

From Click to Trust: The Role of Website Quality and Brand Awareness in Customer Trust in Tourism

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ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement of technology and the growing demand for efficient communication and trade have significantly enhanced the relevance of e-commerce. Trust is a critical factor in ensuring customer retention, particularly in the competitive digital marketplace. Despite its importance, limited research has examined the impact of website quality on customer trust, especially with brand awareness as a mediating factor. This study addresses this gap by investigating the relationship between website quality, brand awareness, and customer trust in the tourism industry. The research focuses on prominent Iranian tourism websites, including AliBaba, Eligasht, Flightio, Zoraq, Samtik, Safarestan, DoroNazdik, SafarMe, SafarNik, and Airplane Ticket. Using a descriptive-survey and applied methodology, a sample of 385 online customers was selected based on Cochran's formula. Data were gathered through questionnaires, with construct validity and reliability confirmed through factor analysis. The data analysis was conducted using SPSS and PLS software. The findings demonstrate that website quality significantly influences customer trust, with brand awareness playing a mediating role. All primary and secondary hypotheses were confirmed. These results highlight the importance of investing in website quality to enhance customer trust and foster stronger brand perceptions. Managers in the tourism sector are advised to recognize the dynamic nature of e-commerce and prioritize factors influencing customer trust. By doing so, they can capitalize on new opportunities, improve customer retention, and maintain a competitive edge. This study underscores the strategic importance of aligning website quality with brand awareness to build lasting customer relationships in the rapidly evolving e-commerce landscape.

KEYWORDS

Brand Awareness, Customer Trust, Tourism Industry, Website Quality.

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Introduction

In today's digital era, information technology plays a pivotal role in helping organizations maximize their profitability, offering significant advantages for business operations (Sutrisno et al., 2023). The rapid growth of online stores in C2C and B2C business models has intensified the competition, particularly as businesses expand their reach through social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. In this increasingly competitive landscape, businesses must prioritize building customer trust and satisfaction, which can be achieved by improving website quality (Wijaya et al., 2021).

Website quality, a concept introduced by Barnes and Vidgen (2002), is crucial in e-commerce and government websites. It encompasses three components: usability, information quality, and interaction quality (Lisnawati et al., 2019). Usability includes user-friendly design elements such as easy navigation and attractive interface. Information quality ensures that content is reliable, accurate, and easily understood. Interaction quality focuses on factors such as secure transactions, brand reputation, and customer privacy (Sastika et al., 2016). Together, these elements help build customer trust, which is essential for long-term loyalty and success in e-commerce.

Brand image, a critical aspect of business strategy, plays a significant role in shaping customer perceptions. A strong brand image influences customer attitudes and decisions, making it a key factor in competition. Brand image, encompassing customer beliefs and associations, has become central to branding and contributes to loyalty and increased profitability (Tahir et al., 2024). The cost of retaining loyal customers is much lower than acquiring new ones, making brand image a powerful tool for reducing marketing and customer service expenses (Monzo et al., 2015). Therefore, website design is crucial for spreading the organization's brand, and websites must be considered from both technical and theoretical perspectives. In other words, the knowledge of librarians and information specialists who are aware of website design principles and criteria should be utilized alongside computer specialists (Rusdi et al., 2016). Therefore, owners of companies that have chosen many strategies for transitioning to online transactions and marketing must consider solutions to reduce concerns and increase customer trust (Aydinli & Senyurek, 2016). Despite the growing importance of e-commerce, many businesses still fail to fully grasp the strategic impact of website quality and brand image on customer trust. Companies often lack a clear understanding of how to align their website design with their branding goals.

Furthermore, the increasing risk of online transactions—such as fraud and privacy concerns—adds another layer of complexity. These risks discourage customers from engaging in online purchases, highlighting the need for businesses to foster trust and mitigate perceived risks (Saw & Inthiran, 2022). Online consumers lack the experience of physical interaction with sellers. This makes it difficult to evaluate orders and verify seller identity effectively. Therefore, trust is a crucial factor in online buyer loyalty.

Additionally, when purchasing from websites, payment is typically made using credit cards. Thus, the possibility of fraud is very high, and the received product may not match

the order. Online shopping brings its own uncertainties and risks for customers compared to shopping from physical stores (Sastika et al., 2016).

