



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38035/dijemss.v7i6>
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Digital Marketing and Brand Image as Determinants of Customer Trust and Booking Intention: A Study of Hotels in Medan

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Abstract: The hotel industry has increasingly adopted digital marketing strategies to remain competitive in the era of online travel platforms and information transparency. In this context, digital marketing activities and brand image are expected to play a critical role in building customer trust and influencing booking intention. This study aims to analyze the effect of digital marketing and brand image on customer trust and booking intention, with customer trust positioned as a mediating variable. The research focuses on three-star hotels in Medan City as the object of analysis. This study employed a quantitative approach using a survey method. The population consisted of hotel guests who stayed at five three-star hotels in Medan City during the period from August to December 2025, with a total population of 4,100 guests. The sample size was determined based on Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) requirements, using five times the number of indicators. With 45 measurement indicators, a total of 225 respondents were selected using proportional sampling from each hotel. Data were analyzed using SEM to test both direct and indirect relationships among variables. The results indicate that digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on customer trust. Brand image is also found to significantly influence customer trust. Furthermore, customer trust has a positive and significant effect on booking intention. The mediation analysis shows that customer trust partially mediates the relationship between digital marketing and booking intention, as well as between brand image and booking intention. These findings suggest that digital marketing and brand image contribute to booking intention primarily through the formation of customer trust. This study contributes to the hospitality and marketing literature by providing empirical evidence from the hotel industry, particularly three-star hotels in Medan City. Practically, the findings imply that hotel managers should prioritize credible digital marketing communication and consistent brand image development to strengthen customer trust and increase booking intention.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Brand Image, Customer Trust, Booking Intention, Hotel Industry.

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry in urban destinations has undergone substantial changes due to the combined effects of economic growth, tourism development, and digital transformation. In Indonesia, cities with strong commercial and business activities increasingly require adequate accommodation infrastructure to support business travel, tourism, and related economic activities. Medan City, as the economic and commercial center of North Sumatra, represents a strategic location where hotel development continues to grow in response to increasing demand for accommodation services.

Empirical evidence shows that the hotel industry in North Sumatra, including Medan City, has experienced significant growth in terms of hotel capacity and guest volume. Data indicate that the province has a large number of star-rated hotels with substantial room capacity, serving thousands of guests per day. The majority of hotel guests consist of domestic travelers, reflecting the strong role of local business activities and interregional mobility in driving hotel demand. These conditions position Medan as an important destination for business travel and Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions (MICE), where three-star hotels play a vital role in accommodating business-oriented and general travelers.

Previous research on three-star business hotels in Medan emphasizes that hotel development is closely linked to economic growth, trade activities, and the increasing need for supporting infrastructure. Hotels are no longer viewed merely as accommodation providers but as integral components of urban economic systems that support business transactions, meetings, and tourism-related activities. This finding highlights the importance of competitiveness among hotels, particularly in the three-star segment, which must offer reliable services while maintaining affordable pricing and operational efficiency.

In the current digital era, competition among hotels is increasingly shaped by digital visibility and online communication rather than physical facilities alone. Digital marketing has become a strategic instrument for hotels to present service information, communicate value propositions, and interact with potential guests prior to their arrival. Through online travel agents, social media platforms, and official hotel websites, digital marketing enables hotels to reduce information asymmetry and influence customers' perceptions during the decision-making process. Studies in digital marketing literature suggest that effective digital marketing practices—characterized by information accuracy, interactivity, and responsiveness—can significantly reduce perceived risk in service purchases and enhance customer confidence.

Beyond digital marketing activities, brand image has emerged as a critical factor influencing customer trust in the hospitality industry. Brand image reflects customers' overall impressions of a hotel, including perceived service quality, professionalism, and reliability. In service contexts such as hotels, where customers cannot evaluate service quality before consumption, brand image often functions as a signal of trustworthiness. This role becomes particularly important for three-star hotels in Medan, which cater to heterogeneous customer segments, including general travelers, entrepreneurs, and government employees.

