



# The Role of Brand Image in Mediating Social Media Marketing and Customer Relationship on the Decision to Choose a Private University


Trias Setyowati <sup>a,1,\*</sup>, Fefi Nurdiana Widjayanti <sup>a,2</sup>, Naning Kristiyana <sup>b,3</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember, Indonesia

<sup>b</sup> Universitas Muhammadiyah Ponorogo, Indonesia

<sup>1</sup> trias@unmuhjember.ac.id\*; <sup>2</sup> fefinurdiana@unmuhjember.ac.id; <sup>3</sup> nrafakristi@gmail.com

\* corresponding author

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## ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine the impact of social media marketing and consumer relationships on the decision-making process regarding enrollment in private universities, as well as to assess their influence on the brand perception of these institutions. Additionally, it seeks to analyze how the perceived brand image affects the decision to enroll in a private university. The study targeted new students entering private universities in Jember Regency for the 2023/2024 academic year, using proportional random sampling methods for data collection via questionnaires. Statistical analysis and hypothesis testing were conducted using SEM-PLS methodology. Findings indicate that social media marketing significantly affects the decision to enroll in a private university, while consumer relationship factors do not. Moreover, both social media marketing and consumer relationships impact the brand image of private universities, which subsequently influences enrollment decisions. Indirect testing reveals that brand image serves as a mediating factor in the relationship between social media marketing, consumer relationships, and the decision to enroll in a private university.

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## 1. Introduction

Globalization has encouraged the emergence of very fierce competition in various fields such as economic, social and humanities, including education. Higher education institutions (i.e. Universities) are currently competing with each other to optimize their potential and abilities in order to attract the interest of prospective students. The competitive ability of a university is very dependent on the performance of its management in planning strategies that can increase competitiveness. Universities must be able to formulate appropriate strategies to improve the quality of education, research and community service. Apart from that, they need to pay attention to innovation in learning, infrastructure, and involvement in international cooperation networks. By planning a good strategy, universities can strengthen their position on the global stage and make a greater contribution to national development. Increasingly tight competition is one of the challenges faced by education providers, especially universities. Competition does not only occur between state universities as the main competitors, but also between private universities. According to data available from LLDIKTI Region VII East Java, the number of registered higher institutions can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Data on Private Higher Education in East Java

| No     | PT form           | Number of Active PTS | Number of Accredited PTS |    |    |          |           |      |       | Not yet accredited | Expired |
|--------|-------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|----|----|----------|-----------|------|-------|--------------------|---------|
|        |                   |                      | A                        | B  | C  | Superior | Very good | Good | Total |                    |         |
| 1      | University        | 96                   | 7                        | 42 | 29 | 0        | 7         | 3    | 88    | 7                  | 1       |
| 2      | Institution       | 23                   | 0                        | 5  | 1  | 0        | 6         | 1    | 13    | 10                 | 0       |
| 3      | High School       | 124                  | 0                        | 37 | 48 | 0        | 15        | 1    | 101   | 17                 | 6       |
| 4      | Academy           | 51                   | 0                        | 8  | 15 | 0        | 5         | 0    | 28    | 18                 | 0       |
| 5      | Polytechnic       | 12                   | 0                        | 1  | 2  | 0        | 5         | 0    | 8     | 4                  | 0       |
| 6      | Community Academy | 10                   | 0                        | 0  | 0  | 0        | 0         | 0    | 0     | 10                 | 0       |
| Amount |                   | 316                  | 7                        | 93 | 95 | 0        | 38        | 5    | 238   | 66                 | 7       |

Source: (<https://www.kopertis7.go.id/prodiKL>), 2021

The data in Table 1 provides an overview of the intense competition among private universities in East Java. From this data, it can be seen that the number of higher institutions registered in LLDIKTI VII East Java has reached 316 institutions. The details are 96 universities, 23 institutes, 124 high schools, 51 academies, 12 polytechnics and 10 community colleges. Universities that have a high level of competitiveness will encourage people to choose and complete their education at the tertiary level. Students' decisions to continue their studies at higher education are influenced by several factors, such as a university's image or reputation (brand image), available facilities and curriculum offered, educational costs, and strategic location (Hudzaifah, Sari, and Andriyani 2024). According to (Hudzaifah et al. 2024), the consumer's decision to buy or not buy a product or service is one of the most important alternative choices for marketers. Kotler and Armstrong (2008) explain that decision making is an activity of individuals who are directly involved in obtaining and using the goods offered. Consumer decisions are the result of purchasing activities carried out, often occurring after consumers experience

and use the services purchased. The decision process to use services is a complex process and is influenced by various factors.

Higher education institutions face other increasingly critical challenges, namely student demand for institutions that meet their expectations by having the best quality, easy access to information about higher education institutions, especially with the rapid progress of digital technology today, the positive image of higher education institutions in society, and the cost of education. Because of the (Narayana and Rahanatha 2020) many educational options available, prospective students consider various educational models as well as post-college career prospects. In facing this situation, universities, especially private universities, need to develop marketing strategies to remain more competitive. This fierce competition has an impact on fluctuations in the number of new registrants at private universities from year to year. Therefore, it is important to conduct studies and research on the factors that influence prospective students' decisions in choosing private universities. It is hoped that the results of this research can provide valuable information and become the basis for formulating marketing strategies for higher education institutions, especially private universities, in order to maintain or increase the number of students in the future. Reinartz, Kraff, and Hoyer (in Lupiyoadi, 2006) state that consumer preferences tend to fluctuate according to current conditions. Therefore, every business entity or organization, including universities, is expected to be able to adapt to continuously changing consumer preferences. To attract the interest of prospective students, universities need to develop attractive promotional strategies, one of which is by utilizing social media marketing, as well as improving relationships with customers through various advertising media, sales promotions, and personal and direct selling interactions expected to attract high school graduates to register, especially at private universities according to their wishes.

