

## **Explaining the Low Enrollment Intention at International Universities in Indonesia: A Serial Mediation Study**

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This paper aims to explain the unsuccessful relationship between the awareness of prominent international education brands and enrollment intention. A serial mediation model encompassing perceived congruity and brand attitude was developed and was tested using the Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) technique involving 132 respondents. The results revealed that the brand awareness must be subsequently perceived as internally congruent with the prospective students' self-image in terms of resource sufficiency before developing enrollment intention by forming the desired brand attitude. The originality of this study is that it could be the first to discuss the international universities landscape in Indonesia. In addition, the proposed model could be a plausible framework for explaining the intention to accept not only international education brands but also other brands of goods and services, hence benefiting both educational and consumer research. This paper includes generalizability as its limitation with suggestions to undertake the broader scope of studies.

*Keywords:* international universities, brand awareness, perceived congruity, brand attitude, enrollment intention

### **Introduction**

Following the implementation of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) in 1995, education has become an internationally tradable service. As a result, the number of students studying abroad has doubled from about 2.1 million in 2001 to 4.6 million in 2017 (Study International, 2018). Studying abroad drives numerous benefits for the international students and the economies of destination countries (Mellors-Bourne, 2017). However, there are also many barriers to pursuing international education, such as hefty overall costs,

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family commitments, and other personal issues.

The concept of Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) was introduced to resolve such obstacles. TNHE occurs when an education provider delivers its services across and beyond its country of origin. There are three identified modes in the TNHE delivery: distance mode, in-country delivery mode, and blended mode (Francois, 2016). In Indonesia, the in-country delivery mode is the current practice as the method drives many advantages, such as lower tuition fees than those charged in the country of origin, no associated costs of living, airfares, and health insurance, as well as the comparable value of the degrees and qualifications obtained than those granted in the country of origin (Mellors-Bourne, 2017).

TNHE institutions, referred to as international universities henceforth, operating in Indonesia must partner with local establishments due to Indonesian government restriction on foreign ownership. Some of such partnerships are Central Queensland University with Bakrie University, the University of Queensland with Indonesia Institute of Life Sciences, North Umbria School of Design with Binus University, Monash College with Jakarta International College, the University of Hertfordshire with Raffles College, Raffles Design Institute, LaSalle College in Jakarta and Surabaya, and BTEC UK with Unisadhuguna International College. These institutions offer a wide range of qualifications, from certificates to bachelor's and master's degrees.

Those international universities are in existence due to several motives. First, there has been an initiative from the Indonesian government to liberate and improve the existing local institutions' quality and competitiveness at the international level (Danyathi, 2016). Secondly, Indonesia is undeniably a huge market for education businesses, with the number of high school students currently approaching ten million. Lastly, there has been a strong and growing demand from students from the upper strata of society for international education (Tadjudin, 2000). It can be argued that international universities in Indonesia should have a good outlook. In addition, international universities can improve their prospects of attracting students by leveraging their global brands, which are associated with high quality and prestige (Özsomer, 2012). Unfortunately, most, if not all, of them currently suffer from a shortage of student's number as their primary source of revenue. The research gap is clear that the awareness of the esteemed international education brands has been unable to influence the enrolment intention, in contrast to the Theory of Brand Equity. This study aims to explain the unsuccessful relationship.

## **Literature Review**

### **Synthesizing Two Theories**

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) variables were synthesized with the Theory of Self-Congruity (TSC) and were established as mediators to achieve the research objective. The mediation approach in brand equity studies was justified by Rambocas, Kirpalani, and Simms (2018). The basic tenet of TPB is that

attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control influence behavioral intention. Moogan, Baron, and Bainbridge (2001) stated that university choice is influenced by prospective students' aptitude and their reference group consisting of family members and friends (Goh, Nguyen, and Law, 2017) in higher education marketing. It can be inferred that a prospective student's aptitude corresponds to TPB's perceived behavioral control, which is the individual's understanding of their capacity to perform a specific action. Likewise, the influence of the reference group corresponds to TPB's subjective norm, which is an individual's perceptions of social pressure on whether to perform an action.

