



The Role of Vocational High School Brand Image in Building Parents' Trust and School Selection Decisions

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Abstract. The selection of vocational education institutions has now transformed into a future investment decision fraught with risk considerations. This study aims to analyze the crucial role of Vocational High School (SMK) brand image in influencing parents' decision-making. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive approach through library research, this study examines scientific literature sourced from reputable academic journals, textbooks, and vocational education policy reports. The gathered data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, specifically through coding and theme categorization, to identify dominant patterns regarding risk perception and institutional image. This article dissects the core dimension shaping Vocational school brand image, encompassing industrial synchronization (link and match), alumni track record, and the reliability of technical facilities as well as the dynamics of its reinforcement through communication strategies in the digital era. The results of the study confirm that brand image is not merely a surface attribute or a big name, but a risk reducer mechanism that significantly wins parents' trust, which in turn drives the final decision to choose a school. The implication of this study emphasizes the importance of strategic reputation management for school administrators to align internal performance quality with public perception.

Keywords: Brand Image, Parents Decision making, Vocational Education, Vocational High School.

1 Introduction

Vocational education and Vocational High Schools (SMK) play a key role in shaping human resources ready to enter the workforce. As the number of educational institutions grows quickly competition among schools to attract good students is getting tougher. This change is clear in what's happening on the ground. Parents, who make most of the decisions, for their children's education are now thinking carefully and choosing schools with more attention. They are not just picking any school—they are looking closely at what each one offers [1].

In the view of educational marketing management, the process of choosing a school is a high-involvement decision. This is because people worry about risks, especially the fear of educated unemployment. The worry is made worse by things:

the population keeps growing there are gaps in education the economy is not even there are not enough qualified teachers and industry does not help much with curriculum design. Here the role of a high school's brand image is put to the test. Brand image can no longer be seen as a logo, a big name or a seasonal slogan. Brand image is the values, the quality and the academic promises that people hold in their minds. Schools that do not share their identity of excellence on the internet where modern parents look first will lose relevance and competition. By using media such as websites and social media schools can share information fast reach more people and shape a good perception in the community.

Even though a school's reputation is known to be important most studies look at school choice with numbers. Treat brand image like a generic marketing variable. There is a gap in research about how the specific everyday parts of vocational schools—such as how well they match industry needs the success of their alumni and how reliable their facilities are—act as psychological safety nets for nervous parents in the digital age. Also, studies that use qualitative methods to explore these parts are rare. This study fills that gap by looking at how vocational brand image is built and understood by parents as a way to reduce risk giving a richer picture of educational marketing today. School branding strategies are vital for building trust between schools and the community and for supporting a school's reputation, sustainability and competitiveness amid change and higher public expectations.

The main novelty of this research is that it brings together four ideas—brand image, perceived risk parents' trust and digital communication strategies—into one model for vocational high schools. While earlier work looks at these ideas separately or in higher education this study creates a complete qualitative framework. It shows how local vocational features, like industry alignment and reliable technical facilities are shown through communication to directly ease the psychological worries of parents. This turns reputation into real trust. By doing this the study offers a conceptual model that reshapes educational marketing for vocational schools in today's digital world.

Based on this background the study asks two questions: first how do the parts of brand image affect the way parents build trust when choosing a vocational high school? Second how can digital communication strategies be designed to create a strong and credible brand image, for the school?

The objective of this study is to look at how the brand image of Vocational High Schools or SMK affects parents' trust and their choices when selecting a school for their children. The study wants to find out which aspects of the SMK brand image parents notice most during the decision-making process. It also aims to see how strong the brand image is in shaping parents' trust. Then it will explore how that trust influences parents' decision to choose an SMK. The study will also check if the brand image can directly affect the school selection decision without relying on trust. In addition, it will examine whether trust acts as a step. A mediator. In the link between brand image and school choice. Finally, the study will offer suggestions that vocational schools can use to improve their brand image build stronger trust, among parents and stand out more in the digital era.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Brand Image, in Educational Marketing

Brand image is known to be one of the valuable invisible assets that service organizations, including schools can own. Brand image means the set of thoughts, beliefs and connections that people have a brand after they experience it and hear about it from other sources. In marketing brand image shows how parents and future students view a school's academic quality, its overall reputation the learning services it offers its buildings and equipment and the success of its graduates.

