



Integrated Marketing Communication Effects on Prospective Students' Enrollment Decisions: Brand Image and Trust Mediation

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The study examines the influence of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) on prospective students' enrollment decisions through the mediating roles of brand image and brand trust. Increasing competition in the higher education sector has positioned private higher education institutions as market-oriented service providers, requiring effective strategies to influence prospective students' enrollment decisions. Drawing on a consumer behavior perspective, this study adopts a quantitative approach using survey data from 266 respondents, analyzed with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results indicate that IMC does not have a significant direct effect on prospective student enrollment decisions, but exerts strong positive effects on brand image and brand trust, both of which significantly influence prospective student enrollment decisions. Furthermore, IMC indirectly affects prospective student enrollment decisions through these mediators, confirming a full mediation mechanism. This study contributes to the IMC literature by demonstrating that communication effectiveness operates through brand-based perceptual and relational mechanisms rather than direct behavioral influence. From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that higher education institutions should strategically design integrated and consistent communication efforts that reinforce institutional credibility, strengthen brand image, and build trust across multiple touchpoints to effectively drive prospective student enrollment decisions.

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INTRODUCTION

The intensifying competition in the higher education sector has positioned private higher education institutions as organizations operating within an increasingly competitive service market. In this context, prospective student enrollment decisions are no longer determined solely by traditional academic attributes, such as study programs or accreditation (Ng & Forbes, 2009; Suprivanto et al., 2024). Instead, these decisions are increasingly shaped by perceptual and reputational factors, including the effectiveness of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), institutional brand image, and brand trust (Foroudi et al., 2016; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Roy & Misra, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2025). This shift reflects a growing tendency for prospective students to behave as

consumers who evaluate higher education services based on perceived value, brand positioning, and institutional credibility.

Within this service-oriented context, IMC has emerged as a strategic marketing approach that ensures message consistency and enhances communication effectiveness through the integration of multiple communication channels (Andrews & Shimp, 2018; Schultz & Schultz, 2020). As an external marketing stimulus, IMC plays a critical role in reducing perceived risk and uncertainty by delivering coherent and credible information throughout the enrollment decision process (Dwivedi et al., 2021). However, prior research suggests that the effectiveness of IMC is contingent upon the degree of integration and balance among its communication elements.

This issue is evident in the marketing communication practices of Institut Al Fithrah (IAF) Surabaya during September–December 2025, where an imbalance across IMC elements was observed. Public relations and word-of-mouth accounted for 36.1%, digital and interactive marketing 25.3%, direct and personal communication 22.9%, and advertising only 6.0%.

This pattern indicates a reliance on relational communication channels, while paid media play a relatively limited role in influencing prospective student enrollment decisions. Such imbalance suggests that IMC may not function optimally as a holistic system, thereby limiting its direct influence on prospective student enrollment decisions.

Accordingly, the impact of IMC should not be viewed as a purely direct relationship, but rather as a process mediated by psychological and perceptual mechanisms. In this regard, brand image and brand trust emerge as key constructs that translate marketing communication efforts into favorable perceptions and institutional confidence ([Foroudi et al., 2016](#); [Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016](#)).

Brand image reflects prospective students' cognitive evaluation of functional quality, emotional appeal, and institutional reputation ([Gómez-Rico et al., 2023](#)), whereas brand trust represents affective beliefs regarding the reliability, integrity, and credibility of the institution ([Ljubenova, 2019](#)). Both constructs are particularly critical in high-involvement and high-risk service contexts such as higher education services ([Perera et al., 2023](#); [Snadrou & Haoucha, 2024](#)).

Although prior studies have demonstrated that IMC can influence prospective student enrollment decisions and contribute to the development of brand image and brand trust ([Ayvat & Gunturkun, 2022](#); [Hendi et al., 2022](#); [Nguyen et al., 2025](#); [Sawaftah, 2020](#)), empirical findings remain inconsistent. Some studies report insignificant effects of IMC on prospective student enrollment decisions, brand image, or brand trust ([Murtiasih et al., 2021](#); [Pungkasari & Agustini, 2023](#)). These inconsistencies suggest that the relationship between IMC and prospective student enrollment decisions may not be direct, but instead operates through mediating mechanisms.