Recently, it was highlighted that businesses must develop brands congruent with what customers want and need (Alvarado-Karste & Guzmán, 2020). In facilitating such a notion, this study employed TSC. Marketing researchers have also used the theory to describe consumer behaviors, such as brand attitude, purchase intention, brand choice, satisfaction, trust, and commitment (Sirgy, 2018). In higher education marketing, self-congruity has explained students' satisfaction, trust, commitment, and social benefits (Japutra, Wang, & Li 2021). According to TSC, similar to humans, products and services have personal images, such as youthful, friendly, and modern. Such images were termed product-user images and interact with the consumer's self-image. Self-congruity is a subjective perception that results from such interactions. Consumer behavior is influenced by the congruence resulting from a psychological contrast between the product-user image and self-image (Sirgy, 2018).

From the previous description, it is clear that both TPB and TSC explain behavioral intention. It can then be inferred that perceived congruity is a concept of conformity in both a prospective student's internal and external states. Such a conclusion extends the TSC. The TPB was also extended that the variable of perceived behavioral control related to prospective students' aptitude can be translated to internal perceived congruity. The variable of subjective norm related to the reference group's influence can be translated to external perceived congruity. The two new variables can be defined respectively as prospective students' own perception (internal) and the reference group's perception (external) about the prospective student's self-image of resource sufficiency (e.g., self-interest, financial situation, intellectual capabilities, and opportunities) relative to the resource sufficiency image of the students currently studying at the intended international university.

### **Establishing Relationships**

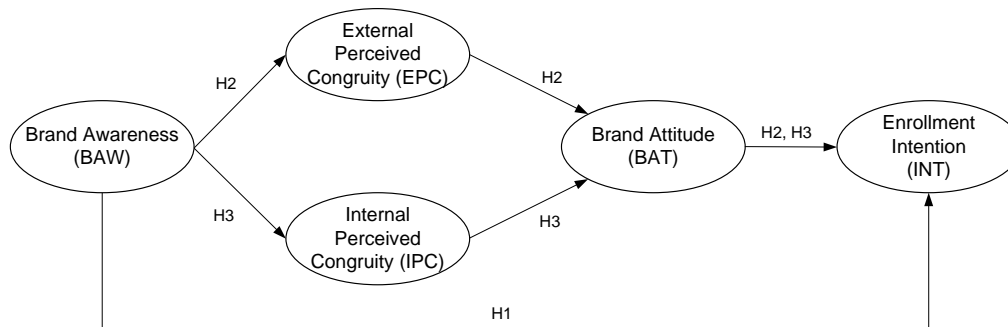
The early models of self-congruity were just developed in the 2000s (Sirgy, Grewal, & Mangleburg, 2000; Sirgy, Grzeskowiak, & Su, 2005; Sirgy & Su, 2000). The serial mediation concept later evolved in the subsequent works (Close, Krishen, & Latour, 2009; Wu & Lo, 2009). The reason for using the serial mediation concept of self-congruity and attitude in the relationship between external cues and the behavioral intention was explained in Kang, Tang, and Lee (2015). Marketing scholars agreed that customers evaluate products from two aspects: 1) product-user image (symbolic attributes) relating to self-congruity via

peripheral route and 2) product attributes (functional attributes) relating to functional congruity via central route. It was further described that consumers first develop a positive attitude about an object via the peripheral route, after which personal relevance and product knowledge can be improved. Such a persuasion process occurs consecutively (serially).

### Building Theoretical Framework

The preceding synthesis enabled this study to introduce two new variables of internal perceived congruity and external perceived congruity aligning with the cognitive response domain's similarity (Tasci & Pizam, 2020). Both were positioned after the external cue of brand awareness. As the psychological assessment of an object, the TPB's variable of attitude was translated into brand attitude. It was defined as the overall evaluation of an international university brand by the prospective students (Siu, Kwan, & Zeng, 2016). Such variable was positioned after the perceived congruity variables. This study proposed a serial mediation model to understand better the relationship between variables, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Serial Mediation Model of Behavioral Intention



### Developing Hypotheses

The positive and direct association between brand equity and purchase intention has been well documented (Bian & Liu, 2011; Wang & Li, 2012). Brand equity can be operationalized as multidimensional, consisting of brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand associations, other proprietary assets (Sudhana, Noermijati, Sabil Hussein, & Khusniyah Indrawati, 2021). Brand awareness is defined as the strength of a brand's presence in the target audience's minds over time (Rodríguez-López, del Barrio-García, & Alcántara-Pilar, 2020). Brand awareness was highlighted as the antecedent in this study since many past studies have placed it as the primary component in brand equity. Therefore, it was hypothesized H1: brand awareness (BAW) relates positively to enrollment intention (INT).

