



The Influence of Word of Mouth, School Facilities, and School Programs on Parents School Choice Decisions

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to examine the influence of word of mouth, school facilities, and school programs on parents' school choice decisions. The research employed a quantitative approach using a survey method. The population consisted of parents of students enrolled at a private junior high school, with a total of 47 respondents selected using a saturated sampling technique. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analyzed using multiple linear regression with the assistance of SPSS version 26. The results indicate that word of mouth has a positive and significant effect on parents' school choice decisions. In contrast, school facilities and school programs do not show a significant partial effect. However, the simultaneous test reveals that word of mouth, school facilities, and school programs collectively have a significant influence on parents' decisions in choosing a school. These findings suggest that interpersonal communication and recommendations play a more decisive role than physical facilities or program offerings in parents' school evaluations. This study contributes to the literature on educational service marketing by emphasizing the importance of word of mouth as a key determinant of parents' school choice decisions and provides practical implications for school management in developing effective communication and promotional strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Parents' school choice has become a critical issue in contemporary society as education is increasingly perceived as a long-term investment shaping children's academic achievement, character formation, and future social mobility. The importance of this issue lies in the growing competition among schools, particularly private institutions, to attract and retain students in an environment characterized by diverse educational alternatives. Parents are expected to make rational and informed decisions, yet their choices are often

influenced by subjective perceptions and social interactions (Safitri & Lateh, 2024; Sanjani & Safitri, 2024). Empirical evidence from educational service marketing studies indicates that parents' decisions are shaped not only by academic outcomes but also by trust, reputation, and perceived value communicated through social networks (Suherman et al., 2022; Pertiwi et al., 2024). As schools increasingly operate within a quasi-market system, understanding the determinants of parents' school choice becomes essential for ensuring transparency, accountability, and quality assurance. Therefore, examining factors that influence parents' decisions is important not only for school management but also for society at large, as it contributes to equitable access to quality education and informed parental decision-making (Fauzi et al., 2025; Maulidy & Zaini, 2025).

Despite the growing awareness of education as a strategic service sector, many parents continue to face difficulties in evaluating school quality objectively (Rahmadan & Shudiq, 2024; Sholehah & Ichsan, 2025). The abundance of promotional information, school branding, and program claims often creates information asymmetry between schools and parents. As a result, parents may rely on incomplete or biased information when selecting schools for their children. In the context of private education, this problem is further intensified by the absence of standardized quality indicators that are easily understood by the public (Rusdiah, 2024; Windiasari et al., 2025). Previous studies highlight that parents frequently struggle to distinguish between symbolic attributes, such as school image, and substantive attributes, such as learning effectiveness and program relevance (Hakiki, 2021). This situation raises concerns regarding decision accuracy and satisfaction after enrollment. When school choice decisions are based on limited or misleading cues, parents may experience regret, while schools may face declining trust and reputational risks. Consequently, identifying reliable factors that genuinely influence parents' school choice decisions is a pressing issue within educational management and policy discussions (Afifah, 2025; Makiyah, 2024).

In urban areas such as Bekasi City, parents are exposed to a wide range of school options offering diverse facilities, programs, and promotional strategies. Field observations indicate that parents actively seek information through interpersonal communication, including discussions with relatives, neighbors, and other parents whose children are already enrolled in certain schools. Word of mouth becomes a dominant source of information, particularly for private faith-based schools that rely heavily on community trust. At the same time, schools invest substantially in improving physical facilities and designing innovative programs to enhance their attractiveness. However, enrollment patterns suggest that well-equipped facilities and comprehensive programs do

not always translate into higher enrollment rates. This phenomenon indicates a possible discrepancy between what schools emphasize in their marketing strategies and what parents prioritize in their decision-making process. Such conditions raise important questions regarding the relative influence of word of mouth, school facilities, and school programs in shaping parents' school choice decisions in real-world settings.

Previous research has extensively examined the role of word of mouth as an influential factor in parents' school choice decisions. Studies consistently report that information conveyed through trusted social networks is perceived as more credible than formal advertising (Suherman et al., 2022; Pertiwi et al., 2024). Nevertheless, other findings suggest that word of mouth does not always have a significant effect, particularly in schools with strong institutional branding or standardized reputations (Hakiki, 2021). Similarly, research on school facilities presents mixed results. Some studies confirm that adequate infrastructure and learning environments positively influence parents' choices (Haryono et al., 2024; Kristanto, 2025), while others argue that facilities function merely as baseline expectations rather than decisive factors (Pertiwi et al., 2024). These inconsistencies reveal a research gap concerning the contextual nature of parents' preferences and highlight the need for integrated models that examine multiple factors simultaneously rather than in isolation.