Customer trust is widely recognized as a key determinant of behavioral intention in service industries. Trust represents customers' belief that a hotel will deliver services as promised and provide a safe and satisfactory experience. Relationship marketing theory emphasizes trust as a foundational element for building long-term relationships and influencing customer behavioral intentions, including booking decisions. In the hotel industry, trust reduces concerns related to service uncertainty, payment security, and overall satisfaction, thereby increasing the likelihood of booking.

Booking intention refers to customers' willingness to make reservations and choose a particular hotel over competing alternatives. For three-star hotels in Medan, booking intention is influenced by both functional considerations and perceptual factors. Empirical observations indicate that hotel guests in this segment consist predominantly of general customers (55%), followed by entrepreneurs (30%) and government employees (15%). This composition suggests that hotels must address diverse expectations related to reliability, brand credibility, and ease of access to information—factors that are strongly associated with digital marketing quality and brand image.

Despite the growing relevance of digital marketing and brand image in shaping hotel competitiveness, empirical studies that integrate these variables with customer trust and booking intention—particularly in the context of three-star hotels in Medan—remain limited. Existing research on hotel development in Medan largely focuses on infrastructure, capacity, and economic functions, while the role of digital marketing and brand-based trust in influencing booking decisions has received less scholarly attention. Moreover, many studies examine direct relationships without adequately considering the mediating role of customer trust.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze the effect of digital marketing and brand image on customer trust and booking intention, with customer trust positioned as a mediating variable. By focusing on five three-star hotels in Medan City and incorporating empirical insights from prior research on hotel development in the region, this study seeks to contribute to hospitality marketing literature and provide practical guidance for hotel managers in enhancing digital competitiveness and customer trust.

Conceptual Framework & Hypotheses – with References

Digital Marketing and Customer Trust

Digital marketing enables hotels to communicate service information, pricing, promotions, and customer experiences through digital platforms such as websites, social media, and online travel agents. High-quality digital marketing reduces information asymmetry and perceived risk, which are critical factors in trust formation in service industries. Prior studies confirm that informative, interactive, and transparent digital marketing activities positively influence customer trust, particularly in online and hospitality contexts (Kannan & Li, 2017; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Gefen et al., 2003).

H1: Digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on customer trust.

Brand Image and Customer Trust

Brand image reflects customers' perceptions and associations regarding a hotel's credibility, professionalism, and service quality. In hospitality services, brand image functions as a trust signal, especially when customers cannot evaluate service quality prior to consumption. Empirical evidence indicates that a strong brand image reduces perceived risk and enhances customer trust in service providers (Keller, 2013; Liu et al., 2020; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

H2: Brand image has a positive and significant effect on customer trust.

Customer Trust and Booking Intention

Customer trust is a fundamental determinant of behavioral intention in service and hospitality industries. Trust reduces uncertainty and strengthens customers' willingness to engage in transactions, including hotel bookings. Relationship marketing theory emphasizes that trust directly influences customers' intention to purchase and maintain long-term relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Pavlou, 2003).

H3: Customer trust has a positive and significant effect on booking intention.

The Mediating Role of Customer Trust

Digital marketing and brand image are expected to influence booking intention indirectly through customer trust. Previous studies suggest that trust mediates the relationship between marketing communication and customer behavioral intention, particularly in digital and service-based environments characterized by high uncertainty (Gefen et al., 2003; Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002; Pavlou, 2003).

H4: Customer trust mediates the relationship between digital marketing and booking intention.

H5: Customer trust mediates the relationship between brand image and booking intention.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design with an explanatory approach to examine the causal relationships among digital marketing, brand image, customer trust, and booking intention in the hotel industry. The explanatory design was selected to test both direct and indirect effects among the research variables within a single analytical framework. A survey method was used to collect primary data from hotel guests, as it is appropriate for capturing perceptions and behavioral intentions in hospitality and marketing research.

Research Object

The research object of this study consisted of **five three-star hotels located in Medan City**. These hotels were selected because they represent the three-star hotel segment that serves diverse customer groups, including general travelers, entrepreneurs, and government employees. The selected hotels operate within similar market conditions and compete for customers through digital platforms and brand positioning.

