



The Influence of School Image, Service Quality, and Parental Trust on School Choice Decisions

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ABSTRACT

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The increasing competition among private educational institutions has heightened the need for effective educational management strategies to understand factors influencing parents' school choice decisions. This study aims to analyze the influence of school image, educational service quality, and parental trust on parents' decisions to choose Northern Green School Medan. The study is motivated by a noticeable decline in student enrollment in recent years, which reflects weakening parental preference amid intensified competition among private schools. Employing a quantitative research design, data were collected through a survey administered to parents of enrolled students and analyzed using Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results indicate that school image and educational service quality have a positive and significant effect on parents' school choice decisions. Furthermore, parental trust emerges as the most dominant factor influencing parents' decisions among the examined variables. The structural model demonstrates strong explanatory power, with an R^2 value of 0.843, indicating that 84.3% of the variance in parents' school choice decisions is explained by the proposed model. These findings imply that private schools need to prioritize trust-based management practices, consistently improve the quality of educational services, and strengthen institutional image to enhance parental confidence and sustain student enrollment in a competitive educational environment.

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing competition among private educational institutions has transformed parents' school choice decisions into a complex and strategic process with significant implications for society (Hikmah & Mudarris, 2026; Holidi, 2025; Kusumawati, 2025; Syafiih, 2025). Education is no longer perceived merely as a medium for academic instruction but as a long-term investment that shapes

students' competencies, character development, and future socio-economic prospects (Ajzen, 1991). As a result, parents are becoming more rational and selective, carefully evaluating schools before committing to long-term educational arrangements. Empirical evidence indicates that parents' decisions increasingly resemble consumer behavior in service industries, where perceptions, expectations, and trust play central roles (Parasuraman et al., 1985). This shift is socially important because parents' choices influence school sustainability, educational quality, and equal access to education. Schools that fail to meet parental expectations risk declining enrollment, which can ultimately reduce educational diversity and innovation (Dewi & Manshur, 2026; Hefniy & Alwahedi, 2025; Khofsah & Rozi, 2025). Therefore, understanding the determinants of parents' school choice decisions is not only essential for school administrators but also crucial for policymakers and society to ensure sustainable, high-quality education systems in competitive environments.

Despite the growing emphasis on educational quality, many parents still face difficulties in identifying schools that can consistently meet both academic and non-academic expectations (Dewi & Manshur, 2026; Hefniy & Alwahedi, 2025; Khofsah & Rozi, 2025). The abundance of private schools offering similar curricula and facilities has created information asymmetry, making it challenging for parents to distinguish between genuinely high-quality institutions and those relying primarily on promotional claims (Abas & Kholidah, 2025; Alam & Mohanty, 2023; Wagner, 2025). This condition increases perceived risk, as school choice involves long-term financial, emotional, and developmental commitments. Prior research suggests that when parents lack reliable indicators of school performance, they rely heavily on subjective evaluations such as reputation, service experiences, and trust in school management (Keller, 1993; Niedlich et al., 2021). However, not all schools are able to manage these intangible factors effectively. Consequently, parents may experience dissatisfaction, regret, or school-switching behavior, which can disrupt students' learning continuity. This general problem highlights the need for systematic analysis of key factors that shape parents' school choice decisions, particularly within competitive private education markets.

In Indonesia, the rapid growth of private educational institutions has intensified competition, particularly in urban areas outside Java. Cities such as Medan present a unique educational landscape characterized by diverse socio-economic backgrounds, rising parental expectations, and increasing demand for quality education (Arianto et al., 2022). Although many private schools offer comparable academic programs, not all are able to maintain stable student enrollment. Empirical observations indicate that one private non-religious school in Medan has experienced a noticeable decline in student enrollment over recent

years, signaling weakened parental preference and reduced competitiveness (Zakri, 2022). This phenomenon suggests that tangible facilities alone are insufficient to secure parents' decisions. Instead, parents appear to place greater emphasis on intangible dimensions such as school image, educational service quality, and trust in school management. These field conditions demonstrate a practical problem that requires empirical investigation to identify which factors most strongly influence parents' decisions in regional private school contexts.

Previous studies have extensively examined parents' school choice decisions by focusing on factors such as facilities, academic performance, tuition fees, and location (Listrianti et al., 2023; Munif & Sulaiman, 2023). More recent research highlights the growing importance of intangible factors, including school image, service quality, and trust, in shaping parents' perceptions and preferences (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Arianto et al., 2022). School image has been conceptualized as a cognitive and affective representation of institutional reputation that influences parents' initial evaluations (Keller, 1993). Meanwhile, educational service quality reflects a school's ability to deliver consistent academic and administrative services aligned with parents' expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Several studies report that high service quality enhances parental satisfaction and loyalty (Wahyuni et al., 2023; Zakri, 2022). However, these studies often treat school image and service quality as indirect predictors, limiting a comprehensive understanding of their direct influence on school choice decisions.

