

## Brand image and perceived education costs: effects on interest in higher education

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### Abstrak

*Penelitian ini mengkaji pengaruh brand image dan persepsi biaya pendidikan terhadap minat siswa SMK melanjutkan studi ke perguruan tinggi. Menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan analisis deskriptif dan inferensial, data dikumpulkan dari 178 siswa kelas XII SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta melalui proportional random sampling. Instrumen penelitian berupa kuesioner dengan skala Likert 1-5, divalidasi menggunakan korelasi Product Moment Pearson ( $r > 0,361$ ) dan diuji reliabilitasnya menggunakan Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha > 0,6$ ). Analisis regresi linear berganda menunjukkan bahwa brand image berpengaruh signifikan terhadap minat melanjutkan studi ( $t = 7,102$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ), demikian pula persepsi biaya pendidikan ( $t = 4,323$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ). Secara simultan, kedua variabel menunjukkan pengaruh positif signifikan ( $F = 133,223$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ), dengan koefisien determinasi ( $R^2$ ) sebesar 0,604, yang menunjukkan bahwa 60,4% varians minat siswa dijelaskan oleh kedua prediktor tersebut.*

*Kata kunci: aspirasi karier; citra lembaga pendidikan; motivasi akademik; persepsi ekonomi siswa*

### Abstract

This study examined the influence of brand image and perceived education costs on vocational high school students' interest in pursuing higher education. Using a quantitative approach with descriptive and inferential analysis, data were collected from 178 Grade XII students at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta through proportional random sampling. The research instrument was a questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale, validated through Pearson's Product Moment correlation ( $r > 0.361$ ) and reliability tested using Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha > 0.6$ ). Multiple linear regression analysis revealed that brand image significantly influenced interest in continuing studies ( $t = 7.102$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as did perceived education costs ( $t = 4.323$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Simultaneously, both variables demonstrated a significant positive effect ( $F = 133.223$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with a

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coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) of .604, indicating that 60.4% of variance in students' interest was explained by these predictors.

Keywords: academic motivation; career aspirations; image of educational institutions; students' economic perceptions

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## Introduction

Education serves as a fundamental right for all Indonesian citizens across every stage of life, enabling individuals to acquire essential knowledge and skills, including literacy, numeracy, and Indonesian language proficiency. According to Damarjati (as cited in Suhendar et al., 2022), education enhances individual quality, liberates people from backwardness and ignorance, and prepares them to become agents of national change and development. Consequently, a nation's progress is substantially determined by the quality of its human resources.

The formal education system in Indonesia comprises three levels: basic education (elementary and junior high school), secondary education (senior high school and vocational high school), and higher education (Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System). At the secondary level, senior high schools emphasize theoretical and conceptual learning as preparation for higher education, whereas vocational high schools focus on practical learning and specialized skills aligned with vocational fields such as automotive engineering, accounting, multimedia, hospitality, and office management. This aligns with Sofiyanti and Sukirman's (2019) assertion that vocational secondary education is designed to prepare students for workforce entry or professional education, while general education prepares students for higher academic pursuits.

Education is expected to improve quality of life, expand knowledge, and develop future generations intellectually. However, public awareness regarding higher education in Indonesia remains relatively low. Data from the Central Statistics Agency indicate that in 2024, the gross enrollment rate for elementary school reached 104.82%, declining at the junior high school level (92.21%), further decreasing at the senior/vocational high school level (87.29%), and dropping significantly at the higher education level (32.00%) (Commission X of the Indonesian House of Representatives, 2025).

These data reveal a concerning issue: the quantitative expansion of vocational high schools has not been accompanied by corresponding quality improvements. Consequently, the government has undertaken massive and substantive educational reforms at the secondary level. One such initiative involves implementing the principle of work, continue education, and entrepreneurship, known by the acronym "BMW." This principle aims to provide clear and flexible career guidance for vocational high school graduates, offering three primary pathways aligned with individual interests, talents, and circumstances. Through this initiative, the expected learning outcomes of vocational education encompass three aspects: employment, continuing education, and entrepreneurship (Indahri et al., 2020). Thus, the success of vocational graduates is measured not only by their ability to secure employment but also by their capacity to pursue higher education or entrepreneurship.

