

The Influence of Marketing Mix and Brand Image on the Decision to Choose Kindergarten Education in South Semarang: The Mediating Role of Parental Trust

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Article Info

Article history:

Received: 15 January 2026

Publish: 2 March 2026

Keywords:

Marketing mix;

Brand image;

Trust;

Kindergarten Decision Making.

Abstract

This study analyzes the factors influencing parental decision-making when selecting a kindergarten (TK) in South Semarang, Indonesia. It examines the direct and indirect effects of the marketing mix—conceptualized through price, place, and physical evidence—and brand image on the school choice process, with trust hypothesized as a critical mediating variable. A quantitative approach was employed, utilizing a structured questionnaire distributed via WhatsApp to parents of kindergarten students. Data from 153 valid responses were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling – Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS 4.0.0.9. The results confirm that both the marketing mix and brand image exert significant positive direct effects on parental trust and, subsequently, on the school decision-making process. Trust fully mediates the relationship between the marketing mix and decision-making and partially mediates the relationship between brand image and decision-making. Notably, brand image demonstrates the strongest direct influence on the final choice. The model explains a substantial proportion of variance in trust (65.8%) and in the decision-making process (67.8%). This research provides a nuanced, context-specific model for early childhood education (PAUD) marketing within a developing urban setting.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This research is grounded in the dynamics of early childhood education (PAUD) in Indonesia, particularly at the Kindergarten (TK) level. Education during this phase is globally acknowledged as a critical foundation for a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development (UNESCO, 2025). In Indonesia, the government's commitment to accelerating PAUD transformation is strengthening, as reflected in various national policies and movements (PAUD Dikdasmen | Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2025). However, at a practical level, parents face increasingly complex choices. In Semarang City, data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS Indonesia, 2025) indicates a significant number of TKs and RAs, creating a dense competitive landscape. This phenomenon shifts the paradigm: PAUD institutions are no longer merely educational service providers but must also function as entities capable of effective "marketing."

The research problem stems from the gap between the multitude of available choices and parental uncertainty. The process of choosing a kindergarten is not a routine transaction; it is a long-term investment laden with emotional and rational considerations. Previous studies have highlighted factors such as educational quality, promotion, and location (Sugiyarni & Muhammad, 2023), school image and social media promotion (Ristanti et al.,

2024), and the marketing mix for vocational high schools (Panditatwa & Hidayat, 2024). Nevertheless, research comprehensively integrating specific marketing mix elements (price, place, physical evidence), brand image, and trust within the context of Indonesian kindergarten selection, particularly using a structural equation modeling approach remains limited. Most studies focus on physical products or higher education, thus failing to capture the specific nuances of the PAUD market, which heavily relies on parental perceptions and beliefs.

Consequently, this study aims to examine and analyze the direct and indirect influences of the marketing mix (with indicators of price/financial accessibility, place/location, and physical evidence/facilities) and brand image on how parents make decisions about selecting a kindergarten, considering the mediating role of trust. The contribution of this research is twofold. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on educational services marketing by testing an integrated model in the kindergarten context. Practically, the findings are expected to serve as a strategic guide for kindergarten administrators, especially in South Semarang, in designing marketing initiatives that are not only informative but also build sustainable trust-based relationships with prospective parents.

The study's conceptual framework is based on three main theoretical pillars. First, the marketing mix concept introduced by McCarthy (1960) and continually evolving. In the context of services, particularly education, the 7P theory (product, price, place, promotion, people, process, physical evidence) is often adapted (Pfoertsch, 2024). This research focuses on three elements deemed most salient in the initial decision to choose a TK: Price (affordability and value), Place (accessibility and environment), and Physical Evidence (adequacy of facilities). The theory posits that an optimal combination of these elements creates perceived value and fosters positive consumer behavior. Second, Social Exchange Theory, explored in the context of relational marketing by Morgan & Hunt (1994) through Commitment-Trust Theory. The core of this theory is that sustainable business relationships are built on a foundation of trust and commitment. In kindergarten decision making, the relationship between parents and the institution begins long before the child enrolls; it starts with the information search process and trust formation. Trust functions to reduce parental uncertainty and perceived risk. Third, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), used to explain the parental decision-making process. TPB states that the intention to perform a behavior in this case, choosing a kindergarten is influenced by three factors: 1) Attitude toward the behavior, 2) Subjective norms, and 3) Perceived behavioral control.