Parental trust has increasingly attracted scholarly attention due to its role in reducing perceived risk and fostering long-term commitment to educational institutions (Niedlich et al., 2021). Existing studies frequently position trust as a mediating variable between service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty (Hamzah et al., 2023). While this approach provides valuable insights, it leaves a gap in understanding the direct role of parental trust in school choice decisions. Moreover, most empirical studies focus on religious-based or elite private schools in major metropolitan areas, particularly in Java, limiting their generalizability to non-religious private schools in regional contexts. Consequently, there is insufficient empirical evidence explaining how school image, educational service quality, and parental trust simultaneously and directly influence parents' school choice decisions. Addressing this gap is essential to enrich educational management literature and to provide context-specific insights for school administrators operating in competitive regional environments.

This study offers novelty by positioning parental trust not as a mediating construct but as a direct determinant of parents' school choice decisions alongside school image and educational service quality. By focusing on a private

non-religious school in Medan, this research extends the existing literature beyond dominant metropolitan and religious-school contexts. The integration of these three variables within a single structural model provides a more comprehensive understanding of parents' decision-making behavior in competitive private education markets. Furthermore, the application of Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) allows for robust analysis of complex relationships among latent variables. This approach contributes to the state of the art by empirically demonstrating the relative strength of each determinant, particularly the dominance of parental trust, which has been underexplored in prior studies. The findings are expected to offer strategic insights for educational management practices in similar regional settings.

Based on the identified gaps and empirical phenomena, this study addresses the following research problem: how do school image, educational service quality, and parental trust directly influence parents' school choice decisions in a private non-religious school context? This study argues that positive school image and high educational service quality contribute to favorable parental perceptions, while parental trust serves as the most critical factor in reducing perceived risk and strengthening commitment. By empirically testing these relationships, this research contributes theoretically by extending consumer behavior and service quality frameworks into educational management contexts. Practically, the findings provide actionable insights for school administrators to develop trust-based management strategies, improve service quality, and strengthen institutional image to sustain enrollment and competitiveness. Ultimately, this study supports the development of more responsive and sustainable private education systems.

RESEACH METHODS

This study employed a quantitative research approach with an associative (explanatory) design to examine the relationships between school image, educational service quality, parental trust, and parents' school choice decisions. A quantitative design was chosen because the study aims to test hypotheses and measure causal relationships among variables using numerical data and statistical analysis, thereby ensuring objectivity and replicability (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The explanatory design allows for the identification of both partial and simultaneous effects of multiple independent variables on a dependent variable, making it suitable for assessing the relative influence of each construct within an educational management context (Ghanad, 2023; Gul, 2023; Sardana et al., 2023). By adopting this design, the study provides empirical evidence regarding the direction and strength of relationships that explain parents'

decision-making behavior in selecting private schools.

The research was conducted at a private non-religious school located in Medan, Indonesia. This school was selected as the research setting because it operates in a highly competitive private education environment and has experienced a decline in student enrollment over recent years. Such conditions indicate potential changes in parents' school choice behavior and signal the relevance of examining managerial factors influencing parental decisions. Moreover, Medan represents a major urban center outside Java with diverse socio-economic characteristics and increasing parental expectations regarding educational quality (Arianto et al., 2022). These contextual features make the selected school an appropriate and meaningful case for analyzing the roles of school image, educational service quality, and parental trust in regional private school settings (Zakri, 2022).

Data were collected using a structured, closed-ended questionnaire developed based on established theories and empirical studies relevant to educational management and service quality. The questionnaire measured school image using indicators related to institutional reputation, credibility, and overall image (Keller, 1993). Educational service quality was measured by adapting the SERVQUAL dimensions, including tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Parental trust was measured through indicators reflecting integrity, competence, transparency, and consistency of school management (Niedlich et al., 2021). Parents' school choice decisions were assessed through indicators related to preference, commitment, and willingness to recommend the school (Arianto et al., 2022). All items were rated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The population comprised all parents of students enrolled during the research period, and a saturated sampling technique (census sampling) was applied to include all population members as respondents.