The tourism industry is particularly impacted by these issues, as many Iranian tourism websites struggle to establish trust with online customers. While the Internet has become a significant transaction platform, concerns over security and the inability to physically verify products or services contribute to consumer hesitation. Trust, therefore, plays a critical role in fostering online loyalty and reducing perceived risks. Websites with high-quality design, clear communication, and strong security measures can help to build customer confidence and facilitate smoother transactions.

Despite numerous studies on website quality and customer trust, research has yet to simultaneously examine these variables, particularly in the context of the tourism sector. By exploring this relationship, the study aims to provide valuable insights into how tourism businesses can enhance customer trust and loyalty by improving their website design and brand image. The findings of this research will help managers and organizations in the tourism industry understand the critical role of website quality and brand image in creating lasting customer relationships. As online shopping grows, particularly in sectors like tourism, ensuring a trustworthy, user-friendly website will be essential for maintaining a competitive edge and driving business success. Hence, this research aims to address the gap in the existing literature by investigating how website quality affects customer trust in the Iranian tourism industry, with brand awareness acting as a mediating factor.

The remaining parts of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical background of the study. Research methodology is discussed in Section 3. Research findings are reported in Section 4. Discussions and conclusion are presented in Section 5. Section 6 deals with managerial implications. Limitations and future studies are introduced in Section 7.

Literature Review

Website Quality

A website is an information and communication technology medium used to display informational content in a fast, scalable, cost-effective, and diverse manner. Additionally, a website serves as the virtual face of an institution, reflecting its presence in the digital space. The role of a website has become a crucial part of an organization, offering competitive advantages to entities capable of delivering services or products to users or customers online. Through a website, companies can access broader markets or even global audiences (Napitupulu, 2017).

Website quality is a pivotal concept in e-commerce, as customers' perceptions of a site's quality significantly influence their intention to use it and shape their purchasing decisions (Hsu et al., 2018). When a website meets consumer expectations, users are more likely to maintain their engagement with the company. Unsurprisingly, some websites excel in attracting and retaining customers due to their ability to meet higher standards

in satisfying consumer expectations (Suryani et al., 2024). Customers' perception of website quality can be described as "users' evaluation of a website's features based on their needs." Consequently, identifying the website attributes that users prioritize becomes essential for companies seeking to implement a successful e-commerce strategy. Online retailers must clearly understand website quality to attract and retain customers (Hsu et al., 2018).

In online shopping, websites play a fundamental role in enabling transactions between buyers and sellers. Certain websites achieve greater success in attracting and retaining buyers, thanks to features such as user-friendly interfaces and positive user experiences. As a result, website quality emerges as a crucial determinant of an online business's success (Gao & Li, 2019). Website quality is a multifaceted concept encompassing three key dimensions: information quality, system quality, and service quality (Gao & Li, 2019; Hsu et al., 2018). These dimensions collectively assess the core factors shaping users' expectations and perceptions of website quality. The quality of information, systems, and services provided through a company's website forms the cornerstone of effective business website design.

- *Information Quality* is assessed from a technical perspective and refers to the perceived value of the output generated by a website.
- *System Quality* relates to the overall performance of the website system and can be measured by the degree of user-friendliness perceived by customers during online shopping.
- *Service Quality* is evaluated from a customer-centric perspective and refers to customers' overall assessment and judgment of the quality of online service delivery.

These three factors play a critical role in enhancing online customer satisfaction, ultimately improving their purchase intentions (Hsu et al., 2018).

Customer Trust

Trust is a vital element in building strong, long-term relationships. It plays a crucial role in enhancing interactions and fostering enduring connections between customers and companies. Trust can be described as an individual's willingness to rely on another party. Thus, *customer trust* can be defined as the customer's readiness to depend on a company, with the expectation that the company will honor its commitments (Honora et al., 2023). Trust reflects customers' confidence in their exchange partner's ability to meet their expectations. It entails a willingness to engage in specific actions based on the belief that the other party will deliver on their promises. Trust encompasses three key components: credibility, reliability, and intimacy. Credibility reflects honesty and dependability in employees. Reliability pertains to fulfilling promises, including timely delivery of services or products. Intimacy relates to ethical integrity, showcasing employees' honesty and moral values. Collectively, these elements underscore the importance of trust in sustaining long-term relationships between companies and their partners (Dimyati & Subagio, 2018). According to Rousseau et al. (1998), trust is the willingness to rely on an

exchange partner in whom one has confidence and involves accepting vulnerability based on positive expectations of the other party's actions.