According to (Griffin, Phillips, and Gully 2016), another factor considered by students in choosing a college is the brand image of the college. Universities with a good brand image are a priority because this positive image provides added value in the eyes of prospective students and reflects the quality of the education offered. (Griffin et al. 2016) explains that several variables can form a brand image including the quality of teachers, library facilities, educational technology, consultation services, sports activities, marching bands and the arts, religious activities, parent participation in campus visits, and track record of alumni in the work. (Jacobson, Gruzd, and Hernández-García 2020) put forward another view which identifies the factors that shape brand image, such as quality, trust, usefulness, service, risk, price and brand image itself (Jacobson et al. 2020). Apart from that, in the context of choosing a university, prospective students also consider the marketing mix of educational institutions, which includes product, price, distribution, promotion, people, processes and physical evidence. Brand image reflects the institution's reputation in the eyes of the public. Universities that have a good reputation and many successful graduates are generally considered to be quality institutions and have high quality standards (Gustafson et al. 2021).

Promotion through social media marketing, as previously researched by (Suarmaja et al. 2023), is one of the factors that can influence consumers' decisions in using goods or services according to their needs. According to promotion is an effort made by marketers to interact with potential consumers. In this context, these interactions involve the exchange of ideas, information, or emotions between marketers and potential consumers (Baser et al. 2013). Through this communication, marketers can provide convincing explanations to potential users of educational services. Promotion acts as a communication tool used to disseminate information about the services offered by higher education providers to the public, especially potential prospective students. Research conducted by (Sopian et al. 2022) also supports this concept.

Research conducted previously (Yuliana and Pravitasari 2023) and (Trias Setyowati 2015) shows that there are several variables that also determine prospective students' decisions in choosing a university, including: social media marketing, customer relationships and brand image. It is very interesting to investigate how the brand image of a university influences students' decisions in choosing to continue their studies at that university. Research conducted by (Dewi et al. 2022) shows that brand image also influences consumer decision making, based on theory, this has a big impact on students' decisions in determining which university to choose to continue their studies (Habibah, Hamdani, and Lisnawati 2018), so researchers want to prove the truth of the theory and the influence between social media marketing, customer relationships and educational brand image on students' decisions in determining which university to choose. Based on data from each higher institution recorded since the 2022 Academic Year, the number of new students from a 4 year period shows fluctuations, indicating variations in the decisions of students who entered between 2019/2020 and 2021/2022 to choose education at private institutions in Jember. This growth is unstable, varies, and even tends to decline.

Based on the explanation and background and phenomena above, it is very important to carry out studies and analyzes to prove that the decision of prospective students to continue their education at private universities in Jember Regency is caused by Social Media Marketing, customer relationships, and brand image. Therefore, this research aims to analyze the influence of social media marketing and consumer relationship factors on the decision to choose to study at a private university, analyze the influence of social media marketing and consumer relationship factors on the brand image of private universities, and analyze the influence of brand image on the decision to choose to study at a private university.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Social Media Marketing**

Characterize social media marketing as a recent strategy designed to enhance brand visibility, improve recall, and encourage engagement with brands, businesses, products, individuals, or other entities through platforms like blogs, microblogging, social

networking, social bookmarking, and content sharing. (Hudzaifah et al. 2024) and (Gustafson et al. 2021).

Social media marketing is a strategy used by companies to carry out promotions through social media platforms, considering that there is a wide community in it and is more promising than traditional advertising methods (Gustafson et al. 2021). This is a company's effort to market products or services online by targeting certain communities as their audience (Respatiningsih and Sudirjo 2015) (Respatiningsih and Sudirjo 2015). Stated that social media marketing has certain dimensions, one of which is the formation of online communities, where companies need to build communities to market their products to that audience, with the hope of building consumer loyalty (Lin, Lin, and Wang 2021). Second, Interaction, companies must facilitate interactions with consumers, such as responding to comments, direct messages, and sending messages widely, to ensure consumers find it easy to get information from the company. Third, Content Sharing, is a dimension where social media marketing is used as a means for exchanging information and distributing content to consumers, for example through direct messages and comment columns. Fourth, Accessibility, emphasizes the importance of convenience and cost efficiency in carrying out marketing strategies via social media. Fifth, Credibility, refers to a company's ability to demonstrate trustworthiness through providing accurate information, responding quickly to consumer problems, and handling suggestions or criticism from consumers well (Adenan, Ali, and Rahman 2018).

### **Consumer Relationships**

Customer Relationship (CR) is a crucial concept in the contemporary marketing world, which involves the entire process of building and maintaining profitable relationships with customers, with the aim of providing superior customer value and satisfaction (Swastha, 1990). In the mid-1990s, CR began to be enriched by various advances in information technology. The integration of technology in CR practices is a response to the changing dynamics occurring in the business environment (Habibah et al. 2018)(Sopian et al. 2022). The traditional definition of CRM is still relevant in general, but with the rapid popularity and widespread distribution of social media networks in consumer and business markets, there is a need to updating the conventional view of CR. Social customer relationship management is the integration of traditional customer-related activities, including processes, systems, and technology, with the emerging use of social media applications to engage customers in collaborative dialogue and improve customer relationships (Adenan et al. 2018). Customers are now increasingly utilizing social media networks to interact with other individuals and companies, as well as obtain information through content shared and interactions that occur on the platform. Consumers have become active in co-creating experiences with companies, especially in the fast food industry. This change in behavior provides an opportunity for companies to increase interactions with customers through the adoption of new technology and the development of new capabilities (Sopian et al. 2022). Customer Relationship is basically the art of maintaining good and healthy relationships with customers. Customer Relationship is an individual who has responsibility not only for selling and marketing

products, but also for maintaining and strengthening good and positive relationships with customers.

