



COMMUNICATING TRUST AND CHOICE IN UMRAH TRAVEL: EVIDENCE FROM MARKETING PUBLIC RELATIONS, BRAND IMAGE, AND PILGRIM TESTIMONIALS

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Article Info

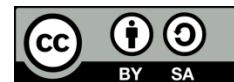
Keywords:

marketing public relations, brand image, pilgrim testimonials, trust, service choice, Umrah travel

ABSTRACT

The growing competition in Indonesia's Umrah travel industry has increased the importance of credible communication in shaping pilgrims' trust and service selection. In this setting, travel providers are required not only to promote their packages, but also to communicate reliability, transparency, and ethical responsibility in ways that reduce uncertainty among prospective pilgrims. This study analyses the effects of marketing public relations, brand image, and pilgrim testimonials on pilgrims' service choice, with trust embedded as a core evaluative dimension of the dependent construct. The study employed a quantitative explanatory design and used purposive sampling to select 60 respondents who had previously used the services of PT Darul Umrah Alharamin in Medan, Indonesia. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression. The findings show that marketing public relations, brand image, and pilgrim testimonials all have positive and significant effects on pilgrims' service choice. Among these variables, brand image emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by marketing public relations and pilgrim testimonials. These results indicate that pilgrims' decisions are shaped not only by promotional exposure, but also by how communication builds credibility, how the brand signifies reliability, and how testimonials provide experiential reassurance. The study contributes to communication research by demonstrating that service choice in religious travel is a communication-sensitive outcome formed through the interaction of relational messaging, symbolic reputation, and socially mediated trust cues. Practically, the findings suggest that Umrah travel providers need to strengthen transparent communication, maintain a credible brand image, and manage authentic testimonials more systematically to reinforce pilgrims' confidence and choice.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Umrah travel industry in Indonesia has developed into a highly competitive service sector in which communication plays a central role in influencing consumer judgement and organisational legitimacy. In cities such as Medan, prospective pilgrims are increasingly selective when choosing an Umrah provider because their decisions involve not only financial considerations, but also spiritual expectations, moral trust,

and perceived service reliability. In this context, service choice cannot be understood merely as a transactional response to package offerings. Rather, it is shaped by how a company communicates credibility, presents its reputation, and reassures prospective pilgrims through meaningful and trustworthy messages. This makes communication a decisive factor in religious service markets, where the success of an organisation depends not only on what it offers, but also on how it is perceived and trusted by the public (Ropik & Hati, 2025; Tiana et al., 2025).

This communicative dimension is particularly significant because Umrah travel differs from ordinary commercial services. Pilgrims do not simply purchase transportation, accommodation, and administrative support; they place confidence in an organiser who is expected to facilitate a sacred journey responsibly and ethically. In such a context, trust becomes an inseparable evaluative element in the process of service choice. A provider is selected not only because its packages appear attractive, but because its communication is perceived as transparent, responsive, and aligned with the values of amanah and professionalism. Previous studies have shown that trust and service decisions in Umrah travel are closely related to perceived credibility, service quality, and institutional reputation, indicating that communication has a constitutive role in shaping pilgrims' confidence before they make a final choice (Al Khairi et al., 2024; Anggraini et al., 2020).

One important communication-related factor in this process is marketing public relations. In service industries, marketing public relations does more than support promotion; it helps organisations establish legitimacy, maintain relationships, and reduce uncertainty among audiences. In the Umrah travel context, marketing public relations becomes important because prospective pilgrims often require clear explanations, responsive interaction, and transparent information before committing to a provider. Effective communication through public relations can therefore strengthen positive perceptions and support decision-making by presenting the company as open, reliable, and service-oriented. Prior research has indicated that public relations strategies significantly contribute to increasing public interest and strengthening the perceived value of Umrah services, suggesting that communication quality is directly relevant to service selection in this sector (Handayani et al., 2025; Ropik & Hati, 2025).