School programs, encompassing curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities, are widely regarded as indicators of institutional quality and student development orientation. Empirical studies show that innovative and holistic programs can enhance parental confidence and positively affect school choice decisions (Suharsono et al., 2023; Olivia et al., 2025). However, most existing studies focus on program outcomes rather than parents' initial perceptions during the school selection stage. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to how parents weigh school programs relative to other factors such as word of mouth and facilities. Many studies also emphasize public schools or general private institutions, leaving faith-based junior high schools underrepresented in the literature. This gap suggests that the influence of school programs may vary depending on institutional values, parental expectations, and community context. Therefore, further empirical investigation is required to clarify the relative and combined effects of school programs within parents' decision-making processes.

The novelty of the present study lies in its integrative approach to examining word of mouth, school facilities, and school programs within a single empirical model applied to a private faith-based junior high school context. Unlike previous studies that analyze these variables separately, this research captures their simultaneous influence on parents' school choice decisions.

Additionally, this study introduces a nuanced perspective by positioning word of mouth as a dominant determinant, while facilities and programs are conceptualized as supporting factors whose value may emerge after enrollment rather than during initial decision-making. Addressing this issue is important because it challenges the assumption that tangible attributes and program diversity are always the primary drivers of school choice. By focusing on trust-based communication and perceived credibility, this study advances the state of the art in educational service marketing and provides a more context-sensitive understanding of parental behavior.

Based on the identified gaps and field phenomena, this study formulates the central research problem as follows: to what extent do word of mouth, school facilities, and school programs influence parents' school choice decisions, both partially and simultaneously? The study proposes the argument that word of mouth has a significant positive effect on parents' decisions, while school facilities and school programs may not exert a strong partial influence but contribute collectively within an integrated model. By empirically testing these arguments, this research contributes theoretically by enriching educational service marketing literature with evidence from a private faith-based junior high school context. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for school management in designing effective communication strategies, prioritizing trust-building efforts, and aligning institutional positioning with parents' decision-making patterns.

RESEARCH METHODS

The unit of analysis in this study is individual parents whose children are enrolled at SMP Dharma Putra Advent, Bekasi City, a private faith-based junior high school. The research focuses on parents as key decision-makers in the school selection process, examining their perceptions and evaluations related to word of mouth, school facilities, and school programs within the context of choosing a school for their children. The institutional setting provides a relevant context for investigating parents' school choice behavior in a competitive urban educational environment. Given the limited population size, all parents whose children were enrolled at the school during the study period were included as research subjects, resulting in a total of 47 respondents and ensuring full population coverage.

This study employed a quantitative research approach with a survey design, which is appropriate for testing relationships and measuring the influence of multiple independent variables on a dependent variable in an objective and systematic manner. The primary data source consisted of responses obtained directly from the research respondents through a structured questionnaire. In addition, secondary data were obtained from relevant

documents, including school profiles, institutional reports, and previous empirical studies, to support contextual understanding and instrument development. The survey instrument was designed based on established theoretical frameworks and prior research to ensure conceptual relevance and content validity.

Data collection was conducted through a desk review of related literature and the distribution of a standardized structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Prior to hypothesis testing, the instrument was examined for validity and reliability to ensure accurate measurement. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics to summarize respondent characteristics and variable distributions, followed by inferential statistical analysis using multiple linear regression with the assistance of SPSS version 26. Partial effects were tested using t-tests, while simultaneous effects were assessed using an F-test to evaluate both individual and combined influences of word of mouth, school facilities, and school programs on parents' school choice decisions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study is based on original field data collected from 47 parents of students at SMP Dharma Putra Advent, Bekasi City through a structured questionnaire. The data were analyzed quantitatively using multiple linear regression analysis to examine the influence of word of mouth, school facilities, and school programs on parents' school choice decisions.

Partial hypothesis testing was conducted using the t-test to assess the individual effect of each independent variable. The results indicate that word of mouth has a positive and significant effect on parents' school choice decisions ($B = 0.337$; $t = 5.175$; $\text{Sig.} = 0.000$). In contrast, school facilities ($\text{Sig.} = 0.327$) and school programs ($\text{Sig.} = 0.167$) do not show a significant partial effect on parents' decisions.

Table 1. Result of the t-Test

Variable	Coefficient (B)	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	Sig.
Constant	13.602	2.959	–	4.596	0.000
Word of Mouth	0.337	0.065	0.597	5.175	0.000
School Facilities	0.120	0.121	0.122	0.991	0.327
School Programs	0.122	0.087	0.203	1.405	0.167

Source: Processed Primary Data, 2025

To examine the combined effect of the independent variables, a simultaneous hypothesis test was conducted using the F-test. The results show that word of mouth, school facilities, and school programs simultaneously have a significant influence on parents' school choice decisions ($F = 29.964$; $\text{Sig.} = 0.000$).

