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Exploring Brand Experience, Firm-Generated Content, and Trust as Determinants of Customer Satisfaction in Indonesia's Telecommunications Sector

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the influence of brand experience and firm-generated content on brand trust and customer satisfaction within Indonesia's telecommunications sector, focusing on Telkomsel Prepaid users in Aceh Province. Despite Telkomsel's dominant market share and superior network infrastructure, recent declines in user numbers suggest a gap between brand promise and actual customer experience. Drawing on theories of experiential marketing and digital brand communication, this research explores how emotional engagement and content credibility shape consumer trust and satisfaction. Using a quantitative explanatory design, data were collected from 204 respondents via structured online surveys and analyzed using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results reveal that brand experience significantly affects both brand trust and customer satisfaction, while firm-generated content positively influences brand trust but has no direct impact on satisfaction. Brand trust emerges as a strong mediator, linking brand experience and content credibility to overall satisfaction. Multi-group analysis shows no significant generational differences, indicating that trust and experience are universally influential across age segments. These findings underscore the importance of aligning promotional content with actual service quality to maintain brand credibility. Managerially, Telkomsel should prioritize experience-based marketing strategies and responsive digital communication to enhance emotional value and trust. The study contributes to the literature by integrating firm-generated content and brand experience into a unified model of satisfaction, offering practical insights for improving digital engagement and loyalty in competitive telecom markets. Future research is encouraged to expand the geographic scope and incorporate user-generated content for a more holistic understanding of brand dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

The development of telecommunications technology in Indonesia has shown a very rapid pace over the past two decades. The increasing public demand for digital communications and internet access has made this industry one of the most dynamic sectors in the era of digital transformation (Putra & Sari, 2023). Today, communication services encompass not only telephone calls and text messages but also high-speed data, supporting economic, educational, and social activities (Hidayat, 2022). This growth opens up significant opportunities for cellular operators to expand their market share, while simultaneously creating intense competition among companies to attract and retain customers (Sutanto, 2021).

Among the major operators in Indonesia, PT Telekomunikasi Selular (Telkomsel) holds the top position in market share. Based on the 2024 Top Brand Index for the prepaid cellular card category, Telkomsel Prepaid scored 41.6%, far surpassing IM3 (15.5%), Tri (13.6%), and XL Prepaid (9.1%) (Top Brand Award, 2024). This achievement demonstrates the strength of the Telkomsel brand as a top-of-mind brand that is most remembered and used by consumers. Operationally, Telkomsel manages 159.66 million customers with 257,349 BTS and an average revenue per user (ARPU) of IDR 45,300, far above Indosat (IDR 37,500) and XL Axiata (IDR 44,000) (Telkomsel Annual Report, 2024). This superior network coverage and ARPU value confirm Telkomsel's position as an industry leader (Suryani, 2024).

However, this superiority does not always translate into stable customer numbers. Telkomsel data shows a fluctuation in user numbers from 171.1 million in 2019 to 159.3 million in 2023, marking a decline of approximately 7% over the past five years (Telkomsel Annual Report, 2023). This phenomenon is interesting because it occurs amidst Telkomsel's network dominance and aggressive digital expansion. This decline is suspected to be related to declining customer satisfaction due to negative perceptions of services that do not meet expectations (Sadad et al., 2023). Customer complaints are frequently found on Telkomsel's official social media platforms, particularly regarding high package prices, unstable networks, and slow customer response (Nofriyanti, 2017). The company's lack of response to these complaints worsens public perception and lowers customer satisfaction levels (Kusdianto, 2018).

In the context of modern marketing, brand success depends not only on service quality but also on the ability to create a consistent and meaningful brand experience. Brand experience plays a crucial role in building customer trust and long-term loyalty (Brakus et al., 2009). Consumers tend to stick with brands perceived as providing emotional value and meeting experiential expectations, even at a higher price (Chinomona, 2016). According to Costabile in Rizan (2012), brand trust is a consumer's perception of a brand's reliability based on repeated positive experiences that meet customer expectations. When actual experiences do not match the brand's promise, customer trust and satisfaction decline (Suharyani & Setyowati, 2020). The role of firm-generated content—content created and published directly by companies on social media—is also increasingly important in shaping customer perceptions and trust (Heng Wei et al., 2023). Content such as videos, testimonials, or digital promotions aims to strengthen brand image and clarify service value. However, for Telkomsel, many customers feel that content highlighting service advantages does not align with the reality of the user experience, particularly regarding network stability and pricing (Utami & Kurniawan, 2022). This mismatch creates a gap between brand promise and actual experience (content–reality gap), potentially reducing brand trust and customer satisfaction (Rahman & Haris, 2023).

