

Integrating Religious Values and Service Quality in Parental Decision-Making: A Structural Model of Choosing Integrated Islamic Junior High Schools in Pekanbaru, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Education serves as a strategic investment in human capital that shapes both intellectual and moral development. In Indonesia, parents increasingly perceive education as a dual investment academic and spiritual particularly reflected in the growing popularity of Integrated Islamic Junior High Schools (Sekolah Menengah Pertama Islam Terpadu or SMPIT). This study aims to examine the structural relationship among school image, perceived price, service quality, and religiosity in influencing parents' decisions to choose SMPIT in Pekanbaru, Indonesia, with interest as a mediating variable. A quantitative survey was conducted involving 255 parents whose children were enrolled in SMPIT. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that school image, service quality, and religiosity significantly influence parental interest and decision-making, whereas perceived price shows a weaker direct effect. Moreover, interest mediates the relationship between religiosity and the final decision, suggesting that value-based motivation transforms into behavioral intention through emotional engagement. This study contributes theoretically by integrating economic rationality and religious values into a unified behavioral model, and practically by providing managerial insights for Islamic schools to strengthen branding, communication, and service quality. The results highlight the need for educational institutions to align quality improvement with the spiritual expectations of modern Muslim families.

Keywords: Parental Decision-Making, Religiosity, Service Quality, School Image, Perceived Price, Islamic Education, Pekanbaru, Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Education has long been recognized as a strategic form of human capital investment that generates long-term socio-economic returns for individuals and society (Becker, 1993; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020). It enhances cognitive skills, increases productivity, and contributes to sustainable economic development. In recent years, education has also been seen as a means to cultivate moral, cultural, and spiritual capital, aligning with the vision of holistic human development in the 21st century (OECD, 2023). In Indonesia, education plays a dual role not only in preparing a competitive workforce but also in preserving religious and cultural identity amid globalization (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the fragility of educational systems worldwide, leading to significant learning loss and widening inequality (UNESCO, 2022). For Indonesia, this disruption revealed the urgent need

for educational resilience and parental involvement in school decision-making (World Bank, 2023). Parents became more active evaluators of school quality, digital readiness, and value alignment when selecting educational institutions for their children. The pandemic experience has permanently reshaped parental expectations, emphasizing the importance of blended learning, emotional safety, and moral education (Setiawan & Wahyuni, 2023).

In this context, education is perceived by Indonesian families not merely as a short-term expense but as a long-term investment combining economic, social, and spiritual returns (Ali & Ahmad, 2022). Parents carefully assess both tangible factors such as cost, infrastructure, and quality of instruction, and intangible factors like school image, moral environment, and alignment with religious values (Rahman, 2023). This holistic evaluation mirrors the behavioral model of rational decision-making infused with value-based reasoning, where both cognitive and affective considerations determine school choice (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2015).

The increasing demand for faith-based education, particularly Integrated Islamic Schools (*Sekolah Islam Terpadu*), reflects this evolving parental rationality. National data from the Ministry of Education and Culture (2023) show a steady rise in the number of private and Islamic-based schools across Indonesia, particularly at the junior high level. In Pekanbaru City, for instance, the number of *Sekolah Menengah Pertama Islam Terpadu* (SMPIT) increased from 18 in 2021 to 23 in 2023 (BPS Pekanbaru, 2023). Parents' preference for Islamic integrated schools stems from a desire to provide balanced academic achievement, moral guidance, and religious discipline (Aufa & Setiawan, 2024).

Prior studies indicate that parents' school choice is influenced by a combination of factors, including school image, perceived price, and service quality (Nasution & Santoso, 2021; Suryani, 2022). However, these studies often neglect the psychological and spiritual dimensions that underpin parental decision-making. Religiosity, which reflects the internalization of faith-based values and spiritual motivation, has emerged as a powerful determinant in educational preference, especially among Muslim families in urban Indonesia (Huda, 2021; Syafri, 2024). Yet, religiosity has seldom been modeled as a central construct in empirical frameworks.

