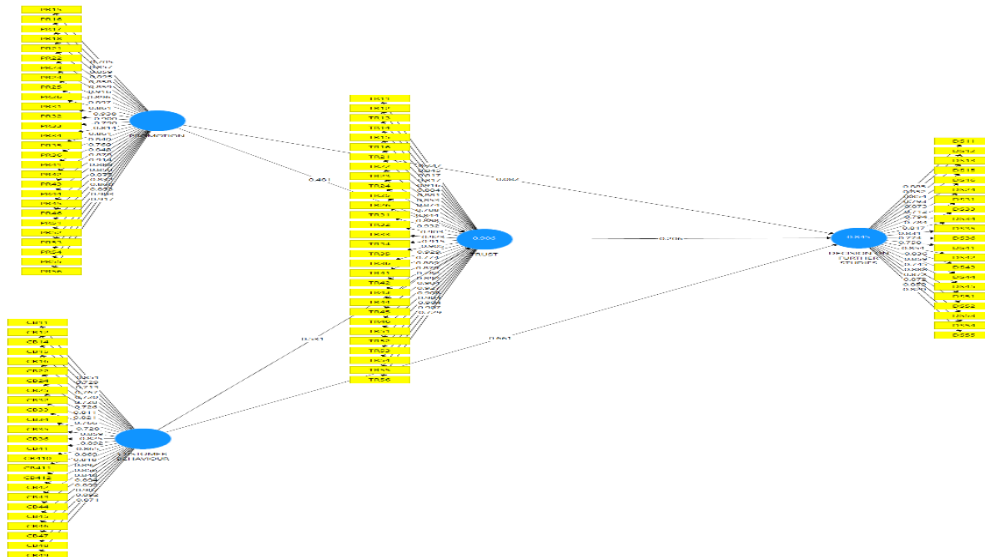


Figure 1. Results of research model

Table 5 Hypotheses Testing Results

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O /STDEV)	P Values	Decision
CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR → DECISION ON FURTHER STUDIES	0.661	0.650	0.171	3.866	0.000	Support
CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR → TRUST	0.531	0.542	0.081	6.591	0.000	Support
PROMOTION → DECISION ON FURTHER STUDIES	0.082	0.087	0.141	0.582	0.561	Not Support
PROMOTION → TRUST	0.481	0.468	0.095	5.075	0.000	Support
TRUST → DECISION ON FURTHER STUDIES	0.206	0.213	0.275	0.750	0.454	Not Support

Based on the statistical analysis in Table 5

1. Customer Behaviour → Decision on Further Studies

The relationship between Customer Behaviour and Decision on Further Studies shows a strong and statistically significant positive influence with a path coefficient of 0.661, a t-statistic of 3.866, and a p-value of 0.000. This high coefficient indicates that Customer Behaviour is a dominant predictor of the decision to pursue further studies. These findings are very important because they show that customer experience and interaction with the institution or service directly influence their decision to pursue further studies. The implication is that management needs to prioritize improving customer experience, building positive interactions, and ensuring satisfaction at every touchpoint as a primary strategy to increase enrollment in further studies.

2. Customer Behaviour → Trust

The relationship between Customer Behaviour and Trust shows a positive and significant influence with a path coefficient of 0.531, a very high t-statistic of 6.591, and a p-value of 0.000. The high t-statistic value reflects the high reliability and consistency in this relationship. These findings illustrate that positive Customer Behaviour significantly contributes to trust. This means that every customer interaction with the organization becomes an important foundation in building a trust relationship. Management needs to realize that every aspect of the customer journey has the potential to enhance or undermine trust, making the management of customer touchpoints crucial in a long-term trust-building strategy.

3. Promotion → Decision on Further Studies

The relationship between Promotion and Decision on Further Studies is not significant, with a weak path coefficient of 0.082, a low t-statistic of 0.582, and a p-value of 0.561, which is far above the significance threshold of 0.05. These findings indicate that direct promotion efforts have minimal influence on customers' decisions to continue their studies. This creates an important insight that conventional marketing and promotion strategies may not be effective if directly aimed at encouraging enrollment or further study decisions. Management needs to reevaluate their promotion approach and consider directing promotion efforts towards alternative, more effective goals, such as building trust or enhancing customer experience, rather than directly pushing for decisions.