In this study, trust is viewed as a core component of parental attitude toward the school. Meanwhile, brand image can influence subjective norms through social recommendations and general public perception. The marketing mix can influence attitude through perceptions of the value and convenience offered. This research model integrates these elements by positioning trust as an attitude influenced by the marketing mix and brand image, ultimately affecting the choice process.

Hypothesis Development

The Influence of Marketing Mix on Decision Making (H1). An effective marketing mix—particularly affordable and perceived fair pricing, strategic and safe locations, and adequate facilities can directly influence parents' practical considerations. Studies in various contexts, such as restaurants (Adhiansyah & Rizkianfi, 2020), smartphones (Asdi & Halim Perdana Kusuma Putra, 2020), and elementary schools (Irawan, 2019), consistently show the positive influence of the marketing mix on consumer choices. Within TPB, these elements can enhance perceived behavioral control (e.g., ease of access), thereby encouraging intention. Therefore, the hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The marketing mix has a positive and significant influence on parental decision making in selecting a kindergarten.

The Influence of Brand Image on Decision Making (H2). Brand image is the overall perception formed in consumers' minds regarding a brand. A strong brand image, built through reputation, recommendations, and an impression of professionalism, can be a key differentiator in a saturated market. A positive brand image can strengthen parents' subjective norm the feeling of being supported by their social environment to choose that school. Research by Momen et al. (2020) in higher education and Hermiyenti & Wardi (2019) generally finds that brand image strongly influences purchase decisions.

H2: Brand image has a positive and significant influence on parental decision making in selecting a kindergarten.

The Influence of Trust on Decision Making (H3). Trust is the core of a positive attitude in TPB. In the context of high-risk educational services, parents need assurance that the institution will act in their child's best interest. Trust reduces perceived risk and encourages commitment, ultimately strengthening the intention to choose. Research by Hidayat et al. (2021) in an online context and Benhardy et al. (2020), which found trust mediates purchase intention, reinforces the central role of this variable.

H3: Trust has a positive and significant influence on parental decision making in selecting a kindergarten.

The Influence of Marketing Mix on Trust (H4). Transparent pricing, safe locations, and visible, tangible facilities serve as "evidence" or signals that can build trust from the outset. A marketing mix perceived as fair and prioritizing consumer interests can foster perceptions of institutional integrity and capability, thus encouraging a positive attitude. A study by Asiati (2019) indicates a positive relationship between marketing elements and trust.

H4: The marketing mix has a positive and significant influence on parental trust.

The Influence of Brand Image on Trust (H5). A positive brand image functions as a social guarantee that reduces uncertainty. When a parent hears a favorable reputation about a kindergarten, they are more inclined to trust the institution before direct interaction occurs. A good brand image influences the formation of a trusting attitude. Research by Sanny et al. (2020) demonstrates how brand image builds brand trust. This trust is constructed through positive perceptions of the offered marketing mix and the communicated brand image, ultimately influencing the school decision-making process (Hao et al. (2025); Jonathan et al. (2023)).

H5: Brand image has a positive and significant influence on parental trust.

Indirect Influence (Mediation).

Based on the integration of Social Exchange Theory and TPB, it is assumed that the marketing mix and brand image not only have direct impacts but also indirect effects through the prior formation of trust (attitude). In other words, trust acts as the psychological mechanism translating external information (marketing mix and brand image) into internal belief, which then drives the decision. Research by Made et al. (2021) and Rafdinal & Alty Amalia (2019) supports the mediating role of trust in the relationship between marketing mix and consumer choices.

