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MENGEKSPLORASI PENGARUH *BRAND IMAGE* DAN BIAYA PENDIDIKAN TERHADAP KEPUTUSAN ORANG TUA DALAM MEMILIH SEKOLAH: DAMPAK MEDIASI *WORD OF MOUTH (WOM)*

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Abstrak: Word of Mouth (WoM) cenderung lebih dipercaya dibandingkan promosi langsung dari sekolah. Orang tua cenderung mempercayai pengalaman nyata orang lain dalam memilih sekolah, sehingga dapat memperkuat brand image positif suatu sekolah. Melalui WoM, orang tua dapat memperoleh informasi lebih mendalam tentang berbagai aspek sekolah, antara lain kualitas pendidikan, fasilitas, kurikulum, dan suasana pembelajaran. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui peran mediasi WoM dalam mempengaruhi citra merek dan biaya pendidikan terhadap keputusan orang tua dalam memilih sekolah. Purposive sampling digunakan untuk menentukan responden penelitian yang berjumlah 43 orang tua siswa di SMP Ma`arif 2 Ponorogo. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis jalur dengan metode PLS-SEM. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa WoM berperan sebagai mediator yang tidak signifikan terhadap citra merek ($\beta=0.094$; $p=0.101$), namun signifikan terhadap biaya pendidikan dan keputusan orang tua dalam memilih sekolah ($\beta=0.388$; $p=0.005$). Selain itu, WoM juga berpengaruh langsung terhadap keputusan orang tua ($\beta=0.540$; $p=0.000$). Temuan ini menyoroti pentingnya rekomendasi dan ulasan dari orang tua lain dalam membentuk persepsi orang tua terhadap suatu sekolah, yang berdampak pada keputusan mereka dalam memilih sekolah untuk anak-anak mereka. Implikasi praktis dari penelitian ini adalah sekolah dapat meningkatkan brand image dan menyesuaikan biaya sekolah agar lebih menarik bagi orang tua, sekaligus memperkuat strategi pemasaran WOM untuk meningkatkan keputusan pilihan sekolah orang tua.

Kata-kata kunci: citramerek,biayapendidikan, keputusan orang tua, promosimulutkemulut, PLS-SEM.

EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF BRAND IMAGE AND EDUCATION COSTS ON PARENTS' DECISIONS IN CHOOSING A SCHOOL: THE MEDIATING IMPACT OF WORD OF MOUTH (WOM)

Abstract: Word of Mouth (WoM) tends to be more trusted than direct promotion from the school. Parents tend to trust other people's real experiences in choosing a school, which can strengthen a school's positive brand image. Through WoM, parents can get more in-depth information about various aspects of the school, including the quality of education, facilities, curriculum, and learning atmosphere. This research aims to investigate the mediating role of WoM in influencing brand image and educational costs on parents' decisions in choosing a school. Purposive sampling was used to determine research respondents totaling 43 parents at SMP Ma`arif 2 Ponorogo. Data were analyzed using path analysis with the PLS-SEM method. The research results show that WoM acts as a mediator which is insignificant on the brand image ($\beta=0.094$; $p=0.101$), but significant on the cost of education and parents' decisions in choosing a school ($\beta=0.388$; $p=0.005$). Apart from that, WoM also directly influences parents' decisions ($\beta=0.540$; $p=0.000$). These findings highlight the importance of recommendations and reviews from other parents in shaping parents' perceptions of a school, which impacts their decisions in choosing a school for their children. The practical implications of this research are that schools can improve their brand image and adjust their tuition fees to be more attractive to parents, while also strengthening WOM marketing strategies to improve parents' school choice decisions.

Keywords: brand image, education costs, parents' decisions, word of mouth, PLS-SEM.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a crucial role in human life. Schools that provide education must of course be able to provide the best quality education, for this reason, careful planning is needed in choosing a school (Badrusalam, 2021; Hwang & Choi, 2019; Pajpach et al., 2022). Education is essentially the duty and responsibility of parents. However, parents can work with schools to support their children's education. Parents of students will of course choose the school with the best quality, therefore, schools compete to show their quality and maintain the quality that has been established (Alvafindo & Bahrun, 2023; Hidayati & Rifa'i, 2020). This quality is what is called an image or the image of a product. Brand image is the image or perception formed by consumers of a brand or product. Educational institutions that have a good reputation for quality (perceived quality) in the eyes of the public will certainly form a strong brand image of the school (Foroudi et al., 2019; Nasib et al., 2022; Shehzadi et al., 2020).

