

Mediating Role of Brand Image: Competitive Advantage and School Selection Decisions in Islamic Education

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Abstract

This study explores how Digital Marketing and Competitive Advantage affect students' school selection decisions at an Islamic boarding school in South Kalimantan, with Brand Image as a mediator. Despite strong quality indicators and digital marketing efforts, enrollment trends have fluctuated. Using a quantitative design, data were collected from 121 students via purposive sampling (response rate: 85.2%) and analyzed with PLS-SEM. The results show that Digital Marketing and Brand Image significantly influence school selection decisions, while Competitive Advantage only predicts Brand Image. Brand Image fully mediates the relationship between Competitive Advantage and Selection Decision and partially mediates the effect of Digital Marketing. The model explains 61% of the Brand Image variance and 42.2% of the Selection Decision variance. The study concludes that competitive advantages only affect enrollment when they are transformed into a credible brand image, addressing contradictions in prior research. Limitations include the cross-sectional design and reliance on student respondents, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. This study contributes a framework positioning Digital Marketing and Competitive Advantage as key drivers of Brand Image, clarifying how institutional strengths influence enrollment decisions.

Keywords: Brand Image, Competitive Advantage, Islamic Education, Mediation Effect, School Selection Decision

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid transformation of Indonesia's education sector has significantly reshaped families selection of schools for their children. Education is not only a socially valued service but also a constitutionally protected right, making access, quality, and institutional accountability central concerns in public discourse and policy development ([Budhiartie, Pradhan, Hasnda, & Iswandi, 2025](#)). Simultaneously, the expansion of private education has intensified competition among schools, as parents increasingly evaluate multiple attributes before making enrollment decisions. These attributes commonly include academic quality, teacher competence, school reputation, facilities, affordability, religious orientation, and the availability of value-added programs ([Sukmawati, 2025](#); [Taruna and Harianto, 2025](#)). Consequently, school selection has become a complex and high-involvement decision rather than a simple administrative choice.

This competitive pressure has encouraged private schools to differentiate themselves through distinct educational models and institutional positioning. Some institutions emphasize religious integration, others focus on residential learning environments, and still others promote contextual and nature-based learning experiences ([Darwanto, Prahmana, Susanti, & Khalil, 2024](#); [Robianti, Raufu, Sasongko, & Busari-Raufu, 2024](#)). Within this landscape, an anonymized Islamic boarding school in South Kalimantan represents a particularly relevant case. The school is accredited "A" and combines the national curriculum with a faith-based boarding system, extracurricular enrichment, and flagship programs. Despite these favorable institutional attributes, enrollment data from the 2021/2022 to 2024/2025 academic years revealed considerable fluctuations. Occupancy of the school's 300-student capacity ranged from 64.33% to 75.67%, while new student intake moved from 60 students in 2021 to 85 in 2022, declined to 62 in 2023, and then recovered to 84 in 2024. This pattern presents a strategic paradox: institutional quality appears to improve, yet the enrollment outcomes remain unstable.

One plausible explanation for this lies in the role of digital marketing. In contemporary educational markets, digital marketing no longer functions as a mere promotional tool. It has become an important channel through which institutions build visibility, provide information, engage prospective families, and shape their early perceptions of quality. [Ramdani and Fietroh \(2025\)](#)

defined digital marketing as a marketing activity conducted through Internet-connected technologies and digital channels, while [Istiqomah and Rohim \(2023\)](#) emphasized its role as an Internet-based medium for market communication. In the focal school, internal marketing data indicate substantial growth in digital outreach during 2023–2024, including a 164.4% increase in TikTok followers and a gain of over 5,700 YouTube subscribers. This expansion coincided with a stronger enrollment recovery in 2024. The school's marketing division also reported that approximately 80% of the final admission target was expected to be supported by digital campaigns, particularly through Instagram and Facebook content, aimed at parents.

However, marketing communication alone is unlikely to fully explain enrollment decisions. In educational services, prospective students and families do not respond only to promotional exposure; they also evaluate whether a school possesses meaningful and credible advantages over its alternatives. From a strategic perspective, *competitive advantage* refers to activities or resources that an organization performs better than its competitors or possesses in ways that are difficult to replicate ([Wulandari and Haryono, 2025](#)). In the case of the focal school, these advantages are reflected in its integrated educational system, character-building orientation, immersion and community-based programs, and digital skill development. However, superior attributes do not automatically convert into student choices. Their influence depends on whether these strengths are recognized, interpreted, and valued by the market.