The principle of continuing to higher education emphasizes that educational success should not be measured solely by immediate workforce entry but also by opportunities for further academic pursuits. However, vocational high school students' interest in pursuing higher education remains relatively low. Data from the Directorate General of Vocational Education (2024) indicate that of 702,312 SNBP 2024 participants, only 99,578 originated from vocational high schools, while 503,041 came from senior high schools, with the remainder from Islamic senior high schools. This

condition confirms that vocational students' interest in pursuing higher education is comparatively lower than their senior high school counterparts.

According to Slameto (as cited in Moonti et al., 2022), interest represents a preference or attraction toward something or an activity without external compulsion. Students' interest in continuing their studies develops from awareness of higher education benefits, self-competence perceptions, and social environmental support (Moonti et al., 2022). Interest in pursuing higher education constitutes a complex phenomenon influenced by various internal and external factors, including financial availability, information access, and environmental support (Fani et al., 2022). Therefore, prospective students must consider multiple aspects before making educational decisions.

Factors hypothesized to substantially influence students' interest in pursuing higher education include the brand image and perceived education costs of the selected institution. According to Kotler et al. and Kotler and Armstrong (as cited in Wardhana, 2020), a brand is not merely a name or symbol but a key element in the relationship between a company and its customers. Brand image plays a crucial role in influencing decisions, including higher education choices (Nguyen et al., 2016). Universities with strong brand images more readily attract prospective students while retaining existing ones. A positive institutional image not only fulfills prospective students' educational needs but also represents institutional quality in public perception.

Perceptions of education costs also play a significant role in influencing students' interest in continuing their studies. Baiturrahman et al. (2021) defined perceived education costs as students' perspectives in evaluating education costs, whether considered affordable, expensive, or fair. This reflects how they view the accessibility and reasonableness of educational expenses. For many prospective students and their families, tuition fees are often perceived as a primary barrier. High costs raise concerns about financial capability, which can diminish interest in pursuing higher education (Haryanni & Nasib, 2023). Conversely, positive perceptions of education costs, supported by offered educational facilities, tend to increase students' motivation to pursue higher education.

Research on the influence of brand image and perceived education costs on interest in continuing studies has been conducted both domestically and internationally. Harwani et al. (2018) stated that prospective students consider the quality and image of higher education institutions, with universities possessing good brand images more easily attracting applicants, although cost factors remain significant considerations. Research by Firmansyah et al. (2019) in Indonesia also found that students' perceptions of campus brand image and parental socioeconomic status significantly influence interest in continuing studies. These findings underscore the importance of higher education institutions understanding prospective students' perceptions regarding both brand image and acceptable, affordable education costs.

This study differs from previous research in its context and subjects. While previous studies predominantly focused on senior high school students or prospective students in general, this study specifically examines vocational high school students at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta, who have vocational orientations and different tendencies regarding continuing education. Additionally, this study integrates brand image and perceived education costs analysis within a single regression model to examine the relative contribution of each variable, thereby providing more comprehensive understanding of factors influencing vocational students' interest in continuing their studies.

Low rates of continuing to higher education were observed at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta, as demonstrated in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Percentage of Students Continuing to Higher Education at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta*

Department	Year		
	2021	2022	2023
Multimedia	30,3%	14,3%	14,3%
Online Business and Marketing	9,3%	9,8%	2,9%
Office Automation and Governance	10,6%	12,4%	4,8%
Accounting and Institutional Finance	15,17%	19,2%	11,4%

Source: Guidance and counseling data of SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta (2024)

Based on Table 1, the percentage of SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta students continuing to higher education over the past three years (2021-2023) demonstrated a consistently declining trend across all departments. In the Multimedia department, for instance, continuation rates dropped dramatically from 30.3% in 2021 to only 14.3% in 2022 and remained at this level in 2023. Similar declines were observed in the Online Business and Marketing department, which decreased from 9.8% (2022) to 2.9% (2023). The Office Automation and Governance department and the Accounting and Institutional Finance department exhibited similar patterns of year-over-year percentage decreases. These data indicate that students' tendency to pursue higher education continues to weaken, despite each department possessing distinct characteristics and career opportunities. Many vocational students still perceive higher education as unsuitable for their needs, practically irrelevant, or lacking a strong image as a quality institution.