H6: Trust mediates the positive influence of the marketing mix on parental decision making in selecting a kindergarten.

H7: Trust mediates the positive influence of brand image on parental decision making in selecting a kindergarten.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a quantitative approach using a survey method. This design was chosen as it is suitable for testing relationships between variables defined in the hypothetical model (Sugiyono, 2013). The approach is explanatory as it aims to examine causal influences and relationships among variables.

The population comprises all parents or guardians of children attending Kindergartens (TK) in districts within the South Semarang area (based on Statistics Indonesia (BPS Indonesia, 2025) data). The sampling technique used was non-probability sampling with a purposive sampling method. The sample inclusion criteria were:

- 1) Parents/guardians of children attending a kindergarten (TK) in South Semarang;
- 2) Directly involved in the school selection process;
- 3) Willing to be respondents.

The sample size was determined based on the rule in SEM-PLS analysis, which is 10 times the largest number of indicators forming a construct (Hair et al., 2019). To ensure statistical power and better generalizability, this study successfully collected 153 valid questionnaires, sufficient for SEM-PLS analysis.

Data was collected through a closed questionnaire distributed online via Google Forms. The distribution technique involved a WhatsApp blast to several kindergarten (TK) parent groups and parenting communities in South Semarang. The questionnaire consisted of two parts:

- 1) Respondent demographic data;
- 2) Statements to measure the four research variables using a 1-6 Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 6=Strongly Agree). The 6-point scale was chosen to minimize central tendency bias and encourage respondents to lean towards agreement or disagreement (Preston & Colman, 2000).

Operational Definitions of Variables

- 1) Marketing Mix (X1): The strategic combination of elements controlled by the kindergarten to influence parental response. Operationalized through 5 indicators covering dimensions of Price (affordability, value), Place (accessibility, environmental safety), and Physical Evidence (adequacy of facilities).
- 2) Brand Image (X2): Parents' overall perception of the kindergarten's reputation, modernity, social recommendations, service quality, and visual professionalism. Measured with 5 indicators.
- 3) Trust (M): Parents' belief that the kindergarten acts honestly, transparently, is committed to child development, attentive, and can guarantee child safety. Measured with 4 indicators.
- 4) Decision Making (Y): The process and final outcome where parents intend to, search for information about, consider, recommend, and confidently choose a specific kindergarten. Measured with 5 indicators.

Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling – Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS 4.0.0.9 software. PLS-SEM was chosen based on its ability to handle complex models with relatively small sample sizes and its focus on prediction and theory development (Hair et al. (2019); Rahadi Dedi Rianto (2023)). The analysis was conducted in two stages:

- 1) Testing the Measurement Model (Outer Model) to assess instrument validity and reliability;
- 2) Testing the Structural Model (Inner Model) to examine causal relationships and the proposed hypotheses.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Research Results

