

From Recommendations to Digital Reputation: Effects of Program Quality, Brand Image, and Word of Mouth on Choosing SDIT Nurul Azmi Medan

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Abstract.

This study aims to analyze the influence of program quality, brand image, and word of mouth on parents' decisions in choosing SDIT Nurul Azmi Medan as an educational institution for their children. The research uses a quantitative approach with an explanatory design. The population consists of 50 parents of 1st grade students of SDIT Nurul Azmi Medan for the 2024/2025 school year, with a total sampling technique. Data were collected through questionnaires and analyzed using multiple linear regression with the help of SPSS version 26. The results of the hypothesis test showed that brand image had a positive and significant effect on the decision to choose a school ($\beta = 1.348$; $p = 0.000$), while the quality of the program had a significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.324$; $p = 0.033$), and word of mouth had no significant effect ($p = 0.388$). The Adjusted R^2 value of 0.813 indicates that 81.3% of the variation in parental decisions can be explained by these three variables. These findings indicate that school image is a dominant factor in decision-making, while the quality of programs has a negative influence, which needs to be studied further. This research contributes to school management in developing image-based and communication-based marketing strategies.

Keywords: program quality; brand image; word of mouth; the decision to choose a school; SDIT

INTRODUCTION

School selection is an important decision for parents, especially in the context of basic education that lays the foundation for a child's character and academic development (Chen, 2020; Hanushek et al., 2017). In the midst of many school choices—both public and private, conventional and religious—parents tend to consider various factors before deciding which school to choose (Alsaad & Mustafa, 2021; Witte & Wolf, 2020). These factors often include school reputation, quality of teachers, curriculum, facilities, religious orientation, and proximity to home (Liu & Steiner-Khamsi, 2022; Jalal et al., 2021; Parker & Hansen, 2022).

SDIT Nurul Azmi Medan, as an integrated Islamic educational institution, offers a comprehensive program that combines academic, Islamic, and character-building education (Rahman & Yusuf, 2019; Mulyono & Sutrisno, 2020). However, to date, there has been no scientific research that empirically examines the factors influencing parents' decisions to choose this school. Previous studies have shown that parental decisions to enroll children in Islamic schools are often shaped by considerations of religious values, moral education, academic quality, and social environment (Fauzi,

2021; Hasanah & Utami, 2022). Moreover, integrated Islamic schools in Indonesia are increasingly seen as alternatives that meet both academic excellence and religious formation needs (Syahrul & Marlina, 2020; Hakim, 2021; Lestari, 2023).

Previous studies have shown that a combination of institutional quality, reputation, and social recommendations influences parents' school selection (Nicholson, 2023). For instance, Ismail and Rahman (2020) found that service quality and brand image significantly affect parental choice in private primary schools, highlighting the importance of perceived educational standards and institutional prestige. Meanwhile, Santoso et al. (2019) demonstrated that word-of-mouth communication from other parents and community networks plays a crucial role in shaping school preferences, particularly in faith-based educational contexts. Despite these insights, there remains a lack of empirical research specifically examining integrated Islamic schools such as *SDIT Nurul Azmi Medan*, where academic, religious, and character education are provided in an integrated manner.

Based on the theoretical framework of Engel et al. (2015) and Kotler & Keller (2016), consumer decisions—including those related to educational services—are influenced by service quality, brand image, and word of mouth. This study adopts three independent variables: program quality (X1), brand image (X2), and word of mouth (X3), with the decision to choose a school (Y) as the dependent variable.

The objectives of this study are: (1) to analyze the influence of program quality on the decision to choose a school; (2) to analyze the influence of brand image on school choice; and (3) to analyze the influence of word of mouth on the decision to choose a school. The results of this research are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the development of educational marketing strategies in faith-based schools.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a quantitative approach with an explanatory design. The population consists of 50 parents of 1st-grade students at *SDIT Nurul Azmi Medan* for the 2024/2025 school year. The sampling technique used is *total sampling*, as the population is limited and can be fully reached.

The research instrument was a closed-ended questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The questionnaire comprised 66 statement items divided into four variables: X1 (18 items), X2 (15 items), X3 (15 items), and Y (18 items).

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 with the following steps:

1. **Validity test** (*Pearson Product Moment*) with the criterion of *r* calculation

$> r$ table (0.2787) and $sig. < 0.05$.

2. **Reliability test** (*Cronbach's Alpha*) with the criterion $\alpha > 0.60$.
3. **Classical assumption tests**: normality (*Kolmogorov-Smirnov*), multicollinearity ($VIF < 10$), and heteroscedasticity (*Spearman's Rho*).
4. **Multiple linear regression analysis** to test partial and simultaneous effects.
5. **Hypothesis testing** (t -test and F -test) with $\alpha = 0.05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Validity and Reliability Test

All statement items are declared valid because r is calculated > 0.2787 and $sig. < 0.05$.

Cronbach's Alpha values for all four variables:

Program Quality (X_1): 0.973

Brand Image (X_2): 0.965

Word of Mouth (X_3): 0.973

Choice of School Results (Y): 0.974

All values > 0.60 , so the instrument is reliable.

Classic Assumption Test

Normality: After the outlier (34th case) was removed, the significance value of Kolmogorov-Smirnov = 0.200 $> 0.05 \rightarrow$ the normally distributed data.