While several studies support the mediating roles of brand image and brand trust ([Musafak et al., 2025](#); [Sentosa et al., 2025](#); [Setyowati et al., 2025](#); [Sriyanto et al., 2024](#)), others indicate that such mediation effects are context-dependent and yield mixed results ([Budivono & Novandalina, 2023](#); [Sauqv & Ariescy, 2025](#)). Furthermore, although brand image and brand trust are often identified as key

determinants of prospective student enrollment decisions ([Amelia & Tambunan, 2025](#); [Tojiri, 2025](#); [Yani et al., 2025](#)), their influence remains inconclusive across different institutional and market contexts.

Therefore, this study examines the effect of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) on prospective student enrollment decisions, with brand image and brand trust serving as mediating variables in private higher education institutions in Surabaya. This study contributes to the marketing literature by clarifying the role of brand-based perceptual and relational mechanisms in translating communication strategies into prospective student enrollment decisions.

By focusing on private higher education institutions in Surabaya, Indonesia, this research provides context-specific insights from an underexplored emerging Southeast Asian market, where consumer behavior, institutional trust, and marketing communication dynamics may differ from those observed in more established higher education systems. From a managerial perspective, the findings offer practical implications for higher education institutions in designing integrated communication strategies that strengthen brand perceptions, build trust, and enhance competitive positioning.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

IMC and Prospective Student Enrollment Decisions

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) represents a strategic approach that integrates communication channels to deliver consistent and credible messages to target audiences ([Andrews & Shimp, 2018](#); [Schultz & Schultz, 2020](#)). In the context of higher education services, IMC functions as an external marketing stimulus that reduces perceived risk and uncertainty, thereby facilitating prospective student enrollment decisions ([Dwivedi et al., 2021](#)).

Drawing on the Hierarchy of Effects Model, integrated communication influences cognitive and affective responses before affecting prospective student enrollment decisions ([Keller & Swaminathan, 2019](#); [Lavidge & Steiner, 1961](#)). Empirical studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between IMC and prospective student enrollment decisions ([Ayvat & Gunturkun, 2022](#); [Roy & Misra, 2024](#)).

H1: IMC positively and significantly influences prospective student enrollment decisions.

IMC and Brand Image

IMC plays a critical role in shaping brand image by ensuring consistency and synergy

across communication channels ([Andrews & Shimp, 2018](#); [Schultz & Schultz, 2020](#)). Within higher education services, such consistency strengthens brand associations and signals institutional quality and credibility, as suggested by the Associative Network Memory Model and Signaling Theory ([Collins & Loftus, 1975](#); [Erdem & Swait, 2004](#); [Spence, 1973](#)). Through coordinated messaging, institutions are able to reinforce favorable perceptions regarding their reputation. Empirical evidence supports the positive influence of IMC on brand image ([Hendi et al., 2022](#); [Ihzaturrahma & Kusumawati, 2021](#)).

H2: IMC positively and significantly influences brand image.

IMC and Brand Trust

Consistent and transparent communication is essential for building trust in service-based contexts. IMC contributes to the development of brand trust by delivering credible and coordinated messages across multiple channels ([Schultz & Schultz, 2020](#)). Brand trust reflects consumers' confidence in a brand's reliability, honesty, and ability to fulfill its promises ([Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005](#)). Within higher education institutions, brand trust signifies prospective students' belief that an institution is credible, consistent, and concerned with their long-term interests ([Ljubenova, 2019](#)). In such a high-risk context, consistent communication enhances perceptions of reliability and reduces uncertainty. As prospective students rely on available information to evaluate institutional credibility, IMC becomes a key mechanism for fostering trust. Empirical studies support the positive effect of IMC on brand trust ([Nguyen et al., 2025](#); [Sawafah, 2020](#)).