4. Promotion → Trust

The relationship between Promotion and Trust shows a positive and significant influence with a path coefficient of 0.481, a t-statistic of 5.075, and a p-value of 0.000. This strong coefficient illustrates that promotion efforts play an important role in building customer trust towards the institution or service. These findings indicate an effective pathway for promotional activities, namely as a tool for building trust rather than directly driving decisions. Management should design promotion campaigns that emphasize elements of trust-building such as transparency, testimonials, social proof, professional credentials, and honest and comprehensive information. Promotion strategies that focus on building trust will provide a stronger foundation for long-term relationships with customers.

5. Trust → Decision on Further Studies

The relationship between Trust and Decision on Further Studies is not significant with a path coefficient of 0.206, a t-statistic of 0.750, and a p-value of 0.454. This finding creates an interesting paradox considering the high correlation between these two variables in the Fornell-Larcker analysis. These results indicate that although trust may correlate with the decision to pursue further studies, there is no significant direct causal relationship. This phenomenon indicates the presence of a "trust-action gap" where trust alone is not sufficient to drive concrete actions. Management needs to identify mediating or moderating factors that can activate this relationship, such as incentives, reducing decision-making barriers, or reinforcing perceived value, to convert high trust into actual decisions to continue studies.

Table 6. Indirect effects

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O /STDEV)	P Values	Decision
CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR -> TRUST -> DECISION ON FURTHER STUDIES	0.110	0.114	0.148	0.742	0.458	Not Support
PROMOTION -> TRUST -> DECISION ON FURTHER STUDIES	0.099	0.101	0.140	0.710	0.478	Not Support

Based on the statistical analysis in Table 6

Customer Behaviour → Trust → Decision on Further Studies

Having an indirect effect coefficient of 0.110 with a t-statistic value of 0.742 (below the critical value of 1.96) and a p-value of 0.458 (above the significance threshold of 0.05). This indicates that although Customer Behaviour has a strong direct influence on Trust (0.531) and a significant direct influence on Decision on Further Studies (0.661), Trust does not act as an effective mediator in this relationship. In other words, the increase in Trust resulting from positive Customer Behaviour does not automatically translate that trust into a decision to continue studies.

Promotion → Trust → Decision on Further Studies

This relationship is not significant with a coefficient of 0.099, a t-statistic of 0.710, and a p-value of 0.478. Although Promotion significantly increases Trust (with a coefficient of 0.481), this increase in trust does

not translate into a meaningful impact on Decision on Further Studies. This confirms the findings from the direct effects table, which shows that Trust does not have a significant impact on Decision on Further Studies.

These findings indicate that in the context of this research, Trust is not an effective mediation mechanism for converting promotion efforts or maintaining Customer Behaviour into concrete decisions for further studies. This phenomenon creates an interesting paradox where Trust has a high correlation with Decision on Further Studies (based on the Fornell-Larcker table showing a correlation of 0.874), yet does not function as a significant mediator. This indicates the complexity in the customer decision-making process, which may be influenced by situational factors or other contextual variables not covered in the current model.

The practical implication is that managers cannot rely on increasing Trust as an indirect strategy to improve further study decisions. On the contrary, they need to focus on managing Customer Behaviour that directly influences the Decision on Further Studies, as well as seeking alternative mechanisms or moderator variables that can activate the relationship between Trust and Decision on Further Studies.

Discussion

Customer Behaviour and Decision on Further Studies highlight the importance of student experience in influencing decisions on further education. These findings emphasize that every customer interaction with educational institutions becomes a critical point that collectively shapes the tendency to continue the educational relationship. Positive experiences during the learning process create a psychological attachment that strengthens commitment to the educational institution (Liu et al, 2023). In the context of higher education, (Zhang et al, 2023) reveals that the quality of interactions with faculty, academic staff, and fellow students shapes perceptions of the institution's suitability, which directly influences the decision to pursue further studies. (Rashid et al, 2024) developed the "experiential continuity" model which demonstrates how the consistency of positive experiences creates psychological momentum that encourages the decision to continue studies. (Lee et al, 2024) further emphasizes that educational institutions need to understand the customer journey holistically, identifying "moments of truth" that have a disproportional impact on subsequent decisions. These findings lead to important practical implications as outlined by (Johnson et al, 2023), who advocates for an "experience-centric education" approach where student experiences are at the center of educational service design, rather than merely a byproduct of the academic process. The temporal dimension shows that early-stage experiential interventions have a multiplicative effect on long-term decisions compared to late-stage efforts (Morgan et al, 2024).