Multicollinearity: VIF value < 10 ($X_1=5.988$; $X_2=6.517$; $X_3=1.490$) $\rightarrow$ multicollinearity does not occur.

Heteroscedasticity: The value of sig. Spearman's Rho $> 0.05 \rightarrow$ heteroscedasticity did not occur.

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Regression equations:

$$Y = 13.546 - 0.324X_1 + 1.348X_2 + 0.058X_3 + e.$$

Hypothesis Testing

Table 1. Variable

Variable	B	t count	p-value	Information
X_1 (Program Quality)	-0,324	-2,200	0,033	Significant (negative)
X_2 (Brand Image)	1,348	7,315	0,000	Significant (positive)
X_3 (Word of Mouth)	0,058	0,872	0,388	Insignificant

F Test (ANOVA)

F count = 70,727; $p = 0.000 < 0.05 \rightarrow$ the regression model is feasible and the three variables simultaneously have a significant effect on Y.

Coefficient of Determination Test (R^2)

Adjusted $R^2 = 0.813 \rightarrow$ 81.3% variation in parental decision is explained by X_1 , X_2 , and X_3 ; 18.7% are influenced by other factors (location, cost, etc.).

Discussion

The results of this study show that brand image has a positive and significant effect on the decision of parents to choose SDIT Nurul Azmi Medan. This is consistent with Fadhilah and Sudarwanto (2024), who found that school image is a key determinant of parental interest, as it reflects perceived credibility, trustworthiness, and symbolic value. The findings are supported by Kotler and Keller (2016), who argue that brand image functions as a heuristic in consumer decision-making, particularly when the product or service is intangible and complex, such as educational services. At SDIT Nurul Azmi, brand image is reinforced through consistent communication on social media, strong teacher-parent interactions, and demonstrable program performance, which strengthens positive perceptions and builds parental trust. The results suggest that parents prioritize reputation and institutional identity when selecting schools, highlighting the importance of strategic brand management in educational institutions.

Interestingly, the quality of the educational program was found to have a significant negative effect on parents' decision, contrary to the initial hypothesis. This may be explained by the perception that innovative program features, such as the integration of ClassDojo or blended learning, create additional administrative burden or do not align with parents' expectations for their child's learning. Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory (2003) supports this interpretation, indicating that the adoption of new innovations is affected by perceived complexity and compatibility with users' values and routines. Although descriptive data showed that the average program quality rating was in the "Agree" to "Strongly Agree" range, the negative influence suggests that numerical ratings alone may not fully capture parental perceptions, emphasizing the need for qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups to better understand parental concerns.

Word of mouth (WoM), while descriptively important, was found to have no significant effect on the decision-making process. This indicates a shift in how parents acquire and validate information, as digital channels such as school websites, social media platforms, and online reviews increasingly dominate. Santoso, Hidayat, and

Prasetyo (2019) similarly found that in the context of education, traditional interpersonal recommendations are being supplemented or even replaced by digital sources, which are perceived as more comprehensive and accessible. This finding emphasizes the evolving role of WoM in contemporary educational marketing, where information is less reliant on social circles and more on digital content credibility.

Despite the non-significant effect of program quality and word of mouth, the study highlights that parental decisions are multidimensional and influenced by both rational and emotional considerations. Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard (2015) assert that consumer behavior in service settings involves both cognitive evaluation of tangible features and affective evaluation of brand and reputation. At SDIT Nurul Azmi, parents' choices appear to be guided more by institutional credibility and perceived long-term benefits for their child rather than the novelty or complexity of program features. Therefore, schools should carefully balance program innovation with user-friendliness and clear communication to ensure positive parental perceptions.

The findings also reveal practical implications for faith-based educational institutions. Schools should prioritize brand-building initiatives that communicate values, program consistency, and past success stories. At the same time, innovations in teaching and learning should be implemented in ways that are easily understandable and actionable for parents. Strategies might include parent training sessions, regular informational updates, or demonstrations of program benefits, which can increase alignment between program offerings and parental expectations. This approach can mitigate the negative perception of program quality and strengthen overall institutional appeal.

This study demonstrates the dominant role of brand image in parental school selection, while revealing that program quality and word of mouth may play more nuanced or indirect roles. The research contributes to the literature on educational marketing by empirically validating the theoretical link between brand perception and consumer choice in faith-based schools. Practically, the findings provide actionable insights for school administrators seeking to attract and retain students in competitive educational environments. By leveraging brand management, effectively communicating program benefits, and adapting to digital information trends, schools can optimize parental engagement and decision-making.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that brand image has a positive and significant effect on parents' decisions to choose *SDIT Nurul Azmi Medan*, confirming that institutional reputation and perceived credibility are key determinants in educational choices.

Conversely, the quality of the program shows a significant negative effect, suggesting a misalignment between parental expectations and the perceived relevance or complexity of program innovations. Meanwhile, word of mouth is not a significant factor, indicating that interpersonal recommendations are secondary to institutional image and digital information sources.

These findings fulfill the research objectives by empirically analyzing the influence of program quality, brand image, and word of mouth on school selection, highlighting the dominant role of brand perception in faith-based educational contexts. For future research, it is recommended to conduct qualitative studies, such as interviews or focus groups, to explore parental perceptions of program quality in greater depth. It is also important to investigate the evolving role of digital information in comparison to traditional word of mouth in educational decision-making, thereby contributing to more effective marketing strategies for schools.

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