H3: IMC positively and significantly influences brand trust.

Brand Image and Prospective Student Enrollment Decisions

Brand image plays a central role in shaping prospective student enrollment decisions by reflecting perceptions of institutional quality, emotional appeal, and reputation. Brand image represents prospective students' cognitive evaluation of institutional attributes, including functional quality, emotional appeal, and reputation ([Gómez-Rico et al., 2023](#); [Snadrou & Haoucha, 2024](#)).

In higher education services, a favorable brand image reduces perceived risk and enhances confidence, thereby influencing prospective student enrollment decisions. Consumer Decision-Making Theory suggests that favorable brand perceptions reduce perceived risk and

enhance confidence, facilitating decision-making ([Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019](#)). Empirical studies demonstrate that brand image significantly influences prospective student enrollment decisions ([Kwartawaty, 2023](#); [Sentosa et al., 2025](#); [Tojiri, 2025](#)).

H4: Brand image positively and significantly influences prospective student enrollment decisions.

Brand Trust and Prospective Student Enrollment Decisions

Trust represents a fundamental determinant of decision-making in uncertain and high-risk contexts. In higher education services, brand trust reflects prospective students' belief in an institution's reliability and integrity in delivering its promised value ([Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005](#); [Ljubenova, 2019](#)). According to Commitment-Trust Theory, trust is a key determinant of decision-making and long-term relational commitment ([Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#)). By reducing uncertainty and strengthening confidence, higher levels of trust encourage prospective student enrollment decisions. From a consumer behavior perspective, trust facilitates choice by reinforcing confidence in the institution's ability to meet expectations. Empirical evidence indicates that brand trust positively influences prospective student enrollment decisions ([Amelia & Tambunan, 2025](#); [Yani et al., 2025](#)).

H6: Brand trust positively and significantly influences prospective student enrollment decisions.

Mediating Role of Brand Image

The effect of IMC on prospective student enrollment decisions may occur indirectly through the formation of brand image. Integrated communication enhances awareness and shapes favorable perceptions, which subsequently influence prospective student enrollment decisions. From a signaling perspective, consistent communication conveys quality and credibility, thereby strengthening brand image and reducing uncertainty ([Erdem & Swait, 2004](#); [Spence, 1973](#)). Empirical studies provide evidence supporting the mediating role of brand image in linking IMC to prospective student enrollment decisions ([Hendi et al., 2022](#); [Ihzaturrahma & Kusumawati, 2021](#)).

H6: Brand image mediates the effect of IMC on prospective student enrollment decisions.

Mediating Role of Brand Trust

Beyond image formation, IMC also influences prospective student enrollment

decisions through the development of brand trust. Consistent and credible communication enhances perceived reliability, which is critical in high-risk service contexts such as higher education. According to Commitment-Trust Theory, trust plays a central role in shaping decision outcomes by fostering confidence in the exchange relationship ([Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#)). Empirical evidence supports the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between IMC and prospective student enrollment decisions ([Sriyanto et al., 2024](#); [Lubis et al., 2023](#)).

H7: Brand trust mediates the effect of IMC on prospective student enrollment decisions.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach with an explanatory research design to examine the direct and indirect relationships among the proposed constructs ([Creswell & Creswell, 2023](#)).

The population comprised all active students at a private higher education institutions in Surabaya, totaling 720 individuals. Although the study focuses on prospective student enrollment decisions, active students were considered appropriate respondents because they possess retrospective evaluations of their enrollment decision-making processes, as well as informed perceptions of institutional marketing communications. This approach has been widely adopted in higher education research, where current students serve as valid proxies for examining enrollment-related decision behavior.

The sample size was determined using Slovin’s formula with a 5% margin of error, resulting in a minimum requirement of 257 respondents. A stratified proportional sampling technique was applied based on semester level (1st, 3rd, 5th, and 7th semesters), as differences in exposure to institutional communication and accumulated experience may influence perception formation and evaluation processes.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed proportionally across strata between September and November 2025,

yielding 266 valid responses. The sample exhibited a balanced gender distribution (49.6% male; 50.4% female). The majority of respondents were aged 18–20 years (59.8%), followed by those above 20 years (35.0%) and below 18 years (5.3%). In terms of academic level, respondents were distributed across 1st (48.5%), 3rd (16.9%), 5th (21.8%), and 7th (12.8%) semesters.