### **Brand Image**

According to (Narayana and Rahanatha 2020) Brand image is a group of brand associations that are formed and embedded in consumers' minds. Consumers who are accustomed to using a particular brand tend to show consistency with that brand image. So if a solid brand concept is conveyed effectively to the appropriate market, the product will produce a brand image that reflects a clear brand identity. According to (Narayana and Rahanatha 2020) the use of a positive brand image is, first, advantages related to appearance and current profits - a positive brand can increase the profits achieved, make consumers accept price increases for a product, increase the effectiveness of marketing communications and increase trade cooperation. Second, profits are related to long-term revenue - consumer loyalty to a brand so that the company is stronger in responding to challenges posed by competitors and has a better ability to manage marketing crises. And third, profits relate to the company's potential for growth - the opportunity to grant permission to open branches, providing a positive force in marketing through word of mouth, the brand's ability to facilitate the introduction of new products as a brand extension.

### **Consumer Behavior and Purchase Decisions**

Consumer behavior is the impulses that cause a consumer to make decisions in spending their money. Initially, someone assumes that the motivation to choose a product is because the consumer believes that the product has the best quality or the cheapest price. But in reality, often these considerations are based on other incentives, for example a sense of self-worth, joining in, saving time, and so on. Knowledge of the secret motives of a person in making a purchase will produce the most appropriate way to encourage someone to make a choice, regarding the products offered.

Consumer behavior is all activities carried out by individual humans in the planning process, making decisions to buy or refuse to use goods and services. Meanwhile, physical activity is a business activity to search for information about a product and compare it with other similar products, repurchase or reject it (Habibah et al. 2018) and (Narayana and Rahanatha 2020).

The decision to purchase taken by a buyer is actually a collection of a number of decisions; each purchasing decision has a structure of seven components (Swastha and Handoko, 2000). The usage decision-making process begins before the act of usage and continues long afterward, because consumers make many kinds of usage decisions every day. So, marketers need to focus on the usage process as a whole, not just on the usage decision. The usage process can be explained in the following image.

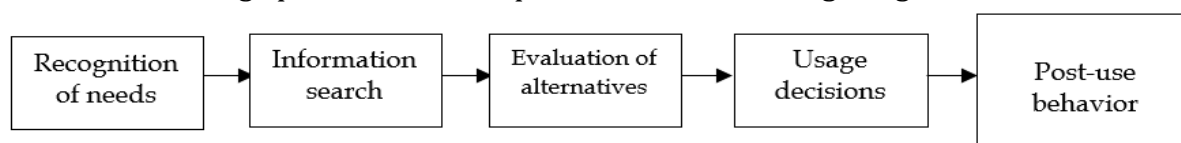


Figure 1. Usage Decision Process

Source: Kotler, Amstrong (2001)

According to (Cheung, Peng, and Wong 2018) (Einolander 2015) purchasing decisions are "the process of formulating various alternative actions in order to make a choice on one particular alternative for making a purchase". Related to this, Kotler and Keller (2009) state that in purchasing products, consumers generally follow five process stages, namely problem recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchasing decision making, and post-purchase behavior.

### Conceptual Framework

To provide an overview and make it easier to understand this research, the following conceptual framework for the research is presented.

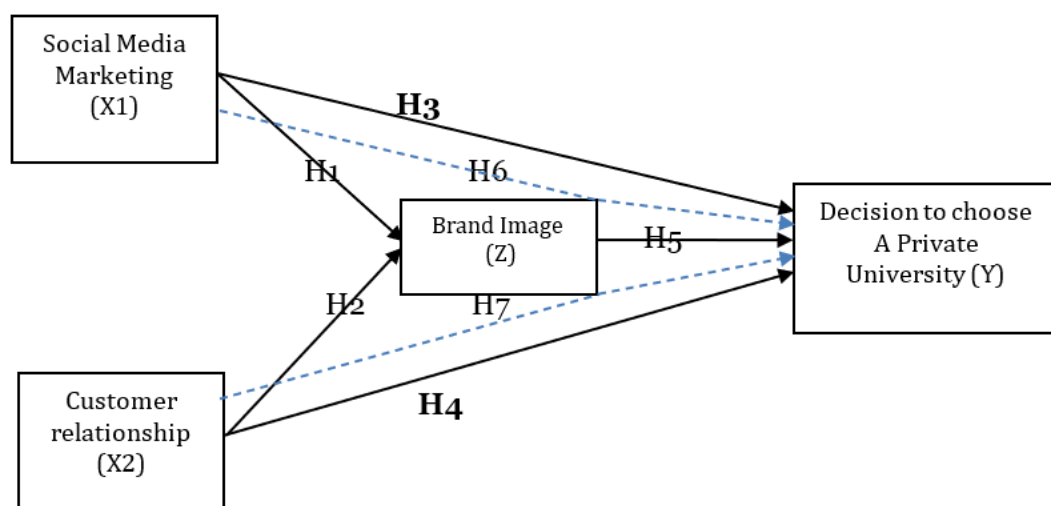


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework

Source: Data processed by the researcher, 2024

### Hypothesis Development

#### The Influence of Social Media Marketing Factors on Brand Image ( X1 - Z )

Social media has the characteristic that messages posted by a user are not only addressed to one individual but can also be accessed by a large number of users simultaneously, thus allowing the message to spread more quickly than other media. Social media users who see a product have a higher probability of discussing the product indirectly and promoting it to other consumers who do not use social media. Therefore, the higher the use of social media, the higher the chances of a product being discussed by the public.