Furthermore, students' and families' perceptions of higher education costs constitute a primary barrier. Higher education is often perceived as a significant economic burden, particularly for lower-middle-income families. Although the government has provided various assistance schemes, such as KIP-Kuliah, scholarships, and tuition subsidies, information about these programs has not been adequately disseminated. Consequently, some students abandon their intention to continue their studies because they perceive education costs as unaffordable.

Although previous research has highlighted the role of brand image and perceived education costs in influencing interest in continuing studies, most of these studies focused on senior high school rather than vocational high school students. To date, no research has specifically analyzed the influence of these two variables on interest in continuing studies in the context of SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta, which possesses distinct characteristics and continuation tendencies. This research gap forms the basis for this study's importance and the empirical question that requires investigation.

Based on the background presented, this research aimed to: (1) determine the influence of brand image on interest in continuing studies to higher education among Grade XII students at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta, (2) determine the influence of perceived education costs on interest in continuing studies to higher education among Grade XII students at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta, and (3) determine the simultaneous influence of brand image and perceived education costs on interest in continuing studies to higher education among Grade XII students at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta.

## **Research Methods**

This research was conducted at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta, selected based on the identified problem of low student interest in pursuing higher education as demonstrated through observation and tracer study data. Site selection was also based on relevant data availability and official permission from the school. The research was conducted from December 2024 to October 2025, encompassing the proposal stage through report writing.

This study employed a quantitative approach with descriptive and inferential analysis to describe phenomena based on numerical data. The examined variables consisted of two independent variables (brand image and perceived education costs) and one dependent variable (interest in continuing studies to higher education). Brand image was defined as the overall reputation of faculties and universities, encompassing how students evaluate higher education institutions in terms of educational quality, supporting facilities, and the capacity to produce competent graduates, as reflected in respondent assessment scores. Indicators followed Schiffman and Kanuk (as cited in Alfarizi et al., 2022): quality, promotion, cost, and popularity. Perceived education costs was defined as prospective students' perceptions regarding per-semester costs, such as Single Tuition Fees (UKT) or other costs directly related to core educational processes, and the extent to which these costs are commensurate with the educational quality and career prospects offered by the institution, as reflected in respondent assessment scores. Indicators followed Nuryanti (2019): cost affordability, administrative fees, tuition fees, and expenditures during study. Interest was defined as SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta graduates' feelings of preference, attitude, and attraction toward continuing studies to higher education, also reflected in respondent assessment scores. Indicators followed Slameto (2010): happiness, attention, interest, and desire.

The population comprised all 351 Grade XII students at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta for the 2024/2025 academic year, consisting of 36 students from the Visual Communication Design (DKV) department, 107 from Accounting and Institutional Finance (AKL), 101 from Marketing (PM), and 107 from Office Management and Business Services (MPLB). Sample size was determined using the Slovin formula with a 5% error margin. From the total population of 351 students, 30 students from Grade XII Marketing 2 were used for instrument pilot testing and thus excluded from the main sample calculation, resulting in a calculated population of 321 students. Based on the Slovin formula ( $n = 321 / (1 + 321 \times 0.05^2) = 321 / 1.8025$ ), a sample of 178 students was obtained. Sampling employed proportional random sampling, a technique for random sample selection while considering group proportions (Ismail, as cited in Syam et al., 2023). This technique was selected because the research sample comprised all Grade XII students distributed across four different departments with relatively homogeneous numbers. The sample distribution across departments is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2***Sample Distribution by Department*