All measurement items were adapted from validated scales in prior studies. Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), brand image (BRI), and brand trust (BRT) were specified as second-order formative constructs and operationalized using the disjoint two-stage approach, as recommended for hierarchical component models in PLS-SEM ([Hair et al., 2022](#); [Sarstedt et al., 2019](#)).

In this approach, each higher-order construct (HOC) is formed by a set of lower-order constructs (LOCs). IMC consisted of five LOCs: interactivity (4 items), mission marketing (3 items), organizational infrastructure (4 items), strategic consistency (3 items), and planning and evaluation (6 items), adapted from [Reid \(2005\)](#) and [Sharma et al. \(2024\)](#). Brand image (BRI) comprised three LOCs: functional image (3 items), affective image (3 items), and reputation (4 items), adapted from [Gómez-Rico et al. \(2023\)](#). Brand trust (BRT) included three LOCs: consistency (3 items), honesty (3 items), and concern (4 items), adapted from [Ljubenova \(2019\)](#).

Prospective student enrollment decisions (PSED) were modeled as a first-order reflective construct, measured using three indicators: intention to enroll, actual enrollment decision, and willingness to recommend, adapted from [Arifin et al. \(2020\)](#). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which is appropriate for analyzing complex models involving hierarchical constructs, relatively small sample sizes, and predictive relationships ([Hair et al., 2022](#)).

Table 1. Convergent Validity and Reliability of Lower-Order Constructs

Lower-Order Constructs	Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Interactivity (INT)	INT1	0.744	0.792	0.829	0.617
	INT2	0.806			
	INT4	0.806			
Mission Marketing (MIM)	MIM1	0.826	0.709	0.837	0.633
	MIM2	0.729			
	MIM3	0.827			

Organizational Infrastructure (ORI)	ORI1	0.840	0.801	0.882	0.713
	ORI2	0.860			
	ORI3	0.833			
Strategic Consistency (STC)	STC2	0.743	0.732	0.805	0.675
	STC3	0.893			
Planning and Evaluation (PLE)	PLE2	0.835	0.876	0.910	0.670
	PLE3	0.810			
	PLE4	0.850			
	PLE5	0.736			
	PLE6	0.856			
Functional Image (FUN)	FUN1	0.863	0.831	0.899	0.748
	FUN2	0.901			
	FUN3	0.828			
Affective Image (AFF)	AFF1	0.868	0.839	0.903	0.757
	AFF2	0.905			
	AFF3	0.835			
Reputation (REP)	REP1	0.750	0.763	0.864	0.681
	REP2	0.885			
	REP4	0.835			
Consistency (COS)	COS1	0.897	0.898	0.936	0.830
	COS2	0.935			
	COS3	0.902			
Honesty (HON)	HON1	0.930	0.879	0.925	0.805
	HON2	0.924			
	HON3	0.834			
Concern (COC)	COC1	0.911	0.931	0.951	0.830
	COC2	0.877			
	COC3	0.915			
	COC4	0.939			
Prospective Student Enrollment Decisions (PSED)	PSED1	0.702	0.750	0.857	0.668
	PSED2	0.879			
	PSED3	0.860			

Table 2. HTMT-Based Discriminant Validity of Lower-order Constructs

Lower-Order Constructs	INT	MIM	ORI	STC	PLE	FUN	AFF	REP	COS	HON	COC	PSED
INT												
MIM	0.808											
ORI	0.780	0.834										
STC	0.629	0.566	0.575									
PLE	0.816	0.880	0.843	0.721								
FUN	0.739	0.823	0.672	0.720	0.876							
AFF	0.622	0.779	0.716	0.669	0.803	0.881						
REP	0.732	0.724	0.748	0.690	0.858	0.862	0.886					