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between product quality, brand image, and brand trust on Telkomsel customer satisfaction. A study by Nuraini (2022) showed that product quality and brand image significantly influence Telkomsel prepaid card user satisfaction. Meanwhile, Sembiring's (2021) study found that service quality and customer value only explained 49.6% of the variation in customer satisfaction, suggesting other factors may be involved. To date, research specifically linking firm-generated content with brand trust and brand experience in the context of Telkomsel Prepaid is still limited. Most previous studies were cross-sectional with local samples, such as in Lubuklinggau and Medan, thus not reflecting national conditions (Setiawan, 2022). The limitations of previous research have created a clear research gap. First, few studies have empirically measured the alignment between company-published content and actual customer experiences in the context of prepaid services. Second, the relationship between firm-generated content, brand trust, and brand experience on Telkomsel customer satisfaction has not been studied simultaneously. Third, previous research has generally focused on the functional aspects of products, even though customer loyalty in the digital era is heavily influenced by emotional experiences and trust built through online interactions (Kotler & Keller, 2020). Therefore, this study offers novelty by combining the appropriateness of firm-generated content and actual customer experiences in shaping brand trust and its impact on Telkomsel Prepaid customer satisfaction. This approach differs from previous studies that focused solely on product quality or brand image. This study will also include data from various regions, both urban and remote, to more comprehensively illustrate variations in customer experience (Pratama & Lestari, 2024). Furthermore, this study has the potential to identify more effective digital brand communication strategies to narrow the gap between service expectations and reality.

Thus, this research is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to enriching the study of the relationship between firm-generated content, brand trust, and customer satisfaction in the telecommunications industry. Practically, the results of this study can serve as a basis for Telkomsel in developing a digital communication strategy that is more transparent and responsive to customer complaints, as well as strengthening user trust and loyalty. The company's success in maintaining consistency between brand promise and customer experience will be key to business sustainability amidst the increasingly competitive telecommunications industry in Indonesia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Brand Experience on Brand Trust

Brand experience is a consumer's subjective perception of interactions with a brand, encompassing sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects (Brakus et al., 2009). Consistent positive experiences strengthen consumer trust in a brand because these perceptions are formed through repeated evaluations of actual experiences (Zuhroh, 2015). When consumers have a pleasant experience, trust in the brand tends to increase, while negative experiences can decrease trust (Ferrinadewi, 2008). Several studies have shown a strong relationship between brand experience and brand trust. Kusdianto (2018) found that positive brand experiences significantly increase customer trust in a brand. Khan and Fatma (2017) also demonstrated that brand experience has a direct impact on brand trust in various service industry contexts. Research by Lee and Jeong (2014) supports these findings, with empirical evidence that the higher the perceived quality of the brand experience, the higher the level of consumer trust in that brand. Thus, brand experience plays a crucial role in creating perceptions of a brand's credibility and reliability.

H1: Brand experience has a positive effect on brand trust.

2.2. Firm-Generated Content on Brand Trust

In the digital context, brand trust is a major challenge because consumers no longer interact directly with products before purchasing (Stouthuysen et al., 2018). Therefore, companies need to utilize firm-generated content (FGC)—content officially created and disseminated by the company through digital media—to foster initial consumer trust (Heng Wei et al., 2023). FGC, which includes product information, testimonials, or official promotions, serves as a credible source of information that helps consumers recognize and evaluate brands before making purchase decisions (Singh & Matsui, 2017). Relevant, informative, and consistent content can strengthen perceptions of brand reliability and integrity, while content that is inconsistent with reality can damage customer trust. A study by Heng Wei et al. (2023) showed that FGC positively influences brand trust because it provides reliable information during the information search stage of the purchasing process. Therefore, the better the quality and credibility of a company's content, the greater consumer trust in that brand.

H2: Firm-generated content has a positive effect on brand trust.

2.3. Brand Trust towards Customer Satisfaction

Brand trust is consumer confidence in a company's ability and good intentions to fulfill its brand promises (Costabile in Rizan, 2012). When consumers believe that a brand consistently delivers the promised value and quality, they tend to feel safe and comfortable, which ultimately increases customer satisfaction (Kusdianto, 2018). Previous research has shown a positive relationship between brand trust and customer satisfaction. Caturani et al. (2019) concluded that increased brand trust directly increases customer satisfaction, while decreased trust decreases satisfaction. Similar results were found by Saputra and Dewi (2015), who found that brand trust significantly influences customer satisfaction across various product and service categories. This suggests that customers who trust a brand are not only more satisfied but also more loyal and more likely to make repeat purchases.

