

Is this Truly Healthy? Consumer's Trust in a Healthy Product Extension in Traditionally Unhealthy Products

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Abstract: - Global health awareness trend has been increasing even before the pandemic. Companies jump on this bandwagon by introducing a healthier product line or extension. Problems arise when the parent brand is widely perceived as unhealthy, as it may hinder the process of building trust in the new brand. This research examined how brand trust of a healthy brand extension mediates the relationship between perceived competence and benevolence on customer loyalty. Structural Equation Modelling was employed in answering this question, involving a survey on respondents' attitudes toward a recently-launched healthy instant noodle. The study found that brand trust mediates the relationship between perceived competence and benevolence and brand loyalty. Therefore, this study found that it is advisable to introduce a newer product line to form trust instead of relying on brand extension when the public's attitudes towards the original brand are too strong.

Key-Words: - brand trust; brand loyalty; perceived competence; healthy products; consumer behavior; product extension

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1 Introduction

With over 12,5 million servings demanded in a year, Indonesia is the second biggest instant noodle consumer worldwide in 2020, only after China, [1]. To put that into perspective, Indonesia's demand for instant noodles is bigger than USA's and Japan's combined. Indonesians' fondness for the food is not only explained by its preparation simplicity but instant noodle consumption has also been engrained culturally within the community. As such, a study even revealed that their Indonesian respondents wrongfully perceived that instant noodles help them avoid obesity, [2].

However, the food is known for its danger as opposed to its benefits, and rightfully so. A rich body of health sciences knowledge has associated a number of risks with instant noodles, [3], [4], [5]. Not only that, the instant food contains next to no nutritional value, [6]. It is encouraging that, at least in Indonesia's case, the annual demand for instant noodles is going through a decline, [7]

Indeed, healthy eating awareness, [8] and fondness towards organic food, [9] have been a worldwide trend even before the pandemic. The global demand for organic food had doubled in less than a decade prior to the pandemic, [10]. After the pandemic, the trend persists if not intensifies. A

recent survey by Statista reported that not only half of their respondents tried to eat healthily, half of the rest also actively tried to avoid preservatives, [11].

Acting on this recent trend, ISM, a leading instant noodle manufacturer in Indonesia, released a healthy instant noodle product line, referred to as LM noodles hereafter¹. The company is a dominant force in Indonesia's instant noodle market, with an overwhelming 72% market share, [12]. Their dominance may provide a solid foundation to instill trust in the customers, who have long thought that instant noodle is an unhealthy product, that the healthy product is indeed healthy. However, research on how the attitudes toward the healthier version of a traditionally-perceived unhealthy product is few and far between.

Among the few, a study examined how a healthier product extension fits the parent brand, [8]. It studied the snacks market in Mexico, which makes the study very similar to the one presented. Firstly, snacks and instant noodles can satisfy due to their ease of use. Secondly, both Indonesia and Mexico are viewed as third-world countries. They found that the attitudes towards the parent brand, the less-healthy option, are too pervasive. This makes

¹ Both ISM and LM are pseudonyms

the reformulated product have low nutritional value credibility. Moreover, Kemp and Bui who studied product extensions offered as the healthier alternative, found that brand familiarity and credibility on a healthier brand both positively stimulate purchase intentions, [13]. However, they did not extend their inquiry on whether the healthier alternative's perceived familiarity and credibility originated from the parent brand.

The aforementioned research gap calls for further studies on how customers perceive and trust the healthier option of products that are largely seen as unhealthy. The current research sought to examine how brand trust of a healthy brand extension mediates the relationship between perceived competence as well as benevolence on customer loyalty, using LM noodle as a case in point.

Consumers are said to show brand trust when they have confidence in the specific aspects of a brand, [14], [15], [16], and this is especially true in credence-based products of which quality is difficult to judge, [17]. Trust is also associated with the confidence one has in the risk of using a product, or lack thereof, [18], [19]. Indeed, "reliance" is the keyword in a consumer putting trust in a product, [20, p. 644], as trust lowers the perceived uncertainty associated with the purchase and in turn also decreases the perceived risk, [21]. Therefore, it can be said that consumers who put trust in a brand not only believe that it will satisfy their needs, [21] but also believe that it possesses the right intention to do so and minimize the risk while doing that.

Indeed, two variables commonly associated with brand trust are perceived competence and perceived benevolence, [15], [16], [22]. Perceived competence refers to the extent to which customers view a product can solve their problems and satisfy their needs. A brand is perceived to be competent when it can be relied upon and possess the ability to do the thing it is purchased for, [20]. In regards to this research, perceived competence can be divided into competence perception towards the parent brand and the extended brand, [23], even though "brands are proprietary quality signals linked to a specific firm", [22, p. 622].

Benevolence is another deciding factor of brand trust, [24], [25], [26]. Perceived benevolence is when a customer believes that a company has a sincere intention to do good for the customer, [25]. Some past researchers proposed an interesting definition of the term, they suggested that benevolence is the ability of an organization to first serve the needs of their customers before their own, [27]. Pertaining to this, a well-cited longitudinal study found that consumers who create a

relationship with a brand perceived as sincere resemble a relationship with a close friend, [28].