Recent research has begun to explore the mediating mechanisms that translate religiosity and perceptions into behavioral intentions. Studies in educational consumer behavior suggest that interest or intention acts as a bridge between perception and actual decision (Hair et al., 2021; Ali, Kim, & Ryu, 2023). Nevertheless, the mediating role of parental interest representing psychological engagement and willingness to act remains underexplored in the context of Islamic education. This creates a theoretical gap in understanding how religious motivation transforms into tangible school choice behavior.

At the same time, school marketing strategies have become increasingly competitive. Islamic schools now employ digital branding, academic reputation, and community engagement to enhance their public image (Alfina, 2024). The perception of school image (*citra sekolah*) functions as a trust signal that shapes parents' confidence in educational outcomes (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Meanwhile, service quality measured through reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility plays a crucial role in shaping parental satisfaction and loyalty (Parasuraman et al., 2013; Suryani, 2022).

Pekanbaru represents a compelling case to examine this phenomenon, as it exhibits rapid growth in the number of Islamic integrated schools, alongside strong parental participation in educational decision-making. The city's urban Muslim middle class increasingly views religious-based education as both a moral and economic investment, seeking to balance modern competitiveness with Islamic identity (Wahyuni, 2023). This local dynamic provides an ideal empirical setting for testing a structural model of parental decision-making in education.

Therefore, this study aims to develop and empirically test a structural model that integrates economic, psychological, and spiritual determinants of school choice among parents in Pekanbaru. Specifically, it examines the effects of school image, perceived price, service quality, and religiosity on parental decisions, with *interest* serving as a mediating variable. This integrative approach advances the literature by merging rational and value-based perspectives in educational consumer behavior, providing novel insights for both theory and educational policy. The findings are expected to contribute to better school management strategies and inform policymakers in promoting equitable and value-oriented education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

School Image

School image refers to the collective perception of a school's reputation, credibility, and educational quality (Kotler & Keller, 2016). A positive image functions as a trust signal that influences parental decisions in selecting schools (Nasution & Santoso, 2021). In the context of Islamic education, image includes both academic excellence and adherence to religious principles (Wahyuni, 2023). Studies show that parents are likely to enroll their children in schools perceived as reputable, safe, and morally grounded.

Recent research emphasizes that school image acts as an intangible asset influencing loyalty and satisfaction (Ali & Ahmad, 2022). Schools with strong branding and consistent communication strategies enjoy higher credibility and enrollment stability. For Islamic integrated schools, reputation is also built through religious activities, alumni success, and consistent moral discipline (Aufa & Setiawan, 2024).

Hence, image management should not be seen as superficial marketing but as the embodiment of institutional credibility and moral responsibility. Schools that project a coherent image of academic rigor and faith-based identity tend to generate stronger parental trust (Suryani, 2022).

Perceived Price

Perceived price represents the parents' evaluation of the fairness between educational costs and the expected quality (Zeithaml, 2008). In consumer behavior theory, price perception often influences purchase intention and satisfaction (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2015). Parents perceive school fees not merely as expenses but as investments in their children's future (Becker, 1993; Rahman, 2022).

Several studies have found that higher tuition fees do not necessarily discourage parents if they believe the educational benefits justify the cost (Haryanto, 2021). For Islamic integrated schools, the added value of moral education, Qur'anic learning, and character development enhances perceived worth (Fitriani, 2023).

However, pricing remains sensitive in middle-income families. Thus, perceived price fairness and transparency are essential to maintain trust. Schools must communicate the tangible and intangible benefits associated with tuition costs to align parental expectations with institutional capacity (Kotler & Keller, 2020).

Service Quality

Service quality in education encompasses tangible and intangible dimensions, including facilities, teacher competence, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 2013). In educational services, quality is often linked to student outcomes, parental satisfaction, and school reputation (Suryani, 2022).

Islamic integrated schools are expected to offer not only academic excellence but also holistic care for emotional and spiritual growth. Parents assess service quality through classroom interaction, safety, communication, and responsiveness to students' needs (Alfina, 2024).

High-quality service fosters parental satisfaction and loyalty. According to the SERVQUAL framework, continuous improvement in reliability, empathy, and assurance dimensions can significantly strengthen trust and long-term engagement between parents and schools (Tjiptono, 2016).

