SCHOOL PROMOTION AND POSITIONING EFFECTS ON SCHOOL CHOICE, MEDIATED BY BRAND EQUITY

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Abstract
This study aims to examine and analyze the influence of school promotion and positioning on school choice decisions, with brand equity as a mediating variable at the Cendikia Bunayya Private Islamic Senior High School (MAS) in Kabanjahe, Karo Regency. Facing increasingly competitive educational institutions, promotional strategies and school image positioning are key to shaping public perception and attracting prospective students. Brand equity is positioned as a mediating variable that can strengthen the relationship between marketing strategy and school choice decisions. This study used a quantitative approach with a survey method. Data were collected through questionnaires distributed to 170 respondents, consisting of parents and students who had chosen MAS Cendikia Bunayya as their educational institution. Data analysis used Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) based on Partial Least Squares (SmartPLS). The results showed that school promotion and positioning had a positive and significant effect on school choice decisions. Furthermore, brand equity was shown to significantly mediate the relationship between promotion and positioning on school choice decisions. These findings underscore the importance of managing a school's marketing and branding strategies in building brand strength that can increase public interest in choosing that school.

Keywords: Promotion, School Positioning, Brand Equity, School Selection Decision, Private Islamic Senior High School

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the dynamics of school choice have undergone significant changes. In the past, parents' decisions in selecting schools were often simple, influenced mainly by geographical proximity or family tradition. Today, however, these decisions have become more complex, involving rational and emotional considerations from both parents and students. This shift is closely linked to the growing awareness of the importance of quality education and the increasing number of available educational institutions, whether public or private, secular or faith-based.

School choice is no longer a mere administrative act but a strategic decision-making process in which parents act as consumers of educational services. Schools are now viewed as "products" evaluated based on various attributes, such as academic reputation, institutional values, teaching quality, facilities, social environment, teaching approaches, and even leadership styles. Previous studies have shown that both schools and parents are actively involved in this process: schools attempt to attract prospective students using different

marketing strategies, while parents critically evaluate schools by comparing the available information (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004).

In Indonesia, this trend has become increasingly evident, especially at the senior secondary level, including private Islamic schools (madrasah). Communities now expect Islamic institutions not only to excel in religious instruction but also to provide high-quality academic standards and 21st-century skills. To remain competitive, private schools must adopt well-planned educational marketing strategies that highlight their unique advantages. In this context, both promotion and positioning play crucial roles in shaping public perception and influencing parents' school choice decisions.

Promotion is one of the most critical elements of the educational marketing mix, as it directly affects how the public perceives a school. Effective promotion strategies not only enhance visibility but also communicate a school's unique values and build emotional connections with potential students and their families. Today, promotion is carried out not only through conventional means—such as brochures and banners—but also through digital channels, social media, and testimonials from students and alumni.

However, promotion alone is insufficient without a clear positioning strategy. Positioning allows a school to establish a distinct image in the minds of parents and students, differentiating it from competitors. In the educational context, positioning reflects the unique identity and competitive advantage that schools seek to embed in the minds of stakeholders (Ivy, 2001). Research has emphasized that schools with clear and consistent positioning are more easily recognized and remembered, which increases the likelihood of being chosen by parents (Ariffin et al., 2020; Wibowo & Susilo, 2022; Ali et al., 2021).

Despite this, some schools still struggle with weak promotion and unclear positioning, which reduce their visibility and competitiveness. For instance, Madrasah Aliyah Swasta (MAS) Cendikia Bunayya in Kabanjahe faces challenges in increasing its student intake due to limited exposure in both conventional and digital media, as well as an underdeveloped school identity. Without strong and consistent positioning, the school lacks a clear place in the minds of parents, who often base their decisions not only on academic quality but also on identity and value alignment.

Therefore, this study is intended to examine how promotion and positioning influence school choice, with brand equity as a mediating variable. Brand equity—encompassing awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty—acts as a bridge between marketing strategies and decision-making processes (Aaker, 1991). When schools effectively manage their promotion and positioning, they can strengthen brand equity, which in turn enhances parents' and students' decisions to choose the school.

LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1   School Choice: Concept and Determinants

School choice is a complex decision-making process that involves both rational evaluations and emotional considerations by parents and students (Ball & Vincent, 1998). Consumer-behavior frameworks applied to education conceptualize school selection as a service-purchase decision involving problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, decision, and post-decision behavior (Kotler, 2016; Engel, Blackwell & Miniard, 2019). Empirical studies highlight multiple determinants of school choice: academic reputation, quality of teaching, institutional values, facilities, social environment, cost and accessibility, and social references such as recommendations from alumni or religious/community leaders (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004; Yuliani & Syahrul, 2022; Ramadhani, 2022).

2.2   Promotion in Educational Context

Promotion — as part of the marketing mix — serves to inform, persuade, and remind target audiences about an institution's value propositions (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Tjiptono, 2017). In the education sector, promotion takes diverse forms: conventional advertising (brochures, banners), digital marketing (websites, social media), direct promotion (open houses, school visits), and word-of-mouth/testimonials. Recent evidence shows that integrated and digital-oriented promotional strategies (social media, testimonial-driven content, open houses) can significantly influence parents' decision-making, particularly among digitally savvy segments (Tahir et al., 2022; Dewi & Hidayat, 2023). However, context matters: in some settings, promotion alone is insufficient when stronger sociocultural influences (e.g., religious authority, community reputation) dominate the choice process (Rahman & Isnaini, 2021; Saragih et al., 2022).

2.3 Positioning of Schools

Positioning refers to designing school offerings and image so the institution occupies a distinctive place in the minds of target parents and students (Ries & Trout, 2001; Kotler & Keller, 2016). In education, positioning may emphasize academic excellence, religious/character formation, bilingual curricula, technology integration, or a combination of value-based differentiators (Ivy, 2001; Nurlaili & Sari, 2021). Empirical studies indicate that clear and consistent positioning increases recognition and recall, which in turn raises the probability of selection (Ariffin et al., 2020; Putri & Nugroho, 2021). Nevertheless, inconsistent messaging or weak dissemination of the positioning strategy can nullify its potential effect (Sari & Nurul, 2023; Manik & Ginting, 2022).

2.4 Brand Equity in Educational Institutions

Brand equity—conceptualized as the value added by a brand's name and associations—includes dimensions such as brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2020). In service sectors like education, where intangibility is prominent, brand equity operates as an important intangible asset that affects perceived quality and choice behavior (Tjiptono, 2017). Schools with strong brand equity tend to attract more applicants, command trust from parents, and enjoy higher loyalty among alumni and stakeholders (Ramadhani, 2022; Wijaya, 2021). Studies in education show that promotional activities and positioning strategies contribute to building brand equity when they are coherent, credible, and supported by actual institutional performance (Yuliana, 2018; Putri & Siregar, 2021).

2.5 Mediation Role of Brand Equity: Theory and Evidence

Theoretically, brand equity can mediate the relationship between marketing inputs (promotion, positioning) and behavioral outcomes (choice, loyalty). Promotion raises awareness and shapes perceptions; positioning clarifies a school's unique benefits. When these inputs successfully form positive brand associations and perceived quality, brand equity increases, leading to higher preference and selection intentions (Keller, 2020; Aaker, 1996). Empirically, several studies confirm brand equity's mediating role in educational contexts: Handayani & Wahyudi (2021) and Fitriani (2020) found partial mediation of brand equity between promotion and choice; Putri & Nugroho (2023) showed positioning improves brand equity which then affects enrollment interest.

2.6 Conflicting Findings and Contextual Nuances

Although many studies support positive effects of promotion and positioning on school choice (Nuryanto, 2020; Wulandari, 2019; Sari & Utami, 2020), some research reports weak

or non-significant direct effects of promotion—particularly when other social influences or established reputations dominate (Rahman & Isnaini, 2021; Wijaya, 2021). These inconsistencies point to contextual moderators (e.g., local culture, role of religious leaders, socioeconomic status) and measurement differences (types of promotion measured, operationalization of positioning or brand equity). They also suggest the importance of testing mediation mechanisms—whether marketing activities influence choice directly, indirectly through brand equity, or both—within specific institutional settings such as private madrasah.