Population

The population of this study comprised hotel guests who stayed at the selected three-star hotels during the period **August 2025 to December 2025**. The total population across the five hotels amounted to **4,100 guests**, distributed as follows:

1. Hotel 1: 750 guests
2. Hotel 2: 550 guests
3. Hotel 3: 800 guests
4. Hotel 4: 1,050 guests
5. Hotel 5: 950 guests

This population was considered appropriate for examining booking behavior, as all individuals had direct experience with hotel services and digital booking platforms.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sampling technique used in this study was **proportional purposive sampling**. Respondents were selected based on the criterion that they had completed a hotel stay at one of the selected hotels during the research period. This criterion ensured that respondents possessed sufficient experience to evaluate digital marketing activities, brand image, trust, and booking intention.

The sample size was determined based on Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) requirements. According to SEM guidelines, an adequate sample size can be obtained by multiplying the number of indicators by a factor of five to ten to ensure stable parameter estimation. In this study, the total number of measurement indicators was **45**, resulting in a minimum required sample size of **225 respondents** (5×45).

The sample was distributed proportionally across the five hotels based on their respective population sizes, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Population and Sample Distribution

Hotel	Population	Proportion (%)	Sample
Hotel 1	750	18.3	41
Hotel 2	550	13.4	30
Hotel 3	800	19.5	44
Hotel 4	1,050	25.6	58
Hotel 5	950	23.2	52
Total	4,100	100	225

Data Collection Method

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed to hotel guests after their stay. The questionnaire was administered either in printed form or online to ensure accessibility and response convenience. Respondents were informed of the research purpose and assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. This procedure was intended to reduce response bias and enhance data accuracy.

Measurement of Variables

All variables were measured using indicators adapted from established marketing and hospitality literature. Responses were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

1. **Digital Marketing** was measured using indicators related to online information quality, content attractiveness, interactivity, responsiveness, and ease of access to digital platforms.
2. **Brand Image** was measured through indicators reflecting brand credibility, reputation, service professionalism, and overall brand perception.
3. **Customer Trust** was measured using indicators related to reliability, security, honesty, and confidence in the hotel's services.
4. **Booking Intention** was measured through indicators reflecting willingness to make future bookings, intention to recommend, and preference for the hotel over competitors.

Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using **Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)**. SEM was chosen due to its ability to simultaneously test multiple relationships among latent variables and to examine mediation effects within a comprehensive model. The analysis involved two main stages: evaluation of the measurement model to assess validity and reliability, followed by evaluation of the structural model to test the proposed hypotheses. The mediating role of customer trust was examined using indirect effect analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed by ensuring voluntary participation and informed consent from all respondents. Respondents were assured that the data collected would be used solely for academic purposes and that their identities would remain confidential. These measures were implemented to maintain research integrity and ethical compliance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Analysis of Respondents

Descriptive analysis was conducted to describe the profile of respondents involved in this study. A total of **225 valid questionnaires** were analyzed. All respondents were hotel guests

who stayed at five three-star hotels in Medan City during the period from August to December 2025.

Based on the occupational background, the majority of respondents were **general customers**, followed by **entrepreneurs** and **government employees**. This distribution reflects the customer composition of three-star hotels in Medan, which serve diverse market segments with varying accommodation needs.

Table 2. Respondent Characteristics

Category	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Occupation	General customers	124	55%
	Entrepreneurs	68	30%
	Government employees	33	15%
Total		225	100%

The dominance of general customers indicates that accessibility of information, perceived reliability, and ease of booking are critical factors influencing hotel selection. Meanwhile, the presence of entrepreneurs and government employees suggests that trust and brand credibility remain important considerations in booking decisions.

Measurement Model Evaluation

Prior to testing the structural relationships, the measurement model was evaluated to ensure construct validity and reliability. Indicator reliability was assessed through standardized factor loadings, which exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70. Convergent validity was confirmed by Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values above 0.50 for all constructs. Composite reliability values were also above 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. These results confirm that the measurement instruments used in this study were valid and reliable, allowing further evaluation of the structural model.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was analyzed to test the proposed hypotheses concerning the relationships among digital marketing, brand image, customer trust, and booking intention. Path coefficients, t-values, and significance levels were examined to assess the strength and significance of each relationship.

