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## Research Article

### Shaping Power Trio of Parents' Private School Choice: Image, Attractiveness, and Experience

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## ABSTRACT

Only a few studies have concurrently investigated school image, attractiveness, and parents' past experiences at private high school within a single, emotion-based framework. This study examines the direct, indirect, and moderating relationships among these variables in shaping private high school choice in Indonesia. Employing the Hayes PROCESS Macro on data from 270 parents, analysis revealed that school image is a powerful predictor of parental school choice, operating both directly and indirectly via school attractiveness. Prior private high school experience significantly leveraged the parents' ratings of image, attractiveness, and school choice, and magnified the impact of both image and attractiveness on the final school choice. This study provides two primary contributions: First, it significantly advances the literature on emotion-based school choice by demonstrating the strong interplay between image and attractiveness. Second, it establishes prior experience as a critical moderator, indicating that the emotional drivers of choice are fundamentally different for experienced parents, offering a new insight for school management and marketing strategies that seek to leverage parental background.

**Keywords:** *Emotion-based choice, Parental school choice, School image, School attractiveness, Past study experience*

## Background

Parental school choice—a process in which parents select from various school options for their children by considering various alternatives (Berends and Waddington, 2018)—is a complex decision-making process. This is particularly the case when opting for a private school, which, while globally perceived as

superior in quality (e.g., Zia et al., 2017; Fatima and Rafique, 2020; Termes et al., 2020), requires a greater financial sacrifice than public schools (e.g., Yaacob et al., 2014; Pratiwi, 2023).

Particularly in Indonesia, a key factor in attracting interest for school choice is the school's attractiveness (Sudirjo et al., 2023),

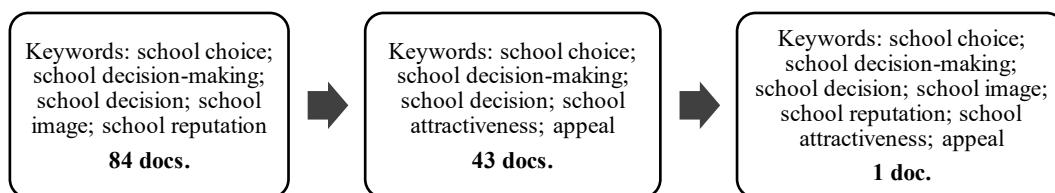
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which refers to the factors that can influence a consumer's decision when selecting a school (Hao and Pilz, 2021). This is affirmed in the broader Asian context, such as in Vietnam, Vuong et al. (2024) found that educational institutions can boost their attractiveness by developing a strong school image—the overall perception and associations that students and other stakeholders hold about the institution (Wong et al., 2016). Ultimately, parental school choice is contingent upon a parent's assessment of a school's attractiveness, which, in turn, is influenced by the positive or negative perception of the school's image.

However, most past studies have discussed the relationships between school choice, school image, and school attractiveness partially, without integrating them into a single model. This conclusion is strongly supported by the bibliometric test results we conducted on 3

September 2025 (Figure 1). A broad search using keywords related to school choice and school image/reputation yielded 84 documents. Further, changing keywords related to school attractiveness/appeal reduced the number of records to 43. Finally, combining keywords for all three concepts: school choice, school image/reputation, and school attractiveness/appeal resulted in only 1 document. The dramatic decrease from 84 papers to a single document proves that a comprehensive study, concurrently and explicitly examining the relationship between all three concepts, is exceptionally rare, reinforcing the need for new research that tests them within a single, unified framework. This identified gap raises a critical question about how integrating school image and attractiveness shapes parents' choices of private high schools in Indonesia.



*Figure 1. Scopus metadata results (3 September 2025)*

Beyond the external factors of school image and attractiveness, a crucial and often overlooked influence on parental school choice is the parents' own educational history. Their formative experiences—both positive and negative—at their own schools can significantly shape their preferences and criteria for their children's education. The nature of educational services is experience-based, whereby the assessment of consumer appeal for educational services will greatly depend on firsthand experience and that of others (Riyanto and Khairisma, 2024). For example, Tuzzahrah et al. (2016) found that past educational experiences influence parents' perceptions of Islamic schools. In the US, Rhodes et al. (2023) also found that parents' educational experiences determine their choice of school for their children. However, how this may interfere with the effects of school image and school attractiveness on parental private high school choice is

unknown. This is another gap the current study attempts to address.