COS	0.685	0.690	0.695	0.536	0.765	0.776	0.740	0.900			
HON	0.779	0.805	0.745	0.473	0.752	0.830	0.766	0.830	0.840		
COC	0.721	0.711	0.696	0.541	0.746	0.803	0.760	0.809	0.855	0.843	
PSED	0.843	0.863	0.698	0.579	0.746	0.804	0.813	0.855	0.792	0.892	0.826

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Measurement Model Evaluation

This study employed a disjoint two-stage approach. In line with this approach, model estimation was conducted in two stages. The first stage focused on evaluating the reflective measurement model of all lower-order constructs (LOCs), including convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability. Latent variable scores obtained at this stage were subsequently used as formative indicators in the second-stage analysis (Hair et al., 2022; Sarstedt et al., 2019).

Convergent validity was assessed using outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted

(AVE), while construct reliability was evaluated using Cronbach’s Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR). Following established PLS-SEM criteria, acceptable thresholds include outer loadings ≥ 0.70 , $AVE \geq 0.50$, and CA and CR ≥ 0.70 (Hair et al., 2022).

The results (Table 1) indicate that most indicators met the recommended thresholds. However, indicators INT3, ORI4, PLE1, REP3, and STC1 exhibited loadings below 0.70 and were therefore removed. After refinement, the remaining indicators showed loadings ranging from 0.702 to 0.939 and AVE values between 0.617 and 0.830, confirming adequate convergent validity.