Social Media Marketing has the potential to increase brand loyalty because it allows companies to form direct, interactive, interesting and responsive two-way communication channels with customers via social media (Budiarto, Amanda, and Nordin 2023). Social media is an online platform where individuals with similar interests gather to exchange thoughts, comments and ideas (Suarmaja et al. 2023).

According to (Pristi A., Setiawan, and Purwaningrum 2022) brand image is a picture that includes the overall perception of a brand, which is formed by past experience and information about the brand. Brand image is related to attitudes in the form of beliefs and preferences towards certain brands. Brand image is an important requirement for significant brand strength. The brand image that is formed must be clear

and have advantages compared to competitors. If a company has succeeded in building a strong brand image in the minds of its consumers, then the company does not need to make extra efforts to find customers. By having a strong brand image, consumers will trust and loyally consume the brand.

H1: The more intense social media marketing increases the university's brand image

### **The Influence of Consumer Relationship on Brand Image (X2 – Z )**

Consumer Relationship (CR) focuses on creating, managing, and expanding relationships between a company and its customers (Schultz and Schultz 2020). CR is part of marketing management in a company. In marketing actions, a company expects to contribute to improvements in customer behavior and preferences which, in turn, influence the depth and strength of the relationship between the company and its customers, which then increases the customer's lifetime monetary value which, in aggregate, contributes to customer satisfaction, equity and profitability of marketing investment (Pristi A. et al. 2022).

If Customer Relationship (CR) is implemented effectively with a focus on interactions between individuals, remembering that customers are basically humans with diverse characteristics, the company will obtain a positive brand image in the eyes of customers. Satisfied customers will become carriers of positive messages about the brand, sharing their experiences with other potential customers, so that overall, the brand will gain a good reputation in society.

H2: The better the consumer relationship, the more the university's brand image will improve

### **The Influence of Social Media Marketing Factors on Consumer Decisions (X1 – Y)**

The increasing presence and participation of consumers/customers on social media poses opportunities and challenges for marketers, because consumers base their purchasing decisions on peer interactions on social media (Abuiyada and Chou 2012). Social Media Marketing is a type of online marketing that uses the cultural context of society to meet communication and branding goals (Sopian et al. 2022). Social media turns consumers into marketers as they generate, edit, create, and share online information about organizations and brands (Fadjri and Silitonga 2018). Several benefits of Social Media Marketing for marketers have been reported in the literature, for example enabling two-way communication and reducing information search efforts (Abuiyada and Chou 2012).

H3: The more intense the use of social media marketing, the more prospective students will decide to choose to study at a private university

### **The Influence of Consumer Relationship on Consumer Decisions (X2 – Y)**

Consumer relationships are processes used to attract, maintain, and strengthen customer relationships (Abuiyada and Chou 2012) (Hudzaifah et al. 2024). Customer retention will be increased by relationship marketing that is built in the long term (Lin et al. 2021). The company will benefit from a strong relationship between customers and



the company, where the company will gain invaluable information about how best to serve customers and prevent customers from moving to competitors.

Relationship marketing concepts are useful in developing definitions of new concepts such as relationship quality, which is the degree of suitability of a relationship to meet customer needs associated with the relationship. Relationship marketing can be used as a strategy designed to foster long-term customer loyalty, interaction and engagement (Armayani and Jatra 2019). In this case, long-term and short-term customer relationships enable companies to collect useful information from customers and, with adequate management, provide superior value as a source of competitive advantage (Suarmaja et al. 2023). Therefore, improving the quality of the relationship will increase the customer's desire to maintain the relationship (Respatiningsih and Sudirjo 2015). With regard to customer relations, the company carries out customer relationship management/CRM.

H4: The more intense the consumer relationship, the more prospective students will decide to choose to study at a private university

### **The Influence of Brand Image on Consumer Decisions (Z - Y )**

Brand Image refers to the impression formed in consumers' minds regarding the characteristics of a brand, both its advantages and disadvantages, both real and imaginary (Hudzaifah et al. 2024). According to Kotler and Keller (2009), image is a collection of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of an object (Narayana and Rahanatha 2020). Brand Image, basically, is the perception and belief held by consumers, which reflects the associations embedded in their memories (Kotler and Keller, 2009).

The quality of a brand is important for making purchasing decisions (Adenan et al. 2018). This considers the evaluation of various relevant brands and then determines the choice of the most suitable brand (Sanjiwani and Suasana 2019). If the brand image is positive, consumers tend to choose the product to purchase and use. The existence of a positive Brand Image can influence improvements in the purchasing decision making process.

H5: The better the brand image, the greater the consumer's decision to choose to study at a private university

### **The Influence of Social Media Marketing Factors on Consumer Decisions Mediated by Brand Image (X1 - Z - Y )**

Social Media Marketing is a digital marketing strategy that integrates cultural aspects of society to achieve goals in communication and brand image formation. Social media turns consumers into marketers as they generate, edit, create and share online information about organizations and brands. Social media users who see the product have a higher possibility of discussing the product indirectly and promoting it to other consumers and making this a way for the company to instill a brand image (Cuong and Khoi 2019).

Brand Image is the perception and belief held by consumers, as a reflection of the associations embedded in consumers' memories (Suarmaja et al. 2023). The quality of a

brand is important for making purchasing decisions. This considers which brands to consider and then which brands to choose.

H6: Brand image plays a mediating role in influencing social media marketing on prospective students' decisions to choose to study at a private university

### **The Influence of Consumer Relationship on Consumer Decisions mediated by Brand Image (X2 - Z - Y)**

The Consumer Relationship concept is useful in developing definitions of new concepts such as relationship quality, which is the degree of suitability of a relationship to meet customer needs associated with the relationship. Consumer Relationship can be used as a strategy designed to foster long-term customer loyalty, interaction and involvement (Armayani and Jatra 2019). This is in line with research conducted (Suarmaja et al. 2023).