The above definitions highlight that customers prefer relationships with trustworthy partners, as trust minimizes transaction risks. As customer trust grows, uncertainty and anxiety about interactions decrease (Issock et al., 2020). In marketing, customer trust is commonly described as a customer's willingness to engage with a brand repeatedly. Trust operates in two dimensions: belief and intention. It reflects a customer's positive expectation and readiness to make a purchase (Manzoor et al., 2020). Trust is regarded as one of the most crucial foundations for building and sustaining corporate and cooperative relationships in business. Studies have consistently highlighted its importance in establishing and maintaining long-term connections. Customer trust represents consumers' confidence in a specific store or brand to meet their needs and achieve their goals.

Additionally, trust includes expecting the other party to contribute to a favorable outcome (Alharthey, 2020). Over time, this concept has evolved to encompass trust in institutional frameworks, trust in outcomes, trust in sellers, and trust in platforms. This evolution illustrates how the definition of "trust" has expanded alongside advancements in e-commerce (Saw & Inthiran, 2022). Ha and Stoel (2009) highlight that trust and pleasure are critical factors influencing perceptions of online shopping quality. Establishing and sustaining customer trust is a key responsibility for e-commerce platforms, as customers need to feel secure to engage in online shopping. Trust in e-commerce websites grows when customers perceive the technology as reliable.

The importance of trust in online shopping surpasses that in physical retail settings due to the inherent uncertainties and higher risks associated with the online environment. Trust plays a vital role in mitigating these uncertainties and reducing perceived risks (Haque & Mazumder, 2020). When customers trust an online store, they feel more comfortable and confident during their shopping experience. This trust encourages repeated purchases, ultimately fostering customer loyalty (Juwaini et al., 2022).

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness refers to the extent to which consumers recognize, accept, and recall a brand. Aaker (2012) defines it as "a potential buyer's ability to identify or remember that a brand belongs to a specific product category." Similarly, Keller (1993) emphasizes that brand awareness involves tracking the brand in consumers' memory, representing their ability to recognize or recall a brand name across various situations. By reducing the time and effort required to search for a desired product, brand awareness helps minimize the perceived risk for consumers. Consequently, consumers are more likely to choose a brand they are familiar with. Aaker identifies four levels of brand awareness: brand recognition, brand recall, top-of-mind awareness, and dominant brand status (Bilgin, 2018).

According to Hong et al. (2022), research suggests that even a single exposure to a brand in a consumer's environment can evoke the thought, "I know this brand," when

encountered again. This principle forms the basis of many advertising strategies, which aim to embed the brand name in the minds of current and potential customers. In brand management literature, brand awareness is vital in strengthening a brand and achieving a competitive edge (Świtła et al., 2018). It is also one of the core dimensions of brand equity (Amelia, 2018; Doddy et al., 2020; Alexandra & Cerchia, 2018). Without brand awareness, consumers have limited knowledge of a brand, leading to a decline in its perceived value. Aaker further defines brand awareness as the strength of a consumer's connection to the brand, reflected in their ability to recall and retain it in memory (Doddy et al., 2020). Brand awareness is critical in consumer decision-making, offering three primary advantages: learning, consideration, and choice. Customer-based brand equity arises when consumers exhibit high brand recognition and familiarity alongside strong, favorable, and distinctive brand associations embedded in their memory. This awareness stems from consumers' exposure to the brand (Amelia, 2018). Brand awareness heavily influences consumer decisions, with even minimal recognition sometimes being sufficient for a purchase. Consumers often prefer well-known and familiar brands, which are perceived as more reliable due to their established presence in the market and consistent quality (Alexandra & Cerchia, 2018). Brand awareness is foundational in developing a product's brand identity. Companies seeking to expand their market share must prioritize increasing their brand visibility.

Brand awareness can be categorized into several levels: 1) Unaware of Brand, 2) Brand Recognition, 3) Brand Recall, and 4) Top of Mind (Apriyani et al., 2018). Research shows that while consumers may recognize several brands, they typically recall only a few or even just one. Effective brand awareness is cultivated through advertising, media exposure, social networks, and user-generated content. Studies confirm its substantial positive impact on purchase decisions and overall brand equity (Appiadu et al., 2023).