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with the assistance of SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM was selected due to its suitability for predictive and exploratory research models involving multiple latent variables and complex relationships, as well as its ability to handle relatively small sample sizes and non-normal data distributions (Hair et al., 2021). The analysis process involved two main stages. First, the measurement model was evaluated by assessing convergent validity, discriminant validity, and internal consistency reliability. Second, the structural model was assessed by examining path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values obtained through a bootstrapping procedure, as well as the coefficient of determination (R^2) to evaluate the explanatory power of the model.

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through rigorous validity and reliability testing within the PLS-SEM framework. Convergent validity was assessed using factor loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and cross-loading analysis. Reliability was examined through Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability values, with all constructs required to meet the recommended threshold values (Hair et al., 2019). These procedures ensured that the measurement instruments accurately captured the intended constructs and that the findings derived from the analysis were valid and reliable for drawing conclusions in the context of educational management research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the empirical findings of the study based on the results of Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis. The discussion integrates statistical evidence with theoretical perspectives and previous empirical studies to provide an in-depth explanation of parents' school choice decisions in private educational institutions.

The evaluation of the measurement model indicates that all latent constructs satisfy the recommended criteria for validity and reliability. All indicator loadings exceed the acceptable threshold, confirming that each indicator successfully represents its respective construct. In addition, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs are above the minimum recommended level, indicating that each construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators.

Table 1. Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Variables	Average variance extracted (AVE)
School Image (X1)	0.619
Quality Service Education (X2)	0.666
Parental Trust (X3)	0.732
Parental Decision Choose School (Y)	0.796

(Source: Processed primary data, 2025)

Reliability testing further confirms the robustness of the measurement model. The Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values for all constructs exceed the recommended cut-off values, indicating strong internal consistency among the measurement items (Ghanad, 2023; Gul, 2023; Sardana et al., 2023). This result suggests that respondents interpreted the questionnaire items consistently, thereby enhancing the credibility of the empirical findings.

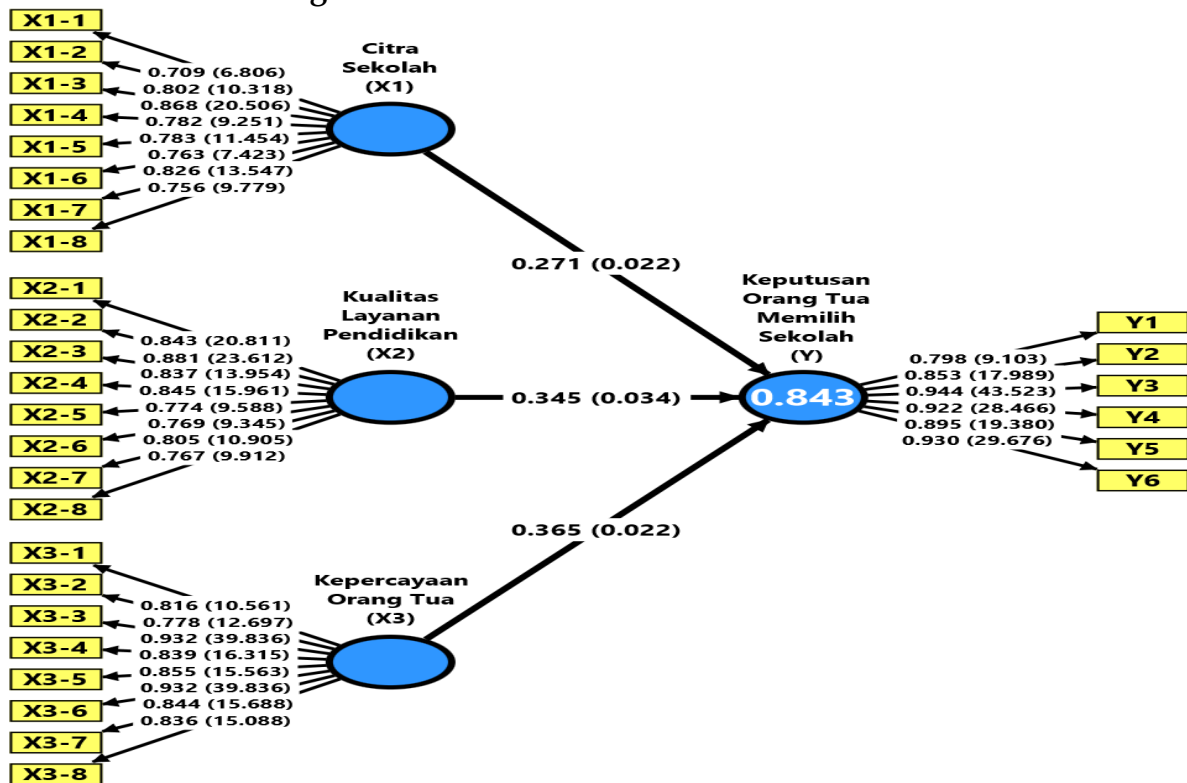
Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)
School Image (X1)	0.912	0.917	0.928
Quality Service Education (X2)	0.928	0.933	0.941
Parental Trust (X3)	0.947	0.950	0.956
Parental Decision Choose School (Y)	0.948	0.954	0.959

