

FROM ADMIRATION TO ALLEGIANCE: THE IMPACT OF CELEBRITY BRAND CONNECTION ON BRAND LOYALTY IN HALAL SKINCARE AMONG GEN Z

Yolanda Soedibyo*, Hananiel Mennoverdi Gunawan
Universitas Pelita Harapan, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the role of Celebrity Brand Connection (CBC) in influencing consumer behavior toward halal skincare products in Indonesia. In recent years, the halal skincare market has grown significantly due to increasing awareness of religious compliance, ethical consumption, and health conscious. Simultaneously, celebrity endorsements have become a prevalent marketing strategy, aiming to build trust and ultimately brand loyalty. The present research explores the extent to which CBC influences halal skincare purchase decisions by examining four hypotheses derived from the constructs of product quality, customer experience, trust, and brand loyalty. Using a quantitative method, primary data were collected from 105 respondents through structured questionnaires distributed online. The data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The analysis assessed the validity, reliability, and significance of the proposed relationships between variables. The results indicate that Celebrity Brand Connection significantly influences trust and brand loyalty, confirming three out of the four hypotheses.

Keywords: Celebrity Brand Connection; Quality Product; Customer Experience; Trust; Brand Loyalty.

*Corresponding Author: yolanda.soedibyo@lecturer.uph.edu

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary branding research increasingly conceptualizes brands not merely as product identifiers, but as symbolic and relational entities that enable emotional, psychological, and identity-based connections with consumers. In highly competitive markets, consumer loyalty is no longer driven primarily by functional attributes or price considerations; rather, it emerges from the extent to which brands resonate with consumers' self-concepts and value systems (Aaker, 1997; Keller, 2013). This shift has redirected branding scholarship toward examining how enduring psychological bonds between consumers and brands are formed and sustained over time.

Within this relational branding paradigm, celebrity endorsement has long been recognized as a prominent strategic tool. However, prior research has predominantly examined celebrity endorsement effects through surface-level outcomes such as brand awareness, brand attitude, or purchase intention (Erdogan, 1999). Although these studies demonstrate the persuasive power of celebrities in enhancing brand evaluations, they offer limited theoretical explanation regarding the relational mechanisms through which celebrity involvement translates into enduring outcomes such as brand loyalty. Consequently, celebrity endorsement has often been positioned as a tactical communication instrument rather than a relational construct grounded in consumer–brand theory.

To address this limitation, recent scholarship has introduced the concept of Celebrity Brand Connection (CBC), which refers to consumers' perceived psychological linkage between a celebrity endorser and a brand. Unlike traditional endorsement perspectives that emphasize message effectiveness or credibility alone, CBC highlights consumers' subjective perceptions of symbolic congruence, identification, and perceived fit between the celebrity and the brand. By focusing on how celebrities become meaningfully integrated into brand meaning, CBC provides a theoretically richer explanation of how celebrity endorsement can contribute to long-term relational outcomes. Despite its conceptual relevance, empirical research on CBC remains limited, particularly in explaining loyalty-oriented outcomes rather than short-term evaluative responses.

This theoretical gap becomes more pronounced within value-laden markets such as halal consumer goods. Halal brands operate not only within commercial frameworks but also within moral, religious, and identity-based systems, where trust, authenticity, and value congruence are central to consumer decision-making. Existing halal branding research has largely focused on certification, religiosity, or halal awareness, offering insufficient insight into how relational branding mechanisms—such as CBC—function in shaping consumer loyalty in this context.

Moreover, Generation Z represents a particularly relevant consumer segment for examining CBC. As digital natives, Gen Z consumers demonstrate heightened sensitivity to authenticity, symbolic meaning, and identity expression through brands. Their intensive engagement with social media platforms increases exposure to celebrities and influencers, fostering parasocial relationships that blur the boundaries between mediated communication and perceived interpersonal interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Labrecque, 2014). These dynamics suggest that CBC may operate as a critical mechanism linking celebrity endorsement to deeper forms of consumer–brand attachment among Gen Z.