Trust is crucial in forming purchasing decisions, [17] as well as maintaining customer loyalty, both in the business and customer markets, [17], [29]. Trust has been recognized as having a crucial role in consumer purchasing decisions and product loyalty, [17]. A company is more likely to generate brand loyalty when they are able to instill trust among the customers, [30], with this especially true in high-involvement purchases, [31], [32]. Indeed, trusted brands generate not only behavioral loyalty, but also attitudinal loyalty, [33].

2 Methodology

Employing quantitative methods, this study relied on online questionnaires to obtain its data. Purposive sampling was used, with most of the recruited respondents coming from a mid-size city in Java, Indonesia. As loyalty is one of the constructs studied, respondents should have already purchased LM noodles. One hundred forty respondents were invited to fill in the questionnaire, which is a representative number.

2.1 The Structural Model and Hypothesis

The study employed variant-based Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The Partial Least Square method is employed to test measurement errors and hypotheses, with the calculation conducted using SmartPLS 3.0.

As aforementioned, the study sought to identify the influence of perceived competence and benevolence on brand loyalty mediated by brand trust. Therefore, the study can be summed up by the following framework.

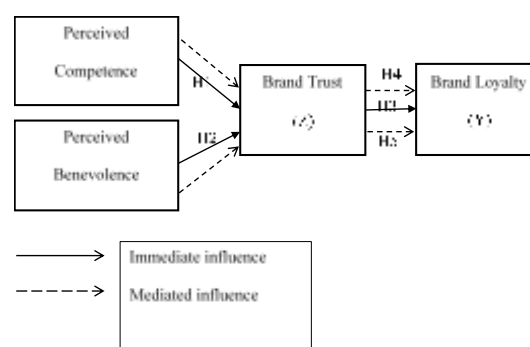


Fig 1: Research Framework

Based on the aforementioned or otherwise mentioned further below, the following hypotheses can be stated.

- H1: perceived competence positively influences brand trust [16], [17], [20], [22], [23]
- H2: perceived benevolence positively influences brand trust [22], [27], [34]
- H3: brand trust positively influences brand loyalty [17], [22], [29], [30], [33], [35]
- H4: mediated by brand trust, perceived competence positively influences brand loyalty [16], [17], [22], [23], [30]
- H5: mediated by brand trust, perceived benevolence positively influences brand loyalty [17], [22], [27], [28]

2.2 Construct Measurement

Each construct was measured using two to three items modified from commonly used measures within the marketing, consumer behavior and psychology realms and further adapted to suit the instant food industry better. The wording was also simplified, considering that the respondents might not all have a college degree. Albeit simplified, the survey questions aimed to elicit the respondents' overall attitudes and perceptions of LM noodles.

Variables	Operational Definitions
Dependent variable Brand loyalty [22], [36], [36]	Long-term commitment Repeat purchase
Mediating variable Brand trust [16], [22], [37]	Brand performance Quality reliability
Independent variables Brand competence [17], [30]	Ability to solve customers' needs Ability to safely serve customers' needs
Brand benevolence [22], [30], [38]	Perceived sincerity in the customers' welfare Perceived responsibility in the production process

3 Results

3.1 The Respondents

Table 1. Respondents' demographic characteristics

Gender	Frequency
Male	34
Female	89
Unspecified	17
Total	140
Age range	Frequency
17 – 22	98
23 – 24	19
Total	140
Occupation	Frequency
Students	87
Housewives	11
Factory workers	8
Part-time workers	1
Office workers	19
Self-employed	14
Total	140

Table 1 briefly describes the demographic characteristics of respondents involved in the study. This research employed purposive sampling by filtering respondents to only those who had purchased LM to ensure that they had formed attitudes toward the product. Therefore, the sample typifies LM's target market. For instance, only a small fraction of the respondents was grassroots workers. Indeed, LM was marketed as healthier instant noodles, so the price is significantly higher than other brands.

3.2 Validity and Reliability Test

The Validity test in the study includes convergent validity and discriminant validity. Table 2 shows that the outer loading for each variable was more than 0.7, indicating that all variables were deemed valid, [39]. In regard to the discriminant validity in table 3, each variable's average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded the 0.5 thresholds, suggesting that each variable has acceptable discriminant validity, [22], [39].

Table 2. Outer loading

Variables	Indicators	Outer Loading	Note
Perceived Competence X1	PC1	0.921	Valid
	PC2	0.882	Valid
	PC3	0.836	Valid
Perceived Benevolence X2	PB1	0.936	Valid
	PB2	0.942	Valid
Brand Trust Z	BT1	0.935	Valid
	BT2	0.928	Valid
Brand Loyalty Y	BL1	0.962	Valid
	BL2	0.946	Valid

Table 3. Average Variance Extracted

	AVE
Perceived Competence	0.775
Perceived Benevolence	0.882
Brand Trust	0.868
Brand Loyalty	0.910

The reliability test conducted involved a composite reliability test. A variable having a composite reliability value exceeding 0.7 is said to be a reliable construct, [39]. Table 4 suggests that all constructs measured were proved to be reliable.