Hence, this study aims to examine how Indonesian parents decide on private high schools for their children, using the emotion-based choice theory (Mellers et al., 1999). It highlights that emotion and personal memories may weigh more heavily in these decisions than just cold, hard facts. Instead of simply focusing on statistics or rankings, this research delves into how parents' educational experiences and feelings about schools influence their choices for their kids' futures.

## **Literature Review**

### **Emotion-based choice**

The main idea of emotion-based choice in Mellers et al. (1999) lies in the idea that people make decisions not solely based on expected utility, but on emotions they anticipate experiencing as a result of their choices. Instead of

maximizing expected utility, people are seen as maximizing expected emotional pleasure. Each option is evaluated by averaging the anticipated emotional responses to its possible outcomes, weighted by their subjective probabilities.

While rational choices are often based on beliefs, preferences, and optimization of expected utility (Elster, 2010), the emotional choice mainly relies on anticipated emotional reactions. In other words, rational choice is an objective decision-making, while the emotional choice is a subjective one. In the case of school choice, rational or objective reasonings include the technology implementation, overall school quality, infrastructures, and the cost-benefit analysis (e.g., Badri and Mohaidat, 2014; Melo et al., 2021; Kurt and Kalman, 2022; Von Stumm et al., 2022; Peñate et al., 2024).

On the other hand, perceived image and attractiveness are closely related to emotion (e.g., Meyer et al., 2011; Felix and Wanjira, 2022). Perceived image and attractiveness are closely related to emotion because they are subjective, non-rational concepts processed through the brain's limbic system, which governs emotions and memory (e.g., Isik and Vessel, 2021; Proverbio and Cesati, 2024). Unlike objective facts, a person's perception of an image or an attractiveness is not based on a logical checklist. Instead, it's an immediate, intuitive, and often subconscious response.

For parents, a school's perceived image and attractiveness are not just rational metrics but potent emotional triggers. Parents' school image—encompassing its reputation, brand, and overall atmosphere—is processed through the brain's emotional hub. When a parent encounters a school's prospectus or website, their response is often an immediate, intuitive feeling rather than a logical analysis. For instance, a school's image might evoke prestige and security, appealing to a parent's desire for their child's future success and well-being. Similarly, school attractiveness, which relates to a school's perceived appeal, is a subjective emotional assessment. Instead of being a checklist of objective features, they are mainly about whether the school feels "right." This feeling is rooted in a parent's emotional landscape,

influenced by their own past experiences and aspirations for their child.

### ***The linkage of school image, attractiveness, and choice***

Existing research in Indonesia highlights a strong relationship between a school's image and attractiveness. For example, Riyanto and Kharisma (2024) and Budiyatmo and Iriani (2022) explicitly found that a positive school image leads to greater attractiveness. This is because a strong image—perceived as a good reputation, a commitment to innovation, or a safe environment—makes a school inherently more appealing to prospective parents.

**H1** School image significantly influences school attractiveness.

In their research, Pracipta (2021) and Mahbub et al. (2023) found that school image determined parents' decisions to choose a private elementary school. This relationship was also evident in higher education, as Fakhri et al. (2017) found a campus's image was a dominant factor in student choice. This connection shows that parents rely on a school's image as a critical part of their selection process. Further, Budiyatmo and Iriani (2022) found that to attract new students, a school must strengthen its appeal in the eyes of prospective parents and students. Similarly, Riyanto and Kharisma (2024) confirmed that a positive school image was crucial for attracting public interest. This underscores that a school's appeal is a key consideration in the final decision-making process.

**H2** School image directly and significantly influences school choice.

**H3** School attractiveness significantly influences school choice.

The existing literature suggests a direct influence of school image on school choice (e.g., Krisbiyanto and Nadhifah, 2022; Mahbub et al., 2023). However, this linkage may not be a simple, one-step process. A school's image, which is its reputation and overall perception, may first shape its attractiveness to parents, which,

in turn, becomes the factor that drives parents' final choice (e.g., Budiyatmo and Iriani, 2022; Riyanto and Kharisma, 2024). In essence, a strong school image contributes to a higher level of school attractiveness for Indonesian parents, which, in turn, positively influences their decisions to select schools for their children. Thus, the hypothesis:

**H4** School attractiveness significantly mediates the effect of school image on school choice.

#### **Parents' educational experience as a moderator of school choice**

Prior studies on school choice often use a parent's formal education level as the main factor (e.g., Murshed and Uddin, 2019; Bekele and Kenea, 2024) since it is linked to better information-processing skills and the ability to make informed decisions when selecting a school. This is largely posited as a rational consideration, as a higher education level is believed to equip parents with the sophisticated cognitive and analytical skills necessary to process complex information and objectively evaluate school-related factors to make an optimal selection for their child. Yet, how parents' past emotional experience in their own high schools can shape their decision in choosing schools for their children is relatively unexplored.