Parasocial Interaction Theory offers a robust theoretical lens for understanding how CBC may influence brand loyalty. Originally proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956), the theory explains how individuals develop one-sided yet emotionally meaningful relationships with media figures, perceiving them as familiar and trustworthy despite the absence of direct interaction. Contemporary studies demonstrate that such parasocial relationships with celebrities and influencers can enhance perceived authenticity, trust, and relational closeness, which subsequently shape brand-related evaluations and behaviours (Chung & Cho, 2017; Labrecque, 2014; Tukachinsky, 2011). When a celebrity perceived as credible and value-congruent is strongly associated with a brand, the psychological bond formed with the celebrity may transfer to the brand itself, thereby strengthening consumer–brand relationships.

In halal branding contexts, this mechanism may be particularly influential. Celebrities who are perceived as embodying Islamic values and moral integrity can reinforce consumers' trust and identification with halal brands, facilitating loyalty formation. Prior research has consistently established trust as a key antecedent of brand loyalty, encompassing both attitudinal and behavioural dimensions (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Nevertheless, empirical studies that integrate Celebrity Brand

Connection, parasocial interaction, and brand loyalty within halal skincare markets—especially among Generation Z consumers—remain scarce.

Accordingly, this study seeks to address this theoretical gap by examining the effect of Celebrity Brand Connection on brand loyalty in the halal skincare industry among Generation Z consumers. By positioning CBC as a relational and identity-based construct rather than a mere promotional tactic, this research contributes to branding and consumer behavior literature by advancing understanding of how celebrity–brand relationships foster loyalty in ethically grounded and value-driven markets.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Product Quality and Customer Trust

Product quality represents consumers' evaluative judgment of a product's ability to consistently perform its core functions and meet expected standards. Rather than merely reflecting technical attributes, perceived product quality functions as a market signal of firm competence and reliability, thereby reducing perceived risk in consumption decisions (Garvin, 1987; Zeithaml, 1988). In classical marketing theory, product quality is therefore positioned as a foundational driver of customer trust, as consistent performance reinforces consumers' confidence in a brand's promises.

From a relationship marketing perspective, repeated exposure to reliable product performance is expected to foster trust by signaling predictability and functional dependability (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). High product quality reduces uncertainty and strengthens beliefs that a brand is capable of delivering expected value over time, which is particularly important in categories involving personal use and perceived risk, such as skincare products.

However, recent consumer behavior literature suggests that in highly standardized and experience-intensive markets, product quality may operate as a **hygiene factor** rather than a primary trust-building mechanism (Oliver, 2010). Once minimum acceptable quality thresholds are met, consumers may no longer differentiate brands based on functional performance alone. Instead, trust formation increasingly relies on symbolic, relational, and experiential cues that extend beyond the product itself.

This shift is especially relevant in halal skincare markets targeting Generation Z consumers. Given the widespread availability of halal-certified products with comparable functional quality, trust may be shaped less by technical product attributes and more by perceived authenticity, moral alignment, and relational signals communicated through branding and endorsement strategies. Accordingly, while product quality remains a necessary condition, its direct influence on customer trust warrants empirical examination rather than theoretical assumption.

H1: Product Quality has a positive effect on Customer Trust.

Celebrity Brand Connection, Parasocial Interaction, and Customer Trust

Celebrity Brand Connection (CBC) refers to consumers' perceived psychological and symbolic linkage between a celebrity endorser and a brand, reflecting the extent to which the celebrity is perceived as embodying the brand's identity, values, and meaning. This construct is theoretically grounded in Parasocial Interaction (PSI) Theory, which explains how individuals develop one-sided yet emotionally meaningful relationships with media figures through repeated mediated exposure (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Parasocial relationships foster perceived familiarity, intimacy, and trust toward celebrities, even in the absence of direct interaction (Tukachinsky, 2011). In marketing contexts, these perceived relationships can be transferred to endorsed brands through associative learning and symbolic meaning transfer processes (McCracken, 1989). When consumers perceive a strong alignment between a celebrity and a brand, the emotional bond formed with the celebrity becomes embedded within the brand itself. Importantly, CBC is conceptually distinct from traditional endorsement credibility or influencer trust. While endorsement credibility emphasizes source characteristics such as expertise, attractiveness, or trustworthiness, CBC captures a brand-level relational mechanism in which the celebrity becomes an integral component of brand meaning. Thus, CBC moves beyond message effectiveness and functions

as a conduit through which parasocial bonds contribute to consumer–brand trust. In halal skincare contexts, where moral integrity, authenticity, and value congruence are central evaluative criteria, a strong celebrity–brand connection serves as a symbolic signal of ethical alignment. Celebrities perceived as embodying Islamic values or moral consistency enhance consumers’ confidence in the brand’s sincerity and integrity, thereby strengthening customer trust.