According to (Schultz and Schultz 2020), CRM (Customer Relationship Management) concentrates on establishing, managing and expanding relationships between companies and customers. A company's ability to implement CRM successfully can act as a factor influencing the formation of a positive brand image in customer perception. Satisfied customers have the opportunity to become advocates for the brand by conveying their experiences to potential customers (Jacobson et al. 2020).

H7: Brand image plays a mediating role in the influence of consumer relationships on prospective students' decisions to study at private universities

## **3. Research Method**

The population is all research subjects (Arikunto, 1992). The population used in this research were all new students entering the 2023/2024 at private universities in Jember Regency, namely Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember, Universitas Muhammad Seroedji, Universitas PGRI Argopuro and Universitas Islam Jember. According to Arikunto (1992), the sample is a part or representation of the population being studied. Determining the sample size must consider factors such as time, cost and availability of facilities and in this study the number of samples is as many as 200 respondents which are determined proportionally to all students spread across 4 private universities in Jember Regency who are admitted in the 2023/2024 academic year.

### **Variable Identification**

This research variable includes exogenous variables (X), namely Social Media Marketing (X1) and Consumer Relationship (X2). The intervening endogenous variable is Brand Image (Z). The endogenous variable is the Decision to Choose a College (Y). The measurements of each variable can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Research Variable Indicators

| No | Variable                                 | Indicator   |
|----|--|---|
| 1  | Social Media Marketing (X <sub>1</sub> ) | a. Good writing<br>b. Interesting photo<br>c. Frequency of active posts |
| 2  | Customer Relations (X <sub>2</sub> )     | a. Advertising<br>b. Sales Promotion                                    |

| No | Variable                         | Indicator   |
|----|----------------------------------|---|
|    |                                  | c. Public Relations and Publicity                             |
|    |                                  | d. Personal Selling   |
|    |                                  | e. Direct Marketing   |
| 3  | Brand Image (Z)                  | a. Has professional teaching staff                            |
|    |                                  | b. Has high credibility                                       |
|    |                                  | c. Run by experienced management                              |
|    |                                  | d. Good reputation than competitors                           |
|    |                                  | e. High popularity  |
|    |                                  | f. Alumni who are ready to be accepted into the world of work |
| 4  | Decision to Choose a College (Y) | a. Recognition of Needs                                       |
|    |                                  | b. Information Search   |
|    |                                  | c. Alternative Selection                                      |
|    |                                  | d. Buying decision  |
|    |                                  | e. Post-Purchase Behavior                                     |

Source: Data processed

### Data analysis

Before entering the data analysis stage, the author tested the validity and reliability of the instrument. Data analysis was carried out using Structural Equation Model Partial Least Square (SEM-PLS) with the help of SmartPLS 3 software. Hypothesis testing is aimed at determining the direct or indirect influence of exogenous variables on endogenous variables.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### Data Analysis Results

Data analysis is aimed at answering the research hypothesis. Data analysis was carried out with Partial Least Square (PLS) using SmartPLS software. The stages of SEM-PLS analysis can be described as follows.

### Assessing the Outer Model

The assessment at this stage is related to measurements on the outside of the SEM model as a result of the analysis including Convergent Validity, Discriminant Validity and Composite Reliability. The Outer Loadings values from the analysis can be summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. PLS Model Assessment

|                                  | $\lambda$ | Cronbach Alpha | Composite Reliability | AVE   |
|----------------------------------|-----------|----------------|-----------------------|-------|
| Social Media Marketing ( $X_1$ ) |           | 0.962          | 0.966                 | 0.654 |
| X11                              | 0.832     |                |                       |       |
| X12                              | 0.682     |                |                       |       |
| X13                              | 0.826     |                |                       |       |
| X14                              | 0.876     |                |                       |       |
| X15                              | 0.858     |                |                       |       |
| X16                              | 0.861     |                |                       |       |
| X17                              | 0.674     |                |                       |       |
| X18                              | 0.820     |                |                       |       |
| X19                              | 0.687     |                |                       |       |
| X110                             | 0.866     |                |                       |       |
| X111                             | 0.850     |                |                       |       |
| X112                             | 0.834     |                |                       |       |
| X113                             | 0.795     |                |                       |       |

|   | $\lambda$ | Cronbach Alpha | Composite Reliability | AVE   |
|---|-----------|----------------|-----------------------|-------|
| X114                                    | 0.864     |                |                       |       |
| X115                                    | 0.764     |                |                       |       |
| Customer Relationship (X <sub>2</sub> ) |           | 0.897          | 0.914                 | 0.518 |
| X21                                     | 0.769     |                |                       |       |
| X22                                     | 0.753     |                |                       |       |
| X23                                     | 0.580     |                |                       |       |
| X24                                     | 0.697     |                |                       |       |
| X25                                     | 0.721     |                |                       |       |
| X26                                     | 0.722     |                |                       |       |
| X27                                     | 0.595     |                |                       |       |
| X28                                     | 0.759     |                |                       |       |
| X29                                     | 0.808     |                |                       |       |
| X210                                    | 0.756     |                |                       |       |
| Brand Image (Z)                         |           | 0.878          | 0.902                 | 0.508 |
| Z1                                      | 0.776     |                |                       |       |
| Z2                                      | 0.757     |                |                       |       |
| Z3                                      | 0.727     |                |                       |       |
| Z4                                      | 0.649     |                |                       |       |
| Z5                                      | 0.803     |                |                       |       |
| Z6                                      | 0.681     |                |                       |       |
| Z7                                      | 0.678     |                |                       |       |
| Z8                                      | 0.674     |                |                       |       |
| Decision (Y)                            |           | 0.868          | 0.896                 | 0.501 |
| Y1                                      | 0.619     |                |                       |       |
| Y2                                      | 0.648     |                |                       |       |
| Y3                                      | 0.742     |                |                       |       |
| Y4                                      | 0.778     |                |                       |       |
| Y5                                      | 0.747     |                |                       |       |
| Y6                                      | 0.808     |                |                       |       |
| Y7                                      | 0.581     |                |                       |       |
| Y8                                      | 0.588     |                |                       |       |

