

## Decision to Choose a College Viewed from Personal Selling, Brand Image, and Brand Trust as Intervening Variables

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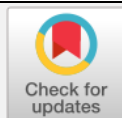
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### ABSTRACT

*In pursuing enhancing human resources' quality, the state has ensured that private universities also have rights and obligations. The main objective of this study is to investigate whether personal selling and brand image influence college decision-making through the mediating role of brand trust. This research was conducted at the Politeknik Unggul LP3M in Medan, Indonesia. The study's population was comprised of active students from the 2019/2020 academic year, totaling 257 individuals. A stratified sampling technique was employed, using the Slovin formula with a 5% margin of error, resulting in a sample size of 157 respondents. The study utilized a quantitative approach, with data collected through structured questionnaires. The analysis included descriptive statistics, reliability tests, and path analysis to determine the direct and indirect effects of personal selling and brand image on college decision-making through brand trust. The findings indicate that personal selling significantly affects brand trust, suggesting that effective strategies can enhance students' trust in the institution's brand. Similarly, brand image significantly directly affects brand trust, underscoring the importance of a positive brand image in building trust among potential students. Furthermore, the results show that personal selling*

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*indirectly influences college decision-making through brand trust, indicating that the trust developed through personal selling efforts can lead to positive college choice decisions. Likewise, brand image indirectly affects college decision-making through brand trust, highlighting the role of a strong brand image in shaping students' enrollment decisions. In conclusion, personal selling and brand image are crucial in influencing college decisions, with brand trust as a key mediating variable. These findings provide valuable insights for educational institutions aiming to enhance their marketing strategies and build stronger relationships with prospective students. Future research could explore additional factors influencing college decision-making and examine these relationships in different educational contexts.*

**Keywords:** Brand Image; Brand Trust; College Decisions; Educational Marketing; Personal Selling

## 1. Introduction

The need for competent human resources requires every university to continue to improve (Arianto et al., 2021). Everyone's desire to get a good college education is hoped to provide job opportunities (Martin & Nasib, 2021). Besides that, the need for good human resources is not only expected by everyone but also by the industrial world (Nasib et al., 2021). So, most people expect a change in higher education. Given that technological developments continue to change from time to time (Nasib, Munandar, et al., 2022).

The decision to study will be difficult when each prospective new student has insufficient reference places for the information needed (Fadli et al., 2020). Providing sufficient information sources will be very helpful for prospective new students to find various sources that are considered in line with their needs (Aditi et al., 2022). Furthermore, the decisions to be taken by prospective new students have an important meaning for higher education. Given that before making the right selection, a new student candidate has defeated many alternatives in other universities (Marpaung et al., 2021).

The decision to choose a tertiary institution was made by evaluating various available sources of information (Nasib et al., 2017). Every university will try to spread much information to the wider community (Nasib et al., 2020). Online and offline media are also used to provide clear information to the target market (Banuari, 2023). It is preferred for prospective millennial students looking for literacy from online media (Nasib, Azhmy, et al., 2022). So, determining which college to choose is certainly not wrong. Finally, high-ranking student candidates prove directly whether the information is following what is in the field (Sanny et al., 2020).

Politeknik Unggul LP3M is one of the private universities in the vocational field. At 18, the Politeknik Unggul LP3M brand has produced many graduates working in private and government companies. The high number of competitions has made management continue to make improvements.

The decline in the number of students is a problem for management. Prospective students demand high hopes for the quality of education offered during promotional activities. Students choose to study at Politkenik UngguL LP3M because promotional activities are very attractive

to prospective students. Management must fulfill the expectations of these prospective students. This aims to continue to increase the existing sense of trust. Hopefully, these prospective students will become Politeknik Unggul LP3M ambassadors to help increase the number of students.

Private universities often choose direct recognition of excellence to increase the decision of prospective new students. This effort is used by coming directly to the student's source face-to-face and explaining their advantages (Sutisna, 2002). So, personal sales must first be trained in face-to-face activities with prospective students. Later, the explanation will be delivered based on solving prospective new students' problems (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Problems often faced include tuition fees, accreditation, and the recovery process, especially for students while working.