Besides formal communication efforts, brand image also functions as a major determinant of service choice. In religious travel services, brand image serves as a symbolic representation of reputation, professionalism, and reliability. Because prospective pilgrims usually cannot assess the full quality of service before departure, they often rely on brand-related cues to reduce perceived risk and to infer whether a provider deserves their trust. A positive brand image therefore works as a reputational shortcut that helps consumers feel more secure in making their decision. Earlier studies have consistently shown that brand image has a strong influence on decisions to purchase or select Umrah travel services, especially when consumers associate the provider with quality, credibility, and positive prior performance (Adiatma & Ramdani, 2025; Horijah et al., 2023; Iqbal & Murtani, 2024).

At the same time, communication in contemporary service markets is no longer shaped only by organisations themselves. It is increasingly influenced by user-generated narratives, especially testimonials from previous customers. In the Umrah travel sector, pilgrim testimonials are important because they provide experiential reassurance that official promotional messages alone may not fully achieve. Testimonials allow prospective pilgrims to evaluate a provider through the lived experiences of others, making them a form of social proof that can strengthen confidence and shape final choice. Research has demonstrated that testimonials affect consumer trust and decision-making in Umrah services because they are often seen as more authentic, relatable, and persuasive than formal advertising messages (Lesmana et al., 2024; Rojalih, 2025). In this sense, testimonials do not simply support communication; they actively participate in the construction of service credibility.

Although previous studies have examined promotion, brand image, trust, and decision-making in Umrah-related contexts, the existing literature still tends to address these variables in a fragmented manner. Many studies focus on brand image and purchasing decisions, while others discuss communication strategies or testimonials separately, without adequately explaining how these communication-related factors work together in shaping pilgrims' service choice. This study addresses that gap by examining the effects of marketing public relations, brand image, and pilgrim testimonials on service choice at PT Darul Umrah Alharamin in Medan, with trust positioned as a core evaluative dimension within the dependent construct. The novelty of this study lies in its communication-centred perspective, which explains service choice in religious travel not simply as a commercial outcome, but as the result of relational messaging, symbolic reputation, and socially mediated trust cues. Thus, this research contributes to communication studies by showing that service choice in the Umrah travel sector is a communication-sensitive outcome shaped through the interaction of credibility, image, and testimonial-based reassurance.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative explanatory design to examine how communication-related factors influence pilgrims' trust-based service choice in Umrah travel services. The research was conducted at PT Darul Umrah Alharamin in Medan, Indonesia, and focused on pilgrims who had previously used the company's services. Because the study required respondents with direct experience of the company's communication practices and service delivery, purposive sampling was applied. A total of 60 valid respondents were included in the analysis, which was considered sufficient for testing the effects of the three predictor variables on the dependent construct within the scope of this study.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The independent variables consisted of Marketing Public Relations (X1), Brand Image (X2), and Pilgrim Testimonials (X3), while the dependent variable was Trust-Based Service Choice (Y). In this study, Marketing Public Relations referred to the clarity, responsiveness, transparency, and consistency of the company's communication with prospective and existing pilgrims. Brand Image referred to respondents' perceptions of the company's reputation, professionalism, reliability, and positive service associations. Pilgrim Testimonials referred to the perceived credibility, relevance, and persuasive strength of previous pilgrims' accounts. The dependent variable, Trust-Based Service Choice, represented respondents' confidence in the company and their decision orientation to choose, use, and recommend its Umrah services.

Before hypothesis testing, the questionnaire data were subjected to validity and reliability assessment to ensure that each construct was measured consistently. Descriptive statistics were then used to identify the general pattern of respondents' perceptions across the four variables, while multiple linear regression was employed to determine the extent to which Marketing Public Relations, Brand Image, and Pilgrim Testimonials influenced trust-based service choice. This analytical structure was maintained in order to remain consistent with the existing results and discussion, in which the study emphasises the comparative strength of the three predictors and identifies the dominant factor influencing respondents' confidence and decision-making.

The regression model used in this study is formulated as follows:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \varepsilon,$$

Where:

- Y denotes Trust-Based Service Choice
- X₁ denotes Marketing Public Relations,
- X₂ denotes Brand Image
- X₃ denotes Pilgrim Testimonials.