Unlike businesses that sell goods schools compete by providing learning value and long-term career paths instead of tangible products. For high schools (SMK) building a strong and trustworthy brand image is therefore essential to stand out in an ever-tougher educational market. A positive brand image helps schools share their strengths and institutional trustworthiness with clarity, which in turn makes the public feel more assured.

2.2 Brand Image of Vocational High Schools

Brand image of high schools grows from many parts that show how good the school is and how ready its graduates are. These parts are: how well the curriculum matches industry needs how many industry partnerships exist how skilled the teachers are, how good the practical learning learning facilities are key to how the public sees the quality of a school. Similarly [1] discovered that marketing for schools wants to the school and how things run—help students decide to sign up for high schools.

2.3 Parents Trust in School Selection

Trust is very important when parents make decisions about school because they spend a lot of money, time and hope on their children's education. Because parents cannot check every part of a school before they choose they look at the school's reputation and school image to judge quality. Parents build trust when schools keep showing skill, honesty, openness and high learning standards.

Empirical evidence supports the relationship between brand image and parents trust.[7] Showed that brand image has an effect on parents' decisions when picking a school and good word of mouth makes this effect stronger. Also [8] said that brand image and how well a school serves its students both shape parents choices meaning that schools with reputations are more likely to earn parents confidence.

2.4 School Selection Decision

Choosing a school is a decision because it carries big learning, money and job risks. Parents usually look at things before picking a school, such as how good the learning is, how much tuition costs, how well graduates find jobs the school's reputation, the facilities and advice from people they trust. Because of this picking a school is a process that needs a lot of searching and careful thought.

In today's environment parents use school websites, social media, online reviews, stories from former students and other digital channels more and more when they look at schools. A study by [9] says that digital communication makes a school look more credible and boosts its brand image, which then gives parents trust in the school.

3 Research Gap

Even though earlier research shows links, between brand image and school selection decisions some gaps still exist. First most studies look at school image as a marketing idea and do not dig into the special parts of vocational education like industry collaboration, how well graduates get jobs, certification of skills and how reliable technical training facilities are.

Second earlier studies mostly look at how brand image affects school selection decisions and they have not studied much how parents trust acts as a middle step. Since parents see education as a long-term investment that carries doubt about future jobs trust can be a key mental tool that lowers the risk parents feel when choosing a school. Because of this this study wants to add to the field by looking at how brand image of high schools builds parents trust and then shapes school selection decisions in vocational education

3.1 Brand Image of Vocational High Schools

The brand image of vocational high schools is developed through multiple dimensions that reflect educational quality and graduate readiness. These dimensions include curriculum relevance to industry needs, partnerships with industry, teacher competence, practical learning facilities, graduate employability, and students' academic and non-academic achievements. Research conducted by [6] demonstrated that vocational education contributes significantly to labor market readiness by equipping students with occupational competencies required by employers. Therefore, indicators such as industry collaboration, graduate employment outcomes, and technical learning facilities become important components influencing public perceptions of vocational school quality.

Similarly, [10] found that educational marketing aims to establish a favorable school image capable of attracting prospective students. Their study revealed that educational marketing mix elements—including product, price, location, promotion, physical evidence, and process—positively influence students' decisions to enroll in vocational high schools.

3.2 Parents' Trust in School Selection

Trust plays a fundamental role in educational decision-making because parents invest substantial financial resources, time, and expectations in their children's education. Since educational services cannot be fully evaluated before consumption, parents often rely on institutional reputation and school image as indicators of quality. Trust is therefore developed when schools consistently demonstrate competence, integrity, transparency, and educational excellence.

Empirical evidence supports the relationship between brand image and parents' trust. [7] found that brand image significantly influences parents' decisions in choosing schools, while positive word of mouth strengthens this relationship. Likewise, [8] reported that brand image and service quality significantly affect parents' educational choices, indicating that schools with stronger reputations are more likely to gain parents' confidence.