This is where *brand image* becomes important. In service settings, *brand image* reflects stakeholders accumulated perceptions, associations, and evaluations of an institution. A favorable institutional image can shape judgments about quality, trustworthiness, and desirability, thereby affecting preferences and behavioral intentions ([Silva, Dias, Pereira, da Costa, & Gonçalves, 2022](#)). In educational markets, these perceptions matter because school choice unfolds through multiple stages, including awareness, information search, comparison of alternatives, evaluation, and final decision. Brand-related constructs such as awareness, trust, and overall institutional impression therefore play a central role in translating school attributes into actual enrollment intentions and decisions ([Prasetya, Fadirubun, Sitohang, & Hidayati, 2024](#)). Viewed from this perspective, the enrollment fluctuation observed in the focal school cannot be understood solely in terms of institutional quality or digital activity; it also requires attention to how these strengths are perceived by prospective students and parents ([Dhia & Melinda, 2024](#)).

The urgency of this study emerges from two interconnected gaps in the literature. First, although previous studies have shown that digital marketing can influence school or student decisions, much of that evidence remains focused on direct effects, with limited attention paid to *brand image* as an intervening mechanism. [Alamsyah, Bukhori, and Agustina \(2023\)](#) for example, confirmed the importance of digital marketing in students' school choice, yet their analysis did not examine whether that influence operates through *brand image*. Second, and more importantly, the mechanism through which *competitive advantage* affects enrollment-related decisions remains insufficiently explained in the literature. Some studies have reported that *competitive advantage* directly influences decision outcomes, whereas others have found that *brand image* fails to mediate the relationship between institutional strengths and consumer choice ([Laura & Ringo, 2017](#); [Mariyam & Taharuddin, 2023](#)). Simultaneously, other evidence indicates that *brand image* exerts a substantial influence on purchase or choice decisions, suggesting that perceptual mechanisms may matter more than direct institutional superiority alone ([Harun & Paludi, 2025](#)). These mixed findings indicate that the pathway linking *competitive advantage* to student enrollment decisions is still theoretically underdeveloped, particularly in educational contexts where decisions are highly involved and socially embedded.

This study addresses this unresolved issue by proposing that *brand image* functions as the explanatory mechanism through which *competitive advantage* and *digital marketing* shape *school selection decisions*. The proposed model was tested in the context of an Islamic boarding school, a setting that has received limited empirical attention despite its distinctive combination of educational, religious, and reputational considerations. By examining the pathway from Digital Marketing and Competitive Advantage to Brand Image and ultimately to students' school selection decision, this study seeks to clarify how institutional strengths are translated into enrollment

outcomes. This study extends the educational marketing literature and helps reconcile prior empirical inconsistencies by showing that the effect of *competitive advantage* may depend less on its direct presence than on its successful transformation into a credible and attractive *brand image*.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Integration: Strategic Marketing and Consumer Behavior

The theoretical foundation of this study synthesizes Porter's Competitive Advantage theory ([Stoica, Patriche, David, Beldiman, and Bălănică \(2025\)](#); [Wulandari and Haryono \(2025\)](#)) with [Seow and Hussain's \(2024\)](#) Consumer Decision-Making Process model and contemporary digital marketing frameworks ([Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019](#)). Recent literature continues to view consumer decision-making as a multi-stage process that begins with problem recognition and proceeds through information search, evaluation of alternatives, choice, and post-choice evaluation ([Oktaria, Raras, Alam, Barusman, & Habiburrahman, 2025](#)). Applied to educational settings, these stages are evident in prospective students' search for information, comparison of institutional attributes, and eventual enrolment choices ([Bernal, Abadia, Arango, & De Witte, 2024](#); [Ürer Erdil, Tümer, Nadiri, & Aghaei, 2021](#)).

Nevertheless, the translation of intention into final choice remains contingent on social influence and situational conditions, as students' decisions are often shaped by family, school-based advisers, and contextual constraints beyond their initial preferences ([de Matos, Luppi, & Veiga, 2025](#); [Petcu, Marshall, Zhang, Lalor, & Hussain, 2025](#)). By integrating these frameworks, this study addresses a critical theoretical gap: the disconnection between institutional competitive strengths and the psychological processing of brand perception that ultimately drives enrollment decisions in educational services. This integration is particularly crucial in the context of high-involvement decisions, such as school selection, where the complexity of the choice process exceeds that of simple consumer goods.

2.2 Digital Marketing as a Decision Driver

Within educational institutions, digital marketing functions not only as a promotional instrument but also as a strategic driver of prospective students' decision-making. Contemporary literature shows that digital channels shape awareness, facilitate information search, support evaluation, and influence institutional choice while also contributing to branding, relationship management, and enrolment outcomes ([Eum, 2025](#); [Pawar, 2024](#)). However, its effectiveness depends on the institution's ability to provide interactive, credible, and informative digital communication that signals quality and reduces uncertainty among prospective students ([Song et al., 2023](#)). Accordingly, digital marketing plays a direct role in influencing school selection decisions and an indirect role in strengthening brand image, which subsequently encourages more favorable selection outcomes ([Eum, 2025](#); [Setyowati, Widjayanti, & Kristiyana, 2025](#)).