The brand image often reflects the values and culture of the school. This is in line with research by Schlesinger *et al.* (2023) that overall, brand image plays an important role in shaping parents' perceptions, reputation, and confidence in schools. This influences their decisions in choosing schools that are considered most suitable to meet their children's educational needs and expectations. However, this research is not in line with research by Satria & Hidayat (2018) which states that brand image has no significant influence on parents' decisions. Competition is increasingly fierce, which can be proven by various creative and innovative efforts from education providers to continue to explore the uniqueness and advantages of their schools so that they are increasingly sought after by the public. Research conducted by Hanum *et al.* (2020) states that brand image and interest have a positive and significant influence on the decision of parents to choose educational services. Nasib *et al.* (2022) also researched the influence of brand image and perceived education costs on interest in continuing studies, showing that the results of this research showed that there was a positive and significant influence of brand image and perceptions of education costs on interest in continuing studies.

Based on the results of the researchers' initial pre-survey, there was a varied distribution in parents' perceptions of the brand image of SMP Ma'arif 2 Ponorogo. As many as 17% of 30 parents stated that they considered the school's brand image to be very good. Most parents, around 27%, assess the school's brand image as good.

Furthermore, as many as 33% of 30 parents felt that the school's brand image was quite good. However, around 23% of parents expressed their dissatisfaction by assessing the school's brand image as not good. Thus, even though the majority of parents give a positive assessment of the school's brand image, there are still a small number who feel dissatisfied with the school's image. However, even though most parents may have an unfavorable view of the Brand Image of SMP Ma'arif 2 Ponorogo, interestingly, the number of students registering is continuing to increase. This phenomenon highlights that in educational decision-making, factors other than brand image also play an important role, such as the curriculum, the quality of teaching, or the perception of its cost.

Another factor that influences parents' decisions is the perception of educational costs. Education costs of education refer to the way individuals or groups interpret and understand the costs associated with education. These perceptions can vary between individuals, families, and communities depending on various factors, including economic context, culture, values, and personal experiences (Belfield et al., 2018; Gallarza et al., 2017). Parents' socio-economic conditions play a big role in every decision their children make, including education. During an economic crisis like this, what many parents feel is the high cost of education and every year the cost of education is increasing. This is in line with research by Badrusalam (2021) which states that one of the problems in the world of Indonesian education is the issue of education costs because it is common knowledge that education costs in Indonesia are very expensive and very burdensome for society. Schools that provide education must of course be able to provide the best quality education, for this reason, careful planning is needed in choosing a school (Formicola, 2017; Hippe et al., 2020). Education is essentially the duty and responsibility of parents. However, parents can work with schools to support their children's education. Parents of students will of course choose the school with the best quality, therefore, schools compete to show their quality and maintain the quality that has been established. This quality is what is called an image or the image of a product. Brand image is the image or perception formed by consumers of a brand or product. Educational institutions that have a good reputation for quality (perceived quality) in the eyes of the public will certainly form a strong brand image of the school (Gallarza et al., 2017; Pajpach et al., 2022).

Based on the pre-survey results, it show that the cost of education at SMP Ma'arif 2 Ponorogo

has increased by 14% in the last two years. However, surprisingly, the number of students enrolling at the school continues to increase. This shows that although parents may be faced with financial challenges due to rising educational costs, they still prioritize the educational values and opportunities that the school offers for their children. The decision to choose a school is one of the important decisions in the lives of both parents. Apart from considering brand image and cost perception, it turns out that parents also make word of mouth one of their considerations. The definition of "word of mouth" in the school context refers to the way information about the school is spread and exchanged through conversations between people, especially between parents (Schlesinger et al., 2023; Sinuraya et al., 2021). Kurniawan (2022) states that school word of mouth can influence people's perceptions. Word of mouth has a significant influence on parents' decisions in choosing a school. This research is in line with research by Hanum *et al.* (2020) which states that word of mouth is often considered one of the most effective forms of marketing because it is based on trust and interpersonal relationships. This is different from research conducted by Alwifaqi & Ambarwati (2023) which states that word of mouth is not the main factor in parents' decision to choose a school. Choosing the right location that is easy to remember can be the most influential factor in parents' decisions. This research is in line with research by Casiño & Walag (2022) which states that word of mouth only has a small influence on the decision to choose a school.

Based on the pre-survey results, it shows that word of mouth plays a significant role in the decision-making process of parents. It can be seen that around 60% of the parents who participated in the observation stated that recommendations from friends and family had a big impact on their decisions. As many as 25% said that positive testimonials about personal experiences from individuals they knew influenced their assessment of SMP Ma'arif 2 Ponorogo. Meanwhile, around 15% said that word of mouth only had a minimal or insignificant influence on their decision, with other factors such as the child's needs, location, and school costs being more dominant in making the final decision. Thus, although word of mouth is not always the main factor, it still makes a significant contribution to shaping parents' perceptions and choices regarding the schools they choose for their children.