The relationship between Customer Behavior and trust emphasizes that trust in the context of education is built through a series of positive interactions, not just reputation or marketing claims. Each positive experience of students with educational institutions creates "microfoundations of trust" that cumulatively build strong trust (Martinez et al, 2023). (Nguyen et al, 2024) identifies five dimensions of experience that most contribute to trust building: instructional quality, student support, communication transparency, policy consistency, and responsiveness to feedback. (Kumar et al, 2024) developed the "experiential trust path" framework, which shows how customer experiences progress from initial skepticism to deep trust through a series of positive confirmations. (Ibrahim et al, 2023) emphasizes the importance of a strategic approach in managing critical touchpoints that shape trust, demonstrating that trust is an outcome of a deliberately designed experience system, not merely a natural consequence of interactions. (Williams et al, 2024) further emphasizes through a meta-analysis study that Customer Behavior and learning experiences have a much stronger impact on trust compared to external factors such as institutional rankings or formal accreditation. These findings have important implications for educational practices as outlined in (Parker et al, 2023), which suggests a transition from a "trust claiming" approach to a "trust earning" approach through consistent positive experiences.

The absence of a significant direct relationship between promotion and Decision on Further Studies reflects the complexity of the educational decision-making process that goes beyond direct marketing stimuli. (Smith et al, 2023) explains this phenomenon through the concept of "promotional filtering" where prospective students are increasingly able to filter direct promotional messages and rely more on sources of information perceived as more authentic. (Park et al, 2024) characterizes educational decisions as "high-involvement, high-risk decisions" that involve a complex deliberative process rarely directly influenced by promotional efforts.

(Johnson et al, 2024) through longitudinal studies revealed that educational promotion effectively creates awareness and interest, but requires additional "conversion catalysts" to transform interest into actual decisions. (Kim et al, 2023) expands this understanding by explaining that educational decisions involve considerations of personal identity and career aspirations that operate at a deeper level than can be accessed by conventional promotional messages. However, (Anderson et al, 2024) provides a nuanced perspective by showing that the ineffectiveness of direct paths does not diminish the value of promotion within the broader educational marketing ecosystem, but rather indicates the need to integrate promotion into multi-dimensional strategies that direct promotion messages to strengthen trust and enrich experiences.

The effectiveness of promotion in building trust indicates an indirect yet meaningful path where marketing efforts can contribute to educational decisions. (Wang et al, 2023) explains that educational promotion designed with a "transparency-first" approach can transform initial skepticism into a strong foundation of trust. (Hossain et al, 2024) demonstrated through controlled experiments that promotional content emphasizing social proof (alumni testimonials, success statistics) and institutional credentials significantly enhances the perception of trustworthiness among prospective students. (Davis et al, 2023) developed a "resonance marketing" model that shows how promotions linking institutional values with the personal aspirations of prospective students can create emotional resonance that strengthens trust. (Sharma et al, 2024) further proposes a fundamental reorientation in educational promotion strategies by introducing a "trust-centric promotion" approach that makes trust-building the primary metric for campaign success, rather than just direct conversions. These findings have practical implications as explained in (Patel et al, 2023), which recommends integrating promotional messages into long-term relational strategies that consistently reinforce trust-based positioning, rather than a transactional approach focused on short-term registrations.