2.3 Competitive Advantage as Brand Image Antecedent

Competitive advantage in educational services refers to the substantive strengths that distinguish one institution from competing schools, such as program quality, unique learning experiences, staff excellence, reputation, and perceived value. From a strategic management perspective, competitive advantage emerges when an organization performs certain activities better than its rivals or possesses valuable resources that are difficult to imitate ([Wulandari & Haryono, 2025](#)). However, in terms of branding, these strengths do not automatically create a preference. Brand image is formed through stakeholders' accumulated beliefs and evaluations of institutional attributes, meaning that school advantages must first be recognized and interpreted positively before they can shape market responses ([Teng et al., 2025](#)).

In the context of school choice, many institutional strengths may function as *hygiene factors*, namely, attributes that are necessary to meet stakeholder expectations but are not sufficient by themselves to trigger final enrollment decisions. Accreditation, qualified teachers, adequate facilities, and curriculum quality are often treated by parents and students as baseline requirements rather than as decisive differentiators. Consequently, competitive advantage becomes strategically

meaningful only when strengths are translated into a distinctive and credible image that stakeholders can easily recognize and value. This explains why competitive advantage is expected to exert a stronger effect on *brand image* than on *school selection decision* directly (Amoozegar, Nguyen, Krishnasamy, Omanee, & Vasudevan, 2025; Greaves, Wilson, & Nairn, 2023; Stoica et al., 2025).

2.4 Brand Image as a Strategic Mediator

Brand image refers to the perceptions, associations, and evaluative meanings that stakeholders attach to an institution. In educational settings, this image is built not only from institutional identity and reputation but also from perceived quality, credibility, trust, and emotional attachment. Because school selection is a high-involvement decision, prospective students and parents rarely respond to institutional claims in purely objective terms. They first interpret whether a school appears academically reliable, socially reputable, and personally relevant before making a final choice (Seow & Hussain, 2024; Stoica et al., 2025).

Therefore, brand image is positioned in this study as a strategic mediator. This explains how digital marketing and competitive advantage are translated into actual school selection decisions. A school may possess strong programs, good facilities, and intensive digital promotion; however, these factors will not influence enrollment effectively unless they are internalized by the market as a credible and attractive institutional image. In this sense, brand image operates as an interpretive bridge between institutional strengths and student choice, helping to explain why the direct effects of competitive advantage are often inconsistent across prior studies (Amoozegar et al., 2025; Mariyam & Taharuddin, 2023; Setyowati et al., 2025; Snadrou & Haoucha, 2024).

2.5 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical arguments above, this study proposes a mediation model in which Digital Marketing and Competitive Advantage act as antecedents of Brand Image and School Selection Decision. Digital Marketing is expected to influence school choice both directly and indirectly because digital channels shape awareness, information access, and institutional impressions. Competitive Advantage is also expected to influence decision-making, but its effect is theorized to depend more strongly on whether institutional strengths are successfully transformed into a favorable brand image. Thus, Brand Image is positioned as the central mechanism linking institutional signals to enrollment behavior (Alamsyah et al., 2023; Karamang, 2021; Mariyam & Taharuddin, 2023).

The conceptual model assumes that institutional strengths do not operate in isolation. Instead, they interact through a perceptual pathway in which Digital Marketing and Competitive Advantage strengthen brand image, which subsequently drives school selection decisions. This structure allows the study to test whether the effect of institutional advantage on student choice is direct, partial, or fully mediated by brand perception. Therefore, the framework provides a clearer explanation of how educational institutions convert strategic resources and communication efforts into actual enrollment outcomes (Laura & Ringo, 2017; Setyowati et al., 2025).

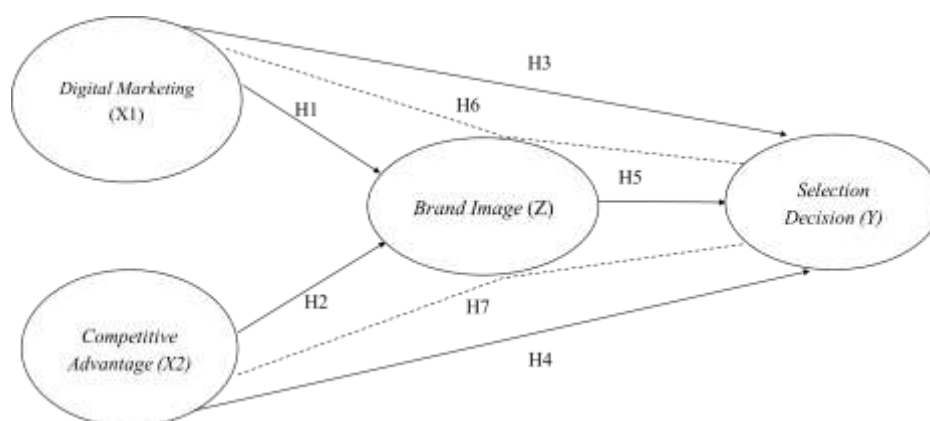


Figure 1. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

*H*₁: Digital Marketing positively and significantly influences Brand Image.

