

# ANTECEDENT OF BRAND TRUST IN E-TERTIARY EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

Trust decreases the perceived risk of using a service. Since e-learners have no direct contact with the education providers, trust plays an important role in an e-tertiary setting. In a review of the literature, hypotheses are developed that suggest that the antecedent of brand trust in e-tertiary education is related to institutional and courseware design assurance factors, site quality and public awareness. A conceptual model summarizing the hypotheses is subsequently validated in an empirical study.

## INTRODUCTION

According to [4], brand trust is the willingness of consumers to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function. Brand trust contributes to a reduction of uncertainty in consumer purchases [11] [12] and is believed to increase customer loyalty [10] [24] and brand equity [1] [9]. Therefore, consumers' trust in a brand is critical to a brand's success. There is a consensus that brand trust is established through a combination of familiarity, security, word-of-mouth, advertising, and brand image [11] [31]. While brand has been mentioned as one of the factors affective student's choice of tertiary education [14] [30], there is a lack of empirical evidence on the effect of brand trust on student's decision-making process.

This study explores on the effect of brand in student's decision-making process. It aims to discover the antecedents of brand trust in e-tertiary education. E-tertiary education is defined as university's undergraduate and post-graduate education via the Web.

## CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The rapid development of specialized branding language within different industries has led to an array of definition of brand [8]. However, brand is commonly referred to as the name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good/service as distinct from those of other sellers [1].

Similarly, diverse views in studying trust across different disciplines have resulted in various definitions. Economists view trust as either calculative [32] or institutional [33]. Psychologists define trust in terms of trustors and trustees and focus upon internal cognitions [7] [26]. Sociologists assess trust in terms of social relationships/social institutions [13] [20]. On the other hand, social psychologists consider trust as an expectation that is specific to a transaction and the person with whom one is transacting [8] [16]. Within the marketing discipline, the study of trust mostly

focuses on understanding the consumer-brand relationships as in brand loyalty [1][24], brand equity [3][9] and relationship marketing [23]. These conceptualisation of trust in brands are largely brand performance related. For example, [1] conceives brand equity as the value added to the core product or service by associating it with a brand name.

It is apparent that most discussions of trust agree that confident expectations and risk are critical components. For example, [7] defines trust as the confidence that one will find what is desired from another, rather than what is feared. Similarly, [19] [23] also consider confidence expectations as key elements of trust. Trust matters only when a person is in a situation that involves uncertainty/vulnerability/risk about an outcome [21]. A strong brand is a trust mark (highly regarded by consumers) because it signals high product quality or reliability, evokes consumers' feelings of security, and enhances their confidence that a product offering will deliver what they expect [1].

*Hypothesis 1: Brand trust in e-tertiary education is related to risk aversion, contingent on situational factors such as institutional assurance and courseware design.*

**i) Institutional assurance factors:** Regular faculty evaluation and government recognition of e-degrees [6] and course accreditation [25] ensure quality of e-courses. This paper proposes that instructor quality (relevant qualification & motivated), and government recognition of e-tertiary providers as the institutional assurance attributes. A motivated e-instructor is taken to mean having strong empathy with e-learners (time-pressed, computing skills, sense of isolation). Given that strong research outputs is a common criteria for generating worldwide university ranking [30], it is included as a institutional assurance factor.

**ii) Courseware design factors:** Lack of a minimum study period, low entry requirements and unspecified study materials are some of the characteristics of a 'certificate mill' [25]. A certificate mill refers to the provision of education degrees for a fee. Previous academic records are deemed irrelevant by the certificate mill and they promise a certificate (based on work experience) within 30 days after entry. In order to maintain trust in the e-tertiary education system, this paper proposes that courseware developed for e-tertiary education must have certain minimum periods of study, and the same entry requirements and study materials as classroom study.

*Hypothesis 2: Brand trust in e-tertiary education is influenced by knowledge acquired through direct brand experience (site quality) and indirect brand experience (public awareness).*

According to [17], familiarity with a company or brand generates higher trust, unless a person has a negative perception of a brand. Similarly, [5] also indicates a strong correlation between familiarity and trust. Brand familiarity is defined by [2] as the variable that reflects consumer's level of direct and indirect experiences with a product. In contrast, [22] suggests that trust is not so dependent on familiarity. Given that e-tertiary education is a form of invisible purchase (no face-to-face contact) where the outcome of the purchase (satisfaction) can only be assessed after course completion, users' positive experience (direct & indirect) with the brand is key in maintaining trust in this form of learning.

**iii) Site quality:** Site quality is discussed as a main factor in engendering trust in the e-retailer [28] [29]. Good structure/clarity of design, technical helpdesk and self-checking activities are influential factors in the market acceptance of e-education [6]. Site quality in this paper is taken to mean a well-designed web site that gives e-learners up-to-date information (knowledge content), is easy to navigate, and shows necessary links to other relevant websites or facilitates an effective interaction with e-learners.