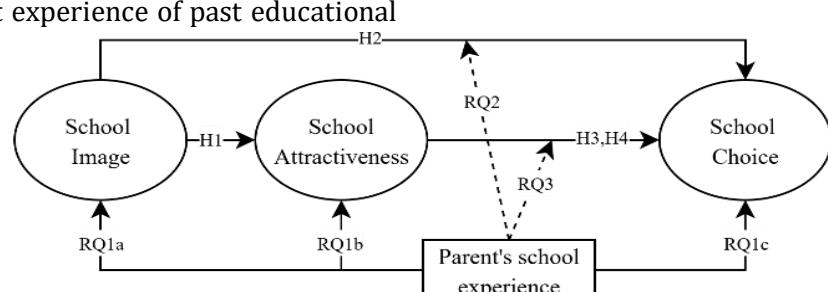
The educational industry is a service industry where a customer's emotional experiences play a significant role in their decision-making process, potentially creating lasting memories and emotional ties with customers (Kandampully et al., 2022; Riyanto and Kharisma, 2024). They cannot be fully evaluated before consumption, making the school choice process an experience-based assessment for decision-makers like parents. In such a case, parents' direct or indirect experience of past educational

history can be a key determinant of assessing school image and attractiveness that ultimately may influence their school choice for the children. Amid the few relevant studies, Rhodes et al. (2023) conclude that parents' prior experience with education plays an essential role in shaping their school preferences and choices. For example, Tuzzahrah et al. (2016) found that parents' perception of Islamic school image is determined by their own school experience. In addition, Sudirjo et al. (2023) suggest that one of the critical aspects of an educational institution's attractiveness is parents' direct and indirect experience with relatively similar institutions.

Given the existing gap in empirical research, this study operates on the premise that a parent's past emotional experiences at private high schools have not been quantitatively examined as determinants of school choice. Consequently, this research cannot formulate and test traditional hypotheses. Instead, it is designed to explore this uncharted territory by proposing further research questions to lay a foundational understanding of how these nuanced experiences may influence a parent's selection of a school for their child. Thus, the further research questions are:

- RQ1** Do parents' private high school experience differ from their perception of their private school image **(a)**, attractiveness **(b)**, and choice **(c)** for their children?
- RQ2** Can parents' private high school experience moderate the effect of school image on school choice?
- RQ3** Can parents' private high school experience moderate the effect of school attractiveness on school choice?

All hypotheses and research questions can be depicted in Figure 2:



*Figure 2. Research model*

## Methods

### Respondents

The target population comprised parents with at least one child still studying in a private high school in Indonesia. Such an eligibility was stated in the initial part of the online questionnaire, allowing only those who met the eligibility to continue to the subsequent sections.

In order to ensure ethical compliance, informed consent was secured in the second part of the questionnaire, which included research purposes, procedures, confidentiality, and risk protection warranty, as well as the respondents' understanding of voluntary participation

and right to withdraw. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement before continuing to the remaining sections.

Four hundred online questionnaires were distributed through social media. From this initial outreach, 310 responses were received, yielding a response rate of 77.5%. A subsequent data cleaning and screening process was then performed to ensure data quality. During this phase, 40 responses were identified as incomplete or containing outliers and consequently excluded from the dataset. This resulted in a final sample of 270 valid responses (67.5%) deemed suitable for further analysis.