*H*₂: Competitive Advantage positively and significantly influences Brand Image.

*H*₃: Digital Marketing positively and significantly influences school selection decisions.

*H*₄: Competitive Advantage positively and significantly influences school selection decisions.

*H*₅: Brand Image positively and significantly influences School Selection Decision.

*H*₆: Brand Image mediates the influence of digital marketing on school selection decisions.

*H*₇: Brand Image mediates the influence of competitive advantage on school selection decisions.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs an explanatory quantitative design with a causal approach to examine the relationships between Digital Marketing (*X*₁), Competitive Advantage (*X*₂), Brand Image (*Z*), and School Selection Decision (*Y*). The research was conducted at the SMA Global Islamic Boarding School, Barito Kuala Regency, South Kalimantan. This location was selected based on the relevance of the research phenomenon, namely, the significant fluctuation in new student acquisition from year to year amid efforts to continuously improve institutional quality and brand image.

The population comprised 214 active students in classes X, XI, and XII. Using purposive sampling, 142 respondents were initially targeted from classes X and XI, selected because their decision-making processes occurred within the most recent two years, ensuring data accuracy and minimizing recall bias. Class XII students were excluded because their decision-making timeframe exceeding three years could potentially introduce recall bias and contextual irrelevance to the study. Of the 142 questionnaires distributed via Google Forms, 121 were returned with complete and valid responses, constituting the final sample. This sample size exceeds the minimum requirement of 105 respondents calculated using the Slovin formula ($\alpha = 0.05$) and satisfies the PLS-SEM minimum ratio of 5 to 10 observations per indicator with an estimated 20–25 indicators ([Sarstedt, Ringle, & Hair, 2021](#); [Sugiyono, 2017](#)).

Data were collected using structured questionnaires with a 5-point Likert scale. Variables were operationalized as follows: Digital Marketing (*X*₁) with ten indicators covering six dimensions accessibility, interactivity, entertainment, credibility, irritation, and informativeness ([Eum, 2025](#); [Pawar, 2024](#); [Song et al., 2023](#)); Competitive Advantage (*X*₂) with indicators measuring program quality, uniqueness, human resource excellence, price competitiveness, and institutional reputation ([Stoica et al., 2025](#); [Wulandari & Haryono, 2025](#)); Brand Image (*Z*) measuring institutional identity, innovation perception, accreditation status, student development outcomes, and emotional attachment ([Amoozegar et al., 2025](#); [Mariyam & Taharuddin, 2023](#); [Setyowati et al., 2025](#); [Snadrou & Haoucha, 2024](#)); and School Selection Decision (*Y*) assessing decision-making stages including problem recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, and final decision ([Bernal et al., 2024](#); [de Matos et al., 2025](#); [Oktaria et al., 2025](#); [Petcu et al., 2025](#); [Ürer Erdil et al., 2021](#)). Descriptive analysis utilized the Respondent Achievement Level (TCR) technique to measure respondent perceptions, with classifications ranging from “Not Good” (0–35%) to “Very Good” (85–100%) ([Sugiyono, 2017](#)). Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4 software, following a two-stage evaluation: measurement model (outer model) assessment for validity and reliability, and structural model (inner model) assessment for explanatory power, effect size, and hypothesis testing through bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples ([Ghozali, 2008](#); [Sarstedt et al., 2021](#)).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Result

4.1.1 Respondent Characteristics

The final sample consisted of 121 respondents. The age distribution shows a dominance of late adolescents aged 16–19 years (84.3%), with early adolescents aged 12–15 years comprising 15.7% of the sample. Gender distribution indicates a higher proportion of female students (62.8%) than male students (37.2%). Class X students represented 61.2% and Class XI 38.8% of the respondents. Geographically, 57% of the students originate from South Kalimantan and 38% from

Central Kalimantan, with 2% from East Kalimantan and 3.3% from other regions, indicating that the school's student recruitment reach is concentrated in two primary Kalimantan provinces. Notably, social media emerged as the most dominant initial information source for school registration (approximately 47 respondents), followed closely by family referrals (42 respondents) and friends (23 respondents), confirming that digital channels and word-of-mouth are the primary pathways for discovering schools. This contrasts with conventional promotional media, such as brochures and banners, which are less effective.

4.2.1 Descriptive Analysis of Research Variables

Descriptive analysis using the Respondent Achievement Level (TCR) technique revealed differentiated perceptions across variables. Digital Marketing (X_1) received an overall mean score of 3.67 ("Good"), with notable strengths in entertainment value (4.31, "Very Good"), informativeness (4.15, "Good"), and social media accessibility (4.40, "Very Good"). However, website interactivity (3.24, "Moderate") and platform stability for both website (3.14, "Moderate") and social media (3.26, "Moderate") represent notable weaknesses. Competitive Advantage (X_2) achieved a mean of 3.74 ("Good"), with strengths in program quality and uniqueness ("Streams" program scoring 4.39, "Very Good") and reputation indicators (accreditation, score 4.07), but a significant weakness in price perception (2.78, "Moderate") and limited acceptance of the Immersion Program exclusivity claim (3.31, "Moderate"). Brand Image (Z) received a mean of 3.82 ("Good"), with the highest-rated indicator being the "A" accreditation status (4.14, "Very Good"). The School Selection Decision (Y) achieved a mean consistent with overall positive engagement across the decision-making stages.