In this equation, β_0 is the constant, β_1 , β_2 , and β_3 are the regression coefficients, and ε is the error term. To assess the robustness of the model, classical assumption tests were conducted, including normality, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity tests. Hypothesis testing was performed using the t-test for partial effects and the F-test for the simultaneous effect of all independent variables, with a significance level of 0.05. The coefficient of determination (R^2) was also used to evaluate how far the model explained variation in the dependent variable.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the empirical findings of the study and interprets them in relation to the communication-centred framework proposed in the introduction. The analysis focuses on how Marketing Public Relations (X1), Brand Image (X2), and Pilgrim Testimonials (X3) influence Trust-Based Service Choice (Y) at PT Darul Umrah Alharamin in Medan. In line with the revised title and analytical structure, the findings are interpreted not merely as market responses, but as communication-sensitive outcomes shaped by credibility, symbolic reputation, and testimonial-based reassurance.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were first employed to identify the overall pattern of respondents' perceptions across the four core constructs. The mean scores and standard deviations provide an initial picture of how pilgrims evaluated the company's communication, image, testimonials, and trust-based service choice.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Marketing Public Relations (X1)	4.10	0.75
Brand Image (X2)	4.30	0.65
Pilgrim Testimonials (X3)	4.15	0.70
Trust-Based Service Choice (Y)	4.25	0.60

Overall, the descriptive results indicate that respondents evaluated PT Darul Umrah Alharamin positively across all variables. All mean scores are above 4.00, suggesting that the company is generally perceived as communicatively credible, reputationally strong, and supported by persuasive testimonial narratives. At the same time, the standard deviations show that although the responses tend to cluster at the positive end of the scale, there remains some variation in how respondents interpret different aspects of the company's communication and service credibility.

The mean score for Marketing Public Relations is 4.10, with a standard deviation of 0.75. This result indicates that respondents generally perceived the company's communication practices positively, particularly in terms of clarity, responsiveness, and transparency. However, compared with the other independent variables, this construct records the largest standard deviation, suggesting that not all respondents experienced the company's communication in exactly the same way. In substantive terms, this means that the communication strategy is already viewed favourably, but its consistency across touchpoints may still vary.

The mean score for Brand Image is 4.30, with a standard deviation of 0.65, making it the highest-rated independent variable in the descriptive analysis. This suggests that respondents hold a strong overall perception of PT Darul Umrah Alharamin as a reputable, professional, and trustworthy Umrah travel provider. The relatively lower standard deviation also indicates that this positive perception is more stable across respondents. In other words, the company's symbolic standing appears not only strong, but also broadly shared among the pilgrims who participated in the survey.

The mean value for Pilgrim Testimonials is 4.15, with a standard deviation of 0.70. This shows that respondents generally regarded prior pilgrims' experiences as credible and useful in shaping their evaluation of the company. Although the score is slightly lower than that of brand image, it still falls within a high evaluative range. The result suggests that testimonials function as an important source of reassurance, especially in a service setting where prospective pilgrims often rely on the experiences of others to reduce uncertainty.

The dependent variable, Trust-Based Service Choice, recorded a mean score of 4.25 and a standard deviation of 0.60. This indicates that respondents not only felt confident in the company, but also displayed a strong orientation to choose, use, and recommend its services. The relatively low dispersion suggests that the confidence associated with choosing PT Darul Umrah Alharamin is fairly stable among respondents. From a communication perspective, this finding is important because it implies that positive perceptions of company communication, image, and testimonials are reflected in a similarly positive orientation toward service choice.

Taken together, the descriptive findings suggest that PT Darul Umrah Alharamin operates from a favourable perceptual position. The company is not merely seen as communicative, but as credible and dependable in ways that matter to pilgrims making high-stakes religious travel decisions. At this stage, the descriptive evidence already points to the possibility that trust-based service choice is closely tied to how communication is delivered, how the brand is interpreted, and how prior user experiences circulate among the public.

Regression Analysis

To determine whether these positive perceptions also translated into statistically significant relationships, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. The model tested the extent to which Marketing Public Relations (X1), Brand Image (X2), and Pilgrim Testimonials (X3) affected Trust-Based Service Choice (Y). This step was crucial because descriptive positivity alone does not confirm whether each variable meaningfully contributes to the dependent construct when analysed simultaneously.