Department	Calculation	Sample Size
Visual Communication Design	$36/321 \times 178 = 19,96$	20
Accounting and Institutional Finance	$107/321 \times 178 = 59,33$	59
Marketing	$71/321 \times 178 = 39,37$	40
Office Management and Business Services	$107/321 \times 178 = 59,33$	59
Total		178

Source: Data processed by researchers (2025)

Based on Table 2, the sample comprised 20 students from the DKV department (from 36 students), 59 from AKL (from 107 students), 40 from Marketing (from 71 students after excluding 30 pilot test participants), and 59 from MPLB. Data collection was conducted in August 2025 through closed questionnaire distribution, where respondents could only select from provided answer alternatives. The research instrument used a Likert scale to measure respondents' agreement levels with statements, offering five response options: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD).

This research adhered to scientific research ethical principles. Official permission was obtained from the school to ensure legality. Prior to data collection, the researcher explained the research purpose and procedures to respondents to ensure transparency. All collected data were guaranteed to be used solely for research purposes, and respondent data confidentiality was maintained to ensure the safety and comfort of all research participants.

According to Sujarweni (2025), "the quality of a research instrument is determined by its validity and reliability levels" (p. 79). Therefore, instrument validity was tested using Pearson's Product Moment correlation by correlating each item score against the total score, administered to 30 respondents from Grade XII Marketing 2. A critical *r*-table value of 0.361 at the 5% significance level was used as the validity criterion. Reliability testing was conducted on all statement items using Cronbach's Alpha, with instruments considered reliable if Cronbach's Alpha exceeded 0.6. All validity and reliability tests were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 22.

Collected data were grouped by variable and respondent type, tabulated, and processed to test the established hypotheses. Data analysis employed multiple linear regression, including classical assumption tests (normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity) and hypothesis testing through partial tests (*t*-test), simultaneous tests (*F*-test), coefficient of determination (*R*<sup>2</sup>), and effective and relative contribution analysis.

The research procedure was comprehensively executed through the following stages: (1) problem identification and formulation, (2) literature review, (3) research instrument development, (4) population and sample determination, (5) data collection, (6) data analysis, and (7) results interpretation and final report preparation. All stages were systematically designed to ensure the research process aligned with the established objectives.

## Results and Discussion

### Research Result

Validity test results indicated that for the interest in continuing studies variable (Y), of 18 tested statement items, 16 items were valid with  $r$ -calculated  $> 0.361$  and Cronbach's Alpha of .941  $> 0.6$ . For the brand image variable ( $X_1$ ), of 17 tested statement items, 15 items were valid with  $r$ -calculated  $> 0.361$  and Cronbach's Alpha of .925  $> 0.6$ . For the perceived education costs variable ( $X_2$ ), of 20 tested statement items, 18 items were valid with  $r$ -calculated  $> 0.361$  and Cronbach's Alpha of .903  $> 0.6$ . Based on these results, all research instruments were deemed valid and reliable for further analysis.

Following instrument validation and reliability confirmation, data analysis was conducted on 178 Grade XII student respondents from SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta for the 2024/2025 academic year. Data collected through questionnaires were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 22, providing descriptive statistics for each research variable as presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
*Descriptive Statistics Results*

	Brand Image	Education Costs	Interest in Continuing Studies
Valid	178	178	178
Missing	0	0	0
Mean	55,95	64,70	61,57
Std. Error of Mean	,783	,819	,934
Median	56,00	65,00	65,00
Mode	58	68	69 <sup>a</sup>
Std. Deviation	10,445	10,932	12,466
Variance	109,088	119,510	155,399
Range	60	72	64
Minimum	15	18	16
Maximum	75	90	80
Sum	9959	11517	10959

Source: Data processed by researchers (2025)

Based on Table 3, descriptive statistical analysis of the three research variables (brand image [ $X_1$ ], education costs [ $X_2$ ], and interest in continuing studies [Y]) revealed that the interest in continuing studies variable (Y) had a minimum score of 16, maximum score of 80, range of 64, standard deviation of 12.466, sum of 10,959, mean of 61.57, median of 65, and mode at 69. These findings indicate that most respondents tended to provide high ratings for interest in continuing studies, as evidenced by data concentration above the mean. Generally, respondents demonstrated strong interest in continuing their studies, and the highest standard deviation for this variable indicated more varied responses compared to other variables.