H2: Celebrity Brand Connection has a positive effect on Customer Trust.

Customer Experience and Customer Trust

Customer experience encompasses consumers’ cognitive, emotional, sensory, and behavioral responses arising from cumulative interactions with a brand across multiple touchpoints (Brakus et al., 2009). Rather than isolated encounters, customer experience reflects an ongoing evaluative process through which consumers form holistic judgments about a brand’s competence and benevolence.

From a relational marketing perspective, positive and consistent customer experiences function as trust-building signals by demonstrating responsiveness, reliability, and concern for consumer well-being (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Experiential cues such as ease of interaction, emotional resonance, and perceived personalization reduce uncertainty and reinforce consumers’ expectations regarding future brand performance.

Empirical studies consistently show that customer experience exerts a strong influence on customer trust, particularly in service-oriented and digitally mediated consumption contexts (Chen & Lin, 2015). For Generation Z consumers, who actively engage with brands across digital platforms, experiential consistency plays a critical role in shaping trust judgments. Accordingly, customer experience is conceptualized in this study as a relational mechanism that complements functional and symbolic brand attributes in fostering trust.

H3: Customer Experience has a positive effect on Customer Trust.

Customer Trust as a Relational Mediator

Customer trust refers to consumers’ willingness to rely on a brand based on positive expectations regarding its competence, integrity, and benevolence (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Trust is not formed instantaneously but emerges through cumulative evaluations of functional performance, symbolic alignment, and experiential consistency.

Within relationship marketing theory, trust functions as a central mediating construct that translates brand-related perceptions into long-term relational outcomes. By reducing perceived risk and reinforcing confidence in the brand, trust enables consumers to commit to ongoing relationships rather than engage in purely transactional exchanges. In this study, customer trust is positioned as a key relational mediator linking product quality, celebrity brand connection, and customer experience to brand loyalty. This positioning allows for a more nuanced examination of how different branding mechanisms contribute—directly or indirectly—to enduring consumer–brand relationships.

Customer Trust and Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty represents a deeply held commitment to repurchase or continue using a preferred brand consistently over time, despite situational pressures or competitive alternatives (Oliver, 1999). Loyalty reflects both behavioural repetition and attitudinal attachment, indicating the strength and durability of the consumer–brand relationship. Trust plays a pivotal role in the transition from transactional satisfaction to enduring loyalty. When consumers trust a brand, they are more willing to tolerate risk, resist competitive offerings, and engage in advocacy behaviours (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In value-driven markets such as halal skincare, trust anchors loyalty by reinforcing confidence in the brand’s ethical and functional consistency. Accordingly, customer trust is expected to exert a direct and significant influence on brand loyalty. This study presents the compiled model as in Figure 1.

H4: Customer Trust has a positive effect on Brand Loyalty.

