

DETERMINANTS OF SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Jennifer Yunani¹, Sam'un Jaja Raharja², Neng Susi Susilawati Sugiana³, Rusdin Tahir⁴

¹ Padjadjaran University, ² Padjadjaran University, ³ IDE LPKIA, ³ Padjadjaran University

³ Padjadjaran University, 45363

³ IDE LPKIA, 40266

¹ jen.yunani@gmail.com, ² s.raharja2017@unpad.ac.id, ³ nengsusi@lpkia.ac.id, ⁴ rusdin@unpad.ac.id

Abstract

Private universities in West Java and Banten face intense competition in attracting prospective students due to the proliferation of higher education institutions and changing market demands. This study aims to examine the determinant factors of sustainable competitive advantage, focusing on the roles of product mix and integrated marketing communication strategies. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to 210 marketing managers and administrative leaders across private universities in the region. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to analyze the relationships among variables. The findings reveal that both product mix and integrated marketing communication significantly influence the achievement of sustainable competitive advantage. Specifically, the alignment of academic program diversity with market needs and consistent, targeted communication campaigns contribute to institutional differentiation and long-term competitiveness. Theoretically, this research enriches the literature on strategic marketing in higher education by integrating marketing mix elements and communication frameworks. Practically, the study offers valuable insights for university leaders in developing effective marketing strategies to sustain competitiveness amidst a dynamic educational landscape..

Keywords: *sustainable competitive advantage, product mix, integrated marketing communication, higher education marketing*

1. Pendahuluan

Indonesian higher education is now facing major challenges due to globalization, the information technology revolution, and changes in government policies that encourage autonomy and fierce competition between State Universities (PTN) and Private Universities (PTS) [1], [2]. The autonomy of private universities has reduced their market share, exacerbated by the proliferation of new private universities in various regions. Another challenge comes from globalization, which encourages the internationalization of education through cooperation, distance classes, and the opening of foreign university branches.

As one of the regions with the highest number of private universities, West Java and Banten face complex dynamics [3]. Data from LLDIKTI Region IV records that of approximately 2,500 study programs, only around 70% are accredited [4]. Private universities in this region face internal challenges such as suboptimal governance and external ones such as free competition and the existence of established state universities [2]. Nevertheless, private universities still make a great contribution to access to higher

education, especially for those who are not accommodated in public universities.

Data from PDDIKTI between 2013 and 2025 show that the number of private universities increased until 2023, then declined slightly due to mergers and license revocations [3]. The number of students has also surged again after dropping during the COVID-19 pandemic [3]. The most common study programs are in Engineering & Technology, followed by Economics & Business and Social & Humanities [4]. Although the lecturer-to-student ratio is relatively stable, only about 10% of private universities in the region are accredited A [4].

To survive and thrive, private universities must implement a strategy of competitive advantage through the marketing mix (7P): product, price, venue, promotion, process, physical proof, and people [7]. Private universities need to position themselves as institutions that are able to answer the needs of the community, establish international collaborations, and develop a reputation through innovation and service quality [8]. The promotion and quality of educational products have proven to play an important role in attracting students.

With increasing competition and self-management demands, private universities need to manage the marketing mix in an integrated manner

and oriented to public needs [9]. The right communication and campaign strategies will determine the attractiveness and sustainability of the institution [10]. Private universities are required not only to fulfill moral and ethical obligations of education, but also to become competitive and adaptive institutions in the era of global education.

In the last two decades, Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) has become increasingly relevant in addressing the challenges of modern communication [11]. Technological changes, media fragmentation, and increasing consumer intelligence are driving organizations to adopt IMC to create consistent and effective messages [12], [13]. In the higher education sector, Private Universities (PTS) are facing pressure due to globalization and the transformation of State Universities into Legal Entities. IMC can be a strategic approach to strengthen the competitiveness of private universities through the coordination of various communication channels [11]. In addition, the mix of educational products also plays a role in shaping the perception and added value of services [12]. However, empirical studies on the synergistic influence of IMC and product mix in private universities are still limited. This study aims to examine the influence of the two on the competitive advantage of private universities in West Java and Banten.