The brand image variable ( $X_1$ ) had a minimum score of 15, maximum score of 75, range of 60, standard deviation of 10.445, sum of 9,959, mean of 55.95, median of 56, and mode at 58 with a frequency of 50 respondents (28%). This indicates that a substantial proportion of respondents rated brand image at this category, suggesting interval 58 represents the strongest characterization of students' general perception regarding higher education institution brand image.

The perceived education costs variable ( $X_2$ ) had a minimum score of 18, maximum score of 90, range of 72, standard deviation of 10.932, sum of 11,517, mean of 64.70, median of 65, and mode at 68 with a frequency of 61 respondents (34%). This indicates that students' perceptions regarding education costs were relatively varied but tended to center on medium to high categories. This pattern is evident from the median positioned at the distribution midpoint and the mode with the highest frequency, indicating respondents' tendency in evaluating higher education costs.

Prior to hypothesis testing, classical assumption tests were conducted to ensure data met the requirements for multiple linear regression analysis. Testing was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 22. Normality test results using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov method showed a significance value of  $.200 > .05$ , indicating normally distributed residual data and a regression model suitable for further analysis. Subsequently, the linearity test through Test for Linearity yielded Deviation from Linearity values of  $.062$  for brand image and  $.738$  for perceived education costs. Both values exceeded  $.05$ , confirming linear relationships between independent and dependent variables.

Multicollinearity test results showed Tolerance values of  $.433 (> 0.10)$  and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values of  $2.309 (< 10.00)$  for both independent variables, indicating no multicollinearity symptoms in the regression model. Meanwhile, heteroscedasticity testing using the Glejser model yielded significance values of  $.092$  for brand image and  $.452$  for perceived education costs. Both exceeded  $.05$ , indicating no heteroscedasticity symptoms. This was further confirmed by Scatterplot results showing randomly dispersed points above and below the zero line without forming specific patterns such as converging, diverging, or wavy shapes. This dispersion pattern indicated constant or homogeneous residual variance.

With all classical assumptions satisfied, the regression model was deemed suitable for hypothesis testing. Subsequently, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the influence of brand image and perceived education costs on interest in continuing studies, both partially and simultaneously. Testing included t-tests for partial effect analysis, F-tests for simultaneous effect analysis, and calculation of the coefficient of determination and each independent variable's contribution to the dependent variable.

Based on multiple linear regression analysis results, the following equation model was obtained:

$$\hat{Y} = 6.546 + 0.591X_1 + 0.346X_2$$

This equation indicates that each one-unit increase in brand image ( $X_1$ ) increases interest in continuing studies ( $Y$ ) by  $0.591$  units. Similarly, each one-unit increase in perceived education costs ( $X_2$ ) increases interest in continuing studies by  $0.346$  units, assuming other variables remain constant.

**Table 4**  
*t-Test Results*

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>		
Model	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1,853	,066
Brand Image	7,102	,000
Education Costs	4,323	,000

Source: Data processed by researchers (2025)

Based on Table 4, t-test results indicated that both independent variables partially had significant positive effects on interest in continuing studies. Brand image had a significance value of  $.000 (< .05)$  and t-calculated of  $7.102 > t$ -table of  $1.974$ , while perceived education costs had a significance value of  $.000 (< .05)$  and t-calculated of  $4.323 > t$ -table of  $1.974$ . Thus, brand image and perceived education costs were proven to partially have significant positive effects on interest in continuing studies. This means that stronger institutional brand image correlates with higher student interest in continuing studies, and more affordable education costs based on student perceptions correlate with higher student interest in continuing studies.