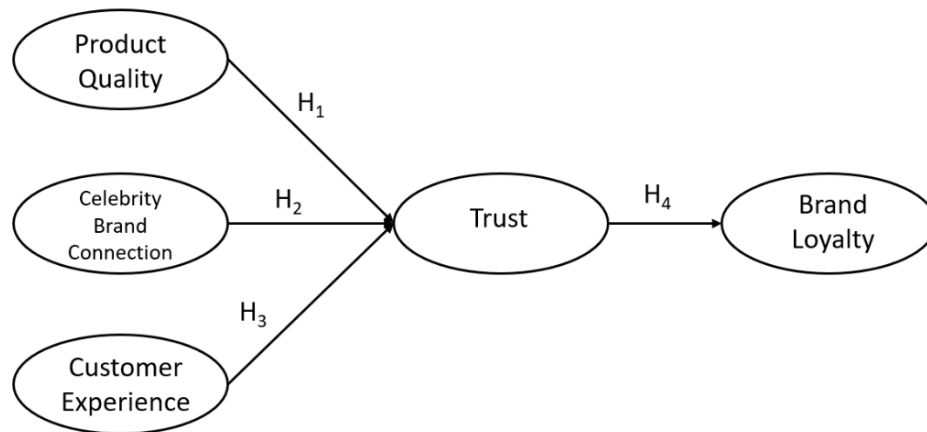


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a quantitative methodology and considers the users of Wardah in Surabaya as the population for the study. The sampling technique utilized is non-probability sampling, with a questionnaire as the primary tool for data collection. The "snowball sampling" method will be employed to select participants who will assist in distributing and completing questionnaires. Based on the characteristics of the respondents, the study includes 105 consumers of Wardah in Surabaya as its respondents. While the sample size of 105 respondents is acceptable for SEM with a relatively simple model, it can be considered borderline. This limitation may constrain the statistical power of the analysis and the generalizability of the results. Future research should replicate the model using larger samples to confirm the consistency of the relationships identified in this study.

Sampling is a commonly used technique in research and statistics to obtain information about a population by studying a subset of that population (Kabir, 2016). Samples are usually chosen randomly to ensure that they are representative of the larger population, and the size of the sample is determined based on statistical calculations to ensure an accurate representation. However, sampling methods can potentially introduce biases into the results if the sample is not truly representative of the population. For example, if a researcher only selects participants from a specific geographic region or social class, the results may only accurately reflect part of the population. Snowball sampling recruits eligible participants through referral chains and is useful when a complete sampling frame is unavailable, although seed selection and network dependence may restrict sample diversity and generalizability (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018).

This study employed a non-probability sampling method using a snowball sampling technique. This approach enabled the researchers to recruit respondents through participant referrals for questionnaire distribution. Eligible respondents were male or female consumers aged 18–28 years who resided in Surabaya and had completed at least three Wardah purchase transactions within the previous year.

The analysis technique used in this work is called structural equation modeling, or SEM. Hair et al. (2014) define structural equation modeling (SEM) as a multivariate method that incorporates aspects of factor analysis and multiple regression. This allows researchers to simultaneously investigate many dependent relationships between the latent constructs and the measured variables, as well as between multiple additional latent constructs. The ability to quantify the influence of theoretical relationships and validate the dimensions of a concept or component that is widely used in management is one of the advantages of SEM applications in management research (Ferdinand, 2006). To answer the study questions, the analytical tool AMOS 22.0 (Analysis of Moment Structure) will be used.

RESULTS

Respondent Characteristics

Following distribution, the questionnaire was processed using AMOS, which presents the results of respondents' frequency-calculated responses to the questionnaire's questions. Each question is rated on a Likert scale, with 1 being the lowest score and 5 representing the highest. The respondents generally held positive perceptions across all study constructs, with mean scores ranging from 3.71 to 4.29 on a five-point Likert scale. The relatively low standard deviations indicate consistent responses, suggesting broad agreement regarding product quality, celebrity brand connection, customer experience, trust, and brand loyalty. Overall, these findings reflect favorable evaluations of Wardah among Generation Z consumers in Surabaya and provide a solid basis for the subsequent structural model analysis.

The descriptive statistics indicate consistently high mean scores across all constructs, with relatively low standard deviations, particularly for Product Quality indicators. This pattern suggests that respondents share homogeneous perceptions of product quality and generally regard it as a basic market standard rather than a differentiating attribute. Such limited variance reduces the explanatory power of Product Quality in predicting Customer Trust and provides a theoretical explanation for the rejection of the Product Quality–Trust hypothesis. In contrast, Celebrity Brand Connection and Customer Experience exhibit greater perceptual variation, indicating that relational and experiential evaluations differ more substantially among consumers. These variations allow emotional, symbolic, and interaction-based cues to play a more prominent role in trust formation. This supports the interpretation that, in mature and competitive markets such as halal skincare, trust is shaped less by functional performance and more by relational meaning and experiential consistency, particularly among Gen Z consumers. Accordingly, the descriptive results reinforce the theoretical argument that Product Quality operates as a hygiene factor, while Celebrity Brand Connection and Customer Experience function as primary trust-building mechanisms.