2. Literature Review

This research is based on three levels of theory: Grand Theory, Middle-Range Theory, and Applied Theory. The Grand Theory used is Marketing Management Theory from Philip Kotler which emphasizes the importance of value creation and competitive advantage through structured marketing strategies [6]. This theory continues to evolve in the digital age through approaches such as data-driven marketing and AI-powered marketing [7], [8]. The Middle-Range Theory uses the Marketing Mix Theory from Neil Borden and developed by Kotler, which describes marketing elements such as products, prices, venues, and promotions as business strategy tools [9]. Applied Theory includes several approaches, such as Product Mix Theory by Don E. Schultz which emphasizes the importance of product portfolios [10], Integrated Marketing Communication which integrates various communication channels [6], and Customer Value Theory which states that customer decisions are based on value perception [11].

2.1 Competitive Advantage

The study also adopts Porter's Competitive Advantage Theory which includes low-cost, differentiation, and market- focused strategies [12], [13]. Competitive advantage is measured through the VRIO [14], Balanced Scorecard [15], and dynamic capabilities [16] approaches. The marketing mix is an

important concept introduced by McCarthy in 1960 and further developed by Borden and Levitt in the 1950s–1960s [9]. This concept integrates four key elements, product, price, promotion, and distribution, that must be managed strategically [17]. As development, the focus of marketing shifts from production efficiency to meeting customer needs and desires [18]. Experts such as Keith and McKitterick emphasize the importance of understanding customer desires before going into production [18].

2.2 Product Mix

One of the main components is the Product Mix, which is the entire product line and items offered by the company [9]. The Product Mix has four main dimensions: width, length, depth, and consistency [6]. Zeithaml & Bitner emphasize the importance of customer value in the product mix [19], while Peter & Olson attribute it to consumer perception and preferences [20]. In service marketing, Lovelock & Wright highlight service integration as part of a product strategy [21]. While in the context of B2B, the complexity of the product and its relevance are the main measure [22]. Thus, product mix does not only describe a variety of products, but also a strategy to build competitiveness and customer loyalty [6].

2.3 Integrate Marketing Communication

The Marketing Mix or marketing mix is an important concept introduced by McCarthy in 1960 and further developed by Borden and Levitt in the 1950s–1960s [9]. This concept integrates four key elements, product, price, promotion, and distribution, that must be strategically managed in order for a company to meet market needs [17]. As the times progress, marketing orientation has shifted from focusing on production to a more customer-centric approach [18]. Keith and McKitterick stated that the success of marketing is determined by understanding the needs of consumers before the production process begins [18].

One of the main components of the marketing mix is the Product Mix, which is the entire product line and item offered by the company to the market [9]. The dimensions of the product mix include width (number of product lines), length (total number of items), depth (number of variants per line), and consistency (interconnectedness between product lines) [6]. Customer value is at the core of a product mix strategy [19], while consumer perception and preferences play an important role in purchasing decisions [20]. In service marketing, integrated service management is essential [21], while in B2B business, the complexity and relevance of products determine customer satisfaction and loyalty [22]. Therefore, product mix functions not only as an overview of product variety, but also as a strategic tool to build a competitive advantage [6].

By combining the theoretical framework of three levels of theory, this study provides a comprehensive

understanding of the importance of the marketing mix, especially the product mix, in building a sustainable competitive advantage [23], [6]. The integration between marketing management theory, communication strategy, and customer value reflects that marketing approaches can no longer be linear or separate [10], [11]. Value-oriented product strategies, portfolio depth, and consistency between product lines are key to winning an increasingly complex and differentiated market [9], [6]. On the other hand, the success of the implementation of the marketing mix is greatly influenced by the company's adaptation to digital technology and the dynamics of modern consumers [8], [16]. Therefore, the practical implications of this study are the importance of strengthening dynamic capabilities and the application of strategic analysis tools such as VRIO and Balanced Scorecard to assess the effectiveness of the marketing mix in supporting competitive advantage [14], [15], [13]. Thus, an integrated approach to the marketing mix is an important foundation in designing business strategies that are adaptive, value-oriented, and based on long-term competitive advantages [6], [12].