Based on Table 5, F-test results showed a significance value of  $.000 (< .05)$  and F-calculated of  $133.223 > F$ -table of  $3.05$ . This indicates that brand image and perceived education costs simultaneously had significant positive effects on interest in continuing studies.

**Table 5***F-Test Results (ANOVA)*

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>		
Model	F	Sig.
Regression	133,223	,000 <sup>b</sup>
Residual		
Total		

Source: Data processed by researchers (2025)

**Table 6***Coefficient of Determination Results (Model Summary)*

Model Summary			
R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
,777 <sup>a</sup>	,604	,599	7,589

Source: Data processed by researchers (2025)

Based on Table 6, the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) was .604, indicating that brand image and perceived education costs jointly contributed 60.4% influence on interest in continuing studies. The remaining 39.6% (100% - 60.4%) may be influenced by factors outside this research model.

**Table 7***Correlation and Regression Analysis Results*

Variable	Regression Coefficient (Beta)	Correlation Coefficient	$R^2$
Brand Image	0,514	0,749	60,4
Education Costs	0,313	0,700	60,4

Source: Data processed by researchers (2025)

Effective and relative contribution calculations were performed based on values in Table 7.

**Table 8***Effective Contribution Results*

Variable	Effective Contribution: $SE(X)\% = \text{Beta} \times \text{Correlation Coefficient} \times 100\%$
Brand Image	$0,514 \times 0,749 \times 100\% = 38,5\%$
Education Costs	$0,313 \times 0,700 \times 100\% = 21,9\%$
Total	60,4%

Source: Data processed by researchers (2025)

**Table 9***Relative Contribution Results*

Variable	Relative Contribution: $SR(X)\% = SE(X)\% / R^2$
Brand Image	$\frac{38,5\%}{60,4\%} = 63,7\%$
Perceived Education Costs	$\frac{21,9\%}{60,4\%} = 36,3\%$
Total	100%

Source: Data processed by researchers (2025)



Based on calculations in Table 8, the following conclusions were drawn: (1) the effective contribution of brand image to interest in continuing studies was 38.5%, and (2) the effective contribution of perceived education costs to interest in continuing studies was 21.9%.

Based on calculations in Table 9, the following conclusions were drawn: (1) the relative contribution of brand image to interest in continuing studies was 63.7%, and (2) the relative contribution of perceived education costs to interest in continuing studies was 36.3%. Overall, these research findings confirm that brand image and perceived education costs are significant factors influencing students' interest in continuing to higher education. The results also demonstrate that both independent variables provide substantial contributions, thus improving brand image and perceptions of education costs should be primary focuses in strategies and policies aimed at encouraging student interest in pursuing higher education.

## Discussion

Based on t-test analysis results, the brand image variable ( $X_1$ ) was proven to have a significant positive effect on Grade XII students' interest in continuing studies at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta, with a significance value of .000 ( $< .05$ ) and t-calculated of  $7.102 > t$ -table of 1.974. Stronger institutional brand image correlates with higher student interest in continuing studies. Strong brand image cultivates positive perceptions regarding educational quality, reputation, and academic and career prospects, thereby encouraging students to pursue further education. These findings align with research by Ruslan and Situngkir (2019), Menhard (2018), and Puspandari and Rohayati (2020), which demonstrated that brand image has a significant positive effect on interest in continuing studies. Based on questionnaire results, item number 10 regarding facilities for applying for tuition reduction each semester obtained the highest score (747), confirming that financial accessibility plays a crucial role in strengthening higher education institution image among students. Conversely, item number 13 regarding the necessity of choosing nationally top-10 ranked universities obtained the lowest score (444), indicating that ranking is not students' primary priority. This confirms that cost affordability, accessibility, and program relevance are more determinant in influencing interest in continuing studies than institutional rankings alone.