During the face-to-face process carried out by personal selling with prospective new students, it is expected that it is not only one direction but also has to be done in two directions between the personal selling force and the prospective new students (Supardin, 2022). Being able to make a response for prospective new students is the main focus of the personal selling activity (Widiatmoko et al., 2023). The results of this face-to-face activity aim to prospect new student candidates genuinely interested in continuing their education (Rivaldo et al., 2022). Then, higher education has a great opportunity to get new student candidates (Nasution & Harahap, 2022). The seventh target is already tight, namely, students who have completed their education (Chen & Zhou, 2022).

A sense of trust will be obtained when prospective students feel confident with the existing evidence of the superiority of higher education (Boeck, 2022). Building trust through proof of promise when marketing activities are mandatory when universities want to continue to make prospective students and existing students continue to have good brand trust (Shin et al., 2022). Maintaining the quality assurance of online media information is one way that is often used to maintain the university brand trust (Balagopalan et al., 2022).

Brand image can be defined as a student's belief about an object, such as a college. This belief forms a principle that is difficult to change when considering other brands (Prihatini & Gumilang, 2021). Furthermore, students' perceptions of a brand result from their past experiences, and the experiences can be both direct and indirect (Saragi & Rainanto, 2021). It is essential for a university to maintain its brand image because students with a positive perception of the university are likely to encourage their closest friends to study there as well (Kaushal & Ali, 2020).

Brand trust has many characteristics, including the ability to build good relationships, especially with students and alumni, the ease of influencing students and alumni because they have a high sense of trust, universities are open to communication, high trust will make students reduce the level of supervision or worry, trust the good will also make students have a sense of patience when there are colleges that give negative criticism, students are willing to defend it, good trust will also make them feel comfortable and satisfied (Simanjuntak et al., 2022). Brand image can also be developed through identifying images and strengthened through business contacts with students (Susilawati et al., 2022).

Private universities can make improvements in building their brand image. Among them are trying to build good communication between tertiary institutions and other universities, colleges to the industrial world, and universities and schools as suppliers of prospective new students. The next step is providing good service, especially for students who have undergone the lecture process (Bahari et al., 2023). Finally, universities must continue to develop their

excellence. This will start with improving accreditation, providing facilities, and providing evidence that has been promised to students (Kartajaya, 2004).

Based on the existing descriptions related to the decision to choose a college concerning brand image, personal selling, and brand trust. Given that all these variables are unique compared to the results of previous studies. This is what makes this different from prior research. So, in this case, several questions need to be asked: (1) Does personal selling affect brand trust? (2) does the brand image affect the brand's trust? (3) does personal selling affect college decisions through brand trust? (4) does brand image affect college decisions through brand trust?

This study aims to analyze the direct and indirect effects of personal selling and brand image on college decisions through brand trust. Furthermore, the target for college decisions is active students on the Politeknik Unggul LP3M campus.

## 2. Research Methodology

The object of this research is Politeknik Unggul LP3M, chosen for its strong brand image. The target population comprises 257 active students from the 2019/2020 school year. **Table 1** details the student distribution: 61 students in the informatics management program, 98 in the accounting program, 54 in the computerized accounting program, 6 in the secretarial program, 4 in the marketing management program, and 34 in the tax accounting program.

**Table 1. Student Distribution by Program**

Study Program	Number of Students
Informatics Management	61
Accounting	98
Computerized Accounting	54
Secretarial	6
Marketing Management	4
Tax Accounting	34
<b>Total</b>	<b>257</b>

The sampling method used is non-probability sampling, specifically stratified sampling, due to six distinct study programs at Politeknik Unggul LP3M. The sample size was determined by the Slovin formula, resulting in 157 respondents. **Table 2** shows the sample distribution: 37 students in the informatics management program, 60 in the accounting program, 33 in the computerized accounting program, 4 in the secretarial program, 2 in the marketing management program, and 21 in the tax accounting program.