2.7 Research Gap and Rationale for Current Study

The literature shows solid theoretical and some empirical support for links among promotion, positioning, brand equity, and school choice, but gaps remain: (1) fewer studies focus explicitly on madrasah or private Islamic senior-high school contexts where religious identity and community endorsement play strong roles; (2) existing results are mixed about direct vs. indirect effects, indicating the need to examine mediation more rigorously using robust multivariate techniques (e.g., SEM-PLS); and (3) local case studies are needed to inform practice—how schools like MAS Cendikia Bunayya can translate marketing investments into tangible increases in enrolment. This study addresses those gaps by examining both direct effects of promotion and positioning on school choice and the mediating role of brand equity in the context of a private Islamic senior-high school in Kabanjahe.

2.8 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses (brief)

Building on the reviewed literature, the conceptual model posits that: (a) Promotion positively affects Brand Equity and School Choice; (b) Positioning positively affects Brand Equity and School Choice; and (c) Brand Equity positively affects School Choice and mediates the relationships between Promotion/Positioning and School Choice. These hypotheses align with prior findings (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2020; Handayani & Wahyudi, 2021; Putri & Nugroho, 2021) and are tested empirically in the present study.

METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative causal design to examine the direct and indirect effects of promotion and school positioning on school choice, with brand equity as a mediating variable. The research applied a survey method using structured questionnaires.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population comprised parents and students of Madrasah Aliyah Swasta (MAS) Cendikia Bunayya in Kabanjahe, North Sumatra. Based on the guidelines of Hair et al. (2014), the minimum sample size for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) should be at least ten times the number of indicators. With 17 indicators in this study, a minimum of 170 respondents was required. Accordingly, 170 valid responses were collected through purposive sampling.

3.3 Data Collection

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The instrument measured four latent variables: Promotion, School Positioning, Brand Equity, and School Choice Decision.

3.4 Operationalization of Variables

1. Promotion (X1): Indicators included advertising, social media, direct marketing, word-of-mouth, and promotional events (Tjiptono, 2017).

2. School Positioning (X2): Indicators included differentiation, clarity of message, relevance to needs, and uniqueness (Nurlaili & Sari, 2021).
3. Brand Equity (Z): Indicators included brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2020).
4. School Choice (Y): Indicators included trust, preference, loyalty, and intention to re-enroll (Kotler, 2016).

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS software. The procedure followed Hair et al. (2022):

1. Measurement Model (Outer Model): Validity and reliability were tested using factor loadings (>0.7), Average Variance Extracted (AVE > 0.5), Composite Reliability (CR > 0.7), and Cronbach's Alpha (>0.7). Discriminant validity was assessed with the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT ratio (<0.9).
2. Structural Model (Inner Model): Relationships among constructs were evaluated using R^2, Adjusted R^2, Q^2, and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF < 5).
3. Hypothesis Testing: Path coefficients were tested using bootstrapping (5,000 resamples). Statistical significance was determined at $t \geq 1.96$ and $p \leq 0.05$.
4. Mediation Test: Indirect effects of promotion and positioning on school choice through brand equity were tested to determine whether mediation was partial or full.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
4.1 Measurement Model

The measurement model was evaluated using factor loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability (CR), and Cronbach's Alpha. All indicators met the required thresholds: loading values > 0.70, AVE > 0.50, CR and Alpha > 0.70, indicating convergent validity and internal consistency reliability. Discriminant validity was confirmed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT ratio (< 0.90).

Table 1. Reliability Testing Based on Composite Reliability (CR)

Construct	Composite Reliability
Brand Equity (Z)	0.939
School Choice (Y)	0.948
School Positioning (X2)	0.941
Promotion (X1)	0.952

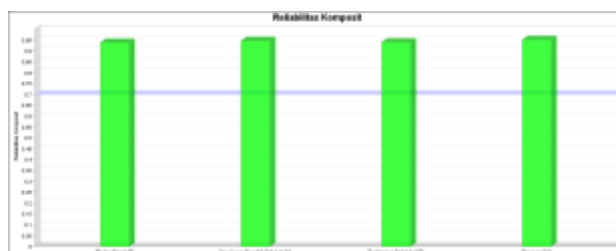*Source: Processed using SmartPLS*

Figure 1. Reliability Testing Based on Composite Reliability (CR)

The recommended CR value is above 0.7 (Mahfud & Ratmono, 2013). It is evident that all CR values are greater than 0.7, which means they meet the reliability requirements based on Composite Reliability. Subsequently, reliability testing was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha (CA).