3. Research Method

This study aims to examine the influence of product mix (PM) and integrated marketing communication (IMC) on competitive advantage in Private Universities (PTS) in the LLDIKTI IV area of West Java and Banten. The object of the research includes all the characteristics of the three main variables found in private universities, while the research subjects are marketing managers and administrative leaders of universities, polytechnics, institutes and colleges.

TABLE I. MEASUREMENT MODEL ANALYSIS RESULTS

Private Universities	Total (People)	
	Rector/ Chairman/ Director	Marketing Manager
University	134	134
Institute	25	25
High School	148	148
Academy	63	63
Politeknik	51	51
Community Academy	2	2
Sum	423	423

Sumber: BPS (2025); LLDIKTI (2025)

Using a quantitative approach, data was collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to 210 marketing managers and administrative leaders across private universities in the region. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is used to analyze the relationships between variables.

This study is descriptive-verified, using an explanatory survey method with a variant-based

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach. The main variables consist of PM and BMI as independent variables, besides alternately PM and IMC as intervention or bound variables, and CA as bound variables. Data was collected through a Likert scale questionnaire and supported by interviews and documentation. The population includes 423 private universities with a sample of 210 respondents selected through the Simple Stratified Proportional Random Sampling technique. Data processing is carried out using WMS for description and SEM for hypothesis testing. The test was carried out with statistics F and t to see the simultaneous and partial influence between variables. This research can provide a comprehensive picture in improving the competitiveness of private universities in the era of fierce competition for universities in Indonesia, especially West Java and Banten.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Result

The results of the Measurement Model Analysis show that most of the indicators in the model have good convergent validity, characterized by a loading factor value that is generally above 0.70. This shows that these indicators are able to explain the measured construct quite well. Some indicators such as IRHE (0.954) and AoAS (0.959) even show very high loading values, which indicates a very strong contribution to its construct.

However, there are several indicators that have loading values below 0.70, such as DMSA (0.594), WOMM (0.621), PS (0.631), AEA (0.506), and AD (0.551). Although still within the minimum tolerance limit in exploratory studies, these values suggest that these indicators have a weaker contribution to the constructs they represent. Especially AEA and AD need special attention because of their low loading and R² values, which means that the contribution to the construct is not too large and the error rate is high.

In terms of statistical significance, all indicators show a t-value higher than the critical limit of 1.96, which means that the relationship between the indicator and its construct is statistically significant. This is reinforced by the "Ket" column which states "Ho Reject" on all indicators, indicating that all loading factors are statistically significant and statistically acceptable inferentially.

The R² value of most indicators is also quite good, indicating that the proportion of variance described by the construct is quite high. Indicators with R² above 0.5 are considered good, while some indicators such as AEA, AD, and SLS have values below that, which suggests that these indicators only explain a small fraction of the variation of the construct in question. The magnitude of the variance

error in these indicators is also high, reinforcing indications that their contribution is not optimal.

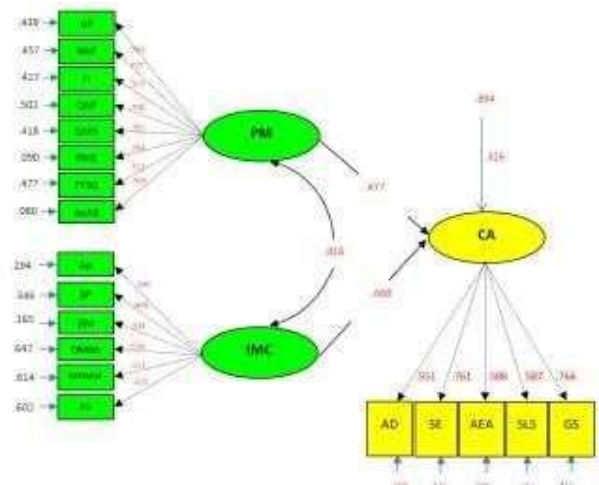
Overall, this measurement model is quite good, with most indicators showing adequate validity and reliability. However, some indicators with low loading values and R^2 need to be further evaluated, both for revision and for consideration for their removal if they do not support the overall suitability of the model. Further validation by looking at the AVE (Average Variance Extracted), CR (Composite Reliability), and structural model results will go a long way in ensuring that the construct used is truly robust and trustworthy.