4.3.1 Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model confirmed that all constructs were measured reliably and validly. Convergent validity was supported by AVE values exceeding 0.50 for all constructs: Brand Image (0.589), Digital Marketing (0.603), Selection Decision (0.540), and Competitive Advantage (0.595). Internal consistency was adequate, with Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.60 across all constructs. Discriminant validity through cross-loading analysis confirmed that each indicator loaded highest on its associated construct compared to other constructs, demonstrating that the latent variables were empirically distinct and reducing concerns about construct overlap.

Table 1. Summary of convergent validity and reliability metrics

Construct	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (ρ_c)
Brand Image	0.589	0.883	0.886
Digital Marketing	0.603	0.836	0.850
Selection Decision	0.540	0.717	0.717
Competitive Advantage	0.595	0.903	0.906

As shown in Table 1, all AVE values exceeded the threshold of 0.50, indicating adequate convergent validity across the constructs. Similarly, all Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values were above the minimum acceptable level of 0.60, confirming satisfactory internal consistency. These findings suggest that the indicators can consistently and accurately measure their respective latent constructs. Beyond convergent validity and reliability, it is also important to confirm that each construct is empirically distinct from the others. Therefore, discriminant validity was further considered using the HTMT criterion, as presented in Table 2.



Table 2. HTMT criterion across construct pairs

Construct Pair	HTMT	Interpretation (<0.90)
Digital Marketing (X_1) ↔ Competitive Advantage (X_2)	0.186	Valid
Digital Marketing (X_1) ↔ School Selection Decision (Y)	0.568	Valid
Digital Marketing (X_1) ↔ Brand Image (Z)	0.63	Valid
Competitive Advantage (X_2) ↔ School Selection Decision (Y)	0.535	Valid
Competitive Advantage (X_2) ↔ Brand Image (Z)	0.549	Valid
School Selection Decision (Y) ↔ Brand Image (Z)	0.827	Valid

Table 2 presents the HTMT criterion used to assess discriminant validity among the pairs of constructs. In PLS-SEM, HTMT values below 0.90 generally indicate that the constructs are sufficiently distinct from one another, whereas values below 0.85 reflect a stricter standard. In this study, the discriminant validity assessment is also supported by the cross-loading results, which show that each indicator loads the highest on its intended construct. Taken together, the evidence from the AVE, reliability coefficients, cross-loadings, and HTMT criterion indicates that the measurement model is acceptable and that the constructs are both reliable and empirically distinguishable.

4.4.1 Structural Model Assessment

The structural model demonstrated adequate explanatory power. Brand Image (Z) achieves $R^2 = 0.610$ (moderate), indicating that 61% of its variance is explained by Digital Marketing and Competitive Advantage, while the remaining 39% is influenced by factors outside the model. School Selection Decision (Y) achieves $R^2 = 0.422$ (moderate), with 42.2% of the variance explained by the combined effects of Digital Marketing, Competitive Advantage, and Brand Image, while 57.8% is attributable to external variables not examined. The f^2 effect size analysis revealed that Competitive Advantage exerted the largest substantive effect on Brand Image ($f^2 = 0.501$, large effect), far exceeding the 0.35 threshold. The effect of digital Marketing on Brand Image ($f^2 = 0.144$) approached the moderate threshold, while the effect of Brand Image on Selection Decision ($f^2 = 0.122$) and the direct effect of Digital Marketing on Selection Decision ($f^2 = 0.057$) were categorized as small but practically relevant. Crucially, the direct effect of Competitive Advantage on Selection Decision is practically negligible ($f^2 = 0.002$), falling below the minimum threshold of 0.02.

Table 1. Structural model fit and predictive power

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Category	f^2 Effect Size Contributors	f^2 Level
Brand Image	0.610	Moderate	Comp. Advantage (0.501); Digital Marketing (0.144)	Large; Small
Selection Decision	0.422	Moderate	Brand Image (0.122), Dig. Mktg (0.057); Comp. Adv. (0.002)	Small; No Effect

The model also showed satisfactory predictive and fit indicators. The SRMR value was 0.036, which is below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating a good model fit. The Q^2 value was 0.775, indicating that the model had predictive relevance. In addition, the GoF value was 0.548, indicating a strong overall goodness of fit. Overall, these results confirm that the proposed structural model is acceptable and has adequate explanatory and predictive capabilities.

4.5.1 Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis testing was performed using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsample. The results for the direct, indirect, and total effects are summarized in Table 3.