Table 2. Regression Results

Independent Variable	Coefficient	p-value
Marketing Public Relations (X1)	0.30	0.02
Brand Image (X2)	0.45	0.01

Pilgrim Testimonials (X3)	0.25	0.04
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The regression results show that all three independent variables have positive and statistically significant effects on Trust-Based Service Choice. Because all p-values are below 0.05, each predictor contributes meaningfully to explaining variations in the dependent variable. This confirms that pilgrims' trust-oriented decisions are not random or isolated reactions, but are shaped by identifiable communication-related factors that operate together within the company's service environment.

The coefficient for Marketing Public Relations is 0.30, with a p-value of 0.02. This indicates that improvements in communication clarity, responsiveness, and transparency are associated with an increase in respondents' trust-based service choice. Put differently, when pilgrims perceive the company's communication as more open and reliable, they are more likely to feel confident in choosing the provider. This finding confirms that communication is not simply a promotional accessory, but an active determinant of trust-oriented decision-making.

The coefficient for Brand Image is 0.45, with a p-value of 0.01, making it the largest coefficient in the model. Within the estimated regression, this suggests that brand image contributes the strongest positive association with trust-based service choice among the three predictors. When pilgrims perceive PT Darul Umrah Alharamin as reputable, professional, and dependable, they become more confident in selecting its services. This result reinforces the notion that in religious service markets, the brand functions as a condensed signal of reliability and moral assurance.

The coefficient for Pilgrim Testimonials is 0.25, with a p-value of 0.04. Although this effect is smaller than those of brand image and marketing public relations, it remains statistically significant and substantively meaningful. The result implies that prior pilgrims' experiences, when seen as credible and relevant, enhance respondents' confidence in choosing the service. Testimonials therefore act as communicative evidence that supports trust formation and strengthens decision orientation, particularly when prospective customers seek reassurance from people who have already undergone the journey.

A comparative reading of the coefficients indicates that Brand Image exerts the strongest effect, followed by Marketing Public Relations, and then Pilgrim Testimonials. This pattern suggests that although direct communication and testimonial circulation matter, the broader symbolic evaluation of the company still plays the most influential role in shaping trust-based service choice. In practical terms, the data imply that respondents do not separate communication from reputation; rather, they interpret communication within the wider frame of what the brand represents.

Hypothesis Testing

Based on the regression results, the hypotheses proposed in this study can be evaluated directly. Each hypothesis predicted a positive relationship between one of the communication-related determinants and Trust-Based Service Choice. Since all three predictors recorded positive coefficients and significant p-values, all hypotheses are supported.

Table 3. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Marketing Public Relations positively influences Trust-Based Service Choice	Supported
H2	Brand Image positively influences Trust-Based Service Choice	Supported
H3	Pilgrim Testimonials positively influence Trust-Based Service Choice	Supported

The support for H1 indicates that marketing public relations has a significant role in shaping pilgrims' trust-oriented service decisions. This means that respondents do not treat company communication as mere information delivery; rather, they interpret it as evidence of seriousness, reliability, and organisational openness. In a religious travel context, where customers often seek assurance before committing to a provider, communication quality becomes part of the trust-building process itself.

The support for H2 shows that brand image significantly influences trust-based service choice. This hypothesis receives the strongest empirical backing in the model because brand image records the largest coefficient. The finding implies that the company's reputation, symbolic standing, and perceived professionalism are especially influential when respondents judge whether the provider deserves their confidence. In effect, the brand becomes a communicative shorthand through which quality and reliability are inferred.

The support for H3 confirms that pilgrim testimonials significantly influence trust-based service choice. Although their statistical effect is smaller than that of brand image, testimonials remain important because they supply experiential proof from prior users. This result suggests that respondents are more likely to trust a provider when its service claims are echoed by other pilgrims' lived experiences. In this sense,

testimonial communication performs a validating role that complements both formal communication and reputational perception.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that trust-based service choice in Umrah travel is shaped not by isolated promotional efforts, but by a broader communicative process involving marketing public relations, brand image, and pilgrim testimonials. This indicates that pilgrims' decisions emerge through the interaction of message credibility, reputational interpretation, and experiential reassurance. In this respect, the study moves beyond a narrow marketing reading and supports a communication-centred perspective in which trust and choice are socially and symbolically constructed.