The results of statistical calculation using the Lisrel 10.2 Application show the magnitude of the influence of Product Mix and BMI on Competitive Advantage, both partially and simultaneously, presented in Table 2.

TABLE II. MEASUREMENT MODEL ANALYSIS RESULTS

Dimen- sion	Standardized Solution (Loading Factor)			t Value	R^2	Erro r	Conclusion
	PM	IMC	CA				
AP	.749			17.618	.561	.439	H_0 Reject
NAP	.737			16.139	.543	.457	H_0 Reject
FI	.757			16.903	.573	.427	H_0 Reject
QAP	.706			9.064	.498	.502	H_0 Reject
DSPS	.763			13.696	.582	.418	H_0 Reject
IRHE	.954			15.192	.910	.090	H_0 Reject
FTSQ	.723			13.543	.523	.477	H_0 Reject
AoAS	.959			14.340	.920	.080	H_0 Reject
Ad		.840		15.815	.706	.294	H_0 Reject
SP		.809		14.743	.654	.346	H_0 Reject
DM		.914		17.179	.835	.165	H_0 Reject
DMSA		.594		9.143	.353	.647	H_0 Reject
WOMM		.621		10.626	.386	.614	H_0 Reject
PS		.631		5.113	.398	.602	H_0 Reject
AD			.551	8.902	.304	.696	H_0 Reject
SE			.761	11.366	.579	.421	H_0 Reject
AEA			.506	7.142	.256	.744	H_0 Reject
SLS			.587	9.258	.345	.655	H_0 Reject
GS			.766	7.258	.587	.413	H_0 Reject

Information: PM=Product Mix; AP= Academic Programs; NAP=Non-Academic Programs; FI=Facilities & Infrastructure; QAP=Quality of Academic Programs; DSPS=Diversification of Study Programs and Services; ILM= Innovation in Learning Methods; IRHE=Image and Reputation of Higher Education; AAS=Academic & Administrative Services; FTSQ=Faculty & Teaching Staff Quality ; AoAS=Advantages of Additional Services; IMC=Integrated Marketing Communication; Ad=Advertising= SP=Sales Promotion; PRP= Public Relations & Publicity; DM= Direct Marketing; DMSA= Digital Marketing & Social Media; WOMM= Word-of-Mouth Marketing; PS=Personal Selling ;CA= Competitive Advantage; AD=Academic Differentiation; IPI= Institutional Reputation & Image; SE= Service Excellence; ITA= Innovation & Technology Adoption; AEA= Affordability & Economic Value; SLS= Student Loyalty & Satisfaction; GS=Graduate Competitiveness



FIGUR 1. DETERMINANTS OF SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE MODEL

TABLE III. RESULTS OF THE TESTING OF THE EFFECT OF PRODUCT MIX AND BMI ON COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Latent Variable	Path Coeff	R^2	P-Value	Conclusion
PM $\rightarrow$ CA	.477	.228	.000	H_0 Reject
PM $\rightarrow$ IMC $\rightarrow$ CA	.088	.008	.081	H_0 Not Reject
Total PM $\rightarrow$ CA	.055	.235	.000	H_0 Reject
IMC $\rightarrow$ CA	.688	.473	.000	H_0 Reject
IMC $\rightarrow$ PM $\rightarrow$ CA	.088	.119	.028	H_0 Reject
Total IMC $\rightarrow$ CA	.231	.481	.000	H_0 Reject
PM & IMC $\rightarrow$ CA	.846	.716	.000	H_0 Reject
Total;	Influence = 849		Residue = 106	

Source: Lisrel Output 10.2 (Author, 2025)

Based on the results of hypothesis testing using the Lisrel 10.2 application, it can be concluded that the product mix (PM) and Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) have a significant influence on competitive advantage (CA), both partially and simultaneously.