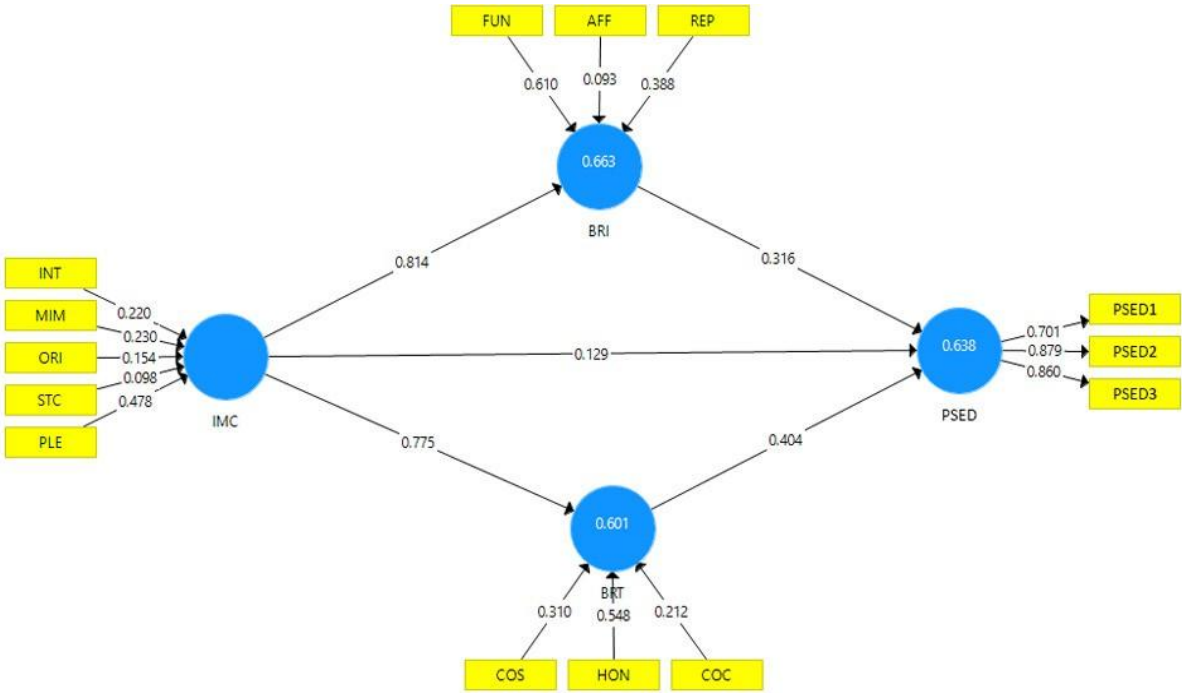


Figure 1. Higher-Order Constructs Measurement Model

Reliability measures also exceeded the recommended thresholds (CA: 0.709–0.931; CR: 0.805–0.951), indicating satisfactory internal consistency across all constructs.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), with the criterion $HTMT < 0.90$ (Henseler et al., 2016). The evaluation results (Table 2) indicated that all HTMT values ranged from 0.473 to 0.892, confirming discriminant validity. Hence, the measurement model at the first stage was considered adequate, allowing progression to the evaluation of higher-order constructs (HOCs).

At the second stage, the formative measurement of higher-order constructs (HOCs) was evaluated using outer weights, T-values, P-values, 95% confidence intervals (CIs), and variance inflation factors (VIF). LOCs were considered significant contributors when T-values > 1.96 , P-values < 0.05 , confidence intervals excluded zero, and VIF values were below 5.00 (Hair et al., 2022; Kock, 2015).

The results (Table 3) indicate that INT, MIM, PLE, FUN, REP, COS, and HON significantly contribute to their respective higher-order constructs. In contrast, ORI, STC, AFF,

and COC were not statistically significant; however, they were retained due to adequate outer loadings (≥ 0.70) and acceptable VIF values (< 5.00), consistent with formative measurement evaluation principles (Becker et al., 2012; Hair et al., 2022; Sarstedt et al., 2019).

Structural Model Evaluation

The structural model was evaluated by examining the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and the significance of path relationship using bootstrapping procedures (Hair et al., 2022).

The R^2 values indicate substantial explanatory power across all endogenous constructs, with brand image (0.663), brand trust (0.601), and prospective student enrollment decisions (0.638) demonstrating moderate to high levels of variance explained. These results suggest that the proposed model effectively

captures key determinants of enrollment decision-making within the higher education services context.

Effect size (f^2) analysis reveals that IMC exerts a strong influence on both brand image (0.492) and brand trust (0.386), indicating that communication strategies play a critical role in shaping brand-related perceptions. In contrast, the effects of brand image (0.143) and brand trust (0.118) on prospective student enrollment decisions are smaller, yet meaningful, highlighting their roles as proximal drivers of decision-making.

Predictive relevance, assessed using blindfolding, shows positive Q^2 values for all endogenous constructs (brand image = 0.524; brand trust = 0.505; prospective student enrollment decisions = 0.396), confirming that the model possesses adequate predictive capability (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 3. Evaluation of Formative Higher-Order Constructs

High-Order Constucts	Sub constructs	Weights	T-value	P-value	Loadings	VIF	CI 95%
Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC)	INT	0.220	2.526	0.012	0.805	2.024	[0.075; 0.414]
	MIM	0.230	2.308	0.021	0.843	2.362	[0.034; 0.427]
	ORI	0.154	1.795	0.073	0.804	2.224	[-0.007; 0.331]
	STC	0.098	1.673	0.094	0.760	1.335	[-0.015; 0.214]
	PLE	0.478	3.812	0.000	0.941	3.008	[0.186; 0.684]
Brand Image (BRI)	FUN	0.610	6.535	0.000	0.952	3.200	[0.428; 0.797]
	AFF	0.093	0.938	0.349	0.864	3.379	[-0.116; 0.275]
	REP	0.388	5.318	0.000	0.872	2.148	[0.251; 0.537]
Brand Trust (BRT)	COS	0.310	2.250	0.024	0.888	2.736	[0.040; 0.578]
	HON	0.548	4.484	0.000	0.964	4.043	[0.284; 0.761]
	COC	0.212	1.306	0.192	0.924	4.472	[-0.088; 0.548]