Word of Mouth can also play an important role in influencing parents' perceptions of educational

costs (Cuddy et al., 2020; Kurniawan, 2022). If parents hear positive testimonials about the value of the education provided by a school, they may be more motivated to consider the cost of that education as a worthwhile investment in their children's future (Assefa & Stansbury, 2018; Hidayati & Rifa'i, 2020). This research aims to understand in more depth how parents make decisions about school for their children. By exploring the role of WoM as a mediator between school brand image, perceived educational costs, and parents' decisions, this research will help reveal the psychological mechanisms and decision-making processes involved. This research will provide valuable insights for schools and educational institutions in developing more effective marketing and communication strategies. By understanding how WoM influences brand image and perceptions of the cost of education, schools can adapt their messages and leverage social networks to strengthen their reputation (Ridhonie et al., 2022; Venzin, 2022). In addition, related parties in the education sector can develop policies that support better access to education for all children, and parents can participate actively in supporting their children's education.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design and Participants

This research applies a quantitative approach with survey research methods (Apriliani et al., 2023; Putra et al., 2022; Widayanto et al., 2021). This research design uses an explanatory and correlational approach using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) which is an approach used to explore the relationship between variables in a conceptual model. PLS-SEM is a multivariate statistical method used to analyze the relationship between latent or measured variables in a structural model. By using this approach, this research combines explanatory and correlational elements to better understand the complexity of the relationships between variables in a conceptual model. PLS-SEM allows researchers to test models holistically, including identifying cause-and-effect relationships and correlation relationships between variables, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the observed phenomenon. Participants in this research were 43 parents at SMP Ma'arif 2 Ponorogo, East Java, Indonesia.

Measures

The data collection technique used in this

research is a four-variable questionnaire. Research design with an explanatory and correlational approach to determine the relationship between independent variables (brand image and education costs), mediation (word of mouth), and dependent variables (parents' decision). This research uses a Likert scale consisting of 4 alternative answers from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Daryono et al.,

2020; Widyastuti et al., 2023). Data collection was carried out using a survey method via Google Forms. Research instrument variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Instruments

Variables	Constructs	Constructs	References
Brand Image (X1)	Popularity	BI1	(Chandra et al., 2019; Chen, 2024; Hassan et al., 2019; Maduro et al., 2018; Nasib et al., 2022; Shehzadi et al., 2020)
	Renewal and innovation	BI2	
	School reputation	BI3	
	Learning facilities	BI4	
	Student creativity	BI5	
	Moral students	BI6	
	Students with character	BI7	
	Development of student talents	BI8	
Education Costs (X2)	Comparison of costs	CoE1	(Belfield et al., 2018; Formicola, 2017; Gallarza et al., 2017; Hippe et al., 2020; Pajpach et al., 2022)
	Fees according to facilities	CoE2	
	The financial burden on parents	CoE3	
	Affordable	CoE4	
	Suitability of cost to quality	CoE5	
	Book costs	CoE6	
	Satisfaction with quality	CoE7	
Parents' Decision (Y)	Special needs	PD1	(Alvafindo & Bahrin, 2023; Cuddy et al., 2020; Assefa & Stansbury, 2018; Hidayati & Rifa'i, 2020; Jones et al., 2019)
	Searching for information	PD2	
	School reputation	PD3	
	School is a choice	PD4	
	The right school for your child	PD5	
	Consideration in choosing	PD6	
	Satisfied with the service	PD7	
	No regrets	PD8	
	Believe	PD9	
Word of Mouth (Z)	Positive conversation	WoM1	(Alwifaqi & Ambarwati, 2023; Hamzah et al., 2023; Satria & Hidayat, 2018; Sinuraya et al., 2021; Venzin, 2022)
	Positive information and stories	WoM2	
	Other people's information	WoM3	
	Motivation from others	WoM4	
	Positive story	WoM5	
	Invite other people	WoM6	
	Information from social media	WoM7	
	Tell of satisfaction	WoM8	

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis of this research uses the PLS-SEM measurement technique. The outer model testing stage is a measurement model testing stage that aims to prove the validity and estimate the reliability of indicators and constructs. Several requirements that must be met are the indicator loading factor ($\lambda > 0.70$), and the reflective construct AVE (> 0.50) (Apriliani et al., 2023;

Daryono et al., 2024; Fauzan et al., 2023; Supriyanto et al., 2022). Reliability estimates use cronbach

Alpha, Rho_A, and CR values (> 0.70). The goodness of fit model testing stage aims to test the predictive power of the model and the feasibility of the model.