Source: Data processed

The results of SEM PLS processing show that the loading factor value for each indicator is more than 0.50. So, it is declared valid or has met convergent validity. The test results show that the CR value for each construct is greater than 0.70, the Cronbach Alpha value is greater than 0.6, and the AVE value is also greater than 0.5. Thus, the SEM PLS model tested has met the recommended reliability criteria.

### Structural Model Testing (Inner Model)

Test results related to the R-square value can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. *R-Square Value*

| Variable | Variable Name         | R-square |
|----------|-----------------------|----------|
| Z        | Brand Image           | 0.601    |
| Y        | Decision to Choose PT | 0.435    |

Source: Data processed

The R-square value of the Brand Image construct is 0.601, which means that 60.1% of the variability in changes in Brand Image can be explained by social media marketing and consumer relationship variables. The R-square value of the Decision to Choose a Higher Education construct is 0.435, which means that 43.5% of the variability in changes

in the decision to choose to study at a private university can be explained by social media marketing, consumer relationship and brand image variables.

**SEM-PLS Analysis Results**

This section describes each path in the model section using path analysis. The results of data analysis can be seen in Figure 3 as follows.

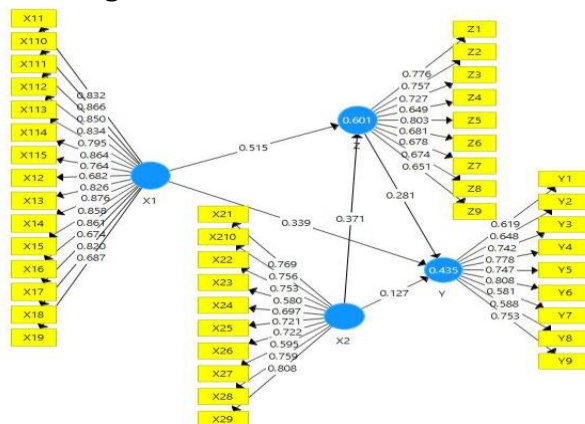


Figure 3. Full SEM-PLS Model  
Source: Data processed

**Direct Effect Testing**

Each path tested shows the influence of social media marketing and consumer relationships on brand image and the decision to choose to study at a private university. Each path tested represents the hypothesis in this research. The path coefficient values can be seen in Table 5 below:

**Table 5. Direct Influence Path Coefficient Value**

|         | Regression Coefficients | S.E   | t Statistics | P Values | Description    |
|---------|-------------------------|-------|--------------|----------|----------------|
| X1 -> Z | 0.515                   | 0.080 | 6,419        | 0,000    | H1 is accepted |
| X2 -> Z | 0.371                   | 0.077 | 4,828        | 0,000    | H2 is accepted |
| X1 -> Y | 0.339                   | 0.102 | 3,330        | 0.001    | H3 is accepted |
| X2 -> Y | 0.127                   | 0.094 | 1,350        | 0.177    | H4 is rejected |
| Z -> Y  | 0.281                   | 0.104 | 2,712        | 0.007    | H5 accepted    |

Source: Data processed

Based on Table 5, it can be seen that for testing social media marketing variables on brand image, a beta ( $\beta$ ) value of 0.515 was obtained with a  $\rho$ -value of 0.000. Thus, there is a significant influence of social media marketing on brand image.

The results of testing the customer relationship variable on brand image obtained a beta ( $\beta$ ) value of 0.371 with a  $\rho$ -value of 0.000. Thus, there is a significant influence of customer relationship on brand image.

The results of testing the social media marketing variable on the decision to choose to study at a private university obtained a beta ( $\beta$ ) value of 0.339 with a  $\rho$ -value of 0.001. Thus, there is a significant influence of social media marketing on the decision to choose to study at a private university.

Test results of customer relationship variables on choosing decisions studying at a private university obtained a beta ( $\beta$ ) value of 0.127 with a  $\rho$ -value of 0.177. Thus, there is no significant influence of customer relationship on the decision to choose to study at a private university.

The results of testing the brand image variable on the decision to choose to study at a private university obtained a beta ( $\beta$ ) value of 0.281 with a  $\rho$ -value of 0.007. Thus, there is a significant influence of brand image on the decision to choose to study at a private university.

### Results of Indirect Effect Testing

Testing at this stage is carried out to test the influence of exogenous variables on endogenous variables by involving intervening or mediating variables. In summary, the results of indirect influence testing can be presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Summary of Indirect Effect Test Results

|              | Regression Coefficients | S.E   | t Statistics | P Values | Information |
|--------------|-------------------------|-------|--------------|----------|-------------|
| X1 -> Z -> Y | 0.145                   | 0.065 | 2,224        | 0.027    | H6 accepted |
| X2 -> Z -> Y | 0.104                   | 0.041 | 2,575        | 0.010    | H7 accepted |

The results in Table 6 are the results of PLS analysis which will then be interpreted as follows. The path parameter coefficient obtained from the relationship between social media marketing and the decision to choose to study at a private university through brand image is 0.145 with a P value of 0.027. Social media marketing has a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose to study at a private university through brand image mediation. Thus, the hypothesis which states that brand image plays a mediating role in the influence of social media marketing on prospective students' decisions to choose to study at private universities is proven to be true.