The transmittal approach posited in Rungtusanatham, Miller, and Boyer (2014) was adopted to develop subsequent hypotheses. With such an approach, mediation hypotheses were developed without articulating hypotheses relating

BAW to EPC, BAW to IPC, BAW to BAT, EPC to BAT, IPC to BAT, and BAT to INT. Therefore, it was hypothesized:

H2: external perceived congruity (EPC) and brand attitude (BAT) serially mediate the relationship between brand awareness (BAW) and enrollment intention (INT).

H3: internal perceived congruity (IPC) and brand attitude (BAT) serially mediate the relationship between brand awareness (BAW) and enrollment intention (INT).

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is threefold. First, this study could be the first to discuss the international universities landscape in Indonesia. Understanding consumer behavior has always been the success key of every business, including those of international universities. A quantitative descriptive study is needed to understand the determinants of the enrollment intention of international universities operating in Indonesia. Such study is important so that an understanding of the theoretical aspects can be developed which in turn can be put into practice by the management of international universities. The analysis will assist any future strategies, especially in the sales and marketing campaigns. Furthermore, by synthesizing the two employed theories (Theory of Planned Behavior and Theory of Self-Congruity), this study extended both in terms of internal and external states and resource sufficiency. Finally, this study implemented the state-of-the-art methodology of serial mediation to investigate the underlying causal chains of the hypothesized relationships.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The quantitative methodology was employed using questionnaire distributed in June 2021 as the data collection method. This study was undertaken within a case international university operating in Indonesia, which will be referred henceforth as “UniX”. The university is Canadian based and offers undergraduate vocational qualifications in arts and design.

### **Population and Sample**

The population was defined as leads obtained from UniX marketing activities for the 2021 enrollment year, totaling 4080 leads. According to Gleanster Research, not all leads have adequate brand awareness and only a quarter (25%) of them are good enough to advance to sales (Lead Forensics, 2017). Lead scoring can differentiate which leads are ready to buy and which are not. Based on such reasoning, 75% of the leads were omitted using quartile analysis. The population thus became 941 prospective students. For social science and business research, Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt, (2017) suggested using the G\*Power software (Erdfelder, Faul, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) to perform the power analysis in

determining the sample size. It was added that the following inputs are to be used (Memon et al., 2020): F tests as the Test family, Linear multiple regression: Fixed model,  $R^2$  deviation from zero as the Statistical test, A priori: Compute required sample size – given  $\alpha$ , power, and effect size as the Type of power analysis, 0.15 as the Effect size  $f^2$ , 0.05 as  $\alpha$  err prob, and 0.80 as the Power ( $1 - \beta$  err prob). Using 4 as the number of predictors in this study, the software generated a required sample size of 85. The simple random sampling method was adopted since the leads database has sequential numbers. Microsoft Excel was then used to generate the random numbers of respondents to whom invitations were sent to fill up the questionnaire. The self-administered survey was done online using Google Form. In total, the online survey collected 167 responses, with 35 responses excluded due to incomplete and straight-lining issues. Accordingly, the net response is 132 and is larger than the required sample size.

### **Analytical Methods**

The analytical methods were carried out in two stages: (1) assessment of the reliability and validity of the measurement model and (2) assessment of the structural model to determine the hypothesized relationships (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017). The PLS-SEM technique with SmartPLS 3 software was used in all stages to test the relationships between variables due to its ability to handle a complex model.