Table 2. Reliability Testing Based on Composite Reliability (CR)

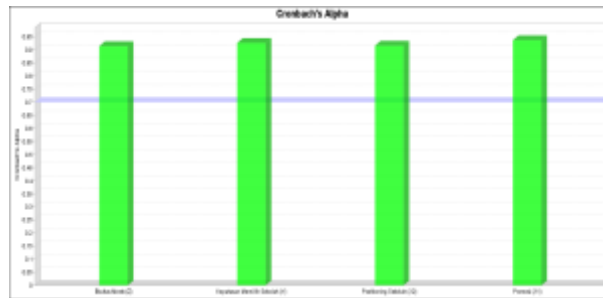| Construct	Composite Reliability
Brand Equity (Z)	0.939
School Choice (Y)	0.948
School Positioning (X2)	0.941
Promotion (X1)	0.952

Source: Processed using SmartPLS

Figure 2. Reliability Testing based on Cronbach's Alpha (CA)

The recommended CA value is above 0.7 (Mahfud and Ratmono, 2013). All CA values were found to be >0.7, which means they met the reliability requirements based on Cronbach's alpha. Next, discriminant validity testing was conducted using the Fornell-Larcker approach. Table 4.5 presents the results of the discriminant validity testing.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity Testing

Construct	Brand Equity (Z)	School Choice (Y)	School Positioning (X2)	Promotion (X1)
Brand Equity (Z)	√AVE = 0.892			
School Choice (Y)	0.782	√AVE = 0.905		
School Positioning (X2)	0.639	0.555	√AVE = 0.894	
Promotion (X1)	0.551	0.594	0.310	√AVE = 0.894

Source: Processed using SmartPLS

4.2 Path Coefficients

The results of hypothesis testing are summarized below:

Table 4.4 Path Coefficient Results

Relationship	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV	Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values
Brand Equity (Z) -> Decision to Choose School (Y)	0.579	0.577	0.128	4.529	0.000

School Positioning (X2) -> Brand Equity (Z)	0.518	0.517	0.089	5.8	0.000
School Positioning (X2) -> Decision to Choose School (Y)	0.411	0.409	0.101	4.077	0.000
Promotion (X1) -> Brand Equity (Z)	0.391	0.393	0.086	4.54	0.000
Promotion (X1) -> Decision to Choose School (Y)	0.467	0.473	0.09	5.171	0.000

Source: Processed with SmartPLS

Based on the results in Table 4.4, the following findings are obtained:
1. Brand Equity (Z) has a positive effect on Decision to Choose School (Y), with a path coefficient value (Original Sample) of 0.579, and is significant with a P-Value = 0.000 (Hypothesis Accepted).
2. School Positioning (X2) has a positive effect on Brand Equity (Z), with a path coefficient value of 0.518, and a P-Value = 0.000 (Hypothesis Accepted).
3. School Positioning (X2) has a positive effect on Decision to Choose School (Y), with a path coefficient value of 0.411, and a P-Value = 0.000 (Hypothesis Accepted).
4. Promotion (X1) has a positive effect on Brand Equity (Z), with a path coefficient value of 0.391, and a P-Value = 0.000 (Hypothesis Accepted).
5. Promotion (X1) has a positive effect on Decision to Choose School (Y), with a path coefficient value of 0.467, and a P-Value = 0.000 (Hypothesis Accepted).

Table 4. R-Square

Variable	R-Square
Brand Equity (Z)	0.546
Decision to Choose School (Y)	0.657

Source: Processed with SmartPLS

The R-Square value of Brand Equity (Z) is 0.546, which means that Promotion (X1) and School Positioning (X2) are able to explain Brand Equity (Z) by 54.6%. The R-Square value of Decision to Choose School (Y) is 0.657, which means that Promotion (X1) and School Positioning (X2) are able to explain the Decision to Choose School (Y) by 65.7%.

Table 5. Adjusted R-Square

Variable	Adjusted R-Square
Brand Equity (Z)	0.541
Decision to Choose School (Y)	0.651

Source: Processed with SmartPLS

The Adjusted R-Square value of Brand Equity (Z) is 0.541. Since Adjusted R-Square = 0.541 > 0, it can be concluded that Promotion (X1) and School Positioning (X2) have predictive relevance for Brand Equity (Z). The Adjusted R-Square value of Decision to Choose School (Y) is 0.651. Since Adjusted R-Square = 0.651 > 0, it can be concluded that Promotion (X1) and School Positioning (X2) have predictive relevance for Decision to Choose School (Y).