**Table 2. Sample Distribution by Program**

Study Program	Number of Respondents
Informatics Management	37
Accounting	60
Computerized Accounting	33



Study Program	Number of Respondents
Secretarial	4
Marketing Management	2
Tax Accounting	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>157</b>

The variables in this study include exogenous variables, such as personal selling and brand trust, and endogenous variables, such as brand image and college decisions. All variables were measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data analysis was conducted using path analysis to determine the direct and indirect effects of personal selling on brand image and brand trust on brand image. The indirect effect of personal selling on college decisions through brand image and brand trust on college decisions through brand image was examined. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with Lisrel was used for data analysis. The model fit criteria evaluated included Chi-Square, P-value, RMSEA, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI), and Normal Fit Index (NFI).

### 3. Results and Discussion

Based on **Table 3**, the sample consists of 157 respondents, with 55 men (35%) and 102 women (65%). From these data, it is evident that female respondents outnumber male respondents. **Table 4** shows that all respondents are under 25, indicating that the average student at Politeknik Unggul LP3M has recently graduated from high school.

**Table 3. Respondent Gender Distribution**

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Men	55	35%
Women	102	65%
<b>Total</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 4. Respondent Age Distribution**

Age Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage
< 20 years	45	29%
20-22 years	82	52%
23-24 years	30	19%
<b>Total</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>100%</b>

#### 3.1. Validity

Evaluation of each construct measures the relationship between latent variables and observed variables through validity measurements. The result is considered valid if the t-value is greater than 1.96. The construct results can be seen in **Table 5** as follows:

Table 5. Standard Loading Factor (SLF)

Variable	t-Value	Evaluation
<b>Personal Selling (PS)</b>		
PS11	5.48	Good
PS12	6.29	Good
PS13	0.48	Good
<b>Brand Image (BI)</b>		
BI21	8.15	Good
BI22	12.65	Good
BI23	11.75	Good
<b>Brand Trust (BT)</b>		
BT11	9.53	Good
BT12	11.77	Good
BT13	11.69	Good
<b>Decision (D2)</b>		
D21	13.68	Good
D22	10.52	Good
Y23	13.32	Good

### 3.2. Reliability

The measurement model's reliability assessment must be calculated using the Standard Loading Factor (SLF) and higher than 0.50. The validity of the research is shown in Table 6:

Table 6. Model Reliability

Variables	Construct Reliability	Evaluation
Personal Selling (PS)	0.70	Good
Brand Image (BI)	0.72	Good
Brand Trust (BT)	0.63	Good
Decision (D2)	0.76	Good

### 3.3. Compatibility Models

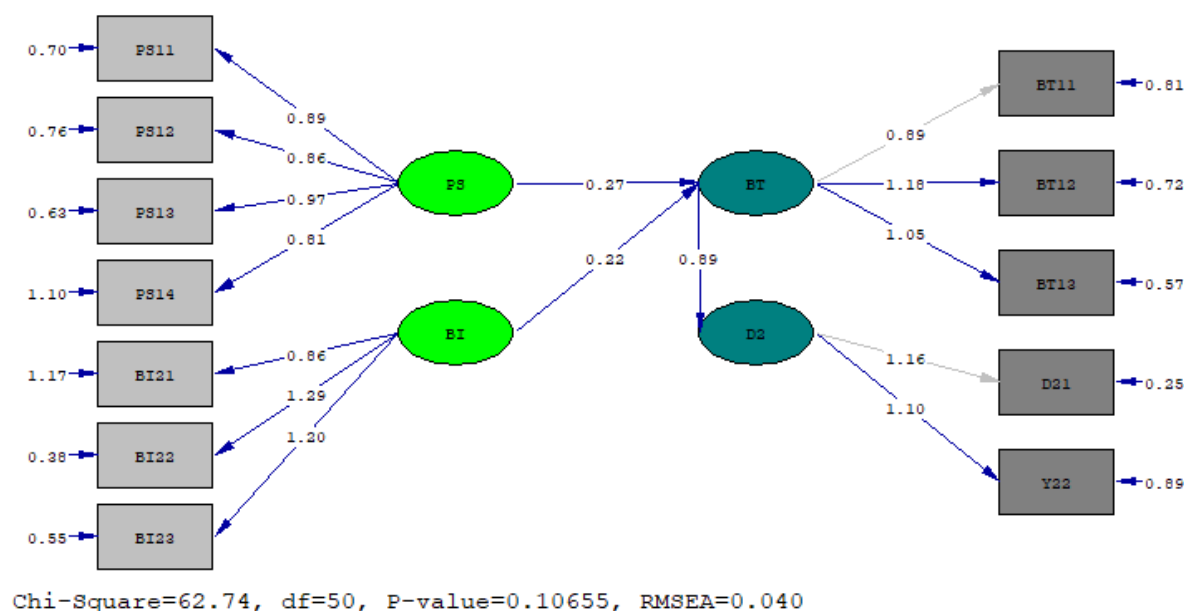
The results of testing the compatibility model using P-value, RMSEA, Chi-Square, Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI) are as follows:

Table 7. Measurement of Goodness of Fit Index (GOFI)

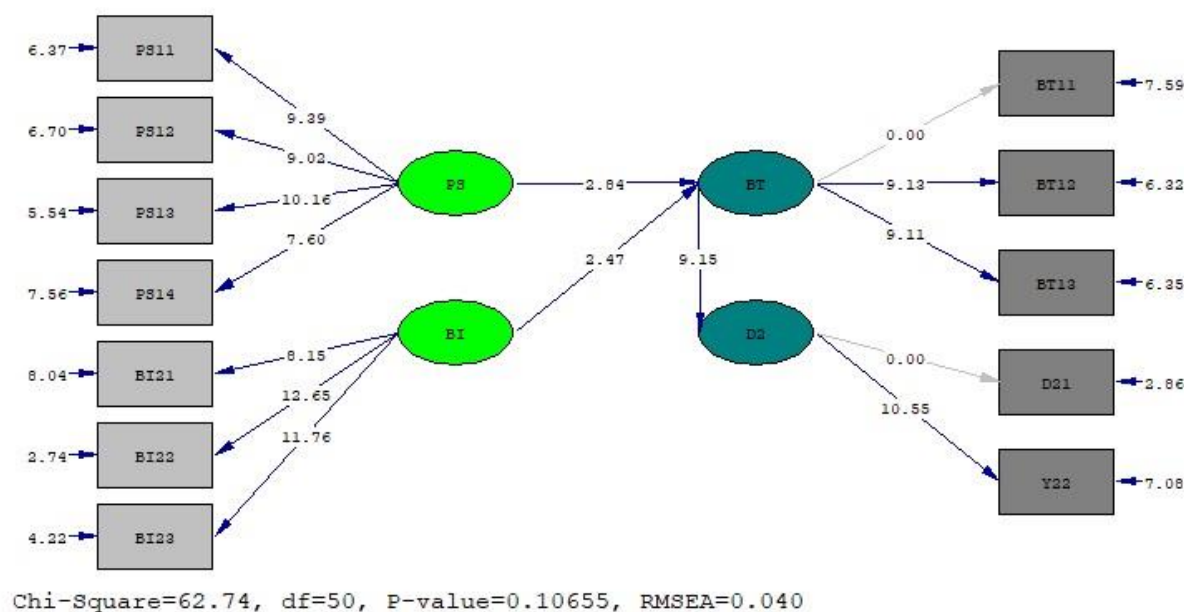
Fit Index	Criteria	Result	Evaluation
Chi-Square		62.74	Good Fit
p-value	$\geq 0.05$	0.10655	Good Fit
RMSEA	$\leq 0.08$	0.040	Good Fit
NFI	$\geq 0.90$	0.92	Good Fit
NNFI	$\geq 0.90$	0.97	Good Fit
CFI	$\geq 0.90$	0.98	Good Fit

IFI	$\geq 0.90$	0.98	Good Fit
RFI	$\geq 0.90$	0.90	Good Fit
GFI	$\geq 0.90$	0.94	Good Fit

The SEM assessment shows that the model is fit, as indicated by the GFI, CFI, RMSEA, NFI, NNFI, IFI, and RFI values.



**Figure 1. Goodness of Fit Index (GOFI) Measurement Model**



**Figure 2. Influence of Personal Selling on Brand Trust and College Decision**

The results showed that personal selling directly affects brand trust. The personal selling indicator, particularly product knowledge, is dominant in increasing brand trust. This includes

explaining the advantages of Politeknik Unggul LP3M compared to other universities, answering questions, addressing negative information, and providing solutions to prospective students' concerns, such as tuition fees, accreditation, and job-readiness guarantees.