*Table 1. Respondents' characteristics*

		<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Age		25	63	43.9		
Gender	Male				85	31.5
	Female				185	68.5
Education	Elementary school				8	3.0
	Junior high school				33	12.2
	Senior high school				121	44.8
	Diploma or bachelor degree				88	32.6
	Master degree				16	5.9
	Doctoral degree				4	1.5
Occupation	Public/government employees				69	25.6
	Private employees				25	9.3
	Entrepreneurs				45	16.7
	Professionals				7	2.6
	Part timers				6	2.2
	Farmers/fishermen/breeder/etc.				22	8.1
	Housewife				75	27.8
	Retired				1	.4
	Unemployed				2	.7
	Others				18	6.7
Monthly income	< IDR 5 million				130	48.1
	IDR 5 to 7 million				49	18.1
	IDR 8 to 10 million				42	15.6
	IDR 11 to 15 million				19	7.0
	> IDR 15 million				30	11.1
Number of family dependant	2-3 persons				162	60.0
	4-6 persons				95	35.2
	More than 6 persons				13	4.8
Having past experience in private high school	Yes				147	54.4
	No				123	45.6

Based on Table 1, respondents have a mean age of 43.9 years, ranging from 25 to 63. Most respondents are female, accounting for 68.5%

of the total. Most participants completed senior high school (44.8%), followed by a diploma or bachelor's degree (32.6%). The largest

occupational group is housewives (27.8%), with public/government employees making up 25.6%. Nearly half of the respondents (48.1%) have a monthly income of less than IDR 5 million. The most common family size is 2 to 3 people (60.0%). Finally, a slight majority of the respondents (54.4%) have a personal history of attending a private high school.

### **Measurement**

A five-point Likert scale was employed from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). School image ( $\alpha = .94$ ) was the independent variable, measured using three continuous items, developed from Wong et al. (2016), comprising school superiority, strength, and uniqueness. School attractiveness ( $\alpha = .87$ ) was the mediation variable, measured using three continuous items, developed from Hao and Pilz (2021), consisting of school speciality, overall perception, and competitiveness. School choice ( $\alpha = .92$ ) was the dependent variable, measured using three continuous items developed from Hofflinger et al. (2020), comprising distance, overall quality, and moral and religious values at school. Additionally, parents' past experience in a private high school acted as the categorical moderator (1 = yes; 2 = no).

*Table 2. Descriptive results*

Variables	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
School image	270	4.45	.73	10.77	.00***
Parent studied in private high school	147	4.83	.36		
Parent did not study in private high school	123	3.99	.80		
School attractiveness	270	4.31	.72	11.23	.00***
Parent studied in private high school	147	4.70	.42		
Parent did not study in private high school	123	3.86	.73		
School choice	270	4.49	.72	10.28	.00***
Parent studied in private high school	147	4.85	.32		
Parent did not study in private high school	123	4.05	.81		

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

Similarly, Table 2 also shows that the descriptive analysis for RQ1b (Table 4) addressed whether parents' private high school experience affects their perception of a school's attractiveness. The data reveal a significant difference between the two groups of parents. The overall score was 4.31, indicating that private high schools were relatively attractive. However, when the data was broken down, parents

### **Data analysis**

The current study employed mean analysis and two distinct models of the Hayes PROCESS Macro to test all hypotheses and answer the research questions. H1 to H4 were tested using model 4, specifically designed to evaluate either direct and simple mediation effects (Hayes, 2022). The RQ1 was answered by conducting an independent t-test, while RQ2 and RQ3, exploring the moderating role of parents' past experience in private high school, were tested using model 1, which is appropriate for scrutinizing conditional effects on a categorical moderator (Hayes, 2022).

### **Results**

Table 2 shows a significant difference in how parents perceive the school's image, depending on their past high school experience. The overall mean score was 4.45, indicating that parents had a relatively good image of private high schools. In more detail, parents who attended a private high school rated the school's image significantly higher, with a mean of 4.83, compared to 3.99 for parents who did not. This difference is statistically significant with a *p*-value of less than .001.

who studied in a private high school reported a higher mean score for school attractiveness ( $N = 147$ ;  $M = 4.70$ ) compared to those who did not, who had a lower mean score ( $N = 123$ ;  $M = 3.86$ ). This difference was statistically significant with a *p*-value  $< .001$ . This finding confirms that a parent's personal experience with a private high school is a key factor influencing their

perception of a private school's attractiveness when choosing a school for their children.

Table 2 also demonstrates the descriptive results for RQ1c (Table 4), showing a significant difference in how parents perceive a school choice based on their educational background. The overall mean score for school choice was 4.49, indicating a relatively strong parental preference for private high schools. However, the analysis reveals a clear distinction between the two groups. Parents with

prior private high school experience gave a significantly higher mean rating for school choice ( $N = 147; M = 4.85$ ) than parents without that experience, who gave a lower mean rating ( $N = 123; M = 4.05$ ). This difference was statistically significant, as confirmed by a  $p$ -value  $< .001$ . The data confirms that a parent's personal experience with a private high school directly influenced their perception of school choice for their children.