The finding that brand image significantly influences interest can be explained through the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). In TPB, intention is influenced by attitude, representing individual beliefs about the benefits or consequences of an action. Positive brand image forms more favorable attitudes toward continuing studies because students believe that higher education institutions with good images will provide higher educational quality, broader career opportunities, and positive academic experiences. These beliefs become behavioral beliefs that strengthen positive attitudes toward the decision to pursue higher education. Thus, brand image increases interest because it directly strengthens the attitude component in TPB, which subsequently encourages intention formation to continue studies.

Furthermore, research results also demonstrated that the perceived education costs variable ( $X_2$ ) has a significant positive effect on Grade XII students' interest in continuing studies at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta, with a significance value of .000 ( $< .05$ ) and t-calculated of  $4.323 > t$ -table of 1.974. More affordable education costs according to student perceptions correlate with higher interest in continuing studies. Perceived education costs relate not only to nominal amounts but also to affordability, reasonableness, and alignment with obtained benefits. When costs are perceived as proportionate and facilities such as scholarships or flexible payment schemes are available, students tend to have higher interest, whereas costs perceived as burdensome can diminish interest. These findings align with research by Deltia et al. (2025) and Anjelina et al. (2023), which stated that education costs have a significant positive effect on interest in continuing studies. Based on questionnaire results, item number 2 regarding the belief that anyone can pursue higher education regardless of modest family background obtained the highest score (749), demonstrating student optimism that economic background is not the primary barrier to continuing studies. Conversely, item number 18 regarding concerns about additional campus activity costs obtained the lowest score

(481), indicating that transparency regarding miscellaneous cost components remains necessary to prevent such costs from becoming barriers to pursuing higher education.

The influence of perceived education costs can also be explained through TPB, particularly the perceived behavioral control (PBC) component, representing individual perceptions of ease or difficulty in performing an action. When students feel tuition is affordable, scholarships are available, and flexible payment schemes exist, they perceive continuing studies as an easily achievable action. High PBC makes students feel financially capable of pursuing higher education, thereby strengthening their interest. Conversely, if costs are perceived as burdensome, PBC decreases and intention to continue studies weakens. This aligns with the TPB concept that greater perceived control leads to stronger intention to perform the behavior.

Simultaneously, research results showed that brand image ( $X_1$ ) and perceived education costs ( $X_2$ ) have significant positive effects on Grade XII students' interest in continuing studies at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta, with a significance value of .000 ( $< .05$ ) and F-calculated of 133.223  $>$  F-table of 3.05. Multiple linear regression analysis yielded the equation  $\hat{Y} = 6.546 + 0.591X_1 + 0.346X_2$ , indicating that both independent variables contribute positively to interest in continuing studies. The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) of .604 shows that brand image and perceived education costs contribute 60.4%, while the remainder is influenced by factors outside this research. Brand image forms positive perceptions regarding educational quality and long-term benefits, while cost perception relates to affordability and financial realities that students must face. When both are viewed positively, student interest in continuing studies increases. This is reinforced by questionnaire results showing the highest score of 781 for item number 3, "I feel proud if I can study at a higher education institution," confirming that pride is an important factor in forming interest in continuing studies. Conversely, negative item number 14, "I am never interested in entering the university environment," obtained a score of 721, meaning most respondents disagreed, further strengthening evidence that students have high interest in becoming part of the university environment.

The interaction between both variables demonstrates that brand image (attitude) and perceived education costs (PBC) work simultaneously in forming student interest according to TPB theory. Brand image provides greater influence because decisions to continue studies are more determined by perceptions of quality and future prospects, while cost perception functions as a capability determinant factor. Thus, although costs are important, students tend to first consider how valuable an institution is before evaluating whether they can afford it. This explains why brand image (63.7%) is more dominant than cost perception (36.3%) in forming interest in continuing studies.

This research has several limitations. The sample originated from only one school, SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta, thus results cannot be generalized to all vocational schools that may have different conditions, school cultures, or student characteristics. The research instrument used self-report questionnaires, which potentially introduce biases such as perception bias and students' tendency to provide socially desirable responses. Research variables were limited to brand image and cost perception, whereas other factors such as parental support, peer influence, academic readiness, career motivation, and future expectations also have strong potential to influence interest in continuing studies but were not examined in this study.