The path parameter coefficient obtained from customer relationships on the decision to choose to study at a private university through brand image is 0.104 with a P value of 0.010. Customer relationships have a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose to study at a private university through brand image mediation. Thus, the hypothesis which states that brand image plays a mediating role in the influence of customer relationships on prospective students' decisions to choose to study at private universities is proven to be true.

### Hypothesis Test Results

After conducting path analysis, the next step is to carry out hypothesis testing to see whether what influences students' interest in choosing a university is proven to be due to the role of social media marketing, customer relations and brand image through the results of the path analysis test which are tested to be significant or not. The following is a summary of the results of hypothesis testing presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

| Research Hypothesis   | Description    |
|---|----------------|
| Social media marketing has a positive effect on brand image   | H1 is accepted |
| Customer relationship has a positive effect on brand image  | H2 is accepted |
| Social media marketing has a positive influence on the decision to choose to study at a private university  | H3 is accepted |
| Customer relationships have a positive influence on the decision to choose to study at a private university   | H4 is rejected |
| Brand image has a positive influence on the decision to choose to study at a private university   | H5 accepted    |
| Brand image plays a mediating role in the influence of social media marketing on prospective students' decisions to choose to study at a private university | H6 accepted    |

| Research Hypothesis   | Description |
|---|-------------|
| Brand image plays a mediating role in the influence of customer relationships on prospective students' decisions to choose to study at a private university | H7 accepted |

Source: Data processed

Overall, the research results show that the proposed hypothesis can be approved. The following is an analysis of this hypothesis.

### **The influence of social media marketing on brand image**

The research results show that social media marketing has a significant influence on brand image. Thus, the hypothesis which states that the more intense social media marketing the more the brand image of universities increases is proven to be true or H1 is accepted. In this case, the better the social media marketing, the better the university's brand image.

The characteristic of social media is its ability to convey messages from one user to a large number of users simultaneously, allowing for faster message dissemination compared to other media. Social media users who see a product have a higher probability of discussing the product indirectly and promoting it to other consumers who do not use social media. Therefore, the higher the use of social media, the higher the chances of a product being discussed by the public.

Social Media Marketing has the potential to increase brand loyalty because through social media platforms, companies can form two-way communication channels that are direct, interactive, interesting and responsive with customers (Hidayah, 2019). Social media is an online environment where individuals with similar interests come together to share their thoughts, comments and ideas (Weber, 2009).

According to Setiadi (2009), brand image is a picture that includes a comprehensive perception of a brand, which is formed through information and past experiences with the brand. Brand image is related to attitudes in the form of beliefs and preferences towards a brand. Brand image is a prerequisite for the existence of a strong brand. The brand image that is formed must be clear and have advantages compared to buyers. If a company has succeeded in creating a good brand image and succeeded in instilling that brand image in the minds of its consumers, then the company no longer needs to make extra efforts to find out who their customers are. By having a good brand image, consumers will have enough confidence and trust to consume the brand.

### **The influence of customer relationships on brand image**

The research results show that customer relationships have a significant influence on brand image. Thus, the hypothesis which states that the better the consumer relationship will further improve the university's brand image is proven to be true or H2 is accepted. In this case, the better the customer relationship, the better the university's brand image. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) focuses on creating, managing, and expanding relationships between a company and its customers (Bolton, 2016). CRM is part of marketing management in a company. In marketing actions, a company expects to contribute to improvements in customer behavior and preferences which, in turn, influence the depth and strength of the relationship between the company and its customers, which then increases the customer's lifetime monetary value which, in

aggregate, contributes to customer satisfaction, equity and returns on marketing investments (Lin, Lin, and Wang 2021).

If CRM is implemented effectively with an emphasis on interactions between individuals, because customers are basically humans with various characteristics, then the company will obtain a positive brand image in the eyes of customers. Satisfied customers will become ambassadors for the brand by conveying their experiences to other potential customers, so that overall, the brand will gain a good reputation in society.

### **The influence of social media marketing on the decision to choose to study at a private university**

The research results show that social media marketing has a significant influence on the decision to choose to study at a private university. So, the hypothesis which states that the more intense the use of social media marketing will increase the decision of prospective students to choose higher education is proven to be true or H3 is accepted. In this case, the better the social media marketing, the better the decision to choose to study at a private university.

The increasing presence and participation of consumers/customers on social media poses both opportunities and challenges for marketers, because consumers base their purchasing decisions on peer interactions on social media (Sopian et al. 2022) and (Armayani and Jatra 2019). Social Media Marketing is a digital marketing strategy that utilizes cultural aspects of society to achieve goals in communication and brand image formation. Social media turns consumers into marketers as they generate, edit, create and share online information about organizations and brands. Several benefits of Social Media Marketing for marketers have been reported in the literature, for example enabling two-way communication and reducing information search efforts (Budiarto et al. 2023).

### **The influence of customer relationships on the decision to choose to study at a private university**

The research results show that customer relationships do not have a significant influence on the decision to choose to study at a private university. Thus, the hypothesis which states that the better the customer relationship will further increase the decision of prospective students to choose a university is proven untrue or H4 is rejected. In this case, the existence of customer relationship factors is not a determining factor in the decision to choose to study at a private university.

Consumer relationships are processes used to attract, maintain, and strengthen customer relationships (Dwivedi et al. 2021). Customer retention will be increased by relationship marketing that is built in the long term (Lin et al. 2021). The company will benefit from a strong relationship between customers and the company, where the company will gain invaluable information about how best to serve customers and prevent customers from moving to competitors.