Research Background

Qatawneh et al. (2023) explored how website quality influences citizens' e-loyalty in Jordan's domestic tourism sector, with e-satisfaction and e-trust serving as mediating factors. Their findings reveal that citizens' e-loyalty toward Jordan's tourism-related government websites is moderate, with users expressing general comfort with the electronic services provided. Additionally, the study highlights that e-satisfaction and e-trust mediate the relationship between website quality dimensions—particularly information quality and personalization—and e-loyalty. Wijaya et al. (2021) analyzed the effect of website quality on customer loyalty, considering customer satisfaction as a moderating variable. Their research indicates that website quality has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction with e-commerce websites. However, customer satisfaction does not have a significant direct effect on customer loyalty. The study also finds that website service quality directly influences customer loyalty in the e-commerce context.

Hansopaheluwakan (2020) examined the interplay between e-service quality, website quality, and e-customer loyalty, with e-customer satisfaction acting as a mediator. The

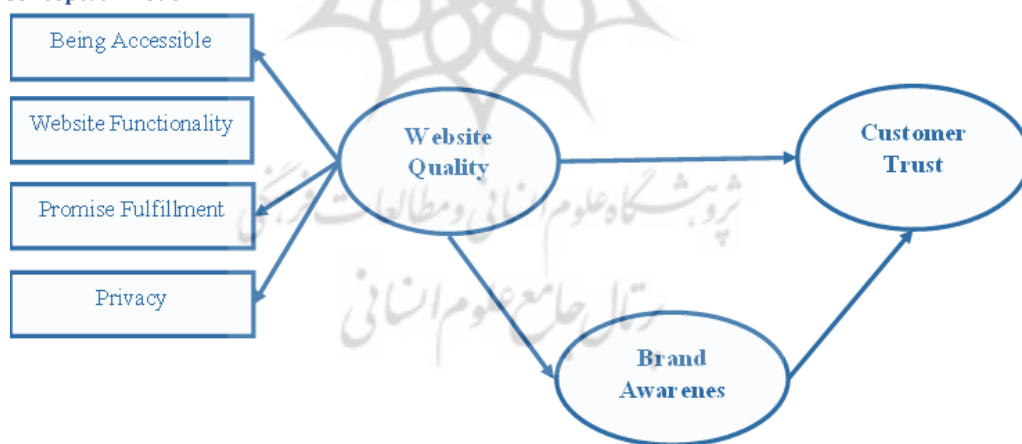
results demonstrate that both e-service quality and website quality significantly contribute to e-customer loyalty via the mediating effect of e-customer satisfaction. Aydinli and Senyurek (2017) confirmed in their research the positive impact of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction.

Ha and Lennon (2010) investigated how various website elements influence shoppers' emotions, specifically pleasure and arousal, during browsing and purchasing activities. Their findings reveal that these emotional responses, triggered by website features, positively impact consumer satisfaction, purchase intentions, and approach behaviors. Notably, the study found that online shoppers with a clear intent to purchase experienced higher levels of pleasure and arousal when initially interacting with websites rich in task-relevant cues, such as detailed product information. Conversely, shoppers without a specific purchase intention were more likely to feel pleasure and arousal when browsing websites featuring low task-relevant cues, like patterns and background colors.

Research Conceptual Model

This research includes three variables: website quality, brand awareness, and customer trust. Therefore, the independent variable is website quality, the dependent variable is customer trust, and the mediating variable is brand awareness. The research model (Figure 1) has been developed based on studies by Pramudya et al. (2018), Qatawneh et al. (2023), and Sastika et al. (2016).

Figure 1.
Research Conceptual Model



(Source: Researcher's Findings)

According to research conceptual model (Figure 1), research hypotheses are presented here:

Main Hypotheses

1. Website quality significantly impacts customer trust.
2. Brand awareness significantly impacts customer trust.
3. Website quality significantly impacts customer trust through brand awareness.

Secondary Hypotheses

1. Accessibility significantly impacts customer trust through brand awareness.
2. Website functionality significantly impacts customer trust through brand awareness.
3. Promise fulfillment significantly impacts customer trust through brand awareness.
4. Privacy significantly impacts customer trust through brand awareness.

Methodology

This study aims to investigate the effect of website quality on customer trust, with brand awareness acting as a mediating variable in the tourism industry. The research is applied in its purpose, adopts a quantitative approach, and employs a descriptive-survey method for data collection. The statistical population includes online customers of Iranian tourism websites, assumed to be unlimited. Using Cochran's formula, the required sample size was calculated as 385. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed, and responses were collected to match the calculated sample size.