## **Results**

### **Demographic**

The respondents' demographic data are presented in Table 1. Some interesting phenomena can be observed. First, the age characteristics have come as a surprise, where more than half of the respondents are 21 years and older. As discussed in Sudhana, Ameen, Isaac, and Nusari (2019), that can be attributed to the fact that Indonesian parents perceive conventional college majors, such as business, engineering, law, and sciences, will give their children better job prospects. Therefore, parents tend to discourage fresh high school graduates (i.e., younger than 21 years) from studying relatively unfamiliar majors, such as arts and design. Second, prospective female students outnumber their male counterparts by more than three times. Statistics of higher education enrolments in the US (USNews.com, 2019) and the UK (HESA, 2018) also recorded similar evidence. Third, the division of the streams in secondary education in Indonesia is simply a means for the government to accommodate students' diverse interests, talents, and abilities (Siregar, 2011). As appeared in Table 1, there was a mix of the prospective students' streams, signifying that study programs in arts and design are open to any student's background. The balanced mix of the prospective students' streams represents that study programs in arts and design are available for any student's background. Lastly, the evaluation of parents' occupation and

level of education suggests that international-oriented education has more appeal to prospects with entrepreneurial parents having a good level of education.

*Table 1. Demographics of the Respondents*

Characteristics	Groups	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18 or less	18	13.6
	19–20	40	30.3
	21 or above	74	56.1
Gender	Male	30	22.7
	Female	102	77.3
High School streams	Natural science	67	50.8
	Social science	65	49.2
Parent's occupation	Government officers	14	10.6
	Private employees	44	33.3
	Entrepreneurs	74	56.1
Parent's level of education	Doctorate	0	0.0
	Master's degree	10	7.6
	Bachelor's / Diploma	105	79.5
	Senior High school	12	9.1
	Lower than Senior High	5	3.8
Preferred University Major	Natural Science	15	11.4
	Social Science	34	25.7
	Engineering	12	9.1
	Health Science	8	6.1
	Arts and Design	58	43.9
	Others	5	3.8
TOTAL		132	100%

### Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model assessment evaluates the reliability and validity of construct measures. There were three criteria in the evaluation: convergent validity, internal consistency, and discriminant validity (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017). Using the PLS Algorithm routine, PLS path model estimation was performed in SmartPLS to assess the measurement model. Table 2 details the assessment results of the indicators, which are all closed questions ranked by a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = “strongly disagree” until 5 = “strongly agree”. The first run of the PLS Algorithm routine resulted in a singular matrix problem, thus one indicator of intention variable (INT1) was dropped from further analysis. As can be observed from Table 2, all criteria of the measurement model assessment were satisfied.

Table 2. Measurement Model Assessment Results

Variable (Sources)	Indicator Items		Convergent Validity		Internal Consistency		Discriminant Validity
			Outer Loadings > 0.708	AVE > 0.50	Cronbach's Alpha 0.60 – 0.90	Composite Reliability 0.60 – 0.90	HTMT ratio < 0.90
Brand Awareness (BAW) (Buil, de Chernatony, & Martínez, 2008)	BAW1	I am aware of the school called UniX.	0.960	0.951	0.987	0.990	Yes
	BAW2	I can recognize UniX among other competing international universities.	0.991				
	BAW3	I know what UniX looks like.	0.988				
	BAW4	When I think of international universities, UniX is one of the institutions that comes to my mind.	0.965				
	BAW5	UniX is an international university that I am familiar with.	0.971				
External Perceived Congruity (EPC) (Tasci & Pizam, 2020)	EPC1	My reference group sees that the image of students enrolling at UniX matches my self-image.	0.973	0.951	0.974	0.983	Yes
	EPC2	My reference group sees me as having the willingness and the ability to enroll at UniX.	0.982				
	EPC3	My reference group sees me as having the resources (i.e., passion, money, intellectual capabilities, and opportunities) to enroll at UniX.	0.972				
Internal Perceived Congruity (IPC) (Tasci & Pizam, 2020)	IPC1	The image of students who enroll at UniX matches my self-image.	0.986	0.981	0.991	0.994	Yes
	IPC2	I have the willingness and the ability to enroll at UniX.	0.991				
	IPC3	I have the resources (i.e., passion, money, intellectual capabilities, and opportunities) to enroll at UniX.	0.995				
Brand Attitude (BAT) (Ye, Bose, & Pelton, 2012)	BAT1	I feel good about UniX.	0.978	0.928	0.981	0.985	Yes
	BAT2	UniX is my favorable brand.	0.976				
	BAT3	I like UniX.	0.983				
	BAT4	I will be proud when enrolling at UniX.	0.925				
	BAT5	I trust UniX.	0.954				
Enrollment Intention (INT) (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012)	INT2	I am willing to recommend others to enroll at UniX.	0.987	0.970	0.969	0.985	Yes
	INT3	I intend to enroll at UniX in the future.	0.983				

### Structural Model Assessment

Following the acceptable results of the measurement model assessment, the structural model testing was carried out, and the results were detailed in Table 3.