The demographic distribution indicates that the sample is predominantly female (67.6%), while male respondents constitute 32.4%. This skewed composition is not incidental and may partially explain why customer experience and celebrity brand connection exert stronger effects on trust formation than product quality. Prior research suggests that female Gen Z consumers tend to place greater emphasis on relational and symbolic cues—such as emotional connection with endorsers and experiential aspects of brands—when evaluating credibility and trust. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted with caution, as the trust mechanisms identified in this study may be gender-contingent rather than universal. This demographic structure therefore represents a boundary condition and reinforces the need for future studies to test gender as a moderating variable in the relationship between CBC, customer experience, product quality, and trust. The respondent profile was dominated by female consumers (67.6%), while male respondents accounted for 32.4%. In terms of age, most respondents were between 18 and 22 years (73.3%), with the remaining 26.7% aged 23–28 years. This distribution indicates that the sample primarily represents younger Generation Z consumers, who constitute Wardah's main target market.

The age distribution (Figure 3) shows that most respondents are aged 18–22 years (73.3%), while only 26.7% fall within the 23–28 age group. This dominance of younger Gen Z consumers is theoretically relevant rather than merely descriptive. Individuals in early Gen Z are typically in a formative consumption stage, where identity construction, social affiliation, and symbolic meaning play a stronger role than functional product evaluation. This demographic profile helps explain why Celebrity Brand Connection and customer experience outweigh product quality in shaping trust, as younger consumers are more responsive to affective and relational cues than to cognitive assessments of intrinsic quality. Accordingly, the non-significant effect of product quality on trust should not be interpreted as a universal rejection of quality-based trust formation, but as age-contingent. The findings therefore suggest an important boundary condition: trust mechanisms in halal skincare branding may differ between early and late Gen Z cohorts. To determine how well the model and the retest data match, the entire SEM model can be examined and its goodness of fit assessed. The six variables in this model (Product Quality, Celebrity Brand Connection, Customer Experience, Trust, and Brand Loyalty) are each represented by nineteen indicators as in Figure 2.

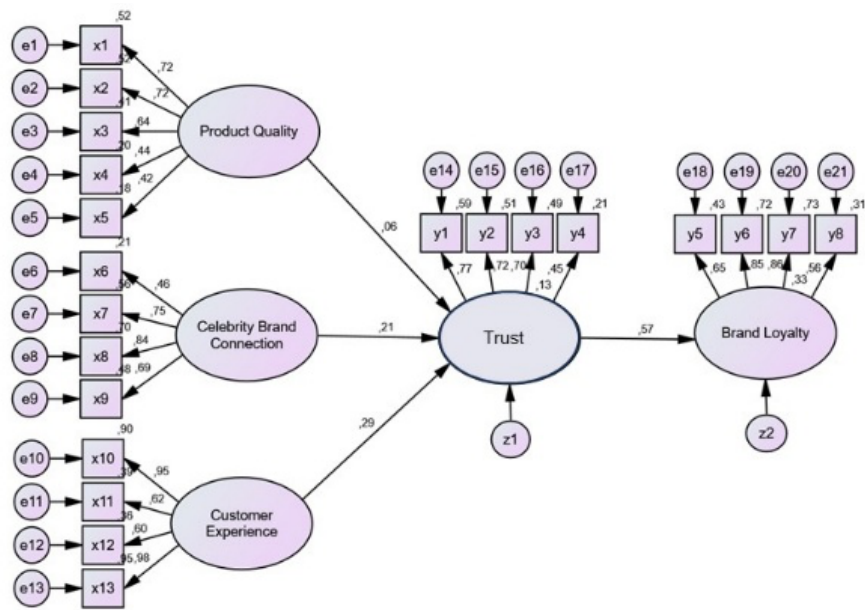


Figure 2. Structural Equation Model

Figure 2 presents the structural model examining the relationships among Product Quality, Celebrity Brand Connection, Customer Experience, Trust, and Brand Loyalty. While the statistical results are correctly reported, a deeper theoretical interpretation is required, particularly regarding the rejected hypothesis and the absence of robustness discussion.