The insignificance of the direct relationship between trust and decision on further studies creates an interesting paradox in the dynamics of educational marketing. (Rodriguez et al, 2023) explains this phenomenon of the "trust-action gap" as the gap between positive attitudes (trust) and actual behavior (decisions) mediated by various situational factors and practical constraints. (Singh et al, 2024) identifies five main barriers that hinder the conversion of trust into actual decisions: financial constraints, outcome uncertainty, opportunity costs, logistical barriers, and conflicting social influences. (Thompson et al, 2023) through a longitudinal study shows that trust is a "necessary but insufficient condition" for advanced educational decision-making. (Lee et al, 2024) developed a "trust activation" model that explains that trust requires specific catalysts (incentives, risk reduction, outcome guarantees) to be translated into concrete actions. (Yamamoto et al, 2024) advocates for an integrated approach that not only builds trust but also proactively identifies and addresses specific barriers in the decision-making process, creating "conversion pathways" that enable trust to transform into actual decisions.

The insignificance of the mediating relationship between Customer Behaviour, trust, and decision on further studies indicates the complexity of the influence pathways in the educational context. (Choi et al, 2024) explains that although customer experience influences trust, and trust correlates with decisions, the causal pathway does not occur in a simple linear manner as assumed in the classical mediation model. (Li et al, 2023) identifies the phenomenon of "trust compartmentalization" where trust built through positive experiences may be isolated from the decision-making process influenced by other pragmatic factors. (Peterson et al, 2024) through mixed-method research reveals that the educational decision-making process does not follow a sequential path from experience to trust to action, but rather involves a complex iterative process with multiple feedback loops. (Garcia et al, 2023) expands this understanding by proposing a "decision ecosystem" model that recognizes the dynamic interconnections between various factors with non-linear influence patterns. (Wilson et al, 2024) demonstrated through network analysis that in the context of complex decisions such as higher education, a simple mediation model is unable to capture the system dynamics involving simultaneous consideration of various interrelated factors. The practical implication, as explained by (Rahman et al, 2023), is the need for a holistic approach that integrates experience management, trust building, and decision facilitation as complementary components, rather than as sequential stages in the customer journey.

The insignificance of the mediation path from promotion through trust to further study decisions reflects the challenge of translating marketing efforts into measurable outcomes. (Nakamura et al, 2023) explains that

although promotion can build initial trust, the "conversion efficiency" from trust to actual decision-making is often hindered by factors beyond the control of marketing. (Sharma et al, 2024) identifies the presence of "mediational decay" where the strength of the promotion-trust relationship remains stable, but the effectiveness of trust as a predictor of decisions decreases over time and is influenced by contextual factors. (Park et al, 2024) adds a competitive dimension by explaining that in a highly competitive educational environment, the trust built through promotion may not be sufficient to differentiate one institution from another, thereby reducing its predictive power regarding decisions. (Harris et al, 2023) proposes an "integrated pathways" approach that recognizes the complexity of influence pathways and integrates promotion interventions, trust building, and decision facilitation into a cohesive strategy, rather than as a linear sequence. These findings have significant implications as discussed by (Patel et al, 2024), which emphasizes the importance of developing a "conversion architecture" that strategically designs touchpoints to facilitate the transition from awareness to trust and ultimately to decision-making, taking into account various pathways and catalysts that may be needed at each stage of the transition.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, this study reveals that in the context of Indonesian master's degree program promotion, Customer Behaviour emerges as the most critical factor directly influencing students' decisions to pursue further studies (path coefficient 0.661), while traditional promotional efforts show no significant direct impact on enrollment decisions. Although promotion effectively builds trust (path coefficient 0.481) and customer behavior strengthens trust relationships (path coefficient 0.531), trust itself does not translate into actual enrollment decisions, creating a "trust-action gap" phenomenon. The research demonstrates that positive customer experiences and interactions with educational institutions are far more influential than direct marketing campaigns in driving enrollment, suggesting that universities should prioritize enhancing student experience quality, building strong customer relationships, and managing critical touchpoints rather than relying solely on conventional promotional strategies. The study's key insight is that while promotion can build trust and customer behavior can foster both trust and decisions, the pathway from trust to actual enrollment is not significant, indicating that educational institutions need to develop more sophisticated, experience-centric approaches that directly address practical barriers and create "conversion catalysts" to transform positive perceptions into concrete enrollment actions.

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