First, the direct influence between PM on CA shows a path coefficient of 0.477 with an R^2 value of 0.228, which means that 22.8% variation in competitive advantage can be explained by the product mix. A very small p-value (0.000) indicates strong statistical significance so the null (H_0) hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that the product strategy run by private universities makes an important contribution in building competitiveness.

Meanwhile, when the influence of PM on CA was analyzed indirectly through IMC, the results showed that the effect was relatively small and insignificant. The path coefficient of 0.088 and the R^2 value of only 0.008 indicate that these indirect paths do not make a significant contribution to CA, as shown by a p-value of 0.081 that exceeds the significance limit of 0.05. This means that although the product mix has a direct influence on competitive advantage, it becomes weak when mediated by the IMC.

However, when viewed in total, the influence of PM on CA remains significant with a total coefficient of 0.055 and a p-value of 0.000. This reinforces the conclusion that although the indirect influence is

weak, overall PM is still relevant in shaping the competitive advantage of private universities.

In contrast to PM, IMC shows a stronger direct influence on competitive advantage. A path coefficient of 0.688 with an R^2 of 0.473 suggests that almost half of the variation in competitive advantage can be explained by the effectiveness of the IMC. A very significant p-value (0.000) reinforces that IMC is the dominant factor that determines the competitiveness of private universities. In addition, IMC also has a significant indirect influence on CA through PM, although the contribution is smaller, with a coefficient of 0.088, R^2 of 0.119, and a p-value of 0.028. Thus, IMC not only influences CA directly, but also provides a boost to product development which ultimately contributes to competitive advantage.

When viewed in total, the influence of IMC on CA remains significant with a total coefficient of 0.231 and a p-value of 0.000, indicating that an effective communication strategy, both directly and indirectly, is able to improve the overall competitive position of private universities.

Simultaneous testing of the influence between PM and IMC on CA showed that the two variables together contributed very significantly to competitive advantage, with a path coefficient of 0.846 and an R^2 value of 0.716. This means that 71.6% of the variation in competitive advantage can be explained by the combination of these two factors, and the remaining 10.6% (residue) is likely to come from other variables not included in this model.

Overall, this research model is relatively strong with a total influence of 0.894. These findings provide an understanding that in the context of competition between private universities, success in building competitiveness is largely determined by a combination of good product management and effective marketing communication strategies. IMC proved to be the most dominant factor, while PM retained an important role, especially if it was strategically improved and aligned with the right communication channels.

4.2 Discussion

This study adopts a multi-level theoretical framework, Grand Theory, Middle-Range Theory and Applied Theory, to explain the influence of Product Mix (PM) and Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) on competitive advantage in Private Universities (PTS).

At the Grand Theory level, this research draws upon Philip Kotler's Marketing Management Theory, which underscores the importance of value creation through adaptive and structured marketing strategies, especially in the digital era [6], [11]. The findings demonstrate that both PM and IMC contribute significantly and simultaneously to the competitive advantage of PTS, which aligns with the core principle of marketing management: value creation

must be rooted in strategic differentiation, deep market understanding, and the ability to adapt to external environmental changes.

Moving to the Middle-Range Theory level, the analysis is anchored in Neil Borden's Marketing Mix model, further developed by Kotler, encompassing four key elements product, price, place and promotion as tools of strategic marketing [4]. Statistical results indicate that Product Mix has a strong direct impact on competitive advantage, whereas its indirect effect via IMC remains relatively weak. This finding affirms prior literature suggesting that a well-managed product portfolio, considering dimensions such as width, length, depth and consistency is a key differentiator in competitive positioning [4], [6]. However, the limited mediating effect of IMC signals an opportunity for better alignment and integration between product strategies and communication efforts.

At the Applied Theory level, the research incorporates Product Mix Theory [13], Integrated Marketing Communication Theory [15], and Customer Value Theory [17]. The findings reveal that IMC emerges as the most dominant predictor of competitive advantage. This supports Kotler & Keller's assertion that in today's hyper-connected market, success in marketing depends on the integration of communication channels, from traditional to digital, to shape brand perception, reinforce messaging, and influence customer value [6]. In the context of PTS, a robust and integrated communication strategy is essential not only to build brand equity but also to attract prospective students and enhance stakeholder loyalty.