The significant effect of Marketing Public Relations confirms that communication quality plays a substantial role in the Umrah travel sector. This result is consistent with Ropik and Hati (2025), who argue that public relations strategies are central to attracting Umrah pilgrims, and with Handayani et al. (2025), who emphasise the role of communication in strengthening perceived service value. In the present study, clear, consistent, and responsive communication appears to function not only as information delivery, but also as reassurance. At the same time, the relatively higher variation in this variable suggests that communication is not always experienced uniformly, indicating a need for greater consistency across channels and interactions.

Among all predictors, Brand Image emerged as the strongest determinant of trust-based service choice. This finding supports previous studies showing that brand-related perceptions strongly influence Umrah travel decisions (Iqbal & Murtani, 2024; Adiatma & Ramdani, 2025; Alfin & Putri, 2018). In the context of Umrah services, brand image is not merely an aesthetic or promotional asset; it serves as a symbolic indicator of safety, professionalism, and religious reliability. Because pilgrims often cannot fully verify service quality in advance, they rely on the brand as a reputational shortcut for judging whether a provider is worthy of confidence.

The effect of Pilgrim Testimonials is also significant, confirming that prior users' experiences contribute meaningfully to trust-based service choice. This result aligns with Lesmana et al. (2024), who show that testimonial-based communication influences trust and decision-making in Umrah services, and with Rojalih (2025), who highlights the persuasive role of prior-user narratives. Testimonials function as a form of social proof that bridges official company claims and lived service experience. Their influence may be smaller than that of brand image, but they remain important because they provide authenticity that institutional promotion alone cannot fully supply.

Taken together, the three predictors should be understood as mutually reinforcing communicative forces rather than separate marketing tools. Marketing public relations establishes clarity and relational openness, brand image provides reputational stability, and pilgrim testimonials offer experiential validation. Their combined influence creates a communication environment in which trust-based service choice becomes more likely. This is particularly relevant to the field of communication and *syiar* Islam, where trust is closely connected to expectations of honesty, *amanah*, sincerity, and moral accountability in guiding pilgrims through a sacred journey.

Practically, the findings suggest that PT Darul Umrah Alharamin should continue strengthening its communicative foundation by preserving a credible brand image, standardising the quality of its public communication, and managing authentic pilgrim testimonials more strategically. However, the study should also be read with caution, since the respondents were individuals who had already used the company's services. Even so, the results remain meaningful in showing that, in the Umrah travel context, service choice is shaped not only by what is offered, but by how credibility is communicated, recognised, and experienced.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Marketing Public Relations, Brand Image, and Pilgrim Testimonials each have a positive and significant influence on Trust-Based Service Choice at PT Darul Umrah Alharamin in Medan. The findings confirm that pilgrims' decisions are shaped not only by service offerings, but also by how credibility is communicated, how reputation is perceived, and how prior user experiences are circulated and interpreted. Among the three predictors, Brand Image emerged as the strongest determinant, followed by Marketing Public Relations and Pilgrim Testimonials.

These results indicate that trust and service choice in Umrah travel are fundamentally communication-sensitive outcomes. In a religious service context, pilgrims respond strongly to communication that is clear, credible, and ethically aligned with their expectations of reliability and sincerity. This means that PT Darul

Umrah Alharamin should continue strengthening its reputational image, maintaining transparent and responsive communication, and systematically leveraging authentic pilgrim testimonials as part of its trust-building strategy.

Although the study is limited to respondents who had already used the company's services, it provides meaningful evidence that communication plays a central role in shaping confidence and service selection in the Umrah travel industry. Future research may broaden the sample to include prospective pilgrims or compare multiple providers in order to deepen understanding of communicative trust formation in Islamic travel services..

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