H3: Brand trust has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

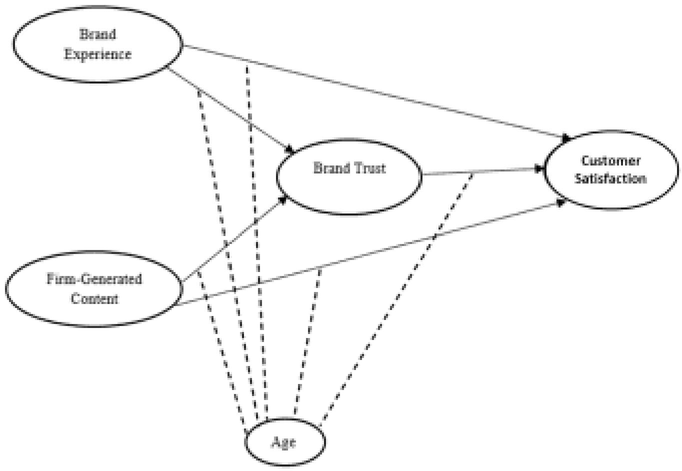

Figure 1. Research Framework

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This quantitative explanatory study was conducted in Aceh Province, Indonesia, focusing on Telkomsel customers as the research subjects. The study examines the relationship among four variables: brand experience and firm-generated content (independent variables), brand trust (mediating variable), and customer satisfaction (dependent variable). The population comprised all Telkomsel users in Aceh, estimated at 3,142,000 individuals (Purwanza et al., 2022). Using purposive sampling, 204 respondents were selected based on two main criteria: (1) active Telkomsel users residing in Aceh, and (2) aged 17 years or older (Sahir, 2021). Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms, employing a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree) to capture participants' perceptions of each construct. The measurement instruments were adapted from established scales to ensure validity and comparability across studies. Brand experience was measured with five indicators adopted from Brakus et al. (2009) and Khan & Fatma (2017); firm-generated content with four indicators from Heng Wei et al. (2023); brand trust with seven indicators from Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001) and Cheng et al. (2019); and customer satisfaction with three indicators from Chuenyindee et al. (2022). Each variable was operationalized at the interval level using standardized statements to ensure reliability and consistency.

Data analysis employed Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS software, suitable for complex models and moderate sample sizes (Hair et al., 2021). The assessment model followed three main criteria: convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted > 0.50), discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker and HTMT < 0.85), and composite reliability (CR > 0.70). This analytical approach allowed simultaneous testing of both measurement and structural models, evaluating the causal effects among brand experience, firm-generated content, brand trust, and customer satisfaction in the context of Telkomsel users in Aceh.

Table 1. Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker)

Variables	Brand Experience	Brand trust	Customer Satisfaction
Brand trust	0.814		
Customer Satisfaction	0.754	0.858	
Firm Generated Content	0.780	0.792	0.686

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Respondent Characteristics

The demographic profile indicates that the majority of respondents belong to the productive age group, with 42.4% aged 17–24 years and 31.4% aged 25–33 years. In terms of education, most respondents hold a Bachelor's degree (54.8%), followed by senior high school graduates (32.4%). Regarding employment status, 46.2% are employed, 24.8% are students, and 29.0% are unemployed. From a marital perspective, the data shows that 66.2% of respondents were unmarried, 32.4% were married, and only 1.4% were widowed or divorced. These characteristics reveal that the respondent base largely consists of young, educated individuals who are digitally active and represent Telkomsel's core market segment in Aceh Province. Their familiarity with mobile technology and social media aligns well with the study's focus on digital experience, firm-generated content, and brand perception.

4.2 Reliability and Validity Testing

All measurement constructs demonstrated excellent reliability and validity, confirming that the instruments used were both consistent and empirically sound. The Cronbach's Alpha values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 for all variables: Brand Experience (0.865), Brand Trust (0.930), Customer Satisfaction (0.908), and Firm-Generated Content (0.877). Similarly, Composite Reliability (CR) ranged between 0.902 and 0.944, surpassing Hair et al.'s (2021) criterion (>0.70), while Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values (0.649–0.784) confirmed convergent validity (AVE > 0.50).