The questionnaire consists of two sections. The first section includes demographic information, such as participants' gender, job title, workplace, or educational level.

The second section utilizes a five-point Likert scale to measure website quality, brand awareness, and customer trust. Responses range from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, scored from one to five, respectively. The questionnaire includes 29 items designed to evaluate the study variables: website quality design (items 1–5) across four components—accessibility (items 6–8), website functionality (items 9–12), promise fulfillment (items 13–15), and privacy (items 16–19). Additionally, brand awareness is measured with four items (items 20–23), and customer trust is assessed with six items (items 24–29).

Table 1.

Research Constructs Measurements and Their Sources

Component	Questions	Source
Website Quality	Questions 1-5	Hsu et al. (2018)
Accessibility	Questions 6-8	Sastika et al. (2016)
Website Functionality	Questions 9-12	Sastika et al. (2016)
Promise Fulfillment	Questions 13-15	Sastika et al. (2016)
Privacy	Questions 16-19	Sastika et al. (2016)
Brand Awareness	Questions 20-23	Bilgin (2018)
Customer Trust	Questions 24-29	Manzoor et al. (2020)

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

In this research, the initial questionnaire was provided to several professors and experts with relevant research backgrounds to assess content validity and face validity. After collecting and implementing experts' corrective feedback, the initial questionnaire was given to a number of employees, and necessary corrections were made to its writing style to ensure accuracy and complete understanding by respondents.

In this research, Cronbach's alpha coefficient method was used to estimate the reliability of the questionnaires. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated using SPSS software, and its reliability is presented below. In this research, due to the multiplicity of independent variables and indicators, the Partial Least Squares (PLS) method using Smartpls software was used to confirm the model's validity.

Table 2.

Reliability Coefficient and Composite Reliability of Factors

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
Website Quality	0.720	0.804
Accessibility	0.836	0.901
Website Functionality	0.723	0.782
Promise Fulfillment	0.756	0.821
Privacy	0.852	0.922
Brand Awareness	0.763	0.845
Customer Trust	0.889	0.924

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

Convergent Validity: The acceptable threshold for Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is 0.4, as suggested by Gebremedhin et al. (2022). The AVE values for each construct are presented in Table 3. As indicated in the table, all AVE values exceed 0.4, confirming that the model demonstrates adequate convergent validity.

Table 3.

Results of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for Variables to Examine Convergent Validity

Variable	Website Quality	Accessibility	Website Functionality	Promise Fulfillment	Privacy	Brand Awareness	Customer Trust
AVE	0.85	0.86	0.83	0.82	0.88	0.87	0.85

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

Discriminant Validity: shows the correlation level between a construct and its indicators. Discriminant validity is acceptable when the square root of AVE for each construct is greater than the shared variance between that construct and other constructs in the model.

Table 4.

Matrix Comparing Square Root of AVE and Construct Correlation Coefficients

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Website Quality	0.91						
2. Accessibility	0.84	0.92					
3. Website Functionality	0.59	0.61	0.92				
4. Promise Fulfillment	0.62	0.85	0.86	0.94			
5. Privacy	0.59	0.70	0.59	0.69	0.85		
6. Brand Awareness	0.59	0.70	0.59	0.69	0.85	0.88	
7. Customer Trust	0.61	0.86	0.59	0.83	0.70	0.88	0.86

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

As demonstrated in the matrix above (Table 4), the AVE values for each construct (located on the main diagonal) are higher than the correlation coefficients between that

construct and the other constructs (found in the respective rows and columns). This indicates that the constructs exhibit acceptable discriminant validity.

Goodness of Fit (GOF) criterion is used to evaluate the overall model, which was proposed by Tenenhaus et al. (2004). This criterion is calculated as follows:

$$GOF = \sqrt{0.5 * 0.23} = 0.33$$

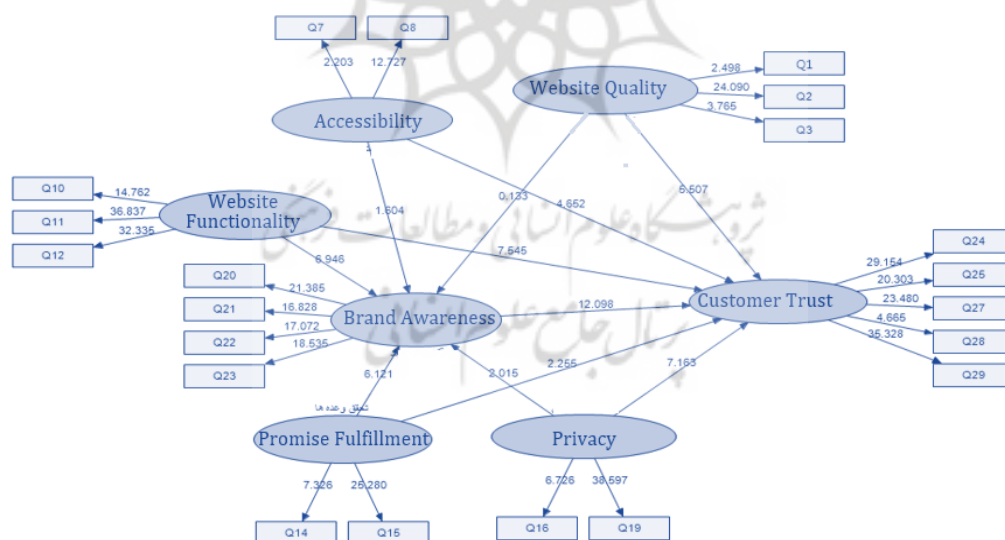
$$GOF = \sqrt{0.5 * 0.30} = 0.38 \quad GOF = \sqrt{\text{Communalities} R^2}$$

Values of 0.01, 0.25, and 0.36 are considered weak, moderate, and strong, respectively, in terms of the goodness of fit for the overall model. The calculated GOF value for the research model was 0.33 and 0.38, which indicates a strong overall fit. Therefore, the structural model's overall fit is confirmed as strong.

Findings

Two methods are used to examine the fit of the structural model: determining the t-value and the R^2 . In examining hypothesis testing, if the t-value is greater than 1.96, the path and path coefficient are significant, and the hypothesis is confirmed; otherwise, the path coefficient is not significant, and the related hypothesis is rejected (See Figure 2).

Figure 2.
T-Test of Hypotheses



(Source: Researcher's Findings)

The Sobel test was utilized in this model to assess the third main hypothesis and all secondary hypotheses. The Sobel test, also known as the coefficient product approach, delta method, or normal theory approach, is used to make inferences about the indirect effect coefficient (ab). This test is based on the same inference theory as direct effects. The indirect effect (ab) is an estimate of the population's indirect effect, which is subject to

sampling variance. By estimating the standard error of ab and assuming a normal distribution for the sampling distribution of ab , a p -value for ab can be calculated.

In the Sobel test, normal estimation is generally applied to examine the significance of the relationship. Using the standard error estimate of the indirect effect, the null hypothesis can be tested against the alternative hypothesis. The Z statistic is calculated by dividing ab by its standard error, resulting in the Z -value expressed by the following formula:

$$z - value = \frac{a \times b}{\sqrt{(b^2 \times sa^2) + (a^2 \times sb^2) + (sa^2 \times sb^2)}}$$

In this formula, the letters represent:

a: Path coefficient value between independent and mediating variable

b: Path coefficient value between mediating and dependent variable

sa: Standard error for the path between independent and mediating variable

sb: Standard error for the path between mediating and dependent variable

In the research model below, all hypotheses were confirmed. A summary of the hypothesis results is presented in Table 5.

Table 5.
Summary of Research Hypothesis Results

Hypothesis	t-statistic	Path Coefficient	Test Result
Website quality has a significant effect on customer trust.	5.507	+	Confirmed
Brand awareness has a significant effect on customer trust.	12.098	+	Confirmed
Website quality has a significant effect on customer trust through brand awareness.	7.921	+	Confirmed
Accessibility has a significant effect on customer trust through brand awareness.	3.721	+	Confirmed
Website functionality has a significant effect on customer trust through brand awareness.	7.789	+	Confirmed
Promise fulfillment has a significant effect on customer trust through brand awareness.	6.154	+	Confirmed
Privacy has a significant effect on customer trust through brand awareness.	5.083	+	Confirmed