**iv) Public awareness:** According to [6], industry support (recognition of skills achieved), strong alumni network (mouth-to-mouth communication) and friends/family's opinions about e-tertiary education are vital for its success. This paper intends to validate this argument in relation to brand trust.

## METHODOLOGY

**Questionnaire and samplings:** The pre-tested (self completion) questionnaire comprised of demographic, institutional and course assurance factors, site quality and public awareness factors, where respondents rank their importance in trusting e-tertiary education. Eight hundred questionnaires were randomly distributed via mall-intercept in Singapore and Malaysia (Johore). Out of the 437 questionnaires returned, 210 were from Singapore. The data was normally distributed.

**Factorial validity and structural model test:** Exploratory factor analysis on all 4 factor scales using SPSS's Principal Component Analysis (varimax rotation) techniques indicated they were best represented by one construct each. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using AMOS version 6.0 revealed sufficient evidence of goodness-of-fit between the proposed model and the sample data (CMIN/DF=2.10, RMSEA=0.050, GFI= 0.962). All measurement models showed internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha coefficient > 0.7).

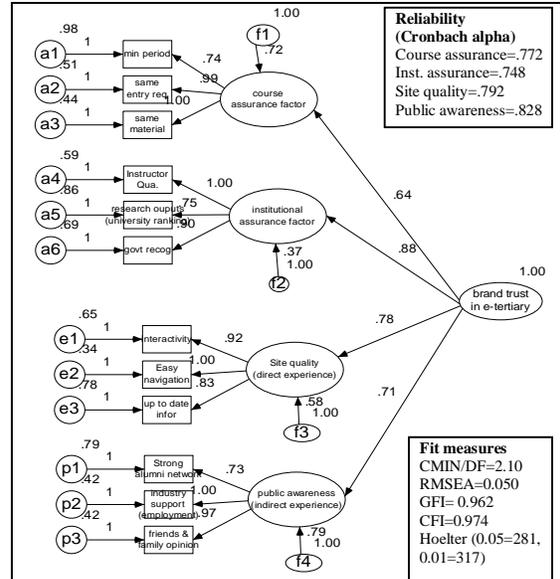


Fig. 1: SEM statistics (unstandardised) of the proposed model

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The SEM results indicated that institutional assurance factors and courseware design assurance factors had regression weights of 0.88 and 0.64 respectively. The indicated importance of instructor's quality, university's ranking and government recognition of e-tertiary degree (institutional assurance factors) could be interpreted as a potential e-graduate needing the assurance that their efforts and money spent on e-tertiary education would be rewarded with public recognition; that quality instructors are available to encourage, mentor and motivate them to maintain their interest in their 'isolated' learning journey; and that the institution they enrolled in are highly regarded worldwide for its quality of teaching/research.

Similarly, the indication for the need of a minimum period of study, same course entry requirements and study materials as classroom study (courseware design factors) could be interpreted as respondents viewing these factors as necessary to avoid falling into the 'certificate mill' trap. The importance of institutional and courseware design assurance factors meant respondents tried to reduce uncertainty (risks) regarding e-tertiary education, given that e-education involves no direct contact with the institution or its staff. Thus, hypothesis one (brand trust in e-tertiary education is related to risk aversion, contingent on situational factor such as institutional assurance and courseware design) is supported by this research.

Site quality (regression weight=0.78) and public awareness factors (0.71) also influence brand trust in e-tertiary education. Thus, the hypothesis that brand trust in e-tertiary education is influenced by knowledge acquired through direct brand experience (site quality) and indirect brand experience (public awareness) is also validated. This confirmed [28] [29] arguments that site quality is vital in engendering trust

in e-retailer. It also supports [6] assertion that family and friend's opinion on e-degree; industry support in the form of employment and strong alumni network for word-of-mouth communication (public awareness) are influential in the uptake of e-education. In view of the collectivist society of Singapore and Malaysia [15], this may be interpreted as respondents being concerned that their investment in time consuming and costly education will be rejected by the community. Collectivists tend to be concerned with affiliating closely with others and maintaining connectedness, placing strong emphasis on group decisions [15].

The low uncertainty characteristics reflected in this study is inconsistent with the low uncertainty avoidance (UA) index of Singapore [15]. This low UA would suggest that Singaporeans would readily accept change and risks. This is not supported in this paper (at least with respect to the adoption of e-tertiary study). To explain the low uncertainty avoidance ranking, Singaporeans may show a low aversion to risk because they find themselves secure within a strongly Confucian culture. Also when a government provides high stability as in Singapore, its citizens possibly do not fear uncertainty as much as they do in countries with lesser political stability.

## CONCLUSION

This study supports the argument that governmental support and industry collaboration are important for the propagation of e-education. Brand trust in e-tertiary education is related to risk aversion (contingent on institutional and courseware design assurance factors) and knowledge acquired through direct brand experience (site quality: interactivity, up-to-date knowledge contents, ease of navigation) and indirect brand experience (friends/family's opinion about e-tertiary education, industry support, mouth-to-mouth communication via alumni networks).

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