Table 2. Validity and Reliability Test

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Brand Experience	0.865	0.868	0.902	0.649
Brand trust	0.930	0.932	0.944	0.705
Customer Satisfaction	0.908	0.912	0.935	0.784
Firm Generated Content	0.877	0.886	0.916	0.731

The outer loading results further validate each indicator's contribution to its construct. Brand Experience indicators range from 0.763–0.844, showing balanced representational strength, with item a5 (0.844) as the most dominant. Brand Trust indicators scored 0.775–0.882, where fulfilling service promises (a14) emerged as the strongest factor influencing consumer trust. Customer Satisfaction showed the highest stability (0.831–0.911), underscoring satisfaction and repurchase intention as primary reflections of loyalty. Firm-Generated Content achieved strong indicator loadings between 0.798–0.915, indicating that respondents' interest in Telkomsel's social media content plays a central role in shaping brand perception. Discriminant validity assessed via the HTMT ratio (0.686–0.858) confirmed that all constructs were distinct yet related within acceptable limits (<0.85).

4.3 Hypothesis Testing and Multi-Group Analysis

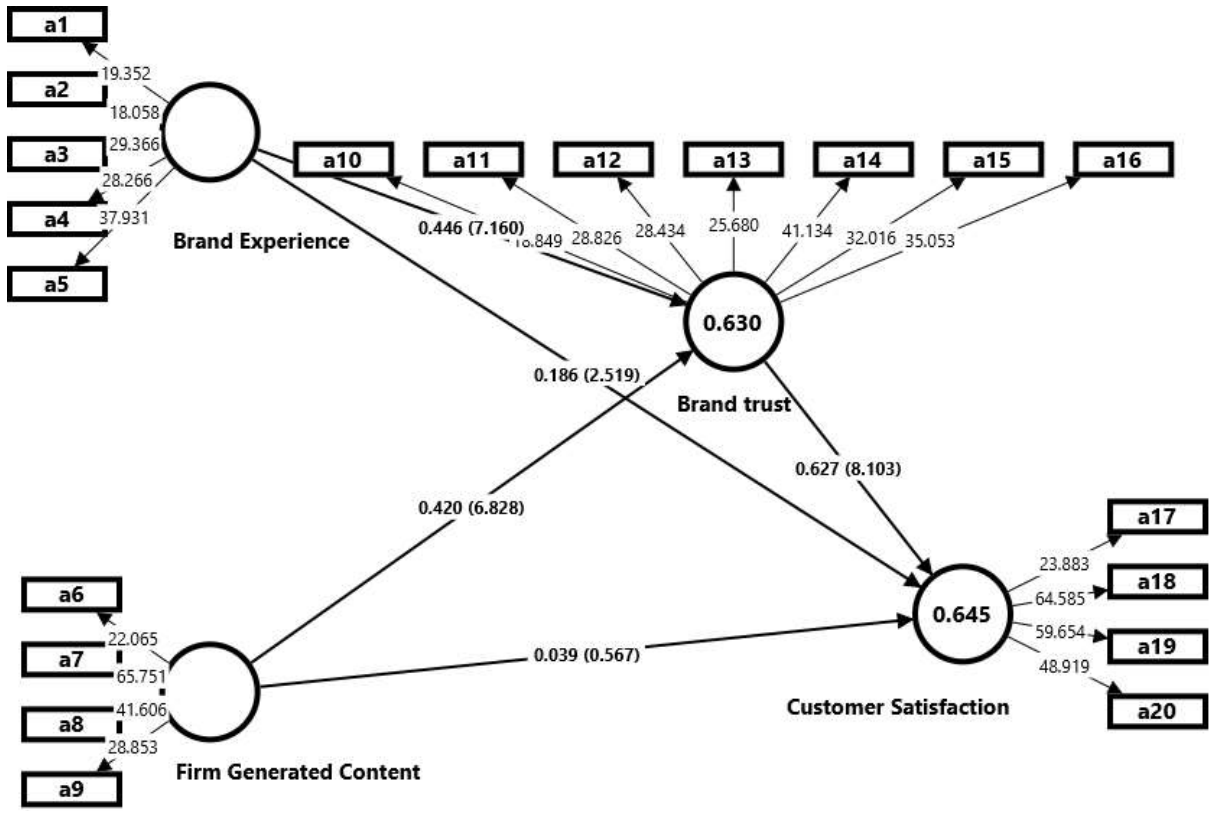

Figure 2. Structural Model

Table 3. The Result of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Brand Experience -> Brand trust	0.446	0.447	0.063	7,064	0.000
Brand Experience -> Customer Satisfaction	0.186	0.190	0.075	2,482	0.013
Brand trust -> Customer Satisfaction	0.627	0.623	0.075	8,361	0.000
Firm Generated Content -> Brand trust	0.420	0.418	0.062	6,746	0.000
Firm Generated Content -> Customer Satisfaction	0.039	0.039	0.068	0.576	0.565