First, the model shows that Product Quality has a very weak and non-significant effect on Trust ($\beta = 0.06$), leading to the rejection of the hypothesis proposing a positive relationship between these constructs. This finding suggests that, within the context of halal skincare consumption among Generation Z, trust is not primarily formed through cognitive evaluations of intrinsic product attributes, such as perceived quality. This result contrasts with classical branding and quality-based trust models, which assume that superior product performance naturally translates into higher consumer trust.

However, rather than indicating that product quality is irrelevant, this non-significant relationship should be interpreted as context-dependent and segment-specific. Generation Z consumers—particularly those in early adulthood—tend to rely more heavily on symbolic, affective, and relational cues when forming trust judgments. In such contexts, trust functions less as a rational assessment of product excellence and more as an outcome of perceived authenticity, identification, and emotional reassurance. Consequently, product quality may be perceived as a basic expectation or hygiene factor rather than a decisive trust-building mechanism.

In contrast, Celebrity Brand Connection ($\beta = 0.21$) and Customer Experience ($\beta = 0.29$) show significant positive effects on Trust, highlighting that relational and experiential factors play a more prominent role in trust formation. These findings support relational branding and parasocial interaction perspectives, which argue that trust emerges from perceived closeness, symbolic alignment, and repeated positive interactions rather than from functional attributes alone. This pattern also explains why Trust, in turn, exerts a strong influence on Brand Loyalty ($\beta = 0.57$), confirming its mediating role between upstream branding mechanisms and long-term consumer outcomes.

Regarding robustness, the current model focuses on a single structural specification and does not explore alternative explanations. The absence of a robustness or alternative model discussion represents a limitation. For instance, product quality may exert an indirect effect on brand loyalty through customer experience or may become significant under different conditions, such as higher consumer involvement or older age cohorts within Gen Z. Future studies are encouraged to test alternative model structures, include moderating variables (e.g., age, involvement, or religiosity), or examine non-linear and indirect effects to further validate the stability of the proposed relationships. Overall, the model suggests that trust formation in halal skincare branding is driven more by relational and experiential

mechanisms than by perceived product quality, emphasizing the importance of moving beyond purely functional explanations toward identity-based and symbolic interpretations of consumer behavior (see Table 2).

Table 2. Regression Weight

Construct	Indicator	Standardised loading	C.R.	<i>p</i>
Product quality	X1	0.719	5.283	< .001
	X2	0.721	5.122	< .001
	X3	0.637	—	—
	X4	0.445†	3.298	< .001
	X5	0.424†	3.251	.001
Celebrity brand connection	X6	0.457†	4.375	< .001
	X7	0.750	6.831	< .001
	X8	0.837	—	—
	X9	0.690	6.234	< .001
Customer experience	X10	0.950	7.283	< .001
	X11	0.621	5.490	< .001
	X12	0.600	—	—
	X13	0.976	7.278	< .001
Customer trust	Y1	0.766	—	—
	Y2	0.715	6.445	< .001
	Y3	0.700	6.481	< .001
	Y4	0.454†	4.214	< .001
Brand loyalty	Y5	0.653	—	—
	Y6	0.850	6.773	< .001
	Y7	0.856	6.982	< .001
	Y8	0.561	5.111	< .001

Table 2 reports the structural path estimates of the proposed model. While the statistical results are correctly specified, their theoretical interpretation warrants deeper elaboration, particularly for the rejected hypothesis. The path from Product Quality to Trust is non-significant ($\beta = 0.064$, $p = 0.628$), leading to the rejection of the proposed hypothesis. Rather than treating this outcome as incidental, the finding suggests that trust formation among Generation Z consumers in the halal skincare context is not primarily driven by functional evaluations of product performance. Product quality may operate as a baseline expectation or a hygiene factor, where acceptable quality is assumed and therefore does not actively differentiate trust perceptions.

