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TRUST AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN BRAND EXPERIENCE AND LOYALTY: EVIDENCE FROM STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AND INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEMS IN THAI UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

Recently, universities use digital communication and structured platforms to manage student information. This study explored how brand experience influences student loyalty and trust in Thai universities. This study highlights how students respond to institutional information using digital systems. Furthermore, this study examines how digital communication builds trust and loyalty among students. A survey was conducted among 330 undergraduates at private universities in Thailand, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with AMOS was used to test both direct and indirect effects. The results indicate that brand experience significantly strengthens trust ($\beta = 0.73, p < .001$) and loyalty ($\beta = 0.42, p < .001$). Trust further enhanced loyalty ($\beta = 0.51, p < .001$) and partially moderated the correlation between brand experience and loyalty (indirect $\beta = 0.37, p < .001$), as confirmed by bootstrapping analysis. This study examined how universities utilize communicative and system-based practices in higher education to build trust between institutions and students. In addition, it highlights the use of integrated digital platforms and communication strategies to strengthen trust.

KEYWORDS: Brand Experience; Trust; Loyalty; Higher Education; Digital Communication; Institutional Systems; Student Engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, branding has become the most important tool in educational institutions, especially in private universities. However, they face competition in student enrollment (Ivy, 2001; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). (García-Gordillo et al., 2023) discussed how universities face major changes due to internationalization and reputational competitiveness resulting from branding. Among the various dimensions of university branding, brand experiences gather important information on students' perceptions, emotions, and behaviors toward academic institutions (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). These experiences influence students sensory, cognitive, behavioral, and relational dimension contributing student's overall interaction and university branding (Iglesias, Singh, & Batista-Foguet, 2011). However, the concept of social responsibility in universities reflects the brand experience through societal ethics among humans and the environment (Erazo-Coronado et al., 2020). Although brand experience is directly connected to brand loyalty in various contexts, few studies discuss the key processes that explain this relationship in higher education. A key element of this relationship is brand trust, which represents students' beliefs in the credibility, honesty, and consistent performance of a university brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Trust is considered an important factor in strengthening consumer relationships by reducing uncertainty and increasing psychological security (Delgado et al., 2003). Trust in a brand plays a significant role in consumers' intentions toward the brand (Ghaleb, and Pardaev, 2025). In Thailand's private university sector, institutions face challenges related to brand credibility, competitive positioning, and student retention. Branding plays a mediating role in many industries (Monfort and Villagra, 2016). By investigating brand experience, brand trust, and brand loyalty, this research fills a theoretical gap by offering empirical insight into university branding strategies that strengthen student commitment in a sustainable and measurable manner. This study examined the mediating role of brand trust in the

relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty among students in Thai private universities. Specifically, it explores how brand experience directly influences trust and loyalty and how trust impacts loyalty. The study also investigated whether brand trust serves as an integrating factor that links students' experiences with their loyalty toward the university brand. These objectives seek to uncover how brand-related experiences shape students' psychological commitment, contributing to both theoretical insights and practical strategies for higher education branding.

2. HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT AND THEORETICAL SUPPORT

2.1 Hypothesis Development

Based on theoretical foundations and prior empirical evidence, this study proposes a model to examine brand experience, trust, and loyalty within Thai private universities.

- H1:** Brand experience has significant impact on brand trust.
- H2:** Brand experience has positive impact on brand loyalty.
- H3:** Brand trust has a positive impact on brand loyalty.
- H4:** Brand trust has a unified relationship among brand experience and loyalty.

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in the theoretical proposition that brand experience shapes brand loyalty both directly and indirectly through brand trust as a mediating variable. This model is based on relationship marketing theory and empirical studies in brand management (e.g., Brakus et al., 2009; Iglesias et al., 2011; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), which suggests that experiential interactions foster cognitive and emotional trust, ultimately leading to behavioral commitment. The main aim of this framework is to test the linear and mediating paths that form a theoretical ground causal model. Therefore, this study reveals how experiential engagement transforms into loyal behavior through brand trust development.

This framework is illustrated below:

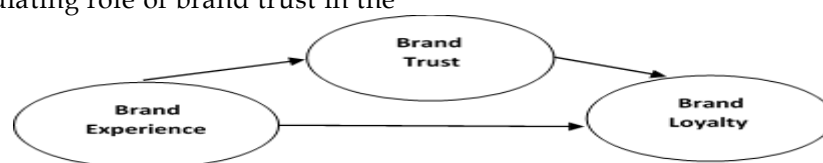


Figure 1: Research Framework.