Hypothesis testing using PLS-SEM revealed that Brand Experience significantly influences Brand Trust ($\beta = 0.446$; $t = 7.064$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that positive experiences with Telkomsel's products enhance consumer trust. Similarly, Brand Experience also directly influences Customer Satisfaction ($\beta = 0.186$; $t = 2.482$; $p = 0.013$), confirming that consistent user experiences improve satisfaction levels. The strongest relationship was found between Brand Trust and Customer Satisfaction ($\beta = 0.627$; $t = 8.361$; $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that trust serves as a critical determinant of customer satisfaction. Meanwhile, Firm-Generated Content significantly affects Brand Trust ($\beta = 0.420$; $t = 6.746$; $p < 0.001$), but its direct effect on Customer Satisfaction was statistically insignificant ($\beta = 0.039$; $p = 0.565$), suggesting that promotional content enhances credibility but does not directly elevate satisfaction without strong brand trust.

Table 4. Moderation Hypotheses Testing

Path	Difference (Young Gen - Old Gen)	1-tailed (Young Gen vs Old Gen) p-value	2-tailed (Young Gen vs Old Gen) p-value
Brand Experience -> Brand trust	0.003	0.5	1
Brand Experience -> Customer Satisfaction	-0.02	0.556	0.889
Brand trust -> Customer Satisfaction	0.183	0.207	0.414
Firm Generated Content -> Brand trust	-0.049	0.639	0.722
Firm Generated Content -> Customer Satisfaction	-0.071	0.624	0.751

Multi-group analysis comparing younger and older respondents revealed no significant generational differences across all structural paths. The effect of Brand Experience on Brand Trust (difference = 0.003; p = 1.000) and Customer Satisfaction (difference = −0.020; p = 0.889) was consistent between age groups. Likewise, Brand Trust's influence on Customer Satisfaction was slightly stronger among younger users (difference = 0.183) but not statistically significant (p = 0.414). The effects of Firm-Generated Content on Brand Trust (difference = −0.049; p = 0.722) and Customer Satisfaction (difference = −0.071; p = 0.751) also showed no meaningful divergence. These findings imply that both young and older users perceive Telkomsel's brand experience, trust, and content communication similarly. In other words, customer satisfaction across age groups is shaped more by service quality, reliability, and network stability than by promotional messaging alone.

5. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings highlight the critical role of brand experience and brand trust in shaping customer satisfaction among Telkomsel users in Aceh. Managers should prioritize creating meaningful and consistent customer experiences across all service points—ranging from network performance to after-sales support. Since firm-generated content affects brand trust but not satisfaction directly, Telkomsel's marketing teams must ensure that promotional materials align closely with actual service quality to prevent expectation gaps. Strengthening two-way digital communication and efficiently addressing user feedback on social media can further enhance perceived transparency and reliability. Investment in experience-based marketing—such as interactive campaigns, personalized offers, and storytelling emphasizing reliability—would likely yield stronger emotional engagement and sustained trust.

6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that brand experience and firm-generated content significantly influence brand trust, which in turn strongly determines customer satisfaction. The mediating role of brand trust confirms that customer confidence acts as the bridge linking experience and satisfaction. Although firm-generated content increases trust, it does not directly affect satisfaction unless the overall service experience supports the promotional claims. Moreover, generational comparisons revealed no significant differences, suggesting that Telkomsel's brand strategy resonates similarly across age segments. Thus, maintaining service reliability and trust consistency is more impactful than demographic targeting alone.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study was limited to Telkomsel customers within Aceh Province, which may limit generalizability to other regions or service contexts. The cross-sectional design also limits the ability to infer long-term causal effects. Future research could adopt longitudinal or comparative multi-regional approaches to capture changes in customer perception over time. Including user-generated content (UGC) and service quality dimensions as moderating variables may provide deeper insight into how digital engagement shapes satisfaction and loyalty in the evolving telecommunications landscape.

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