In contrast, Celebrity Brand Connection ($\beta = 0.208$, $p = 0.044$) and Customer Experience ($\beta = 0.287$, $p = 0.021$) exhibit significant positive effects on Trust. This pattern indicates that relational and experiential cues outweigh cognitive product assessments in shaping trust, supporting relational branding and parasocial interaction perspectives. For Gen Z consumers, perceived symbolic alignment with celebrities and cumulative brand experiences appear more salient in establishing psychological assurance than technical product attributes. Furthermore, Trust strongly predicts Brand Loyalty ($\beta = 0.573$, $p < 0.001$), confirming its central mediating role between upstream branding mechanisms and long-term loyalty outcomes. This result reinforces the view that trust functions as a relational conduit rather than a purely evaluative judgment in value-laden markets such as halal skincare.

Regarding robustness, the model tests a single structural specification and does not examine alternative causal pathways. The non-significant Product Quality–Trust relationship may indicate indirect or conditional effects, for instance through Customer Experience or under higher involvement conditions. Future research could assess alternative models by positioning product quality as an antecedent of experience, introducing moderating variables (e.g., age subgroups within Gen Z or religiosity), or testing indirect effects to validate the stability of the findings. The results suggest that trust among Gen Z halal skincare consumers is constructed more through relational meaning and experiential

consistency than through perceived product quality, highlighting the need to move beyond functionalist explanations in loyalty formation research.

DISCUSSION

This study supports three of the four proposed hypotheses, while the direct effect of Product Quality on Customer Trust is not supported. This pattern indicates that trust formation in a mature and highly competitive market such as halal skincare extends beyond functional product attributes. Among Generation Z consumers, trust appears to be shaped more strongly by relational, symbolic, and experiential mechanisms. Product quality remains essential, but consumers may perceive it as a basic requirement rather than a distinctive trust-building factor. Celebrity Brand Connection and Customer Experience therefore emerge as more influential antecedents of Customer Trust.

Product Quality does not have a statistically significant effect on Customer Trust ($p = .628$). Although traditional marketing theory positions quality as a central source of consumer confidence, this finding suggests that its effect depends on market maturity and consumer characteristics. In saturated markets, product quality may function as a hygiene factor—a necessary condition for preventing dissatisfaction rather than a differentiating attribute that actively creates trust (Oliver, 2010). Consumers may assume that brands operating in regulated categories such as halal skincare already meet acceptable quality, safety, and certification standards. Quality therefore becomes an implicit expectation rather than a salient basis for evaluating brand trustworthiness. Javed and Wu (2020) similarly demonstrate that consumers expect high product quality, but trust is shaped more strongly by experiential dimensions such as satisfaction and interaction quality. Akoglu and Özbek (2022) also show that product quality may influence brand trust indirectly through satisfaction and perceived value rather than through a direct relationship. These findings imply that quality becomes meaningful for trust formation when consumers experience its benefits through favourable brand interactions.

This interpretation is particularly relevant in digital and social media environments, where consumers cannot fully assess skincare quality before purchasing. Trust is therefore formed through indirect signals, including social interaction, emotional engagement, endorsement credibility, and relational closeness. Labrecque (2014) argues that trust in online environments is shaped more strongly by perceived interaction quality and relational proximity than by functional performance alone. Aw and Labrecque (2023) demonstrate that parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers can reinforce brand trust through perceived self-congruity, highlighting the relational foundations of consumer confidence in endorsed brands. These arguments explain why Product Quality remains theoretically important but does not directly predict Customer Trust in the present study.

Celebrity Brand Connection has a significant and positive effect on Customer Trust ($p = .044$), demonstrating the importance of symbolic and relational branding among Generation Z consumers. CBC reflects consumers' perceptions of emotional, symbolic, and value-based alignment between a celebrity and a brand. A credible celebrity–brand connection signals authenticity, compatibility, and moral consistency, thereby reducing consumer scepticism and perceived risk. Erdogan (1999) argues that credible endorsers facilitate trust formation, particularly in high-involvement categories such as skincare. This mechanism can be further explained through Parasocial Interaction Theory, which describes how repeated mediated exposure enables consumers to develop one-sided but emotionally meaningful relationships with celebrities (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Social media can strengthen these perceived relationships by creating familiarity, closeness, and sincerity (Labrecque, 2014). Consumers may subsequently transfer these positive evaluations from the celebrity to the endorsed brand.