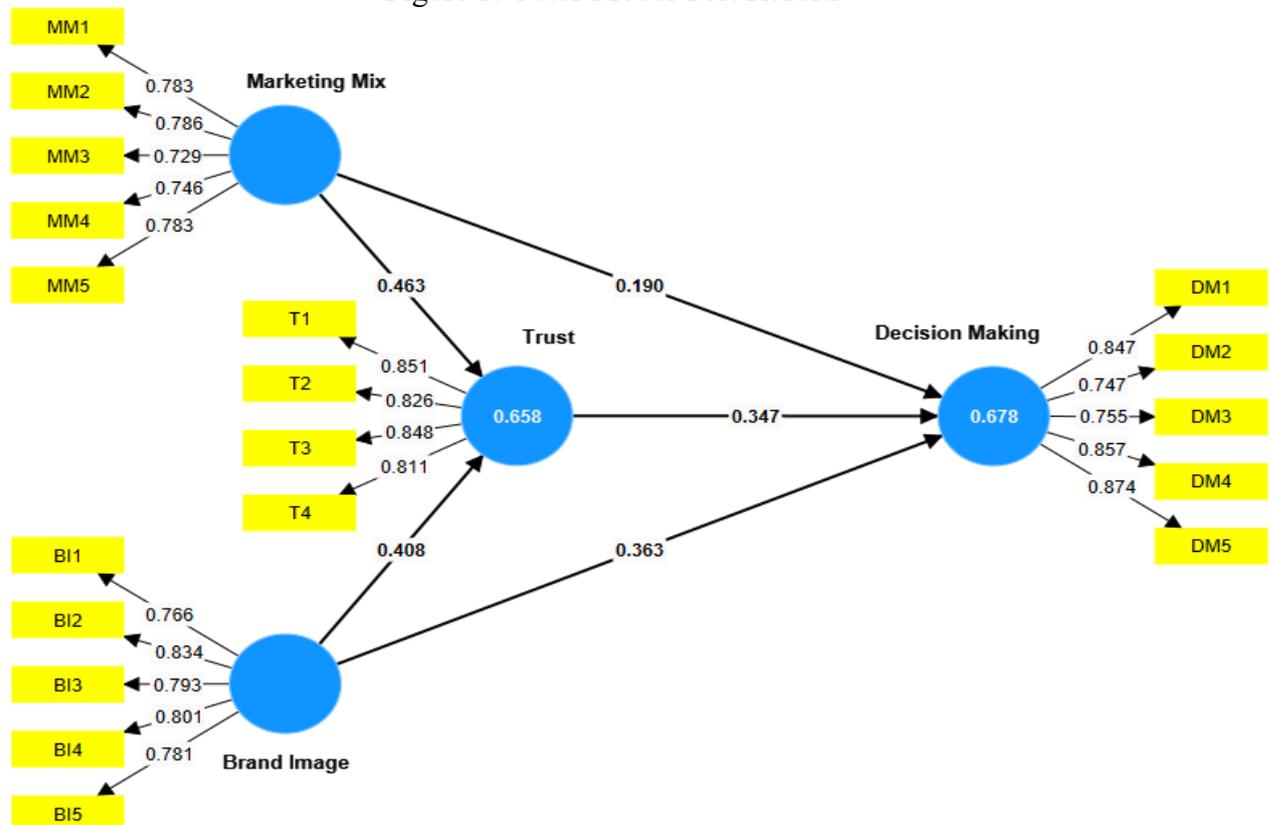
Descriptive Statistics of Respondents

Prior to model testing, respondent profiles were analyzed. Of the 150 respondents, the majority were aged 30-39 (59.3%), representing the productive age group most likely to have kindergarten-aged children. Most were biological parents (92%), with the highest education levels being Bachelor's degree (48%) and Senior High School/equivalent (30%). In terms of occupation, private sector employees dominated (46%), followed by homemakers (33.3%). Interestingly, 64% of respondents reported a monthly income below IDR 5,000,000. This profile indicates that the sample is predominantly young families with lower-middle incomes, who are highly sensitive to price and value considerations when choosing a kindergarten.

Evaluation of the Measurement Model (Outer Model)

All indicators exhibited loading factors above 0.7, confirming their suitability for predicting the latent variables.

Figure 1. Outer Model Test Results



The evaluation of the outer model included tests for reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, with results presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of Reliability and Convergent Validity Tests

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho a)	Composite reliability (rho c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Brand Image	0.855	0.858	0.896	0.632
Decision Making	0.876	0.886	0.910	0.669
Marketing Mix	0.824	0.828	0.876	0.586

Trust	0.854	0.855	0.901	0.696
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Reliability was confirmed as the Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values for all constructs exceeded 0.7, indicating good internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019). Convergent validity was assessed via the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All AVE values were > 0.5, indicating each construct explains over 50% of the variance of its indicators, thus establishing validity.