Table 3. Direct and indirect effects

Model	$\beta$	SE	$t$	<sup>a</sup> $p$	<sup>b</sup> CI		Result
					LL	UL	
H1 SI $\rightarrow$ SA	.81	.03	24.41	.00***	.75	.88	Accepted
H2 SI $\rightarrow$ SC	.45	.06	7.39	.00***	.33	.57	Accepted
H3 SA $\rightarrow$ SC	.41	.06	6.63	.00***	.29	.53	Accepted
H4 SI $\rightarrow$ SA $\rightarrow$ SC	<sup>c</sup> .33	<sup>d</sup> .07	-	-	<sup>e</sup> .20	<sup>f</sup> .46	Accepted

SI (school image); SA (school attractiveness); SC (school choice)

<sup>a</sup> \*\*\*  $p < .001$

<sup>b</sup> With a 95% Confidence Interval (CI), the range between lower (LLCI) and upper (ULCI) must not include zero, or both must have either a positive or a negative slope, to be significant.

<sup>c</sup> Effect

<sup>d</sup> BootSE

<sup>e</sup> BootLLCI

<sup>f</sup> BootULCI

As shown in Table 3, the findings confirmed H1. The results show a positive and statistically significant relationship, with  $\beta = 0.81$  and a  $p$ -value of  $0.000 < 0.001$ . The 95% confidence interval for this effect ranged from 0.75 to 0.88, a range that did not include zero, further supporting the significance of the relationship. This means a more positive perception of a school's image leads to a greater perception of its attractiveness.

Table 3 shows a statistical analysis of the direct and mediation effects among the variables. The results show  $\beta = 0.45$  and a  $p$ -value =  $0.000 < 0.001$ , indicating that the relationship was statistically significant. The confidence interval (CI) ranged from 0.33 (LLCI) to 0.57 (ULCI). Since this interval did not include zero and both were positive, it further validated the significance of the direct influence of school image on school choice, leading to the conclusion that H2 was accepted.

Based on Table 3, H3 was accepted, supported by the statistical figures ( $\beta = 0.41$ ;  $p =$

$0.000 < 0.001$ ;  $CI [LL = 0.29; UL = 0.53]$ ). The findings, thus, provide further evidence that school attractiveness is a positive and significant factor in parental school choice.

Based on the results shown in Table 3, H4 was accepted, validating that school attractiveness significantly mediated the effect of school image on school choice, which was strongly supported by the statistical findings ( $\beta = 0.20$ ;  $p$ -value =  $0.000 < 0.01$ ;  $CI [LL = 0.14; UL = 0.26]$ ). This mediation analysis indicates that the influence of a school's image on a parent's school choice was not solely direct. Instead, a significant portion of that effect was transmitted indirectly through the parents' perception of the school's attractiveness. This is a case of partial mediation, as both the direct effect of school image on school choice and the indirect effect through school attractiveness were statistically significant.

The combined interpretation of Table 4 and Figure 3 may address RQ2, answering whether parents' private high school experience can

moderate the effect of school image on school choice. The moderation analysis reveals a significant interaction effect between school image and a parent's private high school experience on school choice, indicated by the statistical figures ( $\beta = 0.24$ ;  $p\text{-value} = 0.03 < 0.05$ ). This suggests that the relationship between school image and school choice was not the same for all parents; instead, it was moderated by whether or not they had personal experience with private high schools.

In support, Figure 3 visually illustrates this moderating effect. The two lines represented

the relationship between school image and school choice for the two groups of parents. The line for parents with private high school experience ("Yes" group) had a steeper slope than the line for parents without this experience ("No" group). This steeper slope for the "Yes" group means that as their perception of school image increased, their school choice rating increased faster than the "No" group. This confirms that a parent's own private high school experience strengthened the positive relationship between a school's image and their subsequent school choice for their child.