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

R² Criterion: The second criterion used to assess the fit of the research's structural model is the R² criterion, which reflects the extent to which an independent (exogenous) variable influences a dependent (endogenous) variable. A higher R² value indicates a better model fit. Fauzi (2022) defines benchmark values of 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67 as representing weak, moderate, and strong R² values, respectively. The R² values for the main endogenous variables in this model are 0.23 and 0.30, suggesting that the structural model provides an appropriate fit for the data.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of Main Hypothesis 1 demonstrates that website quality significantly affects customer trust. This hypothesis was confirmed with a t-value of 5.507, which exceeds the critical threshold of 1.96, validating the researcher's proposition. The characteristics of a website play a pivotal role in shaping customer behavior and trust, especially in the tourism sector, where these factors are particularly influential. As a result, tourism companies have increasingly focused on enhancing website quality to deliver greater value to customers. This includes strategies to retain existing customers, attract new ones, and foster robust customer relationship management. Companies aiming to achieve these goals must understand the dimensions of customer value. The confirmation of this hypothesis can be attributed to the quality of website content and the provision of accurate, reliable, and engaging information. These elements significantly contribute to customer trust and satisfaction. Therefore, tourism companies must prioritize improving website quality, as customer trust is integral to achieving organizational goals.

These findings align with prior research conducted by Aydinli and Senyurek (2017) and Qatawneh et al. (2023), further emphasizing the importance of website quality as a driver of customer trust. By implementing measures to enhance website design and functionality, companies can establish stronger relationships with their customers and improve their competitive positioning in the tourism industry.

The analysis of Main Hypothesis 2 reveals that brand awareness significantly affects customer trust. This hypothesis was confirmed with a t-value of 12.098, well above the critical threshold of 1.96, validating the researcher's claim. Brand awareness is a fundamental prerequisite for building trust, significantly influencing customers' purchase decisions. This awareness plays a key role in embedding a brand in customers' minds, facilitating familiarity with its characteristics, and reducing perceived risks of purchasing decisions. As a result, customers are more likely to evaluate a brand positively and demonstrate a higher willingness to engage with it. Brand awareness also serves as a critical driver for acquiring brand equity and represents one of the foundational steps in brand-building efforts. Companies with strong brand awareness often enjoy a competitive edge, as heightened awareness is associated with increased sales, greater market share, and enhanced customer loyalty. In the context of tourism, the findings suggest that a positive brand image fosters customers' trust, which is essential for decision-making and loyalty. This connection underscores the importance of creating and maintaining a favorable brand image in customers' minds, particularly in a highly competitive industry like tourism. The results further emphasize the need for tourism companies to invest in strategies that enhance brand awareness, as it directly contributes to trust-building and long-term customer engagement. By doing so, companies can achieve stronger market positioning and sustained success.

The analysis of Hypothesis 3 indicates that website quality significantly impacts customer trust through the mediating role of brand awareness. This hypothesis was validated with a t-value of 7.921, exceeding the critical value of 1.96, and confirming the

researcher's proposition. The findings highlight the role of websites and internet branding in shaping brand image and serving as communication channels with potential and existing customers. A high-quality website not only enhances brand awareness but also facilitates the establishment of trust, which is crucial for the success of any business. Customer trust, in turn, positively influences customer behavior, improving company and website performance. Increased customer interaction driven by trust further contributes to website refinement, which subsequently attracts a larger customer base. In the tourism sector, factors such as the availability of diverse services, comprehensive information presented in accessible formats, user-friendly search functionalities, and rich, relevant content on websites appear to play a significant role in reinforcing this relationship. These attributes enhance customer experiences, foster trust, and elevate brand perception, confirming the hypothesis. The results underscore the importance of investing in website quality as a strategic asset. By creating well-designed, informative, and user-centric websites, tourism companies can strengthen brand awareness and trust, leading to improved customer engagement and sustained competitive advantage.

The analysis of the secondary hypotheses highlights the significant impact of various factors on customer trust through the mediating role of brand awareness. According to Secondary Hypothesis 1, the findings indicate that accessibility plays a crucial role in enhancing trust by improving brand awareness. With a *t*-value of 3.721, the ease of accessing and navigating site content emerges as a key factor. User-friendly website features ensure seamless interaction, foster a sense of trust among users, and strengthen their connection to the brand.

Similarly, based on Secondary Hypothesis 2, website functionality significantly affects customer trust through brand awareness, with a *t*-value of 7.789. Effective website elements, such as intuitive navigation, quick loading times, and search engine efficiency, contribute to a better user experience. These features enhance customer satisfaction and elevate the brand's perceived value, thereby building trust.