3.3 School Selection Decision

School selection represents a high-involvement decision because it involves considerable educational, financial, and career-related risks. Parents generally evaluate multiple factors before selecting a school, including educational quality, tuition costs, graduate employability, school reputation, facilities, and recommendations from trusted sources. As a result, school selection is a complex decision-making process that requires extensive information search and careful evaluation.

In today's digital environment, parents increasingly rely on official school websites, social media platforms, online reviews, alumni testimonials, and digital communication channels when assessing educational institutions. According to [9], digital communication positively influences institutional credibility and strengthens brand image, which subsequently enhances stakeholders' trust in educational institutions.

Research Gap. Although previous studies have established significant relationships between brand image and school selection decisions, several research gaps remain. First, existing studies generally examine school image as a broad marketing construct without specifically investigating the unique characteristics of vocational education, such as industry collaboration, graduate employability, competency certification, and the reliability of technical training facilities. Second, previous research has primarily focused on the direct relationship between brand image and school selection decisions, while the mediating role of parents' trust has received limited scholarly attention. Considering that parents perceive vocational education as a long-term investment involving uncertainty regarding future employment opportunities, trust may function as an important psychological mechanism that reduces perceived risk during school selection. Therefore, this study seeks to extend the educational marketing literature by examining how the brand image of vocational high schools contributes to building parents' trust and ultimately influences school selection decisions within the context of vocational education.

4 Research Overview

- a. The Problem: Existing studies evaluate school image as a broad marketing concept, overlooking the distinct operational features of vocational education.
- b. The Research Gap: Prior literature focuses primarily on direct effects, neglecting parents' trust as a mediating variable that mitigates perceived employment risks.
- c. The Solution: This study evaluates how specific vocational school attributes build parental trust and reduce their perceived long-term investment risks.

- d. The Objective: To examine the impact of vocational school brand image on school selection decisions, mediated through parents' trust

5 Methodology

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to synthesize existing evidence regarding the role of Vocational High School (SMK) brand image in building parents' trust and influencing school selection decisions. A systematic literature review was chosen because it provides a transparent, rigorous, and reproducible approach to identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing previous research on a particular topic [10].

The literature search was conducted using internationally recognized academic databases, including Web of Science, Science Direct, Springer Link, Taylor & Francis Online, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar. The search strategy employed combinations of the following keywords: vocational high school, school brand image, school reputation, parents' trust, school choice, school selection decision, educational marketing, and *vocational education*. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to improve the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the search process [11].

The inclusion criteria consisted of: (a) peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2026; (b) articles written in English or Indonesian; (c) studies focusing on educational marketing, school brand image, parents' trust, school reputation, vocational education, or school selection decisions; (d) empirical quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods studies; and (e) articles with full-text accessibility.

The exclusion criteria included: (a) conference proceedings, books, editorials, dissertations, theses, and unpublished manuscripts; (b) duplicate publications; (c) studies unrelated to educational institutions or vocational education; (d) articles lacking sufficient methodological information; and (e) publications unavailable in full text.

The article selection process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines [10]. Initially, all identified records were collected from the selected databases. Duplicate records were removed, followed by title and abstract screening to determine relevance. Subsequently, full-text articles were assessed based on the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Only studies meeting all eligibility requirements were included in the final review.

The selected articles were analyzed using thematic analysis [12]. The analysis involved several stages, including familiarization with the literature, open coding of key findings, categorization of similar concepts, development of overarching themes, comparison across studies, and interpretation of the synthesized evidence. This approach enabled the identification of recurring themes concerning the dimensions of vocational school brand image, parents' trust formation, digital communication strategies, and school selection decisions.

Finally, the synthesis process adopted a narrative synthesis approach [13], in which evidence from the selected studies was integrated to develop a comprehensive conceptual understanding of how vocational high school brand image contributes to

parents' trust and influences school selection decisions. The synthesized findings also served as the basis for identifying research gaps and proposing future research directions in educational marketing and vocational education. The literature selection process in this study was conducted systematically in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, comprising four sequential phases: identification, screening, eligibility evaluation, and final inclusion.