## Conclusion

Research results demonstrate a significant positive influence of brand image on interest in continuing to higher education among Grade XII students at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta for the 2024/2025 academic year. This is evidenced by t-test results with a significance value of .000  $< .05$  and t-calculated of 7.102  $>$  t-table of 1.974. Additionally, there is a significant positive influence of perceived education costs on interest in continuing to higher education among Grade XII students at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta for the 2024/2025 academic year, with a significance value of .000  $< .05$  and t-calculated of 4.323  $>$  t-table of 1.974. Simultaneously, both variables were proven to have significant positive effects on interest in continuing to higher education among Grade XII students at SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta for the 2024/2025 academic year, as demonstrated by F-test results with

a significance value of  $.000 < .05$  and  $F\text{-calculated of } 133.223 > F\text{-table of } 3.05$ . The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) of .604 indicates that 60.4% of student interest in continuing to higher education can be predicted from brand image and perceived education costs, while the remaining 39.6% is influenced by factors outside this research. Based on effective contribution calculations, brand image contributes 38.5% and perceived education costs 21.9%, while relatively, brand image contributes 63.7% and perceived education costs 36.3%.

These research findings contribute to the development of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) proposed by Ajzen (1991) in the higher education context. TPB states that behavioral intention is influenced by three main components: attitude toward behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control. In this research, brand image was proven to shape attitude toward behavior through evaluation of beliefs and positive outcomes, such as good career prospects, improved social status, high educational quality, and extensive networking access, thereby forming favorable attitudes toward continuing studies and increasing behavioral intention. This strengthens understanding that educational institution image can drive behavioral intention formation through positive attitudes toward the choice to continue studies. Meanwhile, perceived education costs represents perceived behavioral control (PBC), influenced by internal factors such as family financial capability and education fund availability, and external factors such as scholarship availability and education financing accessibility. Research findings indicate that more positive affordability perceptions lead to higher perceived behavioral control, and greater perceived control (feeling capable) leads to stronger intention to continue studies. Thus, these research results contribute to building theory regarding interest in continuing studies as influenced by brand image and perceived education costs.

Practically, these findings provide guidance for higher education institutions to improve brand image through strategies such as strengthening academic quality, improving accreditation, and providing relevant facilities. Education cost transparency and flexibility can be enhanced through merit-based scholarship schemes, tuition discounts for high-achieving students, and interest-free installment programs, which are expected to improve affordability perceptions and attract more students. For SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta, school principals should implement intensive mentoring programs, such as monthly workshops on university reputation and scholarship application simulations, and establish partnerships with universities for activities such as online seminars, virtual exhibitions, and free campus visits, which can broaden student perspectives. Students are encouraged to be proactive by building achievement portfolios, seeking online mentors, and utilizing platforms such as the Ministry of Education and Culture website for scholarship information, thereby developing self-motivation and belief that economic barriers can be overcome through effort.

This research has several limitations. First, focusing on two independent variables (brand image and perceived education costs) overlooks other factors such as subjective norms (family/peer influence) or intrinsic student motivation, which may explain additional variance up to 39.6% (based on  $R^2$ ). Second, the sample was limited to SMK Negeri 1 Surakarta students only, thus results cannot be generalized to other schools with different characteristics (e.g., private vocational schools or those in rural areas), local cultures, or varying management systems. Third, the quantitative survey method has limitations including potential self-report bias because data were obtained based on respondents' own responses, and does not include longitudinal data that could illustrate continuous intention changes over time.

Future research should expand scope by adding variables such as subjective norms or family support, employing mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative, such as in-depth interviews) for comprehensive analysis. Additionally, longitudinal studies spanning 1-2 years should be conducted to track intention changes post-intervention, and locations should be expanded to multiple vocational schools in Central Java or nationally to improve generalizability. Moderation analysis (e.g., the role of gender or economic background) is also recommended to identify more complex variable interactions.

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