Furthermore, the study substantiates Porter's theory of competitive advantage, which emphasizes differentiation and focus strategies as pathways to long-term success [8], [9]. In this regard, IMC acts as a key differentiation mechanism by communicating the uniqueness of academic programs, the quality of services, and emotional appeals to students and the public. Using the VRIO framework [10], the study positions IMC as a strategic resource, valuable, rare, inimitable, and well-organized, thereby fulfilling the conditions necessary for sustainable competitive advantage.

Notably, the combination of PM and IMC explains 71.6% of the variance in competitive advantage, suggesting a high degree of synergy between product strategy and communication. This lends strong empirical support to the Dynamic Capabilities Framework [18], which highlights the importance of an institution's ability to reconfigure, integrate, and adapt internal competencies in response to external changes. The relevance of this finding is further reinforced by the Balanced Scorecard approach [16], which emphasizes the need for a holistic measurement system integrating customer orientation, internal processes, learning and growth,

and financial performance to assess institutional competitiveness.

Overall, the findings confirm that achieving competitive advantage in PTS cannot rely on partial strategies. Rather, success demands an integrated approach that aligns value-driven product portfolio management with consistent and adaptive communication strategies. Competitive positioning is no longer solely dependent on academic product quality, but also on how effectively these values are communicated to the market.

The practical implications of this study are significant. First, PTS must enhance their dynamic capabilities by cultivating agility in strategic decision-making and responsiveness to market signals. Second, they must manage their product portfolios with clarity and alignment to market demand. Third, they must optimize their integrated marketing communications, leveraging data-driven strategies, artificial intelligence (AI), and digital platforms [11], [14] to build an agile and competitive marketing ecosystem. Thus, a value-based, consumer-oriented, and technology-enabled marketing mix strategy becomes a cornerstone for sustaining competitive advantage in the higher education sector

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that both Product Mix (PM) and Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) have a significant and positive influence on the Competitive Advantage of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in the LLDIKTI Region IV (West Java and Banten). The empirical evidence derived from LISREL 10.2 confirms that PM has a strong direct effect on enhancing competitive positioning. This finding highlights the strategic role of developing a diverse, consistent, and relevant portfolio—ranging from academic programs to student services and institutional facilities—to strengthen institutional market differentiation and attractiveness.

IMC also exerts a direct and significant impact on competitive advantage. This underlines the essential function of coordinated communication efforts, including digital promotion, public relations, and brand management, in shaping stakeholder perceptions and enhancing the institution's perceived value. When tested simultaneously, the combined influence of PM and IMC reaches a total effect value of 0.894, with a residual error of only 0.106, suggesting a synergistic relationship between product strategy and communication efforts. These findings advocate for the design and implementation of value-driven and integrated marketing strategies as a prerequisite for sustainable competitive advantage in the higher education sector.

Interestingly, the analysis reveals that the indirect effect of Product Mix through IMC on competitive advantage is not statistically significant, implying that product-based strategies are more

effective when implemented directly, without reliance on communication mediation. On the other hand, IMC exhibits a significant indirect effect through PM, suggesting that the success of communication strategies depends on the substance, relevance, and quality of the institution's academic and service offerings.

These empirical insights are strongly aligned with the Grand Theory of Marketing Management [5], [13], the Middle-Range Theory of Marketing Mix [5], [12], and Applied Theories of Product Mix and IMC [14], [16], [18]. Furthermore, the results corroborate Porter's Competitive Advantage Theory [7], [8], the VRIO Framework [9], and the concepts of Customer Value [18], Balanced Scorecard [17], and Dynamic Capabilities [19], all of which underscore the importance of organizational agility, resource alignment, and long-term strategic positioning.

In conclusion, the study confirms that competitive advantage in the digital era of higher education cannot be achieved through fragmented marketing efforts. Instead, a holistic and adaptive marketing approach is required—one that integrates value-based product development with technology-enabled and customer-centric communication strategies. This integrated framework enables institutions not only to differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive landscape, but also to build lasting stakeholder relationships, ensuring long-term sustainability and impact.

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