Religiosity

Religiosity is defined as the internalization of faith-based values influencing behavior and life choices (Glock & Stark, 1965; Huber & Huber, 2012). It comprises belief, practice, knowledge, experience, and moral consequence. In Islamic societies, religiosity shapes parental aspirations for faith-based schooling (Huda, 2021).

Empirical studies reveal that religiosity strongly predicts parental preference for Islamic schools (Rahman, 2023; Syafri, 2024). Parents perceive Islamic education as essential to preserve moral integrity and spiritual resilience amid modernization.

Religiosity thus operates as both a moral compass and a motivational force. It transforms value orientation into behavioral intention parents who deeply internalize religious values are more committed to choosing Islamic integrated schools despite higher costs or longer commutes.

Interest

Interest (*minat*) refers to the psychological state reflecting curiosity, attention, and willingness to act (Schiefele, 1991). In consumer decision theory, it precedes behavioral intention and actual choice (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Interest mediates the influence of perception-based factors such as school image, price, and quality toward decision-making.

Parents with high interest actively seek information, visit schools, and engage with administrators. Studies have shown that intention or interest serves as the strongest predictor of behavioral outcomes (Hair et al., 2021).

In the educational context, parental interest often grows through positive experiences, testimonials, and emotional resonance with school values. Thus, interest connects rational evaluation and emotional conviction (Ali, Kim, & Ryu, 2023).

Decision-Making

Decision-making involves a cognitive process of evaluating alternatives based on beliefs, values, and expected outcomes (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 2012). In educational settings, parents consider school reputation, affordability, service quality, and alignment with personal or religious values (Kotler & Armstrong, 2020).

The decision process typically moves through stages need recognition, information search, evaluation, intention, and final selection (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2015). Parents' choices are not purely rational but shaped by emotional and moral dimensions.

In Islamic schooling, decisions reflect integrated rationality balancing cost-benefit analysis with spiritual expectations. Hence, decision-making represents the culmination of cognitive and affective judgment informed by religiosity, trust, and perceived value.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey. A structured questionnaire was distributed to parents of students enrolled in Integrated Islamic Junior High Schools (SMPIT) in Pekanbaru. The research aimed to test a structural model linking school image, perceived price, service quality, and religiosity to parental decision-making, mediated by *interest*.

A causal-explanatory design was used to explore direct and indirect relationships among variables (Hair et al., 2021). Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which is suitable for predictive and exploratory modeling in behavioral studies (Sarstedt et al., 2022).

Population and Sample

The population consisted of parents of students in 23 SMPIT across Pekanbaru City. Using purposive sampling, 255 respondents were selected as they represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. This sample size met the minimum requirement for PLS-SEM analysis (50–300 respondents) and ensured statistical reliability (Hair et al., 2021).

Respondents filled out online and printed questionnaires containing 35 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Data collection was conducted between February and April 2025.

Variables and Measurement

All constructs were measured using validated indicators adapted from previous studies.

- **School Image:** 4 indicators - personality, reputation, value, corporate identity (Wijaya, 2016).
- **Perceived Price:** 3 indicators - affordability, quality-value match, benefit fairness (Kotler & Keller, 2020).
- **Service Quality:** 5 dimensions - tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy (Parasuraman et al., 2013).
- **Religiosity:** 5 dimensions - belief, practice, experience, knowledge, consequence (Glock & Stark, 1965).
- **Interest:** 4 indicators - curiosity, consideration, desire, and engagement (Assael, 2008).
- **Decision:** 3 indicators - school selection, satisfaction, and commitment (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2015).

Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed using SmartPLS 4.0. The analysis included two stages:

- **Outer Model** – testing reliability and validity (Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, AVE).
- **Inner Model** – evaluating path coefficients, R^2 , and mediation effects.

Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples assessed the significance of path relationships. The mediation of *interest* was tested using the indirect effect approach (Hair et al., 2021).