Relationship marketing concepts are useful in developing definitions of new concepts such as relationship quality, which is the degree of suitability of a relationship to meet customer needs associated with the relationship. Relationship marketing can be used as a strategy designed to foster long-term customer loyalty, interaction and



engagement (Cuong and Khoi 2019). In this case, long-term and short-term customer relationships enable companies to collect useful information from customers and, with adequate management, provide superior value as a source of competitive advantage (Dewi et al. 2022). Therefore, improving the quality of the relationship will increase the customer's desire to maintain the relationship (Sopian et al. 2022). With regard to customer relations, the company carries out customer relationship management.

### **The influence of brand image on the decision to choose to study at a private university**

The research results show that brand image has a significant influence on the decision to choose to study at a private university. Thus, the hypothesis which states that the better the brand image will further improve consumer decisions in choosing a university is proven to be true or H5 is accepted. In this case, the better the brand image, the better the decision to choose to study at a private university.

Brand Image is an impression formed in consumers' minds regarding the characteristics and personality of a brand, which includes real and imaginary qualities and shortcomings. According to (Budiarto et al. 2023), image is a collection of beliefs, ideas and impressions that an individual has of an object. Brand Image, as explained by Kotler and Keller (2009), refers to the perceptions and beliefs held by consumers, which are the result of associations embedded in their memories.

The quality of a brand plays an important role in the purchasing decision making process, where consideration of which brands are worth considering and ultimately choosing becomes a crucial factor. When the brand image is positive, consumers are more likely to choose the product for consumption. On the other hand, a negative brand image can result in consumer dissatisfaction after purchase, because it does not match previously known information and does not meet their expectations. Therefore, a positive brand image has the potential to increase purchasing decisions (Kohler 2009).

### **The Influence of Social Media Marketing Factors on Consumer Decisions Mediated by Brand Image**

The research results show that brand image plays a mediating role in the influence of social media marketing on the decision to choose to study at a private university. Thus, the hypothesis which states that brand image plays a mediating role in the influence of social media marketing on prospective students' decisions to choose to study at private universities is proven to be true or H6 is accepted. In this case, the success of campuses or universities in optimizing social media marketing will encourage the formation of a positive brand image in the eyes of prospective students and ultimately encourage increased decisions to choose to study at private universities.

Social Media Marketing is a type of online marketing that uses the cultural context of society to meet communication and branding goals. Social media turns consumers into marketers as they generate, edit, create and share online information about organizations and brands. Social media users who see the product have a higher possibility of discussing the product indirectly and promoting it to other consumers, making this a way for the company to instill a brand image.

According to (Pristi A. et al. 2022) Brand Image is the views and beliefs held by customers, reflecting the relationships formed in their memories. The quality of a brand is an important factor in the purchasing decision making process, which influences brand evaluations as worthy of consideration and choice by consumers.

### **The Influence of Consumer Relationship on Consumer Decisions mediated by Brand Image**

The research results show that brand image plays a mediating role in the influence of Consumer Relationship on the decision to choose to study at a private university. Thus, the hypothesis which states that brand image plays a mediating role in the influence of consumer relationships on prospective students' decisions to choose to study at private universities is proven to be true or H6 is accepted. In this case, the better ability of universities in managing Consumer Relationship will encourage the formation of a positive brand image in the eyes of prospective students and ultimately encourage an increase in decisions to choose to study at the private universities.

The Consumer Relationship concept is useful in developing definitions of new concepts such as relationship quality, which is the degree of suitability of a relationship to meet customer needs associated with the relationship. Consumer Relationship can be used as a strategy designed to foster long-term customer loyalty, interaction and involvement (Dewi et al. 2022).

Customer Relationship (CR) involves developing, overseeing, and enhancing interactions between a business and its clientele (Sopian et al. 2022). It falls under the domain of marketing management within a company. Successfully implementing CR can serve as a platform for the company to cultivate a favorable brand reputation among its customers. According to Kotler and Keller (2009), brand reputation is characterized as a compilation of beliefs, concepts, and perceptions that individuals hold about a particular entity. Satisfied customers often transform into advocates who spread their positive experiences to prospective clients.

## **5. Conclusion**

Based on the analysis carried out in this research, the following conclusions can be drawn. There is an influence of social media mark factors on Brand Image in Private Universities. This means that more intense social media marketing will improve the university's brand image. There is an influence of consumer relationships on the Brand Image of Private Universities. This means that the better the consumer relationship, the more the university's brand image will be improved.

There is an influence of social media marketing factors on decision making to study at a private university. This means that the more intense the use of social media marketing, the more prospective students will decide to choose a higher education institution. There is no influence of consumer relationship factors on the decision to choose to study at a private university. This means that the existence of a customer relationship is not considered a factor that determines a prospective student's decision to choose a university.

There is an influence of Brand Image on the decision to choose to study at a private university. This means that the better the brand image, the more it will improve consumer decisions in choosing a university. Brand image plays a mediating role in the influence of social media marketing on prospective students' decisions to choose to study at private universities. However, when brand image mediates the influence of customer relations on prospective students' decisions to choose to study at private universities, it turns out that it is not effective enough.

Referring to the results of the conclusions and discussion, several suggestions can be put forward as follows. For private universities, the results of this research show that social media marketing and customer relationship variables are able to improve brand image and the decision to choose to study at a private university. Therefore, private universities should always pay attention to components related to these factors. As a reference for future research with a similar theme, it is hoped that we can add variables used such as marketing mix, service quality, trust, and others so that the findings can better explain the decision to choose to study at a private university and the factors that influence it.

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