Table 2. Result of the F-Test

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-value	Sig.
Regression	535.875	3	178.625	29.964	0.000
Residual	256.338	43	5.961	–	–
Total	792.213	46	–	–	–

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that word of mouth is the most influential factor affecting parents' school choice decisions. The significant positive effect indicates that recommendations, shared experiences, and informal communication among parents play a crucial role in shaping trust and confidence in a school. This result is consistent with marketing and consumer behavior theories, which emphasize that word of mouth is perceived as more credible and persuasive than formal promotional activities because it is grounded in personal experience and social trust (Kotler & Keller, 2020; Ali, 2020; Ali, 2020). Empirical evidence from previous studies also supports this finding, showing that word of mouth significantly influences parents' decisions in choosing educational institutions (Agnes & Cahyono, 2024; Pertiwi et al., 2024; Suherman et al., 2025). In the context of private and value-oriented schools, such as faith-based institutions, interpersonal communication becomes increasingly important as parents seek reassurance regarding both academic quality and character education (Hakiki, 2021).

The non-significant partial effect of school facilities suggests that facilities function as a supporting or complementary factor rather than a decisive determinant in parents' initial school choice decisions. This finding aligns with studies indicating that parents tend to assume schools have met minimum facility standards, reducing the distinguishing power of physical infrastructure during the selection process (Rahmawati, 2021; Suhartini, 2020). While some studies report a significant influence of facilities on school choice (Haryono et al., 2025; Kristanto, 2025), the present results support the argument that facilities serve as a basic requirement rather than a primary consideration. Facilities appear to gain importance after enrollment, when parents and students directly experience the learning environment and assess whether it supports effective teaching and learning processes.

Similarly, the absence of a significant partial effect of school programs indicates that program-related attributes are not the primary focus during the early stage of parents' decision-making. Although school programs, including extracurricular and enrichment activities, are theoretically expected to enhance institutional attractiveness, parents may have limited information or experience to fully evaluate program quality prior to enrollment. This finding is in line with previous research suggesting that program effectiveness is often recognized only after students participate directly in school activities (Suharsono et al., 2023; Olivia et al., 2025). In faith-based and private school contexts, parents may prioritize trust, reputation, and social recommendations before considering detailed program characteristics.

Despite the lack of significant partial effects of facilities and programs, the significant simultaneous effect of all independent variables indicates that parents evaluate schools in a holistic manner. Word of mouth strengthens parents' perceptions of facilities and programs, thereby enhancing overall confidence in the school. This interaction effect supports the view that parents' school choice decisions are shaped by the combined influence of informational, physical, and program-related factors rather than by a single variable in isolation (Kotler & Keller, 2020; Benny Wijaya et al., 2025). Positive interpersonal communication may amplify parents' perceptions of school quality, making facilities and programs more meaningful when supported by credible recommendations.

Overall, this study provides empirical evidence that word of mouth serves as the primary driver of parents' school choice decisions, while school facilities and school programs reinforce decision-making when considered collectively. These findings contribute to the educational service marketing literature by confirming that parental decision-making behavior closely resembles consumer behavior in service contexts, where trust and social influence play a dominant role (Ali, 2020; Ajayi, 2023). Practically, the results suggest that school management should prioritize trust-based communication strategies, maintain positive relationships with parents, and ensure consistent service quality so that favorable word of mouth can be sustained. At the same time, maintaining adequate facilities and well-structured programs remains essential to support long-term satisfaction and institutional credibility.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that parents' school choice decisions are primarily shaped by trust-based information, with word of mouth emerging as the dominant determinant compared to physical facilities and school programs. This result highlights a key insight that parents rely more heavily on interpersonal communication, shared experiences, and social recommendations

when selecting a school, particularly at the initial decision-making stage. Although school facilities and programs do not exert a significant partial influence, their collective contribution reinforces parents' confidence when evaluated alongside positive word of mouth. This finding suggests that parents' school choice behavior is holistic in nature, where informational credibility serves as the foundation upon which other institutional attributes gain meaning.

From a scholarly perspective, this study contributes to the field of educational service marketing by providing empirical evidence from a private faith-based junior high school context, which remains underrepresented in previous research. By integrating word of mouth, school facilities, and school programs within a single empirical model, this study extends existing literature that often examines these factors separately. Nevertheless, this research is subject to several limitations, including the relatively small sample size and the focus on a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research is encouraged to involve larger and more diverse samples, apply comparative or longitudinal designs, and explore additional variables such as school image, digital word of mouth, parental values, or satisfaction as mediating or moderating factors to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of parents' school choice decisions.

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