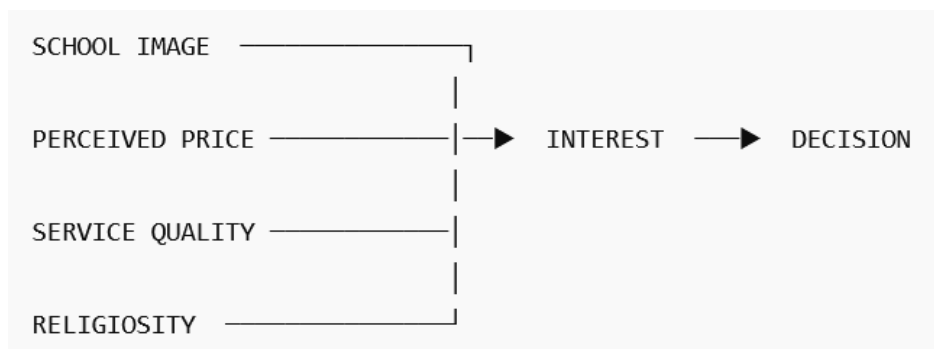


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The majority of respondents were female parents (68%), aged between 35–50 years. About 60% belonged to middle-income groups. Over 70% stated that religiosity was their main reason for choosing SMPIT, while 20% prioritized quality and image.

Table 1. Profile of Respondents

Characteristics	Percentage
Female Parents	68%
Male Parents	32%
Age 35–50 years	70%
Middle Income	60%

Outer Model

All indicators met the reliability and validity criteria: factor loadings > 0.70, composite reliability > 0.85, and AVE > 0.50. Discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion) confirmed construct independence.

Table 2. Reliability and Validity Statistics

Construct	Composite Reliability	AVE
School Image	0.87	0.62
Perceived Price	0.85	0.58
Service Quality	0.90	0.64
Religiosity	0.92	0.66
Interest	0.89	0.61
Decision	0.88	0.60

Inner Model

The model showed strong explanatory power with R^2 values of 0.61 for *interest* and 0.74 for *decision*. School image ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$), service quality ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$), and religiosity ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) significantly influenced parental interest. Perceived price had a minor but positive effect ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 3. Path Coefficients and p-values

Path	Beta	p-value
Image → Interest	0.29	<0.01
Service Quality → Interest	0.32	<0.01
Religiosity → Interest	0.41	<0.001
Price → Interest	0.12	<0.05
Interest → Decision	0.52	<0.001

Mediation Analysis

The mediation test revealed that *interest* significantly mediated the relationship between religiosity and decision (indirect $\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$). Similar partial mediation occurred for school image and service quality.

Table 4. Mediation Analysis Results

Indirect Effect	Beta	p-value
Religiosity → Interest → Decision	0.21	<0.001
School Image → Interest → Decision	0.15	<0.01
Service Quality → Interest → Decision	0.18	<0.01

Summary of Findings

Overall, religiosity emerged as the strongest predictor of both *interest* and decision-making, followed by service quality and school image. Perceived price had an indirect effect through *interest*.

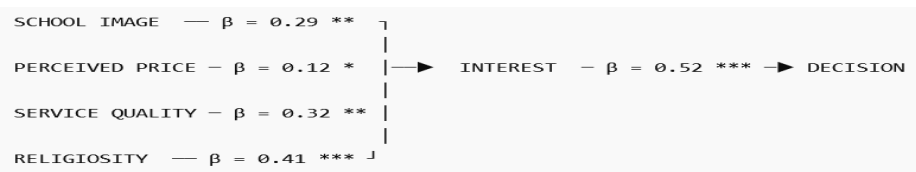


Figure 2. Structural Model Results

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that parents' school choices in Islamic contexts are guided by both economic rationality and spiritual motivation. Consistent with the theory of consumer behavior (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2015), decision-making involves cognitive evaluation and emotional conviction.

The dominant role of religiosity aligns with Huda (2021) and Rahman (2023), who found that parents prioritize faith-based identity formation. However, this study extends previous models by empirically demonstrating that *interest* mediates this effect; religious belief must be accompanied by emotional engagement to result in actual choice.

Service quality also significantly influences parental decisions, emphasizing the managerial importance of professional teaching, responsive communication, and safe environments. This supports the SERVQUAL perspective (Parasuraman et al., 2013).

The significant role of school image reflects how reputation and credibility shape trust (Nasution & Santoso, 2021). For Islamic schools, branding should integrate moral authenticity with academic performance.

Interestingly, perceived price showed a weaker direct effect, suggesting that parents evaluate education as a moral investment rather than a purely economic transaction (Ali & Ahmad, 2022).