Tabel 2. Summary of hypothesis testing results

Hyp	Path Relationship	β	T-Statistics	P-Values	Result
Direct Effects					
H_1	Digital Marketing (X_1) \rightarrow Brand Image (Z)	0.300	3.754	0.000	Supported
H_2	Competitive Advantage (X_2) \rightarrow Brand Image (Z)	0.560	7.163	0.000	Supported
H_3	Digital Marketing (X_1) \rightarrow Selection Decision (Y)	0.246	2.296	0.022	Supported
H_4	Competitive Advantage (X_2) \rightarrow Selection Decision (Y)	0.047	0.443	0.657	Not Supported
H_5	Brand Image (Z) \rightarrow Selection Decision (Y)	0.426	4.024	0.000	Supported
Indirect Effects					
H_6	$X_1 \rightarrow$ Brand Image (Z) \rightarrow Selection Decision (Y)	0.128	2.685	0.007	Supported
H_7	$X_2 \rightarrow$ Brand Image (Z) \rightarrow Selection Decision (Y)	0.239	3.338	0.001	Supported

Overall, the structural results confirm a coherent explanation. Six of the seven hypotheses are supported, with only H_4 (Competitive Advantage \rightarrow Selection Decision) rejected. The strongest pathway was Competitive Advantage \rightarrow Brand Image ($\beta = 0.560$), followed by Brand Image \rightarrow Selection Decision ($\beta = 0.426$). The total effect analysis confirms that Digital Marketing ($\beta_{total} = 0.373$) demonstrates a larger overall impact on Selection Decision than Competitive Advantage ($\beta_{total} = 0.285$), with both becoming significant through the integration of direct and indirect pathways.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Influence of Digital Marketing on Brand Image of SMA

The findings indicate that digital marketing strengthens the brand image of the SMA. In the context of educational services, digital marketing is not only a channel for information dissemination but also a mechanism for shaping institutional meaning, credibility and emotional appeal. When content is informative, visually coherent, and easy to access, prospective students and parents are more likely to form consistent associations with school quality, culture, and distinctiveness. This interpretation is consistent with recent higher education studies showing that social media communication contributes to university brand value and strengthens brand-building outcomes when institutions emphasize relevance, continuity, and audience engagement (Li, Zhang, & An, 2023; Nguyen, Tran, & Baker, 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, this result supports the view that digital marketing works simultaneously at the communication and symbolic levels. It reduces information asymmetry while translating institutional values into recognizable brand cues. Recent work in higher education marketing similarly shows that social media engagement and relationship quality are closely tied to brand performance, indicating that the effectiveness of digital marketing depends on how institutions sustain meaningful interactions rather than merely increasing content volume (Pawar, 2024; Song et al., 2023). For SMA, the implication is clear: digital communication should consistently present academic excellence, student development, and school culture in a professional and integrated manner so that promotional activities are converted into durable brand meaning.

4.2.2 Influence of Competitive Advantage on Brand Image of SMA

The findings show that competitive advantage is the strongest antecedent of brand image at SMA. This indicates that brand image is rooted in substantive institutional strengths rather than in promotional claims alone. In educational markets, a favorable image becomes credible when stakeholders perceive clear evidence of superior programs, distinctive learning experiences, and reliable institutions. This interpretation is aligned with recent university-brand literature emphasizing that brand formation depends on the institution's ability to connect positioning, identity, and quality signals in a way that stakeholders can easily recognize and trust ([Castro-Gómez, Sánchez-Torres, & Ortíz-Rendón, 2024](#)).

An important implication of this result is that not all claimed advantages have the same brand power. Stakeholders tend to respond more positively to concrete, experienced, and educationally meaningful advantages than to claims of uniqueness that are not yet fully internalized by the market. In other words, differentiation becomes persuasive when it is translated into visible academic value and student outcome. For SMA, this means that communication should foreground demonstrated program quality, learning relevance, and institutional credibility, because these are the elements most capable of being transformed into a strong and trustworthy brand.

4.2.3 Influence of Digital Marketing on Students' School Selection Decision at SMA

The findings confirm that digital marketing directly influences students' school-selection decisions. This suggests that digital platforms already function as an important decision environment for prospective students and families, especially in markets where initial contact, information search, and comparison increasingly occur online. Recent reviews of school choice and higher education marketing show that promotional communication can shape attention, information processing, and institutional consideration long before final enrollment decisions are made ([Greaves et al., 2023](#); [Pawar, 2024](#)).

At the practical level, the results indicate that digital marketing is effective when it does more than just broadcast information. Content must guide prospective students from awareness to evaluation by making the institution easier to understand, trust, and compare with alternatives. Recent evidence also shows that social media posts can influence enrolment decision-making when they combine attention-grabbing content with useful information and a clear path toward action ([Dwivedi, 2024](#); [Pawar, 2024](#)). For SMA, the most strategic priority is to strengthen platform responsiveness, narrative consistency, and user experience so that digital exposure is converted into actual school choice.