Table 3. Structural Model Assessment Results

Relationship	Path Coeff.	t-values	p-values	Hypothesis	Conclusion
BAW → INT	0.158	0.947	0.344	H1	unsupported
BAW → EPC → BAT → INT	0.027	0.699	0.484	H2	unsupported
BAW → IPC → BAT → INT	0.261	3.269	0.001	H3	supported

To examine the mediating effects, Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010) specified that the evidence for mediation is apparent when there is a statistically significant indirect effect ( $t\text{-value} > 1.96$ , two-tailed,  $p < 0.05$ ). In addition, specific indirect effects must be estimated for models with multiple mediators, as contained in the recent studies (Boğan & Dedeoğlu, 2020; Ghazali, Mutum, & Woon, 2019; Ülkerdemirel & Yıldız, 2021). As observed from the above table, H1 is not supported. The serial mediation model is supported only when IPC and BAT serially mediated the relationship between BAW and INT as there is a statistically significant indirect effect of 0.261 ( $t = 3.269$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). The variables of IPC and BAT then have a full mediator role serially, hence supported H3. However, the contrary occurs with EPC and BAT, therefore unsupported H2.

## Discussion

The unsupported H1, that brand awareness does not relate positively to enrollment intention, further justifies the research gap of this study. It aligns with the results of many recent empirical studies that contrast the Theory of Brand Equity across different goods and services and consumer settings (Sudhana, Noermijati, Sabil Hussein, & Khusniyah Indrawati 2021). The unsuccessful relationship warrants fundamental research to explain the underlying mechanism of the failed relationship between external cues and behavioral intention. Mourad and Ahmed (2012) attempted to justify such variation by stating that the green brand awareness through environmental promotions failed to significantly influence the green brand preference because consumers did not necessarily understand the meaning of environmental slogans and labels of the advertised green brands. Reflecting on the brand of UniX, throughout the marketing campaigns, the public often associates UniX with something not related to higher education, such as fashion brand, garment producer, event organizer, and clothing store. The public does not understand that the portfolios are the products of design education that they can learn to create by studying through a design school such as UniX.

The unsupported H2, that external perceived congruity and brand attitude serially do not mediate the relationship between brand awareness and enrollment intention, can be attributed to the demographic result that more than half of the respondents are mature individuals aged 21 or above. At that age level, the family support diminishes, supporting the attachment-individuation theory (Slovacek, Jacob, & Flenoury, 2015). As family and friends are considered socio-economic

factors, there could be diverse and contradictive opinions that a prospective student may disregard when forming the brand attitude (Singh, 2016). However, the contrary occurs for high school students that family influence is most evident.

The supported H3, that internal perceived congruity and brand attitude serially mediate the relationship between brand awareness and enrollment intention, aligns with the retail patronage study by Sirgy, Grewal, and Mangleburg (2000) that concluded the greater the self-congruity (i.e., the match between the store patron image and the consumer's self-concept), the more likely that the consumer has a favorable attitude toward that store and the more likely that he would patronize that store. Additional studies by Sirgy and Su (2000) in tourism and Sirgy, Grzeskowiak, and Su (2005) in housing produced similar results.

### **Theoretical Implications**

There are at least three theoretical implications of this study. First, this study has enhanced the current body of knowledge. The foundational theory highlighted in this study is brand equity. Although the topic is an important area in marketing research (Ahmad & Butt, 2012; Buil, de Chernatony, & Martínez, 2008), there is little research on higher education branding (Pinar, Trapp, Girard, & Boyt, 2011). Some studies have been performed in the context of TNHE (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Pimpa, 2003; Prugsamatz, Pentecost, & Ofstad, 2006), but self-congruity was not mentioned anywhere. Furthermore, educational marketing is well-recognized in many Western countries but not in Eastern ones (Li & Hung, 2009). This study is therefore valuable due to many shortcomings above.