The model's explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.74$) demonstrates its robustness, confirming that a combination of cognitive, affective, and value-based factors provides a comprehensive explanation for school choice behavior in Muslim urban contexts.

CONCLUSION

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes significantly to the theoretical development of consumer decision-making in education by integrating religiosity as a central determinant in the parental choice model. Unlike conventional models that emphasize cognitive and economic evaluations, this research demonstrates that spiritual values play a critical role in shaping parents' preferences. Religiosity, when combined with school image and service quality, creates a more comprehensive explanatory framework that reflects the dual rational-spiritual orientation of Muslim parents in educational decisions.

Moreover, the study provides empirical evidence that *interest* acts as a mediating construct between intrinsic beliefs and actual behavior. This supports the notion that decision-making is not merely a rational process but also a function of psychological engagement and emotional attachment. The inclusion of *interest* strengthens the theoretical connection between cognitive appraisal and behavioral outcome, extending the traditional Theory of Planned Behavior to include spiritual and affective dimensions.

The model also enriches existing educational marketing theories by contextualizing them within an Islamic socio-cultural setting. It introduces religiosity as a moderating and guiding force in consumer choice, which is rarely operationalized in Western-based marketing frameworks. Consequently, the model developed here provides a culturally embedded perspective that may be adapted to other faith-based education systems globally.

Practical Implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings highlight the importance of combining service excellence with value-driven education. School administrators must understand that parental decisions are shaped not only by academic performance or infrastructure but also by how effectively the school embodies religious and moral principles. Thus, institutions should integrate Qur'anic learning, ethical leadership, and responsive communication as part of their service delivery to enhance parental trust and satisfaction.

Marketing communication should focus on authenticity and transparency. Schools that articulate their vision and spiritual values consistently through digital platforms, open houses, and alumni testimonials are likely to strengthen parental loyalty. The development of a credible brand image rooted in Islamic values will sustain competitiveness in a saturated educational market.

In addition, professional training for teachers and administrative staff must emphasize service quality dimensions such as empathy, responsiveness, and assurance. When parents perceive that the school genuinely cares for their children's holistic well-being, satisfaction increases and word-of-mouth referrals follow. Therefore, continuous service quality improvement becomes a long-term investment in the school's reputation and enrollment stability.

Policy Implications

From a policy standpoint, this study offers insights for both government and educational regulators. Local and national education authorities should recognize the strategic role of faith-based schools in advancing moral education and character development. Integrated Islamic schools (SMPIT) have proven to contribute to balanced academic and spiritual outcomes, which align with Indonesia's national education goals. Policies should thus encourage partnerships between government and private Islamic schools through resource sharing and joint teacher development programs.

Furthermore, government agencies should ensure that Islamic schools have equitable access to funding, facilities, and accreditation. Current disparities in educational infrastructure between public and private schools can undermine quality assurance and public trust. Incentive-based funding schemes, such as grants for curriculum innovation or teacher certification, would improve institutional quality and inclusivity.

Lastly, policymakers must integrate religiosity-sensitive frameworks into educational planning. Recognizing the sociocultural preferences of Muslim parents will enhance public acceptance of educational reforms. When policy frameworks respect religious identity, they reinforce national unity while maintaining diversity and inclusivity in education.

Future Research Implications

While this study provides valuable contributions, several limitations open avenues for future inquiry. The cross-sectional nature of the data restricts causal interpretation; therefore, future research could adopt a longitudinal design to track parental decisions over time. Such studies would provide richer insights into how attitudes, beliefs, and satisfaction evolve as children progress through their schooling experience.

In addition, future research could expand the current model by including other psychological and sociocultural variables, such as parental satisfaction, perceived moral outcomes, or community influence. Comparative studies across cities or countries could also validate whether religiosity exerts a similar influence in different cultural and economic contexts.

Finally, the integration of qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups could deepen understanding of the emotional and spiritual motivations behind parental choices. Combining PLS-SEM with qualitative thematic analysis would yield a more holistic understanding of decision-making in faith-based education. Such approaches would ensure that future models capture both the measurable and unquantifiable aspects of religious and emotional attachment in educational selection.

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