(Source: Processed primary data, 2025)

Following the evaluation of the measurement model, the structural model was assessed to examine the hypothesized relationships among school image, educational service quality, parental trust, and parents' school choice decisions. The coefficient of determination (R^2) value for parents' school choice decisions is 0.843, indicating that 84.3% of the variance in parents' decisions is explained by the three independent variables included in the model. This high explanatory power suggests that parents' school choice behavior is strongly influenced by an integrated evaluation of institutional image, service performance, and trust.

Figure 1. Structural Model of PLS-SEM Results



(Source: Processed primary data, 2025)

Hypothesis testing results indicate that all proposed hypotheses are supported. School image, educational service quality, and parental trust each have a positive and significant effect on parents' school choice decisions. Among these variables, parental trust exhibits the strongest effect, indicating its dominant role in shaping parents' decisions.

Table 3. Results of Hypothesis Testing (t-values)

	Original sample (O)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	Information
Influence Direct				
School Image (X1) -> Parental Decision Choose School (Y)	0.271	2,296	0.022	Positive Significant
Quality Service Education (X2) -> Parental Decision Choose School (Y)	0.345	2,125	0.034	Positive Significant
Parental Trust (X3) -> Parental Decision Choose School (Y)	0.365	2,285	0.022	Positive Significant

(Source: Processed primary data, 2025)

The effect size (f^2) analysis further confirms the relative importance of each independent variable. Parental trust exhibits the largest effect size, followed by school image and educational service quality, indicating that trust plays a more dominant role in shaping parents' decisions.

Table 4. Effect Size (f^2) of Independent Variables

Influence Independent Variables versus Dependent	f-square
School Image (X1) -> Parental Decision Choose School (Y)	0.166
Quality Service Education (X2) -> Parental Decision Choose School (Y)	0.165
Parental Trust (X3) -> Parental Decision Choose School (Y)	0.185

(Source: Processed primary data, 2025)

Effect of School Image on Parents' School Choice Decisions

The findings reveal that school image has a positive and significant influence on parents' school choice decisions. This result indicates that parents are more inclined to choose schools that are perceived as reputable, credible, and professionally managed (Ghanad, 2023; Gul, 2023; Sardana et al., 2023). In the context of private education, school image functions as an initial evaluative framework through which parents interpret information about a school before making enrollment decisions.

A positive school image shapes parents' expectations regarding educational quality, institutional reliability, and long-term commitment to student development. When parents perceive a school as having a strong image,

they are more likely to associate the institution with high academic standards, competent teachers, and a supportive learning environment. These perceptions reduce uncertainty and simplify the decision-making process, particularly when parents lack direct access to objective performance indicators.

From a theoretical perspective, school image can be conceptualized as an intangible asset that influences stakeholders' attitudes and behavioral intentions. In educational settings, image represents both accumulated past performance and symbolic promises regarding future outcomes. Parents often rely on image-related cues such as reputation, public recognition, and word-of-mouth information to assess whether a school aligns with their expectations and aspirations for their children.

The significance of school image in this study is consistent with previous empirical findings demonstrating that institutional reputation plays a crucial role in parents' school selection decisions. Prior studies suggest that parents are more likely to choose schools with a favorable image even when competing institutions offer similar curricula and facilities. This indicates that image operates as a differentiating factor in competitive educational markets.

In the context of private non-religious schools in Medan, the influence of school image becomes particularly pronounced. Parents are often faced with multiple schooling options that appear similar in terms of academic offerings. As a result, image-related considerations such as perceived professionalism, institutional stability, and social prestige become decisive factors influencing parents' choices.

Moreover, the influence of school image extends beyond initial enrollment decisions. A favorable image not only attracts new parents but also reinforces existing parents' commitment to the school. Parents who continue to perceive the school positively are more likely to maintain their children's enrollment and to recommend the institution to others, thus strengthening the school's competitive position.