Next, discriminant validity was tested using two methods. First, the Fornell-Larcker Criterion, which requires the square root of a construct's AVE (diagonal value) to be greater than its correlations with other constructs (off-diagonal values). The data met this criterion (e.g., \sqrt{AVE} for brand image = 0.795 > correlation with trust = 0.748). Second, the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). All HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.90, confirming each construct is unique and distinct from others. Cross-loading results also showed each indicator had the highest loading on its intended construct compared to others. A multicollinearity test using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) showed all values < 5, indicating no serious multicollinearity issues among indicators.

Evaluation of the Structural Model (Inner Model) and Hypothesis Testing

After establishing a valid and reliable measurement model, the next step was evaluating the structural model. First, model fit was examined. The SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) value was 0.072, below the 0.08 threshold, indicating acceptable model fit (Hair et al., 2019). The NFI (Normed Fit Index) value of 0.789 is within an acceptable range for PLS-SEM.

The predictive power of the model is indicated by R-squared (R²) values. The R² for the trust construct was 0.658, meaning 65.8% of the variation in trust can be explained by the marketing mix and brand image. The R² for decision-making was 0.678, indicating that 67.8% of the variation in the decision-making process can be explained by the marketing mix, brand image, and trust.

Hypothesis testing involved examining path coefficients and their significance via a bootstrapping procedure. Complete results for direct and indirect path testing are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Results of Direct Path Hypothesis Testing

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Marketing Mix -> Decision Making	0.190	0.201	0.081	2.343	0.019
Brand Image -> Decision Making	0.363	0.361	0.118	3.084	0.002
Trust -> Decision Making	0.347	0.339	0.110	3.146	0.002
Marketing Mix -> Trust	0.463	0.463	0.101	4.598	0.000
Brand Image -> Trust	0.408	0.408	0.095	4.287	0.000

Table 3. Results of Indirect Path Hypothesis Testing (Mediation Effects)

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
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			(STDEV)		
Marketing Mix -> Trust -> Decision Making	0.161	0.158	0.065	2.468	0.014
Brand Image -> Trust -> Decision Making	0.142	0.137	0.053	2.666	0.008

Based on Table 2, all five direct path hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5) are supported (p-value < 0.05). Brand image ($\beta=0.363$) has the strongest direct influence on decision making, followed by trust ($\beta=0.347$) and the marketing mix ($\beta=0.190$). Meanwhile, the marketing mix ($\beta=0.463$) has a slightly stronger influence on trust compared to brand image ($\beta=0.408$).

Table 3 shows that both mediation hypotheses (H6 and H7) are also accepted. Trust significantly mediates the relationship between the marketing mix and decision making, as well as the relationship between brand image and decision making. The effect size (f^2) for the paths marketing mix -> trust (0.289) and brand image -> trust (0.225) are considered moderate, while for other paths they are small but still significant.

3.2. Discussion

The findings offer compelling insights into how parental decision making for kindergartens in South Semarang unfolds. First, the results confirming that the marketing mix (H1) and brand image (H2) directly influence the decision-making process align with a substantial body of marketing literature (Kotler (2000); Asdi & Halim Perdana Kusuma Putra (2020); Adhiansyah & Rizkyanfi (2020)). However, the greater influence of brand image compared to the marketing mix suggests that in a kindergarten market potentially saturated with similar physical offerings, factors of reputation and perceived quality (brand image) become the primary determinants.

Second, the significant influence of trust on decision making (H3) reinforces the proposition of Social Exchange Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and its position as a key attitudinal component in TPB. In the context of childhood education, the psychological and emotional risks are substantial. Therefore, before entrusting their child, parents must first feel confident and secure. This result is consistent with research by Hidayat et al. (2021) on online purchase decisions and confirms that trust is not merely complementary but the foundational attitude driving intention.