The criteria that must be met include predictive relevance to see the predictive power of the model

on the blindfolding output (Daryono et al., 2023; Hariyanto et al., 2022). The inner model testing stage is to test the significance of the direct (H-DIR₁₋₅) and indirect effects (the mediating role of H-IND₁₋₂).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

PLS-SEM Analysis: Evaluation of Structural Model

Evaluation of measurement models is very important to ensure that the indicators used to measure latent constructs or variables are by the research objectives and have good quality. Examining construct validity is the primary goal of

measuring model evaluation. Analysing the relationship between the indicator and the measured construct can ensure that the indicator truly reflects the intended aspect of the construct. By analyzing factor loadings, reliability, and discriminant validity, researchers can decide which indicators should be included in the analysis and which should be omitted.

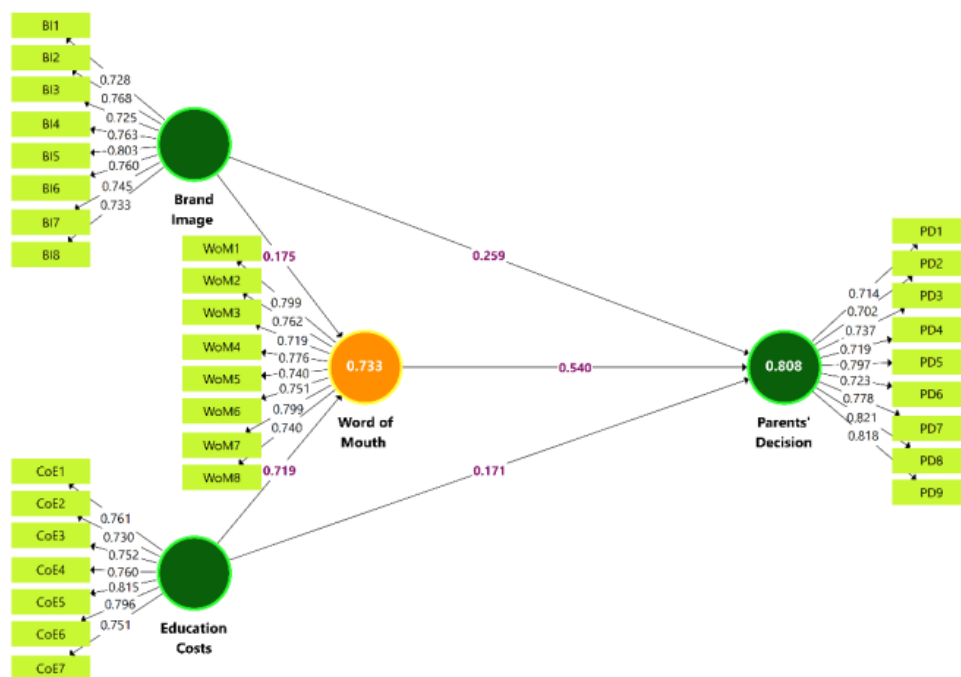


Figure 1. Evaluation of the Measurement Model

Factor loading provides information about how strong the relationship is between the indicator and the construct being measured. The higher the factor loading, the better the indicator represents the construct. Based on Table 2, Overall the factor loading value obtained for each sub-variable is >0.70 (0.702- Seeking Information to 0.821- No regrets). This means that the level of relationship between sub-variables and variables that can be explained is 70.20% to 82.10%. AVE is used as a construct validation criterion in PLS-SEM. The AVE value for each variable has a value of >0.50 (0.567-Brand Image (X₁) to 0.588-Cost Perception (X₂)). A high AVE value indicates that the construct has good convergent validity, namely that the indicators used fully represent the measured construct. The results of reliability testing revealed that all constructs CA (0.891-Brand Image to 0.897-Word Of Mouth), rho_A (0.897-Brand Image to 0.899-

Word of Mouth), and CR (0.913-Brand Image to 0.917-Word Of Mouth), were overall, namely >0.70 . It can be concluded that all research variables have good reliability in measuring the success of Parents' Decisions.