Effect of Educational Service Quality on Parents' School Choice Decisions

The results also demonstrate that educational service quality has a positive and significant effect on parents' school choice decisions. This finding highlights that parents evaluate schools not only based on reputational factors but also on their direct experiences with educational service delivery. Service quality reflects parents' assessments of teaching effectiveness, administrative responsiveness, communication practices, and overall service reliability.

High educational service quality enhances parents' perception of value and satisfaction. When schools consistently deliver services that meet or exceed parents' expectations, parents are more likely to perceive the institution as

capable of supporting their children's academic and personal development. This perception strengthens parents' confidence and reinforces their decision to choose and remain with the school.

Educational service quality also plays a critical role in shaping parents' ongoing evaluations of a school. Unlike school image, which primarily influences initial perceptions, service quality continuously influences parents' experiences throughout their children's enrollment (Arifin, 2024; Ataman & Safitri, 2024; Hidayat et al., 2024; Mundiri, 2023; Sanjani & Fahmi, 2023). Consistent service performance helps maintain parents' satisfaction and reduces the likelihood of negative perceptions that could lead to school switching.

In competitive private education environments, service quality functions as a key mechanism through which schools differentiate themselves. Parents tend to compare schools based on how effectively they respond to parents' needs, handle administrative issues, and communicate academic progress. Schools that demonstrate high service quality are therefore more likely to build positive long-term relationships with parents.

The findings of this study align with previous research emphasizing service quality as a determinant of parental satisfaction and loyalty. High-quality educational services contribute not only to positive perceptions but also to trust formation, which further strengthens parents' commitment to the school.

Effect of Parental Trust on Parents' School Choice Decisions

Among the variables examined, parental trust emerges as the most dominant factor influencing parents' school choice decisions. This finding underscores the central role of trust in parents' decision-making processes, particularly in long-term commitments such as education (Ghanad, 2023; Gul, 2023; Sardana et al., 2023). Trust reduces perceived risk by assuring parents that the school will consistently act in the best interests of their children.

Parental trust reflects parents' confidence in the integrity, competence, and transparency of school management. When parents trust a school, they are more willing to commit their financial, emotional, and time resources to the institution. Trust also strengthens parents' tolerance toward minor service deficiencies, as parents believe that the school will address issues responsibly.

In the context of private education, trust becomes especially important because parents often lack complete information about educational outcomes. As a result, trust serves as a psychological mechanism that compensates for information asymmetry. Parents who trust school management are more likely to rely on institutional assurances and long-term promises.

The dominant effect of parental trust in this study suggests that trust consolidates parents' evaluations of school image and educational service quality

into a stable decision (Listrianti et al., 2023; Munif & Sulaiman, 2023; Wiranata et al., 2024). While image and service quality influence perceptions and satisfaction, trust ultimately determines whether parents are willing to commit to and remain with a school.

This finding supports prior studies that emphasize trust as a critical determinant of long-term relationships between educational institutions and parents. Trust not only influences initial school choice decisions but also plays a key role in sustaining enrollment stability and encouraging positive word-of-mouth communication.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that parents' school choice decisions are shaped by a complex and integrated evaluation of school image, educational service quality, and parental trust. While school image and service quality influence parents' perceptions and satisfaction, parental trust functions as the decisive factor that strengthens commitment and loyalty. These results highlight the importance of adopting integrated management strategies that simultaneously enhance institutional image, improve service quality, and build parental trust in order to sustain competitiveness in private educational institutions.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that parents' school choice decisions in a private non-religious school context are strongly shaped by intangible managerial factors, namely school image, educational service quality, and parental trust. Among these determinants, parental trust emerges as the most influential factor, underscoring the critical role of parents' confidence in school management when making long-term educational decisions. The findings demonstrate that while school image functions as an initial signal shaping parents' perceptions and educational service quality reinforces satisfaction through consistent service delivery, parental trust consolidates these evaluations into a stable and sustained commitment to the school. The key insight of this study is that effective educational management must move beyond a sole focus on tangible resources and academic offerings toward trust-based governance, relational quality, and reputational strength as core strategic assets.

From a scholarly perspective, this study contributes to educational management literature by positioning parental trust as a direct determinant rather than merely a mediating variable of school choice decisions and by integrating school image and service quality within a unified explanatory model. This approach extends prior research that has predominantly emphasized metropolitan or religious school settings, offering empirical evidence from a non-religious private school in a regional Indonesian context. Nevertheless, this study

is limited by its focus on a single institution, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Future research is encouraged to involve multiple schools across different regions and institutional types, employ comparative designs, and further investigate the dynamics of parental trust across diverse educational contexts to enhance the robustness and applicability of the model.

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