The brand image variable has a direct effect on brand trust. Brand image indicators, such as user and alumni perceptions, enhance brand trust. Many industries appreciate Politeknik Unggul LP3M graduates, who often have certifications that support their work. A basic skill graduates require is typing proficiency, evidenced by a 10-finger typing certificate needed for internships.

The personal selling variable indirectly affects college decisions through brand trust. The decision to study at Politeknik Unggul LP3M is strongly influenced by its brand trust. The institution maintains this trust by placing students in partner companies, requiring proficiency in skills like MS Office, typing, and spirituality.

The brand image variable also indirectly influences college decisions through brand trust. Students choose Politeknik Unggul LP3M because of its positive brand image. Many alumni work in government companies, and many are employed in banking.

### 3.4. Discussion

The ability to sell personally is crucial in forming university brand trust. Having the knowledge and ability to provide detailed answers to respondents seeking in-depth information about the products offered is essential. An attractive appearance alone is not sufficient for effective personal selling. The results of this study indicate that personal selling has a positive influence on increasing the brand trust of Politeknik Unggul LP3M. These findings support previous research (Charmawan et al., 2022; Kumar & Sharma, 2022; Nainggolan et al., 2022), which states that personal selling abilities can enhance brand trust. Higher education institutions that optimize brand trust have a greater chance of attracting new students to choose their university (Digdowiseiso, 2023; Pratama et al., 2023). It can be concluded that enhancing personal selling efforts will boost a university's brand trust (Soeswoyo & Amalia, 2023).

Higher education brand image plays a significant role in increasing brand trust. Trust will endure if management maintains a strong commitment to preserving a positive reputation. The results of this study indicate that brand image has a direct effect on brand trust. This aligns with the findings of previous research (Boeck, 2022; Novirsari & Ponten Pranata, 2021; Simanjuntak et al., 2022). When universities enhance their brand image, it positively impacts brand trust. Given the existing trust in Politeknik Unggul LP3M, it is hoped that the institution will not respond excessively to complaints. Many students have struggled to complete their final assignments, as expected by both students and parents. Management will provide alternatives to address these issues, including conducting certification training activities to reduce the number of students unable to pass the certification program.

Personal selling indirectly influences college decisions at Politeknik Unggul LP3M through brand trust. The existing trust makes students more confident about what they have learned from personal selling. The results of this study support the findings of previous research (Kaushal & Ali, 2020; Prihatini & Gumilang, 2021; Saragi & Rainanto, 2021). Engaging information attracts new students to decide on higher education institutions (Yusman, 2022). Information and promises made during marketing activities for new student admissions must align with what students receive. When interacting directly in classrooms, personal selling representatives should be suitable ambassadors to ensure the information matches the academic regulations.



A strong brand image enhances brand trust among prospective students deciding to continue their education (Bastedo et al., 2022; Dong et al., 2022). A positive brand image fosters trust in determining the best college. The results of this study are consistent with the findings (Angerschmid et al., 2022; Ledford et al., 2022; Panigutti et al., 2022). The decision to study at a particular institution is facilitated when prospective students recognize the name Politeknik Unggul LP3M. Marketing activities, including school visits and community engagement, particularly in youth activities, significantly support the marketing team. These activities help identify potential students.

#### 4. Conclusion

Based on the results of the data analysis, the conclusion obtained is that personal selling has a direct effect on brand trust. Additionally, brand image has a direct effect on brand trust. Personal selling also has an indirect effect on college decisions through brand trust; similarly, brand image indirectly affects college decisions through brand trust.

The implications of these findings suggest that to build strong trust among students, the management of Politeknik Unggul LP3M should focus on continuously improving accreditation. Despite efforts in personal and professional selling, enhancing the image of vocational campuses, and offering tuition fee discounts, these factors have not sufficiently increased students' interest in recommending the campus to their siblings.

A limitation of this research is that the sample was drawn from only one university. Future research should consider using samples from private campuses with a well-known brand image and superior accreditation to validate and expand upon these findings.

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The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

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