The results indicate that **digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on customer trust**, suggesting that effective digital communication enhances customers' confidence in hotel services. **Brand image also shows a positive and significant effect on customer trust**, indicating that a favorable hotel image strengthens perceptions of reliability and professionalism. Furthermore, **customer trust has a positive and significant effect on booking intention**, confirming the importance of trust in influencing hotel booking decisions.

The structural model analysis was conducted to examine the causal relationships among digital marketing, brand image, customer trust, and booking intention in the context of three-star hotels in Medan City. The evaluation of the structural model focused on the magnitude and significance of the path coefficients, as well as the role of customer trust as a mediating variable.

The results indicate that digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on customer trust ($\beta = 0.46$; $t = 6.18$; $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that improvements in digital marketing activities—such as the quality of online information, ease of access through online travel platforms, and responsiveness to customer inquiries—contribute substantially to the development of customer trust. In the context of three-star hotels in Medan, where customers rely heavily on digital channels prior to booking, effective digital marketing reduces

uncertainty and enhances customers' confidence in hotel services. The relatively strong path coefficient indicates that digital marketing is a key determinant of trust formation.

The analysis also reveals that brand image has a positive and significant effect on customer trust ($\beta = 0.52$; $t = 7.03$; $p < 0.001$). This result demonstrates that brand image exerts a stronger influence on customer trust than digital marketing. A positive brand image—reflected through perceptions of professionalism, service consistency, and reliability—serves as an important trust signal for customers who cannot directly evaluate hotel services before their stay. For three-star hotels, which compete within a price-sensitive yet credibility-driven segment, brand image plays a crucial role in assuring customers of service quality.

Furthermore, the findings show that customer trust has a strong positive effect on booking intention ($\beta = 0.59$; $t = 8.21$; $p < 0.001$). This result confirms that trust is a dominant predictor of customers' willingness to book hotels. Customers who trust a hotel are more likely to proceed with reservations, recommend the hotel to others, and prioritize it over competing alternatives. The magnitude of this coefficient indicates that trust functions as a central mechanism translating marketing and branding efforts into actual behavioral intention.

In addition to the direct effects, mediation analysis was conducted to examine the indirect relationships between digital marketing and booking intention, as well as between brand image and booking intention through customer trust. The results show that customer trust significantly mediates the relationship between digital marketing and booking intention ($\beta = 0.27$; $t = 4.65$; $p < 0.001$). This finding implies that digital marketing does not directly influence booking intention unless it first enhances customer trust. In other words, promotional intensity alone is insufficient; the perceived credibility of digital marketing messages determines their effectiveness.

Similarly, customer trust significantly mediates the relationship between brand image and booking intention ($\beta = 0.31$; $t = 5.12$; $p < 0.001$). This indicates that brand image contributes to booking intention primarily by strengthening customer trust. Hotels with a strong brand image are perceived as more reliable, which increases customers' willingness to book. The larger indirect effect of brand image compared to digital marketing suggests that brand-related perceptions may have a more enduring influence on trust formation in the hotel industry.

Overall, the structural model results demonstrate that all hypothesized relationships are empirically supported. Digital marketing and brand image influence booking intention indirectly through customer trust, confirming the mediating role of trust. These findings highlight that trust is not merely an outcome of marketing activities but a strategic asset that connects digital marketing and brand image with customers' booking decisions. For three-star hotels in Medan, strengthening customer trust through credible digital marketing and consistent brand image is essential for improving booking performance in a competitive hospitality market.

Hypothesis Testing Results
Table 3. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Digital Marketing → Customer Trust	0.46	6.18	< 0.001	Supported
H2	Brand Image → Customer Trust	0.52	7.03	< 0.001	Supported
H3	Customer Trust → Booking Intention	0.59	8.21	< 0.001	Supported

H4	Digital Marketing → Customer Trust → Booking Intention	0.27	4.65	< 0.001	Supported
H5	Brand Image → Customer Trust → Booking Intention	0.31	5.12	< 0.001	Supported

The results demonstrate that all proposed hypotheses are supported. Customer trust plays a mediating role in the relationship between digital marketing and booking intention, as well as between brand image and booking intention.

Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

The coefficient of determination indicates that **digital marketing and brand image jointly explain 51% of the variance in customer trust ($R^2 = 0.51$)**. This suggests that more than half of customers' trust in three-star hotels in Medan can be attributed to the quality of digital marketing activities and the strength of brand image.

Furthermore, **customer trust explains 55% of the variance in booking intention ($R^2 = 0.55$)**. This result indicates that customer trust is a strong predictor of booking intention in the hotel industry, particularly in the three-star hotel segment.

The coefficient of determination (R^2) reflects the extent to which the exogenous variables in the structural model explain variance in the endogenous constructs. In this study, digital marketing and brand image jointly explain 51% of the variance in customer trust ($R^2 = 0.51$). This indicates that more than half of customers' trust in three-star hotels in Medan is shaped by the quality of digital marketing activities and the strength of the hotel's brand image.

Practical Contribution

From a practical perspective, this level of explanatory power demonstrates that customer trust is not formed randomly or solely through personal experience, but is significantly influenced by managerial actions related to digital marketing and brand management. For hotel managers, this finding implies that strategic investments in digital marketing—such as improving the clarity of online information, enhancing responsiveness through digital channels, and maintaining consistency across online travel platforms—can substantially strengthen customer trust. Similarly, efforts to build and maintain a credible brand image, including consistent service standards and positive online reputation, are likely to yield tangible benefits in terms of trust formation.

In the context of three-star hotels, which operate in a highly competitive and price-sensitive market, the ability to influence more than half of customer trust through controllable marketing variables provides a clear strategic advantage. This suggests that hotels do not need to rely solely on physical facilities or price competition, but can leverage digital marketing and brand image as cost-effective tools to enhance trust and competitiveness.

The model further shows that customer trust explains 55% of the variance in booking intention ($R^2 = 0.55$). Practically, this indicates that trust is a dominant driver of customers' booking decisions. For hotel operators, this means that initiatives aimed at increasing trust—such as transparent pricing, accurate service descriptions, and consistent brand messaging—are likely to have a direct and meaningful impact on booking performance. In markets like Medan, where customers compare multiple hotel options online, trust becomes a decisive factor that differentiates one hotel from another.

Contribution to the Development of Knowledge

From a theoretical standpoint, the R^2 values confirm the central role of customer trust within hospitality and digital marketing research. The findings provide empirical support for relationship marketing theory by demonstrating that trust serves as a key explanatory

mechanism linking marketing efforts and customer behavioral intention. By explaining a substantial proportion of variance in both customer trust and booking intention, the model validates trust-centered frameworks as robust tools for understanding customer behavior in digital service environments.

Moreover, the relatively high R^2 values indicate that integrating digital marketing and brand image into trust-based models enhances their explanatory power, particularly in the context of mid-scale hotels. This contributes to the literature by extending existing hospitality marketing models, which often emphasize service quality or price, to include digital communication and brand perception as critical antecedents of trust. The results also highlight areas for future theoretical development, as the unexplained variance suggests opportunities to incorporate additional constructs such as electronic service quality, perceived risk, or customer experience to further refine trust-based models.

Overall, the coefficient of determination results demonstrate that the proposed structural model offers both practical relevance and theoretical significance. Practically, it provides actionable insights for hotel managers in Medan to design trust-oriented digital marketing strategies. Theoretically, it contributes to the advancement of hospitality and digital marketing research by empirically clarifying the explanatory strength of trust as a mediating construct in booking behavior.

Summary of Results

Overall, the results show that digital marketing and brand image significantly influence customer trust, which in turn drives booking intention. The findings confirm that customer trust functions as a key mediating mechanism that translates marketing efforts and brand perceptions into customers' intention to book hotels in Medan City.

Discussion

This study examined the role of digital marketing and brand image in shaping customer trust and booking intention in three-star hotels in Medan City. The findings provide important insights into how digital-based marketing strategies and brand perceptions influence customer decision-making in the hospitality industry, particularly within a competitive mid-scale hotel segment.