In the identification phase, the initial database search yielded a total of 185 records across six academic databases, broken down as follows: Web of Science and Science Direct ($n = 42$), Springer Link and Taylor & Francis ($n = 38$), Emerald Insight ($n = 25$), and Google Scholar ($n = 80$). Prior to screening, 45 duplicate records were removed, leaving 140 unique records for further evaluation.

In the screening phase, the 140 unique records were rigorously evaluated based on their titles and abstracts. This initial screening resulted in the exclusion of 92 records that failed to meet the preliminary relevance criteria, comprising 58 articles with irrelevant topics and 34 articles outside the context of vocational education (SMK). Consequently, 48 full-text articles successfully advanced to the full-text evaluation stage.

In the eligibility phase, the 48 full-text articles were thoroughly assessed against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. During this stage, 27 full-text articles were excluded for the following specific reasons: 12 publications were conference proceedings, books, or theses/dissertations; 9 articles lacked sufficient methodological information; and 6 articles lacked full-text accessibility. In the final inclusion phase, a total of 21 primary studies met all eligibility criteria and quality standards. These 21 final studies were ultimately included in the qualitative data extraction, thematic analysis, and narrative synthesis.

6 Discussion and Analysis

6.1 Discussion

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that Vocational High School (SMK) brand image is a strategic factor influencing parents' perceptions and school selection decisions. A positive brand image is developed through multiple dimensions, including school reputation, educational quality, industry collaboration, graduate employability, learning facilities, teacher competence, and effective digital communication. According to, brand image consists of consumers' perceptions and associations toward a brand, which subsequently influence their decision-making behavior. In vocational education, these perceptions help parents evaluate whether a school is capable of providing quality education and preparing students for future employment.

Several empirical studies support this relationship [7] found that a positive school brand image significantly influences parents' decisions when selecting schools, particularly when supported by positive word-of-mouth communication. Likewise, [8] reported that brand image and educational service quality positively affect parents' educational choices. These findings indicate that parents perceive school reputation as an indicator of educational quality and institutional credibility.

Another important issue emerging from the reviewed studies is the increasing importance of parents' trust. Educational services involve high uncertainty because educational outcomes cannot be directly evaluated before enrollment. Therefore, parents rely on school reputation, institutional transparency, and previous graduate achievements to reduce perceived risk. This finding is consistent with the Commitment–Trust Theory proposed by [14], which explains that trust develops when stakeholders perceive an institution as competent, reliable, and committed to delivering its promises.

Furthermore, digital transformation has significantly changed educational marketing practices. Parents increasingly obtain information through official school websites, social media platforms, alumni testimonials, and digital promotional materials. [9] argued that digital communication strengthens institutional credibility and improves brand equity, thereby enhancing parents' trust in educational institutions. Consequently, vocational schools must integrate digital branding strategies with educational quality to remain competitive in attracting prospective students.

Recent studies indicate that school image is one of the primary determinants of parents' school selection decisions. [15] found that school image, attractiveness, and previous educational experiences significantly influence parents' preferences when selecting private schools. Similarly, [16] demonstrated that school image, service quality, and parents' trust collectively have a significant impact on school choice decisions.

Research by [7] further revealed that a positive brand image significantly influences parents' decisions when choosing schools, with positive word-of-mouth communication strengthening this relationship. Likewise, [17] reported that brand image, brand trust, and word of mouth are significant predictors of parents' school selection decisions.

In the context of educational digitalization[18] emphasized that digital marketing has become an essential strategic tool for educational institutions. Their findings indicate that digital communication, together with brand image and reference groups, positively influences parents' decisions to enroll their children in schools. This finding supports the argument that official websites, social media platforms, and other digital communication channels play a critical role in strengthening institutional visibility and credibility.