Table 4. Moderation effects

Research questions	$\beta$	SE	$t$	<sup>a</sup> $p$	<sup>b</sup> CI		Answers	
					LL	UL		
RQ1a	Does SI differ by PE?	-	-	10.77	.00***	-	-	Yes
RQ1b	Does SA differ by PE?	-	-	11.23	.00***	-	-	Yes
RQ1c	Does SC differ by PE?	-	-	10.28	.00***	-	-	Yes
RQ2	Does SI*PE $\rightarrow$ SC?	.24	.11	2.23	.03**	.03	.45	Yes
	PE1	<sup>c</sup> .50	.10	5.24	.00***	.31	.69	-
	PE2	<sup>c</sup> .74	.05	15.43	.00***	.65	.84	-
RQ3	Does SA*PE $\rightarrow$ SC?	.49	.10	5.07	.00***	.30	.68	Yes
	PE1	<sup>c</sup> .35	.08	4.22	.00***	.19	.51	-
	PE2	<sup>c</sup> .84	.05	16.35	.00***	.74	.94	-

SI (school image); SA (school attractiveness); SC (school choice); PE (parent's private high school experience); PE1 (parent studied in private high school); PE2 (parent did not study in private high school)

<sup>a</sup> \*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$

<sup>b</sup> With a 95% Confidence Interval (CI), the range between lower (LLCI) and upper (ULCI) must not include zero, or both must have either a positive or a negative slope, to be significant.

<sup>c</sup> Effect

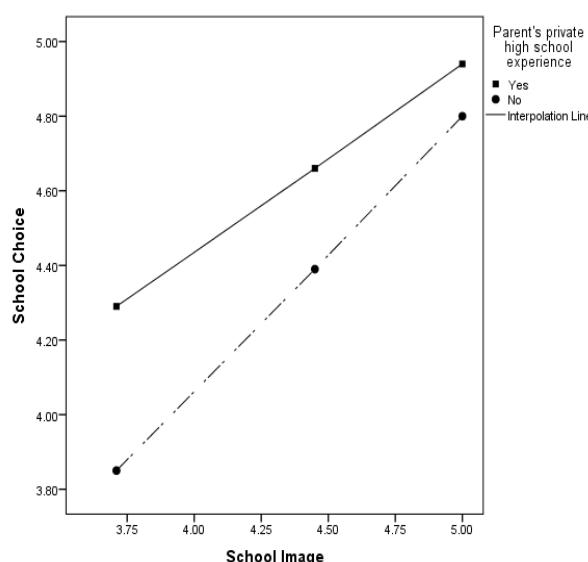


Figure 3. Moderation model of the school image – school choice relationship.

Similarly, the combination interpretation of Table 4 and Figure 4 may also address RQ3, asking whether or not parents' private high school experience can moderate the effect of school attractiveness on school choice. The

moderation analysis reveals a significant interaction effect ( $\beta = 0.49$ ;  $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.01$ ) between school attractiveness and a parent's private high school experience on school choice.

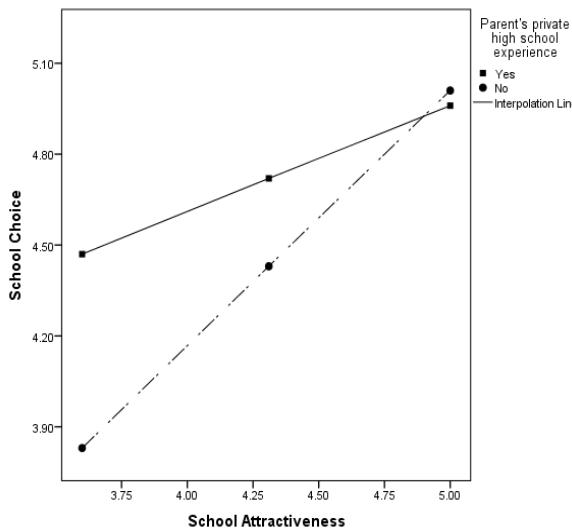


Figure 4. Moderation model of the school attractiveness – school choice relationship.

This indicates that the relationship between school attractiveness and school choice was not typical for all parents; instead, it was moderated by whether or not they had personal experience with a private high school.

In support, Figure 4 visually illustrates this moderating effect. The two lines represented the relationship between school attractiveness and school choice for the two groups of parents. The line for parents with private high school experience (the "Yes" group) was steeper than the line for parents without that experience (the "No" group). This steeper slope for the "Yes" group indicates that as their perception of a school's attractiveness increased, their school choice rating increased faster than the "No" group. Thus, the findings affirm that a parent's own private high school experience strengthened the positive relationship between a school's attractiveness and their subsequent school choice for their children.