Table 6. Goodness of Fit Test

Model Estimation	Value
SRMR	0.071

Source: Processed with SmartPLS

Based on the goodness of fit test results, the SRMR value = 0.071 < 0.1, thus the model is considered FIT.

Table 7. Mediation Test

Relationship	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV	Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values
School Positioning (X2) -> Brand Equity (Z) -> Decision to Choose School (Y)	0.3	0.301	0.092	3.277	0.001
Promotion (X1) -> Brand Equity (Z) -> Decision to Choose School (Y)	0.226	0.229	0.079	2.871	0.004

Source: Processed with SmartPLS

Based on the mediation test results in Table 4.8:
1. Decision to Choose School (Y) significantly mediates the relationship between School Positioning (X2) and Brand Equity (Z), with a P-Value = 0.001 < 0.05 (Mediation Hypothesis Accepted).
2. Decision to Choose School (Y) significantly mediates the relationship between Promotion (X1) and Brand Equity (Z), with a P-Value = 0.004 < 0.05 (Mediation Hypothesis Accepted).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION
5.1 Conclusion
Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that:
1. Brand Equity (Z) has a positive effect on School Choice Decision (Y), with a path coefficient (Original Sample) of 0.579, and is significant with a p-value of 0.000 (Hypothesis Accepted).
2. School Positioning (X2) has a positive effect on Brand Equity (Z), with a path coefficient of 0.518 and a p-value of 0.000 (Hypothesis Accepted).
3. School Positioning (X2) has a positive effect on School Choice Decision (Y), with a path coefficient of 0.411 and a p-value of 0.000 (Hypothesis Accepted).
4. Promotion (X1) has a positive effect on Brand Equity (Z), with a path coefficient of 0.391 and a p-value of 0.000 (Hypothesis Accepted).
5. Promotion (X1) has a positive effect on School Choice Decision (Y), with a path coefficient of 0.467 and a p-value of 0.000 (Hypothesis Accepted).

6. School Choice Decision (Y) significantly mediates the relationship between School Positioning (X2) and Brand Equity (Z), with a p-value of 0.001 < 0.05 (Mediating Hypothesis Accepted).
7. School Choice Decision (Y) significantly mediates the relationship between Promotion (X1) and Brand Equity (Z), with a p-value of 0.004 < 0.05 (Mediating Hypothesis Accepted).

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, which show that both promotion and school positioning have positive and significant effects on school choice, with brand equity as a mediating variable also providing a significant influence, the researcher proposes several strategic recommendations for Madrasah Aliyah Swasta (MAS) Cendikia Bunayya Kabanjahe, Karo, as follows:

1. Optimization of School Promotion Strategies
   The school is advised to further develop and optimize its promotional strategies in a more structured and innovative manner. Promotion can be carried out through various channels such as social media, the school's official website, brochures, school profile videos, as well as direct outreach activities to nearby junior high schools (MTs/SMP).
2. Strengthening a Unique and Relevant School Positioning
   The school needs to reinforce and clarify its positioning in the minds of the community. All school activities, both in teaching and public services, should be aligned with these values to ensure consistency between the communicated messages and the actual experiences of stakeholders.
3. Building and Maintaining School Brand Equity
   Since brand equity has been proven to mediate the relationship between promotion, positioning, and school choice, the school must strive to maintain and enhance the community's positive perception of its brand. This can be achieved through excellent services, active involvement in social and religious activities, and the publication of student and school achievements. A well-maintained reputation will strengthen public loyalty and trust toward the school.
4. Implementing Integrated Communication and Consistent Image
   To strengthen promotion and positioning, the school should develop an integrated communication strategy in which all communication channels—both online and offline—deliver consistent messages that reflect the school's values and characteristics. Consistency in visual identity, promotional narratives, services, and interactions among school members is essential in creating a strong and recognizable image.

By implementing the above recommendations, MAS Cendikia Bunayya Kabanjahe is expected to further enhance its competitiveness in becoming the preferred choice for secondary education that upholds both Islamic values and academic excellence.

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