Within vocational education, demonstrated that the service marketing mix significantly influences students' decisions to enroll in vocational schools. Their findings suggest that educational services, facilities, promotion, and institutional reputation collectively contribute to a stronger vocational school image. Furthermore, [19] argued that effective school marketing strategies are increasingly important for enhancing institutional competitiveness and responding to changing educational environments.

From the perspective of vocational institutions, Mulyawan and Rafdinal (2020)[20] found that effective marketing strategies contribute significantly to improving the image and competitiveness of vocational education institutions. Their findings reinforce the argument that a positive institutional image serves as a strategic asset for attracting prospective students and strengthening public trust.

Overall, these studies consistently support the proposed conceptual framework

of this review, suggesting that educational quality, school reputation, industry collaboration, graduate employability, learning facilities, and digital communication collectively shape the Vocational High School brand image. A strong and credible brand image enhances parents' trust, reduces perceived educational risk, and ultimately influences school selection decisions.

6.2 Analysis

Table 1. Analysis of Previous Studies

Research Theme	Finding	Implication
Brand Image	Brand image positively affects parents' perceptions and school attractiveness.	A strong institutional image improves school competitiveness.
Educational Quality	Curriculum relevance, teacher competence, and graduate quality strengthen school	Educational quality is the foundation of vocational school branding.
Industry Collaboration	Partnerships with industries improve graduate employability and institutional credibility.	Industry collaboration differentiates vocational schools from general education.
Parents' Trust	Trust is built through credibility, transparency, and consistent educational performance.	Trust reduces parents' perceived risk in school selection.
Digital Communication	Websites and social media improve institutional visibility and credibility.	Digital communication strengthens school branding.
School Selection Decision	Parents consider multiple educational and career-related factors before enrollment.	School selection is a high-involvement decision.

Research Gap Analysis. The analysis of the reviewed literature reveals three major research gaps. First, previous studies generally examine school brand image as a broad educational marketing concept without specifically investigating the distinctive characteristics of vocational education, such as industry partnerships, competency certification, graduate employability, and technical learning facilities.

Second, most studies analyze only the direct influence of brand image on school selection decisions. The mediating role of parents' trust has received relatively limited scholarly attention despite its importance in reducing uncertainty during educational decision-making.

Third, although digital marketing has become increasingly important, previous studies rarely integrate digital communication strategies with vocational school brand image development. Existing studies tend to discuss digital marketing separately from

institutional branding.

Based on these findings, this study proposes that vocational school brand image should be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct consisting of educational quality, school reputation, industry collaboration, graduate employability, learning facilities, teacher competence, and digital communication effectiveness. These dimensions collectively strengthen parents' trust, reduce perceived educational risk, and ultimately influence school selection decisions.