The Fornell-Larcker test is one of the methods used in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate the discriminant validity of the constructs in a model. This test aims to ensure that the different constructs in the model can be distinguished from each other. This is done by comparing the variance explained by the construct with the variance explained by other constructs in the model. If the variance explained by a construct is greater than the variance explained by another construct, then the construct has good discriminant validity. Based on the Table 3, the correlation value for Brand Image (X₁) → Brand Image (X₁) has a value of 0.773, which is greater

than the correlation value for Brand Image (X_1) with other variables Education Costs \rightarrow 0.741; Parents'

Decision \rightarrow 0.767; and Word of Mouth \rightarrow 0.707. And so on for assessing correlation with other Variables.

Table 3. Discriminant Vaidity: The Fornell Larcker

Variables	Brand Image	Education Costs	Parents' Decision	Word of Mouth
Brand Image	0.773			
Education Costs	0.741	0.767		
Parents' Decision	0.767	0.721	0.758	
Word of Mouth	0.707	0.748	0.728	0.761

PLS-SEM Analysis: Evaluation of Structural Model

Structural evaluation in testing on PLS-SEM has the main objective, namely to assess the prediction accuracy of the proposed model. This is done by evaluating the extent to which the model can explain variations in empirical data and predict endogenous variables well. Overall, structural evaluation aims to improve understanding of the phenomenon studied in the research context. By analyzing the relationships between variables, researchers can identify the factors that contributed to the phenomenon and develop deeper insight into the dynamics involved.

R^2 (Coefficient of Determination) provides an overview of how well the PLS-SEM model explains variation in the observed endogenous variables (constructs). The higher the R^2 value, the greater the proportion of variation in the construct that the model

can explain. R^2 allows comparison between different PLS-SEM models. Researchers can use R^2 values to compare the effectiveness of different models in explaining variation in observed constructs. Based on Figure 1 and Table 4, the Parents' Decision variable (Y) obtained an R^2 value of 0.808. This means that the three variables Brand Image, Cost Perception, and Word of Mouth together influence 80.80% and other variables outside the research model influence the remaining 19.20%. Furthermore, the Word of Mouth (Z) variable obtained an R^2 value of 0.773. This means that the two variables measuring Word of Mouth namely Brand Image and Cost Perception, together influence 77.30% which is categorized as having a large influence (>67.00%) and other variables influence the remaining 22.70% in outside the research model.

Table 4. Measurement of Structural Model: R^2 , f^2 , Q^2

Variables	R^2		f^2		Redundancy		Communality		Predictive Power
	Value	Decision	Y Value	Z Value	SSE	Q^2	SSE	Q^2	
BI (X_1)	-	-	0.15	0.052	344	-	192.912	0.439	Strong
CoE (X_2)	-	-	0.037	0.874	301	-	169.599	0.437	Strong
PD (Y)	0.808	Substantial	-	-	217.6	0.438	208.270	0.462	Strong
WoM (Z)	0.733	Substantial	0.404	-	208971	0.393	190.427	0.446	Strong

f^2 (effect size) is one of the measures in PLS-SEM to evaluate the strength of the effect of latent variables on the observed construct. Specifically, f^2 measures the predictive power of a latent variable against a particular construct in the model. More specifically, f^2 is calculated by dividing the square of the latent variable regression loading on a particular construct by the amount of residual error (error variance) from that construct. The results provide an idea of how much the latent variable contributes to explaining variation in the observed construct. f^2 helps in determining how significant the contribution of latent variables is to the observed construct. f^2

allows comparison between the contributions of several latent variables to the same In calculating the effect size of each variable on the influence of the small and medium categories. The strongest variable in measuring Parents' Decision (Y) is the Word of Mouth variable with an f-square value of 0.404 in the large category (>0.35). Next, the Brand Image variable obtained an f-square value of 0.150 in the small category (>0.15). Finally Cost Perception with an f-square value of 0.037 is included in the small category (>0.15). Furthermore, the strongest variable in measuring Word of Mouth (Z) is the Cost Perception variable with an f-square value of 0.874,

which is included in the large category (>0.35). Next is the Brand Image variable with an f-square value of 0.052, which is included in the small category (>0.15).

The next test by looking at the predictive relevance value (Q^2) aims to validate the predictive ability of the model according to the reality in the field. Based on the Table 4, all Q^2 values exceed the cut point (greater than zero). The results of calculating predictive relevance Q^2 (redundancy) in Table 4 show a Q^2 value of 0.393 (>0.35) on the Word of Mouth variable in the Strong predictive relevance category up to 0.438 (>0.35) on the Parents' Decision variable in the strong predictive category relevance. So the model results in this research can explain 39.30% to 43.80% of the phenomenon studied. It can be concluded that the research model for improving Parents' Decisions as measured by the three variables can predict 43.80% of the situation in the field. The Q^2 value (communality) shows the four variable dimensions with strong predictive power of

0.437 (Cost Perception) to 0.446 (Word of Mouth). The results of the predictive social aspect test (Q^2) show that the model for measuring Parents' Decisions (Y) has strong predictive power (>0.35).