2.2 Theoretical Support

Theoretical and empirical foundations examine the key aspects of brand experience, trust, and loyalty, which link theoretical perspectives. This framework is divided into three parts: key theories, construct definitions and dimensions, and relationships among the constructs.

Brand experience is grounded in experiential marketing, which emphasizes emotional and sensory interactions (Schmitt, 1999). Brakus et al. (2009) examined a multidimensional construct that includes psychological elements. In education, such experiences form through digital, in-person, and cultural interactions (Iglesias et al., 2011). Subjective responses to brand stimuli have a multi-dimensional approach, specifically sensory and behavioral approaches (Brakus et al., 2009).

Based on brand loyalty, behavioral theory includes attitudinal and behavioral components (Oliver, 1999). It is shaped by emotional commitment, continued enrollment, and advocacy (Dick & Basu, 1994). In higher education, loyalty is a strategic indicator of institutional values and student satisfaction. Commitment to re-engage with a brand encompasses attitudinal, behavioral, and word-of-mouth loyalty (Oliver, 1999).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a quantitative, cross-sectional approach through a structured questionnaire that examines the causal relationship between brand experience, brand trust, and brand loyalty. The study was conducted among 330 undergraduate students at private Thai universities through multi-stage stratified sampling. This instrument explains the content validation, CFA, and reliability testing to ensure psychometric soundness. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and the AMOS model were used to evaluate the direct and indirect effects, including mediation tests through bootstrapping. All survey items were redefined from validated sources and organized into three main constructs: trust, brand experience, and brand loyalty.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This section offers descriptive statistics for the observed variables that measure brand trust, experience, and loyalty. The analysis included the mean, standard deviation (SD), skewness, and kurtosis of each item, which served as indicators of the central tendency, variability, and distribution normality of the dataset.

Approximately 330 valid responses were tested using the SPSS model with a 5-point Likert scale. Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Brand Experience, Brand Trust, And Brand Loyalty (N = 330).

Construct	Item Description	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Brand Experience	The university's environment appeals to my senses	4.12	0.76	-0.54	-0.13
	I feel emotionally connected to the university brand	4.09	0.81	-0.46	-0.22
	The brand stimulates my thinking	4.05	0.78	-0.39	-0.29
	I behave in ways that reflect my connection	4.02	0.83	-0.42	-0.33
	I feel I belong to a brand community	4.10	0.74	-0.51	-0.14
Brand Trust	I trust the university brand	4.18	0.71	-0.62	0.01
	The university fulfills its promises	4.11	0.77	-0.50	-0.19
	The brand is dependable and reliable	4.13	0.73	-0.55	-0.08
	It acts in students' best interests	4.15	0.70	-0.58	0.02
Brand Loyalty	I feel emotionally attached to the university	4.07	0.82	-0.47	-0.17
	I intend to continue studying here	4.10	0.79	-0.53	-0.15
	I recommend this university to others	4.20	0.72	-0.65	0.09

These results revealed that all items across the three latent constructs (Brand Experience, Brand Trust, and Brand Loyalty) showed elevated values of 4.02 to 4.20. The standard deviations (SDs) range from 0.70 to 0.83, suggesting moderate variation in responses.

Skewness has a negative range of -0.39 to -0.65 which indicates less tendency and a left-skewed pattern. (West et al., 1995) discussed kurtosis values with an acceptable range of ± 2 , which confirms the data normality and appropriateness of applying SEM

for hypothesis testing.

To test the theories among brand experience (BE), brand trust, and brand loyalty, an SEM design was utilized using AMOS. The maximum likelihood estimation method assessed both direct and indirect effects, and mediation was analyzed through bootstrapping.

Before examining the path relationships, model fitness was assessed using several fit indices, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Goodness-Of-Fit Indices for the Structural Model.

Fit Index	Recommended Threshold	Model Value
Chi-square/df (χ^2/df)	< 3.00	2.11
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	> 0.90	0.948
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	> 0.90	0.939
RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation)	< 0.08	0.058
SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual)	< 0.08	0.043

All values met the recommended thresholds (Hair et al., 2019), indicating that the model had **good overall fit** and was suitable for hypothesis testing.