4.2.4 Influence of Competitive Advantage on Students' School Selection Decision at SMA

The finding that competitive advantage does not directly influence school-selection decisions is theoretically meaningful. This suggests that possessing superior institutional attributes is not sufficient to move prospective students toward a final decision. School choice is a complex, high-involvement process that involves academic considerations, family influence, social expectations, reputation, and perceived fit. Recent literature has consistently shown that educational choice is shaped by multiple interacting factors rather than by a single institutional strength in isolation ([Greaves et al., 2023](#); [Srivastava & Dhamija, 2022](#)).

This result also indicates that competitive advantage may function as a latent resource, whose effect depends on how it is interpreted by the market. When institutional strengths are not yet translated into a clear and persuasive meaning for stakeholders, they remain important but are insufficient inputs in the decision process. In this sense, the present study does not diminish the value of competitive advantage; instead, it clarifies that in educational services, its influence is more likely to be indirect and perception-driven. For SMA, the managerial implication is to move beyond simply having distinctive programs toward narrating those programs in ways that are understandable, relevant, and convincing to prospective students and their parents.

The finding that Competitive Advantage does not exert a significant direct effect on school selection decisions is theoretically meaningful because it reflects the nature of school choice as a *high-involvement decision*. In this type of decision, prospective students and parents do not rely on a

single institutional attribute to make a final choice. Instead, they engage in a broader evaluative process involving information search, comparison of alternatives, family considerations, reputation, perceived fit, and long-term expectations regarding educational outcomes. Consequently, institutional superiority in the form of strong programs, academic quality, and organizational reputation may remain important, but it may not immediately trigger enrollment decisions directly (Greaves et al., 2023; Srivastava & Dhamija, 2022). This result is consistent with the view that, in educational services, competitive advantage represents a strategic resource whose behavioral impact depends on how it is interpreted and valued by stakeholders rather than on its mere existence (Wulandari & Haryono, 2025).

This paradox can be further explained by the concept of *hygiene factors*. In competitive educational markets, some institutional strengths, such as accreditation, qualified teachers, adequate facilities, and distinctive academic programs, may be perceived as basic requirements that a reputable school is expected to possess rather than as decisive differentiators. Their presence helps reduce uncertainty and supports legitimacy, but does not necessarily create a preference. Under these conditions, Competitive Advantage functions more as a latent source of value that must first be translated into a credible and attractive Brand Image before it can shape students' school selection decisions. This interpretation aligns with branding theory, which emphasizes that stakeholders respond not only to objective attributes but also to the meanings, associations, and trust attached to them (Teng et al. 2025). It also supports prior educational branding studies showing that institutional strengths become more influential when they are internalized through image, reputation, and perceived quality (Amoozegar et al., 2025; Mariyam & Taharuddin, 2023; Snadrou & Hchaou, 2024). For SMA, this implies that possessing superior institutional resources is not sufficient; these resources must be communicated and framed in ways that transform them from *hygiene factors* into compelling brand meanings for prospective students and parents.

4.2.5 Influence of Brand Image on Students' School Selection Decision at SMA

The findings show that brand image has a strong direct influence on students' school-selection decisions. This indicates that, in the context of private education, the final choice is strongly shaped by how the institution is perceived rather than by isolated attributes. A positive school image gives stakeholders confidence that the institution is credible, academically reliable, and capable of supporting student development. Recent literature on higher education branding similarly emphasizes that institutional image plays a central role in preference formation, satisfaction, and loyalty because it condenses various quality signals into a single evaluative judgment that is easier for students and families to use when making choices (Seow & Hussain, 2024; Snadrou & Haoucha, 2024).

For SMA, the practical implication of this result is that accreditation, school identity, student development outcomes, and pride in belonging to the institution should not be treated as separate communication themes. These should be integrated into a coherent brand story. Recent evidence on university brand preference also shows that brand-related perceptions become more influential when awareness, perceived quality, and loyalty-oriented meanings are built in a consistent manner (Cano-Lanza, Casanoves-Boix, Jaimés-Velasquez, & Pipoli, 2025). Thus, maintaining a strong brand image is not only a reputational objective but also a strategic requirement for enrollment conversion.

4.2.6 Brand Image as Mediator in the Influence of Digital Marketing on Students' School Selection Decision

The mediation results show that brand image partially explains how digital marketing affects school selection decisions. This indicates that digital marketing operates through two complementary mechanisms. On the one hand, digital communication can directly stimulate decision-making by improving visibility, access to information, and responsiveness. However, it also shapes how prospective students interpret the institution, thereby strengthening the brand meanings that later influence their choice. This interpretation is consistent with recent studies showing that social media strengthens university brand value and performance by building engagement, relationship quality, and favorable associations with the institution (Nguyen et al., 2021; Song et al., 2023).