Table 4. Bootstrapping Results for Hypothesis Testing

Hypothetical Relationship	Original Sample	T-value	P-value	Decision
IMC → PSED	0.129	1.187	0.235	Not supported
IMC → BRI	0.814	23.182	0.000	Supported
IMC → BRT	0.775	13.324	0.000	Supported
BRI → PSED	0.316	3.082	0.002	Supported
BRT → PSED	0.404	3.537	0.000	Supported
IMC → BRI → PSED	0.257	3.000	0.003	Full mediation
IMC → BRT → PSED	0.314	3.682	0.000	Full mediation

Hypothesis testing was conducted using bootstrapping with a 5% significance level ($T > 1.96$; $p < 0.05$) (Hair et al., 2022). The results

(Table 4) indicate that IMC does not have a direct significant effect on prospective student enrollment decisions. However, IMC

significantly influences both brand image and brand trust, which in turn have significant effects on prospective student enrollment decisions.

Further analysis of indirect effects confirms that IMC significantly affects prospective student enrollment decisions through brand image and brand trust. The absence of a significant direct effect combined with significant indirect effects indicates a full mediation mechanism, suggesting that the influence of IMC operates entirely through brand-related pathways.

Model fit was assessed using global fit indices, with results reported in Table 5. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value of 0.070 is below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating good

model fit ([Hair et al., 2022](#); [Henseler et al., 2016](#)).

Additional indices, including d_ULS (0.516), d_G (0.294), Chi-square (224.765), and Normed Fit Index (NFI = 0.883), further support the adequacy of the structural model.

Table 5. Model Fit Assessment Using SRMR

Fit Index	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.047	0.070
d_ULS	0.228	0.516
d_G	0.209	0.294
Chi-Square	180.395	224.765
NFI	0.906	0.883

Table 6. Out-of-Sample Predictive Power (PLSpredict)

Subconstructs	PLS Model			LM Model		
	RMSE	MAE	Q ² _predict	RMSE	MAE	Q ² _predict
FUN	0.665	0.461	0.563	0.653	0.441	0.579
AFF	0.723	0.537	0.485	0.712	0.525	0.500
REP	0.723	0.502	0.485	0.727	0.505	0.478
COS	0.739	0.536	0.460	0.746	0.539	0.450
HON	0.705	0.490	0.510	0.701	0.491	0.516
COC	0.725	0.489	0.482	0.734	0.495	0.469
PSED1	0.776	0.516	0.182	0.780	0.522	0.173
PSED2	0.624	0.432	0.410	0.635	0.435	0.389
PSED3	0.616	0.446	0.307	0.619	0.447	0.302

To evaluate predictive performance, PLSpredict was employed by comparing the PLS model with a linear benchmark ([Becker et al., 2012](#); [Hair et al., 2022](#); [Shmueli et al., 2019](#)). The results (Table 6) show minimal differences in prediction errors, with all Q²_predict values exceeding zero. This finding confirms the model's out-of-sample predictive relevance, indicating that it has sufficient predictive power in explaining prospective student enrollment decisions.

Discussion

The findings reveal that Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) does not exert a significant direct effect on prospective student enrollment decisions. This indicates that, in the context of private higher education services, communication exposure alone is insufficient to drive enrollment behavior. Instead, decision-making is shaped by deeper evaluative mechanisms, particularly perceptions of institutional credibility, reputation, and trust. This finding underscores the limited role of direct

persuasive communication in high-involvement and high-risk service decisions, where prospective students engage in deliberate and information-intensive evaluation processes.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding refines the assumptions of the Hierarchy of Effects Model and Information Processing Theory, which suggest that communication can directly translate into behavioral outcomes ([Keller & Swaminathan, 2019](#); [Lavidge & Steiner, 1961](#)). The absence of a direct effect indicates that, within higher education services, IMC operates not as a direct behavioral driver but as an indirect mechanism that shapes cognitive and affective responses. This also helps explain inconsistencies in prior empirical findings, suggesting that the effectiveness of IMC is contingent upon contextual factors such as institutional credibility, perceived risk, and market maturity ([Avvat & Gunturkun, 2022](#); [Febriyeni & Shihab, 2020](#); [Roy & Misra, 2024](#)).