Path Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

One of the main goals of hypothesis testing is to examine the relationships between variables in a proposed model. This is done by analysing the strength and significance of the relationships between the variables identified in the model. Direct effect evaluation allows researchers to test the consistency between empirical findings and the theory that supports the model. Furthermore, this test analyses the significance of the mediation effect in the research model. This is important for understanding the mechanisms underlying relationships between variables and how certain variables can mediate or change relationships between other variables.

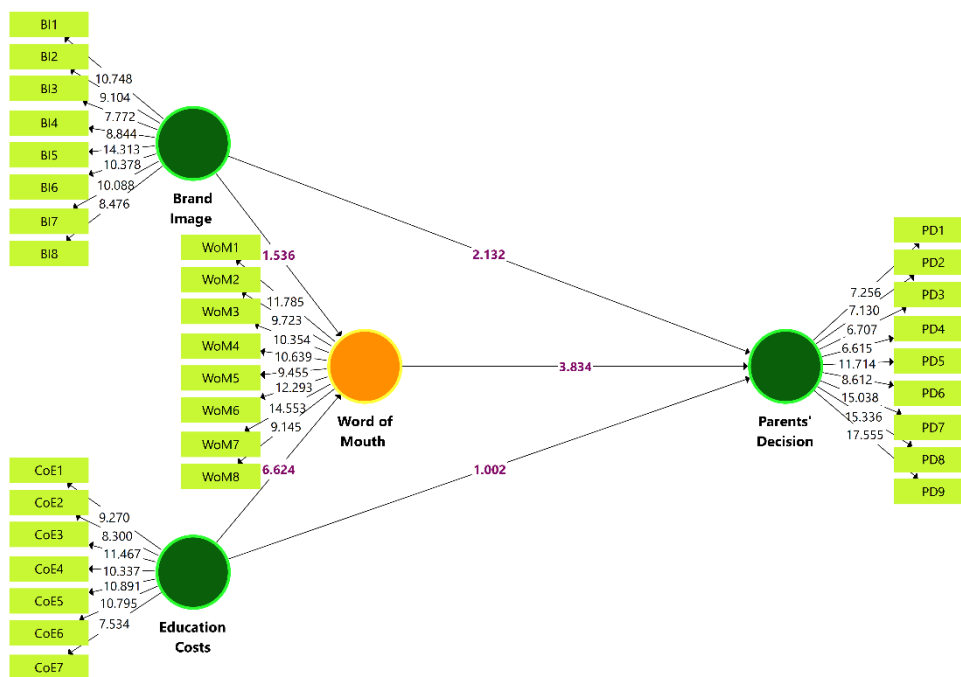


Figure 2. Evaluation of Path Analysis

A hypothesis can be accepted with significant criteria if it has a T-statistic value above 1.96. Meanwhile, the hypothesis can be accepted with a positive or negative influence if the β -value coefficient results indicate a positive or negative direction of influence. Hypothesis H-DIR₁ (X₁. Brand Image → Y. Parents' Decision) obtained β -values = 0.259 (positive decimal), T-statistics = 2.132 (>1.96) and p-values = 0.033

(>0.05). This shows that the brand image variable has a significant positive effect on Parents' Decisions. It can be concluded that the data for these two variables accept the hypothesis (Hypothesis H-DIR₁ is accepted). This can be interpreted as meaning that when the Brand Image variable increases, the Parents' Decision variable also increases and vice versa. Hypothesis H-DIR₃ (X₂. Education Cost → Y.

Parents' Decision) obtained β -values = 0.175 (positive decimal), T-statistics = 1.536 (<1.96) and ρ -values = 0.125 (>0.05). This shows that the cost perception variable has a positive but insignificant effect on Parents' Decisions. It can be concluded that the data for these

two variables reject the hypothesis (Hypothesis H-DIR₃ is rejected). This can be interpreted as meaning that when the brand image variable increases, the Parents' Decision variable also increases but insignificantly.