The results indicate that digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on customer trust. This finding confirms that digital marketing functions not merely as a promotional tool, but as a mechanism for reducing uncertainty in service evaluation. In the hotel context, where services are intangible and cannot be assessed prior to consumption, customers rely heavily on digital information to form expectations. The significant influence of digital marketing on trust suggests that the accuracy, clarity, and accessibility of online information—such as hotel websites, online travel agents, and social media platforms—play a critical role in shaping customers' confidence before making booking decisions. This result supports previous studies in digital marketing and hospitality research, which emphasize the importance of credible and interactive online communication in trust formation.

Brand image was found to have a stronger effect on customer trust compared to digital marketing. This finding highlights the role of brand image as a long-term trust signal in the hospitality industry. For three-star hotels in Medan, brand image reflects accumulated perceptions of service consistency, professionalism, and reliability. Customers, particularly entrepreneurs and government employees, tend to associate a strong brand image with reduced risk and predictable service quality. This supports branding theory, which suggests that brand image acts as a heuristic that simplifies decision-making in service environments characterized by uncertainty.

The strong positive relationship between customer trust and booking intention underscores trust as a central determinant of hotel booking behavior. Customers who trust a hotel are more likely to make reservations, recommend the hotel to others, and prioritize it over competing alternatives. This finding aligns with relationship marketing theory, which positions trust as a key driver of behavioral intention and long-term customer relationships. In the context of three-star hotels, where price competition is intense and switching costs are low, trust becomes a crucial differentiator that influences customers' willingness to commit to a booking.

The mediation analysis provides further insight into the mechanisms through which digital marketing and brand image influence booking intention. The results demonstrate that customer trust mediates the relationship between digital marketing and booking intention, as well as between brand image and booking intention. This indicates that digital marketing activities and brand image alone are insufficient to directly generate booking intention unless they successfully foster customer trust. In other words, aggressive promotion or brand visibility without perceived credibility may fail to translate into actual bookings.

From a contextual perspective, the findings are particularly relevant given the composition of hotel guests in this study. With the majority of customers being general travelers, followed by entrepreneurs and government employees, hotels must address diverse expectations related to reliability, transparency, and service assurance. Digital marketing strategies that emphasize informative content, clear pricing, and responsive communication, combined with consistent brand positioning, are essential for building trust across these customer segments.

Overall, the discussion highlights that customer trust functions as a strategic bridge connecting digital marketing and brand image with booking intention. The findings extend existing hospitality marketing literature by demonstrating that trust-centered models are highly applicable to three-star hotels in developing urban destinations such as Medan. By empirically validating the mediating role of customer trust, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how digital marketing and brand image contribute to hotel booking behavior.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effect of digital marketing and brand image on customer trust and booking intention in the context of three-star hotels in Medan City. The findings confirm that both digital marketing and brand image play significant roles in shaping customer trust, which in turn strongly influences booking intention. These results highlight that trust is a critical mechanism through which marketing and branding efforts translate into customers' booking decisions in the hospitality industry.

The results demonstrate that digital marketing contributes to customer trust by reducing information uncertainty and enhancing customers' confidence prior to booking. Meanwhile, brand image exerts an even stronger influence on trust by signaling service reliability and professionalism. Customer trust was found to be a dominant predictor of booking intention, indicating that customers are more likely to book hotels they perceive as trustworthy, particularly in the three-star hotel segment where competition is intense and service differentiation is limited.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the hospitality and digital marketing literature by empirically validating customer trust as a mediating variable between digital marketing, brand image, and booking intention. The findings reinforce relationship marketing theory and extend its application to the context of mid-scale hotels in developing urban destinations. By integrating digital marketing and brand image into a trust-based framework, this study enhances the explanatory power of models used to understand booking behavior in the hotel industry.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that hotel managers should prioritize trust-building strategies as part of their digital marketing and branding efforts. Investments in credible digital communication, accurate service information, and consistent brand positioning are likely to increase customer trust and, consequently, booking intention. These implications are particularly relevant for three-star hotels in Medan, which must compete not only on price but also on perceived reliability and service assurance.

Overall, this study emphasizes that digital marketing and brand image alone are insufficient to generate booking intention unless they are effectively translated into customer trust. By focusing on trust as a strategic asset, hotels can strengthen their competitive position and improve booking performance in an increasingly digitalized hospitality market.

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