Empirical evidence reinforces this relational mechanism. Leite and Baptista (2022) find that authentic and consistent celebrity–brand relationships strengthen perceptions of brand sincerity and reliability. Chung and Cho (2017) also demonstrate that parasocial relationships developed through social media increase trust in both celebrities and their associated brands. This form of trust is based less on technical product evaluation and more on symbolic identification and emotional assurance. The significant effect of CBC therefore suggests that Generation Z consumers evaluate halal skincare brands partly through the perceived integrity and compatibility of the celebrities representing them.

Customer Experience also has a significant and positive effect on Customer Trust ($p = .021$), highlighting the importance of experiential consistency across brand touchpoints. Customer experience encompasses consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses during their interactions with a brand. Positive experiences reduce uncertainty, demonstrate reliability, and generate emotional satisfaction, which collectively strengthen trust. Chen and Lin (2015) emphasize that favourable customer experiences improve perceived value and brand authenticity. Naseri-moadeli et al. (2013) further argue that responsive service, transparent communication, and consistent performance signal organisational competence and reliability. Such signals become especially important in digital environments, where consumers have limited opportunities to evaluate products physically. Consistent with this reasoning, Febrian et al. (2021) find that user experience strengthens trust by signalling professionalism, security, and dependability. In halal skincare markets, accessible information, responsive communication, and seamless digital interaction can reduce perceived risk and reinforce confidence in the brand's functional and ethical integrity.

Customer Trust has a significant and positive effect on Brand Loyalty ($p < .001$), confirming its central role in sustaining long-term consumer–brand relationships. Trust reduces perceived risk and enables consumers to maintain their brand commitment despite competing alternatives. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) demonstrate that brand trust strengthens both behavioural loyalty, reflected in repeat purchasing, and attitudinal loyalty, reflected in attachment and advocacy. Trust also promotes tolerance and emotional commitment. Ebrahim (2020) argues that consumers are more likely to forgive minor service failures or price changes when they trust a brand. Trust also reduces the cognitive effort required to evaluate alternatives, thereby supporting habitual repurchase. Sohaib and Han (2023) similarly show that brand trust predicts repeat purchase intentions and positive word-of-mouth. These findings indicate that trust converts relational and experiential evaluations into durable loyalty, customer retention, and organic brand support.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER STUDY

The study concludes that Celebrity Brand Connection and Customer Experience strengthen Brand Loyalty by building Customer Trust among Wardah's Generation Z consumers in Surabaya, while Product Quality alone does not significantly create trust. Wardah should therefore select celebrity endorsers whose public identity, values, and audience profile align with the brand. Managers should also deliver consistent and emotionally engaging experiences through responsive service, personalized communication, transparent information, authentic content, customer testimonials, and secure digital transactions. These practices can reduce perceived risk and convert consumer trust into repeat purchases, advocacy, and long-term loyalty.

The findings are limited by the small, non-probability sample drawn from young Wardah consumers in one city, which restricts generalizability and prevents strong causal conclusions. The cross-sectional and self-reported design may also introduce common method and response biases. Future studies should use larger, more diverse, and longitudinal samples across regions and skincare brands. They should also examine identification, admiration, parasocial interaction, brand credibility, consumer–brand identification, and emotional attachment as mediators, while testing age, gender, religiosity, and cultural orientation as moderators of the celebrity–brand connection and loyalty relationship.

ETHICAL DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in full accordance with established ethical guidelines for academic research. Prior to the commencement of data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board. All participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study through a clear and concise informed consent form. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents retained the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, no personal identifying information was collected, and all responses were treated with strict confidentiality. Data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes. The results presented in this thesis are an honest and accurate

representation of the findings derived from the data analysis. No deception or coercion was involved in the research process. Additionally, no conflict of interest or external influence affected the objectivity of the study. The research adheres to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complies with the institutional and national research ethics standards.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article journal. This includes personal, financial, or professional relationships that could be perceived to influence the research outcomes or interpretations presented in this study. All aspects of the research, including the design, data collection, analysis, and reporting, were conducted independently and objectively. No funding body or external party had any role in influencing the research process or results.

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