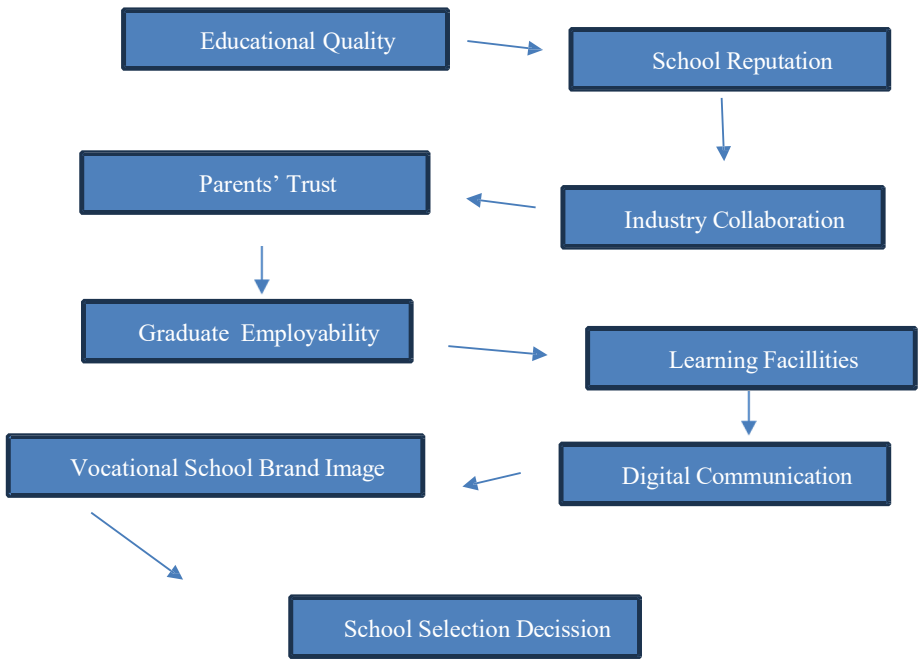


Fig. 1 Conceptual Synthesis

Educational quality is considered the foundation of a vocational school's competitiveness because it reflects the effectiveness of teaching, curriculum implementation, and learning outcomes [6]. A high level of educational quality contributes to a positive school reputation, which subsequently strengthens the school's brand image. Furthermore, industry collaboration, graduate employability, and adequate learning facilities are distinctive characteristics of vocational education that enhance institutional credibility and improve public perception [6]. In the digital era, effective communication through websites and social media further reinforces institutional visibility and trust [9]. As a result, a strong vocational school brand image increases parents' trust, which ultimately influences their school selection

decisions [14][7].

7 Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

This systematic literature review demonstrates that the brand image of Vocational High Schools (SMK) plays a fundamental role in shaping parents' trust and influencing school selection decisions [7], [8]. The reviewed studies consistently indicate that a positive brand image extends beyond promotional activities or visual identity and is developed through educational quality, school reputation, industry collaboration, graduate employability, learning facilities, and effective digital communication [6], [9].

The findings further suggest that parents' trust functions as an essential psychological mechanism that reduces uncertainty and perceived risk during the school selection process. Parents are more likely to choose vocational schools that consistently demonstrate educational excellence, maintain strong partnerships with industry, produce employable graduates, provide adequate learning facilities, and communicate transparently through digital platforms [7], [14]. Consequently, trust serves as a bridge between vocational school brand image and parents' final enrollment decisions.

This review also identifies several research gaps. Previous studies have generally conceptualized brand image as a broad educational marketing construct without emphasizing the distinctive characteristics of vocational education, such as industry synchronization (*link and match*), competency-based learning, graduate employability, and technical learning facilities [6]. Furthermore, relatively few studies have comprehensively examined the mediating role of parents' trust or integrated digital communication strategies into vocational school branding models [7], [9]. Therefore, this review proposes a multidimensional conceptual framework in which educational quality, school reputation, industry collaboration, graduate employability, learning facilities, and digital communication collectively strengthen vocational school brand image, enhance parents' trust, and ultimately influence school selection decisions.

The findings contribute to the educational marketing literature by integrating branding theory, trust theory, and educational decision-making into a comprehensive framework that reflects the unique characteristics of vocational education [14]. This conceptual framework provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical studies and offers practical guidance for vocational school administrators in developing sustainable branding strategies.

7.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this systematic literature review, several recommendations are proposed. For vocational high school administrators, branding strategies should focus not only on promotional activities but also on continuously improving educational quality, strengthening partnerships with industry, enhancing graduate employability, upgrading learning facilities, and implementing transparent digital communication. These integrated efforts will contribute to building a strong institutional reputation and increasing parents' trust.

For policymakers, greater support should be provided to vocational schools in strengthening industry collaboration, accelerating digital transformation, and developing standardized quality assurance systems that improve institutional credibility and public confidence in vocational education [21].

For researchers, future studies should empirically examine the proposed conceptual framework using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approaches. Particular attention should be given to the mediating role of parents' trust and the influence of digital branding strategies on school selection decisions across different educational contexts. Comparative studies involving public and private vocational schools or cross-country analyses are also recommended to enrich the educational marketing literature [10], [11].

Overall, strengthening the brand image of vocational high schools should be viewed as a long-term strategic investment rather than a short-term promotional activity. Sustainable educational quality, supported by effective communication and strong stakeholder relationships, is essential for enhancing parents' trust and ensuring the long-term competitiveness of vocational education [6], [9], [14].

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