Importantly, IMC is found to significantly enhance both brand image and brand trust. This reinforces the view that integrated and consistent

communication strengthens brand associations and signals institutional quality. In line with Signaling Theory, IMC reduces information asymmetry by delivering coherent and credible messages across channels, thereby increasing stakeholders' confidence in the institution ([Andrews & Shimp, 2018](#); [Erdem & Swait, 2004](#); [Schultz & Schultz, 2020](#)). Thus, IMC should be understood as a strategic mechanism for shaping brand-related perceptions rather than directly triggering prospective student enrollment decisions.

Furthermore, brand image and brand trust significantly influence prospective student enrollment decisions, confirming their roles as proximal determinants of behavior. Brand image captures both cognitive and affective evaluations of institutional attributes, while brand trust reduces perceived risk associated with long-term educational investment. These findings align with Consumer Decision-Making Theory and Commitment-Trust Theory, which emphasize the importance of trust and perceived value in complex decision contexts ([Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#); [Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019](#)).

A key contribution of this study lies in demonstrating the full mediating roles of brand image and brand trust in the relationship between IMC and prospective student enrollment decisions. This finding supports a mechanism-based perspective, whereby IMC influences behavior indirectly through the formation of brand perceptions and relational trust ([Erdem & Swait, 2004](#); [Keller & Swaminathan, 2019](#)). In this regard, IMC functions as an enabling infrastructure that activates both cognitive (brand image) and relational (brand trust) pathways, ultimately shaping enrollment decisions.

From a contextual perspective, this study extends the IMC literature by providing evidence from an emerging Southeast Asian market, where institutional trust and perceived credibility play a particularly critical role. Unlike findings from many Western contexts that report more direct communication effects, the results suggest that in emerging markets, prospective students rely more heavily on trust-based and reputation-driven evaluations. This highlights the importance of contextualizing IMC effectiveness across different market environments.

From a managerial perspective, the findings provide clear strategic implications. Higher education institutions should move beyond short-term, campaign-oriented communication and instead prioritize long-term brand-building strategies. IMC efforts should emphasize message consistency, credibility, and trust development across channels. Investments in brand image and trust-building initiatives—such as transparent communication, testimonials, and reputation

management—are likely to generate stronger enrollment outcomes than isolated promotional activities.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is based on data from a single private higher education institution in Surabaya, which may limit generalizability. Second, the cross-sectional design may not fully capture the dynamic nature of enrollment decision-making. Future research is encouraged to adopt longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to better understand how IMC influences prospective student enrollment decisions over time. Additionally, future studies may incorporate other relevant variables, such as service quality, digital engagement, social influence, or economic factors, as well as potential moderating effects to enhance theoretical robustness.

CONCLUSION

This study clarifies the mechanism through which Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) influences prospective student enrollment decisions in private higher education institutions. The findings demonstrate that IMC does not have a significant direct effect on prospective student enrollment decisions. However, IMC exerts strong positive effects on both brand image and brand trust, which in turn significantly influence prospective student enrollment decisions. Furthermore, IMC indirectly affects prospective student enrollment decisions through these mediators, confirming a full mediation mechanism. These results indicate that the effectiveness of IMC lies in its ability to shape brand-related perceptions and foster institutional trust, rather than directly driving behavioral outcomes.

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends the IMC literature by establishing communication as an indirect, mechanism-based driver of behavior, operating through both perceptual (brand image) and relational (brand trust) pathways. This reinforces the importance of adopting a brand-oriented perspective in understanding decision-making within high-involvement service contexts such as higher education services.

From a managerial perspective, the findings emphasize that effective IMC strategies should move beyond mere message exposure toward sustained brand-building efforts. Higher education institutions should prioritize consistent, credible, and integrated communication that strengthens brand image and cultivates trust. Ultimately, the effectiveness of IMC lies not in its ability to directly persuade, but in its capacity to shape how institutions are

perceived and trusted—factors that fundamentally determine prospective student enrollment decisions.

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