## Discussion

The study's findings offer compelling empirical support for the widely held theoretical assertion that a positive school image is a strategic asset and a powerful predictor of institutional attractiveness. Consistent with previous

research by Wong et al. (2016), Mahbub et al. (2023), Kalkan et al. (2020), and Riyanto and Kharisma (2024), this study demonstrates that positive public perceptions and associations directly translate into significant appeal for parents, thereby acting as a powerful determinant in their decision-making process. These results underscore the importance of cultivating a favorable image, as it is not merely a conceptual construct but a tangible driver of a school's ability to attract its target audience.

The empirical findings from this study confirm that a positive school image is a powerful predictor of parental preference and a primary driver of school choice decisions. This supports and extends the work of researchers like Krisbiyanto and Nadhifah (2022), Pracipta (2021), and Mahbub et al. (2023), who have consistently shown that a favorable image is a tangible factor directly influencing a parent's decision to enroll their child. Furthermore, the consistency of these results with similar studies conducted in diverse urban contexts across Indonesia, including Yogyakarta (Pracipta, 2021), Bogor (Mahbub et al., 2023), and Bandung (Fakhri et al., 2017), suggests that this relationship is a pervasive pattern rather than a

localized anomaly. This reinforces the universal importance of institutional image within the Indonesian educational landscape.

Simultaneously, the research establishes that school attractiveness is also a key determinant of parental choice. Consistent with prior empirical findings from Riyanto and Kharisma (2024), Budiyatmo and Iriani (2022), and Sudirjo et al. (2023), this study demonstrates that an institution's success in cultivating a compelling appeal directly influences the enrolment decisions of prospective students and their parents, underscoring the strategic necessity of enhancing a school's overall attractiveness.

While a school's image significantly influenced parents' school choice, the findings also reveal a notable mediating role for attractiveness. This dual pathway demonstrates that school choice is not solely a consequence of a positive brand image but is also significantly influenced by the compelling appeal that a positive image creates. This result effectively reconciles the distinct claims in existing literature. For example, Budiyatmo and Iriani (2022) and Riyanto and Kharisma (2024) suggest that a positive image catalyzes attractiveness. The results are also in line with the findings of Fakhri et al. (2017) and Pracipta (2021), suggesting that strong school image can be a direct predictor of choice. Ultimately, this research suggests that parental selection is a process where a favorable image generates confidence and successfully cultivates a strong sense of appeal, collectively motivating the final decision of a private high school.

Globally, parental school choice debates primarily focus on the trade-offs among objective factors, such as parents' economic constraints, costs, and the distance to the location (e.g., Hao and Yeung, 2015; Farre et al., 2018; Mariel et al., 2018). However, in Asian contexts, such as in Turkey (Kurt and Kalman, 2022), Bangladesh (Chowdhury and Synthia, 2020), the Philippines (Termes et al., 2020), and China (Hao and Pilz, 2021), school attractiveness is the key driver for school choice. In addition, school image has also been shown to be an influential predictor of school choice in Nepal (Joshi, 2020), Malaysia (Yaacob et al., 2014), Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2016), and Iran (Asanjarani et al., 2021). Therefore, this study's findings

align with the global conversation, suggesting that an emotion-based pathway, such as school image and attractiveness, can be salient in parental school choice.

The study's most important finding is that a parent's past private high school experience is a powerful moderator, amplifying the effects of a school's image and attractiveness on their choice. This finding is consistent with the notion that parents tend to emulate or avoid certain types of schools based on their own educational history. For example, Rhodes et al. (2023) found that parents' prior educational experiences are essential in shaping their school preferences. This is further supported by Tuzzahrah et al. (2016), who found that a parent's perception of a school's image is influenced by their past school experience. Additionally, Sudirjo et al. (2023) suggest that an educational institution's attractiveness is partly based on a parent's direct and indirect experiences with similar institutions. This research indicates that a parent's past emotional experiences and associations play a crucial role, challenging purely rational choice models and highlighting the need to incorporate subjective variables into future research. This aligns with the work of Sharma et al. (2023) and Kandampully et al. (2022), who state that consumers' emotions are a salient part of the decision-making process and that experience creates lasting memories and emotional connections with customers in the service industry, which is what the educational industry fundamentally is.