Second, as this study sought to eliminate the research gap, the supported hypothesis confirms that after brand awareness, internal perceived congruity must be in existence to form the desired brand attitude, which then positively and significantly influences behavioral intention.

Lastly, the introduction of the serial mediation model will benefit consumer research not only in the international education branding but also in general. As can be observed from Figure 1, the explanatory process of the model resembles those of the prominent Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). As described in Al Hujran, Aloudat, and Altarawneh (2013), the progression starts from external variables that affect perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Such variables then influence the attitude toward using, determining the intention to use. In this study, brand awareness functions as an external cue. The internal and external perceived congruity variables are the mediating variables affecting the brand attitude. The serial mediation model has its core in self-congruity theory, whereas TAM has self-efficacy theory as its foundation. Both models thus are contingent on self-related states. Due to the current extensive use of TAM, it can be deduced that the proposed serial mediation model could also be a plausible framework in explaining the intention to accept an international university brand equal to the TAM, which explains the intention to accept new technology.

## **Practical Implications**

In the efforts to market educational services, the educational brand can give potential customers more trust and certainty when making purchasing decisions (Mourad, Ennew, & Kortam, 2011). It is because education is regarded as a high credence service. It is logical that customers like what they are familiar with, reducing the perceived risk associated with education services. Because of its importance, brand awareness should be the primary goal of all marketing programs, including those at international universities.

There are practical ways advisable for international universities to increase their brand awareness. First, to amplify the digital landscape. Such landscape includes but is not limited to websites, email, social networks, mobile offerings (i.e., blogs, podcasts), and videos (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). It is desirable because the internet has fundamentally changed the way students and universities look for and select each other (Tate, 2017). It has been well-documented that prospective university students seek information through the internet, such as tuition costs and campus life. Second, to strengthen the physical landscape. The university's actual physical landscape has to be well-managed. Therefore, physical development, academic reputation, and superior administration should always be the areas of continuous improvement. Third, co-branding and other collaboration efforts. As we live in an increasingly connected world, forming an alliance is inevitable. For example, international universities that offer engineering and design courses may co-brand or collaborate with Autodesk as the authoritative brand in computer-aided design. That way, international universities will reach a wider audience, but their brands will also be receiving support. Finally, international universities should adapt to this era of big data by holding awareness and competitiveness surveys and acting on the results. Based on the acquired insights, international universities will refine their marketing strategies, differentiate themselves from other competing institutions, and strengthen their unique selling propositions.

To overcome the problem of brand misinterpretation, Broucker, De Wit, & Mampaey (2021) suggested that higher education institutions should select suitable communication channels based on their status and position. Perceived as a boutique design school, UniX should engage in relatively modest and clustered marketing activities involving a limited number of enthusiastic participants. That way, prospecting interested leads will become more targeted and personal. Special webinars or masterclasses involving experts drawn from artists and designers can be avenues in communicating the UniX brand effectively to the target audience.

To facilitate the development of favorable brand attitude through internal perceived congruity, as recommended by Sudhana, Ameen, and Isaac (2020), UniX could host events that are attractive to young female audiences in urban lifestyle areas, such as fashion sketching workshops, fashion styling workshops, dressmaking competitions, fashion shows, and talk shows presenting famous local and foreign designers. Such events will stimulate the attendees' image of being privileged, chic, unique, and upper-class, which all are congruent to the image of UniX as an upscale and exclusive design school.

### Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

It was concluded that the awareness of educational brands that are subsequently perceived as congruent with prospective students' internal self-image in terms of resource sufficiency would yield enrollment intention by forming the desired brand attitude. It was anticipated that the serial mediation model could be a credible framework for explaining the intention to accept international university brands and other brands of goods and services. This paper also recommended practical ways to improve brand awareness, avoid brand misinterpretation, and facilitate the development of favorable brand attitude through internal perceived congruity, which ultimately leads to enrollment intention.

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations. This study was specifically conducted in Indonesia and within a case international university, hence it is limited generalizability. It is then necessary to determine if the findings can be replicated in other countries to understand better the impact of local education policies and cultural differences. Future research could conduct longitudinal studies to explore the role of each variable over time. Other variables, such as perceived value, could be proposed so that the overall model prediction may also be improved.

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