Table 5. Results of Path Coefficient: Direct Effects

Hyp.	Path Analysis	β -Values (+/-)	SDV	T-Statistics (>1,96)	ρ -Values (<0,05)	Decision
H-DIR1	Brand Image → Parents' Decision	0.259	0.122	2.132	0.033	Accepted
H-DIR2	Education Costs → Parents' Decision	0.171	0.171	1.002	0.317	Rejected
H-DIR3	Brand Image → Word of Mouth	0.175	0.114	1.536	0.125	Rejected
H-DIR4	Education Costs → Word of Mouth	0.719	0.109	6.624	0.000	Accepted
H-DIR5	Word of Mouth → Parents' Decision	0.540	0.141	3.834	0.000	Accepted

In the H-IND1 path analysis, the results of testing the moderating effect of the Word of Mouth variable can be concluded that there is a positive influence (β -values = 0.094) but insignificant (T-stat = 1.644) between Brand Image and Parents' Decisions. So H-IND1 which states "there is a positive and significant influence between brand image and word of mouth as a mediating variable to improve Parents' Decisions" cannot be accepted.

in the h-ind2 path analysis, the results of testing the moderating effect of the word of mouth variable can be concluded that there is a significant (β -values = 0.388) positive influence (T-stat = 2.830) between cost perception on Parents' Decisions. So H-IND2 which states "there is a positive and significant influence between Cost Perception and Word of Mouth as a mediating variable to improve Parents' Decisions" can be accepted.

Table 6. Results of Path Coefficient: Indirect Effects

Hyp.	Path Analysis	β -Values (+/-)	T-Statistics (>1,96)	ρ -Values (<0,05)	Decision	Mediating Role
H-IND1	Brand Image → Word of Mouth → Parents' Decision	0.094	1.644	0.101	Rejected	No Mediation
H-IND2	Education Costs → Word of Mouth → Parents' Decision	0.388	2.830	0.005	Accepted	Full Mediation

Discussion

The school's brand image plays an important role in parents' decisions in choosing a school for their children. Parents tend to choose schools that they believe will provide the best education for their children (Chen, 2024; Hassan et al., 2019). A positive brand image can increase parents' trust in the school. This research is in line with research conducted by Shehzadi *et al.* (2020), it is known that school image has a real influence on parents' decision to choose a school. A strong brand image can make parents feel emotionally connected to the school. They may feel that the school reflects the values and identity they want for their children. This is in line with research conducted by Chandra *et al.* (2019) that a strong brand image has a significant impact on influencing parents in choosing a school for their children because it creates positive perceptions about quality,

reputation, and alignment of values. with the hopes and needs of the family.

The brand image often reflects the values and culture of the school. This is in line with research by Hwang & Choi (2019), brand image plays an important role in shaping parents' perceptions, reputation, and confidence in schools. This influences their decisions in choosing schools that are considered most suitable to meet their children's educational needs and expectations. Student creativity is one of the factors that have a strong value in measuring a school's brand image. This is proven by research data which states that "SMP Ma'arif 2 Ponorogo creates creative students" getting a score of 0.803 or 80.30%. The results of this research are in line with research by Maduro *et al.* (2018) which states that schools that are successful in fostering student creativity can consistently create

differentiation from other schools in the area. This allows schools to build a unique and attractive identity for prospective students and parents, which in turn strengthens their brand image.

However, this research is not consistent with research Shehzadi *et al.* (2020) which states that innovation and renewal do not have a positive and significant influence on the school's brand image in measuring parents' decision to choose a school. According to Nasib *et al.* (2022), schools having a weak reputation can be a significant factor in damaging the brand image of a school. Schools with a weak reputation may lose their appeal in attracting new students. Prospective students and parents tend to choose schools with better and superior reputations, leaving schools with less good reputations. However, the results of Zuliani & Nila's research are not in line with this research which found that the statement "Graduates from SMP Ma'arif 2 Ponorogo can easily enter superior schools" received a score of 0.725 or 72.50%. Thus it can be concluded that school reputation is one of the factors that has a weak influence in measuring school brand image. This is supported by research by Schlesinger *et al.* (2023) which explains that school reputation is one of the factors in forming a brand image. However, the reputation factor is categorized as weak. Meanwhile, creativity and innovation factors in teaching play a more dominant role in shaping brand image.

Popularity has a certain impact on brand image. In this study, popularity was not the main factor influencing parents' decisions in choosing a school for their children. This is proven by the statement "SMP Ma'arif 2 Ponorogo is a well-known educational institution in Ponorogo district" getting a score of 0.728 or 72.80%. This shows that the popularity factor has a weak influence in supporting brand image on parents' decision to choose a school. Overall, this research shows that brand image has a positive and significant influence on parents' decision to choose a school (Alvafindo & Bahrin, 2023; Cuddy *et al.*, 2020). This can be interpreted as meaning that when the Brand Image variable increases, the parents' decision variable also increases and vice versa.