According to the analysis of Secondary Hypothesis 3, promise fulfillment is another critical factor, as demonstrated by a *t*-value of 6.154. Meeting customer expectations through consistent service quality and variety significantly reinforces trust. When companies deliver on their promises, they create a reliable brand image, which further solidifies customer loyalty.

Lastly, based on the analysis of Secondary Hypothesis 4, privacy was found to have a substantial effect on customer trust through brand awareness, with a *t*-value of 5.083. Ensuring the security of website content and respecting user privacy are essential for gaining customer confidence. Websites prioritizing data protection and confidentiality create a trustworthy environment for their users. These results are consistent with the findings of Aydinli and Senyurek (2017) and Qatawneh et al. (2023), emphasizing the critical role of website quality, privacy, and service delivery in strengthening customer trust through enhanced brand awareness.

Practical Implications

The findings from Main Hypothesis 1 suggest that tourism companies should prioritize the development of well-designed websites, considering the criteria identified in this research. A well-crafted website serves as a key organizational asset and can significantly enhance a company's ability to attract, retain, and build customer trust. This, in turn, leads to increased profitability and provides a sustainable competitive advantage over other companies in the industry. Therefore, organizations need to focus on both the technical and user-centered aspects of website design. Websites should be designed in a way that meets customer expectations and preferences. To achieve this, tourism companies should gather feedback from their target audience through surveys focused on the specific indicators outlined in the analytical model. Additionally, including a "suggestions and complaints" section on the website can improve customer engagement and satisfaction.

According to the findings of Main Hypothesis 2, forming a positive initial experience for customers is crucial, especially for those purchasing tourism services for the first time. Companies should give special attention to first-time customers to ensure their first interaction is positive. Companies should create a strong brand experience in customers' minds from the outset. A customer's first encounter with a tourism company may involve both the website and the brand, so having a well-designed website with desirable features is essential. Given the complexity of website design and brand development, companies need to combine customer feedback with insights from experienced website designers and brand experts. This collaborative approach will help ensure that the website is functional and effectively conveys the company's brand image and values.

The findings of Main Hypothesis 3 highlight the importance of website quality as a critical factor in fostering positive customer attitudes and trust. Tourism company managers are advised to invest strategically in enhancing website quality, adapting to rapid changes in the business environment, and capitalizing on the growing shift toward e-commerce. By doing so, companies can differentiate their brand and maintain a competitive edge. Additionally, innovation in service delivery should be prioritized, incorporating customer feedback to refine service methods and improve overall satisfaction.

Regarding Secondary Hypothesis 1, the website environment is increasingly recognized as a vital communication tool with customers and is poised to become one of the most significant channels in the future. To maximize its impact, companies are advised to: 1) Create a visually appealing website environment. 2) Develop an appropriate brand image supported by effective advertising. 3) Ensure quick and seamless accessibility. These elements collectively contribute to a positive and memorable experience for customers, reinforcing brand loyalty.

The findings of Secondary Hypothesis 2 suggest that tourism companies must allocate sufficient budgets to website design. Investments should focus on prioritizing key features and indicators to optimize the website as a strategic tool for customer engagement.

According to Secondary Hypothesis 3, tourism companies can foster repeated purchases by enhancing their internet brand image. This involves fulfilling promises to customers, maintaining website features, and making targeted investments in website design. A consistent and reliable online presence helps to build customer trust and encourages long-term loyalty.

Finally, the results of Secondary Hypothesis 4 underline the importance of addressing customer priorities, particularly website security. Tourism companies should emphasize protecting customer information, incorporating trust seals, and ensuring error-free operation. These elements are especially significant given Iranian customer preferences and cultural considerations. By prioritizing these aspects, companies can strengthen trust and confidence among their online clientele.

Limitation and suggestions for future studies

Like other studies, this research has its limitations, which pave the way for future qualitative and quantitative studies. First, the data for this study were collected from Iranian users of tourism websites, and the model testing was limited to the Iranian user community. It is recommended that the model be re-evaluated in other countries with different socio-cultural and technological contexts. Second, the moderating effects of variables such as gender, age, and education were not assessed in this model. Future research should include these variables in the model to provide a more comprehensive insight. Third, this study examined the tourism industry as a whole and did not focus on specific sectors such as hospitality, ticket booking, and others. Future studies are encouraged to address these specific domains for a more detailed understanding.

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