Theoretically, this finding supports a more integrative understanding of educational marketing. Digital marketing should not be reduced to short-term promotion because its strategic value lies in brand construction. Recent work on higher education marketing further indicates that social media influences enrolment decisions most effectively when it combines persuasive content with institutional meaning and trust cues (Pawar, 2024; Pawar & Islam, 2025). For SMA, this implies that digital marketing should simultaneously pursue immediate conversion and long-term brand strengthening through consistent storytelling, credible information, and purposeful interactions with prospective students and families.

4.2.7 Brand Image as Mediator in the Influence of Competitive Advantage on Students' School Selection Decision

The final mediation finding shows that brand image fully channels the effect of competitive advantage on school-selection decisions. This is the most important theoretical contribution of this study because it demonstrates that institutional strengths do not automatically translate into behavioral choices. In the school context, competitive advantages must first be interpreted, valued, and internalized by stakeholders as part of the institution's image before they can shape the final decisions. This interpretation is consistent with recent university-brand literature emphasizing that brand outcomes emerge when institutional identity, positioning, and stakeholder perceptions are aligned (Snadrou and Haoucha, 2024).

This result also helps explain why educational choices differ from those in lower-involvement consumption contexts. In school selection, prospective students and parents do not respond only to superiority claims; they respond to meanings that they can trust. Therefore, brand image functions as a mechanism that converts competitive strengths into perceived value. For SMA, the implication is decisive: strategic emphasis should be placed on communicating the school's distinctive programs, learning philosophy, and institutional achievements in a manner that consistently reinforces a credible and attractive image. In other words, competitive advantage becomes effective only after it is transformed into a brand that stakeholders recognize and prefer to use.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Conclusions

This study demonstrates that school selection decisions in the competitive private education market are shaped by an integrative mechanism involving Digital Marketing, Competitive Advantage, and Brand Image. The findings show that Digital Marketing and Brand Image have direct and significant effects on school selection decisions, while competitive advantage does not exert a significant direct effect. Instead, Competitive Advantage emerges as the strongest predictor of Brand Image, and its influence on School Selection Decision operates fully through that mediating construct. These results confirm that institutional strength does not automatically translate into consumer choice. In high-involvement educational decisions, institutional advantage becomes influential only when it is effectively communicated and transformed into a credible, attractive, and memorable Brand Image. Theoretically, this study contributes to the educational marketing literature by clarifying that Brand Image is not merely an accompanying variable but the central explanatory mechanism through which objective institutional superiority is converted into enrollment-related behavior.

From a practical perspective, the findings imply that school managers should not rely solely on superior programs, accreditations, facilities, or organizational quality. These strengths must be systematically translated into persuasive brand meanings using professional communication strategies. For the focal school, this means strengthening digital storytelling, improving website responsiveness and social media consistency, using testimonials to enhance credibility, and communicating the value of tuition costs more explicitly. Therefore, the key managerial implication is clear: institutional excellence will not significantly influence school selection decisions unless it is made visible, understandable, and desirable through a Brand Image.

5.2 Research Limitations

This study had several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the research was conducted in a single Islamic boarding school context with 121 respondents, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other educational institutions, geographical regions, or market segments. Second, the cross-sectional design does not allow for the observation of how brand perceptions and enrollment decisions develop over time. Third, although the model explains 42.2% of the variance in school selection decisions, a substantial proportion remains unexplained, indicating that other factors, such as parental influence, word-of-mouth, financial considerations, peer recommendations, and trust, may also shape the decision-making process. Fourth, the study relies only on student respondents, meaning that the findings primarily capture the student-perceived decision-making process rather than the full household decision structure in which parents may act as key financial decision-makers.

5.3 Suggestions and Directions for Future Research

Based on these findings, several practical recommendations can be made for school management. First, Brand Image should be treated as a strategic priority rather than a secondary communication outcome. Managers must systematically convert institutional strengths into market-facing messages that are clear, emotionally resonant, and evidence-based. Second, digital marketing content should move beyond general promotion and focus on communicating specific value propositions such as academic quality, character formation, graduate pathways, and distinctive student experiences. Third, schools should improve digital touchpoints that directly affect stakeholder impressions, especially website interactivity, platform stability, and message consistency across social media, websites, and admission materials. Fourth, because price perception is a weak indicator, schools should communicate educational value more transparently by linking tuition costs to concrete benefits, student outcomes, and long-term developmental advantages.

Several directions are recommended for future research. Replication in different educational contexts is needed to test whether the full mediation role of Brand Image remains stable across boarding schools, non-boarding schools, public schools, and higher education institutions. Future studies should incorporate additional variables, such as parental influence, trust, word-of-mouth, satisfaction, and social media engagement, to improve the model's explanatory power. In addition, multi-respondent designs involving both students and parents would provide a more complete understanding of school selection decisions as joint household decisions. Qualitative approaches, including in-depth interviews or focus group discussions, would also be valuable for exploring how institutional strengths are cognitively processed and why some advantages are perceived as hygiene factors rather than true differentiators.

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