Cost perceptions influence parents' decisions to choose schools for their children. Parents will consider school costs, including registration fees, monthly fees, and other additional costs, to ensure that they can meet the financial obligations associated with their children's education. This research supports research by Badrusalam (2021) that the cost of education can be a determining factor in the

accessibility of a school. In this research, cost perceptions have a positive influence on parents' decisions. This is supported by factors that match cost and quality. Proven by the statement "The quality of education obtained is commensurate with the costs incurred" which received a score of 0.815 or 81.50%. This shows that the suitability of costs to the quality of education is a fairly strong factor in measuring perceptions of education costs.

This research supports research by Belfield *et al.* (2018) which states that the suitability of education costs with quality is an important factor in parents' decision-making in choosing a school for their children. According to Formicola (2017), if a school with more affordable fees also offers good quality education, then parents will tend to choose that school. Apart from the suitability of cost and quality factors, there is a factor that also has a strong influence on cost perception, namely the book cost factor. Book costs are one factor that can influence the perception of educational costs. In this study, the statement "The cost of school books is not a financial burden on parents" received a value of 0.796 or 79.60%, which means that the fact that the cost of books has a fairly strong influence on the perception of educational costs. This research supports research by Gallarza *et al.* (2017) that transparency about book costs and the ability to predict these costs can influence parents' perceptions of education costs. If schools provide clear information about the cost of required books and when they will be needed, parents will feel better prepared and better able to deal with those costs (Belfield *et al.*, 2018; Hippe *et al.*, 2020).

Schools with a good brand image tend to have good quality. Parents who are satisfied with the school are more likely to provide positive recommendations to others through word of mouth. This is in line with research by Hanum *et al.* (2020) which states that positive recommendations from parents who have had good experiences with schools can influence other parents' decisions. Word of mouth from trusted friends, family, or neighbors can be an important factor in shaping parents' perceptions of a school (Kurniawan, 2022; Ridhonie *et al.*, 2022; Satria & Hidayat, 2018). There are many factors measuring the success of word of mouth. In this study, the positive conversation factor which stated "SMP Ma'arif 2 Ponorogo has become a positive conversation among the community" received a value of 0.799 or 79.90%, which means that the positive conversation factor is the most dominant in measuring Word of Mouth.

This research is consistent with research by

Parast *et al.* (2023) and Wijayanti (2022) which states that positive testimonials from trusted individuals can inspire trust from other people. This research also supports research by Sinuraya *et al.* (2021) which states that the factor of getting to know other people through information is fairly weak in measuring word of mouth, while the positive conversation factor is the most dominant. However, this research is not in line with research by Hidayati & Rifa'i (2020) and Pajpach *et al.* (2022) which states that positive story factors are more dominant in measuring word of mouth. Apart from brand image, cost perception, and word of mouth, parents' decisions also have many measuring factors. In this study, the factor that dominantly measures Parents' Decisions is the No Regrets factor. This is proven by the statement "Parents do not regret choosing SMP Ma'arif 2 Ponorogo" which received a score of 0.821 or 82.10%. This research is in line with research by Casiño & Walag (2022) which states that trust is the dominant factor for measuring Parents' Decisions. Parents who believe in schools tend to be more actively involved in their children's school life.

CLOSING

WoM plays an important role in building trust and credibility. Parents tend to trust recommendations from others they know or trust more than direct messages from the school. Therefore, if WoM about the school is positive, it can improve parents' perceptions of the school's credibility and reputation. WoM also has a strong emotional impact. When parents hear positive stories or testimonials about a school from others, it can inspire positive feelings and confidence in their decision. Positive experiences shared by other individuals can influence parents' perceptions of a school's brand image in ways that cannot be achieved through direct promotion. WoM allows parents to get more relevant and personalized information about a school. They can gain deeper insight into school culture, educational quality, and student experiences through the real-life experiences of others. This can help them make more informed and evidence-based decisions than relying solely on official marketing materials from the school.

Schools need to focus on building strong relationships with students' parents. This can be done through open communication, participatory programs, and forums that allow parents to share their experiences with the school. Schools must ensure that every interaction with parents results in a positive experience including providing good customer service, listening carefully to feedback, and responding to concerns quickly and effectively. Social media is a very effective platform for increasing WoM.

Schools should be active on major social media platforms and encourage parents, students, and alumni to share their stories about their school experiences. Ultimately, there is no substitute for quality service and education. Schools must ensure that they provide high standards of education and satisfactory services to ensure that the resulting WoM is positive and strengthens their brand image.

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