To sum up, the explanatory power of the emotion-based school choice framework over purely rational ones lies in its ability to integrate and account for the impact of subjective factors (image, attractiveness, and experience) on the school decision-making process. While rational frameworks assume school choice is part of objective and measurable cognitive assessments, such as cost, location distance, and economic constraints (e.g., Badri and Mohaidat, 2014; Melo et al., 2021; Kurt and Kalman, 2022; Von Stumm et al., 2022; Peñate et al., 2024), the emotional approach acknowledges the subjective, non-rational concepts processed through the brain's limbic system, which governs emotions and memory (e.g., Isik and Vessel, 2021;

Proverbio and Cesati, 2024). Unlike objective facts, a person's experiences and perception of an image or an attractiveness is not based on a logical checklist. Instead, it is an immediate, intuitive, and often subconscious response.

## Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

This study's findings provide strong empirical evidence that school image and attractiveness are crucial drivers of parental school choice, either directly or indirectly. Additionally, the presence of parents' past emotional experiences in a private high school can amplify such relationships.

The current study offers two theoretical contributions. First, while the relationship of school image, attractiveness, and school choice in existing literature has often been discussed in isolation, the current study demonstrates that integrating them into a cohesive model, either directly or indirectly, can strengthen parental school choice. This integration expands the understanding of how school image enhances attractiveness and, in turn, facilitates the decision-making process for parents selecting private high schools.

Second, while the rational choice approach has dominated the majority of parental school choice studies, such as school quality, cost-benefit consideration, and facilities, this study's findings, on the other hand, expand the emotion-based choice theory by linking the role of parents' past educational experiences with school image and attractiveness. This study provides a more comprehensive model that accounts for the emotional landscape influencing parental decisions, advancing the field beyond traditional, objective factors into the parental school choice framework.

From the lens of practical contributions, school managers should prioritize cultivating a positive school image and enhancing overall attractiveness to influence parental choice effectively. By implementing initiatives that improve safety, academic reputation, and the overall emotional climate of the school, administrators can create a compelling appeal for prospective families.

Nevertheless, relying on emotion-based choices driven by school image and

attractiveness may risk reinforcing socioeconomic divides, as the appealing qualities that shape emotional triggers are often the result of financial investments attainable primarily by affluent private schools. This dynamic means that parents prioritizing emotional drivers over rational metrics may be inadvertently contributing to a self-reinforcing cycle of private schools' high-cost exclusivity (e.g., Zancajo and Bonal, 2022; Jheng et al., 2022).

To mitigate such a potential, school administrators facing budgetary constraints can focus on relational equity instead of pivoting investment to capital improvements. In this vein, schools can institutionalize alumni parents as ambassadors by leveraging their pre-existing positive emotional connections to generate cost-effective and credible word-of-mouth promotion. Additionally, engaging parents and alumni through community-building activities can leverage their past experiences to foster emotional connections, further enhancing the school's attractiveness. As a support, policymakers should incentivize and facilitate the creation of strong school-parent-alumni networks. Such a structural support may help smaller or less-resourced private schools compete more effectively on relational capital rather than solely in financially based competitions.

Despite its contributions, this study contains a few research limitations. Firstly, from a geographical perspective, the research is limited to private high schools in Indonesia, which may hinder the generalization of the findings to other cultural or geographical contexts. A broader regional or international context may yield different results, especially those with different educational systems and cultural perceptions of school image and attractiveness.

Second, the study's respondent characteristics reveal a notable gender gap among the participants. Of the total 270 valid responses, 68.5% were female, while 31.5% were male, indicating a significant disparity in the quantity of male and female respondents. The predominance of female parents could reflect the societal trend Wilson (2016) observed, suggesting that mothers are more emotionally engaged in the school choice than fathers, whose decisions are driven mainly by rational or objective

factors. Such a significant gender gap could lead to a skewed understanding of parental priorities in school choice if the male perspective is underrepresented. Future research should achieve a more balanced representation of male and female respondents to fully capture the dynamics of parental school choice.

Third, another methodological limitation is the sampling method employed, which utilized convenience sampling through online surveys. This method, while efficient, may inherently limit the representativeness of the broader Indonesian parent population. Moreover, this study did not categorize the urban-rural parents' locations, which may introduce biases due to the distinct cultures and varying levels of social information and competitive environments. Thus, future studies should employ probability sampling techniques across urban-rural settings to obtain more rigorous generalizability.

Fourth, the online survey methodology of this study may be susceptible to social desirability bias, where parents overreport socially approved motives and underreport less rational influences, such as the pursuit of exclusivity. To address this potential bias, future research should employ a mixed-methods approach, triangulating quantitative results with qualitative methods to gain a more comprehensive and validated view of parental choice.

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