Table 4. Composite reliability

	Composite Reliability
Perceived Competence	0.912
Perceived Benevolence	0.937
Brand Trust	0.929
Brand Loyalty	0.953

3.3 Direct Effect Test

Table 5. Path coefficient

	Original Sample (O)	T-Statistic	P-Value
Perceived Benevolence on Brand Trust	0.466	8.129	0.000
Perceived Competence on Brand Trust	0.473	8.044	0.000
Brand Trust on Brand Loyalty	0.659	11.548	0.000

H1: perceived competence positively influences brand trust

H2: perceived benevolence positively influences brand trust

H3: brand trust positively influences brand loyalty

In terms of the study result, as suggested by table 5, across the first three hypotheses, which concern the immediate influences, all the p values were under the threshold level of 0.05 set in this study. This suggests that all hypotheses one, two and three were accepted.

3.4 Mediating Effect Test

Table 6. Indirect effects

	Original Sample (O)	T-Statistic	P-Value
Perceived Competence → Brand Trust → Brand Loyalty	0.312	6.093	0.000
Perceived Benevolence → Brand Trust → Brand Loyalty	0.307	7.070	0.000

H4: mediated by brand trust, perceived competence positively influences brand loyalty

H5: mediated by brand trust, perceived benevolence positively influences brand loyalty

Furthermore, the calculated p-values in the indirect effect test were under 0.05, as shown in Table 6. Therefore, this suggests that both H4 and H5 were accepted. This means that brand trust mediates both perceived competence and perceived benevolence on brand loyalty.

4 Discussion

This research aimed to identify the relationships between perceived competence and benevolence and brand loyalty which is mediated by brand trust. While other similar inquiries have been conducted, [15], [16], [22], the present study specifically investigated the relationship between the variables in the context of a newly launched healthier product line of which the parent product was widely perceived as unhealthy products. Nevertheless, the results of the study largely confirm the findings of prior studies.

Li *et al.*, proposed an alternative way of identifying brand trusts, [15]. They argued that brand trust is a "second-order measurement" of which formulation is determined by "first-order measurements", which are competence and benevolence, [15, p. 1]. The current study found a positive link between perceived competence, perceived benevolence and brand trust. This means that this finding not only confirms that of Li *et al.*, but also extends their findings into the context of new and improved product lines introduced as a healthier alternative to the original products, [15].

Therefore, the current study also contributes to the debate on whether a brand extension is a suitable strategy when a company wants to launch a new healthier product line of which the original line is widely known as unhealthy, [8]. The current study's findings suggest that when the public's perception and attitudes towards the original brand are too strong, introducing a newer product line is necessary to instill trust in the new line. This study's case was deliberately picked to represent such a case since ISM's share in Indonesia's instant noodle market is well over 70%, most, if not all, of which rely on product lines perceived as unhealthy.

Moreover, this study confirms previous findings on the relationship between brand trust and brand loyalty. Prior studies, [16], [22], [33], [35] unanimously argued that brand trust has a linear and positive relationship to brand loyalty. As for this case, this suggests that for ISM and other companies in similar positions, building brand trust is a crucial foundational block for forming brand loyalty.

Finally, this research also confirms the mediating effect of brand trust on the relationship between Perceived Competence and Benevolence and brand loyalty, [16], [17], [22], [30]. In other words, the higher the perceived competence and benevolence, the higher the customer's trust in the new brand, which will lead to stronger brand loyalty, and vice versa. Therefore, it is essential for LM noodles and other brands in similar positions to show their ability to fulfil the needs they have purchased and

express the right intention in doing so. Both will form competence and benevolence as perceived by the customers.

5 Conclusion

This study proposed a suggestion suitable for both the academia and business realms. While there has been a growing debate on the sufficiency of brand extension when introducing an altered or improved branding, introducing a new product line is especially urged for companies whose original brand might risk overwhelming the new branding. Nevertheless, future studies are suggested to conduct similar inquiries but use a less-strong original brand. It is intriguing to see whether the same pattern will hold in a different context.

Finally, the current study possesses some limitations. Firstly, the study investigated fast-moving consumer goods in a confined time period. Attitudes towards this type of goods are always volatile depending on the current trends. Future studies might yield different results depending on the time frame and the current ongoing trend. Therefore, future studies should examine this in post-covid markets. Secondly, the study only investigated one product line within a specific market region. This study might have failed to capture result variations across different brands and markets. It might be worth doing for future studies to replicate similar inquiries using other brands with varying market shares within a single study.

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Contribution of Individual Authors to the Creation of a Scientific Article (Ghostwriting Policy)

-Anton Agus Setyawan and Putri Dewi Wulan Kusumawati collected the research data and performed the PLS-SEM Analysis,

-Huda Maulana, Sri Murwanti, and Edy Purwo Saputro collectively wrote the research article

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The authors have no conflict of interest to declare that is relevant to the content of this article.

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