The standardized path coefficients for each hypothesis are mentioned in Table 3.

Table 3: Results Of Hypothesis Testing.

Hypothesis	Path	Estimate (β)	S.E.	C.R.	p-value	Supported
H1	BE \rightarrow BT	0.73	0.06	12.17	< .001	Yes
H2	BE \rightarrow BL	0.42	0.08	5.25	< .001	Yes
H3	BT \rightarrow BL	0.51	0.07	7.29	< .001	Yes
H4	BE \rightarrow BT \rightarrow BL (indirect)	0.37	—	—	< .001*	Yes

*Mediation Tested Via Bootstrapping With 5,000 Samples; The 95% Confidence Interval for The Indirect Effect Did Not Include Zero.

Interpretation of Hypotheses:

- H1:** Brand experience significantly and positively affects brand trust ($\beta = 0.73$, $p < .001$).
- H2:** Brand experience significantly influences brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$).
- H3:** Brand trust significantly affects brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < .001$).
- H4:** Trust acts as a connecting factor between brand experience and loyalty. The indirect effect was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < .001$), as both direct and indirect effects remained significant.

These findings demonstrate that the validated model underscores brand trust as a key factor in shaping brand experience and loyalty.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the causal relationships among brand experience, brand trust, and brand loyalty within the context of private Thai universities, emphasizing the mediating role of brand trust. Based on data collected from 330 undergraduate students and analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), the findings confirmed the theoretical framework. Specifically, brand experience significantly influences both brand trust and brand loyalty. Brand trust has also emerged as a strong, direct predictor of loyalty. Notably, the analysis revealed that brand trust serves as a significant mediator in the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty. These results underscore the importance of fostering trust through positive brand experiences, highlighting that student loyalty is shaped not only by direct interactions, but also by the confidence and credibility that students associate with the university brand.

6. DISCUSSION

This study provides a theoretical advancement of branding in higher education by offering three key insights. First, it extends Brakus et al.'s (2009) theory to universities, showing that psychological experience strongly influences students' brand perceptions. Second, it validates the mediating role of brand trust by supporting the frameworks of Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001).

This defines brand trust as a pivotal mechanism through which experiential branding translates into loyalty, deepening our understanding of relationship marketing within higher education. Third, the findings reinforce the dual-path model of brand loyalty (Oliver, 1999), showing that students express both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, which are strongly influenced by trust-driven emotional engagement. Together, these contributions affirm the relevance of consumer behavior theories in educational branding, and call for continued theoretical integration across disciplines. (Sangil et al., 2023) discussed brand strategies for building brand loyalty. Effective branding shape perception and emotional connections.

The outcomes of this research have practical implications for higher education leaders, marketing administrators, and branding professionals. First, institutions should prioritize the development of an integrated approach for all academic, administrative, and digital viewpoints to foster deeper engagement and long-term loyalty among students. The university brand is reinforced by the individual brands of its components—professors, faculties, departments, or journals—benefiting from mutual

prestige (Repiso et al., 2019).

These experiences should be intentionally designed to resonate with the students' senses, emotions, and values. Second, building brand trust requires more than marketing; it demands organizational consistency between brand promises and actual service delivery. Areas such as instructional quality, faculty approachability, and support services must align with brand image to build credibility. Finally, loyalty cannot be assumed in Thailand's competitive private education sector; it must be cultivated. Branding efforts should go beyond surface-level appeals to emphasize ethical integrity, reliability, and transparency. Universities that earn student trust are more likely to secure lasting relationships, advocacy, and competitive differentiation.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE STUDY

This study suggests that private universities

should adopt experience-based branding strategies that intentionally link student interactions with trust-building outcomes. Staff development programs should emphasize brand-consistent behaviors, particularly in service delivery and academic engagement. Moreover, institutional communication should focus on trust-enhancing elements such as testimonials, transparent reporting, and reliable service commitments to reinforce student confidence and foster long-term loyalty.

This research provides longitudinal approaches to express the evolving nature of brand trust and loyalty over time. Comparative studies between public and private institutions or across cultural contexts in Southeast Asia may provide richer insights into branding effectiveness. Additionally, introducing moderating variables, such as student involvement, personality traits, and cultural values, will develop a theoretical understanding of how different factors shape brand relationships in higher education.

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