Third, the finding that the marketing mix and brand image strongly build trust (H4 & H5) is central to this discussion. It appears parents view transparent pricing, safe locations, and adequate facilities as tangible proof of a school's commitment and integrity. Meanwhile, a good brand image functions as a social guarantee that reduces uncertainty. In other words, trust does not emerge spontaneously; it is constructed through a combination of physical (marketing mix) and social (brand image) signals.

Fourth, and most importantly, the acceptance of the mediation hypotheses (H6 & H7) reveals a deeper mechanism. Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior, the influence of the marketing mix and brand image on the final decision is not entirely direct. They first shape a positive attitude in the form of trust, which then becomes the primary driver of intention and the subsequent choice process. This result aligns with the TPB proposition that attitude is a crucial antecedent of behavioral intention (Jiang et al., 2023). Consequently, kindergarten marketing efforts that merely highlight physical advantages or aggressively build image, but fail to cultivate fundamental trusting attitudes, may prove suboptimal in converting interest into actual choices.

Comparison with Previous Research

These findings resonate with prior studies while also providing specific nuance. For instance, research by Irawan (2019) found an influence of service marketing mix on parental decision making in choosing an elementary school (SD). The different context (SD vs. TK) and more specific indicators (focus on price, place, physical) in this study offer greater precision. Research by Panditawati & Hidayat (2024) on vocational school marketing mix also supports the importance of these elements, albeit with different dependent variables and samples. On the other hand, the emphasis on trust mediation strengthens findings by Benhardy et al. (2020) and Sanny et al. (2020) in different fields, while applying them to the highly personal realm of early childhood education.

Theoretical Implications

This research offers several theoretical contributions. First, it successfully tests and validates an integrated model linking strategic marketing variables (marketing mix), perceptual variables (brand image), attitudinal variables (trust), and behavioral variables (decision making) in the context of PAUD educational—a context still underexplored. Second, it extends the application of the Theory of Planned Behavior and Social Exchange Theory to consumer decision-making in high-value service sectors. Third, by proving the mediating role of trust, the study offers a deeper mechanistic explanation of how the marketing mix and brand image ultimately influence decisions—through the formation of trusting attitudes as a mediator.

Practical Implications

For kindergarten (TK and RA) administrators in South Semarang specifically, and Indonesia generally, these findings provide clear strategic guidance:

- 1) **Prioritize Trust-Building:** All marketing strategies should be directed towards cultivating and maintaining parental trust. Transparent, consistent communication focused on children's needs is key.
- 2) **Deliver Tangible Proof:** Ensure pricing policies are clear and perceived as fair, select safe and easily accessible locations, and maintain clean, safe, and educational facilities. These elements are the first "evidence" parents evaluate.
- 3) **Cultivate Reputation from Real Experience:** Encourage positive word-of-mouth from satisfied parents. Leverage social media to professionally showcase school activities, achievements, and values. A modern and up-to-date image is also important.
- 4) **Adopt a Holistic Approach:** Do not rely solely on promotions or low prices. Combine physical advantages (marketing mix) with narratives that build a positive image, ensuring both are integrated into efforts to build long-term trust.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of data from 150 parents in South Semarang using SEM-PLS, this study concludes that:

- 1) The marketing mix (price, place, physical evidence) and brand image have a positive and significant direct influence on parental decision making in selecting a kindergarten.
- 2) Trust has a positive and significant direct influence on the decision-making process.
- 3) The marketing mix and brand image also have a positive and significant influence in building parental trust.
- 4) Trust proves to play a significant mediating role in the relationship between the marketing mix and brand image with decision-making.

These findings underscore that in a competitive kindergarten market, trust is a paramount determinant. Marketing strategies focusing solely on functional attributes or image-building, without accompanying sincere efforts to earn trust, are likely to be less effective in guiding parental decision-making.

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